

# AFTERMATH OF A PRINCESS

by Lee Edgar

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**FRIDAY 20th AUGUST - 1400 hrs.**

The ruins of the city once known as Gay Paris cast long shadows as the sun rose behind them. Everywhere, there was destruction and not a sign of life was evident as the helicopter gunship flew low across the bloated Seine.

Inside, a man in his late twenties put his head into the cockpit. 'How long do you reckon, Frank?'

The pilot shrugged and looked at his watch. 'Most part of an hour, I guess.' He looked up. 'If they leave us alone that long.'

'Any sign of them yet?'

His eyes searched the empty sky. 'No, but they're around somewhere - I feel it in my bones. To be perfectly honest, I'm surprised they have let us get this far.'

'Perhaps they don't know we're here yet,' suggested a young woman who had also come forward.

'Don't you believe it, Miss Gillian. If I know the Russians, they'll know we're here all right. For some reason, they seem to be letting us through.'

The young woman looked at Roger Blackman. 'Will we be in time?'

'I hope so. I would hate to lose Suzette after all she's been through.'

The pilot turned his head slightly. 'If you don't mind my saying so, Mr Blackman, that sister of yours is one tough little cookie. She don't kill easy.'

Roger smiled. 'I hope you're right, Frank. I do hope you're right.'

No-one said anymore for a while as they passed over the winding Seine once more and then crossed the Bois de Boulogne where, not long ago, children had played and couples had fallen in love. But that was before the war.

'Look at that damage,' murmured the pilot. 'What a lousy waste of life and property. And all for what?'

'Greed for power and money does that to you after a while. Let's hope the Consortium which tricked the superpowers into launching their weapons has finally been eliminated.'

'Amen to that,' said Gillian Green soberly.

'Here they come!' said the pilot suddenly.

The others looked around but the sky still seemed empty.

'Behind,' he clarified.

A dart-shaped aircraft was poised, like an eagle about to pounce, as they maintained course north-westwards towards their final destination.

'Is he going to shoot?' whispered Gillian as she stared at the sleek jet bristling with weaponry, its air-brakes open and undercarriage lowered to keep down to the helicopter's speed.

'It's a MiG-25 Foxbat. If he was going to attack us, he could simply have fired a missile from ten miles away and we'd never even have seen it coming.'

'US Navy helicopter,' the radio suddenly blasted out. 'This is Flight-Lieutenant Ivan Pentovic of the Russian Air Force. Please state your destination.'

'What in tarnation are they up to?' muttered the pilot.

'Let's not argue with the man,' said Roger. 'At least not while we're in his sights.'

'Okay.' Frank pushed a switch. 'We are part of the United Nations Task Force from the south and are on an urgent mission of mercy.'

'Will he believe us?' asked the young woman.

'I don't know, Gill. We'll soon know.'

The radio spoke again. 'It is my information that you are American spies. Please turn southwards and clear the area or I will have no alternative but to open fire.'

Roger looked around. The pilot who was speaking was obviously the one who had now drawn alongside and was watching them closely. A second jet was right behind them.

'They are not stupid, are they,' he said. 'Gill, get Jim to open the side door. Then you and Marianne show yourselves. Wave to them or something. We've got to convince them that we mean them no harm.'

'Righto,' she said and disappeared. Roger heard the door being opened and glanced back to see that the girls were doing their part well, smiling and waving frantically.

'What is your destination?' said the voice.

'A place just outside Rouen,' replied the pilot. 'We are bringing a doctor for the woman at the tracking station - the one who was badly injured.'

There was radio silence for some time as the Russian pilot conversed with his superiors.

'I regret we have no record of either an injured person or a tracking station. You must turn south immediately.'

Roger grabbed the microphone. 'Now listen here, Comrade. That young lady is my sister and she is dying. If the doctor we're carrying doesn't get to her right away, it will be too late, do you understand?'

'I understand. But my orders are...'

'To hell with your orders, Lieutenant. We're going in. If you check with your superiors, you will know that we are an unarmed United Nations flight direct from Geneva. If you attack us, you will start a war which will make the last little episode look like a minor skirmish.'

'One moment.'

There was a further delay as they continued down the Seine valley. Gradually, the ruins petered out as they moved further from the capital. In this area, as in most of the rest of France and the low countries, it had been

radioactive fallout that had killed the population - not the blast itself.

The Russian-accented voice came once more. 'It appears that your sister has locked herself into the control centre of the tracking station. No-one can enter the building without setting off explosive devices which will render the equipment useless.'

'I'll get her out,' replied Roger. 'She will listen to me.'

'We cannot take that chance.'

'Is it the equipment you are after? If so, I guarantee to hand it over to you intact. Tell your superiors that. Perhaps then they will reconsider.'

'Suzette wouldn't let that happen,' said the male voice at his elbow. 'She's already tried to destroy the station to prevent it falling into the wrong hands. She would rather die than let it be used for military purposes.'

'I know that, Jim. Nevertheless, I want Suzette out of there alive. What happens to the equipment afterwards is out of my hands.'

'You would hand them Princess on a plate?'

Roger smiled. 'If I know Suzette, she will have already dumped the data from the satellite. Princess is useless to them without the software to run the data evaluation.'

'But they could feed it in again.'

'Like the Americans have been trying to do at Laroque des Albères for over a week now? Suzette knew what she was doing when she corrupted the data beamed down from Princess. I doubt that the Russians will have any greater success.'

'Will they let her go, do you think?'

'Not without a fight. However, what they cannot afford to do is let Suzette die right now. If she does, both superpowers will have lost their best hope of relocating Princess.'

'So they'll have to let us in.'

Roger nodded. 'If they need Princess badly enough. Don't forget she can scan the whole of Europe in a way that none of their so-called spy satellites can do. They need Princess if they are to maintain their hold on Europe.'

'But so do the Americans.'

'Dead right. If I could destroy both tracking stations, I would - like Suzette tried to do. However, she failed so now we just have to try to get her out of there alive.'

'It won't be easy.'

'No. I don't suppose it will.'

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AS THEY PASSED OVER ROUEN, they saw that there was some movement on the ground. The place they had left virtually deserted so recently was now a hive of activity. The pilot circled and got ready to land beside a squat brick building at the edge of an industrial estate.

'It was good camouflage,' said the pilot. 'If I didn't know exactly where I was headed, I wouldn't have known that the tracking station was here.'

'Most of it's underground, Frank. What you see is merely the reception area and garage block. Beneath that is the security area with closed-circuit monitors and the like and right at the bottom is the main control area with the computers linked by dish to Princess.'

'Some set up.'

'It certainly is.' He looked out as they landed. 'Seems as though we are expected.'

Upon touchdown, the helicopter was immediately surrounded by troops and an officer strode towards them. Roger jumped to the ground followed by Jim, the two girls and a middle-aged man with a black bag.

'Is one of you Mr Blackman?' said the Russian politely.

Roger held out his hand. 'That's me.'

After a brief hesitation, the Russian took it and smiled. 'I am Captain Gorvic. My instructions are to make you welcome and give you every assistance you need in gaining access to the control centre.'

'Very well, Captain. May I introduce my colleague Jim Marshal from Cambridge, England.' The men shook hands. 'Miss Gillian Green, also from England.' The Russian bowed. 'And my cousin, Marianne de Bosville from Sorède.'

Marianne smiled. 'Enchantée, monsieur. Mais je ne parle pas bien le Russe ni L'Anglaise.'

The officer looked taken aback.

Roger came to his assistance. 'Mademoiselle de Bosville apologises for being unable to understand well either Russian or English.'

'Ah, so.' He looked behind them. 'And the other gentleman?'

'Doctor Karl Mitzen from Geneva. He has come to see if he can do anything for my sister.'

The men shook hands.

'We have a problem,' said the Captain as they walked towards the building.

'Problem? You mean the lower floors are sealed off?'

'That is quite possible; we have not yet penetrated that far. The problem of which I speak is that there are two US marines in the reception area and they are accompanied by an armed French national. They are refusing to allow any of my men to gain access.'

'I see. Is one of the marines a black major?'

The Captain looked surprised. 'You know the man?'

Roger nodded. 'A little. He is Major Alphonse Slazinski who came with the UN peace force.'

'Then why is he guarding the tracking station?'

'I think he feels he is protecting it against misuse by person or persons unknown.'

The Russian leant closer. 'I am told that we have - what you say? - a deal?'

Roger smiled. 'Don't worry. I'll get through to him. You'll get your precious tracking station if I can get my sister out alive.'

Captain Gorvic clicked his heels. 'I am at your disposal, Comrade Blackman.'

Roger thanked him, bade the doctor and girls wait beside the gunship and strode with Jim towards the main door which opened a crack. He stopped. 'Al. It's me, Roger. Can Jim and I come in?'

'Okay,' said the drawling voice from within. 'But no tricks.'

Roger pushed open the door and found himself confronted by several weapons. 'Come on, Al. We're not the enemy. You know that.'

'I'm not sure who I can trust. One minute we're in an empty zone, the next minute the place is swarming with Reds. I don't like it.'

'I've come to get Suzette out.'

'She ain't coming out.'

Roger drew himself erect. 'Says who?'

'Says she. Your sister has sealed off the middle floor by evacuating all the air from it.'

Roger glanced at Jim. 'Can she do that?'

Jim nodded. 'This place was designed to stand up to an all-out thermo-nuclear attack, to withstand anything but a direct hit. Suzette will be thirty feet down below a double layer of reinforced concrete and pre-stressed steel. Getting her out won't be at all easy.'

'Al. Did I understand from your radio message that Suzette tried to blow the place up?'

'She sure did.'

'Well, she clearly failed. I wonder why.'

'Perhaps she succeeded. It could be all torn apart down there.'

'Did you hear an explosion of any sort?'

The black Major shook his head. 'Not a thing. The warning sirens started and then, after a few minutes, they stopped.'

Roger looked enquiringly at Jim who shrugged. 'There's a auto-destruct sequence built into the main console. Trigger that and you've got three minutes before boom! Everything goes up.'

'Only this time, it didn't?'

'It would seem not. Incidentally, the satellite should have gone up in sympathy at the same time.'

'Did it?'

'It might well have done. Princess is almost forty thousand kilometres away - geostationary over the equator. Al wouldn't have seen a thing from here.'

'Well, it seems as if Suzette started the sequence, probably destroyed the satellite but, for some reason, failed to take out the tracking station.'

Al pointed downwards. 'Does that mean she could be still alive in there?'

'There's only one way to find out.'

'What about the Reds?'

'We made a deal with them. They let us through to try to get Suzette out, we give them the tracking station.'

'I can't let you do that. If they get their hands on that equipment, they could control the world.'

'Listen, Al. That's my sister down there. If there was a chance to get her out alive, I'd sell my own soul.'

'But this is US territory.'

'I beg to differ. Regardless of who occupied this area after the war, this is still French territory.'

'But we have no French people present. They were all killed around here.'

'You're wrong. We have two.'

'Two?'

'Have you forgotten Ramon who helped us get here in the first place?'

'What does he know about politics?'

Roger indicated the youth. 'Ask him. There is also Marianne.'

'You've brought her?'

'She's outside. Shall we ask them?'

'A mere boy and a naive young woman from a mountain village in the Pyrenées?'

'They are both over eighteen. That's voting age in most of Europe. Ask them.'

Al looked up at Ramon who stood with his own corporal. His eyes then drifted outside to the always-smiling French girl with the long, fair hair. 'You would rest such a decision upon two people who are little more than children?'

'They may have been mere youths a month ago but this war has made them grow-up fast. Besides, Marianne is from one of the oldest titled families in Europe. She is adequately qualified.'

'She will do anything to save her cousin. Would she, too, sell her soul?'

'Not to the Russians, Al. Besides, I think we might find that the equipment is of little use to them without Suzette.'

'My last orders were to defend the installation at all costs. I'm not sure I can allow you to do anything to jeopardise my position.'

'You mean you are going to refuse to let me attempt to get Suzette out? You're going to take on half the Russian army? Believe me, Al. My way is a better way.'

'Can I trust you?'

'What option do you have? Believe me, the men outside will get in here whether you stand in their way or not. So far, they've tried it the peaceable way, fortunately for you. You can neither protect nor harm the installation from up here. Now are we going to stand her arguing all day or do we work together and find a way to get Suzette out?'

'I guess I have no choice.'

'Don't worry, Al. I'll make sure you are allowed to get back to your carrier.'

'I've almost forgotten what it's like on dear old Columbia.'

'You'll still be welcome. Admiral Davison has been keeping your bunk warm for you.'

Major Slazinski stood his automatic rifle against the wall. 'You win. Let's get that sister of yours out of her self-inflicted tomb.'

Roger patted his shoulder. 'Thanks, Al. This means a lot to me.'

'We haven't got her out yet.'

'No. But we will.'

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THE GROUP OF THEM pored over the roughly-drawn plan of the building.

'The control room is on the lowest level,' said Jim. 'All the main equipment is down there. Access is by means of a double steel door,' he pointed, 'here.'

'No other way in?' asked the Russian.

'No,' said Gillian. 'I've been down there. There's just the one door. It can only be opened from the bottom or middle floor.'

'And the middle floor has been drained of air?'

Al nodded. 'According to the warning gauge on this side of the upper door.'

Jim pointed again. 'The air-pressure is controlled from below to prevent the intake of radiation in the event of a nuclear exchange.'

'Is there anything else on that middle floor?'

'No. Except for the generator.'

'The generator?'

'Small diesel engine.'

'How on earth does that work in a vacuum?'

'Inlet from outside. The end of the pipe is up on the roof.'

'Tell me,' said Roger. 'What would happen to the computers and such-like if the generator stopped?'

'The batteries would automatically take over.'

'For how long?'

'That depends upon how much equipment is being used. If everything had been shut down the batteries could last for a couple of days. The whole thing was designed to last until the last of the fallout had dissipated.'

'Can we not get in touch with Suzette somehow?' said Gillian. 'Assuming she's still alive?'

'There's no intercom up here.'

'Nor down below,' added Jim. 'After the war, Philippe and I went to the middle floor to check on the radiation levels. We had to use walkie-talkies to communicate.'

'That does make it difficult,' said Roger.  
'What did you do with your walkie-talkie?' asked Gillian suddenly.  
'How do you mean?'  
'As you just said, you and Philippe went to the middle floor with one half of a radio set. What did you do with it?'  
Jim shrugged. 'Left it on the closed-circuit TV console, I guess.'  
'So it could be still there?'  
'It's possible. I didn't move it.'  
'Then all we have to do is get down to the middle floor and speak to Suzette who must still have the other handset.'  
'We've still got to gain access to the middle floor,' said Al.  
Roger turned to the Russian. 'Do you have drilling equipment?'  
'Drilling equipment? What kind?'  
'Portable. Something to bore a hole in that interconnecting door.'  
'We have some tools but that door looks thick.'  
'It is,' said Jim. 'But we only need a tiny hole - enough to let air inside. It's only vacuum that's holding this top door closed.'  
'Only vacuum?' asked Gillian. 'Can't we just pull it open then?'  
Jim smiled. 'You obviously didn't do physics at Cambridge.'  
'No, I did veterinary practice. What's physics got to do with any of this?'  
'Atmospheric pressure. The pressure on that door must be almost forty tonnes.'  
'I don't think we'll manage that,' said Roger.  
'And one tiny hole will?'  
'Of course. Just enough to let air in from outside.'  
'Okay, let's do it.'  
Fifteen minutes later, the drill was set up and, after an hour, they were almost through.  
'Nearly there,' said Ramon as he pushed on the drill. 'We can't have more than a few millimetres to go.'  
'That steel sure is tough. It has taken a dozen bits to make a two millimetre hole.'  
Suddenly, there was a loud bang followed by a rushing of air as it sucked through the hole and filled the rooms on the middle floor. Two minutes later, the door was open.  
'Nothing's changed,' said Jim as he stood in the middle of the room and ran his eyes over the bank of TV monitors and ancillary equipment.  
'Is this the radio?' said Roger, holding up a walkie-talkie.  
Jim nodded. 'You'll have to get closer to the inner door. Reception was lousy last time we tried it.'  
'Will Suzette hear us, do you think?' asked Gillian.  
'That depends on whether she has the other unit switched on.'  
'If she hasn't?'  
'Then she won't hear us.'  
'Can't we bang on the door?'  
Jim shook his head. 'Double-skinned. Two feet thick. Weighs a ton. Not a chance if she chooses to ignore any tapping noises we make. She certainly won't tell voices.'  
'If she's still alive.'  
'Well, this floor looks undamaged.'  
'But what's on the other side of that door? If the device in the console detonated, the room could be still full of radiation.'  
'Try the radio,' suggested Jim.  
'Who's going to do it?' asked Roger.  
'Moi,' said a quiet voice. Marianne stepped forward and held out her hand. 'Elle écoutera a moi.'  
'C'est vrai,' said Roger. He placed the handset into her small hand. 'Voici!. Bon chance, ma chérie.'  
'Merci.' She smiled and then raised it to her mouth and pressed the button. 'Suzette, peut-tu m'écouter?'  
No reply.  
'Suzette, c'est Marianne. Ouvrez la porte, s'il tu plait.'  
Nothing.  
Her eyes flicked to Rogers'. There was panic in them. 'Elle est morte?'  
He shook his head with wishful thinking. 'Non. Essayez encore.'  
There were tears in her eyes as she pressed the button again. 'Suzette, repondez immédiatement! Nous sommes très inquiète. Sortez maintenant!'  
Silence. Marianne banged on the big steel door in frustration. In the process, she dropped the radio which hit the tiled concrete floor with a bang that sounded terminal.  
'Se maudir!' she screamed and thumped feebly on the door with her fists. 'Se maudir!'

Roger put his arm around her and pulled her to him while she cried into his shirt front. 'C'est finis,' he said quietly.

She shook her head frantically. 'Non. Suzette n'est pas morte.'

He raised her chin with his finger. 'Nous avons essayer. Allons-y.'

'Can't we drill through this door?' asked Gillian quietly.

Jim shook his head. 'Not a chance. If a thermonuclear device didn't manage it, we certainly won't.'

'Then we just go away and leave her?'

'We have done everything we can,' said Roger. 'She is obviously dead.'

'I think you must be right,' admitted Jim.

Roger nodded sadly. 'Turn off the generator, would you?'

Jim nodded as they all filed towards the stairs. He shut off the fuel tap and, after a moment, the diesel engine spluttered and then stopped. He paused for the last time and then turned off the master switch and followed the others in thorough dejection. Halfway up the stairs, he stopped. What was that sound? Straining to hear, he stared back into the semi-darkness. The scratching sound came again. He fumbled for his torch and aimed it at the source. Nothing.

'Roger,' he whispered and the other man returned and they stood together in silence.

There was a slight creaking and, slowly, the big steel door swung open. In the doorway stood a young woman who was leaning against the frame for support. Roger stepped forwards and, with a grab to stop her falling, whisked her into his arms and gently kissed her face while Jim ran out to tell the others the good news.

'Suzette,' Roger whispered. 'Am I glad to see you come out of there.'

She tried to smile a little. 'I had to. Someone turned the lights out.'

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#### FRIDAY 20th AUGUST - 1500 hrs.

The Doctor walked out into the sunlight, drying his hands.

Roger jumped to his feet. 'Well?'

Karl Mitzen shook his head sadly. 'There is not much more I can do for her, Monsieur Blackman. She has deteriorated considerably since I last examined her at Genève.'

'Is there hope, doctor?'

'Not unless you can get her to some place where she can have proper treatment followed by several months of complete rest.'

'I can't imagine my sister agreeing to that.'

Karl placed his hands on Roger's shoulders. 'Then you must make her do it. Her spine could be badly damaged and also several of her internal organs.'

'She did take one hell of a beating at Mandagout.'

'Not only that, monsieur. What makes it worse is that she insists on continuing to walk and work. If she is treated now and then forced to rest, there is hope for her. If not...'

'That bad, eh?'

'Her life is completely in your hands.'

'Will you be able to treat her?'

The doctor shook his head. 'I am a specialist in physiotherapy and osteopathy. What your sister needs is something more, possibly an operation to adjust the damaged vertebrae. Every minute she spends on her feet is not only very painful for her but also seriously reducing her chances of a complete recovery.'

'And her internal damage?'

'That may heal naturally. But only...,' he paused, 'only with total rest and a very strictly-controlled diet. In other words, she needs to be in a hospital with constant attention.'

'That's a little difficult in the middle of a war zone. I doubt if there is a single hospital standing and staffed within a thousand miles of here.'

'How about the Americans? Will they help?'

'Maybe, though they may well have ulterior motives. The same applies to the Russians.'

'It seems you have little choice - the Russians on the one hand or the Americans on the other. Alternatively, you could fly around and try to find somewhere in Germany or Switzerland, though I know of nowhere still functioning in Western Europe. At least, nowhere good enough to deal with Mademoiselle Suzette's problems.'

'Is it really as serious as that?'

'Absolutely. Frankly, I am staggered she is still alive bearing in mind what she's been through ever since

her attack.'

'Suzette did what she felt she had to do.'

'Well, now she's done it. She's saved the world from the Consortium and disabled Princess so that neither the Russians nor the Americans can use her for military purposes. If you want your sister to live to reach twenty-four, you must now exercise your authority as older brother and make her rest. I am sure we will find others who will help when they know what is required.'

'How do we make sure she's comfortable until we get her to the hospital, assuming one can be found?'

'I have given Mademoiselle Green something to keep your sister relaxed and a little drowsy. I know she's only a veterinary surgeon but she knows more than the rest of you about medicine.'

'Thank you, doctor, you have been very kind. You must leave her to us now, there have to be hundreds of other patients waiting for you.'

'It's all in a day's work, my boy. And you are right. If you can manage without me I really must return to Genève if the UN helicopter is able to take me. Mademoiselle Suzette will sleep for a while. Keep her that way as long as you can.'

'Can she travel?'

'Not by road. The uneven surface may do irreparable damage. If she is moved, it must be by air or water.'

'Water?'

'Of course. The Seine is less than a mile from here. Follow it downstream to Le Havre and you can sail to anywhere in Europe.' He leant closer. 'I wouldn't risk the Atlantic unless it is a very big boat.'

Roger smiled. 'Don't worry, I won't. I'm afraid I am no sailor. Nor, I think, are any of the others.'

They shook hands. 'Major Slazinski and his crew have agreed to make sure I get back to Genève as quickly as possible. Bon chance, mon ami. Look after her well.'

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#### FRIDAY 20th AUGUST - 1530 hrs.

Jim looked up as the Russian Captain entered with two recently-arrived scientists who ran their eager eyes over the equipment.

'Comrade Marshal, these men have come direct from Moskva. They wish to be shown all about your Princess.'

'I can show them what I know,' said Jim resignedly. 'Miss Blackman is the real expert but I can give you a rough idea how the system works. Are your men familiar with this type of computer system?'

One of the men nodded. 'Da. I study at University of St Petersburg. You will be showing me, please.'

Jim switched on the monitors. 'This is the main console. You autoboot it like this.'

He showed them knowing that, if he didn't, it was something they would soon find out for themselves. Perhaps appearing to help would give them credibility when the opportunity came to move Suzette.

'As you see, the data is divided into five subroutines named AX, BX, CX, DX and EX. Princess has heat sensors on board which measure the ambient temperature and all differences. It beams down the data to the dish on the roof and the computer programme then compares all movements of heat output with this background information and it is designed to identify certain kinds of movement.'

'Like what?'

'Well, AX, BX and CX are different geographical areas of Western Europe. AX is northern France and the British Isles, BX is South-West France and Spain, CX is Eastern France and Switzerland.' At least, that was the official story.

'All these areas,' Jim continued, 'are in the atmosphere. They can be used for identifying weather patterns and cloud formations before they have properly formed.'

'And aircraft?' put in one of the scientists.

Jim looked straight at him. 'Yes, and aircraft. Also missiles,' he added.

'And this section DX?'

'Ground sensors. It takes some hours for the system to build up enough data for this to work effectively but, given time and some interpretation, movements on the ground can be identified within certain tolerances.'

'Are you able to do this?'

Jim shook his head. 'No. Only Miss Blackman has been trained well enough to do that.' Trained, he thought? She knew enough to be able to write the programme.

'And EX?' asked the other scientist.

Jim sighed. They would soon find out for themselves. 'Under-water movements.'

The three experts looked at each other in turn as the implications went home. They conversed between themselves very quickly in Russian but one word came up several times. Jim knew little of their language but recognised one word which, in English, meant "submarine".

'All the data comes from this Princess?' one then asked.



Jim nodded. 'All of it.'

'And to start the programme?'

He showed them and the men watched the screens with interest as it loaded and began to process the incoming data. 'It takes a long time,' he added, standing. 'I'll come back later to see how you're getting on.'

He walked upstairs while they were engrossed and, hands in pockets, sauntered over to where the drowsy Suzette lay quietly talking with Marianne. 'How's the wounded soldier?'

Suzette smiled. 'I'll live.'

'I hope so. Doctor Mitzen has informed Roger that we have to get you to a hospital.'

'So Marianne has just been telling me. I'll be a good girl and do as I'm told this time.'

'Good. I've just been showing the equipment to a couple of scientists who have just arrived.'

Suzette blinked. 'Have they started to run the programme yet?'

'Yes, just.'

She started to sit up. 'We have to stop them.'

Marianne eased her back down again. 'Non. Se reposez.'

'But they won't find anything.'

'What?' said Jim.

'There's something wrong somewhere. The auto-destruct programme sent a signal to Princess to blow her up but it didn't work.'

'Neither did the device in the console.'

'No. While I sat thinking about all that had happened, I remembered that Philippe had once simulated the destruction of this place to fool us into thinking it was gone. He must have removed the detonator so as to use it somewhere else.'

'That explains why this place didn't go up but it doesn't explain why Princess wasn't destroyed. Perhaps the software was faulty.'

'No. I checked it through, line by line. The programme works fine so the fault must be on board the satellite itself or...'. Inspiration seemed to flood over her face.

'Or?'

'Or the dish is out of alignment.'

'That would prevent it working?'

'Of course. One millimetre out within the arc of the dish will be amplified to forty kilometres by the time it gets to Princess.' A sly grin came over her face. 'Besides that, the deviation angle is incorrect.'

'Like it is in the tracking station at Laroque?'

'Precisely. Remember when we discovered that odd command in the autoboot programme?'

'That trigonometrical equation?'

'That's right. For some reason, it was built into the original programme. My guess is that the programme was indeed developed for weather observation purposes and someone discovered what Princess was capable of. Possibly someone inside the Consortium that started the war.'

'And they moved the satellite?'

'Possibly. A more likely explanation is that there was a fault during the launch and it went into the wrong orbit by accident. Two years ago, they were all set to abandon the project, don't forget. I think it was then that they realised the scanning pattern was more useful when it could keep an eye on the whole length of what was the Iron Curtain.'

'And they altered the programme to suit?'

'Yes. Just one line, unintelligible to most people, altered the data so that it read as if it was coming from a different part of the sky.'

'But you discovered it.'

'Only after they tried to kill me. Up until then, I was quite happy to accept things as they appeared to everyone else. Do the Russian scientists know about the deviation angle?'

Jim shook his head. 'I didn't tell them.'

'Then we must get away before they find out or they will not let us go. While they think everything is okay, they won't be on their guard.'

'Then lie still and stop trying to get up. Our only hope of us getting out of here is to convince them that you will die if you remain. Until they are sure that the system can work without you, they will be reluctant to let you out of their sight.'

Suzette lay back. 'It's just so frustrating, lying here like this.'

'I think you'd better learn get used to it for a while,' said her brother as he approached.

Suzette gripped his hand firmly. 'Always the protective big brother, eh Roger?'

'Somebody's got to look after you as you seem incapable of going anywhere without being attacked.' He leant closer and whispered, 'We're leaving tomorrow at first light.'

'Where for?'

'England.'

'Why England?'

'It's the only place left not controlled by either the Americans or the Russians.'

'But how will we get there?'

'I've found a boat. It's moored beside the Shell depot and looks relatively undamaged.'

'Will it get us across the Channel?'

'I think so.'

'Will we all be able to get down to it? Without being captured?'

Roger nodded. 'Fortunately for us, the Russians are not terribly organised and seem to be only interested in this place. I wandered away this afternoon and managed to get right down to the river without being stopped.'

'Then let's do it. There are bound to be hospitals and things in places like Portsmouth or Southampton.'

'Are there people still alive in that part of the country?' asked Jim.

'It's possible. Al told me that there were no actual nuclear detonations in Britain. Parts of the country were affected by fallout but we should find a hospital somewhere that can look after Suzette.'

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#### FRIDAY 20th AUGUST - 1630 hrs.

As the afternoon wore on, the scientists realised that the data was coming through corrupted and adjusted the angle of the dish accordingly. Every second, Princess beamed down millions of bytes of data which the computer began to collate together. Jim watched them and realised the time would soon come when they would start to interpret the findings.

'They are working faster than I anticipated,' he said quietly to Roger as they sat on the low wall around the complex. 'Another couple of hours and they will know that they are barking up the wrong tree.'

Roger stood up. 'We've got to get Suzette away from here very soon.'

'Suzette won't help them any more than she helped the Yanks,' interrupted Gillian. 'She just wants peace.'

'I know that, Gill. The trouble is, a lot hangs on who gets it right first. It was bad enough when the Iron Curtain was where it was before. If they try to establish a new one right down the centre of France it could de-stabilise the whole world.'

'What about the data about the previous positions of warships, etc?'

'Suzette dumped it,' said Jim. 'There was no way she was going to let either side get their hands on that. How the Consortium got hold of it in the first place beats me.'

'Nevertheless, they got it. By persuasion or bribery, who knows?'

'But now it has gone forever,' said Gillian.

'Not entirely,' said Jim quietly.

'What?'

'Suzette did dump it, that I could tell for myself. However, when you give the command to delete a file from the disc, it merely wipes off the filename from the directory. The data is still there unless you re-format the disc or overwrite it with another programme.'

'You mean they could gain access to the all the American submarine launch codes?'

Jim nodded. 'If they know where to look.'

'And could the Americans do the same with the Russian launch codes?' asked Gillian.

'It's possible.'

'Then Suzette was right. As long as Princess is in orbit, she is a threat to world peace.'

'Only if they realise what they've got. So far, I don't think they've sussed it out.'

'Could they retrieve the data somehow?' said Roger.

'That depends how clever they are. Suzette certainly could.'

'My sister would never reveal that sort of information to the Russians.'

'Nor the Americans,' added Gillian.

'No,' said Jim soberly. 'Not willingly.'

'What do you mean?'

'I only know how I felt when the Philippe started to torture Marianne. When she started to scream, I would have done anything to stop her pain.'

'And you think the Russians might try the same thing to persuade Suzette to work for them?'

'If the stakes are high enough, even responsible people will stoop to a very low level to get what they want.'

'You are right,' said Roger thoughtfully. 'We must get Suzette away from here before they try to force her to reveal the information they need.'

'Tonight?'

'As soon as it's dark. We can't wait for morning. Not now.'

'How will we get her down to the river?'

'We will have to carry her on a stretcher of some kind. She certainly can't walk.'

'She may well try,' said Gillian.

'Then you'll have to fill her so high with drugs that she sleeps right through it. I'm not having her permanently disabled.'

'When and where do you want us to meet up?'

'I think we're going to have to stick pretty close to each other all evening. We'll just have to react to whatever opportunities present themselves.'

'They don't seem to worry about us wandering off, do they?'

'How far could we go? There is probably nothing left alive within hundreds of miles of this spot so this is also the only source of food in the area.'

'So, we're agreed. We keep close together and, at the first opportunity, we grab Suzette and run.'

Roger nodded. 'Something like that.'

Gillian looked up. 'Ssh! The Captain is coming.'

'Aha,' the Russian officer said cheerfully. 'So the British contingent is deep in conversation. The weather, eh? I understand it is the usual topic.'

Roger stood up and smiled. 'Jim was just telling us how well your scientists are doing. He says you should have established a solid database from which to work very soon.'

The Captain also smiled. 'That is so.' He turned to Jim. 'My people will be forever in your debt, Comrade Marshal.'

'Are your people still working?'

'Of course.'

'Are they going to stick at it all night?'

The Captain nodded. 'If necessary. They will not stop until the satellite is in our hands.'

'I admire their perseverance,' said Roger grimly.

'They are Russians, Comrade Blackman. Unlike the Americans, we do not give in so easily.'

He turned to leave but then stopped and faced them again, a look of triumph in his eyes. 'That brings me to another matter. We have heard reports that there are armed rebels still in the area.'

Roger looked puzzled. 'Rebels?'

'Terrorists.'

'But I thought you said they had all been eliminated.'

'Obviously not. I think that, for the time being, you should restrict your movements to within the confines of this building. My men will surround the compound to ensure that no-one harms any of you.'

'You mean that we are your prisoners?'

'Not prisoners, Comrade Blackman, just in protective custody. It is for your own good, you know.'

Roger forced a smile. 'We feel very safe in your hands, Captain.'

'That is good. My men are taking up their positions now so I think it best that you go inside.'

'Now?' asked Gillian.

The Captain grinned and they were reminded of the wolf in the story of Little Red Riding Hood.

'It would be most wise,' he said and the menace was barely discernible. 'I would hate any of you to be taken for the enemy and accidentally...' he paused, 'shot!'

#### **FRIDAY 20th AUGUST - 1700 hrs.**

'Well?' said Jim when the Captain had gone. 'What the hell do we do now?'

'There aren't really any terrorists left, are there?' posed Gillian.

'I doubt it,' said Roger. 'The Captain is just trying to frighten us into staying here until he gets orders as to what to do with us.'

'And we have no weapons of any kind, have we?'

Roger turned suddenly and grabbed her by the shoulders. 'Gill, I could kiss you.'

A wry smile came over the young vet's lips. 'Be my guest. Just don't let my Jim see you doing it.'

He ignored her playful seduction. 'Listen. I want you to fill Suzette so full of dope that she would sleep through an earthquake.'

Gillian nodded. 'That can be arranged.'

'Marianne, descendez au l'étage au-dessous d'ici.' He looked at his watch. 'A minuit précicément, s'éteindz les phares extérieurs.'

Marianne grabbed his arm. 'Ou va-tu?'

He glanced up. 'En haut. Au toit.'

'Why are you going onto the roof?' asked Suzette as Gillian squeezed the total contents of a hypodermic into her arm.

'Because, little sister, at exactly midnight, Marianne is going to turn off all the outside floodlights. Then Gill and Jim are going to stagger out of here carrying you on a stretcher.'

'That doesn't answer my question,' she said drowsily. 'Why are you going up onto the roof?'

'Because I just remembered that in all the panic after we took this place from the Consortium and rescued Jim and Marianne, I left a friend lying on the edge of the parapet near to where the helicopter dropped us.'

'A friend?' Suzette said as her eyes slowly closed.

Roger kissed the end of her cute little turned-up nose. 'Yes. A good friend named Diablos!'

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#### **FRIDAY 20th AUGUST - 2345 hrs.**

All was quiet as the bewitching hour approached. Suzette was breathing easily on the makeshift stretcher onto which she had been firmly strapped. Jim was watching out of the main door as the guards stood talking beside the gateway in the perimeter fence. Other than a couple more round the other side, everyone else seemed to be asleep in the makeshift camp the Russians had erected.

'Okay?' whispered Roger.

'Just the two this side,' replied Jim.

'Right. Memorise the route away from here into your brain because when the lights go out, it will be pitch black. As soon as Marianne comes up from below to give you a hand, run like hell till you get to the Seine.'

'What about you?'

'Wait for ten minutes and if I haven't arrived, walk about half a mile further and you will see the boat. Start it up and then just follow the river downstream till you reach the sea. I'll catch up later somehow.'

'Okay. I've got that. Good luck!'

'And you.' He turned to Marianne. 'Douze heures, ma chérie. Bon chance!'

'Je t'aime,' she whispered in reply and turned towards the stairs leading down to the middle floor as Roger let himself out into the garage area.

Feeling his way along the wall, he came to the ladder fixed to the it. Taking a deep breath, he began to climb. The access hatch swung open easily and he clambered onto the roof which was still in total darkness though the complete perimeter was brilliantly lit by floodlights. As quietly as possible, he crept across the roof till he reached the front of the building and looked out over the edge. A hundred metres outside of the perimeter fence were the helicopters in a tight group with what looked like two men guarding. All was quiet. Feeling his way along the parapet, he soon found what he was looking for. It was fairly heavy but familiar as he opened a wooden case and extracted one of the finned cylinders and pushed it into the end of the tube. Carefully raising it onto his shoulder, he aimed and waited.

MARIANNE held her breath as she tiptoed down the steps and peered around the doorway into the security office. The monitors were all off and the room lit only by one dim desk-top lamp and the beam of light coming up from the control room from where she could hear the murmur of voices and the chatter of computer printers. Carefully, she tied her long hair in a tail behind her head and slipped surreptitiously across the room and opened the door to the equipment room. The re-started generator hummed to itself as she ran her eyes over the switchgear until she found what she was looking for. Her hand on the lever of the fusebox, she watched the seconds on her digital watch counting towards midnight.

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#### **FRIDAY 20th AUGUST - 2359 hrs.**

Roger adjusted his position slightly and aimed the hand-held missile-launcher they had brought from Laroque at the nearest helicopter. Soon, there was going to be one hell of a bang. After less than a minute of waiting, the whole area was suddenly plunged into dense darkness. He heard shouting in Russian, he saw faint movements in the darkness, he pulled the trigger. There was a twang as the wire-guided capsule was released and spun towards the target. Almost instantly, a brilliant flash of light lit up the night, there was an almighty explosion and the Russian helicopter literally disintegrated in a shower of flame and debris.

It would have taken a superman not to look in that direction and none of the Russian soldiers were made in that mould. Instantly, their night-sight was gone and Jim could have driven Suzette out in a lorry and not been seen - nor heard with the roaring of flames and shouting of men who seemed to be rushing round in ever-decreasing circles trying to put out the fire and work out who was attacking them at one and the same time.

Suddenly, the second helicopter's fuel tank exploded in sympathetic detonation and the panic became absolute to try and move the third one out of danger. It was obviously their only means of getting back to base. Roger clambered down the external ladder and dropped to the ground and then had to flatten himself against the wall as a couple of soldiers rushed by. However, he was not discovered and as soon as they were

past, he ran for the gate, every moment expecting a shout or a bullet, but none came as he pounded down the track in pursuit of the others. He found them at the river and took the back end of the stretcher from Gillian and Marianne.

'La bateau est la bas,' he said quickly with a nod in the general direction of the oil depot. 'Allez et entrez la. You, too, Gill. Run and get into the boat. We'll be right behind you.'

The two girls ran off into the darkness along the muddy tow-path while Jim and Roger staggered and slithered along with their burden - the wide stretch of glistening water on their right reflecting the dim light from the partially-obscured moon. The shape of the boat loomed dark and sinister as it poised like an overweight black swan alongside a small jetty near the oil depot. Carefully, they got Suzette aboard and down into the small cabin. Gillian and Marianne made her comfortable while Jim cast off the ropes and Roger ran his pencil torch over the controls. Slowly, they drifted out into mid-stream and then were caught by the swiftly-flowing current.

'We don't need an engine with the river flowing like this,' muttered Jim in the darkness.

'We will soon,' said Roger, 'else we're liable to run aground or crash into something.'

The boat - a large covered-in launch - continued to pick up speed as they drifted into the right-hand bend alongside what had been the Renault Car factory. The Forêt de Roumare looked black and ugly on their right as they swept round the headland and into the long strait towards Duclair. Completely out of sight and earshot of Rouen, Roger cranked the emergency handle to start the engines. They burst into life immediately and, as he pushed forward the levers, the twin screws bit into the water and nudged them into a straight line. The bow lifted and they left a luminescent wake behind them as they headed northwards.

'What do you know of Le Havre?' Roger shouted above the roar.

'Only been there once,' Jim responded.

'Do you remember anything about the layout of the docks and river mouth?'

Jim shook his head. 'Very little. I wasn't really watching at the time. All I recollect was thinking how wide the estuary was. We docked on the north side if my memory serves me well.'

'Anything else.'

'No. Except for the barrage. There's a concrete barrier surrounding the dockyard and what looked like a long boom marking the inlet. Is that any help?'

Roger laughed. 'Any information is helpful, Jim. I doubt if there will be any marker buoys still lit. A sharp burst of electromagnetic radiation does horrible things to electrical appliances. That's why I had to crank this engine. The battery charger circuits were fused to hell.'

'So we're lucky the engine started at all.'

'If this boat had a petrol engine instead of a diesel one, we would be paddling across the Channel.'

It seemed odd and eerie to see no lights whatsoever on the hillsides and shadowy villages. The Pont de Brotonne at Caudebec cast an almost frightening shadow across the water as they roared beneath it using the lighter water as their only guide as to direction.

'Café?' said the voice behind them and they took the steaming mugs from Marianne.

Soon, Jim went below and Roger slipped his arm around Marianne's slim waist as they stared ahead into the darkness. After Victor Hugo's Villequier, the river began to widen and they passed several abandoned barges jammed against piers and both banks. The car ferry at Port Jérôme was still loaded with vehicles and poised in mid stream like a kind of dark iceberg as they slowed slightly to pass it by without snagging any guide cables there may be.

'Qu'est qu'il-y-a?' she suddenly said, looking round.

'Comment?'

'Je ne sais pas. Il a été un bruit.'

Roger pulled the levers to throttle right back and the boat settled down into the water and all became quiet except for the bubbling of the engine on tickover.

She pointed to the lights not far behind them. 'Voilà! - Les phares.'

'Tenez bon,' he instructed and pushed the levers forward, spinning the boat around in a wide arc towards the abandoned ferry.

As the lights in the sky approached, Roger tucked the boat in behind the ferry and Marianne shivered at the thought of the bodies on board - their raft's movements paralysed by the detonation and the people showered with the radioactive fallout from which they could not hide.

Jim poked his head out of the cabin doorway. 'What's going on?'

'Helicopter,' said Roger quietly, wondering why because the noise inside the flying machine would obviously drown out their voices even if they were shouting.

The three of them watched it approach, the bright spotlight sweeping to and fro across the rushing waters.

'Will they see us?' asked Jim.

'I hope not. We are lucky the river is flowing so fast else our wake would have been dead easy to see.'

He paused as the noise grew louder and they began to feel the wind from the downdraught of the rotors and

watched it rippling up the already tormented surface of the water.

'It's a shame you didn't bring Diablos with you,' said Jim.

'I couldn't carry it and help you at the same time. Anyway, to knock out a couple of parked helicopters is one thing, to shoot one out of the sky loaded with men is quite another. We don't want to start another war, do we?'

'I suppose not.'

'I just hope they don't have infra-red detectors,' Roger then shouted above the noise.

'What would infra-red detectors do?'

'Pick up the heat output from our engine and even the warmer water in our wake.'

'Is it likely they will have this device?'

'That depends on whether this is the remaining 'copter from Rouen or another sent from their main base, wherever that is.'

'Could it make a difference?'

'Possibly. The three at Rouen looked like fairly simple transport helicopters, used to ferry those troops across to the tracking station. They didn't expect any kind of a reception as everyone in the vicinity had been killed. So they may not have much in the way of weaponry.'

'How soon will we know?' Jim shouted as the roaring sound became unbearable.

'Any second now,' said Roger as the helicopter passed overhead and, for a second, they were bathed in harsh, white light.

Crouching down under the canopy, the three faces looked up as the noisy dark shape with its brilliant beam continued downstream without hesitation.

'Phew!' said Jim.

Roger just let out his breath slowly as the night gradually became quiet once more.

'How did they know we had a boat?' asked Jim. 'And how did they know we would come this way?'

'They may have seen the boat moored earlier and we were not likely to go upstream, were we?'

'Nous sommes sans danger?' asked Marianne.

Roger shrugged. 'Je ne sais pas, me chérie.' He smiled at Jim. 'There's only one way to find out.'

So saying, he pushed forward the throttle controls and the boat rapidly accelerated, turning downstream into the near darkness.

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### **SATURDAY 21st AUGUST - 0500 hrs.**

The sky behind them was tinged slightly with faint grey streaks as they slowed to enter the last, long, sweeping curve towards the suspension bridge at Tancarville.

'We're going to have to pull in somewhere, soon, or they will spot us a mile off. Our wake will stand out like a sore thumb in daylight.'

'No more signs of that helicopter?' asked Gillian as she ascended the companionway with more coffees.

Roger shook his head as he took his from her outstretched hand. 'Strangely enough, no. I half expected them to return upstream to double-check. By the way - how's Suzette?'

'Seems okay. She came round a while ago and I explained what we've done.'

'And?' he said as he sipped the hot fluid while Jim took the wheel.

'She laughed. Marianne's chatting girl-talk with her at the moment. I wish I could remember more of my GCSE French.'

Jim grinned. 'I thought my French was good but those two rattle on like an express train.'

'Our mother was French, don't forget,' reminded Roger. 'Although she was not a well woman and died soon after giving birth to Suzette, her last wish was that my sister be brought up bilingual as I had been.'

'Your father was in the army in France, wasn't he?'

Roger nodded. 'That's where he met our mother. The more I think about it, Marianne and I shouldn't be considering marriage.'

'Why not?'

'She is our cousin. My mother, Juliette de Bosville, had two sisters, Pascal and Dominique, and a brother - Raoul. Marianne is Uncle Raoul's daughter.'

'A bit academic now, isn't it? Particularly when there's no-one else.'

'Wasn't it Marianne's father who ran the restaurant near Laroque?' said Gillian.

'It certainly was. He's with the survivors at Cirque de Navacelles at the moment, hiding out from the Americans.'

'What happened to the other two girls?' asked Gillian. 'Your aunts?'

'Dominique died during the last few months of the war, I'm afraid. Raped to death by German soldiers.'

Gillian shuddered. 'How awful. Poor woman.'

'Woman?' sniggered Roger. 'She was twelve years old.'

'Good God!'

'The Germans were desperate to find my father whom the family were hiding.'

'And the other one?'

'Pascal? She was also raped but survived long enough to give birth to a German bastard.' Roger paused, deep in thought. 'I wonder what happened to cousin Emile.'

'The child?'

'Yes. He grew up tough, did Emile. Being half-German straight after the war didn't help.'

'I bet it was terrible for him.'

'He survived,' said Roger with a sly grin. 'He set up his own company, Guillemot Internationale, and became one of the richest men in France. He had a daughter, too. Good grief, she must be a teenager by now.' He turned and put his head down the companionway. 'Marianne. Quelle age a Simone?'

'Elle a dix-huit ans,' came the voice from below.

Roger straightened. 'Eighteen? Don't they grow up quickly? Do you know, when I last saw her, she was the spitting image of Suzette when she had been the same age?.'

'I wonder what happened to them when the bombs fell,' thought Gillian sadly.

'Emile and Simone? Killed, I guess. In fact, the only member of our family liable to be left alive is Uncle Mike.'

'Would that be your father's brother?'

'Yes. He was something hush-hush in the army until he retired.'

'Retired? Is he that old?'

Roger laughed. 'No. Forty, perhaps. He was ill after Aunt Mary died. He's a writer now and lives with his son, Jonathan. He has also got a daughter who is married and living in Darlington. I think, when this is all over, I'd like to see them again.'

'The bridge is just coming up,' warned Jim.

Roger glanced up at the swiftly-lightening sky. 'We're going to have to park up soon. We're far too obvious.'

'How far to the docks at Le Havre?' asked Gillian.

'No more than three miles, at a guess. Gill, now that it's getting lighter, see if you can find any maps or charts in the cabin. There must be some, somewhere.'

'Will do,' said the English girl and disappeared again.

The two men finished their coffees and stared ahead as the estuary began to widen sharply ahead of them.

'We have three choices,' said Roger as he put down his cup and stared at the locks and the ghostly shapes of the gantries on his right.

'Three?'

'Yes. Either we pull in here and lie low among the other boats in the lockways; we risk running for another ten to fifteen minutes and hope we make the docks at Le Havre; or...'

'Or...?'

'Or we just keep on going.'

'Across the Channel? In daylight?'

Roger nodded. 'At least we'll be able to see where we're going.'

'And so will everyone else.'

'That's a risk we'll have to take, if that is our choice.'

'Let's ask the others.'

'If we do that, we rule out number two. If we hope to reach Le Havre before it gets too light, we'll have to make full speed from now on.'

Jim peered all around at the flat expanse of water which was growing wider by the minute. 'Well, there's no sign of anyone about. How would it be if we high-tailed it for the docks and then rested while we put it to the others? We might even be able to refuel there.'

Roger got to his feet and took the controls from Jim. 'Excellent idea.' He pushed the throttles fully forward. 'Come on, baby. Now that we've found some open water, let's see how you can really go.'

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### **SATURDAY 21st AUGUST - 0530 hrs.**

The launch vibrated under full power as it raced down the channel towards the sea. Jim frowned and, picking up the binoculars, focussed on the dockyard to starboard.

'Lights,' he suddenly said.

'Where?'

Jim looked at the map Gillian had found and then pointed. 'On the flatlands this side of the petrochemical works. Can you see them?'

'Damn. Now we'll have to go back to Tancarville.' He began to slow in order to turn.

Jim touched his arm. 'Not necessarily. We're partially hidden by the barrier at the moment. Can we go on to Honfleur? From the map, it looks as if there is a marina of sorts there.'

'How far?'

'Half a mile, perhaps. We should see it soon.'

'Let's hope we make it before it gets too light to hide.'

The wake stretched out behind the boat as they hurtled westwards with the lighter sky behind them. Jim kept scanning the sea and sky but it remained clear.

'Nearly there,' said Roger. 'This looks like it just ahead.'

With a tight turn, they swerved around the breakwater and into Honfleur harbour. The outer haven was full of boats of all sizes and Roger edged between two of a similar size as Jim lashed the rope around a convenient point.

'Nous restons-ici pendant quelque temps?' asked Marianne as she let her long, fair hair out of its band.

Roger nodded. 'Oui. Jusqu'à nous mangeons le petit-déjeuner.'

'Mais nous n'avons pas la nourriture.'

'Jim, Marianne says we've got no food on board. Would you like to try and locate something to eat for us?' He looked around. 'There must be some shops along the quayside.'

'I'll find something.'

'Just canned stuff, Jim. Anything else will either be rotten or affected by radiation.' He smiled. 'Take Marianne. She'll understand what's on the labels.'

'Okay.' Jim jumped onto the next boat which was nudging the stone steps up to the jetty and then turned and held out his hand to Marianne.

The young woman hesitated.

'C'est bon,' reassured Roger. 'Chercher le petit-déjeuner formidable.'

Marianne smiled and then took Jim's outstretched hand. 'D'accord.' She turned to Roger and blew him a kiss. 'A bientôt.'

Roger smiled and shook his head as he watched the two of them clamber across the neighbouring boat and climb the steps.

'Did I hear someone mention breakfast?' said Gill as she popped her head up.

'Jim and Marianne have gone searching for food. How's the invalid bearing up?'

'Very well, considering we've been rocked about and spun around so many times we don't know which way we're pointing any more.'

Roger laughed as he stepped down the companionway. 'It'll soon be over. With a bit of luck, we should be in England by this time tomorrow.'

MARIANNE held on tightly to Jim's hand as they peered inside the shops, wondering what they might find besides food. A supermarket produced all the canned stuff they wanted as they loaded it into a trolley. It was as they were just coming out into the street again when the men struck. There were three of them and Jim fell to the ground at the blow to the back of his head.

'Now what have we here?' said one in heavily-accented English to Marianne as he hooked his finger in the top of her tee-shirt and pulled her roughly towards him. 'Hans. Dump the feller in the drink while Billy and I take this pretty one out the back and have a little fun.'

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### **SATURDAY 21st AUGUST - 0610 hrs.**

Had Marianne stopped to think about what she might or might not do given that precise set of circumstances, she would probably never have done it. Perhaps where the three men came from, the girls they attacked didn't have knees. It could be that neither did they have teeth, nor bottles of wine in their hands. Marianne had all three - knees, teeth and wine bottles - and she instinctively used them, in that order. The one called Hans dropped his hands to his dented groin before descending slowly to his knees with a loud groan while Billy screamed and clutched at his profusely-bleeding hand. Instinctively, Marianne cried out and then whirled around, bottles flailing like clubs in her outstretched arms until one of them connected, sending a shower of broken glass and dry Barsac all over the one who had first spoken.

'Bloody hell,' said Billy as he wrapped his handkerchief around his wound. 'She's a sodding demon.'

'Sortez!' she shouted at them. 'Sortez! Tout de suite!'

'What did she say?' asked Hans as he painfully tried to straighten up.

'I think she said "get lost".'

'I loves a girl with spirit,' said Carl as he wiped the wine from his face and started towards her again.

'Then try this one for size,' said a voice from the doorway as Gillian lunged at him with an oar, catching him



full in the stomach and pitching him to the floor.

Billy and Hans turned towards her, a look of ill-will on their faces, until they saw Roger. I don't think it was his expression that worried them nor the way he nonchalantly leant on the door jamb. No, to this day, I firmly believe it was the Véry pistol he held loosely in his hand.

'We are having fun, aren't we?' he said as Jim staggered to his feet, shaking his head. 'You all right, Jim?'

Jim placed his hand on the back of his head and then looked down at his palm. There was no blood. He nodded. 'I think I'm still in one piece.'

'You're English?' said Billy as Gillian gave Jim the once-over.

Roger nodded. 'Of course. And what were you about to get up to with my cousin?'

'Nuffink,' he said quickly. 'We was just having a game.'

'Where are you from?'

'Off one of the ships over the water.' He pointed. 'We was in the brig when the war came, stoned out of our minds after a party ashore. When we comes round, everyone else on board is dead an' gone.'

'How many more survived?'

'Just us three. When we finally broke out of the cabin we was locked in and got up on deck, everyone had died 'cept us.'

'So you came here?'

'There was nuffink in L'arve but ghosts so when the Ruskies came, we left.'

'Ruskies?'

'Them Russian soldiers. They come off a big boat wiv 'elicopters and took over the dock buildings. They never knew we was there so we 'id an' then come over 'ere to look fer food like as what you done.'

'What were you planning to do next?'

'Get a boat, I reckon. Hans and Carl is from Rotterdam but they speaks fair English. We was gonna sail across in one of them there yachts moored out in the 'arbour.'

Gillian looked daggers at them. 'When you're sober enough.'

'We gotta drink the wine, ain't we?' he said with a grin. 'After all, it's free.' He turned to Marianne. 'We're sorry, luv. We never meant to 'urt yer or nuffink.'

'Cochon!' spat the french girl. 'Vous êtes des pourceaux crasses.'

The men noticeably recoiled from her verbal attack while Roger looked away in an attempt to prevent the smile in his mind reaching his lips.

'Well,' he finally said. 'Now we've got all the food we came for, we'll get back to our boat.'

Billy grabbed his arm. 'You ain't sailing to England, are ya?'

Roger nodded. 'Eventually. We were about to discuss whether to leave immediately or wait till tonight when we heard Marianne shouting.'

'Can we come wiv yer?'

'I'm afraid not. We only have a small launch and it's only big enough for the five of us. I suppose you could get another boat and sail with us if you can manage to sober up before we decide to leave.'

Billy looked suspicious. 'You said five of yer. Who's the uvver one?'

'My sister. She's still on the boat.'

'Strewf. Where'd you find so many good-looking women?'

Roger smiled. 'We didn't find them anywhere. They were ours to start off with.'

Billy leant forward conspiratorially. 'Ave yer seen any uvver women about?'

'I'm afraid not,' said Roger as he backed from the smell of drink.

The sailor looked genuinely sad. 'Shame. Still, probably lots of 'em across the Channel.'

'You could be right. However, if you don't mind, we'd like to go and have something to eat.'

Billy stepped back. 'Help yourself, Captain. Be my guest, we was leavin' anyways on.'

'What a strange bunch of fellers,' said Gillian as they pushed the full supermarket trolley back along the quayside towards their boat in the first light of day.

'Typical of many merchant seamen, I expect,' said Roger. 'I don't suppose they meant any real harm.'

'Don't you?' said Jim, rubbing the back of his head. 'I think my skull's broken.'

Gillian laughed. 'It's okay, I checked. If they were really evil, they would probably have killed you.'

'They were going to,' said Jim. 'One of them said to drop me into the harbour.'

'I doubt if you would have drowned,' said Roger, peering over the edge of the jetty. 'It's low tide at the moment and no more than a metre or so deep. The shock of hitting the water would probably have revived you.'

'Don't forget what they were about to do to Marianne,' Gillian reminded him.

Roger glanced at his cousin. 'Proper little she-cat, isn't she?'

Marianne sensed the observations and scowled. 'Animeaux!'

'What are you lot laughing about?' said Suzette as they carried the foodstuffs across to their boat. 'I could hear you all the way across the harbour.'

'Good grief,' said Roger suddenly, dropping his full cardboard box onto the deck. 'I'd forgotten about the Russians.'

'The Russians?' said Gillian with a frown. 'But they're away on the other side of the estuary.'

'Maybe so. But they've developed some pretty sensitive listening devices these days. If they're keeping an ear out for us, they could easily hear us over that distance against a background of total silence.'

'What shall we do?'

'I suggest we stay below in the cabin for the time being. The engine should have cooled down a bit by now so it will not be so easy to identify by infra-red, especially now that the sun is up and warming every exposed surface.'

'What about those three fellers on the dock?'

'I'm afraid they will have to take their chances. I suspect the Russians know about them already and will have dismissed them as harmless.'

'So we stay put for the time being?'

'We may have to. Anyway, let's eat first and talk later.'

They did. Gillian and Marianne cooked baked beans and sausages on the tiny calor-gas stove while the two men pored over maps and charts of the Seine Estuary and English Channel they had found in one of the other boats.

'Either Portsmouth or Southampton look like our best bet to start off with. There must be decent medical facilities available at one or the other of them.'

'What did the good doctor recommend?'

'He said that Stoke Mandeville Hospital is the best in England. However, it is in Buckinghamshire and will be difficult to get to from the sea.'

Gillian sighed as she put plates on the table. 'It's a pity that Al couldn't have taken Suzette in his helicopter.'

'Stop talking about me as if I'm not here,' said the girl in question with a wry grin. 'Al couldn't fly me because he had been ordered back to his carrier. Anyway, I don't think the Russian Captain would have let him take me away.'

'You're probably right,' said Roger and then suddenly lifted his head. 'Listen!'

'What is it?' whispered Gillian.

'Engines.'

'Sounds like helicopters,' said Suzette. 'And they're getting closer.'

'They are,' confirmed Jim, peering through the curtains. 'There's two of them.'

'Come away from the portholes,' ordered Roger. 'Don't let them see any movement.'

'But we need to know what they're up to,' said Gillian.

'If they spot us, we'll soon know what they're up to and won't be able to do a thing about it.'

'Quiet. They're almost overhead.'

The roaring reached a crescendo as the two Russian helicopters hovered above the harbour, circling like starving vultures. Suddenly, there was an almighty explosion and the boat felt as if it had been lifted by a giant hand before settling again into the boiling water. There was another detonation and then another until, with a high-pitched whine, the helicopters rose, hovered for a while, and then gradually disappeared over the harbour wall and it became quiet once more.

Gillian groaned as she slowly picked herself up from where she had fallen, red patches all over the front of her tee-shirt.

'Gill,' cried Suzette in alarm. 'You're hurt.'

The English girl looked down, probed the red spots for a moment before licking her fingers and laughing. 'It's tomato ketchup.'

'Ah well,' said Jim as he put his arm around her shoulders and looked at her splattered tee shirt. 'Bang goes breakfast.'

'Literally,' said Suzette and they laughed once more as Roger popped his head out for a look around.

He was back in seconds, a grim look on his face.

Marianne frowned at his expression. 'Qu'est qu'il-y-a?'

He shook his head. 'The three sailors are dead.'

The cabin fell silent. 'Dead?' said Gillian eventually.

'It looks as if they tried to sail a yacht away. There's little left of it now.'

'Do you think the Russians heard us and then came and killed those men?'

'Probably. Let's hope they now think there's no-one else left.'

'But why did they kill those sailors? They were drunken layabouts all right but certainly no threat to the Russian forces.'

'Maybe not. But perhaps they just didn't want any witnesses if they eventually did catch up with us.'

'It's possible they thought those men were us,' said Jim thoughtfully.

Roger shook his head. 'I doubt it. They desperately want Suzette alive, don't forget.'

They were all silent for some time.

'So we won't be able to leave here yet?'

'Not in daylight. I recommend we try to get some sleep during the rest of the day and then leave at sunset. If we paddle out of here and then drift down the channel with the outgoing tide, we should be between them and the setting sun before we have to start the engine. With a bit of luck, we should make it across by morning.'

'Mmm,' agreed Suzette. 'With a bit of luck.'

#### **SATURDAY 21st AUGUST - 0730 hrs.**

For the next hour or so, Roger and Jim carried across several full cans of fuel and topped up the tanks on the boat while Gillian and Marianne cleared up the mess from the explosion that had rocked the boat. They also stocked up with suitable foodstuffs and other items from the abandoned shops in Honfleur. At eleven-fifteen, it began to rain.

'Typical Channel weather,' grunted Jim as he pulled the cabin door closed behind him. 'Those Reds could sneak right up on us in this and we'd never see or hear them coming.'

Roger sat up straight. 'Jim, you're brilliant.'

The electronics man looked puzzled. 'What did I say?'

'I think what my brother means,' clarified Suzette. 'Is that if we can't see or hear them, neither can they see nor hear us.'

Gillian jumped to her feet. 'You mean leave now?'

'Why not? Suzette is right. We are totally invisible in this downpour. Not only that, the patter of the rain will cover the sounds of our departure.'

'Then what are we waiting for?'

Roger looked around the group. 'Well?'

They agreed to go as soon as the tide started to flood.

'We need to head due west for about five miles to make sure we clear the Seine Boom and also miss Cap de la Hève. If we then go north-north-west by compass bearing, we should hit the south coast of England somewhere close to Portsmouth.'

'Would we not be better off heading more eastwards? We could then go through the Straits of Dover and head for London.'

Roger looked at the map and then shook his head. 'Three problems. Firstly, it will take a lot longer and I'm not sure how long Suzette can last out. Secondly, look at all those tidal sandbanks on the chart. I'm no sailor but I've heard enough about the South Goodwins to want to stay well clear of them.'

'Thirdly?'

'Thirdly, we know now the Russians are at sea in this area and, from what Al told us, the American fleet is operating further north. If we try to negotiate the Straits, we stand a good chance of getting ourselves caught by one or the other of them.'

Jim stroked his chin. 'Okay, Portsmouth it is. How long, do you reckon?'

Roger shrugged. 'Depends on the direction of currents and the like.'

'From the south-west,' said Suzette.

He frowned at her.

'Princess has been observing them for long enough. The main stream of water in the Channel is affected somewhat by the tides but is predominantly from the south-west towards the north-east - just like the prevailing winds.'

Her brother smirked. 'Know-all!'

Suzette shrugged. 'It was my job.'

'We're going to get wet,' observed Jim. 'There's not a lot of cover when you're at the wheel.'

'We'll have to live with that, I'm afraid. We have little choice in the matter.'

'I don't mind helping,' said Gillian. 'I think even a out-of-work vet can aim a boat in open water.'

Roger grabbed a waterproof coat he had "borrowed" from a shop in Honfleur. 'Then England, here we come.'

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#### **SATURDAY 21st AUGUST - 1200 hrs.**

By noon, the launch was beyond the breakwater and drifting swiftly towards the open sea. Half an hour later, Roger calculated they had probably drifted far enough out to sea to be safe and started the engine. For an hour, they ran on little more than tickover so as to keep the sound of the engine down before gradually opening her up and running slightly left of north. The sea wasn't particularly rough - just a little choppy - and the bows bashed their way through the white-capped waves with a steady momentum as the grey drizzle

enshrouded them, making them and everything around them invisible. Roger took over again from Jim at two accompanied by Marianne who looked so slight that the wind would blow her away without a moment's hesitation.

'A quelle heure nous-arriverons a L'Angleterre?' she asked.

Roger looked at his watch and then the chart. 'A cinq heures, peut-être.'

'D'accord.' She smiled. 'Je t'aime.'

Roger kissed the tip of her nose. 'Allez-en desous.'

Marianne stood on tip-toe to kiss him before going below as instructed when she looked aft over his shoulder and frowned.

Dropping back to her feet, she peered into the sheets of rain and then pointed. 'Qu'est que c'est?'

Roger turned his head but could see nothing but grey mist. 'Un autre bateau?'

'Non.' She held her index finger a centimetre from her thumb. 'Une petite chose.'

Roger stared back but still couldn't see anything so he put his head down the hatch. 'Jim, can you give me a hand a minute?'

Jim ascended at the run, pushing his arms into his waterproofs as the young girl leant on the stern rail, peering behind them. 'What is it?'

'I don't know. Marianne thinks she saw something behind us just now.'

'Another boat?'

'That's what I asked her but she said not. Something small, she said.'

Jim looked puzzled. 'Small? Out here?'

Roger shrugged. 'I'm only repeating what she told me.'

Jim sat down. 'Okay, I'll keep a look-out. You want to try circling?'

Roger nodded and threw the wheel over, opening up the engine to full. The boat veered around in a tight arc but nothing was visible except for a grey sea capped by a grey wall of rain.

'Try shutting off the engine for a minute,' Jim said when they were more or less back to square one. 'See if we can hear anything.'

'Excellent idea,' said Roger as he eased back the levers and the boat settled in the water. All three of them strained to hear but, other than the hissing of the rain and the lapping of waves against the hull, all was silent.

'Did she imagine it?' said Jim quietly.

Roger glanced sideways at his cousin. 'Anything's possible, but it's not at all like Marianne to cry "wolf".'

Jim agreed so, for ten more minutes, they waited and then slowly circled again before resuming their original course. After an hour, their eyes hurt from straining to see anything in the water but themselves.

'Shame there's no radar,' murmured Jim.

'This launch was not really built for the sea, Jim. Probably just for running the directors of Shell up and down the Seine. Anyways, even if the boat did have radar, the radiation burst might well have blown all the integrated circuitry.'

'What time is it?'

Roger glanced at his watch. 'Just after four. By my rough and ready calculations, we should strike land in another hour or so.'

Jim smiled wryly. 'Not too hard, I hope.'

'Let's hope the rain eases a little as we get nearer.' He looked up at the sky. 'Though this looks set in for the rest of the day.'

Jim's mouth dropped open and his eyes went wide as he stared out over the stern. 'L..look!'

Roger turned his head and did a double take, the boat wobbling about without guidance. 'Good grief!'

A head popped out. 'What's happening?'

'See for yourself,' said Jim.

Gillian stared at the tall, black object seemingly floating a couple of hundred metres behind and slightly to starboard. 'So Marianne was not seeing things after all?'

'It would seem not.'

She looked worried. 'What are we going to do?'

'What can we do? Wait, I suppose, and see what they do, whoever they are.'

'Do you think they've seen us?'

Roger grimaced. 'They could hardly miss us at this range, could they?'

'It's moving,' said Gillian suddenly.

She was right. As if by magic, the periscope moved to one side and then, very slowly and sedately, began to rise out of the sea. The periscope was followed by various antennae and then the main body as the ship rose to its full stature, frothy water cascading from its superstructure. The massive submarine gently surfaced alongside them, towering above them like an immense block of flats in the middle of the ocean. None of them said anything as they stared up at the enormous red star painted on the side.

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**SATURDAY 21st AUGUST - 1600 hrs.**

'They've found us,' said Gillian softly.

'Can't we turn and run for it?' whispered Jim.

Roger shook his head and throttled back. 'We must still be many miles off the south coast so we'd never get that far. This fellah's probably been tailing us all the way from Le Havre.'

A hatch opened in the side of the conning tower and a dozen sailors poured out and onto the deck, throwing ropes across to the comparatively tiny boat.

'They're armed to the teeth,' whispered Gillian as the men gestured for them to climb aboard.

'Do we obey?' asked Jim.

Roger looked at the others. 'I don't think we have much choice, do you?'

No-one disagreed so, ten minutes later, they had jumped the gap and were climbing down into the belly of the world's largest, most sophisticated nuclear submarine. They didn't understand a word spoken by the Russians but the gestures with the barrels of their automatic weapons were quite clear enough to indicate that they should enter the hatch and climb down the ladder. Suzette had been unstrapped from her stretcher so Jim and Roger carried her across between them and they were ushered within. No sooner were they inside and the hatch closed that various orders were shouted and the sounds of rushing water indicated they were diving once more below the surface of the English Channel.

'Come,' an officer called in English and they were led directly into a large changing area and herded together without formality.

'Strip!' he instructed. 'You be quick. Remove clothing.'

Roger hesitated and looked at the others.

The man stepped forward and grasped him roughly by the shoulder. 'You must obey. Take off your clothes. Hurry. Everything off.'

Reluctantly, Roger and Jim started to undo their shirts as the guns threatened. The girls were naturally more reluctant and one of the sailors raised his gun to strike out at Suzette.

Instinctively, Marianne stepped between them and grasped the gun barrel. 'Non! N'elle faites pas du mal.'

Girl and sailor confronted each other until the officer intervened and gave orders to the sailor who reluctantly withdrew. Marianne and Gillian helped Suzette as they stepped into the showers which came on as if by magic.

The water was warm and they were all given soap and the gestures indicated that they should use it. They did, puzzled but obedient. Eventually, the showers stopped and towels were brought, followed by sets of clean overalls. Dried and dressed, the group waited patiently.

'This way,' said the officer eventually and they followed him down a corridor, past the main control centre and into a large stateroom where two men awaited them.

'Greetings, my friends,' said the tall one who was smiling. 'I am pleased we are meeting once more.'

'Andrei Narovic,' said Roger slowly.

'Welcome aboard Malinov One,' said the cheerful Colonel. 'This is the first time you are coming on board my ship, no?'

'It is an honour,' said Roger warily. 'But how did you find us? I thought we had got away from your people.'

Colonel Narovic slapped him on the back. 'Don't be so unhappy, my friend. I knew that you would sail for England.' He indicated his colleague. 'You remember Major Gobonev?'

'How could I forget?' said Roger as he nodded and shook hands.'

The Major clicked his heels. 'It is a pleasure to meet you again, Comrade Blackman.'

Roger looked up at the sound of a muffled thud.

'Your boat,' he explained. 'I'm afraid it was too dangerous for us to allow it to remain.'

'Dangerous?'

'You have obviously not heard the full story,' said the Colonel. 'Please all be sitting down.'

They did and Gillian eased Suzette painfully into a comfortable chair.

'So,' said the Colonel, smiling at her. 'The delightful Miss Blackman. This is a pleasure about which I have been exciting myself for many days.'

'Many days?' she said. 'You knew all along?'

'I knew you had escaped from the Americans at Laroque. I was upset to hear that you were...injured...by the people from the Consortium. I also heard that you had died. I am so glad to find that such is not so.'

'And now you are here.'

'Oh, yes. Now we are here. Tell me, why did you run away from our people at Rouen?'

Roger answered. 'We had to try and get Suzette to a hospital where she could get proper medical attention. The doctor from Switzerland believes she might need an urgent operation.'

The Colonel stroked his beard. 'That is so, yes? Why England? Had you not heard of the contamination?'

Roger leant forward. 'Contamination?'

'Of course. Did your American friends fail to mention that? It was unfortunate that one of our own submarines was laying low in the English Channel when the falsified coded signals were transmitted via your Princess. He had primed his missiles by what he thought were orders direct from the Kremlin and was about to launch them when their boat was in collision with an American hunter-killer submarine under similar misguided instructions.'

'And?'

'Both craft exploded instantly. They were not close to land but the tidal wave was incredible along the south coast of England and the north coast of France and Belgium.' He grimaced. 'I'm afraid the Dutch will need to build new dikes.'

'But there was no sign of such a phenomenon at Le Havre or in the Seine estuary.'

'It was sheltered, you see, and escaped the worst of the deluge.'

'You mentioned contamination,' reminded Suzette.

'Ah, yes. That is why it was necessary to have you shower and change your clothes. The sea in the English Channel is high in radiation.'

'It wasn't noticeable to us,' Jim said suspiciously.

'You were headed for Plymouth, no?'

Roger frowned. 'No - Portsmouth.'

'Then you were going in quite the wrong direction. Probably due to the changes in the magnetic field because of the radiation.'

'We were not headed north?'

'Far from it, my friend. In another three hours, if you had kept the same course, you would have gone aground on the south coast of what you call Devon.'

'What else did the radiation do?' asked Suzette seriously.

'You really want to know?'

She nodded.

'The multiple detonation instantly evaporated an enormous amount of water and lifted it up into the mushroom cloud. I am afraid this resulted in a radioactive fallout over much of England.'

'How much?'

He looked at her for a long time without speaking and it was Major Gobonev who broke the silence. 'If you were to draw a line from the River Severn to the Wash, it is unlikely anything has survived south and east of that line.'

Suzette was horrified. 'London? The South-East? All dead?'

He nodded. 'I'm afraid so. The fallout was very heavy over that area. Neither the American fleet nor ourselves have raised any response whatsoever from that zone.'

'Good grief,' said Gillian. 'That's millions of people.'

'An estimated twenty million deaths in that area alone,' he said sadly. 'Plus the others.'

'Others?'

'If you were to draw another line - this time from roughly the Mersey to the Humber - approximately forty percent of the population south of that band died within forty-eight hours and thousands more are still dying daily.'

'And beyond that?'

'We have no information as yet. We have ships trying to reach them but they are being hindered by the Americans who have suspicions about our efforts to provide relief.'

'Like they did in France and Switzerland,' muttered Gillian.

'So it could be that the North is relatively unaffected?' continued Suzette.

The Colonel nodded. 'It is indeed possible.'

'We have to get Suzette to a hospital,' said Gillian.

'The best hospitals are within Russia,' said the Major proudly.

'That may be so,' said Roger. 'But we don't have the time to get her there. She must have attention very soon or she may die.'

'With respect, Comrade,' said Major Gobonev. 'Miss Blackman does not look very ill to me.'

'The damage is internal,' said Gillian. 'If you are in doubt, get your ship's surgeon to take a look at her.'

The Major looked at her for a moment and then pressed an button on an intercom. He spoke quickly in Russian and, when he had finished, he sat back and smiled. 'We shall see.'

'Where are you taking us?' asked Roger while they waited.

'We have arranged to meet with a surface vessel at 0800 hours tomorrow. From there, you will be flown direct to Moskva.'

'Moscow? Why Moscow?'

'So that Miss Blackman can inform our scientists as to where, precisely, Princess is situated.'

Suzette grinned broadly. 'They don't know?'

The Major leant forward. 'They do not know and you know why they do not know. When you get to Moskva, you will be telling them so that they do know.'

'Like hell!'

He looked puzzled. 'I'm sorry...'

'The precise whereabouts of Princess will remain a secret from both yourselves and the Americans so there can be peace. I will not allow the satellite to be used for military purposes.'

'But you told the Americans how to use it, didn't you?'

Suzette was adamant. 'No, Major, I did not.'

'Miss Blackman is correct,' said Jim. 'I can confirm that before she left, she irreversibly corrupted the data to prevent the Americans using it for their own ends.'

The Colonel now looked puzzled. 'You didn't tell them how to use Princess?'

Suzette laughed. 'Of course not, Colonel. If I had done so, then I would not hesitate to tell your people, too. A balance must be maintained - détente.'

He seemed thoughtful for a long time and they were disturbed by a man in a white coat with two assistants. Suzette was taken away and, while the examination took place, the others were given food and drink which they enjoyed.

'Que dit-ils?' asked Marianne eventually and Roger filled her in while they ate.

As they finished, the doctor returned, alone, and spent some time whispering to the Colonel who frowned throughout the conversation. When the medical man had gone, he sat thoughtfully for some time before pressing a button on the intercom and giving orders. The Major sat up straight and then challenged him. The challenge became a shouting match. The shouting match almost turned to a fight until the Colonel called for support. The Major departed with escort, very hot under the collar.

'I regret the intrusion,' said the Colonel. 'The Major and I do not agree in all things.'

'So I see,' muttered Roger. 'Where is Suzette?'

'Your sister is indeed very ill, my friend. The doctor has kept her in the sick-bay for the rest of the journey. She will be safer there.'

'Can we see her?' asked Gillian suspiciously.

Colonel Narovic smiled. 'Of course, my dear.' He stood up. 'Come, we will all be visiting her together.'

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### **SATURDAY 21st AUGUST - 1930 hrs.**

The United Nations Northern Task Force was spread out all over the North Sea in an attempt to regulate the to-ing and fro-ing of personnel and equipment to the most seriously-affected parts of Europe. It was an impossible task as so much of the Low Countries, France, Germany and Britain had been either damaged by blast, by flooding or by nuclear fallout. It was, therefore, quite simple for Malinov One to slip northwards, undetected.

As they got near, an ensign approached Colonel Narovic and whispered in his ear. He then gave instructions in Russian and, as the ensign left, he turned to Roger. 'We are approaching the Straits of Dover. I would be deeply honoured if you would accompany me to the bridge to see just how good Russian technology is today.'

Roger smiled genuinely. 'Thank you. I would like that.'

The only time Roger had seen the bridge of a submarine before had been in old war films and the like. The control centre of Malinov One bore not the slightest resemblance to his recollections. It was larger than he had imagined and he was surrounded by screens of all types. Instead of the old-fashioned depth-gauge, there was a screen which showed every single contour of the sea bed below them. TV monitors showed what was going on outside the rubber-coated hull.

'We have had to wait for high tide,' explained the Colonel. 'The Straits are very shallow and there is but one deep channel, here.' He pointed to a screen and Roger could see what he meant.

'And the black marks towards the other end?'

'American ships. You will notice that, although they are supposedly here as a peaceful relief force, the first thing they have done is to re-establish their security network.'

'And you are going to try and break through it?'

The Colonel smiled. 'That is what the Comrade Major and I were discussing earlier.'

Roger smiled to himself about the vehemence that had been shown during that "discussion". 'Major Gobonev does not seem to share your sentiments.'

'I'm afraid he is not a navy man but a political animal, Mr Blackman. Poor Micheel thinks that détente is something the French do whilst on a camping holiday.'

'What did he want you to do?'

The Major insisted that we stick to our original orders and go northward along the Atlantic coast of Britain where the Americans have not yet re-established their listening posts.'

'But you decided to come this way instead?'

He nodded. 'The journey is much shorter.'

'But more dangerous.'

'Of course. To get past the Americans undetected will be a challenge, even for Malinov One.'

'Are you going to keep to the deep-water channel?'

'Not all the way. That is what they will expect us to do. Instead, we are going to cut right across the sands before picking it up later.'

Roger glanced at the area indicated. 'That looks very shallow, even at high tide.'

'It is. But we shall still have at least two metres below us at periscope depth.'

'You must be very desperate to get us to Moscow to take a chance like that.'

Colonel Narovic was given a message on clipboard which he read and signed. He gave an order and the submarine began to move forward. He waited until they were relatively alone and then said 'We are not going to Moskva.'

Roger simply stared at him.

'My information is that the young lady would not survive the trip,' he explained.

'Then where...?'

The Colonel placed an arm around his shoulders. 'Mr Blackman, we Russians are not the bad people in the world. Within a matter of hours, your sister will be safe in a hospital in England.'

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#### **SATURDAY 21st AUGUST - 2300 hrs.**

The tension was high as the massive nuclear submarine edged through what had recently been the busiest waterway in the world. Now, except for military craft and abandoned shipping, it was virtually deserted.

'Right four,' called the Colonel as he watched the forward sonar reading closely.

'Right four,' repeated the helmsman and made the necessary adjustment.

The Colonel turned to Roger. 'We are now right in the bottleneck. Get through the next half an hour and we are - how your say? - house and dry.'

'This is the difficult part, isn't it?'

'It is,' the Russian said with a nod. 'The detonation in the Channel and subsequent tidal wave has rendered many of our charts useless. Sands have shifted somewhat and unlike a matter of weeks ago, we no longer have marker buoys and lightships to assist our course.'

'But we will be able to get through?'

'I hope so. However, we have passed the Sandettié Bank safely and this patch on the right is what is called by sailors the Varne. Even at high tide, it is only a matter of two or three metres deep.'

'And ahead?'

'The notorious Goodwin Sands. Not the best place in the world to bring a submarine, Mr Blackman.'

'I don't suppose it is.'

'After that, it will be tricky for a while passing where the Falls light vessel used to stand and then, immediately after that, the sea deepens considerably.'

'Contact astern,' said the Sonar operator suddenly.

The Colonel looked up from his charts. 'Size and speed?'

'Very large. Possibly a carrier or tanker. Converging at approximately three knots.'

'Clearance?'

'Estimated four metres.'

'Four metres?' said Roger. 'That's cutting it a bit fine, isn't it?'

The Colonel nodded. 'It is, because we have less than twenty metres total depth to play with. We will have to take the chance on its missing us.'

'Can't Malinov One outrun a tanker?'

'Not without making it very clear to everyone that we are here. So far, we seem to have passed undetected. I would like it to remain so, if that is possible.'

'Isn't it dangerous?'



'Of course.' He smiled. 'Don't look so worried. We should still have a minimum of three metres below us.'

'You are taking an awful chance for us, Colonel.'

'I am, aren't I?' He held down a switch and said over the tannoy, in Russian. 'All crew stand by.'

'How long?' said Roger as the faint sound of propellers was heard above and behind them without the need of a listening device.

'Two minutes,' said Colonel Narovic. He turned to the helmsman. 'Down one.'

'Down one it is, Comrade Colonel.'

The faint sound became a tremor that seemed to run right through the submarine as the surface vessel overhauled them and began to pass overhead.

'Clearance above?' the Colonel asked.

'Four metres, Comrade Colonel.'

'Below?'

'Two metres and level.'

'Very good. Hold at that.'

The whole submarine vibrated with the sound of the twin screws above as everyone held their breath.

'Carrier,' whispered the Sonar Operator. 'Signature sounds like USS Columbia.'

'Columbia?' said Roger. 'What is Admiral Davison doing right up here? He was in the Mediterranean only a few days ago.'

'Maybe he has orders to try to catch your sister from us.'

'I doubt it,' said Roger. 'Reception has been terrible since the exchange. Anyway, according to Al Slazinski, he sent that American senator packing. He is working for the UN now, not the US navy.'

'I still do not trust him.'

Roger smiled. 'Admiral Davison is very like yourself, Colonel. He wishes to prevent further hostilities just as much as you do.'

'Then why are his people trying to get access to this satellite so badly?'

'So that they can use it to locate further survivors in Europe.'

'We shall see,' the Colonel said grimly.

'Obstacle ahead,' called the Sonar operator suddenly.

'What is it?' said the Russian. 'Sandbank?'

'Niet. Looks like a submerged wreck of some sort.'

'Left ten.'

'Left ten,' repeated the helmsman.

'Clearance below?'

'Point five metres and closing.'

'Above?'

'Four metres.'

'Up two.'

The helmsman looked long and hard at his superior officer to make sure he had heard right before obeying. 'Up two, Comrade Colonel.'

The sound of the propellers was almost deafening and it reminded them all just how vulnerable even the latest and strongest submarine craft really still are.

'We're drifting with the surge,' said the Sonar operator suddenly and they felt the ship turn slightly sideways.

'Straighten up,' commanded the Colonel. 'Keep her amidships or we'll roll right over.'

'But the wreck...'

The Colonel saw the situation they were in as the speed seemed to accelerate from the drag of the larger ship above. 'Full reverse engines. Blow forward ballast.'

Despite his precautions, the bows began to dip as the water in the restricted sea lane surged and dragged the submarine along with it.

'Obstacle five hundred metres and closing,' said Sonar.

'Right fifteen and full ahead,' he suddenly said. 'Drive us through the gap between the wreck and the sandbank.'

Everyone held their breath as the submarine bravely fought to stay upright and clear of static obstacles.

'Vertical clearance restriction,' called Sonar. 'Reduced to two metres and closing.'

Colonel Andrei Narovic paused for the first time and consulted all the incoming data before reacting. 'Left ten. All stop engines. Flood tanks and drop us on the bottom.'

He was obeyed without question and Roger instinctively winced as the noise of the hull scraping the shingle bottom grew louder than that of the propellers immediately above the sail. Despite the flooded tanks and lack of forward drive, the drag still pulled the ship along, slithering and sliding across the sea bed while the unavoidable wreck loomed ever closer. The Colonel presses the tannoy switch. 'All crew make fast.'

Emergency collision stations.'

There was a louder grinding sound followed by a jarring crash as everything pitched forward. Men and loose objects scattered in confusion as the screens and lamps flickered. Roger felt himself falling as the submarine began to roll sideways. He managed to break his fall by hanging onto the table as the ship juddered to a standstill and all the lights went out.

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### SATURDAY 21st AUGUST - 2345 hrs.

Roger shook his head in the darkness and listened to the slight movements around him. It was obvious that Malinov One was no longer on the move but stationary in seventy-odd feet of water. This was not very deep at all by submarine standards but he remembered once being told that a person could drown in less than six inches of water. The lights flashed and flickered and then came on as the emergency batteries took over. So did the screens as men everywhere started to get to their feet.

Colonel Narovic pressed a switch. 'Damage control. Report situation immediately.'

The reports came in one-by-one and were all negative. It appeared that the submarine's hull was still intact despite the occasional creaks and groans.

'Reactor?'

'Stable, Comrade Colonel.'

'Stand-by systems?'

'Functioning correctly, Comrade Colonel.'

He turned to Sonar. 'Clear?'

The man nodded. 'Clear, Comrade Colonel. Surface contact maintaining original course and speed.'

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

'They didn't see us then?' said Roger.

'It would appear not, Mr Blackman. Either the radiation has affected their instruments or they were not looking because they simply did not expect anyone to be here.'

Roger smiled. 'That's understandable. Did we hit the wreck?'

'Fortunately not,' said the Russian. 'Nevertheless, this English sand is very solid when you hit it as hard as we did.' He looked around all the now-functioning screens. 'Slow reverse.'

'Slow reverse,' confirmed the officer and the ship vibrated slightly as the propellers fought to pull the submarine free of the sandbank. He looked up. 'No movement, Comrade Colonel.'

'Increase power.'

The man nodded and gave the order. Malinov One started the shudder until, with a lurch, it broke free and hung motionless as they cut the engines.

'Damage?'

'Negative,' came the eventual reply.

The Colonel grinned widely at Roger. 'In Russia we are making the submarines very strong.'

'So it would seem. I hope Suzette has stood up to it all as well as Malinov One seems to have done.'

Colonel Narovic clapped him on the shoulder. 'Then we shall go and see for ourselves.' He turned to his officer. 'Continue through under minimum power. The depth is greater from here onwards. Set course North East until clear of the Goodwins and then use the deep-water area as much as possible. I will be in the sick bay. Call me if you need me.'

'Very well, Comrade Colonel.'

Together, the two men walked down the corridor and opened the door to the room where Suzette was being cared for.

The man in the white coat raised his head at their entry. 'I do not like it, Colonel. She has started to haemorrhage badly. If she is to live, we must get to a hospital immediately.'

Roger dropped to Suzette's side as the Russians talked. 'How do you feel?'

The dark-haired girl forced a smile. 'Lousy.'

'We'll soon have you tucked up in a proper bed.'

'One that doesn't move?'

Roger grinned. 'Yes. One that doesn't move.'

'What did we hit?'

'Just a sandbank, my love. It was choice between that or some submerged wreck. Colonel Narovic is taking a lot of chances to try to help you.'

'He is a good man at heart. I wonder if he is married.'

Roger smiled. 'Fancy marrying a Russian naval officer then?'

'I could do worse.'

'You'll never marry, Suzette. The "Eternal Virgin" they used to call you at university.'

'Serves them right, filthy-minded bunch of perverts. I hope you and Marianne haven't...'  
He shook his head. 'We want to get all this over with first.'  
Suzette touched his face gently. 'You're as much a sentimental, old-fashioned fool as I am.'  
'We're a right pair, aren't we?'  
The Colonel coughed. 'Mr Blackman, I will leave you both together for a while. I must return to the bridge so that we can make more speed.'  
'Isn't that a little dangerous after what has already happened?'  
'Only if we remain submerged.'  
'Then...?'  
'My crew are about to catch their first glimpse of the surface of the North Sea at night.'  
Roger smiled once more. 'Watch out for the gas rigs.'  
'No trouble,' the Colonel said with a theatrical flourish. 'It is - how you English say? - lump of cake.'

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### SUNDAY 21st AUGUST - 0500 hrs.

Malinov One made good speed on the surface. As they passed the partly-submerged Smiths Knoll, they caught a glimpse of other shipping in the distance and then had to slow to weave their way through the maze of sandbanks and rigs off the coast of Norfolk. Suzette's condition deteriorated gradually throughout the night despite the constant care of the ship's surgeon and the ministrations of Gillian and Marianne. The sun was rising over Denmark as Roger joined the Colonel in the conning tower.

'Good morning. The wind is nippy here.'

'It will be warm later,' confirmed the naval man. He pointed to the line of hills and cliffs in the left distance. 'It is what you call the North York Moors.'

'We have come a long way north then?'

'It was necessary. I radioed to Hull but the hospitals there are full of radiation cases and are already working to capacity. It was recommended that we try a town called Middlesbrough. They are sending a helicopter to meet us in the bay.'

Roger smiled. 'It is a long time since I have been to Middlesbrough.'

The Colonel turned to face him. 'You know the town?'

'Only as a child. Every year, we used to visit my uncle and aunt in a village not far from there.'

'That would be Michael Blackman, no?'

Roger frowned. 'How do you know that?'

Andrei Narovic smirked. 'There is very little that Russian intelligence does not know. When I sent in my report to Moskva via Malinov Two, I received a coded signal by way of reply concerning the whole of your family. You were well-known to the KGB, my friend.'

'But we are not famous or spies or anything. Why on earth would Soviet intelligence have been interested in Suzette and I?'

'Because of your father and uncle.'

'My father was in the army but...'

'Your father was in the SAS.'

'What?'

'It was a carefully-kept secret. When he died in the Falklands, he was on a very secret mission before he was killed when that Exocet missile struck HMS Sheffield.'

'Secret mission? I don't understand.'

'Have you not spoken to Admiral Davison about this?'

'Admiral Davison?'

'It is because of his presence that I and my superiors are faced with a great number of coincidences.'

'Go on,' Roger prompted.

'I will list them in chronological order. Some events, I am sure you will be perfectly familiar with.'

'I guess so.'

'At the end of the Second World War, a young army intelligence officer is dropped by submarine into Southern France to try to hinder the possible retreat of Germans over the Pyrenees into Spain.'

'I know that much. John Blackman was my father and it was while he was there that he met my mother.'

He nodded. 'Juliette de Bosville, daughter of Petrone de Bosville - resistance leader. Descendant of the Duke and Duchess of Ramsden in England.'

Roger swallowed. 'You are indeed very well informed, Colonel Narovic.'

There was a glint in the Colonel's eye. 'I am knowing everything.'

'Everything?'

'I know that your father had a much younger brother who also served in the SAS.'

'Uncle Mike? Also in the SAS?'

'Did you never suspect?'

Roger shook his head. 'Never. He was so...'

'Kind?'

'Yes. Kindly and considerate. He and Aunt Mary were the best relatives Suzette and I could ever hope for.'

They had a cottage in a tiny village near here called Eggescliffe.'

'Until your Aunt died.'

Roger looked down. 'That was ten years ago.'

'The year your uncle retired from the army?'

'That's right. He was very ill afterwards. He writes books.'

'He did.'

'Did? He would have survived up here, surely.'

'He would, had he still been here.'

'You mean he moved?'

'In a manner of speaking. You see, your uncle never actually retired.'

Roger looked wary. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'Listen and I will tell you all we know. Your father is dead, of that much we are certain. He leaves two children - one who is a computer expert who gets herself involved with a space satellite which can greatly assist one or other of the superpowers to control the missiles of the other.'

'But Suzette didn't know that at first. She catalogued data for the weather bureau at Cambridge.'

'So you say. However, she also has a brother who has supposedly never been associated with the British armed forces but, nevertheless, seems to have no trouble whatsoever in handling a sophisticated weapon system that can destroy Russian helicopters. How do you explain that, Mr Blackman?'

'I worked at the factory where they were built. I knew how they worked, that is all.'

'It is not quite as simple as that as you and I both know. You actually designed the Diablos guided missile system, didn't you?'

Roger was taken-aback. 'How could you know that?'

The Colonel smiled. 'As I said before, there is very little that we do not know. Now I will come to the coincidences. Just a month ago, your uncle suddenly disappears from his home in England and the British newspapers are full of reports of how he has abducted, raped and brutally murdered a young French girl.'

'Good god, you're joking.'

'Mr Blackman, I only wish I were. However, we did not believe the reports and neither should you.'

'They were untrue?'

'The young girl in question was born in Sorède.'

Roger's mouth dropped open. 'Sorède? In the Pyrenees?'

'She was Simone de Bosville, your niece.'

'I don't believe it.'

'Believe it, Mr Blackman. The girl came to England suddenly and, within hours, she and your uncle were away to France. There were reports of her death in England and also on the cross-channel ferry. We have been unable to confirm the truthfulness of the latter report because of the subsequent war.'

Roger smiled inwardly. Even Russian Intelligence has its limits, it seems. 'What happened to Uncle Mike?'

'We don't know for certain. However, we do know that he went to join forces with your cousin, Emile de Bosville, who owned a great number of convenient companies all over Europe. He was a very rich man.'

'I hardly knew him.'

'We know that. We also know that one of his companies was a front for the Consortium.'

'The Consortium? The organisation which started the war to gain control of Europe?'

The Colonel nodded. 'Guillemot Internationale. Emile de Bosville was chairman. His daughter was also involved as she was Senior Director of its subsidiary, Guillemot Toulouse.'

'Simone? But she was a mere child.'

'She was eighteen and old enough by law to run her father's company. You see, we have a situation where I have a group of people on board my ship who have been very closely associated with a terrorist organisation which has been directly and indirectly responsible for many millions of deaths throughout Europe.'

'But Suzette and I helped to defeat the Consortium.'

'So it would seem upon first observation. However, where did your uncle go and what did he do? What happened to Simone de Bosville and her father? Are they still alive? If so, where? How much do you and your sister really know about what is going on? Is your cousin, Marianne, also involved? And, of all the naval

officers who could have led the UN Task Force to Europe, why Admiral Davison?’

‘Why not Admiral Davison? How is he involved?’

‘When your father was operating in France during the war, he was in contact with a young American Lieutenant on board one of the escort vessels.’

‘Yes?’

‘A certain Lieutenant Michael Davison.’

‘I didn’t know that.’

‘And where are your uncle and niece? In France or England?’

‘If they were in France, they will be dead. Killed by the nuclear war.’

‘Not necessarily. You and your sister were in France when the bombs fell but you survived. Not only that, three of the people who survived with you subsequently turned out to be the leaders of the Consortium. Now do you see my dilemma?’

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### **SUNDAY 22nd AUGUST - 0700 hrs.**

Gradually, the tall cliffs on their left gave way to a low-lying area backed by the chimneys and oil tanks of Teesside. The South Gare breakwater stood out into the sea as they slowly crept into the bay. Here and there appeared fishing boats which had survived the destruction of the south and flares could still be seen atop the Shell refinery on Seal Island. For an hour, two American warships had been shadowing them at a safe distance but neither had made any attempt to interfere with their course nor to contact them. It was as Malinov One turned close to the Tees estuary that they heard and saw the Sea King helicopter heading out towards them.

‘Right on time,’ said Roger as it passed overhead, the big letters “RESCUE” painted boldly on its bright yellow body.

The Colonel spoke into the phone. ‘Doctor, you can bring the girl up now and have her taken onto the aft deck.’ He put down the phone and turned to Roger. ‘You had better go with her on the first run.’

Roger joined his stretchered sister on the rear decking as the downdraught from the helicopter lifted spray around them. With help from the crew, Suzette was winched up and Roger followed almost immediately. Colonel Narovic waved as they rose, turned and headed inland at high speed. It didn’t take long as they followed the river upstream over docklands and then the town itself. Everyone was helpful and efficient as the helicopter landed in a nearby playing field and they were moved by ambulance to the hospital while the rescue pilot took to the air once more.

Despite the fact that it was well outside the zone where the radiation had affected so many, the hospital was very busy due to the fact that movable cases had been transferred from the area around York and Leeds because of the overcrowding further south. Nevertheless, Suzette was examined straight away and sent to X-ray.

‘How long will she be?’ asked Roger as he watched Suzette disappear.

‘Depends how bad she is,’ said the nurse as she made notes. ‘Could be hours before we know for sure.’ She looked up. ‘If you go home, we’ll phone you.’

Roger explained that it was not quite as simple as that so it was suggested that he go to the canteen and have breakfast and return later. Roger would have loved breakfast but suddenly thought of the others. Perhaps they could all rest and eat together.

The sun was already casting a warm glow over the county of Cleveland as he stepped out into the open air and asked to be directed to the place where the helicopter had landed him. After five minutes of walking, he found the spot and sat down on the grass to wait. After spending three weeks in an area where almost everything had died, it was refreshing to hear birds singing and even children playing nearby. He looked at his watch. They were up early - and on a Sunday morning, too. It was so peaceful yet in complete contrast to the war zone where the deathly silence had hurt the ears. Here was life, here they could find a home free from constant pressure. It wasn’t the home he had been used to but it would do. Any minute now, the helicopter would arrive and he would have Marianne here, too. She would have to learn to speak English but that was a small price to pay. After all the running and hiding in France, they could now relax. Suzette would soon recover and they would all find homes near to each other and, he guessed, have to go and look for work. Roger smiled. It was like paradise. The sky was clear blue without a cloud and, he thought, also without a helicopter. Surely they wouldn’t have landed already, would they? He gave them half an hour and then walked back to the hospital. They must have been dropped off somewhere else.

‘Have my friends arrived?’ he asked at reception.

‘Friends?’

‘I’m with the girl off the submarine. Our three colleagues were also being ferried ashore. Have they been brought in yet, do you know?’

'I don't know. How would I recognise them?'

'One man, a little shorter than myself - dark. Two girls - one fair and a little tubby, the other slim and with long, golden hair - all three dressed in overalls like mine.'

'CCCP,' the receptionist read from the emblem on his top pocket. 'That a Teesside shipping company?'

Roger smiled. 'Not exactly. Seen them?'

'Not as I recall. Would you like me to page them for you?'

'I would be most grateful.'

Roger gave the woman the names of Jim, Gillian and Marianne but there was no response except from two men who approached in raincoats despite the lack of wet weather.

'Mr Blackman?' one asked him.

'Yes, that's right,' Roger replied warily.

'We are police officers. I understand that you have been flown in from a vessel in the bay.'

'That is correct. Is there a problem?'

'May I see your passport, sir.' (It was not a question.)

'I'm sorry but they have been lost in France. You see...'

'Am I to understand, sir, that you have gained entry to Britain illegally?' The "sir" was made to sound like an insult.

'No, I and my sister are British citizens. We come from Cambridge.'

'Ah,' he said as if that explained it all. 'Southerners.'

Roger began to think that maybe he would have been made more welcome if he had said he was a Martian.

'We must ask you to come along with us to the station.'

'Why? Are we going to catch a train?' Roger joked.

It fell on deaf ears as one firmly gripped his arm.

'But I can't leave yet,' he reasoned. 'My friends haven't arrived.'

'Friends?' said the short one.

'The others from the submarine. The helicopter went back for them.'

The men looked at each other and then one walked to reception and picked up the phone. He dialled and spoke for several minutes before returning.

'I have just spoken to the coastguard, Mr Blackman. He received a radio message just before dawn to pick up two people who had been injured in a boating accident. He instructed Air Sea Rescue of this and they just collected yourself and your colleague from the submarine in the bay. That's all he was asked to do.'

'But the others. They will be waiting to be picked up.'

The tall one shook his head. 'I'm afraid not, sir.'

'Why not?'

'Because the coastguard also said that as soon as you had been up-lifted, the submarine submerged.'

'Submerged? But...'

'He says he lost contact with them immediately. I'm afraid you are now very much on your own.'

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### **SUNDAY 22nd AUGUST - 0800 hrs.**

Roger was totally stunned and, in that condition, allowed himself to be herded to a waiting car and thus to the police station. His mind was in a whirl. What had happened to Marianne and the others? Had Colonel Narovic tricked him or was there some kind of danger which had made him try to get away from the American ships which had been following him? From his recollection of the charts he had seen on board Malinov One, the North Sea was no place for a game of hide and seek with a twenty-thousand tonne nuclear submarine.

At the station, he was ushered inside while every eye watched him as if he was a specimen under a microscope. The room he ended up in was empty but for the traditional wooden table and two chairs. He didn't bother to sit as a uniformed policeman stood with his back to the door and looked straight ahead.

'They don't really think I'm some kind of criminal, do they?' he began.

The policeman shrugged. 'I don't know, sir. The sergeant will be here soon and will explain everything.'

Roger thanked him. It wasn't his fault. The door opened and a shorter man walked in and dropped a bulky file onto the table.

'I am Detective Sergeant I'Anson, sir, and this is my colleague Detective Constable Bell.'

Roger nodded to the younger man. 'Perhaps someone could explain why I have been brought here. Am I under arrest? If so, for what? I've committed no crime.'

'All in due course,' said the senior officer, sitting. 'Please be seated.'

Roger sat down and faced the Detective Sergeant who switched on a small tape-recorder. 'Please would you clearly state your full name and address.'

Roger sighed. 'I am Roger Anthony Blackman and my last permanent address was Riverside House,

Grantchester, Cambridge.'

The man had written this down but now looked up. 'You don't live there now?'

'It was my father's house but he died on May 5th 1982.'

'And his name?'

'John Anthony Blackman.'

'And your mother, sir?'

'Juliette Monique Blackman, née de Bosville.'

The policeman looked up sharply. 'She was not English?'

Roger smiled sarcastically to himself. Good grief, this man was quick on the uptake. 'No, she was French. She had a house near Sorède.'

'Had, sir?'

'My mother died in 1967, when I was very young, and my father then came back to England when she died. My sister and I lived with him at Cambridge until he himself died.'

'And your sister's name?'

'Suzette Michelle Blackman.'

'And does she still live at Grantchester?'

'No. When I left home six months ago, Suzette sold the old house. It had memories, you see. Also, it was much too big for her on her own.'

'So she lives in...'

'She has a flat in Trumpington - just outside Cambridge.'

'I see.' He clearly didn't, of course.

'And where were you when the nuclear exchange took place?'

'I was in northern Spain. I have an old college friend who lived in Leon so, when I left home, I went to stay with him. We were there when the missiles struck the British naval base at Gibraltar.'

'But you survived.'

Roger nodded. 'Apart from the detonations in the south, most of the rest of Spain was affected by radioactive fallout. We were lucky enough to escape in the north.'

'So there are a great many people still alive in Spain?'

'In the Basque Country, yes. When it had all settled, we made our way west as far as San Sebastian but we could do nothing to help the few people who had survived there. From there, we continued across to Andorra.'

'Why there?'

'I wanted to get to Sorède to see if any of my mother's family had survived.'

'And had they?'

'Just two. My uncle Raoul who ran a restaurant at Laroque des Albères and his daughter, Marianne. I also found, much to my surprise, that my sister and a couple of her friends had also survived and they arrived at Sorède while I was there.'

'And where are these people now?'

'Uncle Raoul is with a few other survivors at Navacelles, my sister is in the hospital here undergoing surgery. Marianne and the others are still on board that submarine somewhere out on the North Sea.'

'Ah. Now we come down to the present. Why did you come to England?'

'As I said. To bring Suzette to hospital. There were no hospitals left functioning in Western Europe.'

The policeman leant forward. 'I'll tell you what I think, shall I?'

Roger said nothing.

'I think you are a Russian spy.'

Roger should have laughed, would have laughed if it hadn't been so serious. 'Don't talk ridiculous.'

'Ridiculous? You turn up here, out of the blue, in Russian clothes and from, as you have admitted, a Russian submarine. What else am I to think?'

'Do yourself a favour,' said Roger sarcastically. 'And ask yourself whether, if I was a Russian spy, I would still be dressed in Russian clothes and whether I would ask the British coastguard to bring me in by RAF helicopter in broad daylight. Not very subtle, is it?'

The man simply looked at him. He had presumably been given this job under the emergency situation and was clearly out of his depth. Roger suspected that the sum total of his knowledge of spying techniques had been gained from watching James Bond movies.

The policeman switched off the recorder and leant forward over the table. 'Don't try and be clever with me, Mr Blackman. I am not a stupid as you seem to think.'

Roger raised his eyebrows but said nothing and the man stomped out of the room.

'Don't take him too seriously,' said the younger policeman as he sat down opposite to him. He took a box out of his pocket. 'Smoke?'

Roger shook his head. 'No thanks.'

'Do you mind if I do?'

'Would it matter if I did?'

The young constable looked at him long and hard before putting away the packet.

'I'm sorry,' said Roger. 'I'm a little keyed up. I've never been in police custody before.'

'Is it really that bad on the continent?'

'I'm afraid so. There will be a lot of straightening up to do.'

'Bloody Russians!'

Roger looked up sharply. 'It wasn't their fault. They were as much in the dark as everyone else.'

'The Sergeant said you would take their side.'

'I'm not taking anyone's side. Do people here, in England, all think that the Russians were to blame?'

'Of course. Who else could it have been?'

'In the case of Britain, it was the Americans.'

'The United States?'

'Not intentionally, I'll admit. I'll tell you the whole story if you really want to know the truth.'

The man nodded.

'Switch on the recorder,' Roger said and the man did. 'Once upon a time, there was a group of big businessmen who were fed up with government trade restrictions and the like. So they formed a plan - a plan to get the superpowers to do their dirty work for them. They planned to devastate Europe so they could take it over for themselves.'

'They certainly achieved that.'

'It could have been far worse.'

'Worse?'

'It could have escalated and destroyed the whole world. As it was, both superpowers realised what was happening pretty quickly and put a stop to it. No-one in their right minds wanted a Third World War.'

'You can say that again. But how did these people manage it?'

'Very cleverly. They put into orbit a space satellite called Princess and somehow gained access to the American and Russian missile launch codes. After that, it was easy. They slipped into their bunkers and fallout shelters and got Princess to issue the launch codes to the respective missile submarines.'

'Only the submarines?'

'Of course. They didn't want to destroy the whole world or there would be no-one left to trade with. No, Western Europe would be enough. Of course, when it all started, troops moved around, by instinct more than anything else.'

'But all the dead...'

'A small price to pay, or so they thought. I'm afraid that your average big businessman cares little for the peasants.'

'And Britain?'

'My guess is that Britain was not intended to suffer. An unfortunate accident in the channel was responsible for all the deaths in this country. I'm afraid when little boys play with guns, it is often the innocent bystander who gets shot.'

'And these people. Have they been caught?'

Roger smiled. 'Yes, they have. You have my sister to thank for that.'

'Your sister? The one in hospital?'

'That's her. She was not in time to prevent the initial exchange but she did gain access to the satellite and corrupted the data so they couldn't continue. She's a clever girl, is Suzette.'

'How did she get hurt?' he asked with sincere concern.

'Some of the leaders of this Consortium captured her and tried to kill her.'

'But they didn't, obviously.'

'No. Thanks to a few honest people, French, Russian and American, she survived and was brought here. They had to disobey orders to do it and, as the governments are still suspicious of one another - and rightly so if they don't fully know the truth - the people who helped us are liable to get into a lot of trouble.'

'So it's all over now.'

'Not necessarily. The Russians and the Americans have each got control of one of the tracking stations receiving data from Princess. The Americans are operating the one at Laroque des Albères and the Russians the one at Rouen. So far, neither side has total access to the satellite or the launch-code sequences because Suzette corrupted the data before she left France.'

'So it's stalemate.'

Roger nodded. 'At the moment. However, both sides have been trying to exert pressure on my sister to reveal the key to operating the satellite. As long as she can be kept away from them, the world is safe.'

The constable grinned. 'She is quite safe here in England.'

Roger wasn't so sure but he held his tongue.



The sergeant returned. 'You can go.'  
'Go?' Roger was stupefied. After all they had said and implied? Go?  
'Yes. You must have friends, relatives. I'll get a car to take you there.'  
Was this a trick? A trap of some sort? 'I have no-one. With your permission, I will go back to the hospital and see how my sister is.'  
'Very well.' He turned to the constable. 'Take him, would you, John?'  
The young constable nodded and, within five minutes, they were in the hospital car-park, shaking hands.  
'I hope your sister recovers okay,' said the policeman.  
'Thanks. I hope so, too.'  
With a spring in his step, Roger whistled to himself as he walked into the reception area and spoke to the strange young lady behind the desk.  
'I'm enquiring after my sister,' he said.  
'Name, please?' she said pleasantly.  
'Suzette Blackman.'  
The receptionist ran her finger down the column and started to frown. 'When was your sister admitted?'  
Roger felt the muscles in his stomach tighten. 'About seven-fifteen this morning.'  
'Was it for maternity?'  
'No. She was brought in after an accident. An Asian doctor examined her and she was sent to X-Ray.'  
'I can't find the details here. Are you sure it was for X-Ray?'  
'I saw her taken there myself.'  
'Hold on a minute.'  
The girl turned and spoke to another woman who looked at her board and shook her head. Roger looked around for someone familiar but shifts had obviously changed while he had been at the police station.  
The older woman came across. 'You're looking for whom?'  
Roger explained again and she consulted all her schedules.  
'I'm sorry, Mr Blackman. But we have no record of anyone of that name being brought here.'  
'But you must. I...'  
'I'm sorry. Are you sure you've got the right hospital?'  
Roger looked around him. Yes, it all looked the same but then, didn't they all? He looked across and saw the place where he had been picked up by the police. Yes, it was the same place and he told her so. More enquiries were made but with no success. They were adamant - Suzette was not there.  
Roger wandered back out into the sunshine. It was a conspiracy, he thought. The Americans have captured her, or the Russians, perhaps. What was he going to do?  
He went back to reception. 'It was a spinal injury.'  
The busy receptionist humoured him and went through her list of possibilities but with negative results. It was clear he was going to get nowhere. Suzette had been taken by person or persons unknown and there was not a thing he could do about it.

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### **SUNDAY 22nd AUGUST - 1100 hrs.**

For a long time, he studied the map on the wall before emerging back into the sunshine. There was one place which might just contain some of the answers and it was just a few miles away. However, he had no money, no personal effects, no nothing. Everything of value was in the villa at Sorède or at Carlos' home in Leon. Even his change and wallet had been left on board Malinov One. He was stranded, homeless and broke.

A little way up the road, he came to a large roundabout and tried to remember what he had seen on the map. It seemed so odd to see everyone going about their business as if nothing had happened. A church bell rang somewhere in the distance and cars zoomed by in every direction. This driving on the left would take some getting used to again, too. On the A66, he got a lift almost immediately from a jovial Geordie with a beard.

'Had a hard night?' he called as Roger got comfortable in the passenger seat of the lorry.  
'I think you could say that,' Roger agreed, remembering the escapade in the Straits of Dover.  
'You're not local then,' the man said as they picked up speed, heading westwards.  
'No,' Roger said with a smile. He glanced down at the badge on his overalls. 'I'm a Russian spy.'  
The man guffawed. 'Tell that one to the fairies. You're from that London place, aren'tcha?'  
Roger smiled. A real, honest man at last. 'Close. Are you going near to Eaglescliffe?'  
'Right to it, pal. Got a load of tea chests for the Industrial Estate on Durham Lane. Where'd you wanna be dropped off like?'  
'I've got to get to Egglecliffe old village green. Know where that is?'

'Sure. Going right by it. You heard about the south, I expect?'

Roger nodded. 'Terrible, wasn't it?'

'Me and the wife were just watching the telly when everything went off. They came on again after a minute or two, from Newcastle I think, to say that there was a problem but didn't say what. None of us had any idea what had happened until the next morning when they told us on the news.' He leant over. 'You got family down there?'

Roger shook his head. 'Not really. Most of the family are up here. My uncle and cousin live in Egglecliffe.'

'Well, soon be there,' he said as he turned off the dual carriageway and down the slip road.

It all looked strange to Roger. It had been years since he had been in Cleveland and so much had been built in the intervening period. A housing estate here, an industrial estate there. The trees in Preston Park were already beginning to look ready to shed their leaves despite the fact that it was not yet September and Roger wondered just how much of the weather patterns had changed. France had certainly suffered from a fortnight of devastating nuclear winter in more ways than one and many areas would take years to recover from a barrage of radiation and icy-cold conditions. He hoped England would fare better. Men were walking on the golf-course, children in the streets, women jogging beside the road. It was all so normal as if nothing had happened.

'There you go,' said the driver as he stopped just before the zebra crossing. 'Up the lane on the left. You can't miss it.'

Roger thanked him as he climbed down to the pavement and he was alone again.

Butts Lane had altered little since he had been here last. Only the trees had changed. He paused beside the small graveyard and remembered Aunt Mary's funeral. He had been fifteen at the time and had tried to hide the tears that windy afternoon. Aunt Mary had always been so kind. What had happened to make her take her own life at the age of thirty three? What disaster in her life could have made her leave behind a fourteen-year-old daughter and a boy of nine?

The sound of children playing broke through his thoughts and he quickly turned back to the present and made his way to the village green. When he reached it, he stopped dead in his tracks. Where the beautiful stone cottage had been there was now a heap of charred rubble. Damn!

'You another one from the police?' came a voice behind him.

Roger turned to see a little old lady with a big black labrador. He shook his head. 'No, not from the police.'

She stepped closer. 'Insurance?'

He smiled. 'No. Not insurance either. I...'

'You're that young whippersnapper from down south,' she suddenly accused, peering at him over her glasses.

'I'm afraid so, Mrs Thompson.'

'Huh. You remember me then.'

'Who could forget you. You made tea for us all after my Aunt Mary's funeral.'

'Well, my tea hasn't changed over the years and you look as if you could do with a dose right now.' Her bony fingers snapped around his arm like a mechanical grab. 'Come along inside and I'll put the kettle on.'

Roger allowed himself to be led to a neighbouring cottage and seated himself at the round table. A bird twittered in a cage while the big clock ticked sombrely in the corner.

'Your uncle never did those things they say he did,' she called from the kitchen.

'I'm glad you think so,' Roger replied. 'I don't think he did either.'

'The police came and questioned us all. After that, the army came.'

'The army?'

'They said they was from the insurance but I knew different.' She called. 'They had guns, you see.'

'Guns?' His mind boggled at troops all over Egglecliffe village green.

'Inside their coats, like they does on television. They didn't fool me for one moment. They say he killed two policeman as well as the girl,' she said as she carried in the makings on a wicker tray.

Roger took it from her and placed it on the table. 'Uncle Mike wouldn't do that.'

'The other neighbours said it was all the girl's fault. They say she was a flighty piece who simply asked to be raped and then murdered.'

'What was she like?'

'Who?'

'The girl.'

'The one as stayed the night with him?'

Roger grinned inwardly. Not much missed Mrs Thompson. 'Yes, that one.'

She sat down and began to pour tea. 'Tallish, dark hair, torn dress one day, smart new jeans the next.' The way she said "jeans" showed her obvious disapproval of girls in anything but white-laced summer dresses.

'Anything else?'

She leant forward, cup in hand. 'Some say as she was foreign.'

Roger nodded. 'She was. Simone de Bosville.'

Her eyes went dark. 'You know the girl?'

'I should. Simone is my niece.'

Her back shot up straight. 'I told the others that she was one of the family and would be all right.'

Roger smiled at her attitude. 'What happened to Jonathan?'

'His boy? He was at college at the time, in Newcastle. Right to-do when he came home, I'll tell you.'

'Is he at college now?'

'No. It'll be holiday time. He'll be with his sister in Darlington.'

'I don't suppose you have her address, do you?'

'Of course I does.'

She put down her half-empty cup and started to rummage in a drawer. 'It's here somewhere. I used to look after your uncle's cottage while he was away researching his books.'

As she continued, Roger looked out of the net-hung window and noticed the two men in the car alongside the wall to Eggescliffe Hall. So that's why the police had let him go.

'He was on an assignment when he left,' Mrs Thompson was saying.

'What?'

'He took his revolver with him.'

Roger thought he must have sounded stupid. 'Revolver?'

'No-one else knew about it, 'cept me. He had it with him when he took the girl away.'

The plot thickens.

'He didn't kill the girl,' she was saying.

Roger agreed. He needed neither Ivy Thompson nor Andrei Narovic to tell him that. Mike Blackman had obviously been in great danger and so had Simone. But where were they now? Where was that kindly man who always took him fishing when he came up to visit? And where, oh where, was the cheeky French girl who'd had a sexy grin right from the age of six?

'Do you have a back way out of here?' he found himself asking as he watched the men in the car.

'Are you being followed?' she asked with excitement.

'I think so. You see those men in that car?' He pointed.

'Are they policemen?'

'I think so.'

She grabbed his hand. 'Then I will show you how to get away.' She stopped at the door. 'Have you got any money?'

'No. But...'

She opened a drawer and thrust a handful of paper into his hand. 'Take this.'

'But I...'

'Take it. I shan't need it much longer.'

As they walked back down her garden path, she stuffed biscuits into his pocket while she gave him instructions. At the gate, he stopped and kissed her cheek. 'I'll never forget this.'

Mrs Thompson held her back straight. 'I should think not indeed, young man.'

~~~~~

ROGER turned left outside the gate and walked down Church Road. Half way down, he heard the car start up behind him. He didn't turn but continued past the Pot and Glass and onto the footpath which led around the churchyard. As soon as he was out of sight, he ran for all he was worth. Instead of going right round to Butts Lane once more, he turned left and down the slope to Yarm at full tilt, narrowly missing a couple of children on their way up. At the bottom, he crossed the main road, weaving between cars caught in the jam caused by the antiques fair which had just started. At the far end of the stone bridge over the river, he turned and dived down the steps to True Lovers Walk and thence under the bridge. Fighting for his breath, he waited for a long time until he was absolutely sure that he had not been followed. When he was certain, he walked along the river bank until he came to a car park at the back of a supermarket.

The sun was warm as he took out one of the biscuits and began to chew as he pulled the paper out of the other pocket. Good grief, he said to himself as he counted, there's over a hundred pounds here. Good old Mrs Thompson. It was, therefore, a slightly happier Roger Blackman who jumped to his feet and strode confidently toward the bus stop.

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**SUNDAY 22nd AUGUST - 1245 hrs.**

Roger should have known that life could never be that simple. There was no bus direct to Darlington - not

Sunday nor any other day. He would have to go into Stockton where, he was informed, he might get a Darlington bus. Alternatively there may be a train, but maybe not because of recent rail diversions. As he thanked the mine of information, he saw the police car and slipped surreptitiously into a newsagents where he watched until it had gone.

'How do I get to Darlington?' he asked the shopkeeper.

'If you can hang on for ten minutes,' came the reply. 'I'll take you. I'm about to go and visit my dear old mum in Newton Aycliffe.'

Roger thanked him, bought a couple of papers and sat down to wait. Fifteen minutes later, he was in a grey Cavalier, heading westwards out of town. As they passed the airport, Roger wished he had finished his flying lessons and obtained his pilot's license. If he had, a plane was a much quicker way to get about. The newsagent was not very talkative and that suited Roger - he had too much to think about. Where was Suzette and why all the secrecy at the hospital? What had happened to Marianne and the others? Why was he going to Darlington? Would Jenny be of any help at all?

'I'll take you into town,' said the friendly man as they negotiated a roundabout on the ring-road. He pointed down the by-pass. 'I normally go that way.'

'It's very kind of you,' said Roger as he glanced over his shoulder to make sure they weren't followed.

'What part of town?'

Roger showed him the address and, five minutes later, he was getting out at the end of a street full of terraced houses. The car drove away and Roger cautiously stood back in an alleyway for some time while he watched and waited but no-one came along. He had escaped them. Number forty-three was half way down on the other side, Roger noted as he kicked a ball back to a handful of boys in the street. The red front door seemed enormous as he headed towards it in the sunshine. What would he find? He knocked.

'Yes?' said a male voice from an upstairs window.

Roger looked up, shielding his eyes from the bright sunlight. 'I'm looking for Mrs Jennifer Norris.'

'Who wants her?'

'I'm her cousin.'

'Hang on.' The window closed and Roger was left alone again with the Darlington under-eight two-a-side football team.

After a minute, the door opened and on the doorstep was a dark-haired young woman who was very pregnant.

'I'm Jenny,' she said.

Roger smiled. 'And I'm your Uncle John's son, Roger.'

'Don't stand on the doorstep,' she said, wiping her hands on her apron. 'Please excuse the mess, we weren't expecting visitors today.'

Roger wasn't sure, but he felt he was not entirely welcome as he followed her into the living room and Jennifer motioned him to sit as she straightened cushions and things.

He grabbed her hand and their eyes met. 'I need your help.'

She stared back at him. 'No questions about father?'

'Not if you don't want to answer them. That's not what I'm here for.'

Noticeably, she seemed to relax and then sat down. As she did, she burst into tears. Roger hesitated for a moment and then got up, sat next to her and held her tight. Then it all came out - the shock of her father's disappearance, the newspaper reports, the sniding letters, the pressure from the press to become "the daughter who reveals all about her raping, murdering, traitor of a father". Roger just listened and said nothing until she eventually calmed down.

'Just look at me,' she said, standing and drying her face. 'And I haven't even offered you a drink.'

'Tea will do me fine,' said Roger as she reached towards the bottle which, it seemed, had been her only real comfort over the last two months.

Jenny hesitated, anger in her eyes, until she saw him smiling. Realising he was not about to lecture her, she smiled. 'You're right. Tea would be best.'

'Can I help?'

'No. You just sit and I'll play mum.'

From her shape, Roger deducted that she looked as if she was about to play mum seriously once more but, nevertheless, she made a good cup of tea.

'How did you survive?' she asked as she poured and Roger brought her up-to-date with everything that had happened to him up to the day after the war.

'I've just spoken to a very nice old lady,' Roger finished up with. 'She knows your father was not guilty of those things. I do, too.'

'You do?'

'I know he was involved somehow and that everything seemed to revolve around him but not the bad things.'

'It all began about eight weeks ago when daddy came here out of the blue. It was a Tuesday.' She smiled. 'I

remember because I had collected my Child Benefit that morning.'

Roger glanced at the calendar. 'Third of July?'

'No. Earlier - at the end of June. Jonathan was home for the weekend to do some research for a business development project he was working on. Teesside Polytechnic in Middlesbrough has the best library in the area for that sort of thing.'

'So. On the twenty-sixth of June, your father came to see you. Was that unusual?'

'Oh, yes. We had not spoken since mother's death. I guess that was all my fault really.' She cried again for several minutes.

'It's all in the past now,' he reassured her.

'He...he had helped some girl who was being attacked by the river but she had disappeared again.'

'And he was trying to find her?'

'He..he.' She smiled. 'He had found some of her clothing after she had been attacked by some youths. He couldn't locate her but, eventually, she turned up at his cottage.'

'Simone?'

She nodded. 'That's what he said her name was.'

'And what happened then?'

'He rang to say he was taking her away to France - to do some research, he said.'

'She was still alive then?'

'Oh, yes. Despite what the papers said about her death, she was still alive and well the next day. It must have been some other girl who had been killed.'

'And your father was taking Simone to France?'

She smiled a little. 'I joked with daddy about him going away with the girl for a dirty weekend but I wasn't really serious. I knew he wasn't like that. Anyway, he told me about it later.'

Roger was shaken. 'He did?'

She stood up and went to a drawer. 'I have here a letter from him that no-one else has ever seen. Daddy wrote it on the day he died.' She hesitated and then handed it to Roger.

It read:

*My dearest Jennifer*

*By now you will have heard many terrible things about me. Please may I reassure you that none of them are true. No-one will believe you if you try to tell them but that is not important. What is important is that you now know the truth.*

*By the time you read this letter, I will probably be dead - killed by those whom I have tried to expose. There has been a massive conspiracy in Europe by persons who are, in reality, no more than international terrorists. They wish to control the finances of Europe and do not care how many people die so they can get what they want. I won't go into details except to say that the plot was uncovered by one of our relatives, Emile de Bosville, who was working on the inside to stop the plot.*

'Simone's father,' said Roger and Jenny nodded.

*In desperation, he sent his only daughter to get me. At first, I said 'Why me?' but then realised that he knew there was a leak within both the British and French Security departments. Your Uncle John helped them during the war so I had seemed the best bet to help them now. Little did I know then what was really happening.*

*They killed poor Simone. They got her to go with me to Paris and then literally blew her up in front of my eyes. I doubt if you have any idea how I felt about that and I know that I have to kill them all.*

'Good God,' said Roger.

'He loved her,' said Jenny sadly. 'I guess I knew it before they left.'

'But he was old enough to be her father.'

'I know. But that really didn't seem to matter to either of them.'

He read on.

*I tried to get to the bottom of it all but knew I was running out of time. I won't go into details but it is all to do with a space satellite called Princess and people have been trying to use it to gain control of Europe and maybe the whole world. I know that I must stop them and I have now found out how though it pains me to say so.*

Roger paused. 'If he died on 20th July, he never found out what eventually happened.'

Jenny shrugged. 'I don't suppose he did.'

*There is a traitor. What hurts me most of all is that this traitor is one of the family - someone I have always loved all my life. The key is Princess. Whoever controls Princess controls the world. The controller of Princess must die before Europe is destroyed.*

Roger swallowed. He had a funny feeling that he knew where this was leading. But surely not. And yet, if it were true, it would answer so many of his questions.

*In five minutes from now, she will be dead. I have tried my best to find her innocent but it cannot be - the evidence is irrefutable. She is very close now and it is too late to turn back. To save millions, I must kill someone I love - my own niece, Suzette.*

*Please remember me for what I was that day when I came to see you. Love always.*

Your father:-

**M. J. Blackman.**

Roger put the letter down and they sat in silence for a very long time.

'I'm sorry,' said Jenny eventually. 'You loved your sister, didn't you?'

Roger didn't move. 'Suzette is not dead.'

'What?' Jenny dropped to her knees in front of him, clutching his hands in hers. 'Not dead?'

He told her all that Suzette had told him about the attempts on her life, her survival, the attack at Mandagout, the long journey home.

'You mean that Suzette is here? In Cleveland?'

He then told her about the submarine, the helicopter, the police, her disappearance. 'I just don't know what to believe any more.'

'Do you think daddy was telling the truth? Is Suzette guilty of the things he said?'

'Of course not. Your father was acting on what he believed was correct but Suzette is innocent, of that I am sure.'

But was he? He had never had doubts before but...

Jenny stroked his hand tenderly. 'Does Suzette still have access to this Princess?'

He was staring at the floor. 'No. No-one has anymore. She destroyed the data.'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure.' Am I, he thought? I wasn't there at the time. I only have her word for it.

Jenny smiled to reassure him. 'If she has, then what you and I and the world think is not important. As long as she is well away from any contact with the satellite, it doesn't really matter what we believe or what we don't believe about her, does it?'

'Maybe.' He paused and then looked up. 'Jenny.'

'Yes.'

Roger smiled. 'Pass me that bottle.'

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### **SUNDAY 22nd AUGUST - 1500 hrs.**

Roger had Sunday lunch with them, the first proper meal in a long time, with a real family. Nothing more was said about Suzette and Jenny's father and the atmosphere was relaxed as they ate and drank wine. Jennifer Norris, her problems aired and shared, seemed a new woman - the one her husband and family loved so much. After dinner, Jenny's husband played football with the boys for a while and Roger helped Jenny to wash up. He knew that she was only twenty-four, just a year older than Suzette, but the worry and anxiety of the last few weeks coupled with the strain of early motherhood and her impending childbirth had aged her prematurely.

He sat with her all afternoon while she darned socks and the TV played silently to itself in the corner. Deliberately avoiding any further mention of the subject foremost in both their minds, he just watched and listened as she nattered on about all a sundry. It had been a long time since such a conversation had been possible. Jenny's husband came in about four and dropped into the armchair, exhausted, and soon fell asleep in the middle of an exciting cricket match.

'You'll stay to tea?' asked Jenny.

Roger nodded. 'Thank you. I have nowhere else to go.'

Tea was light and drawn out over the news and business headlines. Three weeks after a nuclear war had devastated half the country, the latest update was an "also ran" behind plans to redevelop the docks at Tyneside and news of the proposed widening of the A69. Nevertheless, he learned one important fact. Troops had been moved from Catterick to block off all southbound roads because, for some reason they weren't revealing, the radiation had not dissipated as it should.

The country south of Watford Gap had been declared a "Hot Zone" where no-one could venture upon pain of being shot on sight. It was as the news was finishing that the knock came at the front door.

Jenny's husband peered through the net curtains. 'It's the police, the ones who came before.'

'You were followed,' accused Jenny.

Roger jumped to his feet and shook his head. 'No, I made very sure I wasn't.'

'Then how did they trace you here?'

'They must have put two and two together when they saw me outside your father's old house in Eggescliffe.'

Jenny grabbed his arm. 'Then they will try to implicate you in some way. Quick, out the back way.'

As they went through the kitchen, Jenny reached out and fumbled in her coat pocket before thrusting keys in Roger's hand. 'Take my car. It's the red one in the alleyway.'

He thanked them both as he was pushed through the back door. Jenny kissed his cheek at the gate. 'The spare house keys are there, too. Come back any time you need to.'

He smiled. 'I will. And thanks again.'

There was no-one in the alleyway outside and there was only one red car in sight, a Ford Fiesta. Not the swiftest of cars, he thought ungratefully, but at least it was inconspicuous. The engine started first time and, trying not to hurry, he drove to the end as quietly as possible and turned left onto the main road. Where should he go? What should he do? He knew he ought to go back to Middlesbrough and try to track down Suzette. He also knew he might well be wasting his time and that the hospital would almost certainly be watched. However, he had to do something. Mike Blackman had been convinced that Suzette was working with the Consortium and he was anything but a fool. Also, if Colonel Narovic was correct - and Roger had no reason not to believe him after what he had just learned - then his Uncle Mike was on to something serious when he was killed. Jenny and her father were right, everything revolved around Princess and Suzette had controlled Princess. Maybe she didn't right at this moment of time but...

Following his nose, he found himself heading south on the Northallerton Road. He didn't know where he was going but he knew he could not wander far. It would be dark in a few hours and he had to find somewhere to lay low. He started thinking again as he drove. Surely Suzette was innocent. She had tried to stop the war, hadn't she? How did he know that? She had saved the UN fleet in the Mediterranean, or had she? Corrine and Louis had tried to kill her at Mandagout, but had that been because of the Consortium? Or for personal reasons? She was badly hurt. Or was she? Anyone could fake a back injury and it would explain why there was no record of her at the hospital.

It was all very confusing. Perhaps she had fooled them all. He loved his sister, believed in his sister. But, then, so had Uncle Mike until he had been confronted with "irrefutable proof". What was that proof? Mike had not been specific in his letter to Jenny. Colonel Narovic said that Mike had died in France and the letter to Jenny had been post-parked Paris. Simone had died en route to Paris and, presumably, her father had been killed at or near his home in Paris. Also, if Mike had been in Paris then Suzette must have been in Paris at the same time. But why? Paris was the key, he thought. However, he suddenly remembered, Paris was now a heap of irradiated rubble. Dead end. Another thought suddenly struck him. Mike had said that Suzette was about to die, but she hadn't died at all. What had happened to prevent that happening?

He did a double bend over the Tees at Croft and began to think about where he was going. Pulling in to the side, he looked in the glove compartment and found a map. If he kept going the way he was headed, he would end up in Northallerton. Alternatively, he could turn left a bit father on and end up back in Yarm.

He thumped the steering wheel in frustration. 'Goddam it, Suzette, what in hell's name are you up to?'

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#### **SUNDAY 22nd AUGUST - 1930 hrs.**

As he sat in the car, trying to decide what to do next, a church bell began to chime. People were about in their best clothes, going to evening service. The sight of those people, some with flowers in their hands, made up his mind for him. He knew what he had to do. Rummaging in the boot, he found one of Bill Norris's old anoraks and put it on to cover his overall top. Wetting his hair, he smoothed it down, slipped on a pair of sunglasses from the dashboard and looked at himself in the mirror. He looked like a cross between an escaped convict and a guerrilla terrorist. It was his sun-tan that gave him away. Six months in Spain had that sort of an effect on you. The tan had to go. But how?

The answer came in Acklam and he stopped at a corner shop and bought a tin of ordinary talcum powder. For several minutes he rubbed it into the skin of his face and the backs of his hands. He was no expert at disguise but he reckoned that he would probably pass for a local. The sunglasses also had to go but, with help from some rolled-up cotton wool from the first-aid kit stuffed in his cheeks, he looked sufficiently different to how he had looked earlier in the day.

The car park was virtually full as he parked his cousin's Fiesta and followed the crowds of people towards the hospital's main entrance. Buying a bunch of flowers from the vendor, he now looked the part.

Determined to beat the system, he avoided the main reception and stopped a passing nurse. 'Excuse me, miss. Could you direct me to Orthopedics, please?'

The young redhead smiled pleasantly and pointed. 'Main block, second floor. To save you going right round

the building, if you go to the ambulance bay, there is a small door beside it. Turn right inside and the lifts and stairs are on your left.'

Roger thanked her and followed the specific directions. As he had suspected, two men were in the entrance area desperately trying not to look like policemen but failing miserably, watching all the newcomers as they arrived. However, they gave the new Roger no more than a cursory glance as he entered behind them and climbed the stairs.

The sign in front of him at the top said "Orthopedic Theatre" so he knew he was in the area where they will have dealt with Suzette's spinal injury. There was no staff about near the theatre so he mentally tossed a coin to decide which of the two adjoining wards to try first and then turned right into fourteen.

The ward was fairly crowded with visitors and, as usual at such times, there was not one member of the nursing staff to be seen. For this he was grateful as he wandered from bed to bed in search of his sister. There were men in plaster and women in traction but no Suzette. One or two people glanced up as he peered closely at each and every bed but soon, he was sure. She was not there. Retracing his steps, he wandered into fifteen and found much the same thing. It was as he backed out onto the balcony that he literally cannoned into the nurse he had met downstairs in the yard.

'Sorry,' he muttered as he picked up the file he had knocked out of her hand.

'Still lost?' she said pleasantly as he handed them to her.

'I'm looking for my sister,' he said without thinking of the possible repercussions.

The nurse didn't bat an eyelid. 'Which ward was she assigned to?'

'I'm not sure. I only know that she was brought in with a spinal injury.'

'Have you tried both these wards?'

'Yes. There is no sign of her. Maybe they are still operating on her.'

She shook her head. 'Not tonight. We only work on real emergencies on a Sunday as we have to call in a specialist. Was your sister involved in an accident?'

How much should he tell her? Could he trust her not to give him away to the police?

'She was brought in early this morning,' he said, realising that if he didn't trust somebody, he might never see Suzette again.

'With a spinal injury?'

'Yes.'

'Serious?'

'I don't know. She was in a lot of pain and finding it difficult to walk. The doctor who examined her said it could be very serious.'

'Come,' she said, crooking her finger and walking down the corridor. Roger followed her into a small office where she touched keys on a computer. 'Name?'

'Er. Blackman, Suzette Blackman.' Had he gone too far?

The nurse tapped in the surname. 'No record of that name. Are you sure she was brought here?'

Roger nodded. 'I came with her.'

She frowned and then looked at him strangely. 'That's odd. I wonder...'

He got ready to run. Perhaps this young woman was part of the cover-up. If she was, he was trapped. One shout and the police would be up the stairs in a flash and he would be back in jail.

The nurse tried several alternative spellings of the name but with no better result.

'She's not here,' she eventually pronounced.

'Is that bad?'

'Not necessarily. When the war came, there was something they called a flashover which upset the electrical supply and sent a surge down the grid. Apparently, it affected the mainframe a bit and some of the information was corrupted. With all the extra load on the system since then, some of the data has been lost. Are you certain she is not in either of these wards?'

'Absolutely. She went to X-ray first, though.'

'Okay. Let's start at the beginning. Was she hurt in any other way that you know of?'

'The doctor said that it was possible that her kidneys were damaged.'

She held up a finger. 'Aha!'

'Aha?'

'When a patient is admitted, he or she is given the once over. Occasionally, there is more than one kind of injury, as in the case of your sister. After the initial analysis, a judgement has to be made as to which of the injuries is the most serious. It could be that the kidney damage was assessed as the more urgent of the two.'

'And?'

'If that were so, she would have gone to one of several places, depending on the tests.'

'What tests?'

'Blood tests, etc. If the damage is slight, she will be in one of the general wards, under observation.'

'And if it were more serious?'



'She could have been taken to ITU upstairs or to the Nephrologist at South Cleveland.'

'I'm sorry, you've lost me.'

'ITU - Intensive Therapy Unit. What you TV-watchers call Intensive Care. South Cleveland is our sister hospital in Marton Road. The kidney expert, a nephrologist, is based there.'

'How can I find out which way she went?'

'It will depend on the results of the blood tests.' She cleared the screen and picked up the phone. 'Hello, Peter? It's Liz from Orthopedics. I want you to trace a patient for me.'

She paused. 'Blackman - Suzette. Possible kidney damage or malfunction.' She placed her hand over the mouthpiece. 'The Path Lab computer is a stand-alone and wasn't affected with the others. It should have the results of your sister's blood test on it.' She removed her hand. 'You've got it, Peter? Yes... Thanks. Okay, I owe you one. Don't be cheeky, you're a married man.'

Roger held his breath as she put the phone down. 'Well?'

'Blood tests were negative, however, urine samples showed excessive blood content.'

'And?'

'She was transferred to South Cleveland at lunch-time today.'

'From what you said earlier that's bad, isn't it?'

'It could be, but not necessarily. As you have seen from your wanderings around, we're pretty crowded here due to an influx of patients who would normally have been sent to Leeds. However, they are snowed under with radiation cases. There is no casualty or accident department at South Cleveland so, if your sister's spinal injury was not serious, she may have been shipped there simply to make more room here.'

'But you don't know for certain.'

'We can soon find out.'

'How?'

'My replacement has just arrived so let's go look at the X-rays.'

'Downstairs?'

She closed the office door. 'Sounds like you know your way around here better than I do.'

He shrugged. 'I passed it on the way up.'

She laughed pleasantly. 'So you did.'

Together, they went down in the lift. The two policemen were still there but paid no attention to a nurse and her colleague as they crossed the wide passageway.

Liz pushed open a door. 'Hi, Larry. I'm looking for the plates for a patient who was admitted this morning.'

'Okay. What's his name?'

'It's a her - Suzette Blackman, Miss.'

The technician searched and came up with the goods and placed them on the screen. 'Oh, yes. I remember her now.' He pointed. 'Three cracked vertebrae.'

Roger peered at the faint white lines. 'Is that serious?'

'Not necessarily. The cracks are vertical rather than horizontal so the actual spinal column is not directly affected. However, the muscles hang onto the sides where the damage is so it can be excruciatingly painful at times.'

'Is it dangerous in any way?'

'Only if you keep working and straining the cracked bones. With complete rest, they will heal in a matter of weeks. There could be pain for some months - years, perhaps, in extreme cases - but little danger of paralysis or the like. She must have come one hell of a wallop.'

'She did,' said Roger. 'She was thrown against the railing of a balcony which broke. She then fell twenty feet to the ground.'

'She was lucky not to have broken her neck.'

'She landed in deep snow which cushioned her fall to some extent. It was the handrail which really did the damage.'

'I see.'

'Did you also do an IVP?' asked Liz.

'No. We were short-handed and low on time so, rather than doing a pyelogram, I got Phyllis to do a renal scan.'

'And?'

'The results were inconclusive. That's why she was sent to South Cleveland - just as a precaution.'

'Mystery solved,' said Liz. She looked at the watch on her pocket. 'You'll be too late for visiting there tonight. I could ring across for you if you like.'

Roger smiled. 'You're very kind.'

'Come back to my office. I've got to collect my things from there anyway.'

'Finished for the day?'

They entered the lift. The policemen had gone. 'I should have finished at six but what with the pressure and

the like...'

'You've been very helpful.'

'All in a day's work.'

The doors opened and they walked to the office. The nurse rang a number. 'Hi. It's Liz Appleby at the General. I'm enquiring about a patient we transferred to you today - about lunchtime. Blackman, Suzette Blackman. Yes, I'll hold on.'

Roger fidgeted with his watch strap while he waited. Alarm bells could be ringing at the police station by now.

'Yes,' said Liz. 'Okay. Thanks.' She put the phone down. 'Your sister is in Ward 2 under observation. They are not yet sure whether they will have to operate but will have a better idea tomorrow. In the meantime, she is stable and, apparently, not in any immediate danger.'

Roger sighed. 'That's good to know.'

'You're not from round here, are you?' she said as she reached for her cape.

'Is it that obvious?'

'I'm afraid so. Got far to go home?'

'Not far,' he lied. 'You?'

'Only to Stokesley, if I can find a bus. Knocking off at six is all right as there are plenty about at that time. However, at this time of the evening...'

'I'll take you home,' he offered.

'Oh, I wouldn't want to put you to that much trouble.'

'After all the work you've done for me? It's the least I could do. How about dinner first?'

She hesitated and then smiled. 'That's the best offer I've had all day.'

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#### **SUNDAY 22nd AUGUST - 2050 hrs.**

The sun was setting over the Pennines as they walked towards the car. Most of the other visitors had long gone and there were few vehicles left.

'I wouldn't have taken you for a Fiesta man,' Liz joked as Roger unlocked the car door.

'I'm not,' he said as he reached over and pulled up the button. 'This is my cousin's car. My BMW is still in Spain.'

She climbed into the passenger seat. 'You came here from Spain?'

He smiled. 'Yes - via Andorra, France, and Switzerland.'

'Are things really bad out there? As bad as they say?'

Roger started the engine. 'Probably worse. There are not many people left alive in any of those countries.'

'How dreadful. It makes me feel quite helpless, sitting here in Cleveland.'

'There's not much you could be doing until the relief forces have gone in with uncontaminated supplies and medicines.'

'I thought the Yanks had done that already.'

'Not much. They're too busy arguing about demarcations and territories. The Russians have done far more to help the survivors.'

Little more was said as Liz guided Roger through Linthorpe and out onto Marton Road. She pointed at a collection of new buildings on their left. 'That's South Cleveland where your sister will be. I expect they'll let you visit her tomorrow.'

He smiled as they passed the gate and he observed the not-too-carefully hidden police cars in various places. They seemed pretty determined to catch him again. He guessed they hadn't take too kindly to having been tricked in Yarm and then again at Jenny's place.

'Straight on at the lights,' Liz said as the road widened.

'Where shall we eat?'

'Look. I'm not really dressed for eating out tonight and too tired to think about getting changed. Can we make a date for another day?'

'It wasn't really a date,' explained Roger. 'I just felt grateful for your help. Anyway, I was hungry myself.'

The road became narrower as they went out into the country. Ahead lay the North York Moors looking red in the glow of the setting sun.

'Do you like spaghetti?' said Liz suddenly.

'I love it.'

'How about Spaghetti-a-la-Liz?'

'Sounds delicious.'

'Good. You can treat me another night. Tonight, dinner is on me.'

'I'm very grateful.'

'And lonely?'

He nodded. 'I'm afraid so.'

'Okay. Let's see what Staff Nurse Appleby can do to cheer up her patient. Turn right at the roundabout.'

Her cottage was a small one, not unlike the one in Eggescliffe where Michael Blackman had lived. There were roses around the door and lots of lawn area. Other than that, everything looked simple to maintain. Just as it should be for a working girl.

'I'd better warn you about Ben,' Liz said as she opened the gate. 'He's a bit over-protective, I'm afraid.'

'Your husband?' Roger said slowly.

Liz laughed. 'No. But Ben and I have lived together for the last couple of years.'

Roger didn't know why but he felt disappointed. Marianne should have occupied his every thought but, for the last two hours, his cousin had taken a back seat.

'Ready?' she asked with a twinkle in her eye as she stood with her hand on the door knob.

Roger took a deep breath and nodded. 'As I'll ever be.'

As the door opened, a dark shape jumped at him and he fell backwards onto the lawn. The shape leapt on top of him and he felt something damp being moved over his face. He struggled but was losing the battle.

'Ben,' Liz was calling frantically and, suddenly, the licking stopped. The pressure was released and Roger sat up. Liz was convulsed with laughter and she dropped to her haunches and wrapped her arms lovingly around the neck of the largest Dulux-Dog Roger had ever seen in his life. He lay back on the lawn, his heart beating double-rate, until Liz dropped to her knees beside him. 'I did warn you.'

'Good grief. That thing could lick a burglar to death before he got within a mile of your silverware.'

Liz laughed again as she carefully wiped his face with handkerchief and then suddenly, without warning, kissed him. He didn't know what to say as he watched her get to her feet and reach out her hand to him as if nothing had happened. Gingerly, he took it and, soon, the three of them were inside the cottage. Liz kicked off her shoes while Roger undid his anorak.

'Be a dear and pop the kettle on,' Liz said. 'I really must get out of this uniform.'

Somehow, he had expected her to say "I'll slip into something more comfortable" like they do in all the best movies. He was also quite prepared for her to return in a slinky, see-through negligee, but she didn't. As the kettle started to whistle, she came down in a simple knee-length housecoat, modestly buttoned up to the neck and he breathed a sigh of relief. The biggest single difference was her red hair which now hung long round her shoulders after being released from its restraining cap. Tea was poured and they chattered small-talk as the spaghetti boiled and the meaty sauce simmered on the cooker.

It was delicious as they all tucked in together - Ben included - and it was half-way through the meal before Liz said, 'Tell me about your sister.'

'Tell you what about her?'

'Oh, about your childhood together, about what she does with herself, what she likes and dislikes. She sounds a very intriguing person.'

'What can I tell you?'

Liz finished her meal, pushed the plate away from her, placed her elbows upon the table and leant her chin on her hands. 'Everything. I want to know all about you both.'

'Why?' he asked warily.

'Just interested - fascinated, I suppose - as to why such a good-looking feller should be so deeply concerned about the welfare of someone who is quite obviously being given the very best in care and attention.'

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

'That's all right. We've got all night.'

His muscles tightened involuntarily and he almost started to get up when she smiled again. 'I'm off-duty tomorrow so I don't need to sleep until morning if I don't want to. I'm not tired anyway. I want to hear it all.'

'Where shall I start?'

'Start by helping me wash up. While we do, you can tell me about when you were children. For instance, where were you brought up?'

'Cambridge,' he replied as he collected plates together. 'We had a big house beside the river.'

'Father? Mother?'

'I don't remember much about mother. She died soon after giving birth to Suzette, I was only two years old at the time.'

'Poor thing.'

'Apparently, she was never a well woman. Father and mother met in France during the last few months of the Second World War. Father had been shipped in to report on German movements in the Pyrenees area and it was mother's family who hid him. She and her sisters were tortured by the Germans.'

Liz slowly put down the plate she was drying and stood watching him.

'Her sister, Dominique, died from the treatment as well as her mother. Pascal was ill for months. My

mother... my mother lost the baby she was carrying at the time.' There were tears in his eyes. 'It was my father's child.'

Liz gently touched his tears with the tips of her fingers. 'The girls were raped, weren't they?'

Roger simply nodded and Liz wrapped her arms around him and held him tight for a long time. They gave up on the last few pots and sat down on the settee instead, their hands entwined.

'They didn't give my father away. When the allied troops arrived a few months later, father and mother were airlifted back to England by the Americans where she was nursed back to health. She never recovered properly and gradually developed an obsession, one that was to kill her.'

'She wanted a child to replace the one she had lost.'

Roger looked at her, remembered that she was a nurse and would likely know about such things and then nodded. 'It took a long time and dozens of miscarriages which didn't help either her health or her mental state. But I was eventually born in the twentieth year of their marriage - March 27th, 1965. Suzette was born two years later.'

'And your father?'

'He was still in the army but no longer on active service. I'm not sure precisely what it was he did but he worked mainly at one of the local bases and lived at home with us. Occasionally, he would go away but he would always make sure we were well looked after.'

'You loved him?'

'I don't know about love. I certainly respected him. I gather he was in to some kind of new technology. As a child, he had always been fascinated by radio and radar which was how he got sent to France in the first place. Afterwards, he studied and developed that interest. I remember him once telling me that war would one day be fought, not on the battlefield with tanks and guns, but from an office, with computers and satellites. Few believed him, but he was right. wasn't he?'

'Is he still alive?'

Roger looked down at their hands. 'One day in the April of 1982, he got a phone call direct from Whitehall and a helicopter collected him from the back garden an hour later. It was the last time I ever saw him. Suzette was away at school at the time and didn't see him go, didn't even say good-bye. She has never forgotten that.'

'That I can understand. How did he die?'

'I didn't know at the time but he had been given a very special assignment, a highly secret one which could have stopped the Falklands War almost before it had begun. However, due to what was probably a stupid error of judgement, the ship he was on was struck by an Exocet Missile and he was killed instantly. Crazy when you think he was there to save lives, not take them.'

'How did you both react?'

'It was several days before we found out which made it worse than it might have been. Speaking for myself, I was more furious than sad. It was such a waste of a good man.'

'And Suzette?'

'Nothing, at first. We were given little time to consider anything. His body was suddenly brought home and the funeral all arranged for us. The first I knew of dad's death was when his commanding officer came to see me at work. He just turned up and told me. By the time I got home, the remains had been brought to the house. I can tell you now, the worst job of my whole life was going to Suzette's school and collecting her. As soon as she saw me, she knew.'

'Was she very upset?'

'Oddly enough, no. She was not happy, of course, but there were no tears, no tantrums - nothing. It was afterwards that it all happened.'

'Tell me.'

'The funeral was held at home and when it was all over and the relatives and friends were all drinking tea, she vanished.'

'Disappeared?'

'One minute, she was there, the next, she was gone. No-one saw her go, she just went.'

'Where?'

'Everyone searched high and low. We had the police dragging the river, the army out on the fens, everyone.'

'It was you who found her, wasn't it?'

Roger looked at her sharply. 'How did you know that?'

She smiled and squeezed his hand. 'It is written all over your face.'

'She was... she was standing on the main line which ran not far from her school. She had left the funeral and gone straight back to her classroom, tidied her things up and then walked across the playing fields to the railway.'

'She was okay?'

'Only just. I pulled her from in front of the London-bound express.'

'And?'

'We fought like animals as she tried to drag herself away from me and throw herself under the train. Apparently, she had thought of drugs, slashing her wrists and the like but had decided that those were not final enough.'

'Or dramatic enough?' Liz said with raised eyebrows.

'Don't mock her, Liz. She had no idea that I was around at the time. The Inter-City train was doing about eighty at the time so if it had struck her, I don't suppose we'd ever have found all the pieces.'

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### SUNDAY 22n AUGUST - 2330 hrs.

Nothing more was said for a long time as the two of them watched their hands intertwined in the dim light from the imitation gas/real fire.

Eventually, it was Liz who broke the silence. 'What happened then?'

'I rarely lose my temper but that night I was uncontrollably angry and she was just as determined to end it all.' He looked down again. 'I'm ashamed to say that I beat her up pretty badly.'

'And that's when she fell in love with you.'

'You are very discerning, Liz.'

'I have to be in my profession. Curing the body is only half of the battle. I have to know how my patients tick before I can begin to help them physically. How did you both manage without your father?'

'Very well, actually. Everyone was very kind, of course, though I got a pretty severe telling off from Marianne for attacking Suzette. I thought she was going to kill me.'

'Marianne?'

'Our cousin from France. My fiancée of sorts.'

'Cousin? Fiancée? Are you aware of the heredity dangers?'

'Of course we are,' he snapped and then calmed down. 'I suppose that after the war was over, there didn't seem to be anyone else left alive.'

'The "If you were the only girl in the world" syndrome.'

'Pardon?'

'You fall in love with whoever's left.'

'It's not just that. I do love Marianne, even now.'

'How old is she?'

'Nineteen.'

'Then she would have been eleven at the time of your father's death.'

'True, but she packed one hell of a punch for a skinny kid.' He laughed. 'Proper little she-cat. I had a black eye for days afterwards.'

'Is Marianne like Suzette?'

'How do you mean? Looks? Temperament?'

'Do they look alike?'

'Not at first glance. Marianne has golden hair while Suzette's is black as night. When she was young, and her hair was longer than it is now, Suzette always got the part of the wicked witch in the school pantomime because of that hair.'

'Eyes?'

'Marianne's are deep blue. Suzette's brown.'

'Figure?'

'Gorgeous.'

'Which one?'

'All three of them.'

'Three?'

'There was also Simone, our niece. When they each reached eleven years old, they were like identical triplets. Poor Simone.'

'What happened?'

'She got blown up by terrorists.'

'Good heavens!'

'I still don't know why but I intend to find out one day.'

Liz tactfully steered the conversation back on course. 'You say Suzette and Marianne are alike in build?'

He smiled. 'Only last week when I saw them together for the first time in ages, I realised just how alike they were. It was early evening and they both wore tee-shirts and jeans with headscarves and sunglasses. I had to stop and look very carefully to tell them apart.'

'I see,' Liz said thoughtfully. 'Tell me what happened when Marianne went back to France.'

'She threatened me when we were on the station platform at Victoria. It's funny, threats always sound much worse when uttered in French.'

'What did Marianne threaten you with?'

'That innocent little child said that if I ever laid another finger on Suzette she would cut off my... She would do irreparable damage to certain delicate parts of my anatomy.'

Liz almost fell off the settee laughing.

'She needn't have worried,' Roger continued. 'Suzette was quite safe with me.'

'She went back to school?'

He nodded. 'She had to, she was only fifteen. Give her her due, she worked like a Trojan that last year and got all her O-levels. She then went on the sixth form and thereafter to university.'

'Reading what?'

'Computer studies. Mainly advanced programming and database maintenance.'

'Was she technically clever?'

'Not before father's death. I had my own PC which I used for making calculations and project planning. That very night after Marianne had left, at three in the morning, she came to my room and climbed into bed with me. We both looked a state, me with my black eye and she with her bruised cheekbone and puffy jaw. We just looked at each other across the pillows and laughed for ages before bursting into tears together.'

Liz was looking at him rather oddly.

'Nothing happened,' he said quickly. 'It was not that kind of relationship.'

She smiled. 'Good. You had me worried there for a moment.'

'It was reaction on her part. Since that day, we have been the very best of friends and never a harsh word has been spoken between us.'

'And you never hit her again?'

'Never had to. The next day, it was a Saturday, she did something she had never done before. She got up before I did and made me breakfast in bed.'

'I wish someone would do that for me sometimes.'

Roger smiled. 'Your wish is my command.'

'But...'

'You cooked dinner, I'll cook breakfast.'

She pulled her hands away from his.

He smiled. 'Your bed will be full of dog. I'll sleep on the sofa.'

Liz noticeably relaxed. 'Did Suzette ever try to commit suicide again?'

Roger shook his head. 'Never. All of a sudden, she was a new girl. Throughout that day, she stood behind my chair, watching me struggling with a complicated computer programme I was trying to adapt and then, about five in the afternoon, she asked if she could have a go. I smirked a little, saved my own data and told her to help herself while I stretched my legs. When I got back, she had not only solved my problem, she had half written the solution as a subroutine.'

Liz's mouth fell open. 'She knew about computers?'

'Not a bit. She had never touched one before except to play those silly learning games at school.'

'How did she do it?'

'My Suzette has, among other things, a photographic memory. Every line I typed in, she analysed and co-related to everything else I had done and then all she had to do was rewrite it in the correct sequence. I was amazed. I had spent four years at it and then a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl comes along and shows me where I'm going wrong.'

Liz was laughing again. 'Did she stick at it?'

'It became an obsession. For the next thirty-six hours, she banged away at the keyboard non-stop and wrote a programme to calculate the high and low tide times for any point on the coast of the British Isles.'

'Is that difficult?'

'For any date in history? Right from 4000BC to the year 2000? Giving the day, date and time? And also calculating the mean height of the tide?'

'My God.'

'You see what I had to contend with - an instant genius. She slept for four hours and then went back to school and drove her teachers right over the edge. They were glad to see the back of her when she went to university.'

'And studied advanced computer programming.'

He nodded. 'Basic, Cobol, Pascal, Vax, everything. She could convert one language into another and even wrote her own programme to do most of the converting for her. That's how she got involved.' He stopped. 'Good Heavens.'

'What is it?'

He said nothing for a minute and then changed the subject. 'She and I got on very well after that day of

father's funeral. In fact, I suppose you could say we were inseparable.'

'Did she have no friends?'

'Not at school. What few she had developed previously, she soon lost when she turned "swat" on them. I suppose the only real friend she ever had was Gill.'

'Gill?'

'Gillian Green from Newmarket.'

'Was she like Suzette?'

Roger laughed. 'Quite the opposite. Gill is shorter and tubbier. Not fat, just cuddly. She was training to be a vet when they met at university. It's funny. When she rides a horse, Gill looks just like a teddy bear sitting on a pony.'

'And they got on well?'

'Yes, though I'll never for the life of me know why. They were exact opposites. Suzette was so strict and never had any boy friends while Gill was full of life and had a new boy friend every time I saw her. She had a crush on me at one time.'

'Didn't you like her?'

'I never got the chance to find out. Gill came to tea once and while Suzette was making the coffee, Gill grabbed me and tried her very best to seduce me. Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on your point of view, my darling sister came in and caught her at it. You should have seen Suzette's face and the look she gave Gill. I thought her stare alone was going to reduce her friend to a very small pile of ashes.'

'How did it work out?'

'Gill apologised and Suzette turned as sweet as honey. Since then, there was never a repetition of the incident. The two girls are still the best of pals.'

'But neither of you ever had close relationships.'

'Never. We never discussed it after the confrontation with Gill but it was a kind of unspoken rule.'

'Did Suzette get on well at this place where she worked?'

'Amazingly well, especially after she was given a baby of her own.'

Liz sat up straight. 'What?'

Roger laughed. 'Not a real one. Suzette was never that kind of girl. No, just over a year ago, the European Space Corporation used Ariane to put up a new satellite which had heat sensors to establish weather patterns. It had been in the development stage since the late seventies but technology kept overtaking the designers. It's a good job really. The original satellite was as big as a bus but, as the micro-chip developed, the satellite got smaller and smaller. Princess is now little bigger than a washing machine and contains ten times the planned facilities.'

'Princess?'

'PRNCS. Photoconductive Radiation Network Communication Satellite. It has heat sensors which measure the temperature differentials in the upper atmosphere.' He stopped there. He had no wish to frighten the poor girl to death with what he had suddenly realised a moment ago. 'That's when I knew it was time for me to go.'

'Go? Go where?'

He shrugged. 'Anywhere. Suzette had been presented with her new baby and, while she was distracted, I ran away.'

'Why wait so long? You could have left before, couldn't you?'

'I could,' he said and then paused. 'However, I didn't want to be the one to have to scrape my sister off the front of the eight fifty-two from Liverpool Street.'

'That bad, huh?'

Roger nodded. As if on cue, a watch beeped and Liz patted Roger's knee. 'Midnight. Time all good nurses were in bed.'

Roger grinned as she stood up. 'You are very clever, you know.'

Liz frowned. 'Clever?'

'In the last couple of hours, you've had me telling you things I have never told anyone else before in all my life.'

'And now I'll tell you something, shall I? Something it's about time somebody told you.'

'What's that?'

'Don't marry Marianne.'

He stood up beside her. 'I don't understand.'

'Apart from the heredity and legal problems, there is an even more important consideration.'

'And what's that, Nurse Freud?'

She slipped her arms around his waist. 'You are not in love with her.'

'I'm not?' He smiled. 'How on earth do you work that out?'

'Because you are deeply in love with someone else.'

He held her tight. 'Like who, for instance?'

'Someone for whom Marianne became a substitute. Someone who, despite what she may say or do, still feels the same way about you. You, my dear Roger, are still madly in love with your own sister.'

After a while, he said 'What can I do about it?'

Liz smiled. 'I see you don't deny it.'

'I don't necessarily agree with it either.'

'Then prove it.'

'How?'

'Take me to bed.'

His arms dropped to his sides. 'I couldn't do that.'

Liz kissed him playfully and then grinned. 'That's game, set and match to me, I believe.'

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### MONDAY 23rd AUGUST - 0300 hrs.

Roger couldn't sleep. He tried all ways but soon realised that he had too much on his mind. Was Liz right? Was he really in love with Suzette? Yes, he was, but was that the same thing as desire? If so, what could he do about it? The last thing he wanted to do was hurt his sister in any way but he knew he had to do something, if only to protect her. And what about Marianne? Was Liz right in that, too? Had he fallen for his cousin simply because she was so like his sister? He thought back on how he had felt that day when Suzette had arrived at Sorède with Philippe and realised it was then, and only then, that he had first shown any real interest in Marianne. But again, was it simply love of a family member or something more serious and, if the latter was the case, what was he going to do about that without appearing to be callous? He then thought about Liz. What was it that he was feeling for her? Upon reflection, he realised that his chief emotion regarding the girl he had just met was desire - something entirely different to either of the others.

He got up from the settee and walked round the room for a few minutes. It was no use, he didn't even feel tired. Not only that, he kept running over in his mind what it was that he was going to have to do, and quickly - before it was too late. As quietly as he could, he got dressed and, writing a simple note of thanks, headed for the door.

He never made it. With a crash, the hall door swung open and Liz stood in the doorway in her nightdress. 'And where do you think you're going at this time of night?' she demanded to know as Ben slinked past her and sniffed at his knee as if sizing up breakfast.

Roger dropped his hand from the door knob. 'I was just...'

'Running out on me?' she accused, her eyes seeming almost the colour of her hair. 'And what makes you think I am going to let you go?'

'Liz, you don't know what you're getting yourself into. It may already be too late to avoid you getting into very serious trouble.'

She walked towards him. 'From whom? The hospital? The police?'

He noticeably jolted at the latter and she said 'Aha!'

'I've done nothing criminal,' he began.

'If I thought you had, you wouldn't be here now. Tell me!'

'But Liz...'

She was now standing very close. 'Look, Roger Blackman. I'm going to give you two options and two options only. Either you take me now and screw the hell out of me until you get out of your system whatever's eating you or you sit down and tell me precisely what is going on.'

He put his hands on her shoulders. 'You are a good kid, Liz, a real friend in time of need.'

'Bullshit!'

'You could come to harm. There's great danger.'

She prodded him in the chest, her voice steadily rising in pitch. 'Danger? I'll tell you what danger is, shall I? Danger is trying to cross Linthorpe Road in the rush-hour to get to the supermarket. It's walking home from the bus stop late at night, any minute expecting some gang of nutters to leap out at me, take turns at raping me, and then calmly slit my throat so that they don't have to worry about me identifying them. Danger is working at the hospital on a Saturday afternoon when some drunken hooligan is brought in from Ayresome Park, injured from fighting, and then he threatens to smash his bottle in my face every time I try to help him. Don't preach to me about danger, I face it every bloody day.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't know you felt so strongly about it.'

'Then grow up and get wise. I'm in on this whether you like it or not. God knows why, but I care for you.'

'And I care for you. That's why I must do this alone.'

'How?'

'I don't know, I'll think of something.'

'You're absolutely crazy, you know that? You're in a strange part of the country with the police and



God-knows who after you and you want to play the hero all on your own. Fine, but you're going to have to do it over my dead body.'

He tried to push her away but she slapped his face. Instinctively, he raised his hand.

'What are you going to do? Beat me up, too?'

They faced each other in anger and then, suddenly, she was in his arms and their lips met. After a moment, Liz broke free. 'Well? What's it to be?'

He thought for a moment before lifting the hem of her short nightie and patting her bare bottom. 'Put something on.'

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#### **MONDAY 23rd AUGUST - 0400 hrs.**

Side by side on her bed, he told her everything. Liz lay in her dressing gown on one side of him and Ben snored on the other side. He told her about the afternoon it all started when he and his friend, Carlos, had seen the brilliant flashes of light in the sky. Carlos had said it was lightning but Roger had not been so sure, especially when, some minutes later, the ground had rumbled and the sky over Southern Spain had become dark with the mushroom clouds. He told her about how the fallout had passed them by and how they had taken the old van and driven to the edge of the death zone and seen all the bodies. He went on to tell how he had rushed to Sorède and found Marianne and her father alive because they had been in the cellar of their restaurant when the destruction had come. He informed her of Suzette's arrival the next day, how she had survived by being in the underground tracking station at Rouen. Next came the account of how they had raided the Consortium's other tracking station at nearby Laroque des Albères and had killed the terrorists there; how he and some others had gone on to attack the rebel headquarters at Mandagout while Suzette had stayed behind and corrupted the data so that the Consortium could not fire their missiles at the approaching UN Task Force.

Liz listened in silence as he told of the arrival of Malinov One on the scene, eager to ensure peace and how Suzette had challenged Colonel Narovic, Soviet Chess champion, to a game with neither pieces nor board and had beaten him at his own game. He told of the arrival of the corrupt US senator who had spent valuable time trying to establish frontiers and territories while people died from lack of aid; how Suzette and Marianne had been forced to flee from him to prevent the Americans using her to manipulate Princess into action against the Russians; how they had been captured by the surviving leaders of the Consortium and Suzette had been attacked viciously by a woman mad for revenge. He outlined the efforts to help the wounded Suzette; how Al Slazinski had disobeyed orders by flying her to Geneva to obtain medical treatment; how she had got up off her sick bed and risked her own life to save Marianne; how she had recognised that as long as she and Princess lived, the danger would always be present.

He then told her how Suzette had tried to destroy both herself and the satellite; how she had not succeeded because the nuclear device had failed to detonate; how he and the others had rescued her and gone on the run from the Russians but to be picked up again by Malinov One. He told her about the suspicions of Colonel Narovic, the work of Michael Blackman, the death of Simone, Jenny's letter, the disappearance of Marianne and the others in the submarine. He finished up by telling her quite clearly and concisely what it was he now had to do.

They lay together in silence, looking up at the ceiling, while it all went home. Roger turned his head and looked at Liz. 'Perhaps I should have chosen the other option instead.'

She looked back without smiling. 'I'm beginning to wish you had.'

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#### **MONDAY 23rd AUGUST - 0430hrs**

The first light of dawn touched the North Sea as USS Columbia steamed northwards just off the coast of Yorkshire. Admiral Michael Davison looked up at the knock on his office door. 'Come in, Al, and take a seat.'

The black Major stuffed his unlit cigar into his top pocket and took the offered chair.

'Do you know why you're here?'

Al Slazinski looked guilty. 'I can guess. sir.'

'You can guess? Have you any idea what kind of a mess we're in?'

'No, sir.'

'Then let me enlighten you. Because of your carelessness, that Blackman girl got away from us in the first place. Because of your outright subordination, she ends up in Geneva of all places. What in hell's name possessed you to take her there?'

'She was injured, sir, and needed urgent medical help.'

'So, instead of bringing her to us, you take her to Switzerland. Not content with that, you then take her on to Rouen where she tries to wreak havoc at the tracking station. Then when the Russians arrive, what do you do? You simply hand her over on a plate. The one and only person in the whole wide world who can help us to sort out this mess we're in and you hand her over to the Russian army.'

'It wasn't quite like that, Admiral. I really had no choice.'

'No choice, eh? Well, soldier, I have no choice now. We must get her back at all costs.'

'From Rouen?'

'No. Fortunately for you, events have overtaken us while you've been sunning it up on deck. Around midnight on Saturday, we passed through the Dover Straits and almost ran over what we thought was yet another submerged wreck. However, since then, sonar have persuaded me that it was likely something else.'

'Something else?'

'Yesterday, two of our scout ships caught sight of a conning tower just south of here. They followed it for an hour or so until a helicopter came from the coast and took off what looked like two people, one of them stretcher bound. The sub then disappeared and all attempts to trace it have proved unsuccessful. Does that mean anything to you.'

'Submarine? In the North Sea? There's only one vessel that could do that undetected.'

The Admiral nodded. 'Malinov One.'

'You mean Colonel Narovic has come up from the Med like we did?'

'That's right. Now why would he do that, do you think?'

'Suzette Blackman.'

'Precisely. She's around here, somewhere, and you are going to find her.'

'How?'

'I don't really care. So far, I've managed to suppress the report of your disobedience to specific orders but now I desperately need results. If we lose her for good, I may not be able to stop Court-Marshall proceedings being taken out against you. This is your one chance to wipe the slate clean, do you understand?'

The Major stood up. 'Perfectly, sir.' He turned to go.

'Al.'

'Yes, sir?'

'Good luck.'

'Thank you, Admiral. I think I'm gonna need it.'

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#### **MONDAY 23rd AUGUST - 0630 hrs.**

The bored policeman in the car stretched and looked at his watch. He smiled. In another hour and a half, he could go home to bed. A noise behind him made him look round and he watched the source of it for a moment before picking up his two-way radio.

'Sarge,' he said into the mouthpiece. 'An ambulance had just arrived.'

'You don't say,' came the sarcastic reply. 'This is a bloody hospital, Tom. Ambulances do come to hospitals, you know.'

'You did tell me to let you know whenever anyone arrived at the main entrance.'

'Okay, I'll deal with it.'

The constable shrugged and put down the handset. Inside, the sergeant raised himself from the desk where he had been chatting-up the receptionist and strolled casually towards the automatic doors as the ambulance stopped outside.

'You expecting anyone?' he called to the woman.

'Patients come and go all the time, you know that.'

'So early?'

'Perhaps there is an emergency of some sort.'

'There were no flashing lights or sirens.'

'No need at this time of a Monday morning. The streets will still be pretty quiet.'

He watched as the uniformed driver stepped down from the ambulance accompanied by a pretty nurse and the two of them walked in through the doors.

The nurse ignored him and went straight up to the desk. 'Hi, Julie. I've come to collect a patient for op.'

The receptionist smiled. 'One we can't handle, eh?'

'Don't ask me. I'm only the dogsbody who's been sent along for the ride. I think we're doing it at General because you're so busy here at the moment.'

'You can say that again. However, it has not been bad tonight. Who's the patient?'

The nurse handed over a typewritten sheet of paper. 'A patient from Ward Two - Blackman, Suzette.'

The police sergeant whirled round at the name. 'Who did you say?'

The nurse blinked. 'Suzette Blackman. She's due for an urgent spinal operation this morning.'

'Why wasn't I told about this?'

'Who are you?'

He held up his warrant card. 'Police.'

'Were you supposed to be told? I understood that everything was all arranged with your superiors. Didn't they inform you?'

'Did they hell!' He turned to the receptionist. 'Well?'

The woman shrugged and held up the paper. 'This is a proper transfer requisition. It's all in order.'

'You're sure?'

Her cheeks were tinged with red. 'Of course I'm sure. Do you think I would let just anyone walk out of here with one of my patients without being absolutely certain it was all right?' She stabbed her finger at the paper. 'This is Doctor MacDonald's signature of authorisation.'

'I see. She must go immediately?'

The nurse nodded. 'Yes. The operation is scheduled for eight. I have to get her ready.'

He nodded. 'Very well.'

The receptionist picked up the phone and made the arrangements while the nurse and driver collected a stretcher trolley to load Suzette into the ambulance. Ten minutes later, the ambulance was leaving.

The sergeant grabbed his radio. 'Tom, pick me up out front.'

The police car screeched to a halt in front of the doors, he jumped in and they roared off in pursuit of the disappearing ambulance.

'What's up, sarge?'

'I don't know. But I have this feeling in my bones that there's something going on which is not strictly kosher.'

'Like what?'

'I'm not sure. Just stick close to that ambulance. It's supposed to be taking the Blackman girl to the General Hospital for some kind of an operation. Apparently, the station knew about it but never bothered to let us in on the act.'

The constable nodded towards the distant back end of the ambulance. 'Well, they are going the right way.'

'Just don't lose them.'

He smiled. 'No chance.'

True to his word, he stuck close and followed it as it casually drove around the back streets of Linthorpe towards Ayresome Park. Soon, it was turning in at the main entrance to the General Hospital.

'Stick with it,' the sergeant instructed and the police car tailed the ambulance right to the loading bay. It backed up and, minutes later, the stretcher was unloaded.

'Stay here and keep your eyes open. I'm going inside to check.'

As the sergeant entered the hospital, Suzette was being wheeled into the lift. He collared the nurse. 'This operation going to take long?'

'Can't tell till the surgeon opens her up. Could be three or four hours or it could take all day. I suggest you ring up tomorrow and ask in ITU. She certainly won't be going anywhere for the rest of today.'

'You're sure?'

Her eyes looked daggers at him. 'I'm a nurse, dammit. I have done this before, you know. Now please get out of my way.'

'Okay, I'm sorry. I'll ring up tomorrow.'

'You do that,' said the nurse through the lift doors as they closed.

Deep in thought, he wandered out to the car.

'Anything wrong, sarge?' asked the constable.

'I'm not sure. Jump out and wait in the main area while I pop down to the station and find out what they're playing at.'

'I'm supposed to be off duty in an hour.'

'Tough! You just watch and make sure no-one smuggles out a dark-haired young lady by the name of Blackman.'

The constable sighed. 'You can depend on me, sarge.'

Slowly, he wandered into the hospital just as the lift doors opened again and a stretcher trolley came out. 'Just a minute.'

'What is it?' asked the same ambulance driver who was pushing it.

'Where are you going with that?'

'To St Lukes.'

The constable looked at him and then to the dark-haired nurse. 'Why?'

The ambulanceman smiled. 'Isn't it obvious?'

The policeman looked at the red-headed young woman on the stretcher and then down to the mound where her stomach should have been. He held up her wrist and the identity band said "Elizabeth Appleby - Pregnancy.'

'Okay,' he said and let them go. Thoroughly bored, he sat down, knowing he was probably going to be there for a very long time.

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### MONDAY 23rd AUGUST - 0715 hrs.

As the ambulance turned onto Acklam Road, the "pregnant" woman put her head into the cab. 'Well?'

Roger looked in both mirrors. 'I don't think anyone's following us.'

'Good.' The redhead placed her hands on the Suzette's shoulders. 'How do you feel?'

Suzette groaned. 'Sore and a little confused.'

'Come in the back and lie down.'

Roger held the ambulance steady as Liz helped his sister into the back. 'Which way?'

'Follow the signs for the A19 but take it easy. There is nothing more noticeable than an ambulance tearing around in a town.'

'Okay. You're the expert.'

Liz helped Suzette onto the bunk and made her comfortable. 'What did they tell you?'

'Not a lot. Mostly that I was in for observation. It was when I was told that someone had come to take me for an operation that I became really worried.'

Liz smiled as she slipped the gown over her head and removed the "baby" which had been strapped around her waist. 'You don't need an operation. I checked. If you take it easy, your back will heal by itself.'

'And my kidneys?'

'They'll heal, too. There is likely to be some discomfort for a while but you are in no immediate danger.'

'It still hurts when I move,' said Suzette as she watched Liz button up a white coat.

'The orthopedic doctor said there could be pain for some while. Don't worry, I've seen the X-rays. You'll live.'

Suzette touched her arm gently. 'You took a tremendous chance getting me out.'

Liz smiled wryly as she rolled up her hair. 'After stealing an ambulance and driver's uniform, forging a senior doctor's signature on an official document, absconding with a patient and lying to the police, I don't suppose I shall be welcomed back by Cleveland Area Health Authority for a while.'

'Why are you doing this?'

Liz hesitated. What should she say that wasn't going to upset her? Would she be jealous of her feelings for her own brother? She shrugged. 'Just doing what needs to be done.'

Suzette looked straight into her eyes. 'For love?'

Liz swallowed. 'Partly.'

Suzette grinned. 'Good. It's high time my brother got himself a decent woman.'

'You're not upset?'

'Should I be?'

'You and Roger are... very close.'

'That's why I am so happy for him. You seem like someone he could be happy with.'

'What about Marianne? Won't she be upset?'

Suzette smiled again. 'Probably, but she'll get over it. I have a sneaky feeling they both knew they were living in a fool's paradise.'

Liz sat down on the bunk and made Suzette as comfortable as possible. 'Is this the logical computer brain working now?'

Suzette laughed. 'Probably. Where are you taking me?'

'We're going to Cambridge.'

Suzette blinked. 'Cambridge? Why there?'

'I think I had better let Roger tell you that. I don't fully understand all the implications.'

'S.I.E.D.' said Suzette with certainty.

Liz nodded. 'Roger did mention the place where you once worked.'

Nothing more was said and Suzette stared at the roof of the ambulance, deep in thought. Liz tightened her patient's straps to prevent her rolling about too much. 'I'll go check our driver's not taking us via Newcastle.'

'Give him a kiss from me.'

Liz smiled. 'I will.'

In the cab, Liz pecked Roger's cheek. 'From Suzette.'

He smiled. 'When do I get one from you?'

'First time we stop, I promise.'

'Is she all right?'

'As well as can be expected. But I think she is enduring more pain than she will admit to.'  
'Can you make it any easier for her?'  
'I gave her a shot before we left South Cleveland. It should help for a while.'  
'Which way now?' asked Roger as they reached the A19.  
'Left. Now you can go faster if you like.'  
Roger looked puzzled.  
'Think about it. If you see an ambulance on the open road, where do you expect it to be going?'  
'To an accident?'  
'Exactly. Put your foot down and let's put some miles between us and them.'

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#### **MONDAY 23rd AUGUST - 0800 hrs.**

Thirty minutes later, they were still on the A19.  
'I'm glad we came this way,' said Liz. 'I heard the news on the radio before we left and there are horrific jams expected on the Great North Road. Keep heading towards York.'  
'Is it quicker this way?'  
'Not necessarily quicker but less noticeable under the circumstances.'  
'Easingwold,' said Roger as they passed the sign.  
'This is where the government will be.'  
'Pardon.'  
'They have an underground hideaway here. It has not been revealed exactly how many ministers got away from London in time but, whoever did, this is where they will be.'  
'It's odd to see everything looking so normal.'  
'Once we get south of York we may see a different picture, from what I have heard.'  
'Many deaths?'  
'Yes, and illnesses due to the fall-out.'  
'When do we stop?'  
'At York, I think. For one thing, Suzette will need another job to keep her going and, secondly, it will be about then that the police will know they have been conned and the search will begin in earnest.'

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#### **MONDAY 23rd AUGUST - 0815 hrs.**

Major Alphonse Slazinski walked over to the helicopter and pressed the button on the radio. 'Gunship One to Columbia. Do you read? Over.'  
'Columbia receiving. Go ahead, sir.'  
'Can you put me through to the Admiral, please. Person to person?'  
'Affirmative, sir. Hold on.'  
'She's gone?' asked the pilot as Al waited.  
'Just over an hour ago, it seems. I think our Miss Blackman is far cleverer than we gave her credit for.'  
'Admiral Davison here,' spoke the radio. 'What news?'  
'They've gone.'  
'Gone?'  
'Apparently, she and her brother pinched an ambulance and worked a crafty one which completely fooled both the hospital and local cops.'  
'Where did they go?'  
'It's too early to tell. The police are just sending out an alert now.'  
'Which way could they have gone?'  
'Not to any of the likely places, I'm afraid. The police are watching the cousin's house in Darlington but they have made no attempt to go there.'  
'What are the options?'  
'They could have gone north towards Scotland. There are plenty of places to hide out there. However, if they have, they'll soon be caught as there are very few roads to choose from.'  
'And?'  
'East is out of the question. West is a strong possibility. If they lost no time, they could be real close to the West coast by now.'  
'And South?'  
'The moors are in the immediate vicinity but I've overflowed them a couple of times and nothing looks

obvious. If they are up there, they'll have to come down sooner or later.'

'What if they by-passed the moors?'

Al looked at his watch. 'They could have gone fifty or sixty miles if the roads are clear. However, they won't do that.'

'What makes you so sure?'

'Straight into the hot zone? That's hardly likely, is it, sir?'

'Don't think like a soldier, Al. Get into that girl's mind and think like her. She's from the South of England, isn't she?'

'She is, but...'

'And everything she has left will be there, won't it?'

'I can see what you're getting at but they can't get through. Most of the roads south of York are heavily congested due to the relief work and, even if they did make it through, the troops will halt them as they apparently have strict orders not to let anyone into the hot zone because the radiation levels are still lethal.'

'Go south, Al.'

'But why?'

'I have a gut feeling about this. Let the police look in the other directions while you head south.'

'How far? And what about the radiation?'

'I don't have to tell you how important this is for both of us. I'm afraid you are going to have to go in and take the risk of being contaminated in the process. There is no other way.'

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#### **MONDAY 23rd AUGUST - 0830 hrs.**

'Turn left into Gillygate,' said Liz as the ambulance entered the city of York and followed the slow-moving traffic as it approached the lights beside the arch in the medieval wall.

'Where are we going?'

Liz smiled. 'Tell me. If you wanted to hide a tree where would you put it?'

Roger frowned. 'In the middle of a forest?'

'Precisely. So where would you hide an ambulance where no-one would give it a second look?'

'A hospital?'

'Dead right. Keep on up Wiggington Road and you'll see it on the left opposite the football ground.'

'What are we going to do when we get there?'

'We are going to park up and go to the canteen and get some breakfast. All this excitement has given me quite an appetite.'

#### **MONDAY 23rd AUGUST - 0900 hrs.**

The helicopter gunship passed Thirsk and then followed the dual carriage-way west towards the Great North Road. Soon, they flew over the junction with another, busier, road. Ten minutes later, they saw the traffic.

'Get lower,' shouted Al to the pilot as they peered out of the open doorway. 'Look for a white roof with a blue light atop.'

They flew slowly along the twin row of stationary vehicles until they got to the hold up.

'Turn around and go back. Let's take another look.'

Minutes later, they were sure. The ambulance was not in the traffic jam nor anywhere else in the vicinity.

'Retrace back to that last junction. See where else they could have gone.'

'Only minor roads,' said the pilot as they circled above Dishforth Interchange.

'I told Admiral Davison this was a waste of time. Head back towards the moors.'

The helicopter rose, turned, and headed east. At Thirsk, Al peered ahead. 'Where does that other road go? The one which continues south?'

The corporal rummaged with the map. 'Looks like York. But they wouldn't risk being trapped in a city, would they?'

'Martin, you're thinking like me. The Admiral said think like that girl. Where would she go?'

'Didn't that cop say they had a nurse with them?'

'He did but I can't think why they'd do that.'

'Miss Suzette is sick, isn't she? I saw the damage that lunatic at Mandagout did to her. There is no way those injuries could have been faked.'

'But, at such short notice, what could they have said to persuade a nurse to jeopardise her career in this way?'

'We must assume they've got her at gunpoint. Take the York road. It won't hurt to dally a while before going back. It will at least look as if we tried to locate them.'

The pilot looked sideways at him. 'And if we don't succeed?'

Al shrugged. 'Then, I guess, if I come out of this alive, my head will be right on the block.'

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#### MONDAY 23rd AUGUST - 0950 hrs

Full of eggs and bacon, the three fugitives slowly walked back towards the ambulance.

'The next part could be more difficult,' warned Liz.

Suzette hung onto her brother's arm for support, trying desperately not to look like an invalid. 'Why?'

'Because the roads will be narrower and more congested.'

'We'll just have to take that chance,' said Roger. 'We've still got a long way to go.'

Liz smiled. 'I'm with you.'

A roaring sound made them look up.

'Good grief!' said Roger. 'It looks like one of those helicopters from Columbia.'

'It is,' agreed Suzette. 'But what is it doing here?'

As they watched, it passed overhead and eventually disappeared.

'Looking for us, perhaps?'

'But why here? No, I think it's just a coincidence. They're on manoeuvres or the like.'

Roger opened the door of the ambulance and the girls climbed inside. A few minutes later, they were heading along the ring road beside the Fosse.

'Which way do you suggest?' he asked. 'What are the alternatives?'

'West onto the Great North Road, south via Selby and Doncaster, or south-east towards Hull.'

'I want to avoid the Great North Road if possible due to possible hold-ups and the fact that we shall be too noticeable.'

'That leaves Hull or Selby. If you go to Hull, we shall have to cross the Humber Bridge.'

'And Selby?'

'There's a bridge over the Ouse. We could be trapped at either.'

Roger thought for a moment. 'There's a hospital at Hull, isn't there?'

Liz nodded. 'Quite a big one.'

'Busy?'

'Of course. At the moment, it's handling all the emergency cases transferred from overcrowded hospitals in Lincolnshire.'

'So they will be quite used to ambulances crossing the Humber Bridge.'

Liz grinned. 'You're not stupid, are you? Okay, turn left at the next junction. That's Hull Road.'

'I can see it. Is Suzette all right?'

'For a while. I gave her a small injection before we left to make the pain more bearable. I didn't give her too much in case we need her alert.'

Roger smiled. 'Good thinking, babe.'

They turned left at Walmgate Bar and rolled eastwards. The sun was shining as they left York. On such a nice day, what could possibly go wrong?

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#### MONDAY 23rd AUGUST - 1100 hrs.

The Humber Bridge loomed in the distance as the little ambulance ran with the wide estuary on the right. To the trio, it looked so majestic in the sunshine. However, what did not look so majestic was the line of stationary cars being filtered through very slowly, most being turned back.

'Let's take a chance,' said Liz suddenly and she leant forward and switched on the siren and flashing lamp. 'Put your foot down and go round the traffic.'

'Won't it attract attention to us?'

She grinned. 'What option do we have?'

'None,' he replied and accelerated towards the bridge.

Two policemen stepped out into the road ahead of them. Liz slid open the door and hung out of it, waving a sheet of paper.

'It's an emergency,' she shouted as they drew to a standstill. 'We've got a very sick patient.'

'The hospital is that way,' said the sergeant, pointing towards Hull.

'She's got to get to Grimsby to see the specialist gynaecologist. It's a matter of life and death.'

Liz was banking on the theory that their knowledge of hospital practice would be limited to that closely associated with crime. She was right, after a cursory glance at a purely fictitious scrap of paper that was well out of date, the police let them through.

'Well,' said Roger as they roared across the bridge. 'Obviously the news about us hasn't reached here yet.' 'I don't suppose they ever imagined we would get this far. Those policemen looked as if they have been on duty all night and may not have been updated yet on all the latest news.'

'You're probably right. Look out!'

Roger slammed on the brakes as the shadow descended and then hung, poised just above the road at the end of the bridge. 'It's one of the 'copters from Columbia, just like the one we saw at York.'

'It's the same one,' said a bleary Suzette from the back.

'Are you sure?'

'I remembered the number. It's Al's helicopter.'

'Al? Al Slazinski?'

Before she could answer, an amplified voice called out, 'This is Major Slazinski, Mr Blackman. I must ask you to turn off the engine and stand clear of your vehicle.'

'Or what?' asked Liz quietly. 'Will he open fire on us? Is he armed?'

Roger nodded. 'With enough hardware to destroy this whole bridge if he wanted to.'

'He won't do that,' murmured Suzette. 'For one thing, Admiral Davison wants me alive and for another, it would be a waste of a damn good bridge.'

Roger smiled. 'You've got it all worked out, haven't you?'

'Police car coming up behind us,' said Liz, peering into the rear-view mirror. 'What are we going to do?'

'Between the devil and the deep blue sea - jail or USS Columbia. Which do you prefer?'

'Neither,' said Suzette. 'Drive straight at the helicopter. He'll soon move.'

'He might not.'

'And kill us all? I don't think Al is that stupid.'

Roger put the ambulance into first gear.

Liz sat down. 'Oh, my God.'

Suzette smiled. 'Go get them, brother.'

He slammed down his right foot and the ambulance flew forward, accelerating straight at the helicopter. At the last possible second, it rose into the air and they shot underneath it.

Liz opened one eye. 'Are we still alive?'

Suzette looked behind them. 'So far. They're following us.'

'I wouldn't expect them to do otherwise,' said Roger. 'We won't be able to shake them off here.'

Flat out, the ambulance roared along the A15 with police car behind and helicopter above. Onto the M180, they went in convoy, and then south along Ermine Street.

'Why don't they try to stop us?' asked Liz as they screeched round Caenby Corner.

'I don't know,' said Roger. 'Perhaps they're all too intrigued to know where we're going.'

'Or else they've got road blocks ahead,' offered Suzette.

'You could be right. How well do you know this area, Liz?'

'Not too well. We're beyond my normal operating range.'

Roger grinned as he leant forward and peered upwards through the windscreen. 'So is Al Slazinski but he's sticking with us all the same.'

'The trouble is we're hemmed in by rivers,' said Suzette as she consulted the road atlas taken from the dashboard. 'We've got to go through Lincoln or else a very long way round.'

'So it looks as if we're trapped.'

'Not necessarily,' said Suzette as she turned the map round. 'Take the next right after the airfield.'

'You've got it,' her brother replied as they passed the gates of RAF Scampton.

At the County Showground, Roger turned sharp right and the police car overshot and had to reverse as the ambulance hurled down Till Bridge Lane.

'Left,' shouted Suzette and she gritted her teeth as the tyres screamed on the corner. 'And next right.'

'I'm getting seasick,' complained Liz as she was thrown about by the violent motion. 'Ambulances are not designed to compete at Le Mans.'

'Left at the end,' called Suzette. 'And then right again.'

'Okay,' said Roger, standing on the brake.

They negotiated Saxilby and, a dozen corners later, were back on the A15 going south - this time on the other side of Lincoln.

'We've lost the fuzz,' said Roger as he looked in both mirrors. 'I think he took that last bend too fast and ended up in the dike.'

'I was pretty sure we were going to do the same,' said Liz. 'What about the helicopter?'

'He's still with us,' said Suzette. 'Al doesn't have to worry about turning tight corners.'

'A lot of dead animals around here,' noted Liz.

'Probably people, too.'

'Don't remind me. I should be helping them.'



'You're helping humanity far more by sticking with us,' said Roger. 'You'll get your chance to cure people later.'

'Fat chance of that. They'll never let me work again.'

'Don't be too sure,' said Suzette with a sly smile. 'When this is over, you'll be the hero of the hour.'

'Or dead.'

Roger nodded. 'There is that distinct possibility. However, let's not dwell on that for now. Which way, Suzette?'

'We don't have a lot of choice. Try straight through Sleaford unless you see a problem.'

'Traffic's much lighter here. I guess most people died in their beds.'

Liz nodded. 'It's the natural thing if you're feeling very ill. When the fallout came, people would have been farming and shopping and the like. They probably didn't even realise what it was until they had been exposed to it, poor things.'

'It'll get worse,' said Roger. 'This is only the fringe.'

'Stop the ambulance!' said Suzette suddenly.

Roger slowed a little. 'There's no danger, Suzette. The radiation will have dissipated fairly quickly once it had done its dirty work.'

'It's not that. Stop!'

'Okay.' He pulled up beside some trees.

'Turn off the engine.'

He did and they listened to the sound of the helicopter as it circled around in search of them. It soon located them and hovered above the field on their right. Suzette slid open the door and staggered out.

'Where are you going?'

'I want to talk to Al.'

'No. If the Americans get hold of you, we'll never see you again. I'll go.'

'I'm sorry, Roger, but it has to be me who talks to him. I think I can get through to him.' She suddenly grinned. 'Anyway, there's a huge ditch between him and us.'

Her brother looked around. She was right. The only place the helicopter could land was in the field opposite. She stood on the edge of the road, the downdraught plucking frantically at her clothing and the dust swirling around her as the gunship settled down and the whining began to die away. As she watched, the six-foot black Major from the Bronx dropped to the ground and walked towards her, a dead cigar in his mouth. Twenty feet away on the other side of the dike, he carefully lit his cigar as silence gradually came to the countryside. There was not even the sound of birds in that dead country.

'How are you, kid?' he asked eventually.

Suzette smiled slightly. 'They tell me I'll probably live.'

'Still in pain?'

She nodded. 'Excruciating at times although Nurse Appleby is taking good care of me.'

Al suddenly burst out laughing. 'You know you've got Admiral Davison having heart attacks, the hospital at Middlesbrough breathing fire and brimstone and half the British police running around like headless chickens. I gotta hand it to you - you've sure got style.'

'It had to be done. I suppose you're here to take me back to the Admiral?'

He nodded. 'And thence to Laroque to put right that computer you loused up.'

'I can't do that, Al.'

'You helped the Russians.'

'I did not,' she said vehemently. 'They are as much in the dark as your people and it's going to stay that way if I have any say in the matter.'

'You really want to go ahead with this, don't you?'

'I've got no choice, Al. Don't you see that? I thought you, at least, would understand.'

'I do, kid. But it's not me you've got to convince.'

'I can't do that without proof.'

'How will running away find this proof?'

'Running away? Who's running away? I'm on my way now to try and find that proof.'

'What evidence are you looking for precisely?'

'Evidence that it was the Consortium which started the war and that the Americans and Russians have been simply used as pawns in someone else's game and should be at peace as before; proof that the danger really is now over and we should be helping one another, not harbouring resentment or suspicion; proof that my Uncle Mike was not guilty of murder and that he tried his best to prevent the war not foment it. Also, I intend to find out what happened to my niece, Simone, and her father.'

'That's one hell of a job you've got on. Where do you expect to find this proof?'

'I'm not sure. However, I do know where to start.'

'And where's that?'

'The S.I.E.D. tracking station at Cambridge. If I can get access to Princess, she'll tell me most of what I need to know.'

Al drew back his shoulders. 'I'll take you there and we'll find out together.'

'Al, I believe you mean well. Also, I believe that you are under very strict instructions as was Colonel Narovic.'

The Major frowned. 'Colonel Narovic? What's he got to do with any of this?'

'The same as you. Like you, he risked both his career and his life to help me but there was a limit to what he could do.'

'Has he got some sort of hold on you?'

Suzette drew a deep breath. 'He's got Marianne, Jim and Gill on board Malinov One.'

'Hostages?'

'I suppose you might call them that.'

'And you're going to help him in return for their safety?'

'Not at all. I love them all but the future of humanity is far more important right now.'

The Major shook his head slowly. 'You can be a cold-hearted bitch when you want to be.'

She stared across at him. 'Was that meant as an insult or a compliment?'

He laughed. 'Simply an observation. Does nothing ever penetrate that cool heart of yours?'

Suzette said nothing for some time and then smiled. 'Yes, it does. I once trusted someone completely but he betrayed my trust and tried to have me killed. Once bitten, twice shy. That's why I can't come with you no matter how tempting the offer might be.'

'I could pick you up at any time.'

She grinned wickedly. 'You could try.'

'So we continue this cat and mouse game, do we?'

'Not necessarily. We could work together in a way that will satisfy all parties concerned.'

'How could we do that?' he asked suspiciously.

'You could help us get to Cambridge.'

He looked naturally wary. 'I can see how that would help you but how would it help us?'

'You'll get the proof you need to take to Admiral Davison, you'll be in touch with us the whole time and, when it's all over...' She smiled. 'You get me.'

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### **MONDAY 23rd AUGUST - 1300 hrs.**

Sleaford came and they entered the fen country proper with its flat landscape and criss-cross of dikes and drains. Al had given Suzette a walkie-talkie so they could keep in touch while the helicopter scouted ahead.

'Just press the red button to get my attention,' he had told her. 'And the black one to speak. Let go when you've finished so's you can hear the reply. If you're in trouble, press the red button three times in succession and then again every minute so the radio direction-finder can get a fix.'

Suzette had caught the radio and thanked him before setting off again. It was hard going now as there were more and more abandoned vehicles to obstruct the road and, on occasion, detours had to be found. Not a single police car or ambulance was seen in this land where more than half the population had died due to the fallout and most of the rest were bedridden - their lives in the balance. The emergency services were concentrating their energies further north so this was an area where a person lived or died by his or her own efforts.

This situation almost brought the trio to grief in Bourne where they had stopped to try and obtain food. The main road through was almost deserted except for a scattering of cars and lorries. Roger pulled up in front of a supermarket, got out and peered in the window.

'Everywhere looks deserted,' he observed as Liz joined him. 'I wonder where we might obtain canned stuff without appearing to be looters.'

'Are the shops all closed?'

He tried the door. 'This one is. Mind you, it's just a lock-up. What we need is a shop where the people live on the premises.'

'We could try further down the street.'

They had walked no more than a few paces when they heard Suzette call out. Turning, they saw the mob. It looked ugly and consisted of about twenty men, many of them little more than youths, and they carried sticks and clubs.

Roger faced them. 'Hello. Do you know where we can get some food?'

No-one answered him and Liz moved closer. 'I don't like this, Roger.'

'Nor do I.' He raised his voice. 'We want to buy food. We've got money.'

'We don't want yer money,' one said, obviously the leader. 'We want your pretty doctor friend to cure our children and our wives.'

Roger glanced at Liz who was still in the borrowed white coat from Middlesbrough General. 'My friend is not a doctor, only a nurse. I suggest if you have any urgent cases, you take them to Hull. They are set up to deal with fallout cases there.'

'We rang there when we got no answer from Peterborough or Lincoln. They told us to look after ourselves as they was crowded out already.' As they talked, they moved closer and soon, were surrounded by the men who were dirty and unshaven, clearly doing little to help themselves.

'We just want food,' said Liz. 'None of us are qualified to deal with radiation sickness.'

'Then we'll just take your ambulance.'

'Don't you have vehicles of your own?' asked Roger, trying to keep the temperature of the conversation down.

'And what if we has?' the leader challenged.

'If you have, then you don't need our ambulance. We have a sick patient on board who needs constant supervision.'

'We got sick people here too, but no-one cares. The government made sure they was safe underground. They don't give a toss about us, do they?'

Roger didn't know and said so.

'You can go,' said the man suddenly.

'Go? Just like that?'

'Yes, go. But the pretty doctor stays here with us.'

Roger looked around and didn't like the way that some of them were looking at Liz. He was about to argue when the peace was disturbed by a rushing, roaring sound and, a few seconds later, the air was full of a dense yellow smoke which brought tears to their eyes.

'Get in and drive away,' came the booming voice from above as Roger and Liz staggered to the ambulance and climbed in.

As the doors closed, the frenzied mob attacked - beating and smashing at the windscreen and doors as Roger started the engine. The laminated screen cracked but didn't shatter as Roger leaned on the horn and revved the motor.

'We've still got no food,' shouted Suzette as they began to move forward.

He looked over his shoulder at his sister. 'You can think of your stomach at a time like this?'

'It's not that. It's just that here might be our last opportunity to collect uncontaminated food.'

'Let's get away from this little lot first. Did you call for AI?'

Suzette nodded. 'I gave him the pre-arranged signal.'

Roger put his foot down and they were soon heading out of town. Five miles further on, they came to a fork in the road.

'Keep right,' called Suzette. 'Take the old Roman road and by-pass Peterborough. I've had enough of strange people for one day.'

'You have to feel sorry for them,' said Liz.

'I do. But not at the expense of them attacking you.'

King Street was dead straight as all Roman roads should be and they made good speed as they crossed over side roads and main roads, heading due south. After crossing the A16, they came to a level crossing with its gates down.

'Is there a train coming?' asked Suzette.

Roger looked both ways. 'I doubt it. The signals are not working so I don't suppose the catenary is either.'

'The what?'

He pointed. 'The overhead power supply for the trains.'

Liz got out and looked over the isolated barrier. 'Could simply be a power failure.'

Roger looked up at the cable. 'I don't intend to climb up and find out. Twenty-five thousand volts will do more than make my hair curl.'

'Can we go round?'

Roger looked at his sister and raised his eyebrow.

Suzette consulted the map and shrugged. 'We could try but that might be blocked as well. It looks as if all the railway crossings around here are on the level.'

Roger reversed into a gravel turning area as Liz climbed aboard. 'Which way?'

'Go back up this road half a mile and turn right and then right again at the church.'

'You've got it, our kid.'

'I wish you wouldn't call me that.'

Roger grinned. 'You never did like that, did you?'

'Not since father died. He used to call me that sometimes.'

'Sorry.'

Suzette smiled. 'You're forgiven. Damn!'

'What is it?'

'This level crossing is down, too.'

'Must be a fail-safe of some kind.'

'Hang on, this one is only a half barrier. Can you drive around it?'

Roger smiled. 'As long as no trains come, yes.'

No trains came and, a few minutes later, they were on a deserted Great North Road, heading south. After a mile, they saw flashing headlights and a large truck passed them, going the other way, hooting and waving.

'Friendly chap,' said Liz.

'I think he was trying to tell us something,' said Roger, peering ahead along the empty road.

'Can't see anything,' said Suzette. 'Road looks clear to me.'

'Miss Suzette,' the portable radio suddenly said. 'This is Al Slazinski. Come in, please.'

At the same time, a roaring came overhead and they all looked up at the belly of the helicopter. Suzette picked up the handset and pushed the button. 'Receiving you, Al. Go ahead.'

'Suggest you take the next left down to the river.'

'Waternewton,' Roger read off the sign.

'It's a dead end,' said Suzette, looking at the map. 'What's the problem, Al?'

'No problem. Just thought you might like a late lunch.'

Suzette grinned. 'You're on. I'm starving.'

Roger turned off and into the village. Ahead, the helicopter was just landing in a field beside the river. They stopped as close as they could and Roger and Liz jumped to the ground. Suzette followed more sedately.

Major Slazinski walked towards them, carrier bag in hand. 'How'd you fancy fish and chips?'

'You're joking.'

'Not at all. Take a look.'

He opened the bag and the smell wafted out.

'Where did you get these?'

Al winked. 'Don't ask. It's okay, they're safe to eat.'

The six of them gathered around and Liz played mum with the packages.

'How are you, Miss Suzette?' asked a young rookie.

'I'm fine thanks, Martin. Is the big feller looking after you?'

Corporal Frobisher looked at his superior officer. 'Al's not so bad at times. I've served under far worse.'

The pilot sat down next to Suzette. 'Glad to hear you got out of France okay.'

The young woman smiled as she picked up a chip. 'So am I, Frank. Hey, these are good.'

'Only the best for our invalid,' said Al as he also sat down. 'I never thought you'd get this far.'

'I don't know how much further we'll get. Some lorry driver was signalling to us back there.'

'They've closed off all the roads just south of here at a roundabout. Soldiers are stopping everything and turning them back. There's one hell of a jam.'

'That'll be Norman Cross. Perhaps they'll let an ambulance through.'

Al shook his head. 'I doubt it after your escapades in Lincolnshire. Anyway, by the length of the tail-back, you'll be held up for hours, perhaps days.'

'What about the side roads?' asked Roger.

'All the main roads are blocked off. But their main line of defence is the river.'

Liz pointed at the nearby Nene. 'This river?'

'No, the next one south. The long straight one.'

'The Hundred Foot Drain,' said Suzette.

'You know it?'

Suzette nodded. 'Part of the Great Ouse watershed. They chose well. Few bridges, wide dikes. Impassable virtually to Milton Keynes except by road bridge.'

'And they have every single road covered, even the minor ones.'

'They seem determined not to let anyone through,' said Roger eventually.

'They certainly do, Mr Blackman. We appear to be stuck right here. I think we may all have come a very long way for nothing.'

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**MONDAY 23rd AUGUST - 1800 hrs.**

Suzette lay back on the grass, the sun still warm on her face and the gurgling of the river brought a feeling of calm to them all.

'Penny for your thoughts,' said Roger as he sat down beside her.

'I was thinking about fishing,' she said.

'Fishing? You've just eaten enough fish and chips to keep you full for a month. Anyway, I wouldn't fancy eating anything that came out of a river round here. It will probably glow in the dark.'

'No, silly. I was remembering when daddy used to take you and your friends fishing while he was on leave - that place where I fell in and you had to jump in and drag me out.'

Roger smiled. 'Yes, I remember it well.' He suddenly laughed aloud. 'You lost your knickers and dad was furious because you wouldn't come out of the water.'

Suzette went bright red. 'I was eleven at the time. It was all right for you but nice young ladies don't show off their bottoms in public.'

'You nearly caught pneumonia.'

'You saved the day, though, didn't you? I remember you took off the brand new suede jacket you were so proud of and wrapped it round me to save my embarrassment.'

'What made you think of that event? It must have been twelve years ago.'

'There was a bridge there, wasn't there?'

'Brownhill Staunch? Not so much a bridge - just a lock and footbridge really. We'd never get an ambulance across there.'

'How about Needingworth?'

He shook his head. 'Just a foot ferry at the pub and that has probably ceased by now.'

'What about the Drain itself?'

'Not a chance. Too wide and far too deep.'

'Then we're stuck.'

'Not necessarily,' he said, deep in thought. 'You've just given me an idea. Pass me the map.' He studied it for a moment. 'I wonder.'

'What have you got in mind?'

'I think there's another bridge.'

'There are no other bridges. The nearest is either at Earith or the main road into St Ives. Both are bound to be blocked off.'

'No, there is another one, assuming it's still standing. Look, what's that?'

She looked at dotted line on the map. 'It says "Course of old railway."''

'It must have crossed the river somewhere.'

Suzette looked aghast. 'You want to cross the river using an abandoned railway line?'

He nodded. 'Exactly.'

She lay back. 'I think I'll stay here instead. It's much safer.'

'Suzette. It was safer in Middlesbrough but you left there.'

'You're quite mad.' She smiled. 'But I love you.'

Roger remembered what Liz had said at Stokesley. It seemed like a thousand years ago. What was it that was between them? Nothing wrong, he was sure.

He kissed her cheek. 'Why don't you rest for a while?'

She sat up. 'If we're going to try your hair-brained scheme, we'd better get on with it.'

'No. We can't do much till after dark.'

Suzette looked at him for a long time. 'Let me get this straight, brother of mine. You want to drive to a derelict, abandoned railway bridge in the middle of nowhere and cross a major river in pitch darkness? No headlights, I presume?'

'No headlights.'

'And where, pray, will Liz and I be while all this is going on?'

'You'll be hanging out of the door, trying to guide me along the rails.'

Her mouth dropped open. 'You're out of your tiny mind, you know that?'

He grinned. 'I knew you'd like it.'

Liz arrived at that moment, black bag in hand. 'Right, gentlemen. I need to attend to my patient. Could you take a hike for a while?'

The men got to their feet. 'How long?'

She looked at her watch. 'An hour? Two, if you have the energy.'

'What are you going to do?' said Roger. 'Rebuild her?'

'Not at all. I want to give her back some massage and physiotherapy and I can't do that with all her clothes on.'

'Can't you do it in the ambulance?'

'I could but I'd rather do it out here in the sunshine. So unless you want to embarrass the poor girl...'

'We'll go. Come on lads, show me the workings of your helicopter.' He turned. 'Give us a shout when you're done.'

Liz knelt down beside Suzette and helped her off with her clothes. In just her panties, Suzette lay face-down on the grass while the nurse rubbed in ointment and gently smoothed it into the skin of her back.

'Feels warm,' sighed Suzette after a while.

'Does it ease the pain?'

'Tremendously. Liz, you're good, you know that?'

'I've had a bit of practice.' She patted her bottom. 'Lie there for a while and I'll go and put my own uniform back on.'

In the ambulance, Liz changed her clothes and returned with her white coat which she laid beside Suzette. She took out her syringe case and inserted the needle into a phial. 'I want to give the biggest injection you can safely take.'

'Why? After that massage, I feel fit as a fiddle.'

'I know you do. However you've had a lot of bumping about and I would prefer it if you were more relaxed for a couple of hours. I don't want to knock you out completely - just make you sleepy. You may even feel a little drunk.'

'Huh! That'll be the day.'

'Lay still,' said Liz as she pulled down Suzette's sole garment and administered the injection.

'Ouch! That hurt.'

'Got to go deep, my girl. Right, sit up and put this overall on. The fellers are heading back this way.'

'Are my kidneys going to be okay?' Suzette asked as she did up the last button.

'If you keep drinking a lot, they should be all right. It's a good thing Roger had the foresight to check the water canister. I wouldn't fancy you drinking any water that's had fallout dropped in it.'

Suzette smiled. 'Roger thinks of everything.'

'He certainly thinks a lot of you.'

'I know. We've been through a lot together.'

Liz smiled. 'I know. He told me.'

'Did he tell you about Uncle Mike?'

'A little.'

Suzette lay down again, staring up at the sky. 'I thought about him when we were talking about rivers. The last time I saw him was the year Aunt Mary died. They both came to see us during the summer holidays. In fact, now I think about it, it was only a few weeks before the other incident.'

'What happened?' said Liz as she put her bag away.

'Uncle Mike took me for a quiet walk along by the Granta.'

'Was that unusual?'

'Yes. Normally he was so playful and jolly but that day, he was subdued and...'

'Unhappy?'

'No, not unhappy, just thoughtful, preoccupied.'

'Perhaps he had a lot on his mind.'

'Maybe,' said Suzette quietly, her eyes closed. 'He held my hand and kept cuddling me as if he was never going to see me again. It was very odd and I've only just remembered it.'

Liz was suddenly very interested. The drug was evidently taking effect and relaxing her memory. 'And this was ten years ago, when you were thirteen?'

Suzette smiled in reflection. 'He gave me a piggy-back across the river.'

'Why?'

'So that we could be alone together without being disturbed.'

Liz felt the hackles rising on her neck. 'And...?'

'We sat together and watched the ducks,' said Suzette, sounding more and more like that thirteen-year-old as she spoke. 'It was dark when we got home and everyone wondered where we had been for so long.'

Liz swallowed. Dare she ask? 'Tell me exactly what happened.'

Suzette paused and Liz thought that she had passed out. After a while, she sat up and said, like a child, 'Happened? What do you mean?'

'I don't know what I mean, Suzette. Just relax and think back. Tell me everything that was said and done.'

Suzette lay back again on the grass and closed her eyes once more. 'He said he had just finished an assignment and would stay in England for a long time.'

'Didn't he usually stay in England?'

'No. He travelled abroad quite a bit, in France mainly.'

'Why France?'

'He was doing something for the government - something secret, I think.'

'He didn't tell you anything about it?'

'Not exactly,' replied Suzette, her speech a little slurred. 'I think he wanted to tell me but couldn't find the words. He cried.'

'What?'

'I never saw a man cry before and it made me very sad to see it.'

A tear trickled down her soft cheek and Liz had to look away and swallow hard. When she had control of herself once more, she gently wiped Suzette's tears with the tips of her fingers.

'Now think carefully. Did he give you any clue as to what had made him sad? It could be very important.'

'I remember him holding me tight and saying that everything was going to change. He said there was going to be a Requiem. I never understood what he meant.'

Liz was puzzled. 'A Requiem? A piece of music?'

'That's the word he used. He said it was the music of death and he had tried to stop it but had failed.'

'Anything else?'

'He said Harry would understand.'

This was a new one. 'Harry? Who's Harry?'

'I have no idea.'

'Was this Harry chap dying, do you think? Was the music for him?'

'No,' she said eventually. 'I remember him saying that it was the Requiem for a Princess.' Suzette's eyes suddenly popped open. 'Princess!'

'What?'

'It was him. He knew all the time.'

Alarm bells started ringing inside Liz's head. 'Who? Your Uncle Mike?'

Suzette nodded. 'He tried to stop them.'

'Who?'

'I don't know. He said he had tried to prevent the Requiem but they had sent him home in disgrace.'

'They?'

'His bosses, I think.'

'What happened afterwards?'

'I don't remember. It all became confused when Aunt Mary died a few months later. She committed suicide and Uncle Mike was ill afterwards. He retired to his cottage in Eggescliffe.'

'So he never stopped these people doing whatever it was they were up to?'

'He said.... he said the Requiem was already playing and it was too late.'

'Too late? Too late for whom?'

Suzette turned to face her. 'Too late for the human race.'

#### **MONDAY 23rd AUGUST - 1930 hrs.**

For a long time, Liz sat staring into the waters of the Nene, the faint rushing of the weir in the distance. All she had learned was a jumble of facts which seemed unrelated and yet, she thought, they just had to clip together like one very complex jig-saw puzzle.

'Are you all right?' asked Roger as he came up behind her. 'You're looking very thoughtful.'

At first, she didn't reply but tried desperately to work out who was on which side - whom she could trust. Was she being led totally up the garden path?

She turned to face him without smiling. 'When are we leaving?'

'As soon as we can clear up our things and get going.'

'Suzette's asleep,' she said, staring at the dark-haired girl.

'Perhaps as well.'

Al approached. 'Which way are you going to reach this bridge of yours?'

'We'll have to go by a pretty circuitous route, I'm afraid. Where did you say those troops were? Here, show me on the map.'

The two men pored over it while Liz looked on.

'You say the main road is blocked at Norman Cross?'

'It sure is.'

'How about this other road? The one from Peterborough?'

'Choc-a-block right back to town.'

'Hmm! So we had better keep to the side roads.'

'Some of them are just as bad. Everyone is trying to beat the system.'

'You said earlier that they are using the river as a last line of defence.'

'That's right, Every bridge is blocked off with lorries and armoured vehicles. There are soldiers patrolling the north bank.'

'Anywhere else?'

'They're all over the flatlands but they seem to have gathered in force here, here and here.'

'Alconbury, Wyton and Upwood. That does limit things.'

'You sure you can do this? No-one seems to be getting through. Even I got turned back by fighter aircraft and I've got huge UN decals on both sides of my gunship.'

Roger grinned wryly. 'Suspicious lot, aren't they?'

'You know this part of the country, Mr Blackman?'

'Oh, yes. I'm on my home ground here. While I was at college, I had a mate who lived with his father on Lotting Fen. '

'That near here?'

'There, look.' He pointed it out on the map. 'We used to go scrambling up all these long droves. If you know where you're going, you can get right across the fens without having to touch a road.'

'But there's one hell of a lot of water there. Them straight rivers criss-cross the whole landscape.'

'The dikes? Yes, go the wrong way and you could end up in one of them.'

'How do you get cross them?'

'Iron bridges. The farmers have to get their tractors around. Where a tractor can go, an ambulance can go, too.'

'And you reckon you can get that thing where a motor bike can go?'

'Not necessarily. But what tracks I don't know, Suzette does.'

Liz was horrified. 'Suzette goes scrambling on a motor cycle?'

Roger laughed. 'Not my sister. Perish the thought.'

'Then what did you mean when you said she knew the tracks and, what did you call them? Drokes?'

'Oh yes, she knows them all right. At the age of nineteen, she was the under twenty-one ladies rally champion. She used to drive around those dirt tracks in the dead of night at speeds of over a hundred miles an hour. Proper little devil was Suzette when she was a kid.'

Al blinked. 'Well I'll be darned.'

'You know where it is we cross the Ouse?'

'You showed me. You sure you can make it?'

Roger smiled. 'There's only one way to find out.' He shook the Major's hand. 'I'll meet you on the other side, all being well.'

'You take care now. I'd hate to have to explain to the Admiral how it was you managed to drown yourselves whilst driving an ambulance along a railroad track.'

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TEN MINUTES after leaving Waternewton, they saw the traffic. It blocked both lanes and looked as if it hadn't moved in days. Roger slowed and then turned left onto a cart track. Several very bumpy minutes later, they passed a clay pit and drove through the yard of the brick works. The road they came to was full of stationary traffic but there was just enough room, with a bit of shunting, to get round the vehicles and onto the track opposite. Another clay pit and another brickworks brought them to the village of Yaxley.

'You certainly know your way around here,' mused Liz as she tried to follow their course on the map. 'Which way now?'

'Through the village and down the hill onto Hod Fen. I'm going to take a chance that Holme crossing gates are passable.'

'And if they're not?'

'Then we'll have to go via Conington Fen instead of Woodwalton Fen. It's a bit longer but just as bumpy.'

Liz scowled. 'Thanks a lot. It's a good job Suzette is asleep. If she wasn't, she'd be in agony.'

Roger shrugged. 'Needs must.'

'Couldn't Al keep us better informed?'

'Only up to a point. For one thing, tracks look completely different from the air. Secondly, he doesn't know where is is most of the time and would have great difficulty explaining what he could see and where he could see it. Thirdly, there is nothing more liable to attract unwanted attention than a blooming great helicopter hovering above us.'

'I see what you mean. Uh, oh. Looks like the crossing gates are down.'

'So they are. Oh, well, I never did like Woodwalton Fen anyway. Too many dikes.'

'This looks as if it was a busy railway line.'

'It's the same one we crossed earlier only this is where Mallard broke the world speed record.'

'Mallard? A duck?'

'No,' said Roger. 'A steam locomotive.'

Liz looked down her nose. 'Oh, a train.'

'Not just any train. The fastest in the world.'

Liz wasn't impressed. 'Where now?'

'There's another crossing about a mile further on.'

They drove the mile, found the level crossing and crossed the tracks. Then, it was right, left, right, left, right, left and over the hump-backed bridge.

'This is Monks Lode which drains Sawtry Fen. It runs into the Nene just north of here.'



A few minutes later, they crossed back over the dike and were soon on a narrow tarmacked road which led into a tiny hamlet seemingly huddled up against the railway embankment. There was no sign of life in the village as they drove through and then went back onto cart tracks at the far side. It was so peaceful and, after another half-hour of tracks and ruts, they reached a main road as the sun began to set.

'I'm going to take a chance,' said Roger as he peered both ways along the empty road which ran, straight as a die, in both directions.

'Not drive along a real road?' said Liz sarcastically. 'That's not like you.'

Roger smiled. 'Do you know? I lost a girl friend along here once.'

'You did?'

'She was riding pillion on my motor-bike when it caught fire. When I slowed down, she jumped off.'

'And so would I have done. Was she hurt?'

'Oh, no. At least, no more than her pride.'

'And I suppose the poor girl walked home?'

'Huh! At least she didn't have to push the motor-bike.'

Liz suddenly laughed. 'There's never a dull moment in your life, is there?'

'At least you know what you're letting yourself in for.'

'I could never keep up with Suzette, you know. I'd seem boringly ordinary by comparison.'

'Who cares? Bore me to death, I don't care. I love you.'

'Are you sure?'

'Not any more but I know a good thing when I see it.'

Liz smiled. 'You'll do for me.'

~~~~~

#### MONDAY 23rd AUGUST - 2100 hrs.

It was virtually dark as the ambulance rolled quietly up to the roundabout on the outskirts of St Ives, without lights.

'The main road bridge is just up ahead,' said Roger. 'If Al was right, it will be well-guarded.'

He turned left off the road and past a sign that said "PRIVATE ROAD". He stopped and jumped out. 'Wait here.'

'Not likely,' said Liz and followed as he ran quietly through the bushes and stopped in sight of the bridge.

'I thought as much,' he whispered.

'What is it?'

'There are soldiers everywhere and they've parked a couple of trucks right across the bridge. No-one crosses the river by means of this road. Come on, let's get back to Suzette.'

'Where's our railway bridge?'

'According to the map, it's just down this lane.'

'Hang on a minute,' said Liz, grabbing his arm. 'You mean we not only have to drive across an abandoned railway bridge, we have to do it in full view of half the Army on Red Alert?'

Roger's teeth looked white in the darkness as he smiled. 'Something like that.'

'Good heavens. What have I let myself in for?'

'You wanted to come. You needed the excitement. Instead of running off and leaving Ben with your sister in Marton, you could have stayed at home with him and you'd probably still have a job.'

'And you'd be in custody at Middlesbrough while Suzette lives off saline drip.'

'I didn't say I wasn't grateful.'

She got into the ambulance and closed her eyes tightly. 'Just tell me when we're across.'

Roger smiled, started the engine and crept forward without lights along the narrow road and past water-filled quarries which looked black and ominous. There was no moon and the only light was from the generator-driven floodlamps on the nearby road bridge causing the few trees to cast eerie shadows across the still water. At the end, Roger turned right through the yard of a cement works and onto a dirt track which raised clouds of dust which hung like mist in the near darkness. At the end, they saw the embankment of the old railway and turned towards the bridge.

'Good heavens,' Liz said suddenly as her eyes went wide at the sight of the river. 'You can't cross that.'

Roger braked to a standstill on the edge of the drop to the water. She was right. Part of the bridge had been converted into a road bridge at some time to allow lorries to get to the quarries but the army had evidently seen the opportunity it presented and had demolished it with explosives. Now, all there was left was the iron supports and what remained of the old railway line. In between the rusty girders there was nothing but a gaping black void.

~~~~~

**MONDAY 23rd AUGUST - 2200 hrs.**

Roger got out of the ambulance and stood on the edge, staring at the raging water that roared down from faraway Bucks and Beds. It was indeed impossible. Gingerly, he stepped forward onto the first girder.

Liz grabbed his arm. 'You can't be serious.'

'I want to see how strong it is.'

'Good grief, man. Be realistic. This is plain stupidity.'

'Stay there,' he said and, ignoring her, stepped out across the open void, not daring to look down.

The remaining structure was fairly sound though the gaps were far too large for the ambulance to cross. Liz watched him and had repeated heart attacks.

'We're going to need a few sleepers to lay across the girders. We can keep moving them from behind us to in front of us like they used to do with railway lines in cowboy films. They should bear the weight all right while we cross.'

'While we... You have just got to be joking. There is no way that you are going to get that ambulance across those gaps.'

'We've got to try. There's no other way.'

'But it's madness. We'll all be killed.'

'You stay here, then. I'll do it alone.'

Liz laid a hand on his arm. 'Please don't. I wouldn't want to lose you now.'

'You want to help? Right, you drive while I move the sleepers.'

'Me?'

'Of course. It's quite easy. Just keep going straight while I keep laying sleepers in front of the wheels.'

'I...'

'What?'

'I can't drive.'

Roger looked at her for what seemed a long time. 'This is a fine time to drop that on me.'

'I'm not like your sister, Roger. I've always been a shy girl who stays at home at weekends, plays the piano and makes her own dresses.'

He looked down. 'I'm sorry. I guess we've had it.'

'What's going on,' said a bleary voice from the ambulance. 'Are we there yet?'

Roger let go of Liz's hand. 'Not exactly. I'm afraid we've reached a dead end.' He caught Suzette's arm as she staggered from the cab.

'What's the problem?' She saw Liz and smiled broadly. 'Hello, I'm Suzette.'

Roger looked from his sister to Liz. 'What was in that last shot you gave her? Ecstasy?'

The nurse looked guilty. 'No. But I did want her to rest.'

'She's stewed out of her mind.' He grinned. 'Poor old Suzette. Come on, let's get you back inside the ambulance.'

'I don't want to get back inside,' she argued loudly.

Roger grabbed her shoulders. 'Ssh! Someone will hear us.'

She peered around. 'What are we doing here?'

'Well, we were going to drive over the river,' said Liz. 'But, as you can see, we can't get across.'

Suzette wandered dangerously near the edge and stared down at the water and then tried to focus on the girders and the nearby pile of old sleepers. She turned and grinned stupidly. 'Piece of cake. I'll drive.'

Roger shook his head. 'Suzette, you're just what I need right now. It's no good, we're going back.'

'No!'

'What?'

'We're going across,' she said adamantly.

Liz sat down on the step, her head in her hands. 'Oh, my God. What have I let myself in for?'

After a while, she looked up. Suzette was still standing there but of her brother there was no sign.

'Roger,' she whispered hoarsely. 'Where are you?'

There was no answer and she peered frantically around in the darkness until a sudden sound made her turn.

'You rat!' Suzette suddenly said as she stood, her face and hair dripping wet while Roger put down the bucket.

'Just trying to bring you round, my girl. How do you feel?'

'Bloody livid.' She lashed out at Roger with both fists but he caught her wrists and held them until her fury died away. Then, he took her in his arms. 'Sorry, love, but it had to be done.'

Suzette snivelled on his shoulder. 'I hate you.'

'Good. Now get behind that steering wheel while your still mad as hell.'

'Roger,' said Liz frantically. 'You're not going through with this hairbrained scheme, are you?' He nodded. 'Of course. She's ten times the driver I am.' He smiled. 'When she's sober.'

~~~~~

SUZETTE started the engine and selected first gear as Roger walked carefully across the girders and aligned the first two sleepers. 'Ready?'

Liz hung out of the nearside door and nodded, wishing she was somewhere else - anywhere else. Roger dropped and sat astride the steel cross-member whilst steadying the heavy sleeper. The moon had now risen and Suzette could just see him as he nodded. The ambulance crept forward. The front wheels dropped onto the first pair of sleepers and they began to creak. Liz held her breath. Suzette just watched Roger as he kept nodding. Inch by inch, the ambulance moved slowly forwards and, as the wheels moved towards the centre of the gap, the creaking increased.

'My God!' said Liz. 'We're all dead.'

Suzette gripped the steering wheel, her hands slippery with perspiration, and said quietly, 'Shut up, Liz.'

Liz obeyed and the sound of the rushing water was all-pervading as they moved towards the centre of the bridge. All the weight of the ambulance was now over the gap and the structure groaned ominously.

'It's okay, you're doing fine,' said Roger and he leapt back and dragged the next pair of sleepers into position.

At that moment, the whole sky lit up as if with fire, as the bright pink flare exploded above them.

'There's headlights behind us,' shouted Liz and Roger could hear the sound of approaching vehicles as he watched the flare slowly descend on its parachute.

'Stop where you are,' said a voice through a loud hailer. 'Stop, or we open fire.'

'Keep going,' shouted Roger as he held the sleeper steady. 'Whatever you do, don't stop now.'

Suzette obeyed, seeing the wooden sleepers clearer in the light from the flare. Suddenly, there was the sound of automatic fire and Roger dropped back as flat as he could as several bullets flew around him, chipping at the woodwork and ricocheting off the steel structure.

'He's been shot,' screeched Liz and she started to get to her feet.

'Sit down!' said Suzette as the ambulance started to rock precariously.

Several bullets hit the bodywork and Roger found himself not caring about his own safety but praying that neither of the girls would be hit. The bridge was now beginning to creak more and more as Roger fought to hold the last sleeper in position. If he let go or was hit....

A familiar rushing noise came upon the scene and the beam of a searching spotlight swung around and eventually held steady on the first of several army Land-Rovers moving towards the bridge. There was a flash followed by the sharp crack of an explosion as the ground erupted in front of the vehicle and it keeled over and rolled into the river, the men jumping clear. For three seconds, there was the staccato of cannon shells as the shredded tyres were stripped from the hubs of the two remaining vehicles which slithered to a standstill. The soldiers crouched down behind them as the helicopter gunship hovered over the south bank of the river, the narrow beam of its searchlight panning over the invaders.

An occasional shot was loosed off at the helicopter but the returning fire was much more deadly even though it was over their heads. They gave up and kept themselves well out of the line of fire as Suzette continued to inch forwards.

Roger strained as the front wheels bumped over the sleeper and jolted onto solid ground. The lip was steep and the rear wheels spun for a second, trying to get a purchase on the slippery woodwork until, with a rush, it leapt forward and bounced down the track as Roger rolled clear and, crouching low, ran after it. The ambulance stopped fifty yards away and he had just reached it when the note of the helicopter changed as it turned slowly. There was another flash and the remains of the bridge erupted in massive a ball of fire, pieces of masonry and metalwork scattered far and wide as the missile struck. Before the debris had fallen into the river, the helicopter was rising and side-slipping westwards.

'Come on,' shouted Roger. 'Let's get out of here before they come to their senses and chase after us over the other bridge.'

'You've got it,' said Suzette as she switched on the headlights and slammed her foot to the floor.

They needn't have worried. There was another boom and they looked to their right as the trucks parked on the main road bridge exploded and the flames lit up the sky.

'Go!,' said Roger and the wheels spun on the gravel track as Suzette accelerated tearing down the bed of the old railway line. At what had been a level crossing, she turned to the right, sending up a cloud of dust and stones and, flat out, tore down the lane into Fenstanton.

The gunship followed above as they turned left and drove south-eastwards at full tilt down the A604. Suzette didn't hesitate as she passed Magdalene College at the city limits and, at eighty miles per hour, entered the City of Cambridge where, for her, the mystery had all begun.

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**MONDAY 23rd AUGUST - 2245 hrs.**

There were no lights in the city but Suzette didn't need them. Cambridge was an empty, lifeless shell. As she turned off the main road and into the industrial estate, her heart beating faster as the familiar glass-fronted building loomed ahead, the windows scattering the light from the headlights.

Suzette pulled up beside the main entrance and Roger jumped out with the walkie-talkie. 'Al, there's an empty space at the far end of the car park.'

'Any overhead obstructions?' came the reply.

Roger peered around in the darkness. 'Not as I can see. I'll turn the ambulance and you can land in the beams from the headlights.'

'Okay, son. You got it.'

Roger pointed and gave instructions to Suzette who manoeuvred the ambulance until the lights shone into the empty space. The helicopter hovered and then gradually began to descend onto the concrete area. Down, the motor began to die away and Suzette switched off the lights and Liz helped her to the ground.

'How do we get in?' asked Roger.

'I don't know,' said Suzette. 'I expect we'll have to break a window or something.'

'Alarm?'

She nodded. 'But I know the combination if I can get to the control box in time.' She smiled. 'Not that I suppose anyone is around to hear the alarm bells if they did go off.'

Roger went to the main entrance and looked through the glass doors as Al and the others strode over from the helicopter. He touched the door. 'This looks solid. Might need something heavier than a brick.' He pushed. 'Hey! It's open.'

Suzette stood beside him. 'Everyone probably panicked when the fallout came and forgot to lock up. Death must have been pretty sudden here due to the heavier fallout.'

'It probably was,' confirmed Liz. 'By the look of the way that cars and things are scattered around town, most people died within the first forty-eight hours and the rest over the next few days. This place is a morgue.'

'Here, you don't think...?'

'Dead bodies here? I doubt it. We're well outside the range of Alpha, Beta and Gamma Rays. It was fallout that killed them all and that would have given them all time either to get home or to hospital when they started to feel ill.'

Suzette started to go inside but Al stepped forward. 'Wait, Miss Suzette. We'll go in first, just in case. Martin, you cover the passage while I check the reception area.'

The young Corporal dropped to one knee beside the wall, holding his automatic rifle at the ready, while the professional soldier darted from corner to corner until they were sure they were alone.

'Do you have any showers here?' asked Liz suddenly.

'Showers?' whispered Suzette.

'You need a wash?' grinned Roger.

'We all do. Well?'

Suzette shrugged. 'Down the corridor next to the changing area.'

'Clean clothes?'

'Of course. Most of the staff had lockers here where they kept their overalls and the like.'

'Is there no power?' asked Roger.

'There should be. There's a generator housed downstairs.'

'Show me,' said Roger and she did. Two minutes later, they had power.

'The showers,' prompted Liz.

'We don't have time,' said Suzette.

'We make time. I'm not sure what the residual radiation level is here because I don't have a geiger counter. However, I do know it was lethal not too long ago and we've all been exposed both on the journey and while we were outside.'

'Could it be bad?'

'No,' she smirked. 'Little more than deadly really.'

'That's why we showered on Malinov One,' said Roger. 'Come on, Suzette, show us the way.'

Suzette did and they broke open a few lockers to retrieve clothing before entering the showers.

'Make sure that you wash everywhere,' said Liz with a sly smile on her face. 'Leave not the slightest nook or cranny.'

Roger smiled. 'What do you know about a gentleman's nooks and crannies?'

Liz grinned. 'I'm a nurse, stupid.'

Inside the ladies' shower area, she helped Suzette to undress and supported her as the slightly-warm water

cascaded over them both.

'We'll have a warm one later,' said Liz as she rubbed Suzette's back. 'When the immersion heater gets going properly.' Eventually, she turned off the tap. 'That'll do. We don't want to use up all the available tank water, do we? We might need more later.'

'You're probably right.'

'What are you going to wear?' asked Liz as they dried off together.

Suzette opened her own locker. 'I want to feel comfortable. I'll wear this.'

So saying, she took out a white tennis skirt and a zip-fronted tank top which Liz helped her to put on along with socks and trainers. Liz borrowed a pair of Suzette's denims and a floppy jumper.

'I feel a new woman,' said Suzette as she pinned her dark hair back from her face.

'You look one,' admired Liz. 'Good grief, you're beautiful, Suzette.'

The other girl grinned. 'Is that your professional opinion, Nurse Appleby?'

They laughed and then went and found the men dressed in green cleaners' overalls.

'Which way?' said Roger eventually.

'This way and down the stairs. I'd rather not risk the lift.'

Roger and Liz held Suzette's arms as they went down the concrete steps that were normally only used as a fire escape. To conserve power, they shut off lights behind them and only used what they needed.

'Seems like years since I was here,' said Suzette as she pushed open the door and stood, observing the rows of monitors and printers lining the walls and desks.

The others crowded in around her and stared at the vast array of computer hardware surrounding them.

Suzette touched a monitor and swallowed. 'This was Jim's work station.'

No-one replied. What could they say?

Slowly, she walked across the floor and stopped before an enclosed area within the open-plan office. 'And this is where I controlled Princess.'

Roger and Liz looked at each other long and hard, the same thought running through their minds - could they trust her?

Al turned to his men. 'Frank, go back upstairs and cover the entrance and guard the 'copter. If anything moves out there, let me know immediately.'

'Will do,' said the pilot and turned to go.

'Unless it's an emergency, stay inside the building,' warned Liz. 'Or you'll have to shower again.'

Al nodded. 'Do as she says.' He turned to the corporal. 'Martin?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You cover the stairs and passageway. Don't go to sleep.'

Corporal Frobisher grinned. 'No, Major.'

When he had left, no-one moved for some time.

'Well?' said Roger eventually. 'Where do we start?'

Suzette made up her mind and pressed a button. 'First of all we need a status report.'

She sat down in front of the terminal as the screen cleared and said 'C:\ >'

'Right then, Princess. Let's see how much of your data has been corrupted.'

She typed 'DIR'

The screen cleared and then said:

**Directory of C:\**

**AUTOEXEC.BAT**

**COMMAND.COM**

**SCAN.INI**

**PRINCESS.EXE**

**DESTRUCT.EXE**

**AX.INF**

**BX.INF**

**CX.INF**

**DX.INF**

**EX.INF**

**10 file(s)                    988750 bytes**

Roger stood behind her chair. 'Well?'

'Seems okay at first glance. I expect the data files to be empty but I can get the boot file to load in all the information from when the system was last used. The trouble is, if that was three weeks ago, it will be out of date.'

'You're talking about the weather data now, I suppose?'

She turned to face him. 'It's the only kind of data we've ever held here.'

'What about the other data? That used to activate the Nato and Russian launch codes?'

'It was never programmed into Princess directly. The codes had to be activated from one of the other tracking stations.'

'Could that still be done?'

'Not now. All the data was lost when I started the auto-destruct sequence at Rouen.'

'Jim mentioned something about the file names only being deleted - about the files still being accessible to anyone who knew what they were looking for.'

'Not a chance. I foresaw that danger and reset the disc directory to overwrite. As soon as the Americans started scanning at Laroque, their new data destroyed that previously saved to disc file. The same would have been true at Rouen.'

'So the data has all gone.'

'Yes. Unless there is another copy of the original floppy disc that the Consortium used to load to the integral hard disc.'

'Is this what you are looking for?' said a voice and they all looked up.

A man stood in the doorway to a nearby office. He was in his late fifties with greying hair and in his left hand, he held up a 5¼ inch floppy disc. Al started to get up but in the man's right hand was an automatic pistol.

'Who... who are you?' began Suzette as the others stood in silence.

'You mean you don't know? You are slipping, Miss Blackman.'

Suzette was shaken. 'You know my name?'

'Of course. I know you very well, very well indeed.'

'But I don't understand. What are you doing here?'

'My name is Captain Williams and I worked with your uncle.'

'Uncle Mike?'

'Of course. Who else?'

'What do you want?'

'Want? Oh, my dear. Can't you guess? I have come to do what he failed to do.'

Suzette was puzzled. 'Failed?'

'Yes, my dear.' He took off the safety-catch. 'I have come to kill you.'

~~~~~

FOR SOME TIME, no-one moved or spoke as all eyes watched the newcomer. It was Suzette herself who broke the spell. 'May a woman who is about to die implore a last favour?'

Captain Williams smiled wryly and nodded. 'Of course.'

'Please do not hurt my colleagues, they have had no part in what has happened.'

His eyes flicked round the group. 'Who are these colleagues of yours?'

She reached out her hand. 'This is my brother, Roger Blackman.'

'So,' said the Captain with raised eyebrows. 'You survived.'

Roger nodded, looking for a way to help but recognising that Captain Williams was no amateur. He held his weapon in such a way that showed many years of practice.

Suzette continued. 'And the young lady is a nurse from Middlesbrough General Hospital. She is simply an innocent bystander. The gentleman beside the door is Major Al Slazinski from the United Nations Task Force.'

'You won't get away with this,' said Al. 'My men will shoot you down like a dog.'

The Captain smiled. 'I do not wish to "get away" with anything, Major. I am simply here to see justice done. What happens to me afterwards is immaterial. I shall have done my duty.'

Suzette got to her feet and moved slowly towards him as he spoke. Half a metre from him, she stopped and looked him full in the face. Carefully, she raised her arm a little, pulled the zip of her top down a few inches and then shuffled forward until the barrel of his automatic rested against the skin of her chest just at the bottom of her breastbone.

'If you really do have to kill me,' she said quietly, 'You had better get on with it.'

He hesitated. The gun he held was not standard. Its barrel had been internally reamed out to take an oddball eleven-millimetre projectile with a soft nose that had been deliberately split at the tip to cause the maximum damage. The cartridges had been given extra charge to compensate which made it a fearsome weapon to use. The recoil was wicked but one bullet was usually enough. A slight pull on the hair trigger and a capsule of lead would travel the six inches of the barrel before flattening on impact. Now the size of a fifty-pence piece, it would tear through her heart and still have enough momentum to smash her spine to splinters before emerging through an exit wound the size of a football.

Suzette smiled. 'You must be Harry.'

He frowned a little. 'How do you know that?'

'You worked with Uncle Mike. He once told me that you were the only person in the British Secret Service he could trust completely.'

'What else did he say?'

'He said that if anything ever happened to him, you would know why. Tell me, Harry - why did Michael Blackman have to die?'

'He knew too much - like you.'

'Such as?'

'You know about Princess.'

'Yes, I know about Princess. And, it seems, so does most of the world right now.'

'You knew about the war before it started.'

'Yes, I knew that. Princess told me.'

'How?'

'She supplied the data, I simply interpreted it.'

'What is the deviation angle from here?' he suddenly asked.

'Twenty-eight point five degrees. Princess is geosynchronous over Somali.'

'How could you know that if you are not involved?'

'It is in the autoboot programme.'

He jerked his head. 'Show me.'

Suzette looked into his eyes and then backed towards the terminal and sat down as Harry rested the barrel of his gun along the top, still aiming directly at her heart. She tapped keys and then turned on the printer. After a minute, she tore off the sheet of fanfold paper and handed it to him. The fifth command line has the clue.'

'Angle=angle+DEG(ASN\*0.5),' he read from the page.

'That's to compensate for the change of position.'

'How did you work this out?'

'I didn't. It was already embedded within the programme when I received it.'

'Where did the programme come from in the first place?'

Suzette shrugged. 'I don't know. It arrived on a floppy like the one you are holding. All I did was to transfer it onto the hard disc.'

'The autoboot file is locked, protected. How did you know what it contained?'

'I didn't at first. I simply broke the code so as to allow the system to back-up automatically and speed up the data-retrieval process.'

'What about the missile launch codes? Where did they come from?'

'They were not on the original floppy disc.'

'Are they on the hard disc now?'

She shook her head. 'See for yourself.'

She typed "DIR" again.

**Directory of C:\**

**AUTOEXEC.BAT**

**COMMAND.COM**

**SCAN.INI**

**PRINCESS.EXE**

**DESTRUCT.EXE**

**AX.INF**

**BX.INF**

**CX.INF**

**DX.INF**

**EX.INF**

**10 file(s)**

**988750 bytes**

'How do you know that the codes are not inside one of the segments?'

'Because I checked it. Those codes were transmitted from Laroque, Harry, not from here.'

He tossed the floppy disc onto the desk. 'What about this one?'

Suzette looked at him for a moment and then at the disc before picking it up, slipping it out of its sleeve and pushing it into the slot in the computer.

'DIR A:' she typed.

**Directory of A:\**

**AUTOEXEC.BAT**

**COMMAND.COM**

**SCAN.INI**

**PRINCESS.EXE**  
**DESTRUCT.EXE**  
**AX.INF**  
**BX.INF**  
**CX.INF**  
**DX.INF**  
**EX.INF**

**10 file(s)            988760 bytes**

'It's the same,' said Roger, looking over her shoulder.

Suzette frowned. 'Not quite.'

Roger looked again. 'But the files are all identical.'

'Yes, the file names are the same.'

'Then what is different?'

She touched the screen. 'The length of the files.'

Roger looked. 'It's almost the same.'

Suzette looked up at Harry. 'Do I have your permission to hunt for the difference?'

Harry simply nodded and waved the gun a little. Suzette looked at the yawning black cavern a few inches from her face and then started to type.

Eventually, she said, 'It's one line in the destruct programme which is different.'

'Which line?'

She looked up. 'The one that says "GET CODES"'

'What does that mean?'

Roger straightened. 'It means there is a hidden archive file called "CODES"'

'Shall I access it?' asked Suzette.

Harry looked straight in her eyes. 'Yes. But be very careful.'

Suzette took a deep breath. 'Don't worry, I will.' She pressed keys and then sighed. 'They're there all right.'

She paused. 'Tell me, Harry. Where did you get this floppy disc?'

'Your uncle sent it to me.'

'Uncle Mike? Where did he get it?'

'From Emile de Bosville in Paris.'

'Emile? Simone's father?'

Harry nodded. 'He stole it from the Consortium.'

'So that's why Simone had to die.'

Harry looked puzzled.

Suzette looked straight at him and then pointed. 'It's you!'

'What?'

'You started this whole affair, didn't you? It wasn't the Consortium after all, they were merely the scapegoats. Good grief, I see it all now.'

'Suzette,' said a puzzled Roger. 'What's got into you?'

Suzette got to her feet and confronted Harry. 'You did it. You set this whole damn thing up to gain control of Europe. You fed the Consortium with information, organised them on the quiet to give them the opportunities they had only dreamed of. You even picked poor Philippe to do your dirty work for you knowing how he felt against those who had tricked him in the past.'

'It was necessary if Britain was to retain any degree of control with Nato. We didn't know they would go so far.'

'You didn't care either, did you? Well, I am not doing any more of your dirty work for you, Harry Williams, so you had better kill me now. Shoot me so that I can never betray the human race. But remember that before I hit the ground, Al will have opened fire with his automatic rifle and you, too, will be very dead. And for what, Harry?'

Harry Williams stared at her for a long time before he moved his thumb and slowly lowered the hammer of his pistol and put it into his pocket. He smiled at her and then carefully zipped up her tank top. 'You are nearly right, Miss Blackman. So very nearly right.'

Suzette just stared at him.

Harry placed his hands gently upon her shoulders. 'Please forgive the melodrama but I had to know.'

'Had to know what?'

'Just who's side you were on.'

'I am not on anyone's side but that of humanity.'

'I know that now.'

'Who's side are you on?'

He smiled again. 'Yours. You were perfectly right, you know, we did plan it all.'



'You murdered all those people?'

'Not me, my dear. But it was the British, at least some of them. My superior officer was a certain Colonel Carstairs and he was given instructions to infiltrate the Consortium and use them to bring about the threat of war. Unfortunately for him but fortunately for the human race, so did someone else.'

'Who?'

'Your cousin.'

'Emile?'

Harry nodded. 'Michael Blackman originally stumbled upon the plan ten years ago when it was first conceived. He half suspected what was going on and the dangers involved if the wrong people gained control. He even tried to stop them but the British government sacked him.'

'They sacked him?'

'They could have killed him but that would have aroused too much interest at the time. Instead, they simply trumped up some false charges and had him removed from the scene and publicly discredited.'

Suzette slowly sat down. 'Where did you fit into all this?'

'Personally? Nowhere. I was a junior defence officer with no particular future. I was not nearly ambitious enough.'

'But this Colonel Carstairs was?'

'He was your Uncle's boss before...the trouble.'

'And where did my cousin Emile fit in?'

'He and Mike kept in touch, indirectly. When Mike was taken out of the picture, Emile suspected something was going on but did not know what. He had an eight year old daughter on his hands and plenty of work to do within his companies without taking an active interest in things which did not directly concern him.'

'Then how did he become seriously involved?'

'He decided to kill all the birds with one stone, so to speak. First of all, he let it become known that his company, Guillemot Internationale, was interested in becoming a part of the Consortium. At the same time, he installed his daughter as heir and director designate of a newly-formed subsidiary company, Guillemot Toulouse.'

'Simone?'

'Exactly. She became the go-between.'

'Simone worked for British Intelligence?'

'Not officially, else Carstairs would have found out and put a stop to her sooner than he did.'

'What changed it?'

'It was when she suddenly upped and left her home at Foix in June that the people involved became suspicious. After years of planning and waiting, everything was coming together. The Russians had launched their two new Malinov super-subs in the Black Sea, the underwater heat sensors on Princess were ready and their people were in the right position. Imagine everyone's surprise when, out of the blue, sweet Simone suddenly turned up at your Uncle Mike's cottage in Eggescliffe.'

'Did he know who she was?'

'Not at first. It had been ten years and girls are in the habit of changing quite a lot between the ages of eight and eighteen. They tend to grow up.' He looked down at Suzette's tank top and smiled. 'And out.'

'But why did Simone have to die?'

Harry hesitated and then reached into his inside pocket and took out a photograph. He handed it to her.

'It's you,' said Liz, glancing at the smiling face, dark hair and laughing eyes.

'Where did you get this?' asked Suzette.

Harry smiled. 'It was taken at Foix.'

Suzette frowned. 'But I've never been to Foix.'

'I know that.'

'Then how...?'

'That, my dear girl, is not a photograph of yourself at all but one of your niece.'

'Simone?'

'She looks very like you, doesn't she?'

'What was important about the likeness between my sister and my niece?' asked Roger.

'Your sister was giving the Consortium a problem. She was the one person who knew the Princess system inside out. A message, originating from the highest source in England, suggested she was implicated and that sending her on an innocent trip to France would reveal it one way or the other.'

'So that's why I had to go to Sorède.'

'Precisely, my dear. It was simply a coincidence that your mother's villa is just a mile from the tracking station at Laroque.'

Suzette smiled. 'And when I went there, everyone assumed I was guilty as hell?'

'Something like that. You had everybody worried. You had to die.'

'And my likeness to Simone?'

'Colonel Carstairs saw the implication and decided to use your Uncle's skill and situation to his advantage. You were the fish. Simone was the bait.'

'And Uncle Mike?'

'He was the harpoonist.'

'I don't understand.'

'They killed Simone to make Mike angry enough to react in a given way. They also convinced him that you were implicated in the proposed mass murder. It was his job to kill you.'

'Kill me? Why?'

'Because to kill you was to stop the plot. He was convinced that you were the key, the reason behind all this.'

'But I'm not.'

'I know that now.' Harry suddenly looked at Al Slazinski. 'Can the radio on your helicopter get through to your Carrier?'

'Of course.'

'And is the Carrier in touch with Laroque?'

'It was.'

Harry grinned. 'Then this is what we are going to do.'

~~~~~

#### **TUESDAY 24th AUGUST - 0500 hrs.**

On board USS Columbia, Admiral Davison looked up at the knock on his stateroom door. 'Come.'

'Sir,' replied the rating, 'It's Major Slazinski on the radio for you.'

'About time too. Have Sparks put it through to the bridge, would you?'

'Yes, sir.'

The senior officer made his way to the bridge where he met Captain Whittaker. 'Stay, Henry. I want you to hear this.'

'Yes, Admiral.'

He pressed a button. 'Mike Davison here, Al. What have you got for me?'

'I've got the Blackman girl.'

'Thank goodness for that. Now we can all relax. Where is she?'

'I'm here, Admiral Davison,' came the female voice.

'Good heavens, girl. You've certainly led us all a merry chase.'

'I have, haven't I? Tell me, have you seen anything of Malinov One lately?'

The Admiral grinned. 'Funny you should say that. Radar has reported picking up a fifteen-hundred foot whale just at the edge of our range.'

'Al says you have something called a sonar transmitter buoy.'

'We have.'

'Can you get a message to Colonel Narovic for me?'

'I can try. Is it urgent?'

'Extremely.'

'Very well. What do you want me to say to him?'

'Just get him on the radio link and I will reveal all. Not literally, of course.'

Admiral Davison laughed. 'You are very definitely your father's daughter. He had the same subtle sense of humour.'

'Can you do it?'

'I'll call Al back when I get through.' He cut the contact.

'What in tarnation was that all about?' asked the Captain.

'I don't know, Henry. Intriguing, isn't it?' He turned to the radio operator. 'Contact Omaha. Get one of their 'copters out to that "whale" and drop a radio buoy. Let's see what Comrade Narovic has to say for himself.'

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#### **TUESDAY 24th AUGUST - 0515 hrs.**

The Soviet rating lifted his head in the control room of Malinov One. 'Comrade Major. There is a radio message for the Colonel.'

'Odessa Control?'

'Niet. USS Columbia.'

The officer smiled. 'Very well, put him through.' He picked up the microphone. 'Greetings, Admiral Davison. Major Gobonev here. You are wishing for to speak with us?'

'Not exactly. However, there is a young lady who, for some reason, does seem desperate to get in contact with Colonel Narovic.'

'I am afraid Colonel Narovic is no longer in command. I have assumed control of Malinov One pending his Court-Marshal for dereliction of duty in letting Miss Blackman escape from us.'

'Then, my dear Major, you must be the one to accept full responsibility for what happens if Miss Blackman is able to convey a critical message to ourselves but not to you. She will speak only with Colonel Narovic.'

The Russian sighed. 'Very well. Give me five minutes.'

The political officer paused in thought for a moment and then spoke to the reluctant crew. 'Bring Colonel Narovic to the Control Room. You will all now see that I was right to take the action I did.' He turned. 'Blow all ballast! Surface!'

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### TUESDAY 24th AUGUST - 0530 hrs.

The radio crackled in the helicopter. 'Miss Blackman? Admiral Davison.'

'Go ahead, Admiral.'

'I have Colonel Narovic also listening in on this frequency.'

'Zdravstvuyet, Colonel Narovic.'

'And you, my dear. I hope you are not being too worried about us.'

'Not at all. I knew that my friends were in safe hands.'

'What is it that you want of us, Miss Blackman?' asked the UN Admiral.

'I have a message for you both. The same message.'

'We are waiting.'

'Do you each have pen and paper?'

There was a delay before they both responded in the affirmative.

'Good. Please take this down exactly as I tell it to you. Colonel Narovic, please write the following -  $\text{angle}=\text{angle}+\text{DEG}(\text{ASN}*0.62)$ '. Do you have that?'

'I repeat " $\text{angle}=\text{angle}+\text{DEG}(\text{ASN}*0.62)$ ".'

'Correct. Admiral?'

'I'm here.'

'Please write " $\text{angle}=\text{angle}+\text{DEG}(\text{ASN}*0.69)$ ". Got that?'

'" $\text{angle}=\text{angle}+\text{DEG}(\text{ASN}*0.69)$ ".'

'Perfect.'

'What is this all about?'

'Please now relay each of your messages to your scientists at the tracking stations. You, Colonel, pass on your message to Rouen. You, Admiral, send yours to Laroque des Albères.'

'But I don't understand.'

'No, but your scientists will. Colonel?'

'Yes, my dear?'

'I want Major Gobonev to release my friends and get them aboard Columbia.'

There was a brief silence. 'You knew it was not I who ordered their internment?'

'I guessed. You do not seem the type to take innocent people as hostages. The Major does.'

There was a laughing over the air. 'Comrade Suzette, you and I would make a good team.'

'My dear Colonel, what are you suggesting?'

'I am merely suggesting breakfast aboard Columbia if Admiral Davison will allow such an event to take place.'

'I guess that in the interests of world peace, anything is possible,' said the bemused Admiral. 'As long as someone reveals what was in those messages.'

'Have you sent them?' asked Suzette.

Both naval officers confirmed that the signals had been sent.

'Very well. The message forms a vital part of a certain computer programme which is the main autoboot for Princess and allows for the variation in latitude of each tracking station. The satellite is not geostationary over the Gambia as originally stated, but over Somali and in a position to scan, not only Europe but also the full length of what was the Iron Curtain. As soon as your respective technicians add that command line to the autoboot programme, you will both be able to receive such data direct from Princess.'

'Why the sudden change of heart, Miss Blackman?'

'Because the danger is now over. Neither side can gain access to information not available to the other. In

fact, if your men are really good, you might even get an accurate weather forecast.'

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**TUESDAY 24th AUGUST - 0730 hrs.**

Roger came out of the showers and walked down the passageway as the others went towards the helicopter which would convey them to Columbia. He paused at the doorway. Someone was using the computer. Quietly, he crept into the room and saw who it was.

'What are you doing?'

'Nothing much. Just sending a final, short message to Princess.'

Roger felt a cold finger running up his spine. 'What message?'

Suzette stood up and smiled. 'Just a set of numbers from the disc.'

As she moved, he saw the terminal screen and read:

**MISSILE LAUNCH CODES ACCEPTED  
DESTRUCT SEQUENCE ACTIVATED  
COMMENCING COUNTDOWN  
END >**

Roger stared at the screen for a long time before facing his sister. 'Suzette, what the hell are you up to?'

She moved closer and held his hands. 'Trust me.'

'Trust you? What have you done?'

'Brought everything to an end.'

He swallowed. 'How long have we got?'

'Fifty-nine minutes. Within the hour, it will all be over.'

'Do any of the others know what you have done?'

'No, it is a secret between you and me for the time being.' She glanced at the clock. 'By half past-eight, everyone will know.'

'Can anyone stop it?'

'No.'

'Not even you?'

'Not even me. Even switching off the equipment will not prevent it now. The future of the whole world is now held inside the integrated circuits of Princess.'

'Shall we go and spend what may be our last hour on board Columbia?'

Suzette smiled and took his arm. 'Why not?'

**TUESDAY 24th AUGUST - 0745 hrs.**

As soon as the helicopter landed upon the wide deck of USS Columbia, the intrepid travellers were shown down the the stateroom and greeted by Admiral Davison, Mission Commander John Jakes of USS Omaha, Henry Whittaker - Captain of US Carrier Columbia, Colonel Andrei Narovic and Major Gobonev of Malinov One along with Jim Marshal, Gillian Green and Marianne de Bosville. Roger introduced Captain Harold Williams and Nurse Elizabeth Appleby to them all and there was much smiling and the shaking of hands. Marianne was the only one who did not look entirely happy to see Liz. Eventually, they were all seated and were served the first decent meal in a long time.

'This is good,' remarked Suzette as she shovelled in bacon and beans.

'I'm glad,' said the Admiral. 'East of Masseurachusetts, Columbia is the best-defended eating house in the world.'

'This, we were never eating in the Soviet Union,' declared Colonel Narovic.

Suzette smiled. 'Like it?'

The Russian nodded. 'Is good. I could get to like this kind of food.'

Major Gobonev gave him a sharp look but said nothing.

'I suppose your scientists are all smiles now?' probed Suzette.

'It's no secret that ours are,' said Commander Jakes. 'It was all they needed to get going again. How can we thank you?'

Suzette smiled. 'I'll tell you in due course.' She turned to the Colonel. 'And your people at Rouen?'

'What you say? - Happy as sandbags?'

Suzette laughed. 'I think I know what you mean.'

The Admiral interrupted. 'I still don't understand what it was that changed your mind, Miss Blackman. Why, after keeping your secret for so long, did you now decide to tell us everything we wanted to know?'

'Because it will soon be too late for you to do anything about it.'

The room fell instantly silent.

The Admiral slowly laid down his fork. 'I think you had better explain.'  
'All in due course, gentlemen. We've got almost half an hour yet.'  
'For what?'  
'To eat breakfast and to get to know each other better.'  
'And then what?' asked Captain Whittaker.  
'That depends upon yourselves.'  
The Admiral pushed his plate away. 'I don't think my constitution will stand the suspense - I am not as young as I used to be. Is it something to do with this satellite of yours?'  
Suzette nodded. 'Partly.'  
'Are you still playing games with us, Miss Blackman?'  
'In a manner of speaking. However, this time, I am not going anywhere until the game is completely finished.'  
'The game will end, then?' asked John Jakes.  
'Of course, Commander,' said Suzette with a twinkle in her eye. 'It cannot go on for ever, can it?'  
'Are you still playing the White Queen?'  
She smiled. 'I had never thought of myself quite like that, but yes, I suppose I am.'  
'And who is the Black King?'  
'He will be determined at half past eight - that is, if he still exists.'  
'And the rest of us are just pawns, I suppose,' said Major Gobonev.  
'Only if you want to be. Every one of us, here in this room, has the opportunity to play an important part in the finale of this game. This time, there will be no stalemate.'  
'And if we do not wish to play?' asked the Russian.  
Suzette looked straight at him. 'Then in approximately twenty minutes, you will be off the board - permanently.'  
No one said anything.  
Suzette smiled. 'Right. Who wants to play?'  
'I am intrigued,' said Colonel Narovic. 'I will play this game to the end.'  
'Then you, my dear Colonel, will be the one to make the first move.'  
'Count me in,' said Gillian. 'I'll be white rook.' She smiled, 'If such a creature exists.'  
'I'm in,' said Roger.  
Suzette looked at him. 'Of course. You are my trusty bishop.'  
'Je ne comprends pas,' said Marianne.  
Suzette hugged her confused cousin. 'Cela ne fait rien, ma chérie. Tu es ma bonne amie.'  
The girl with golden hair smiled broadly.  
'Can a poor nurse join in the fun?' asked Liz.  
Suzette looked straight at her. 'Where would I be without you?'  
'This is ridiculous,' spluttered Major Gobonev. 'There is no point to this whatsoever.'  
'Ah, but there is. You see, how can you fight an enemy when you don't know who he is?'  
'Or she,' added Captain Whittaker.  
'I am not your enemy, Captain. And I can vouch for my female colleagues. If mankind does still have an enemy, it is most definitely a he.'  
The Admiral frowned. 'If?'  
'In truth, we may be all on the same side. I am staking my own life on that being so.'  
'What about ours?'  
She looked slowly around the table. 'And all of yours, too.'  
'I still think you owe us an explanation, Miss Blackman.'  
'Ten minutes, Commander. I promise.'  
'And what, pray, do we do in the meantime?'  
'Do? I, for one, am going to finish my breakfast. Is there any more toast, Admiral?'

## TUESDAY 24th AUGUST - 0829 hrs

Only the clicking of the clock disturbed the silence as everyone watched it. Despite having checked a dozen times already, one or two still consulted their watches in confirmation. The hand moved the last millimetre and, ten seconds later, the portable radio in front of Major Gobonev spoke. A staccato of Russian poured forth in frantic tones until the Major jumped to his feet.

'We are at war,' he pronounced.

'Sit down, Major,' said Suzette quietly.

He started to protest until a hard object rested against the back of his neck. Harry took off the safety catch and the Major slowly sat down.

'Now what?' asked the Admiral. 'My Russian is not great but I understood enough to know that they have

received orders to launch the remainder of their nuclear missiles.'

'I know.'

'You do?'

'Of course. I was the one who transmitted those orders.'

The Commander jumped to his feet and his chair fell over. 'You did what?'

'I asked Princess to send active launch codes to all nuclear missile submarines within her scanning area.'

'Good heavens, girl. Are you serious?'

'Perfectly. Sit down, Commander, before you have apoplexy.'

'But we could all be destroyed at any moment.'

'By whom?'

'By... anyone.'

'Such as?'

'The Russians, for one.'

'Why would they do that? Anyway, the only officers with access to the missiles are here, with us.'

'So they cannot launch?'

'Let's ask them. Colonel Narovic, can your crew launch your nuclear missiles with you absent from the submarine?'

The Colonel shook his head. 'Impossible. The Major and I have the only keys.'

'But the other submarines...,' said the Commander.

'What other submarines? When this war started, there were seven Russian nuclear submarines within scanning range of Princess. Four immediately headed west across the North Atlantic, Malinovs One and Two were in the Black Sea and there was another in the Atlantic south of Ireland. All the American ships were too far away.'

'Then there are two other Russian submarines capable of launching missiles.'

Suzette shook her head sadly. 'I am not that much of a fool, Commander. One was involved in a collision with the US hunter-killer tailing it and they have both been destroyed and Malinov Two is in harbour at Odessa. There is only Malinov One with launch capability.'

'And Americans?'

'I checked. None within range of Princess.'

A rating burst in. 'Admiral. The launch tubes have opened on the Russian submarine. They are preparing to fire their missiles.'

Admiral Davison looked at Colonel Narovic and raised his eyebrow.

'They cannot launch,' confirmed the Colonel.

'What is happening, Miss Blackman?'

'It is simple, Captain. But to understand, I will have to tell you a little story.'

'Do we have the time?'

She smiled. 'As long as these two gentlemen remain your guests, we have all the time in the world.'

'May I call in my secretary to take notes?' asked the Admiral.

'Of course. However, you may decide that there are some things you may not wish to leave this room.'

'Secret things?'

'Not necessarily. I am not privy to any state secrets so everything I am about to tell you can be found out by other methods.'

'Then please begin.'

Suzette toyed with her empty plate for a moment before pushing it away from her. 'If I understand it right, this all began fifteen years ago when the younger brother of an active SAS officer was selected for special duties. Harry, you trained him, didn't you?'

Captain Williams looked at her with enmity for a moment before nodding. 'Your uncle was my best student.'

'What were his duties, Harry?'

'He worked for the British government.'

'I know that. What specifically?'

'He was taught to.... kill.'

'He was a trained assassin, wasn't he? Which group was he working for?'

'An elite group. I can say no more than that.'

'Harry. Uncle Mike is dead and so is almost everyone else involved, certainly any who came into contact with him.'

'It was an Anglo-French mission to ensure the security of Western Europe.'

'It was this group which put Princess into orbit, wasn't it?'

He looked at her sharply. 'How did you know that?'

Suzette smiled. 'I guessed. Arianne was not funded by NATO.'

'Very few people knew about it. There were only seven in the group.'

'Let me guess. Michael Blackman, Harry Williams and Emile de Bosville for starters.'

Harry hesitated and then nodded.

'And who else would they have on the French side? How about the head of French Security, Louis Marchant and, perhaps, his assistant Philippe Dubois? Then there would have to be Corrine LaFleche, wouldn't there?'

Harry didn't say anything. He didn't have to.

'That's six,' said Roger. 'Who was the other one?'

Suzette turned her head and looked at the seventh person. 'Do you tell them? Or do I?'

The Admiral stared at her. 'You are treading on dangerous ground, Miss Blackman. Very dangerous indeed.'

'If I can work it out, so can a lot of other people. In fact, they did, didn't they?'

'I officially retired from active service in 1980,' said the Admiral. 'My place in the group was taken by..'

'Don't tell me - Colonel Carstairs.'

'I fear you know more than is good for you.'

'I see you don't deny it.'

'Why should I? It was a perfectly legitimate organisation.'

'Until you retired, it was. Colonel Carstairs then had other plans though, didn't he?'

Admiral Davison nodded. 'When he joined, other group members began backing out. Philippe Dubois left for the diplomatic service and got himself married and transferred to Lebanon. Your Uncle Mike and Emile de Bosville realised pretty quickly that all was not well and began to make noises. Your uncle was fired and discredited and Emile only survived because he agreed to use his company as a front.'

Suzette faced the British agent. 'What went wrong, Harry?'

'After the superpowers made their peace, NATO decided that such an organisation was no longer needed and...drew out their funding.'

'And thus was formed Le Consortium, yes?'

'Yes. The remaining members decided that they had the skill to go it alone, independent of the government. They involved other industrialists, secret service personnel and major bankers to provide the funding. It was to be the start of a new Europe.'

'A grand ideal,' said Roger. 'Why didn't it work?'

'Some became too greedy.'

'Is that when you got out?' asked Suzette.

Harry nodded. 'It wasn't my scene. Anyway, after what they had done to your uncle, I no longer trusted them.'

'But Emile hung on to the end?'

'He saw what was happening and opted to feed us information on the quiet. At first, Le Consortium seemed harmless enough.'

'Until Princess began to function and they saw other possibilities?'

'Ah, yes. Then we were all in trouble. We knew we had to do something so we sent you to France to try to stir up the hornets' nest. But we got more than we bargained for. We assumed you were innocent.'

'I was. I had no idea what was going on around me.'

'I know. But you turned out to be the busiest bee of all. We became convinced that you were more than you seemed to be.'

'They tried to kill me.'

'I know that. In the end, there was only one person who could be relied upon to do the job efficiently.'

'Uncle Mike.'

'Exactly. When Emile saw what was happening, he sent Simone to get your uncle. No-one else would believe what was going on but Emile knew that Michael Blackman could be relied on to do whatever was necessary.'

'Even kill me?'

'Even that, if it proved to be the only way out.'

'But he didn't kill me.'

'Obviously not. I still don't know how he missed you that day in Paris, but he did and you survived to wreak havoc on the Consortium.'

'How did you find all this out?'

'Mike wrote to me just before he died. It came with that floppy disc which Emile had stolen from them.'

'So Uncle Mike trusted you.'

'He had no-one else.'

The Admiral coughed. 'This is all very interesting, Miss Blackman, but what of the launch codes? At any minute, all hell could break loose.'

Suzette smiled. 'I don't think so.'

'But Malinov One...'

'Will not fire her missiles.' She looked at the two officers. 'Is that not so, comrades?'

'I see now that, in the end, you have taken sides,' said Major Gobonev. 'You have made sure that the Americans have our launch codes whereas the Russian people are helpless to defend themselves.'

'I have done nothing of the sort. The codes went out to every nuclear missile submarine within a thousand miles.'

'Then if any were to stray within that zone, mankind is doomed.'

'Not at all. If I have got it all wrong, the worst that could possibly happen is that some already devastated sites could become further contaminated.'

'What do you mean?'

'You launched missiles before. Where did they go? What were the targets?'

'The targets are identified within the code sequence.'

'And where were those targets? I'll tell you - Paris, Lyon, Toulouse, Orleans and Clermont Ferrand - France's industrial sites. If you were able to fire the remainder of your missiles now, with nothing changed, they would target harmlessly on those same areas.'

'We are not, but we might have been.'

'Not any more.'

'How do you make that out?' said Commander Jakes.

'Because I altered the missile launch codes. The US ones, too.'

The Admiral stood up. 'You did what?'

'I altered all the codes. It was quite simple really.'

'What difference would it have made?'

'The missiles would have primed, as before, then they would have ignited but would have instantly gone into self-destruct.'

'On board Malinov?'

'Exactly. On board any US or Russian submarine around Europe. In fact, the system is still running. Any missile submarine entering European waters will have its codes instantly altered without the crew knowing. If they ever to try to launch, they will be committing suicide.'

Harry was grinning. 'So that leaves only Britain with uncorrupted codes in its submarines.'

Suzette looked down. 'I'm afraid not, Harry.'

'But we agreed...'

'You agreed, Harry. Any remaining British, French and Italian submarines will be equally treated if they venture within Princess's scanning range.'

'But the disc at Cambridge...'

Suzette held up a black square. 'You mean this disc?'

Harry stared at it and then held out his hand. 'Give it to me.'

'I don't think so, Harry.' So saying, she gently crushed the fragile plastic in her hand and dropped the screwed-up disc onto the table as the older man stared down at it in disbelief.

'You have betrayed me,' he said quietly. 'You have betrayed England.'

'I have betrayed no-one, Harry.'

He raised his gun again. 'You tricked me. You promised me that Britain would again rule the waves.'

'I said I would ensure that Britain will stand in its own right once more and I told the truth. There has been terrible destruction, there is much work to be done. But out of the ashes of Europe, a phoenix must arise, a single Europe at last which will stand on its own two feet without potential threat from neither the East nor the West.'

'You speak as a traitor.'

'I speak as an Anglo-French citizen.'

He raised his gun arm. 'I will shoot you now.'

'I'd rather you didn't. It would make an awful mess on the Admiral's nice carpet.'

He tilted his head slightly. 'You really don't care, do you?'

Suzette shook her head. 'I have already died so many times. Perhaps I have overstayed my welcome.'

'Someone will find a way to get round your system.'

Suzette laughed. 'Inevitably they will, given time. All I have done has given mankind breathing space - time to reflect on what has happened and consider whether such a threat is worth the trouble or whether continued peace is a far more viable alternative.'

'Give me the gun, Captain,' said a fresh voice suddenly.

'You keep out of this.'

A large shape moved between them. 'I said give me the gun.'

'I could shoot you, too.'

Colonel Narovic smiled. 'You could, but you won't.'



His hand moved like lightning, catching the older man unawares. It closed over the gun, his thumb preventing the hammer falling and then jerked it from his grasp. Harry Williams was beaten and sat down.

'Well,' said the Admiral. 'I reckon that tidies things up nicely.'

'I will return to my own ship,' pronounced Major Gobonev. 'We are still under orders.'

Suzette touched his arm. 'You will remember what will happen if you try to launch your missiles, won't you?'

The Russian simply glared at her.

'Where do we go from here?' said Commander Jakes to break the tension.

'We continue the search for survivors,' said Roger. 'With your permission, I would take medical supplies to France where Liz and I can help out the most.'

'Could Gill and I join you?' asked Jim.

Roger smiled. 'Of course. What about you, Suzette?'

'Your sister needs rest,' instructed Liz seriously. 'A lot of it.'

'I'll do as I'm told,' said Suzette. She turned to the Admiral. 'If AI is free for a few hours and headed in my direction...?'

'Call it done,' he replied with a smile. 'I will place him at your disposal until his leave is due if you would care to assist at the tracking station at Laroque.'

'I have to collect my car from Mandagout and my uncle from Navacelles. After that, I would be glad to help in any way I can.'

'And you, Colonel Narovic? Where will you take Malinov One?'

'I think I am not welcome at home, Admiral Davison. The attitude of my country may have softened considerably over the last few years but it still has a long way to go. I think I will allow Major Gobonev to retain command. It is what he has always wanted.'

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#### **TUESDAY 24th AUGUST - 1000 hrs.**

The helicopter rose majestically from the deck of Columbia and Suzette waved up at her brother and friends as they headed towards Northern France.

'You are sad at losing them?' asked the voice at her elbow.

Suzette shook her head. 'We have agreed to meet in three months at Sorède. It will be a happy reunion.' She turned to face the Russian. 'By the way, I haven't thanked you for saving my life.'

He shrugged. 'It was - how you say? - piece of pie.'

Suzette laughed aloud. 'It's high time someone taught you proper English, Colonel.'

'For that I will need a good tutor.'

'Then why not come with Marianne and I to Sorède for a while? I need the rest and Marianne needs cheering up. Besides, Uncle Raoul is a magnificent chef with the best wine cellar in the Pyrenees.'

He turned to look at Marianne. 'This is sounding very tempting.'

'I hope so. At the same time, I could help you to improve your English and I'm sure Marianne wouldn't mind teaching you French.'

The ex-naval officer looked from one to the other of the girls. 'To stay with two beautiful young ladies in a mountain village in the sunshine? To live off good food and excellent wine? What more could a man ask for?'

He walked toward the waiting AI Slazinski with a girl on each arm and then suddenly stopped, deep in thought. 'Tell me. This villa of yours, does it have a swimming pool and a refrigerator?'

Suzette laughed. 'Of course.'

'And just the three of us would be living there together?'

'Marianne will have to spend some time with her father so, quite often, there could be just the two of us.'

He turned and took her in his arms. 'You and me? Alone together?'

She didn't object, but put her arms around his neck. 'You and me. Alone, together.'

The Russian grinned. 'In that case, it is perhaps better that you are starting to call me Andrei.'