

Spanish Sparrows

Desert Rats

The child stumbled away from the smouldering remains of the encampment, unaware of the stench of burning flesh in his nostrils. He walked without purpose, his mind frozen, empty. Had he walked to the East he would soon have been in Iran. Nearby to the North was Turkey, and to the West, Syria. In the years which followed the First Gulf War¹, perhaps it was Saddam Hussein and his army who had decided to 'sterilise' this troublesome section of their country. Perhaps it was someone else. The Kurds were unwanted by everyone.

He was newly eight years old, the middle child of seven brothers and sisters. Slim and tall for his age, the boy took after his father who had been the leader of the small tribe of Bedouins who had found themselves in the wrong place, mistaken for Kurdish insurgents.

Everyone from his nomadic group was dead, as were their animals. The boy had been asleep, huddled under goatskins against the cold desert night, nestled beside his siblings in the communal bed. He had slept naked. Now, as he walked aimlessly, he was unclothed, unshod. He had nothing to live for, but by a miracle he was physically unharmed.

Initially the boy had no self-awareness, no hope of a future. The trauma had wiped his memory. He did not know that he was Kasim Ariff. He had no reason to believe that he had survived for a purpose that the Sons of Allah would map out for him when his path crossed theirs. But this would be in the future.

The orphan's first days were characterised by thirst and hunger, searing heat and biting cold. He was close to death when Bulbi found him. Although a shadow of himself, she thought him as beautiful, with his perfect tulip face and long black eyelashes. He could easily have been mistaken for a girl. His state of shock would last nearly nine months during which time he was mute, staring ahead with large beautiful blank eyes.

Bulbi was a nine-year old Kurd girl. In a similar attack a year earlier she had lost her right eye and three fingers from her left hand. This experience had smelted her into steel. Like Kasim, at first she had nothing. Over the weeks and months that followed, driven by a deep sense of injustice and loss, Bulbi had gathered a small tribe of similar orphans around her, ruling them with a fierce, vicious authority. To disobey her once was to risk pain. To do so twice meant death. At first she thought only of survival but later, as she mastered this new way of life, she set out to build a cadre of her own 'soldiers' who would deliver revenge on anyone she thought might have caused her hurt. Bulbi could not read. Her knowledge of Allah was sketchy. What

¹ Operation Desert Shield, 1990 to 1991

Spanish Sparrows

she pursued was not *Jihad*, a word she had not heard, a concept she did not fully understand. Her purpose was simply to 'strike back' at everyone and anyone she thought might have been responsible for her loss.

Bulbi's small tribe made a living by subterfuge. They stole from everyone, be they aid agencies, other refugees or from the 'fighters' of every denomination they came in contact with. They used stealth, boldness, ferocity and ruthlessness in equal measure. They traded food, weapons, tobacco, narcotics, medicines, water and information. They did not fall into the trap of becoming 'victims', or the false security of striving for possessions, for animals which they knew would slow them down. They remained mobile and cunning, from time to time attaching themselves to whoever seemed the strongest. As the girls (and boys) grew old enough, they added sex to their list of wares, often using a 'virgin' to lure a 'target' into a death trap, killing and robbing the man before fleeing to start again elsewhere.

But all this was to come. When Bulbi found Kasim she had eight others under her control. Kasim made her unit ten strong. This was a number she had fixed in her mind as ideal.

Mute, the orphan had no name to give her, so she called him Abbu (Abdullah), after her lost father. From the outset she favoured him, adopted him as her own brother. Like her he got the best of their food. Nine months passed and physically Abbu was back to full health.

00000

The day Abbu cracked, suddenly visited by the flashbacks that his subconscious had suppressed, she sent the others to the far end of the narrow Wadi, to wait in the large communal make-shift tent. She took Abbu to her cave and held him, as would a mother.

He was incoherent at first and then, gradually, he poured out his heart to her. She listened, kissed away his tears and told him that the boy that he had once been was now lost, gone forever. Starting that day Bulbi made him anew, in her own image, beginning the process of harsh love intended to make him into the warrior which only a man could become. In her view of the world, a woman, whether disfigured or whole, could never become a true leader. She planned that Abbu would be her representative, do her bidding.

It took her three years of unrelenting twisting and bending, melding and moulding of his mind and strengthening of his body.

She was thirteen and he twelve when they were 'married', using a simple tribal routine, 'legitimising' the bed they had shared since that first night in the cave. She had hoped for sons, but children did not come.

Spanish Sparrows

Since this marriage, Abbu had become her executioner. His favourite method was to disembowel his victim. He found he enjoyed this, that it gave him a rush of pleasure, almost equal to the dizzy release that came at the climax of sex.

00000

In the spring of 2004 Bulbi's group had wandered deep inside Iran. Her band had gradually dwindled until only five remained. The three other young men, all poor physical specimens, were effectively slaves who lived in constant fear of Bulbi and her increasingly erratic behaviour. They were dependent on her for the food and shelter and the structure she provided for their existence. They did not have the will or cunning to desert, as two of the others had, the ones that had not died for their disobedience.

At sixteen Abbu was now tall and thin, almost gaunt, with a scruffy thin beard. He behaved as if he was their leader while taking his orders in private from Bulbi. Dressed as a man, she was a full head smaller, wizened, hard to look at because of her eye.

Early one morning three Toyota Hilux pick-ups suddenly appeared on the ridge above them. The 'soldiers' dismounted and trained their Kalashnikovs at Bulbi's little band. The men called and waved them closer, for inspection. A smallish, bearded man wearing white robes and a red and white checked head-dress descended slowly from the cabin of the leading vehicle and looked at them for a few minutes. His hand moved inside his robe and returned with a pistol. Casually, he fired a bullet into the stomach of Dittal, the boy with the twisted right arm. Dittal lay writhing in great pain as his life ebbed away. Only Bulbi and Abbu remained impassive, erect and proud. The other two boys fell to their knees and screamed for mercy.

Bulbi did not fully understand the man's speech but the gist of it seemed that he was recruiting on behalf of the Sons of Allah, seeking volunteers "to serve Allah unto death".

Bulbi read between the lines and pushed Abbu forward, demanding only that he glorify her in Allah's name, telling him she would meet him in Paradise.

The next bullet blew her brain to a thousand pieces. The other two boys ran, to be gunned down by the Kalashnikovs.

Abbu's life as he had known it was over.

Spanish Sparrows

Sons of Allah

Three weeks later Abbu started a long overland journey on foot as part of a small group masquerading as Bedouins. Initially this group comprised twelve 'recruits' under the control of six men with weapons. Within two days the number of recruits had been reduced to eight. Three were executed trying to escape. One, a slightly built young man with a beautiful face, had died due to 'bleeding out' after being sodomised by each of his captors in turn.

The regime was strict but by Abbu's standards the food was good, and as a boy he had suffered harsher treatment under Bulbi. He closed his mind and walked, day after day. During this journey, and especially during the long nights, his main activity was listening to the conversations of the six warders. By this means he learned that they were paid men, mercenaries, not part of what they called *Jihad*. This was Abbu's first hearing of this word, a word spoken only rarely but with great reverence, by these simple, violent men.

Eventually the group, now reduced to six recruits and their six jailers, arrived in Yemen. The captives were amalgamated with several other similar groups into what became a cohort of thirty recruits. They were then 'marched' as a ragged platoon, on foot to a separate camp several days away. This encampment was inside a compound. The perimeter was heavily mined to prevent unwanted 'intruders', it was explained, with a smile. It comprised several camouflaged buildings, which included classrooms, a canteen and several dormitory buildings.

For Abbu it was his first experience sleeping in a fully enclosed space and he found it disturbing. Within a few hours he crept outside and curled up against the wall of the building and was soon fast asleep. He was discovered by the guards and was punished by incarceration in the solitary punishment cell. For seven days he lay inside the shallow corrugated steel enclosure. He was starved of food and allowed only a half-litre plastic bottle of water per day. By day he baked, at night he froze.

Abbu learned his lesson. Although he hated sleeping indoors, he must accept it. Within a few weeks he learned all the rules and idiosyncrasies of the guards and instructors and from that time developed a faultless record for obedience. His teachers were all ex-soldiers, turned mercenaries. Although one of the youngest, Abbu was to become their star pupil. During the long Phase One they taught Abbu weaponry, free combat, knife combat and the rudiments of desert survival. For him this last part was wasted effort. Unlike some of the others who had been recruited from towns and cities all over Europe, Abbu was already a child of the desert.

Over the next eighteen months the process went on endlessly, to no apparent purpose. But it was soon clear to Abbu that this was a further selection process. What he did not realise was

Spanish Sparrows

that he was being conditioned to respond with unthinking obedience. Those who 'failed' in any aspect simply disappeared to be replaced by others.

00000

One day things changed. A new Commandant arrived. He was to be known only as Colonel D. His name was whispered to be Pierre Depardieu and that he was ex-French Armee de L'Air. Colonel D wore a 3/61 Squadron insignia, denoting an elite Special Forces Unit.

Soon after Colonel D arrived a new cohort of training officers replaced the original group. The new trainers were even more demanding, more brutal. They included several ex-British SAS, three South Africans and even an ex-US Marine.

During those first weeks, they were taught basic English, mainly because their trainers spoke it. Even Colonel D now spoke it, seeming to prefer it to his slow Arabic.

Despite their disparate backgrounds, these men, like their predecessors, were all 'true believers', or at least professed to be. Gradually they revealed to their students that because their identities were known to The Great Satan, they could not be part of 'The Attack' to come.

Friendships between the young men or with their mentors were discouraged, forbidden. They must focus solely on Allah and their *Jihad*. This would happen soon; there was now a schedule to keep.

Unlike Phase One, the intensity of Phase Two was frenetic. Everything was done at the double. New higher performance standards were set; then raised, repeatedly. The goal was perfection. To the physical side and technical activities was added a class which taught reading and writing in Arabic. Although he had never read or written anything in his life, Abbu found it easy. He was given a personal copy of the Koran which he read from cover to cover. Each day sections were learned by rote and a simple verbal 'interpretation' provided. Now that Abbu understood, he changed, realising that he had been 'chosen by Allah' to be a Warrior, just as Bulbi had always wanted him to be. The number of young men dwindled steadily as the brutal selection process continued.

At the outset of Phase Three, there remained only seventeen *Jihadists*, as they now thought of themselves. Like everyone else Abbu was given a new name and a new identity to match. Now he was Johannes (Hans) Grootte, a photojournalist from Dessau in the former East Germany. He soon mastered the basics of a Nikon camera/video recorder and hid his sadness when it was removed after each session.

Their introduction to learning German began at once. After an intensive eight-week period, and to accelerate their learning, they were ordered to speak only in German. Henceforth they must never use their mother tongues or their old names, on pain of death. Conversations not related

Spanish Sparrows

to their training were now strongly discouraged. The first defaulter died within an hour, stripped naked, publicly flogged then shot through the rectum by Colonel D. The man was left to bleed to death and they were made to watch, standing under the hot sun until dusk when his death rattle eventually came. The order to desist from speaking Arabic, to use only German, did not require repetition.

Over the next period the cohort dwindled further from seventeen to eight. Abbu was now eating better food in larger quantities. He had matured physically, grew rapidly and built muscle where before there had been merely bone and sinew. Any army in the world would have been pleased to accept him as one of theirs. With his beard now fuller, he looked and behaved older than his nineteen years. Abbu was easily the brightest and most impressive of his cohort. This fact was soon spotted by Colonel D.

To achieve their goal, not yet revealed, they must become a team of amateur German athletes, training for an event called the Triathlon. They were shown videos of what was involved. They must now learn to swim and to ride a bicycle to a high level of proficiency, and for this they would be relocating. Later, after their Triathlon training, they would also undertake an intensive course in Paragliding. In awe they watched the video of people launching themselves from mountains to soar away like birds into the sky. To them it seemed impossible.

The young men continued to be subjected to remorseless and intensive German language training, interspersed with snap sessions of top-up training and testing of their weapons and combat proficiency. During the German lessons everything was achieved by listening and repeating by rote what they heard. There was no focus on reading or writing of German, as this was thought to be unnecessary and probably beyond their capabilities. They were also given a parallel course in tourist English but told to default always to German if they could not understand or be understood. They were told that where they would be going, German was respected although not well understood by most of the locals.

During their last weeks in Yemen, at the start of Phase Four, a fanatical young cleric to be known only as 'Mohammad' arrived at their camp. Daily indoctrination sessions began and they were told how fortunate they were to have been chosen by Allah; and of Wonders to come to them as a reward for their obedience. This confirmed what they had known for months: they were to carry out a *Jihad* attack in which they would all die, either in the act of *Jihad* or by their own hand. They must not, under any circumstances, allow themselves to be taken alive.

Hans Groote was clearly the best of this group in every aspect of their training. Mainly because of his ruthless streak, Hans was nominated by Colonel D as their leader. The twenty-three-year-old Wolfie Schwartz was chosen as his second-in-command. Initially both young men resented the other, but gradually they became confidants, secretly whispering their thoughts and what they could remember of their histories. Both understood that this was against the 'rules', and so this friendship must always remain as a secret. Listening to Hans's reminiscences, what intrigued Wolfie most was that Hans had enjoyed repeated sex over his years of his

Spanish Sparrows

marriage to Bulbi. Wolfie was a virgin and his frequent masturbations were filled with visions of his new life to come, when he would be wed to his 72 *houris* (Virgins) in *Jannah* (Paradise).

Spanish Sparrows

African Rose

Phase Five of their Jihad training involved a long slow trip on a small vessel heading at first South from Yemen then drifting down the coast of East Africa to the Cape of Good Hope before turning North to the Bight of Benin on the West African Gold Coast. The 2,500 nautical miles would take over one hundred days, the period designated as sufficient to establish their provenance, should The Great Satan's spy satellites target their behaviour.

00000

By day the ship and its crew went through the pretence of launching its observation balloon, to spot and track whales and dolphins, a project supported financially by a small German environmental group call "Free Oceans". This group genuinely believed that the *African Rose* project was a WWF initiative. They had been pleased to re-direct the large donation they had unexpectedly received from an anonymous Frankfurt donor.

Deep in the bowels of this vessel, in the forward section of the ship, an additional bulkhead had been built. It was of wood but carefully painted to make it look like rusting metal. The inner surface was lead-lined. The door was protected by an impressive lock. This so-called high security area housed the *African Rose's* two dirty secrets.

The first and less obvious was an innocuous wooden box about the size of a double width coffin. Inside this box, resting on gimbals, were eight soccer balls, sporting an exact copy of the logo of the soccer ball which would be used in the year to follow at the African Cup of Nations, scheduled to be held in Ghana from 20 January to 10th February 2008. In size, weight and appearance these soccer balls seemed normal, although it would be unwise to kick or drop them carelessly.

In the centre of each ball, suspended by thin tungsten wires, was a small plastic phial which contained a tiny version of a nuclear bomb. Each phial was surrounded by a wad of C4 plastic explosive putty. Seven of the balls had acoustic detonators, tuned to a frequency only a bat could hear. The eighth had a tiny fault in its miniature printed circuit board, caused by a deliberate acid splash. This ball was designed not to explode, allowing forensic scientists to trace its place of manufacture to a huge electronics factory on the outskirts of Beijing, a factory which made parts for Apple, Google, Microsoft and many other US and international companies with household names.

The remainder of the *African Rose's* forward high security zone was filled with a tightly packed matrix of what appeared to be bottles of liquefied natural gas of the type widely used in rural Africa. Before filling they had been decorated by a group of artists in Sri Lanka who thought

Spanish Sparrows

they were making an 'Installation' for a forthcoming art show in New York. Each bottle was a minor work of art and had been carefully 'distressed' to look genuine. Combined, these containers held thirty tonnes of nuclear waste products in the form of radioactive slurry.

The space was hot because the gas bottles were leaking heat as well as emitting deadly radiation. The slurry had been distilled from liquid nuclear waste products by a military re-processing plant inside Severomesk Naval Base, the Home of the Russian Northern Fleet. Aside from the heat and radiation, in theory these bottles were leak-proof, and explosion proof. They had been certified by the Russian Authorities as completely secure for transportation and long-term storage. The plant managers at Severomesk had been please to sign them over to the captain of the *African Rose*, disposing of at least part of their problem at relatively low cost.

This area of the ship was out-of-bounds to the crew and its passengers. The only person who knew what was behind the lead-lined screen was the ship's captain, sixty-three-year-old Archie Strang, originally from Dundee, Scotland. Archie, now in the final stages of a life of addiction, shut his mind to the possibilities by spooning generous helpings of ketamine into large measures of Glenfiddich 12-year-old malt. The unemployed seafarer had been content to accept this commission as captain, when propositioned by the rich German in a bar in Cairo.

For Archie his assignment had been easier than he thought. He was needed only as a figurehead. The elderly ship had been converted and upgraded in Korea and was now fully automated. His Pakistani First Officer Rasheed was highly competent and did all the work. Like Archie, Rasheed had been trained at the Glasgow College of Nautical Studies and had also been recruited by the wealthy German. Rasheed had plans to return to Glasgow, marry, and open a chain of Care Homes, in due time. Like Archie Strang, Rasheed had been promised a huge bonus on successful completion of the "mission".

When the original receiving crew became ill from radiation sickness, Strang had been sent money by the German to pay them off, generously, and to do so in Mombasa. The new crew of three months standing knew nothing of the contents of their vessel's secure forward area, but they were already above the safe recommended life-time radiation dosage and heading for a cancer-filled future.

It was only then that Rasheed figured out what must be in the forward secure area. He challenged his captain who merely shrugged his shoulders.

Until Colonel D and his contingent joined them, Rasheed had thought this mission had meant only the transportation of the nuclear waste, keeping well clear of the forward hold and its emissions. Throughout the long, slow trip to the Bight of Benin, the 'German' passengers and Mohamed were confined to their cabins during daylight hours and kept separated from the Filipino crew. At night, under cover of darkness, the Triathlon squad were allowed a few hours

Spanish Sparrows

on deck, and working now in their pairs kept fit, using a competitive version of an exercise program called 5BX, which had been devised originally for Canadian airmen.

On arrival off the coast of Ghana they were transferred at night by a high-speed RIB which took them to a lonely beach near Lome.

Mohammad did not accompany them ashore but stayed on board the ship, which continued to wander northwards in a desultory search for whales and dolphins.

00000

Near Lome, the Germans were barracked in a luxury villa surrounded by a high security fence patrolled by a small group of armed guards. Effectively Colonel D's team were cloistered, always kept separated from the villa staff and guards.

The Jihadists learned to swim in the 30-metre swimming pool and to ride their specialist bicycles within the grounds of the estate. Most of their bicycle work was done indoors, riding on hi-tech roller trainers in front of a video screen which showed views of a road unfolding before them as they pounded along, each session becoming faster and faster.

They were injected with various concoctions designed to combat diseases endemic to this equatorial location. These medications caused a recurrence of Kasim Ariff's hallucinations from his boyhood trauma, disrupting his sleep pattern, but, with the help of Wolfie he was able to conceal this 'weakness' from Colonel D.

By late October 2007, on schedule, Colonel D and his Germans were transferred again to the *African Rose* for the long trip to Tenerife where the final phase of their training would take place. Mohammad, who had remained on board during their time in Lome, resumed his work of indoctrination and leading their prayers five times each day - at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset and evening.

00000

In Tenerife they would eventually meet their 'Supreme Commander', "The Sheik", a high-born Saudi who spoke perfect German, French and English and who owned many hotels and villas in the Canaries and elsewhere throughout the world. This overt property wealth was merely a cover for his other activities. For this trip he used the 'perfect' passport of Herr Helmut Adolf Frei. His real name was Sheik Aarzam Abdullah Mohamed Al-Hemmendah.

Herr Frei did not look like the man who had stepped from the Toyota Hilux many years earlier. Like his protégés cooped up in the small ship heading towards him, Sheik Aarzam was now clean shaven.

Spanish Sparrows

Dressed as a European, in the role of the dapper, softly spoken and almost effete Helmut Frei, "The Sheik" might even have been unrecognisable to his own family.

Spanish Sparrows

Winter Sun

The queue edged slowly forwards to the airport security barriers. The winter sun-seekers were mainly older retirees, looking to escape the wet and windy West of Scotland for a few weeks. Maisie Kaywood stood amongst them, a tiny smile on her face. She was looking forward to meeting Tom Farquharson-Wright, aka 'Dopey'. He had flown down to Tenerife from Gatwick on Tuesday, and would collect her at Aeropuerto Tenerife Sur.

It was Thursday 3rd January 2008. In the wake of the car bomb here at Glasgow Airport six months earlier in July 2007 following the Tube and bus bombings in London, 2005, the whole approach to air travel security throughout the UK had altered dramatically. Now the security personnel were more alert than might be expected at half past six of a morning. They had become used to being randomly breathalysed before going on shift. As a result their Hogmanay celebrations had been subdued.

Maisie was 'clean', although her extensive wardrobe of outfits, (both male and female), carried in three large hold baggage suitcases, might have raised eyebrows. Everything else that she and Tom might need in the form of weaponry and surveillance equipment had been assembled by David Abernethy and Fida² at Corgarff Castle, near Aberdeen. Labelled as "Emergency Computer Equipment Spares", it had been air-freighted in specially designed containers to the local British Consul at Santa Cruz, the island's capital, by courtesy of enabling paperwork provided by Sir Donald MacCorquindale and his contacts. According to her plan, Tom would have that gear by now, locked down at Sir Donald's villa, which would be their operations base. The villa was called "*Spanish Sparrows*" a name which made her smile broadly: how appropriate for what was to be their love nest!

Shuffling along in the queue Maisie sifted through what she knew, which was sketchy, and began again to run 'scenarios', trying to tease out credible explanations for what she did not yet know.

00000

Her unforeseen trip had started with a telephone call on the 30th of December. She let it ring as she checked the incoming call register. Seeing who it was she picked it up.

"Hallo, eine falsche Nummer haben Sie, sorry."

"Hello, are you free tomorrow, for a wee chat?"

² Read "Fidelity" by John Bonthron for further information on David Abernethy and Fida.

Spanish Sparrows

"Of course; when and where?"

"Lunch at your second favourite place, noon, my treat."

"Right-o, see you then."

The cryptic nature of this telephone call was typical of people like Maisie and Corky. For them old habits were hard to break. Unnecessary chit chat and the use of real or code names were always avoided, except in special circumstances. And like many in her world, Maisie had an excellent 'vocal recall'. A voice, often not heard for decades, could instantly cause its matching face to spring from her memory.

Maisie had recognised Corky's voice at once and sensed the tension in it.

"L' Ariosto" had become a Glasgow institution. It was managed by the energetic Albert Toomey, one of Maisie's favourite adopted nephews. Maisie knew that this lunch date was not a social invitation as she would be seeing Sir Donald (Corky³) MacCorquindale, (ACC, Scotland Yard, (retired)), on New Year's Day, at the now legendary 'hootenanny' get-together at "Denholm Castle", his large sandstone mansion in Pollokshields.

As a distant member of the Thomson/MacCorquindale clan Masie Kaywood was always welcome⁴. Over these recent years, now that Maisie was back living mainly in Glasgow, she had attended most of these annual soirées, finding them a good way of catching up with her large extended family, the substitute for children she had denied herself because of her flawed genes.

Since the Glasgow Airport attack, Maisie had been working closely with Corky over these last six months, acting as his unpaid personal advisor. Although officially 'retired', Corky had been pressured into heading up the recently constituted anti-terrorist squad called "3-D", (Detecting, Disrupting and Dismantling). This small but powerful group comprised seconded police officers and cyber-consultants, focussing on any activity which might impinge on Scottish citizens and Scottish interests, at home and abroad.

The 3-D group had been instigated by Scotland's new First Minister, who had been angry at the lack of concern shown by the London based agencies when it came to sharing intelligence with the Scottish Police Forces, and with the Scottish Parliament. Crucially, 3-D acted autonomously, below the bureaucratic radar and did not share intelligence with MI6 and the Foreign Office in London. In private the Scottish FM blamed London for what had happened at Glasgow Airport. Never stated, Corky and Maisie agreed: both had suffered under the London-centric/Home Counties culture that pervaded these so called 'corridors of power'. The two

³ Sir Donald MacCorquindale's sobriquet, used only by his closest friends, was after *Korky the Cat* from the children's cartoon comic *The Dandy*).

⁴ Maisie was a second cousin through her mother Myra's first husband's family.

Spanish Sparrows

Scots knew the UK dog would happily sacrifice its own Scottish tail, and hope in time to grow a new, more obedient one.

What Maisie had learned over her lunch at L'Ariosto had certainly intrigued her. Tom will love this, she had smiled to herself, knowing the boy in him had never really grown up, and recalling he had been enthused by his Paragliding course completed as part of his SAS training, long years ago.

During their lunch, they had acknowledged the weakness of Corky MacCorquindale's information was that it was wispy, based on small things that had put him on edge, irritations that would not leave him, leading him to ask Maisie for help.

As Corky had admitted, her visit to Tenerife was very much a long shot, unlikely to throw up anything useful. Because of their longstanding relationship, she agreed to check it out. Tom had also jumped at it, she smiled at the pun, agreeing to spend up to three weeks in the sun, on condition there were no problems with his new batch of foals due to be born at his Cotswold stud farm during January. If nothing else, this winter-sun break would give them a chance to walk and talk and catch up, emotionally and physically.

00000

In her window seat, Maisie retreated behind her eye-mask, inserted the iPod buds to feed her ears with her latest playlist of soothing ballads, including her most recent discovery, the emerging US singer Josh Groban⁵. These words of love and loss often helped when she was stuck with a story, unable to get proper traction. Hopefully in Tenerife she would get time to focus, free of other distractions. Allowing her to re-start her stalled novel.

But first they must go through the motions, provided the 'Germans' were still there. The cycle of teasing and projecting from what was known began again.

At her briefing in L'Ariosto, Corky had acknowledged that they might be exactly what the portrayed - a group of fitness fanatics. Watching them from the upper deck at *Spanish Sparrows*, he had noted they always commenced their flights early, well before the other paragliders. Their schedule seemed relentless, often continuing to fly into the early evening, making their final landing of the day in the short gloaming that followed the rapid Tenerife sunset. What had rankled, what had made them seem paramilitary, was that the group flew always in the same tight formation of four groups of two, very close to each other, following their coach, copying whatever manoeuvre he made, as if to test them.

⁵ Listen to him on <http://www.joshgroban.com/>

Spanish Sparrows

Perhaps they were a display team, he had reasoned, but his policeman's instinct told him they were flying under strict orders, not enjoying the freedom the activity allowed. He had decided to take a closer look.

The "Windy Ways" beach bar was the favoured landing place for all the para-gliders in this part of Tenerife. Corky had spent several afternoons there, on a sun lounger, reading while eavesdropping on his targets' sparse conversations. Corky regretted his German was rudimentary but to him the group seemed almost sullen and did not exchange conversation with the other paragliders or acknowledge compliments offered by the other beach users. It was as if they were under orders to remain silent.

Crucially, what he simply could not accept was that among this 'German' team of eight super-fit young men all were dark-haired with dark brown eyes - *not one of them was fair-haired or fair-skinned.*

Their paragliding coach, an older man, probably early fifties, distinguished himself by being their only smoker, sucking deeply on pungent unfiltered Gitanes Brune cigarettes and drinking the occasional beer. The younger men drank only water. Unlike the other recreational paragliders who used a van-taxi service to reach their jumping off ledge, the Germans had their own transport, two long-wheelbase Land Rover Defenders towing trailer boxes for their gear. The trailers were emblazoned with decals depicting a Bird of Prey and the single word "Sturzflug" (Swoop).

On one occasion Corky had seen the eight men on the steep road leading to Mount Teide, cycling at race speed in four rows of two, their coach following in a Defender. Most days they swam in the sea, again in four rows of two. Their swimming had been quick, powerful, continuing all out for more than forty minutes, drawing the eye of all who watched them. The coach stood on the beach, smoking, timing their turns. Corky had tried to engage this man in casual conversation but he had shrugged his shoulders and walked off, ending the encounter. When the swimmers came ashore there were no congratulations, no banter. They merely loaded themselves into the vehicles and were driven off within minutes.

00000

During school holidays *Spanish Sparrows* was well used by the large MacCorquindale tribe. Corky had bought the villa because it was located beside two superb golf courses at La Caleta and with a view to spending more time there in retirement. His December visit had been a boys' get-away week, to play winter golf with his four-ball from Higgs Castle Golf Club, near his home in Pollokshields. As part of his sales pitch, Corky had said on average the southern tip of Tenerife had less than ten days of rain a year, most of which fell in October and November.

Before leaving her penthouse flat in Glasgow, Maisie had switched off her two back-up Nokias and her new *BlackBerry*. In Tenerife she would operate with different sim cards and change

Spanish Sparrows

the access profiles on her MacBook to complete the protection she had been guaranteed by Prof Mel Colic⁶ and her protégé Dr Anisa Chubatti, both now established members of Maisie's XCD Team. Tom would have installed the replacement high security wireless router. Her aim was to be able to operate from *Spanish Sparrows* with complete cyber-security.

From long experience when working as a project liaison officer for GCHQ/MI6, Maisie Kaywood knew initial surveillance and information gathering stages almost always involved long periods of relative inactivity while watching and listening, looking for anomalies and patterns. What better way to fill this downtime, sitting by *Windy Ways*, tapping away on her MacBook, waiting for Tom to 'drop in', re-tuning only when the cohort of Germans arrived, listening to them, watching for clues.

⁶ Read "Out of the blues" by John Bonthron for more information.

Spanish Sparrows

Spanish Sparrows

As she filed across the tarmac heading to Border Control and Baggage Reclaim, Maisie was thinking about Tom and how almost everyone underestimated him. The couple went back a long way. They had first met when she was at GCHQ, leading her original Carpe Diem Team. It was probably his slow, almost sleepy style that fooled them, earning him his nickname of Dopey. Like her mother before her, Maisie was careful choosing her lovers. Tom was one of a very few who had been allowed past her defences. By dint of several unavoidable circumstances Maisie and Tom had been apart for almost nine months. She was looking forward to their encounter.

00000

In the autumn of 1997, following a major change within the UK Government, the politicians and administrators at the FCO/MI6 and GCHQ argued over what to do with the opinionated Maisie Kaywood and her Carpe Diem people. Some saw an opportunity to rid themselves of the 'difficult Scotswoman', an outspoken critic of their every error, large and small. While they argued by emailed memos and counter-memos, Kaywood was ordered to put all her live and planned projects on "hold".

During a three-month period in administrative limbo, Maisie, reading the runes, was already engaged in detail forward planning, using this hiatus to set up various illegal backdoor channels which would allow her continuing personal access to the GCHQ systems after her planned ejection. In addition, while still fully authorised, she had requisitioned a 'genuine' passport for "Harriet Dooley", (with several others) for her future use. On receipt she had then wiped her requests from the system, making these passports seem genuine.

00000

Major Tom Farquharson-Wright (Rtd), an ex-Royal Marine Commando and ex-SAS Officer was a smidgeon over six feet tall, rake thin with lightning quick movement, belied by his laconic demeanour. When Tom had been operational, he had killed many times, usually from close quarters, with his bare hands. "Better sure than sorry", was Tom's motto. His trademark method was a sudden impulsive blow with the heel of either hand to the recipient's forehead, delivered with sufficient impulsive high energy to disrupt or sever the victim's spinal cord. After such a hit the victim would normally slump to his or her knees and collapse as if asleep, showing no external evidence of foul play. If a pulse continued, a further blow to the carotid nerve would normally complete the execution.

Spanish Sparrows

As younger lovers they had first conjoined with discreet and robust passion while Maisie was at GCHQ and Tom was still at MI6. This had continued undetected by their colleagues for over two years prior to his ejection from MI6 under a particularly unfortunate circumstance.

Under the radar, Maisie had been monitoring the communications of an Israeli called Moshi Abrahams, a long-term double agent from her Berlin days. Moshi was a slippery character who had gone over to the 'New Russia' regime following the collapse of the former USSR.

Moshi was a man the desk jockeys at MI6 were keen to 'turn' yet again, very much against Maisie's advice. Tom knew of her concerns and had intervened, without permission from above. He had looked into the insolent eyes of Malcolm Arbuckle (aka Moshi Abrahams) and, knowing what Maisie had told him of the man, had taken the field decision to eliminate him, despatching him before making it seem like a horse riding accident. Unfortunately, the MI6 hierarchy had smelled a rat and sent their own pathologist to investigate. On receipt of this expert's report, Tom was at once persona non grata.

In the face of stern resistance from her superiors, Maisie had re-employed him at GCHQ, re-training him to become a key player in her restructured Carpe Diem Team. Perhaps her wayward and sometimes reckless impatience leading to direct action had made her dismissal from GCHQ inevitable.

The upswing however was this ejection had released her from the fetters imposed by the dead hand dithering of her superiors at GCHQ, the political nabobs at the Foreign Office and the lesser influencers sniping by contorted emails and memorandums from their ivory towers at the Home Office. Free at last, she soon shrugged off the old skin of a government employee to express her true nature by following in the footsteps of her mother, Myra Kaywood.

In short, Maisie Kaywood's dismissal was a godsend, allowing her to pursue an unfettered career as a freelance 'Robin Hood' style agent, setting her own targets, using her trusted network inside the government intelligence hierarchy to embark on a new career, righting wrongs by direct action, using both her guile and considerable personal wealth to get things done without interference and delay imposed from above.

00000

Standing outside Arrivals beside her three large suitcases, Maisie scanned the crowds as they milled around in the Concourse. The lanky Dopey suddenly appeared at her side, as if from nowhere. He was dressed as a tour representative, in red shirt, yellow shorts, yellow bandana over his balding head, a fake black-flecked-with-grey drooping moustache and fluorescent pink trainers.

'Ah, Mees Kayhawoods, I-aha came at you, for to portage your luggage to me, no? Follow-aha me, please.'

Spanish Sparrows

Maisie played her part, adopted a Home Counties persona and made a wimp-ish attempt to lift one of her suitcases onto his trolley, accepted his mild scolding, then stood by as 'Juan Santiago' loaded them. He prattled away in broken English about the weather, and she talked over him, imperiously, as if to a half-wit, asking for the names and addresses of the best shops for high quality jewellery, emphasising that she must have the very best quality pearls, and where she could eat the finest of the freshest seafood. It was highly unlikely that this ruse was needed, but they both enjoyed re-living their younger days when they had been 'operational' together.

Eventually they fitted everything into the rented Fiat Panda, the car he knew she would expect him to provide. It was not the 4*4 model she would have preferred, but they had no plans to ride off-road and did not expect snow, ice or heavy rain. She insisted on driving, knowing that Tom was too brash, too impatient for her to accept the role as his passenger. By contrast, Maisie was a slow careful driver which fitted well with the slightly dithering persona she often used when on an outing with Tom.

Following his reminder directions, they arrived at Corky's villa where they were met by the youthful sixty-six-year-old Tommy Delaney and Corky's housekeeper. Jaquinda (Jaqui) Garacas had been born in Cuba and was a tall, talkative, wide-bodied woman in her mid-forties with a plain face and large, widely spaced teeth. The remnants of her family had 'escaped' from Cuba to return to their ancestral home in Algeciras, near Gibraltar. In search of work, Jaqui had moved to Tenerife long years earlier, trailed soon after by her sister Natasha (Tasha).

Corky and Tommy had been apprentices in the same shipyard. In those days Tommy had been known as 'Tiny D', because of his diminutive stature. Maisie was unsure of the whole story, but knew the bones of it from Teresa, Corky's wife. Corky had gone out on a long limb to rescue the then middle-aged Tommy from a life of petty crime, before installing him as caretaker at his newly enlarged Tenerife villa.

Tommy and Jaqui shopped, cleaned, cooked simple meals for guests, and organised maintenance of the house, grounds and pool. Tommy had never learned to drive and Jaqui delighted in driving Corky's Toyota Landcruiser, often providing a taxi service for 'her guests' as she thought of them.

According to Teresa, Tommy was 'fully reformed and 100% reliable'. Maisie decided to reserve judgement but watching Tommy and Jaqui over the next few days, Maisie understood perhaps why Corky and Teresa had called their place *Spanish Sparrows*. Jaqui treated Tommy as an errant father, scolding him, and continually poking fun at him, both in Spanish and English, filling the villa with their chattering laughter and bonhomie. To Maisie they seemed just like the attractive little birds who had made the grounds of the villa their home, lending it their name.

Spanish Sparrows

Bird Watchers

After a light lunch the two guests at *Spanish Sparrows* had showered and retired behind closed curtains for a long 'siesta'. At 3:45 pm Maisie's *BlackBerry* alarm pinged them back up to wakefulness to enjoy a longer, slower coupling, their third.

While planning the investigation into the Germans, Maisie had chosen their cover: they had come to Tenerife as bird watchers. Birdwatching was indeed one of Maisie's interests. According to what she had read on the internet they might expect to see as many as 150 species. By five o'clock they had showered again. Dressed in tees and shorts, they lounged on the terrace sipping chilled white Rioja, scanning the skies with their binoculars.

They did not have to wait long. Led by their Coach, the Germans flew into view. Masie pointed what looked like a long lens in their direction. It was a listening device feeding its output simultaneously to her MacBook and her earbuds. She had excellent German and was hoping to pick up any inflight chatter. Insofar as she could tell the men were silent. The moves seem to be coordinated by hand signals alone.

In the late 1990's, Maisie had been based in Berlin, before the Wall came down. She had led a joint US/UK counter-espionage unit called "DINT" (Disinformation Intelligence). This program had created a series of false 'leaks' designed to fool the Soviets into believing they were garnering genuine UK and US intelligence. Still classified, the program had proved crucial in persuading the Russians to withdraw from East Berlin.

'Ah, yes, takes me back, Maisie. I simply *must* have a go tomorrow,' said Tom. 'Fancy coming up with me, dear girl, if they'll trust me with a duo-rig?'

'Not if I live to be a hundred! Remember Tom, I'm here for Sea, Sun and Sand, or what passes for sand. Look at that beach down there at La Caleta; it looks as if its ash.'

'Your loss, my gain. Actually, duo-riding is very boring, a bit like biking on a tandem.'

'So, how do you rate our Germans?'

'My view? Top notch, actually! Mind you, they *are* doing around ten flights a day. That's dedication. It looks easier than it is, especially when it gets gusty, like today. No one else is flying, not even the Instructors. But the real trouble with paragliding here on Tenerife is not actually flying, it's getting going. I've been up for a wee nosey to the launch site they're using

Spanish Sparrows

and it's not for beginners. These boyos are serious. They are certainly impressive physically, that's for sure. More like top-notch soldiers than a sports club on holiday. Corky was spot on, they just don't ring true in my book.'

'You've been up to watch them take off? Hope you weren't spotted.'

'Well, I was actually there for the jump off, just once. I was riding that bicycle over there, wearing full Lycra with a helmet and visor. I must say I did look the part, gave myself a helluva shock when I looked in the mirror, complete prat in that get up! And its knacker getting up into these hills, a different set of muscles from riding my gee-gees. Still, use it or lose it, eh?'

'Tom, I wish you'd left it to me. Your job is to fraternise with them, try to get them speaking. We don't want them to recognise you as the same guy they saw dressed as a cyclist. Tomorrow I'll spend the day at *Windy Ways*, and you get flying, see if you can get in amongst them. Jaqui can take the Panda, be your chauffeuse, and drive you up there, to take off alongside them. I don't want them associating you with the Landcruiser, and Corky. She'll like that, I'd say. Did you see her going all gooey when you smiled at her? I think she fancies you! Baby-snatcher!'

'Don't worry, dear one, I don't think they clocked that I was even there. They seem to have generated something of a little fan club. There's three of them, rather dishy girls in their late teens. They have an ancient campervan; see it, that one over there, on that bit of spare ground, just outside La Caleta, just above the beach at *Windy Ways*. It seems that these girls had decided to follow the Defenders on their mopeds up to their launch site to watch them take off. Very forward they were, shouting all sorts of suggestions at them, inviting them to lope over in the night for a bit of hanky-panky. I'm not sure our boyos understood the words but they sure got the idea. Monsieur le Coach was not at all pleased, kept grunting at his boys to keep shtum. Even though they seem to be afraid of him, I could see that his lads still kept muttering to each other and helping themselves to an eyeful of well-tanned flesh whenever they got a chance. In my book, it's unnatural to suppress virile young men like that. Corky was right about these *Germans*, if that's what they are. To my mind they're as fake as a ten-pound Rolex!'

'Is that their villa, that terra cotta one? It's vast. We should find out who owns it.'

'Yes, it is called *Das Rote Haus*, the Red House.'

'How original. There must be dozens of similar villas around here with that name.'

'Can you see their brand-new Mercedes 500 SEL. It's hard to spot, dark grey, in the shade. It's the latest model. Who has a car like that on Tenerife? Oh, I should have said, those two Defenders are brand new as well, there was still some plastic film over the door trims. I smell funny money!'

Spanish Sparrows

'Tom, pay them a visit tonight, see what you can find out, will you, please?'

Spanish Sparrows

Reconnoitre

Thirty minutes after mid-night *Das Rote Haus* was silent and darkened, giving the impression it was shut down for the night, its occupants asleep. As he approached, Tom had not completely discounted the idea that the villa had an active guarding system, although he thought this unlikely given the height and design of the fence. Human patrols are expensive and unreliable. If anything, the perimeter would be protected by radio trembler sensors; he had a scanner which should help him suss these out and, if required, disable a section.

Earlier, from the flat roof of *Spanish Sparrows*, lying in the shadows, Tom had studied the layout of the terra cotta villa for several hours, using his military quality night-sight binoculars, checking for movement, for body heat or the tell-tale glow of a cigarette from a lazy guard.

Embedded in his memory, he had a good mental map of the villa and its out-buildings.

He had edged along the mesh fence, carefully circling the perimeter until he reached the wall section nearest the main building. Rising from a crouch, he threw his light-weight plastic grappling hook over the boundary wall and tugged, hauled himself up the loops to lie along the top of the wall where he re-positioned the hook and lowered the line down on the inside, making ready for his exit. Dropping quietly onto his hands and knees he remained still, listening.

Satisfied that all was quiet. He began to crab forwards.

The leaping Doberman was unexpected.

Tom sensed rather than saw it, swaying his body and ducking his head below its trajectory. It sailed over him then turned back to attack again. This time when it leapt at his throat, Tom leaned backwards onto his heels while swaying to his right, clamping its head between his body and upper left arm, clenching its muzzle with his right hand then twisting its head upwards and backwards viciously until its neck snapped with a muted click.

This happened so quickly it seemed more imagined than real. Tom was already moving, crawling on his hands and knees towards the Mercedes, dragging the animal's corpse behind him across the lawn. He pushed the dog under the car and arranged it as if it were asleep, with its head behind the rear passenger side wheel. He hoped it would not be noticed until after the car had reversed onto the dog's head. Had his heart and breathing been monitored, little increase would have been detected. He was trained for such incursions and was relaxed, poised and ready for the next challenge.

Spanish Sparrows

He crouched beside one of the Defenders and listened but heard nothing out of the normal. For fifteen long minutes he waited - still nothing. As he was about to move, from a distance he heard a slight scraping sound, then two soft thuds then two sets of slow footsteps making their way across a grassed area towards him.

Slipping the dart gun from its chest holster, he slid the smooth safety button until his finger met the roughed stop, re-assuring him the device was ready to fire. This silenced weapon was powered by high pressure compressed air supported by a twist grip quick change replaceable cylinder capable of firing twenty rounds. Emitting only the slightest "phist", it was virtually inaudible when fired.

This specialised pistol had been developed for use by the SAS operating behind enemy lines. It had three independent selectable chambers each loaded with twenty darts. Each chamber had its own power setting. Tungsten tipped "KILL" darts with the power to penetrate Kevlar body armour at up to around twenty metres. "STUN" darts fashioned like a tiny badminton shuttlecock with heads of hard rubber, delivered a ferocious 'impact hit' equivalent to a massive knockout punch from a heavy-weight boxer. This dart was normally used from close range (under five metres) with the intention of disabling the target, not to kill. "SLEEP" darts with syringe tipped heads, usually aimed at the neck of the target, delivered a morphine-based derivative causing instant collapse while disrupting memory recall. These darts could be fired from the pistol with great accuracy up to about twenty-five metres. Alternatively, by attaching the rapid push-fit rifling extension section to the basic pistol, its range could be increased to one hundred and twenty metres. If time allowed, the addition of a laser sighting device was an option.

Both the rifle extension and the sighting device were carried on external magnetic clips integral to Tom's small field rucksack.

He loaded a "STUN" dart into the firing chamber, focused on the approaching sounds, hoping that by kneeling in the gap between the car and wall he would avoid an encounter.

Calling softly to the guard dog, a voice whispered:

'Chi-Chi, hier ziemlich ein, zu kommen und einen Keks.'

(Chi-Chi, here pretty one, come and get a biscuit.)

Tom turned on the video recording App on his headcam.

'Lassen Sie sie in den Schlaf, Wolfie, müssen wir zurück zu bekommen, bevor sie herausfinden, haben wir aus gewesen.'

(Leave her to sleep, Wolfie, we must get back before they find out we've been out.)

Spanish Sparrows

The lights snapped on, flooding the lawn. The Coach stood with his hands on his hips, his face twisted with rage. He growled at them in French-accented English:

'Idiots. Stupid, stupid, stupid! And you Hans, I thought you were the best of the best. Then you do this to me all for a bit of slut flesh! Don't deny it - I can smell those bitches on you! What did you tell them? Did you speak English to them? Eh? If the hit was not to be so soon, I would. . . .'

The two young men sank to their knees, heads bowed, expecting to be beaten or worse.

'Get to bed, and not a word to the others. If I hear of this from anyone, I will surely kill you.'

Forty minutes later, Dopey dropped back to the ground outside the boundary wall. He had planted listening bugs at six key locations and tracking bugs on all three vehicles. With phase one completed, he set off for *Spanish Sparrows* to check that they were functioning and detectable on his dedicated high-tech comms laptop.

At breakfast Tom reported that his devices had appeared to be working to specification until just before dawn when suddenly they had shut down.

Closing her eyes, sensing at once that she had underestimated her foe, Maisie silently mouthed:

'Dearie me, Corky will not be pleased.'

Spanish Sparrows

In Flight

At *Windy Ways* beach bar and café, Maisie was ensconced on a sunbed, ready to listen for anything the Germans let slip when they landed. Maisie's German was fluent enough to allow her to pass for a genuine bossy German frau from Berlin.

Behind the bar an elderly Italian bartender was playing a loop of Andrea Bocelli songs. Maisie was tapping on her MacBook, but she could not settle. The air filled with the sound of young male voices calling to each other in English. Maisie scanned the skies through her sunglasses as the first of the paragliders arrived, a group of five lads from the North of England, probably the Manchester area she surmised. One by one they dropped gracefully onto the 'landing strip' beside the bar and quickly gathered their gear to clear this small patch for the next man.

'Hey, Mario, no Germans today then?' said the tall red-haired lad.

'No, Jee-mee, but may-bee swim, no?'

'No, I looked, from up there. No, they're not swimming. Unless they've gone to another beach.'

'Maybee, Bicicleta, no?'

'Yeh, maybe bikes. So, Mario, where are our three groupies, today?'

'May-bee go after them, on they motociclette?'

'So, Mario, what's the secret, eh? Why do they fancy them and not us, eh?'

'Whoo-meen, who knows ennee-a-teeng?'

An hour passed. Jaqui arrived and stood at the bar chatting to Mario, flashing her toothy smile at the Manchester boys, hoping to draw interest. Then Tom hove into view on his paraglider, circling lazily, checking out the beaches and the terra cotta villa before sweeping far to the North over the hippy encampment then south over the Adeje area. Thirty minutes later he swooped expertly to the landing strip. Maisie read his body language and at once packed up her beach things, signalling to Jaqui.

As Jaqui led the way to the car, Maisie pulled Tom aside:

'What gives?'

Spanish Sparrows

Tom spoke in a low, urgent voice:

'I think our birds have flown! All three vehicles have gone. There is no sign of anyone at the villa. They were not at the take-off site. There is no sign of them swimming at any of the usual beaches. Their bicycles are still at the villa, on the rack under the car porch. We need to check out the airport and ferries. I think my visit must have spooked them. Probably the dog. Sorry.'

'So be it. Let's go! Right, back to *Spanish Sparrows* please, Jaqui.'

As Jaqui accelerated from the slip road she at once launched into her noisy enquiry in her version of English:

'Thees is to Germans, Mee-sah Mah-hay-see you say no? Look, you wait please, I tell you need to know. I seeing Sir Donald is to worry at them. So, he make you come here to find to them for him, you say no? Please Mees-sah Mah-hay-see, no look me so, please. I need tell you. Tasha, she is sister at me, she make-a cleaning company, make cleans to *Das Rote Haus* to the big boss, Herr Frei. Then the German boys come to leev, you say no? I ask to Tasha, muchos hombres to muchos money? *Das Rote Haus* is holiday place, at the riches, the ones who ess gotta chefs to cook and always plays to golf, quando normal, you say no? Now ees no ell normal, now ees mad place, now ees bad place. Now ees no permitido to Tasha girls to one a week. *Es muy grande*, no to cleana one-a week solo, you say no? Germans no speak nothing, make Colonel D enojado, you say angeree-ah, you say no? Frenchie ee speaks at Tasha solo. Herr Frei do arriva one week. No come years, now one week. He pico, hermoso, you say handingsome, simpatico, you say no? Tasha say muy rico, very rich, you say no? All time he take new 'little brother'. This time boy, quizá doce años, how you say twelve? *Pelo de oro*, Tasha says. *Esclavas sexuales*, Tasha say.'

'Thank you Jaqui. Mmmm. Is there anything else we should know?'

'Oh, no gardeeners, eesa jungle, Tasha say.'

'Thank you, Jaqui, is there anything else?'

'No. Wait, I think. Oh, Frenchie, *él es un bruto*, he make smokes bits all places. *Es un animal*, Tasha says.'

'Jaqui, thank you. This is very helpful but please, do not repeat this to anyone, especially not Tasha. This conversation did not take place, right? Remember, we are just holidaymakers who like birdwatching. This is very important. Are we agreed on this Jaqui?'

'Yes, Mee-sah Mah-hay-see, *el silencio es oro*, you say no? I Tommy make say nothing, you say no?'

'Good girl, Jaqui. Mum's the word, what?' added Tom, flashing a broad smile.

Spanish Sparrows

00000

Masie sat on the terrace picking unenthusiastically at her light lunch of grilled sardines, large fat green herby olives, freshly baked sourdough bread and tiny, sweet tomatoes. Tensed, sensing failure, she had no appetite. On the flat roof deck above her Tom was lying under a towel on a sun lounger scanning the terra cotta villa with his special binoculars, taking great care to check everything three times over.

He eventually issued his verdict:

'The entire locus is deserted, empty,' he reported. 'Nothing moving. I think we've lost them.'

'Well Tom, so far as Anisa and Prof Mel⁷ can discover, they've not flown off the Island. Nor have their vehicles left on any of the ferries. I suspect that they may have moved to another bolthole on the island.'

'That Colonel D chap said to Wolfie and Hans that "the hit", whatever "the hit" is, is about to happen soon, so perhaps they are pulling everything forward?'

'Tom, any ideas what it could be?'

'No, your guess is as good as mine. It's the proverbial viper's nest. We could go round in circles...'

'Tom! Stop it! Don't start meandering. If you have nothing sensible to say, say nothing, please.'

'Sorry, dear one, sorry, sorry. Anything showing up on car or property ownership?'

'No, not yet, but Anisa and Prof Mel are working on it. I think I might take the Panda down to La Caleta. I see on the web that there is a Property Centre. My hunch is that someone there will know about our Herr Frei.'

'Yes, maybe I should take a direct approach and pay *Das Rote Haus* another visit?'

'Not in daylight, surely?'

'Yes. I promise I'll be discreet. I go as one of the bottle-collector tramps that rough it down in the hidden valley, down near the beach.'

⁷ Read more at 'Deployment', to follow and check at www.thebuzzinbee.co.uk for a story titled "Out of the Blues". This duo referred to here are part of Maisie's back-up team, responsible to electronic eavesdropping and invasive online snooping.

Spanish Sparrows

'Take great care, please. They may have set booby traps. It's clear we have been seriously underestimating these people.'

00000

Stepping out of the Panda at La Caletta, Maisie was in the persona of Veronique DuBois, a Belgian authoress looking to rent a place to write, a place where she could escape the harsh northern winters of the Low Countries.

The Caleta Property Centre was closed. Veronique moved to the little café/bar next door and ordered a cappuccino. The café owner advised that Barbara from the Property Centre was on holiday in London, but her mother Irene would come if he called her mobile. He passed Maisie a business card.

Ten minutes later Irene arrived on a scooter. After introductions, they relocated to her office.

'English would be best, or slow German, but not French, please,' said Irene in a South London accent.

'English is very good to me,' replied Maisie, smiling inanely, trying to convey a scatterbrained person, someone who bumbles through life chasing a random series of sudden and brilliant ideas. To reinforce this view, she raked in her handbag and eventually found a pair of lilac wrap-around sunglasses which she perched on the tip of her long, slim nose, smiling and peering vacantly across at Irene.

'So, let me see, Ms DuBois, purchase or rent?'

'I am thinking to be in *laisser*, how you say, to let, on the beginning, and then, when I am know of this place more, perhaps to *acheter*, if the price he is good?'

'Very wise. Renting is best until you're sure. There's plenty to choose from either way. Nothing is selling and not much renting over the last few months. It's a global economy thing I hear. That's why Barbara has done a bunk on me. Bored out of her skull, she said. Off to work in London. Daughters, what can you do with them?'

'*Oui je comprends!*'

'So, what size?'

'Well, I have an idea that I am already in love with the big red one. I am being told she is called "*Das Rote Haus*", and that she is perhop-ess available.'

Spanish Sparrows

'Ah, no, sorry, that place is not on the market. Our Herr Helmut Frei from Frankfurt only has his friends, not the general public, sorry. It used to be such a nice place, but he's let it go a bit I hear. Cutting back on cleaning and gardening. Well, it seems that even the rich are feeling the pinch. Hard to keep a secret here, in La Caleta.'

'Oh, he is in secrets, this man Herr Frei? *Oh que je aime secrets*, for my writings, please?'

'Well, nearly everyone knows anyway, so why not you? How to say, he is not actually what he seems our Herr Frei. Says he German, but I know better. No, you see he took a fancy to Álvaro, one of the youngest waiters, a part-timer at the posh restaurant at the other end of the village, "Rosso sul Mare". Well, Herr Frei seduced the boy and took him to *Das Rote Haus*, promised him 5,000 Euros a week for massage and well, you can guess. He must be good at it, Álvaro, because the German stayed for six weeks. Álvaro told his mother that Herr Frei would not let him wear his crucifix, made him flush it down the toilet. He told her Herr Frie was always praying five times a day, a dead give-away, eh? He also heard the man on his special satellite telephone, speaking in what Álvaro thought was Arabic. Well, even though he is a Muslim, Herr Frei drinks heavily and one time when he was drunk, he told Álvaro that he was a cousin of Osama bin Laden, showed him a life size poster of the two of them standing together in white robes; said it was a blow up of a photograph. He keeps the photo in a special room, deep inside the basement. It is probably a 'panic room'. They have become popular with the very richest, a sort of must have facility.'

'Is the young man Álvaro already returning to this place of what you call it?'

'Rosso sul Mare. Oh no, as soon as Herr Frei went off on his private jet, Álvaro went off to London on Ryanair. Well, it was a tragedy for his mother who doted on him, her only child. She tried to stop him but he said he wanted more of the good life. It seems that Herr Frei had given him the keys to one of his apartments, free rental. For six months, Álvaro sent his mother a thousand Euros to her bank account. Then the money stopped. She left messages on his mobile phone but after a while it disconnected. That was four years ago. Juliana's worried sick about him.'

'Ah, the poor, poor woman. What is the second name of this Álvaro, please? I have a friend who works in London. There is always the possibility, no?'

'Álvaro Domingo Quintanilla. He is twenty-nine now, born on the Sunday 7th May 1978, the same day as my Barbara, they were in the same class at school here.'

'Now, Miss Irene, *avez-vous des nouvelles des endroits* so liking to her, *Das Rote Haus*?'

'Well, oddly, there is an identical building along the coast above Los Gigantes, but Herr Frei owns that too. But don't worry, I'm sure I'll find something that suits you. Ah, here we are, now what about this one? It's available for long term lets. This owner is an elderly lady who lives in

Spanish Sparrows

Oslo. She keeps it in perfect order, even though she hardly comes nowadays. I'm sure she would be happy to accommodate your needs, and I think, if it suits you, I could persuade her to sell.'

'Oh Yes! *Elle est une belle maison trop*. What is her cost, please?

'Well, normally, before the global downturn, I would have been asking 4,500 Euro per month but for a long term let, say six months, I'm sure she would agree to let you have it for 2,500 Euros a month.'

Veronique, flabbergasted, broke into shocked French accented English:

'Oh my God, what a lot of money. Oh no, I did not expect it to be so much! Oh my God, I am so sorry, I thought it would be cheap, more cheap, more, more cheap.'

'Pardon me?'

'Oh, it is some great *embarrass!* But no, the price she is too, too more. The taxi man he say everything here is cheap as the dirt to buy, so I say to me, Veronique, why not buy to yourself a nice place here in the sunshine, look after the old bones of you that are becoming *fatigué?*

'Ah. OK, I see, I see. Well, Ms DuBois what *exactly* can you afford?'

00000

It was late afternoon. Maisie was back on the terrace, alone, sipping chilled white Rioja, soaking up the late winter sunshine under the brim of a large straw hat which shaded her MacBook. Although she looked calm and relaxed, her mind was racing. She had sent an encrypted email to Prof Mel and was waiting for a response. She was looking at the 'other' *Das Rote Haus* on Google Earth when Dopey suddenly appeared, as if from nowhere, and threw himself onto the sun lounger beside her.

'Oh God, Maisie, I'll make them pay for this, I swear it! Every single one of them!'

'Tell!'

'No booby traps. Empty, but sterile clean, apart from a few of Frenchie's fag ends they missed. Then I found the vault, inside a locked wardrobe. Couldn't get into it at first but these nimble fingers worked their magic. Empty. No clothes. Nothing. Why lock an empty wardrobe? Then I saw the scuff marks and got the removable panel to swing back. A large walk-in vault also locked with just an infra-red sensor 'eye'. Took ages searching for the remote. Asked myself, why is there no changer for the plasma television in this bedroom? Found it in the icebox of the fridge, under the frozen chickens. Clever...'

Spanish Sparrows

'Tom, get to the point!'

'Huge, like a Panic Room. Four bodies. The three girls from the campervan and a beautiful teenage boy. Sodomised then strangled, all four. God Maisie, what are these people up to? The floor was littered with those French cigarette ends, all over the shop, definitely the work of Colonel D!'

'Was the poster there?'

'What? How did you know about that?'

'Was it?'

'Yes, life-sized, side lit, like a shrine. Took a shot on my *BlackBerry*. Osama bin Laden and a smaller sized look-a-like. Here, look, both dressed as Sheiks. I took the cash, Euros, Swizz Francs, US Dollars, Sterling. Around £250,000 equivalent. And bearer bonds showing a face value of US 1.5 million dollars, if they are real. What do you think? And twenty-three platinum ingots. But no paperwork. I didn't have my fingerprint or DNA kits with me but the vault looked as if it had been sterilised too. Why leave the money? Why not take it?'

'Yes Tom, these bonds are almost certainly the real thing. Probably a pay-off for whoever was to 'clean-up'? Our man Herr Frei is almost certainly a Saudi. Prof Mel and Anisa are on the case.'

'So, what next Maisie?'

'Tom, I have another task for you. It seems that there is another "*Das Rote Haus*", a look-alike, probably built as a replica, maybe as a back-up, another bolthole in case he is attacked? It's near Los Gigantes. Look, here it is on *Google Earth*. Chances are our Germans are holed up there. Go and have a quiet look for me. And try not to kill anyone, just yet. I need to know what this is about. If you can 'take' Herr Frei, do it, but don't bring him here, take him to his own place, *Das Rote Haus* number one. I judge your chances are slim. I think The Sheik will have literally flown. I understand he has a private jet. NO! Don't say it! I accept the blame. It's obvious, really. This Sheik is not the type to rub shoulders on any form of public transport, is he?'

'Ah, no, I don't suppose he is.'

'Prof Mel is on it for me. Now scoot, Tom. Oh, and Sumo and Biscuit are mobilising and on standby. We may well need them. I'll ask Fida to get them here ASAP, even if it means a private charter. Let's put some of Herr Frei's stash to work. Poetic, don't you agree?'

'Some bloody Sun, Sand and Sea holiday this is turning out to be. Bloody trouble seems to follow you around Maisie Kaywood! I've hardly drawn a breath since I arrived!'

Spanish Sparrows

'Moan, moan, moan. Now MOVE IT, soldier!'

Spanish Sparrows

Deployment

It was still dark at 03:08 on Saturday 5th January.

Tom was out there, checking on *Das Rote Haus* number two.

Maisie sat at the end of a long table in the Dining Room, adjacent to the terrace, enjoying the cool sea breeze, with a pot of strong coffee to hand to sustain her as she sifted through the reams of disparate information pouring into her inbox, trawled data from Prof Mel and her acolyte Anisa.

'They've been busy, just like me in the old days,' Maisie mused, under her breath.

00000

Two decades earlier, as a rising star at GCHQ, the taciturn and reclusive Mel Colic had been recruited by Maisie into her then vibrant *Carpe Diem* (CD) team. When this group had been disbanded and Maisie had been forcibly 'retired', she had used her contacts to arrange for Prof Mel to be moved to a sinecure post as Personal Professor of Cyber Science at Cambridge University, a post generously funded by the little-known Margaret Miller Foundation (which Maisie controlled as its principal Trustee.)

At Cambridge, Prof Mel mentored only the most able students. Like her father before her Mel Colic's genius lay in code making and breaking. As Maisie had predicted, GCHQ soon realised they missed her badly, and within a year they had re-employed her as a consultant, restoring Prof Mel's official access to GCHQ's many computers.

It was through the Cambridge connection that Maisie and Prof Mel had discovered the talented Dr Anisa Chubatti and had rescued her from her personal predicament, paid for her rehabilitation and restored her to a successful career. Anisa was now Chief Technical Officer at the New International Telecommunications Consortium (NITC).

NITC worked by stealth. Only a small number of people knew that it was an UK Government FCO/GCHQ initiative, devised and sponsored by Maisie as its 'project champion'.

In its original format it had been deliberately portrayed as a seemingly bland way of assisting British government agencies and approved international organisations to operate more efficiently by providing a secure state-of-the-art communications nexus. A decade later, having bought itself out from its original sponsors, NITC still provided surprisingly affordable

Spanish Sparrows

and powerful 'satellite and internet enabling software' to hundreds of communications companies around the globe.

What was little known was that this powerful code contained embedded spyware, giving Anisa the capability to listen and to log any telephone dialogue, text or email for almost ninety percent of all Internet users. By this means Anisa was able to secretly mine data both in real time and by raiding data archives. As and when directed by Prof Mel at GCHQ, most of Anisa's covert checks searches were in pursuit of terrorists and criminals.

Alongside Tom, Sumo, Biscuit and Fida, Prof Mel and Anisa Chubatti were now important members of Maisie Kaywood's self-funded organisation called 'XCD', the ultra-secret successor to her original government-controlled Carpe Diem (CD) team. Unlike the original CD team, XCD operated under the direct control of Masie, without the dead-hand of government and political interference and delay. This made XCD able to respond and intervene quickly and when required, outside the rule of law. As a devoted member of the XCD Team, Anisa always responded to 'requests' from Maisie or Prof Mel as her top priority.

00000

Watching the data stream from Mel and Anisa made Maisie feel twenty years younger. Her mind was whirring; it was as if she had travelled back in time to her old Carpe Diem days deep inside GCHQ.

After an hour of reading and re-reading what was being revealed, Maisie took a break, to allow her subconscious to deal with the flood of information. She called this her crossword puzzle method, allowing her subconscious, her hidden mind, the larger and often underused part of the human brain, to tease out connections and make sense of the clues. This was a practised routine that had seldom failed her.

Beginning with a few stretching and breathing exercises, with the tune running in her head, she sashayed over to the piano and began to play, a move designed to disengage her upper mind and allow the subconscious process to take over:

"In the wee small hours of the morning"

Her eyes closed, her fingers picking out the keys, moving through the playlist of "Sleepless in Seattle", she drifted off into a reverie, focussing on the two men she had summoned to help her:

David Abernethy, (aka Biscuit, aka The Ferret), was an ex-SAS sniper/observer who now worked for Brigadier Henry Murray-Galbraith on his Corgarff estate. Leaving his wife Fida behind, Biscuit would soon leave to drive south to join Hamish John McIver, aka Sumo, (Ex-Royal Marine, Ex-Special Boat Service). In retirement after a distinguished career, Sumo had

Spanish Sparrows

returned to live in the Hebrides where he made a simple living as an inshore fisherman, diving for scallops and, in the summer season, working as an occasional Sea Life guide. As might be expected, Sumo was proficient with weapons of all types but it was his body that was his most lethal weapon. His physical strength was legendary.

The men would meet at Glasgow Airport. Sumo and Biscuit would travel under secure but anonymous passports and similar professionally prepared supporting documentation from the secure archive at Corgarff. Like Maisie and Tom, this duo would travel 'clean', no longer able to depend on the special diplomatic protection they had enjoyed when working for MI6/GCHQ.

David's Abernethy's wife Fida⁸ was now also an essential part of the XCD Team. At Maisie's behest, Fida had established herself as the sole proprietor of "Excalibur Executive Expediting" (EEE), which operated from Corgarff Castle located in a secluded glen on the eastern slopes of the Grampian Mountains of Scotland, thirty-three miles from Aberdeen. Fida's role was logistics and she would arrange all necessary travel, provide documentation and liaise with Colonel Willie Munro (Rtd). Willie Munro ran a small team of weapons experts, men also retired from Her Majesty's Armed Forces and now employed as ghillies on the Brigadier's large estate. Willie's special container of gear for Biscuit and Sumo was already at Aberdeen Airport in a secure lock-up, with one of Willie's men as baby-sitter.

Poised to act, what Fida needed was a destination from Maisie and the covering diplomatic documentation promised by Sir Donald MacCorquindale for the shipment of the containers.

Originally Maisie's default destination for Sumo and Biscuit had been Tenerife but now her instinct told her "the hit" mentioned by Colonel D would be elsewhere.

As her thoughts began to coalesce, Maisie reached for her MacBook to add to her Think-List, a method she frequently used to share her thoughts with others in her team.

- Why does The Sheik own an identical *Das Rote Haus* a few miles away?
- Is this an insecurity phobia, a need to back-up everything he does?
- Does The Sheik have a second identical "hit" team under training as back-up?
- Or some other back-up plan?
- If The Sheik could afford more than a million US dollars as a pay-off to local police or whoever was to manage the removal and disposal of the bodies in the Panic Room, he could certainly afford another hit squad.
- If so, the "hit" must be big. Quite possibly the biggest intervention we have attempted, thus far.
- If we keep what we know entirely to ourselves, we might fail through lack of resources. Four innocent people have already died.

⁸ Read "Fidelity" by John Bonthron at www.thebuzzinbee.co.uk

Spanish Sparrows

- If we share what we already know with MI6/GCHQ we risk losing control, getting embroiled in bureaucracy.
- Even if our counter-operation is successful, it is inevitable that a GCHQ witch-hunt will almost certainly uncover what has happened. This creates the risk that that XCD might be terminated with possible further consequences for every one of us.
- *Let me have your views. Any ideas will be welcomed, but no discussion with anyone, not even between us. You know the rules. Send you thoughts to me alone.*

Her finger hovered over the 'encrypt and send' button but she held back then deleted the last bullet point, seeing it as a personal weakness. Asking for help like this was not her normal way. As a benign autocrat she did not encourage democracy or debate or the clamour of free discussion and collaboration which, in her experience, inevitably led to stalemates and built resentments for those whose ideas were rejected. Far better that she made these decisions alone.

In her previous life at GCHQ she had put up with years of frustration in endless 'scenario meetings', and with the delays and deferments which inept political interference caused. Her whole instinct was to act independently, trusting only in herself.

This was a heavy burden as she knew whatever this "hit" might be, must be major and the responsibility worried her.

As Maisie often did when she was unsure, she procrastinated. Her current Think-List memo remained unsent.

Faced with indecision, she revisited the key points which troubled her, adding to her current Think-List as a way on conversing with her inner self:

- Tom's photo (attached) from the poster has been verified as Sheik Aarzam Abdullah Mohamed Al-Hemendah aka Herr Frei of *Das Rote Haus*. Aarzam is a member of several charitable NGO's and Aid Agencies and considered to be a 'liberal Muslim'. As such he is highly respected within the international community of wealthy do-gooders.
- What has been suppressed is he was a close friend of Osama bin Laden in his youth, perhaps a cousin. In 2001, in the aftermath of the Twin Towers attack, MI6/GCHQ trackers had 'tagged' Sheik Aarzam as the founder, funder and leader of "The Sons of Allah", an organisation about which little remains known beyond its name.
- It is claimed by the CIA that The Sons of Allah was a charitable organisation dedicated to helping young Muslim boys out of poverty. When no further information was discovered, positive or negative, The Sons of Allah project, believed to be defunct, was archived by MI6/GCHQ.
- Later snippets point to a connection between The Sheik and the disgraced French Army Colonel Pierre Depardieu, a mercenary who has since dropped below the radar. Known

Spanish Sparrows

mostly as Colonel D, he is rumoured to be working on regime change in West Africa. The CIA has used Colonel D as a cipher on several occasions.

- From the CIA file that Prof Mel has purloined, Colonel D seems to be a full-blown psychopath. His trademark kill is sodomy prior to strangulation, as Dopey uncovered at *Das Rote Haus*.
- The digital address of The Sheik's satellite phone is being targeted, not yet found.
- Herr Frei's private jet was logged out of Los Rodeos Airport (Tenerife North) at 07.33 on Friday 5th January, stated destination, Cairo. This was only a few hours after Tom's messy intrusion. His Mercedes will probably be stored in a hangar at the airport, awaiting his next visit.

Maisie estimated the chances of The Sheik's jet landing in Cairo were almost zero. It was evident he was a careful man. Since leaving Tenerife, Aarzam had almost eighteen hours of a start on her which meant he could be almost anywhere in the world. No doubt he would have other jets at his disposal. The mega-rich were always willing to share such anonymous means of transport with those of their own kind.

Another thought occurred. Perhaps The Sheik had not actually boarded his jet. Perhaps he may still be on Tenerife.

Maisie sent a further encrypted email to Anisa asking her to monitor all satellite telephone calls originated from the vicinity of the Canary Islands.

After two further reviews of her Think-List, she decided to share her thoughts with each of the currently active XCD members then pressed the combination of buttons on her MacBook to enable 'encrypt and send'.

00000

At 04:39 Dopey arrived back at *Spanish Sparrows*, shaking his head.

'Sorry Maisie, the other house was empty, locked up, not even a housekeeper, with no sign of the Germans or of their vehicles.'

He stretched his long legs out, laid his head back on the arm of the settee and closed his eyes.

'And?' said Maisie.

'*Das Rote Haus* number one is now 'fully sterilised', as we agreed.'

'A horrible task for you. Thank you. And?'

Spanish Sparrows

'As I always say, "Better sure than sorry". Yes, best way for them, a tragic accident. Regrettable, but it happens. As you said Maisie, much better for their families, avoids the ghoulish interest from the media in a sexually motivated mass murder. And I *will* get Colonel D for them, whatever happens.'

'No, Tom, you will follow my instructions. Hopefully Colonel D will be dealt with in the round, but not as a private action on your own initiative. We both know where that sort of thing can lead.'

Tom pretended to be asleep. Maisie returned to the piano, tinkling quietly, playing a sad jazz requiem for the lost children. Twenty minutes later, less than a mile from where they waited, the girls' campervan exploded, rattling the windows of *Spanish Sparrows* and setting up manic howls from every dog from miles around.

Jaqui and Tommy hurtled into the room, Tommy in running shorts and Jaqui in a short skimpy shift which revealed that she wore no panties. When she realised her appearance, Jacqui ran out again to return in a full-length dressing gown. As Maisie had guessed, the *Spanish Sparrows* had been cohabiting, despite their elaborate pretence of celibacy.

From the terrace the four watched the campervan burn fiercely, saw people rush to it with buckets of water, saw the fire services and police arrive.

'Gas explosion I would say, eh?' said Tom. 'Horrible. I do hope no one got hurt,' he added, stifling a yawn.

'Well, time for us all to get a bit of shut eye,' said Maisie. 'I suspect we will have a busy day tomorrow.'

Spanish Sparrows

Chameleon

Maisie was back at the end of the Dining Room table.

At 07:33 she sent an encrypted email to Fida at Corgarff Castle:

- 'Send birds to H. Leave baggage at A.'
- Despite its many disadvantages including its drum tight security, Heathrow was still the best option, especially when she was uncertain where to look for "the hit".

Stretched on the sofa under a duvet, Tom slept on.

A breakfast snack arrived:

'Ah, coffee! Thank you Jaqui. And freshly baked croissants and a fruit salad too. Very nice. Any news yet of what happened, the explosion?'

'The girls of the home van is died, Tasha says. The police is 'no nothing. Make things to go Madrid, Tasha say. *Habrá una vigilia para ellos* to the church, Tasha says. *Es como la explosión en el Hippy camp*, many years. The man, he make to living but no hearing, *una mano es malo, dañado.*'

'Oh, how horrible! Were those girls German too?'

'No, English, Tasha says, Liverpools. *Is junto a Glasgow?*'

'No, not really, about 350 kilometres.'

'Is Mr Tom he *indispuesto*, he look to tired. I do make him breakfast, *si?* I have the good eggs *y bacon y salchichas plana* to Sir Donald. I have with the "brown sauce".'

'Yes, good idea. But we should let him sleep a while yet.'

'*Si*, I do everything get to him.'

'Thank you, Jaqui.'

Spanish Sparrows

As she often did over breakfast, Maisie plugged in her earbuds and tuned to the BBC World Service on the Internet. Then, based on a news snippet, she brought up the White House website. President George W. Bush's visit would take place soon, commencing in Benin on 18th February. Intrigued, she use copy and paste to add the information to her Think-List.



Benin - Contonou: arrival ceremony, meets president Thomas Boni Yayi

Tanzania - Dar-es-Salaam: meets president, tours hospital; Arusha: tours hospital, textile mill and girls' school

Rwanda - Kigali: meets president, visits genocide memorial

Ghana - Accra: meets president, state dinner

Liberia - Monrovia: meets president, visits university

Sticking to her 'working in boxes' protocol, Maisie emailed this web-link address separately to Prof Mel and Anisa, each with the same tag:

'Search for connects between The S and West Africa as per attached clip regarding Big Chief visits. Urgent, please.'

Maisie entered "Benin" into her search engine and began hunting, sifting, sniffing becoming more intrigued with each new discovery.

Thirty minutes later she added key points to her Think List:

- Benin, capital Porto Novo, main city Contonou, 6.36 N, 2.43 E, tropical, malarial, approx. 50% landmass of UK, 150% Scotland. Pop 9 M growing. V Poor, GDP less than 5% of World average, majority population in subsistence farming, highly dependent on micro-finance support to farmers and traders from Eco-bank and co-venture from Swiss Banks and multiple NGO's and foreign agencies.

Spanish Sparrows

- Gold still is a major source of foreign cash inflow but insignificantly small by world standards.
- Onshore and Off-shore oil almost depleted, minor cash source. Economy weak, dependent, wide open to corruption.
- Former fiefdom of Mathieu Kérékou aka The Chameleon (b 1993 (74)), military dictator, twice President, believed still in cahoots with Libya, Russia and is known 'to do business' with both Olusegun Obasanjo (ex-President Nigeria) and Jerry Rawlings (ex-President Ghana).
- Benin is a Signatory of Basel Convention (1989) but remains a continuing destination for disposal of Nuclear and Toxic industrial waste. The Chameleon believed (many sources) to have been involved in dumping a large amount of Russian nuclear waste then building over it with a new military runway in return for Russian aid.
- Rapid growth in offshore banking sector, with informal links to Switzerland, Lichtenstein, Singapore, Isle of Man, Gibraltar, Kuala Lumpur and recently Shanghai. No customer deposit guarantee at any level. Open to corruption.
- New President Thomas Yayi Boni, (b 1952 (55), elected 6 April 2007), keen to move from old alliances and now courting USA and China.
- **Hence GWB visit?**
- China v USA in Africa?
- China v Russia in Africa?
- Russia v USA in Africa?
- Eurozone influence in Africa?

Tom rolled off the settee, rolled up the duvet:

Shower time.'

Maisie closed her eyes, drummed her fingers, humming 'Tunes of Glory', her mind racing until her fingers flew at the keys again:

- **Key questions:**
 - a. What target could be bigger than the US President?
 - b. Is he 'the hit'?
 - c. What better place to generate negative publicity against USA and its "improved global security" than in Africa, where all the major powers still fight out their 'little wars' to exploit Africa's wealth and resources by controlling African Politicians in these so-called democracies?
 - d. What better place to set-up a dummy regime to facilitate money-laundering on a massive scale under an apparently 'benign' government such as Benin?

Maisie pressed the combination of keys and the separate emails flew off to Prof Mell and Anisa.

Jaqui ran into the room, screeching:

Spanish Sparrows

'Mee-sah Mah-hay-see, it do another bad thing is happening. Tasha do walk her dog at Hippy Camp. Two hippies is *sido asesinados*. They do *estrangulado*, Tasha say. She do know them, is walks dog. The police 'no nothing, Tasha say, *es normal!* The police no listen crazy man, deaf man with bad hand. He do live *una grieta en el suelo*, Tasha says.'

'He lives in a crack in the ground? A cave?'

'*Sí!* He do takes his clothes off, is walks *desnudo*. *Él no está bien de la cabeza*. He mad, you say no? He say men kill hippies go sea *en barco rápido*. Tasha say it Frenchie, Germans who do them, run to way.'

'Jaqui, have you told Tasha about Tom and me?'

'No, Mee-sah Mah-hay-see. No, no hit me to my eyes, *por favor*. I no not saying anytheengs to Tasha, to no one. Tasha she saying theengs, Jaqui she hearing theengs only. *El silencio es oro*, you say no?'

'Yes, I agree, silence is golden. Thank you, Jaqui, thank you very much indeed. Would you ask Mr Tom to come *at once*, please. I'm sure he will be ready for that breakfast now.'

Maisie flipped open her MacBook to share this new information with Prof Mel and Anisa but as she moved to begin, a new message flashed "URGENT". It was from Prof Mel:

A cousin of the ex-President MK (The Chameleon) has been a guest on the yacht of The S many times. The cousin and The S serve on several committees together including Sport for Africa of which The S is a major sponsor.

To celebrate the visit of GWB to B there will be a series of Sporting Events, including a special football match to be attended by GWB, and a multi-nation Triathlon, a showpiece event.

Another message pinged in her inbox, this from Anisa:

- Sat-Phone log indicates multi-cons between S to vessel "African Rose" registered Liberia, owned by The S through dummy corporation.

Spanish Sparrows

- AIS⁹ logs show AR in vicinity Lome, Ghana 28-Oct-07, and Tenerife 11-Nov-07 and Tenerife again dawn 5-Jan-08.
- The S owns property in L, G, including vast gated villa, will check Google earth, coordinates to follow.
- Sat-Phone log shows increased cons between S and AR for these specific dates.
- No decode yet on The S or other voices, so far. Automated search continues.
- M now has this data.

This last line caused Maisie to raise her eyebrows. While she was pleased that Anisa had shared this *particular* information with Prof Mel, she was also slightly irritated. To do so was a breach of protocol, a breach of Maisie's rule of 'working in boxes'. Standing instructions were for each person to work only in his or her own 'box'. Information must not be shared without Maisie's prior approval or instruction. It was for her to decide who saw what, and not for Anisa and Prof Mel to collaborate without specific permission to do so.

As Tom says, maybe I am getting old and crotchety, Maisie thought. Maybe I should free them up, build on their obvious synergy. On this basis she decided to let Anisa's indiscretion pass, but on this occasion only.

'Ah Tom, here you are at last. Good to have you back from the Land of Nod. Get us packed, we need to relocate. I must email Fida. Best we fly to Frankfurt I think, see if we can catch our man there.'

Raising his eyebrows but offering no voiced resistance to this sudden urgency, Tom said:

'So, Maisie dearest, no Sun, Sea and Sand or any of the other, then?'

She looked towards the door which he closed. Whispering, she said: 'I'll brief you later, out of range of the all-knowing Tasha. I look forward to meeting this oracle someday.'

'So, that's a promise, we can come back and continue where we nearly got started?'

'Down boy! Control your urges. And get a move on, soldier! The Sheik is ahead of us by almost a full day.'

⁹ Seagoing Vessel Automatic Identification System. check at:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Automatic_Identification_System

Spanish Sparrows

Frankfurt am Main

Maisie preferred not to know how Fida had managed to get them on the packed Iberia Express flight which left Tenerife just before noon. Many of the voices around them were German, only a sprinkling of Spanish and no English. Wearing an old-fashioned hearing aid from Maisie's 'wardrobe', Tom pretended to be deaf. Tom's listening German was fairly good but his spoken German revealed him as very British. Maisie spoke for both of them.

During the flight she studied again the complete dossier that Prof Mel had compiled, detailing what was known of The Sheik/Herr Helmut Frei. The information was in two sections:

- The first was full of glowing testament and positive publicity surrounding The Sheik and his many 'good works'.
- The second part was sparser, revealing only a little of the shady world of Herr Helmut Adolf Frei: but it did show two potentially useful oddities:
 1. His secret collection of erotic artworks, expressly forbidden in Islam.
 2. His interest in Nazi paraphernalia, particularly personal items of clothing which could be proved to have been worn by the Führer. His biodata showed he was the same height and build as his idol during his last days in the bunker before his suicide.

The flight landed at Frankfurt late-afternoon on Saturday 5th January. Soon they were settled in the anonymity of the Mercure Kaiserhof Hotel near the city centre and connected to its rather insecure in-room internet system. Her first outgoing email was to a re-mailing 'filter' service to alert Prof Mel and Anisa of their location and to ask for a full monitoring and protection screen for the hotel system while she was in residence. A few minutes later she was advised that she was now protected to Level Four only, the best that Anisa could do for this location.

Maisie took the risk, logged in and studied the updated information:

- The Sheik, or at least his satellite telephone, was certainly operating from the Frankfurt area, calls being made mainly in Arabic. Those in English and German and a few in French were banal, not of great interest.
- Looking for code words and hidden meanings, Prof Mel was still working on the Arabic voice files Anisa had provided.
- The AIS log showed the *African Rose* meandering across the Atlantic towards the coast of West Africa, edging towards the Bight of Benin.

A surge of certainty welled up:

Spanish Sparrows

The Sheik's target is most definitely GWB and Benin is the location for 'the hit'.

Adrenalin flushed through her system, arousing her sexually as often happened when she had solved a puzzle. From experience she had learned that post-coital endorphins always helped her to release her creative brain, nudging it into a higher gear:

'Tom, darling, shall we catch up on canoodling? What do you say?'

After their short vigorous coupling, Maisie drifted off into a dwam, the data running in her head.

Time passed.

She drifted back up to wakefulness. Tom slept on.

The bedside clock alarm seemed to be stuck at 6:49 pm local time.

She was ready for more and sent her hand wandering across to the snoring form, to offer encouragement with a gentle kneading, bringing her "little soldier" as she often called it, back to "Attention!"

'Ah, so we are awake, are we?' she crooned.

He knew the format and rolled over onto his back as she eased herself up, her eyes closed, concentrating as her arms reached down to caress his neck and shoulders as his hands found her nipples, squeezing softly, gently, then tugging, squeezing harder.

She mounted him with practised ease and began with a slow canter, talking to him, slowing to enjoy a long tantric coupling, letting the pressure build:

'Tom, earlier, your first service was very enjoyable. Thank goodness you haven't lost your old spark, at least not yet.'

'Ah, I see where this is going. So, if I do lose it, I'll be 'replaced' soonish? Is that it?'

'Only if you let it happen. Show your mettle, be a man.'

Tom responded with timed upward thrusts leaning forward to nibble at her left breast, her favourite. Their pace increased steadily as they raced to cross the finish line with a noisy, flat-out Tally-Ho gallop.

Disengaging, she whispered:

Spanish Sparrows

'Darling man, *Glorious things of thee are spoken*. Perfection. Thank you.'

She rolled over and, wrapped in his arms, she was soon on the edge of sleep, running through the details of her emerging plan.

Time passed.

Tom moved his hand to massage her left breast.

She rolled over onto her back and redirected his hand downwards, lifting her knees and opening her thighs, her hand moving to stroke his penis, tit for tat.

Through the open door her MacBook pinged and she immediately pushed him away, padding naked across the room.

'For f***'s sake, Maisie, leave it!'

But she was gone, sashaying into the lounge area, closing the door on him.

With the MacBook fired up, she logged in, scanned her emails, speaking to herself:

'Ah-ha, thank you Prof Mel!'

She read the first paragraph.

Tom stuck his head round the door:

'What is it, Maisie?'

'**Please**, Tom, not now.'

He retreated.

Maisie studied the information, now able to finalise her plans, all thought of returning to Tom displaced by a different agenda and the imperative to act at once - *Carpe Diem!*

She sent a reply directing Prof Mel to keep searching to discover whether The Sheik owned similar or even and identical house elsewhere in the city, following his model of owning two *Das Rote Haus* properties on Tenerife.

In any event she must displace him from this residence at Schumannstrasse which would surely be 'fully secured' electronically and physically. If she could make him move about, even to a

Spanish Sparrows

hotel, perhaps Tom with support from Anisa and Prof Mel would be able to get her inside his digital defences.

'Right Tom, time to stretch our legs. Our man owns a luxury town house on Schumannstrasse, overlooking Beethoven Platz. Let's check it out, shall we. Perhaps we should be Biffy and Al, you remember, the brash Americans from New York, the wheelers and dealers in antiques and fine art?'

'Oh God, Maisie, you know I hate dressing up as that man. It makes me feel such a prat. And my New York accent is pretty ropey.'

'Put on your hearing aid again and leave the talking to me. Act dumb and hen-pecked, should be easy!'

'But seriously Maisie, should we be trying a direct approach like this? Should we not stake him out first? Remember what happened at ...'

'No! No, not this time. And something tells me that Herr Helmut Adolf Frei will be very willing to invite us in. I have an idea. I'll explain as we walk. Come on! MOVE IT, soldier!'

00000

As they left the Mercure hotel, they looked the part of American tourists, right down to their training shoes. In a sense they were 'authentic' as everything they wore Maisie had purchased in New York, including the expensive antique Nazi motif brooch Biffy carried in her coat pocket. Its provenance certificate showed it had once belonged to Magda Goebbels, wife of Hitler's propaganda minister. (Maisie had bought it to take it out of circulation and with a view to selling off the diamonds and other precious stones to try to cover her outlay but had not yet got further than send a single diamond off for assessment.)

From Anisa, they knew that The Shiek's satellite phone was located at an address around twenty minutes away from his Schumannstrasse residence, probably on the fifty-third floor at the exclusive Tower Restaurant. To make her plan work, they would intercept him when he returned.

Biffy had various New York accents with different clothing ensembles to match. Each accent was 'perfect', and dressed for a chosen Biffy accent, she could pass muster in any company.

Maisie had been based in New York for two years as the MI6/GCHQ liaison officer, helping develop what became the CIA's National Clandestine Service, a version of their British counterpart. During this posting, she had adapted her well-honed Home Counties' English voice (for use at GCHQ and the London scene) to incorporate the Ivy League nuances of her educated

Spanish Sparrows

American colleagues, a dialect a world away from the harsh New York twang for which that city is best known.

Maisie loved playing Biffy, sometimes going out and about in Glasgow or Edinburgh acting the part of the garrulous 'posh' American lady who had no idea what things cost, who always asked for help and who was constantly astonished that civilization had spread so far from New York.

Even real upper crust Americans took her for the genuine article. Apart from her attire, what convinced them was her East coast American English.

For this outing however, Biffy would be more direct, her language and delivery harsher, brasher and where required, bizarre, as demanded for this particular script. She briefed Tom on what they were about to attempt. Without firearms, they would go in 'naked in case they were searched or had to pass through body scanners.

00000

The January evening was cold and dry but windy. Less than twenty paces from The Sheik's entry door, they found a credible location to wait at a bus shelter.

Was it possible the ornate door furniture on the impressive black entrance might actually be solid gold?

If they tried rapping the knocker or pressing the doorbell push, at best they would be shooed away by a grumpy Butler or, more likely warned off over the intercom, with a threat that the police would be called, or perhaps a private security service. No, that way would not work, she reasoned, but another way might.

Keeping silent over the next hour, they allowed many buses to trundle past by stepping back into the bus shelter as they watched and waited, fully alert, aware their window of opportunity would be small. When it presented itself, they must act with boldness. On the plus side, her plan was a version of an approach she had successfully deployed several times before.

They were dressed for a New York winter and out of the wind it did not seem too cold. Tom stood watch as Maisie turned away to check for any non-encrypted emails that her secure remailing service might have diverted to her *BlackBerry* address.

Tom hissed:

'Maisie, check this one.'

As the mid-grey Mercedes 500 SEL slowed to a halt adjacent the door, she grabbed Tom by the arm and pretended to stumble forward, stopping about six paces from the car, at the limit

Spanish Sparrows

of the personal threat zone. Two fit young men emerged first, leaving Herr Frei inside while they checked for trouble. Their practised eyes revealed to Maisie and Tom that these men were armed.

'OH AL, GEE LOOK, HONEY, I'VE LOST A STONE!'

What the target's security detail saw was an oddly dressed elderly American couple stooped nearby, looking down into the gutter. Exchanging a glance, they assessed this pair as 'NO THREAT.' The shorter guard stooped and opened the car door. As The Sheik raised himself out of the car the American woman rushed forward into the path of their client, leaving her husband behind, still peering down.

'**Look Al, look who it is! It's Herr Frei, from that Sotheby's Closed Auction.** So Helmut, this is where you hide yourself, you naughty man. We've missed you, **haven't we Al?** We've been everywhere since we heard you lived in Europe. We thought it would be easy, but it's so big here, so many countries and hardly anyone speaks American! So *this* massive place is where you live, Herr Frei? **Wow, Al, some place!** Do you just have a few rooms, or do you own the whole shebang? I bet it's all yours. Is it?'

'I'm sorry, but you have me at a disadvantage?'

'Biffy and Al Antaar, Antaar Antiques, you know - "You want it - we got it!"'

'Oh, yes, of course. It's nice to meet you again, but I'm rather. . .'

'It *is* Helmut Frei, yeah? Well Helmut, do you have a torch on you? You see I lost a stone outta this brooch. I think it's over there, where Al is.'

Maisie took The Sheik's right hand and placed the brooch with the missing stone in his palm. Now that he had her property he could not easily leave and still be considered a gentleman.

'Don't mind him, Helmut, Al's as deaf as a post and getting a bit gaga, neurones dying like flies, know what I mean? Well, have you got one, Helmut?'

'Entschuldigen sie bitte?'

'No, Helmut, Antaar Antiques, from Sotheby's Closed Auction, that time in Washington, remember? Look here's my card, check it out.'

Maisie leaned forward to press the card on top of the brooch and whispered into his chest:

Spanish Sparrows

'As a matter of fact Helmie, we've been trying to find you because I have a few little items that you might like, you know, "from the Bunker", from the last days, shirts and undergarments, still unwashed. DNA authenticated. Wonderful thing this new science, yes?'

The Sheik held the brooch to the light of the streetlamp, then handed it back but kept the business card:

'Be kind enough to wait one moment, please?'

He stepped away, out of earshot. He pulled out his Sat-phone, dialled the number on Biffy's card. Fida had been primed and answered at the first ring:

'Antaar Antiques,' Fida drawled in a Bronx accent, "You waanit - we gawtit!"

'Good evening, may I speak to your Principal, please?'

'Hey bud, it's still afternoon yet, where-ya callin from?'

'Germany, is your Principal available, please?'

'No chance bud. Biffy and Al are in Europe, flogging some extra special stuff to the idle rich. To some Italian guy, called Frederico, I think she said. Look, gotta go, got another incomer on line three. Remember, you waanit - we gawtit! An' you have a nice day, wherever you are, bud!'

The Sheik turned back to Maisie with a smile on his face.

'Sorry for the delay. Now, let me get my people to help you look for that gemstone.'

They searched with two powerful torches taken from the boot of the car, but without success.

'Gee Al, I'm sorry honey, but never mind, it was just a tiny one, look, you can hardly tell. I'm sure we can get it repaired. Do you know anyone, Helmie? I hear this is a great town for jewellery, is that true?'

'I suppose so, I'm sure we can find someone. May I offer you refreshments, while I call someone I know?'

'Oh Al, honey, look, Helmut wants us to visit with him. And we can have "Refreshments". Hey, Al, we're having "Refreshments!" Wait till I tell the girls at the club. Come on honey, now be careful on those high steps. Do you know, Helmie, I can hardly believe it, but your country over here has nearly everything we have back home. But Helmie, someone should tell them about your electricity, two-twenty is way too high, burned out my hairdryer straight off. Oh, and poor Al's shaver too! Helmie, do you know a good shop, one that sells proper US goods?'

Spanish Sparrows

They were inside the Schumannstrasse town house. The Butler wore his face like a mask. He was tall, effete, with a thin face, a long beaked nose and wore a very slight sneer on his thin lips. It was as if, although he was forced by duty to breathe the same air as these crass people standing before him, he wanted to make it obvious to them that he hated doing so.

The Sheik offered a sad smile:

'I am a Muslim and so I cannot offer alcohol. But we do have tea, of course? Or perhaps you might prefer coffee?'

Maisie caught the slight quiver on the Butler's lips and judged it to be as close to a smile as the man ever allowed himself.

'AI, WHAT DO YOU WANT, TEA OR COFFEE?'

'WATER!'

'One tea, one water, please.'

The sound of their raised voices brought a beautiful golden-haired boy to the doorway of a room at the far side of the large reception hallway. Maisie judged he was about twelve, maybe slightly older. A game controller dangled from his hand and his large blue eyes spoke of sadness, resignation, despair. Helmut shooed him away with the back of his hand and the slim youngster climbed the stairs slowly, reluctantly, then disappeared out of sight.

Tom ruptured a capsule in his trouser pocket and the stain appeared at his crotch as a rank smell of faeces filled the air:

'BATHROOM!'

'Oh AI, you've not had another little accident? Look, I'm sorry Helmut, but could we just use your bathroom for a few minutes. I'm afraid AI, has... well, never mind.' she sighed in resignation.

'Charles, see to our guests. I'll wait in the library.'

'C'mon honey, I've got a full change in my little rucksack.'

'This way, please,' said Charles, in nearly perfect upper-class English. Probably Russian or perhaps Polish, originally, Maisie surmised.

'Great Charlie, any chance of a nice fluffy towel, he's got to have a shower or he'll stink the place to high heaven.'

Spanish Sparrows

'I can assure you that the Bathroom is fully equipped, madam.'

Maisie locked the door and they got to work immediately. Throughout she kept up a **LOUD** once-sided conversation. Tom already had Maisie's decorative rucksack open, removing his tools and the tiny devices from its hidden section.

Their first target was the drainage system. Maisie dropped the six small pouches containing a yellow gel into the WC and flushed. In contact with water the soft plastic would disintegrate and the gel would expand five-hundred fold.

Continuing her **LOUD** conversation, she turned on the shower and squirted the expensive shower gel and shampoo inside the huge walk-in cubicle to create a Vesuvius of foamy bubbles. At each re-filling of the cistern, she flushed again to move the gel pouches into the main outflow drain under the building. When the gel solidified, it would require a major excavation and renewal to clear the blockage, making the house temporarily unusable.

In parallel Tom targeted the electrical system. He removed the cover from the shaver socket and placed the tiny connector across the positive and negative leads, attached the tiny sticky pouch and then squeezed it, rupturing it thus allowing the corrosive liquid to seep out. In about thirty minutes this would remove the insulation, allowing the current to short-circuit, causing the electrical safety system to trip. He repeated the process with the sealed service socket by the door and then with the light switch. Hopefully both power and lighting circuits would soon be disrupted.

Maisie held several towels under the shower spray to get them well soaked and then added a brown odorous gel to create very realistic skid marks. She removed the zip-lock bag from her rucksack and extracted the incontinence pants, dowsed and soiled them before adding a red tincture. She stuffed the pants into the WC, pushing them almost round the bend but making sure that they were still visible. She detached the shower head and sprayed the room until it was swimming with water: it looked as if a mini typhoon had struck.

Tom dowsed his head under the basin tap. Maisie checked her *BlackBerry*. The email from Prof Mel gave the address of The Sheik's back-up house. Maisie wanted to get there ahead of The Sheik to get their listening bugs in place.

'COME ON AL, I THINK WE HAVE TO GET YOU HOME.'

As a final act before leaving the bathroom she gave the space a long blast from a small aerosol can which released an acrid smell of faeces, she then popped the small container into Tom's pocket and with Al clinging to Biffy's arm, they staggered out of the bathroom leaving a trail of wet footprints and a pungent smell in their wake.

Spanish Sparrows

'Oh, Charlie, would you tell Helmie. . .'

The Sheik appeared at the doorway across the hallway and Maisie spoke to him directly:

'Oh Helmie, there you are. Look, can we take a raincheck on those refreshments? Al's piles are acting up again; he's had another bleed.'

'Please, the other matter, the artefacts?'

'Look, Helmie, if you want that "you know what stuff", it's yours for the right price. I did have another guy lined up, to create a bit of tension, if you know what I mean, but well, after this upset for you here tonight, it's only fair you should get it. It's the real deal, came from the family of his manservant from the "you know where".'

'How amazing. Do you have these items with you? I could settle with cash right away.'

'**What?** Do you think I would take them out the Bank and wander around a strange city with them? Eh? *Get real Helmie!* And hey, it's quite a bundle, still in its original suitcase, with the "you know who's" insignia. Hey, come to think of it, maybe I should divide up between you and Frederico. When I sent him the video he was 'somewhat enthused'.'

'**NO!** No, please, Mrs Antaar. Look, of course, we can do this later, tomorrow perhaps? Where are you staying, please? I'll have my driver deliver you?'

'No Helmie, I couldn't risk it. But don't worry, I always wanted you to have them, I guess looking at you they would be a perfect fit.'

On cue Tom gave the aerosol in his pocket a sharp blast filling the space around him with fresh and highly pungent fumes.

'Look, Helmie, Al might release again any time, spoil your nice car. We'll be fine, we'll catch a cab. You just give me a ring mid-morning tomorrow. Ring that card number and they'll give you my special email address and *BlackBerry* number. Perhaps we can try for a SKYPE call. Not too early now, were still jet-lagged. **OFF WE GO AL, THAT'S IT AL HONEY, NOW CAREFUL ON THESE STEPS. WE DON'T WANT YOU FALLING AGAIN.**'

As they staggered off into the darkness, Tom whispered:

'It is quite, quite extraordinary how easily people fall for a crass slapstick routine when the least expect it.'

'That's because like Charlie Chaplin, we are very good at it.'

Spanish Sparrows

00000

Biffy and Al arrived back at the Mercure Kaiserhof Hotel just before six o'clock on Sunday morning. The Sheik's back-up house was now bugged, including the sabotage in-line interceptors hidden in the fibre optics comms cabling. The devices were self-powered by tiny Lithium-Ion batteries with up to six months endurance, each incorporating a powerful explosive charge which could be triggered remotely by a coded internet signal. In addition, should any device sense the pulse of a scanning detector the entire array would explode, destroying possible digital fingerprints that might reveal their source. The lesson of the Lockerbie attack and its aftermath had been learned - *leave no trace, however obscure*.

Tom showered and headed for bed.

Maisie made a large cafetiere of coffee then checked the room safe for fingerprints using her special lamp. She had wiped it clean earlier with a protective compound and it was still clear.

Removing her MacBook, she sent the encrypted internet key-codes for the spyware installed at The Sheik's backup house to Prof Mel, delegating the monitoring task to her. With Anisa tracking The Sheik's Sat Phone and his other phones, hopefully they had all his comms pathways covered.

The most recent emails in Maisie's inbox revealed:

- Sumo and Biscuit were on hold in London, minutes from Heathrow. All Fida needed was a 'go' to fly them to Ghana through Accra. From there they would travel on to the coastal town of Sekondi-Takoradi where Sumo had an SBS contact based in the port who would provide local back-up if required, and a secure destination address for Willie Munro's container.
- The *African Rose* was still meandering slowly towards Africa. New information claimed that she was an oceanic research vessel on an assignment to track whale movements, using a novel method of sending up a high-level observation platform suspended from a towed balloon.

Assuming the earliest The Sheik would call might be around 10:30 local time, she had nearly four hours to wait. However, given the disruption currently in progress at Schumannstrasse, this time seemed unlikely.

Before they had left the Mercure on the previous evening, they had set up the equipment required for the second part of the sting. To be certain, she checked its operation twice more and satisfied, she set her MacBook to "Watch" mode. Still high on caffeine and the residual adrenaline from their earlier incursion at Schumannstrasse, she was in urgent need of some fun.

Spanish Sparrows

Showered, naked and perfumed, she flopped into bed beside the snoring figure.

'Tom, darling, is my little soldier asleep?' she whispered, sliding her icy-cold toes under the sheet to rake the back of his calf muscles.

'Ah, Gawd! Not now I'm not!

'Sorry to disturb you, you poor old thing. Exhausted, are we? And I thought Royal Marines were famous for their physical prowess, their endurance, their. . . .'

'Come here you minx....'

Spanish Sparrows

Intercept

Around noon Maisie's MacBook gave its quiet, insistent, 'rata-ta-tat' sound. The data from the intercept bugs flew into her in-box confirming that Sheik Aarzam had now moved to his back-up town house overlooking Westendplatz. A few hours later Prof Mel and her GCHQ computers cracked The Sheik's laptop encryption algorithm. With this code crack running in her MacBook, Maisie could 'watch' and decode The Sheik's email traffic, virtually live.

As she read his emails, (most written in near perfect German or English), she began to get a feel for The Sheik. There was no mention of drains or electricians in his comms traffic. He seemed oblivious to the fact that he had been 'attacked' and displaced from his primary residence. Their ruse had worked. His rather wordy and pompous communications showed that, in common with many powerful men of his kind, he seemed to have complete faith in his own security. Maisie was now underneath his guard. It felt like being back in the old days, at GCHQ, second guessing her target's next moves.

The Sheik moved a tranche of money from Jersey to the Isle of Man and then on to Zurich. From Zurich he moved US \$5M to an offshore account in the Butterfield Bank on Grand Cayman to the account of "B.Y. Thomas". Maisie knew this bank as an 'old friend', and wondered if the GCHQ finance people still used it as a cut-out for paying informers.

Prof Mel had also seen the B.Y. Thomas connection, and her next email contained the words:

The S to BB trans makes tot of \$18.5 million US to BYT account in last 2y.

Prof Mel's next email was less cryptic. It was a cut and paste from the Washington Post website. It set the hairs up on Maisie's neck as she read it.

"On arrival in Benin on Monday February 18, President George W. Bush will be the Guest of Honour at the inaugural Pan-African Games to witness the showcase event of the All-Nations Amateur Triathlon Challenge. The Games are part of the Sport for Africa initiative and will be attended by a wide spectrum of World leaders in politics, finance and third world development. The Games will now include a Soccer Tournament featuring the Washington All-Stars, a US youth team from Washington DC. The Washington All-Stars will play the Benin Bight Electrics.

Spanish Sparrows

The President's spokeswoman has said today: "We have to get behind these "Sport for Africa" people 100%. We see this as a valid way to take these poor young people out of the clutches of the known terrorists operating in this region."

Maisie's mind fizzed with certainty:

That's it! Bingo! Shazam! Far too many coincidences for it not to be!

She sent a full list of instructions for Fida, giving her the 'GO' to send Biscuit and Sumo to Ghana with instructions to acquire a suitable vessel, this to be used as the base for their operations to observe and, if instructed, to disrupt the activities of the *African Rose*.

'Right Tom, time for you to move. I want you in Benin to check out the lie of the land. It's a place I know little about. Check out this new stadium, see what security is like. Do you have anyone you know down there? I could get Prof Mel to search our records and check out the local residents, see if we can find anyone we can trust or 'incentivise'?'

'Leave it with me dear one, I'll use the old boy network. Surely there must be someone. If it's anything like Nigeria, Benin will be full of folk trying to bump each other off. There will be plenty of protection work on offer, we can be sure of that.'

'Agreed. I'll hang on here meanwhile, stick close to The Sheik, track his movements and monitor his comms traffic. Perhaps the second phase of the sting might not be needed. How disappointing.'

One of her *BlackBerrys* sounded, a fully protected 'burner' she could ditch anytime. It was The Sheik from one of his cell phones. She reverted to her crotchety Berlin Frau persona.

"Hallo, eine falsche Nummer haben Sie, sorry."

'Oh, I was hoping to speak to Mrs Antaar?'

'Sorry, eine falsche Nummer haben Sie, auf wiedersehen!'

Within seconds the transcript of the call was emailed to Maisie by Anisa. The system was working.

After his initial flurry, The Sheik's comms traffic was desultory, almost trivial. He seemed to be concentrating on sourcing and buying erotic artworks, mostly as a telephone bidder at high value private auctions from around the world's capitals.

Spanish Sparrows

Before he left for Africa, Maisie sent Tom to The Sheik's primary residence in Schumannstrasse to plant a full set of intercept bugs as a backstop, in case Herr Frei returned to it after the repairs.

Spanish Sparrows

Trail Hound

With Tom away, Maisie found a serviced apartment on the other side of the Westendplatz Park, directly opposite The Sheik's back-up house with a clear view of the front door. On a hunch, she decided to take it for three months.

Maisie could now monitor The Sheik's physical and electronic activities twenty-four hours a day, allowing her to establish a pattern for his behaviour. From years of trailing targets, she knew that most people were creatures of fixed if somewhat boring habits. Her present target was no different. Helmut Adolf Frei seemed to be a loner, a recluse. There were no visitors. Throughout the remainder of January, he seldom ventured outside. When he did so, he went by car accompanied by his two protectors and driver. Groceries and other necessities were ordered by telephone for delivery to the rear entrance.

She sent an email which purported to come from one of the many auctions sites he had visited. When he foolishly opened it to view the works of erotic art supposedly on offer from a Chinese collector, The Sheik inadvertently implanted a MiMic¹⁰ virus in the bowels of his operating system, allowing her to mirror his keystrokes on her MacBook, revealing everything he did on his computer, giving her full access to his digital life.

As suspected, the Saudi had thousands of obscene images of children on his laptop and spent hours looking at them, compiling montages of the Fuhrer and naked children, with added rousing military music. The listening bugs also provided an insight into his bedroom antics, revealing that The Sheik was displaying these compilations from his laptop to a plasma screen as a background stimulus while playing out his fantasies with the golden-haired child. During these sessions he did a lot of shouting, in German. Maisie deduced that Herr Helmut Adolf Frei was probably wearing his Hitler clothing during these sex sessions. Mercifully, there was no aural evidence of physical brutality, inferring that the child was resigned to playing out his part as a silent, passive participant.

Although Herr Frei's excursions from the Westendplatz house did not fit any obvious pattern, Maisie took to shadowing him in case he might meet someone face to face by a pre-coded 'regular' appointment, a tried and tested method she had used herself in the old days. Herr Frei always travelled to these venues by car. She purchased an electric bicycle to follow them, often towing a box containing several disguises. Some days she was a woman, other days she was a man.

¹⁰ The "MiMic" tracker is a spyware cookie developed originally by Maisie in her GCHQ days, now much improved. When implanted in a host computer it allows the 'Controller' to remotely monitor and the affected computer, revealing its secrets.

Spanish Sparrows

At the chosen gallery or restaurant she would often stand or sit near him, in one of a variety of personas, of either sex. The protectors normally waited in the car or by the entrance, trying to look innocuous, rather unsuccessfully, serving only to draw attention, making it obvious what they were doing. From this Maisie deduced that although they looked impressive, they were not trained to the higher standards he could afford.

His protectors worked in squads of three. They gave the physical appearance of ex-Special Forces, one designated as the driver, practically living in the car, parked close to the rear door of his town house on continuous standby, ever ready for a sudden departure. Each group of three men worked eight-and-a-half-hour shifts, providing a thirty-minute overlap at changeover. The composition of the squads was not constant, indicating that they were from an agency. By their demeanour Maisie could tell that they were relaxed, bored, verging on sloppy. She judged she could sneak past them without help if this became necessary.

From the voice-activated listening bugs inside the Westendplatz house it seemed that the fair-haired boy spent most of his time watching television or playing computer games. Maisie learned that The Sheik was served by a small entourage controlled by Charles the butler, comprising a French chef and three Indonesian men, domestics. Like the Butler, the other four men were never seen outside. Perhaps they were not permitted to leave the premises when The Sheik was in residence, she surmised. Apart from his bedroom rantings at the boy, The Sheik seemed to lead a very dull and solitary life.

During the second week at Westendplatz house, the fair-haired boy was returned to the 'harem' and exchanged for another, the arrangements made through a so-called dating site. The replacement child was a little taller, slimmer, with dark curly hair. This arrangement was repeated a week later and the fair-haired boy returned, clearly a current favourite. Maisie tracked down the location of this boy brothel for future action.

The Sheik's behaviour prompted Maisie to ask Prof Mel to investigate the disappearance of Álvaro Domingo Quintanilla, born on Sunday 7th May 1978, believed to have arrived in London late 2003 or early 2004.

The only product of this search was a facsimile of the young man's passport from the Tenerife authority's databank. Now, at least, they had some idea of what he looked like and hopefully the Automatic Search and Surveillance Software Algorithm (ASSSA) running 24/7 at GCHQ would allow Prof Mel to detect his future cross-border movements or other interactions with officialdom. There was no record of him entering the UK but if he had travelled with The Sheik in his private jet, arriving at a small provincial airport, his entry could easily have avoided detection, a method used frequently by the super-rich to mask their activities.

00000

Spanish Sparrows

In early February, The Sheik visited the MMK Museum for Modern Art. On three consecutive days he arrived just before eleven o'clock. Maisie sensed that a pre-coded meeting was in the offing.

On the fourth day she was at the MMK ahead of him, dressed as her mother Myra, playing an ageing hippy in tall clumpy boots, a baggy purple dress under a faded scarlet cardigan, and a three-rope necklace of shiny orange beads. She wore a slash of garish orange red on her lips and large orange rimmed specs with dark yellow lenses. Maisie rolled stiffly as Myra had done towards the end. Herr Frei looked through her as she passed him muttering to herself in French.

The arrival of Tomasz Drueber was completely unexpected - Maisie had thought he was long dead. Drueber was a man she had tracked hour by hour from 1984 when he had served as a Colonel in the KGB, based in Berlin on the run up to the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989.

Originally from Dresden in the former Communist controlled area of East Germany, Drueber's mother tongue was German. When the USSR imploded, he had disappeared. At the time MI6 reports had suggested that he had been executed by his superiors, caught trying to steal KGB funds. Now here he was, older and greyer, but still the dandy, tall, slim, handsome and expensively dressed. Tomasz Drueber had weathered his lost years very well.

The two men did not shake hands or make a show of any kind, merely falling into step and drifting from one painting to another, pretending to discuss it before passing to the next. Maisie decided it would be too obvious to try to get close enough to eavesdrop and so watched from a distance, attempting to lip read with little success.

The men walked and talked for only twenty minutes and then, without any ceremony, they parted. The Sheik left first with an uncharacteristic spring in his step and a broad smile on his face. It seemed clear that he had received good news or struck a satisfactory bargain.

Feeling sufficiently secure that she had The Sheik covered, Maisie decided to track Tomasz Drueber. Unlike The Sheik, the ex-KGB man did not appear to have minders. Drueber walked slowly, stopping every so often, turning casually to scan the street behind, or stopping to look into shops, perhaps checking reflections. Maisie was immediately on edge, sensing he was checking for a tail. As he swung his gaze towards her, she quickly dismounted, turned away and bent over to check the tyres on her trailer box, lifting the box lid to hide from view.

Drueber entered a shop. Riding past, she saw him talking to a salesgirl, a selection of ties and shirts laid out on the counter. She must take a chance. Outside the upmarket café across the street from the shirt and tie shop, she hauled her bike and trailer up onto the pavement, delved into the box and picked the parcel with the selected ensemble. In the café she used the Ladies' Washroom. Three minutes later she exited, now in the guise of a dishevelled elderly man in a

Spanish Sparrows

heavy wool cardigan, limping on a thin cane. She glimpsed Drueber in the distance, a parcel under his arm. She dumped the bag with Myra's clothes into the box, locked it, chained the bike and set off after him, moving surprisingly quickly.

When in range she reverted fully into her role and continued tail Drueber until he reached his destination at the European Central Bank (ECB). He entered by the Staff Entrance without challenge. She was intrigued.

As she headed back to the café to collect her bike and trailer, her mind raced back to the aftermath of the Twin Tower terror attack in New York and the disruption that had followed on the world money markets. With Drueber's involvement and working at the ECB, Maisie speculated that the planned attack in Benin was being orchestrated not just for ideological or political reasons but for personal financial gain. If Drueber was aware of what was planned for the 18th of February, it would allow him to work with The Sheik and his associates to make vast profits on the world currency markets.

Perhaps Drueber was The Sheik's principal cipher?

Or even his Controller?

Where better to run such a manoeuvre than from inside the ECB?

Spanish Sparrows

Mobilisation

Maisie arrived back at her apartment opposite the Westendplatz house to see the original fair-haired boy being ushered into the grey Mercedes. The intercept information from the listening devices confirmed The Sheik was on the move and would use a fellow countryman's private jet, currently being re-positioned from Zurich, due in Frankfurt in six hours to be re-fuelled for his eight-hour flight to Lagos.

An hour later, following a briefing by Maisie, Prof Mel provided confirmation of what was officially known about Drueber:

- Following the collapse of the USSR, Tomasz Drueber was believed to have had a senior role in the SVR (the new version of the KGB) working directly for Vladimir Putin.
- In the wake of the Twin Towers attack, it was believed that Drueber had fallen from favour, reason unknown.
- The files revealed that he had been 'out of range' of MI6/GCHQ surveillance since March 2003. It was rumoured his 'disappearance' was linked to the assassination of Serbian PM Zoran Đinđić.
- There was no current information in the British or CIA systems to suggest that Drueber was still alive.

Maisie surmised three possibilities:

- Drueber is freelance.
- Drueber is still with SVR but in deep cover.
- Drueber has been 'turned', now working for MI6 or the CIA, and the information that Prof Mel had uncovered was DINFO (dis-information) of the kind she had herself planted about others in her past life at GCHQ.

Maisie was now 100% certain that "the hit" would be in Benin and that it must involve *GWB*, concluding that The Sheik and not Drueber was the prime mover. She must follow The Sheik to Africa and allow the enigma of Tomasz Drueber to be dealt with later.

Although itching to move and fly ahead of the target, she forced herself to review the other reports in her in-box.

- Sumo and Biscuit had located and chartered a ship that matched Maisie's requirements. It was a dive support vessel called "*Cape Gannet*" that made a good living servicing the Offshore Oil Industry.

Spanish Sparrows

- Her skipper was Lt-Commander Kit Lucas RN (Rtd), an experienced helicopter pilot and master mariner. Sumo had unearthed this man through the SBS grapevine and knew Lucas could be trusted.
- Lucas had recruited a hand-picked crew, down-sized from the usual twenty to five, all ex-SBS, men that Sumo had again checked-out and which included his old SBS mucker, Billy Bilsland.
- As was common for this type of vessel, the *Cape Gannet* had a helicopter landing deck. Unusually, it also had a disguised hanger housing a military specification Lynx helicopter. The official purpose of the aircraft was to provide emergency medical evacuation of an injured diver or crew member.
- The Lynx could also be quickly armed with unofficial ordnance to provide both a defensive and offensive capability, useful when operating in troubled waters such as those near Somalia and Yemen

Sumo and Biscuit had secured a two-month hire, the minimum the *Cape Gannet's* Dutch owners would consider. Biscuit paid the combined advanced rental fee and damage guarantee premium with a Gold debit card loaded with 10 million US dollars. On Maisie's authority, this card had been provided by Fida, issued in the name of Truman McKinlay Hellgsborg III¹¹, (aka TruMac), an oil industry tycoon who had quietly departed this world a decade earlier. TruMac had always been a slippery character and many still believed that he was alive. What was generally unknown was that his great wealth continued to thrive in electronic cyberspace, under Maisie's control. Biscuit also had a very convincing passport to prove that he was TruMac, although experience showed that this fiction was rarely required, provided the US Dollar or other required currency transfer arrived in the vendor's account accompanied by a happy confirming "ping".

Tom's report from Benin revealed that the new national stadium and supporting infrastructure had been well behind schedule until two months earlier. There had been a big push since to make sure that it was ready for the US President's visit. White House 'expeditors' flush with briefcases full of US dollars had been providing 'incentivisation' on a grand scale and the Stade de Benin in Contonou was almost completed.

Over the previous week the athletes had begun arriving, but the lack of accommodation for them was causing a problem. The focus of further incentivisation had now shifted to this area. The visiting press had homed in on the chaos, and the Benin Games were already attracting negative publicity.

Through the influence of an old friend from his Royal Marine days, Tom had secured himself a position as a supervisor with SecurMAX, one of two firms providing security and crowd management services. This post furnished Tom with a Blue Area badge issued by PYRAMID Security, the firm which had overarching responsibility for stadium security. Tom reported

¹¹ Read "Fidelity" by John Bonthron

Spanish Sparrows

that his application for a Red Area badge had been rejected; such badges were very hard to come by.

This same friend had provided Tom with an introduction to Bashir Wiltshire, a South African businessman with Indian roots living in exile in Contonou. Bashir owned a Penthouse which overlooked the stadium, only a five-minute walk away. Like Biscuit, Tom also had a fully loaded Gold debit card provided by Fida, and a convincing passport to show that he too was TruMac. Bashir was pleased to provide the flat, his houseboy, his ageing Mercedes and his driver on a three-month let. Wiltshire advised he would use TruMac's cash to fund a trip to Paris where he had contacts who were trying to help him dispose of his South African assets and get his remaining wealth out of his former homeland.

When Bashir left, Tom sent the houseboy and driver on an unexpected but welcome paid holiday, pleased to learn Tom was a confirmed bachelor who preferred to live alone and drive himself. Tom had no intention of using the Mercedes, preferring always to use anonymous local taxis, a bicycle or Shanks's pony.

An encrypted email from Sumo advised that the *Cape Gannet* was cruising five miles offshore, on a heading that would put her within reach of the *African Rose* within six hours. The AIS track for the *African Rose* inferred that at her present speed she would make landfall off the Bight of Benin around mid-night on Sunday 17th February.

Prof Mel and Anisa were monitoring The Sheik's devices and the control tower comms traffic at both Frankfurt and Lagos airports.

Maisie sent a batch of emails:

- To Biscuit on *Cape Gannet* instructing him to relocate to Lagos by helicopter and track The Sheik from his arrival.
- To Fida at Excalibur Executive Expediting (EEE) based at Corgarff Castle, instructing her to make travel arrangements in the name of Harriet (Harry) Dooley, an Irish American freelance sportswriter. on presentation of her US passport, Harry would collect her pre-paid tickets at the Frankfurt airport to arrive in Benin by dawn on Thursday.

With The Sheik's devices under constant surveillance, Maisie was free to shop for a few hours before her late evening flight. She must re-organise her suitcases to cover the various personae that she might need for herself and Tom, choosing clothing appropriate for the tropical heat of Benin.

Maisie held the view that wearing clothes which were obviously new drew unwanted attention likely to raise avoidable suspicion. Frankfurt had excellent charity and pre-loved clothes shops, vending a wide choice of high-quality items at good prices.

Spanish Sparrows

Bedding-in

Enjoying a late breakfast, Maisie sat on the sun terrace of Bashir Wiltshire's penthouse watching the steady stream of planes come and go from the nearby airport. The sun was already high over the coastal city of Contonou, the commercial capital of Benin. The temperature was climbing steadily. By late afternoon it would top 30 Celsius, with attendant high humidity. In the stadium below her, she could see a 4*400 Women's relay team going through its paces. Early mornings were probably the best part of the day in Benin, Maisie thought.

From Frankfurt to Contonou, Maisie had used her Veronique DuBois passport, fitting in with the French and German voices which surrounded her, knowing her Harry Dooley persona would draw unwanted attention.

On her late-night arrival, she and Tom had enjoyed a vigorous reunion in the cool dark master bedroom with the air-con humming in the background. The fastidious Tom had already changed the bedclothes and in the washing machine the 'dirty' bed linen was rumbling on final spin. He had also cleaned the shower cubicle to operating room standards and now arrived to begin vacuuming the terrace, poking the nozzle around her feet, searching for any crumbs which may have fallen from her croissant.

'TOM, STOP!'

'TWO MINUTES, DEAR ONE. NEARLY FINISHED! GOT TO DENY THE ANTS!'

When Tom eventually switched off the vacuum cleaner, the sudden silence was immediately filled by a banal announcement booming from the public address system at the stadium.

"TESTING, TESTING."

"ONE TWO THREE FOUR FIVE."

"TESTING, ZEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEERREEECH"

'Gawd, not again. This has been going on forever. Still at it at midnight last night, they were!'

'Small wonder your Mr Wiltshire was so happy to escape to Paris.'

They moved inside and closed the French doors against the din.

Spanish Sparrows

Tom now provided a booklet of A3-sized architectural drawings which she studied to gain an understanding of how the huge building worked. The magnificent structure had been built by a French-led consortium to provide a capacity of 75,000 spectators. From the Games website she had learned it was called the Stade de Benin because its design was a clone of the Stade de France in Paris. The French Government had been a major contributor to the Sport for Africa Fund, and the European Central Bank had pitched in with a 90% low interest loan to fund the difference and to 'ease' the appointment of the French Contractor over its international and local competitors.

'Tom, are you sure this apartment is digitally secure?'

'Yes, dear one. I have gifted the hapless Bashir a completely new and secure network including a specially encrypted wireless router. I have also checked the incoming Airtel comms network in my guise as a diligent telecom technician and re-wired it so that we have the fastest broadband in the district. There is also a 'minder' bug behind the comms board and should anyone interfere with my expert work, we will be alerted at once. In addition, I've ...'

'STOP! I'll take that as a yes, Tom, shall I?'

'Well, my dearest, you did ask, you know.'

'Thanks, well done, thou good and faithful servant. Not even a pretty face, but a brilliant mind and very clever and adaptable hands. Now, is that enough praise, or do you need more?'

'I do love it when you scold me. Are you sure you're not jet-lagged, dear one. The bedroom has black-out blinds you know and...'

'Down boy. Later. Now Tom, what do we know of the athletes? You know what I'm looking for don't you? Everything about our Sheik seems to be mirrored, backed-up. Do you think he could have another hit squad already here, perhaps using a different approach, in case what he's planning for our fake Germans goes off the rails?'

'Sorry to disappoint on this front my dear one, but so far no. I'm not any real expert on Athletics but as far as I can tell watching them up close, they all seem genuine, particularly the other Triathlon squads. Did you have a look at the team details I sent you yesterday?'

'Yes, thanks, at first pass they seem clean, on paper anyway. But I sent it to Prof Mel who is doing an in-depth check. So, Tom, where do our Germans fit in, since clearly they are not listed to compete?'

'That, as they say, is the sixty- fou...'

Spanish Sparrows

'TOM, NO! Please Tom, please. No banal euphemisms, we agreed, remember?'

'Oops, slipped out, heat of the moment, and all that, dear one. Sorry.'

'Right, enough said. Now, Tom, what about the Contractors, anything odd with them?'

'Not so far but I'll have another look, see if I can swipe a copy of the list of badge-holders from PYRAMID.'

'Ah, yes, PYRAMID. I meant to give them a look over.' Maisie reached for her MacBook.

'"PYRAMID Security",' Tom replied, 'an American crowd or maybe Canadian. They're doing the Main Stadium, Media and Telecoms security. They were my first target for a job but they were very off-hand when I spoke to them, very tetchy and now I've popped up as a sort of rival, well it could be difficult.'

'Here they are! PYRAMID is registered in Toronto. I'll ping this to Prof Mel, see what she makes of it.'

The encrypted reply came very quickly: suspiciously quickly, Maisie thought, suggesting that Prof Mel had been checking her keystrokes of a few minutes earlier. Perhaps Prof Mel had implanted a MiMic tracker in the MacBook. It was uncanny how often this had been happening of late. It could not be a coincidence. Maisie let out an exasperated sigh and gave thanks to the Unknown God of Cyber-land that Prof Mel and Anisa were on her side. She would let it pass for now, but it was a good reminder of how important it was that they each keep their guard up, even against each other. The internet was not a nice place in which to wander through without proper protection, as Maisie well knew.

'Aha! That's more like it. She's been into their computer system. Their software was developed in Belarus - not my favourite country, not by a long way. I smell a rat, Tom. Surely our American cousins will have spotted this too? Mind you they do seem to treat the Canadians with kid gloves so maybe it just slipped through - it happens.'

Maisie zoomed through the rest of the information from Prof Mel.

'Look, Tom, who is this? There's something about this face that seems to ring a long-ago bell.'

'That's Buck Tansett, Chief of PYRAMID Security, their head guy, or so they would have you believe. But I hear that their real boss is a shady figure, keeps in the background, spends most of his time in his office, in the bowels of the stadium, in the Red Area. His name is Denton Smith, a tiny albino guy, less than five feet in old money. Seems Smith is seldom seen outdoors; allergic to sunlight they say. Everything important must be cleared by him.'

Spanish Sparrows

'Tom, do you have a photo of this man calling himself Smith?'

'No, only seen him once, just a quick glance. Strange eyes, dark pink pupils, verging on red. Gets driven everywhere by three goons in a top of the range BMW Seven Series.'

'Prof Mel is doing an in-depth trawl. I'll feed this to her as well. I bet they don't check out! There's something fishy at PYRAMID, don't you agree?'

'Looks like it. I'll have another go, shall I? Try to get a mug shot of this Denton Smith character. If he's in in the GCHQ photo archive, he should be easy to find.'

'**No Tom, no!** Leave them to me, please. You get out there and try to get digital mug shots and anything else you can get on the *other* PYRAMID guys but stay out of my way with Tansett and Smith. I'll go 'head on' with Tansett, see if meeting him face-to-face sparks the neurones and brings back the missing link. He can't refuse an interview, can he? After all I'm a famous sportswriter. And I'm American, so they need to be nice to me, don't they? Look, here's my website, a wonderful bit of fiction which Prof Mel created for me. All these high-powered newspapers and magazines with my expert reporting carefully 'embedded' in their websites, provided of course you click on these links she implanted in my website. I think Prof Mel has surpassed herself this time. What do you think?'

Maisie began her transformation by dyeing her hair. On her MacBook screen she had a full-scale head and shoulders shot of herself from her Harry Dooley passport photo, an image which showed a vibrant woman with dark black hair and heavy eye make-up behind her lime green glasses and vermilion lipstick.

Tom leaned over her shoulder nibbling at her ear:

'Almost butch but still very sexy, in a garish offbeat way. Does she have a little whip too?'

'What do you think? Do I look like Harry?'

'Yes, well, but not Veronique, not someone I would want to cuddle up to. Too ferocious. It always amazes me how you achieve these other people. Last night at the airport, if I'd not known who to look for, I might have missed you. But no, I do prefer you with your own blond hair, dear one. Irish black does not suit your peachy skin tones, not really.'

'Shame on you Tom Farquharson-Wright, putting a girl down when she needs building up. Right, be off with you soldier and do your duty!'

'Lunch here, one-ish? I do a nice tuna salad, real tuna, fresh from the sea?'

'One-ish it is then.'

Spanish Sparrows

'And tradition demands that we have a siesta. I'll get the black-out blinds down now and leave the air-con running at 18 C. What do you say, dear one?'

'Mmm. We'll see. I need to think about my skin tones. Maybe I should sunbathe instead?'

00000

With that Tom was gone, dressed in his pale blue SecurMAX uniform with its long skip cap and wrap-around sunglasses. He was toting a lightweight pale blue matching rucksack slung over one shoulder. Inside he carried his tools and secret weapon hidden in a slim Faraday cage Velcro pouch which he had already proved would fool the security scanner in the unlikely event he was asked to submit the rucksack for checking.

Maisie assembled her outfit before resuming her task of changing back into Harry Dooley. She loved this process of creating an alternative persona. To ease herself into the part, she began rehearsing for her forthcoming encounter with Buck Tansett using a transatlantic Boston-Irish accent which she believed Harry would have acquired during her fictitious years of globe-trotting to hunt down her next sports scoop.

Half an hour later Maisie was ready to pay PYRAMID a visit. In full Harry make-up as before but now with wrap-around sunglasses under a pith helmet, she was aiming at the 'safari/urban explorer' look. Her pale green shirt was unbuttoned to reveal the edges of her bright red bra and a deep fake-tanned cleavage. Her skirt was a darker shade of green and short enough to reveal her shapely legs. She was perched on fluorescent green pumps. In her left hand she clasped her *BlackBerry Curve*, currently seen as an international status symbol, she hoped. It was genuine too, bought in Boston while on transit to visit a second cousin who lived in nearby Rockport, making a short stopover on her way to Toronto to visit the Reid branch of her extended family.

In her large tote bag Harry had copies of recent articles she had allegedly written of sports meetings around the World. Her ace card was an article which she could have written. It was about the new Canadian Women's Hockey League. Maisie followed all the Canadian Hockey Leagues avidly, partly because of her favourite grandnephew Jonathon Reid was a rising star in the youth ranks of the Toronto Maple Leafs. Over recent years Maisie and Jon had enjoyed many long SKYPE calls to argue the finer points of the previous round of matches and prospects for the coming week.

Surely all full-blooded men from Toronto would be pleased to meet someone who shared such enthusiasm for their city and its ice hockey?

As she reached to shut down the MacBook it pinged, then pinged again.

Spanish Sparrows

The first email (from Prof Mel) stated that the Athletes listed had appeared to check out as 'real'. However, an in-depth search had thrown up rumours that the Russian Triathlon squad were doping, both men and women, under direction from their coaching staff. Even at this amateur youth level the lure of fame, political kudos and the possibility of future wealth were distorting results.

The second email (from Anisa) revealed that the UK Team Triathlon squads were to be split, to allow separate English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish Team entries, likewise the Youth Soccer teams. This had come from backdoor pressure from the Scottish Government supported by the Sports Council for Malawi. Sir Donald MacCorquindale would attend the Games as the Scottish Representative, deputising for Scotland's First Minister. From her monitoring of his calls, Anisa advised that Sir Donald would arrive later today, just ahead of the remainder of the Scottish contingent, due tomorrow, Friday 15th February.

Maisie had deliberately kept Corky out of the loop, not knowing where the trail would lead. To involve him now would add an unnecessary layer of complexity to any 'intervention' she might have to make and would probably compromise his position as the FM's Representative. From her experience at GCHQ Maisie knew how easily 'political deliberations' could delay necessary action, creating greater risk and danger. Her first instinct had always been to act on her own authority, as she had done in the original Carpe Diem days, before she was side-lined.

Accordingly, Maisie decided that Sir Donald must continue in ignorance of her presence in Benin.

Spanish Sparrows

Badged to Go

Maisie made a bold attempt to enter the Stade de Benin heading for the Stadium Control Centre (SCC) located on the top floor above the Main Entrance. She knew from the layout diagrams the SCC faced inwards, overlooking the arena from the highest vantage point with the best views.

Before reaching the revolving door, she was stopped by an officious man wearing a pistol. He wore his fair hair in a military buzz cut. His purple PYRAMID uniform with yellow lapels identified him as *Rufus Frent-Supervisor*. Frent barked at her in German. Feigning ignorance, she tried to defuse his anger by offering her sweetest 'vacant' smile while glancing over his shoulder to try to distract him.

Eventually he gave up and redirected her to the Badge Issuing Centre (BIC).

Because Harry Dooley was unbadged, she was required to pass through a body scanner and have her tote bag scanned and searched before being handed a three-page application form and allotted a queue number. On enquiry, she was advised she may have to wait four hours or more.

The BIC was crowded with journalists and cameramen, milling about talking loudly to each other, filling out similar forms. The Assessors wearing purple PYRAMID uniforms were seated behind security screens. These men were of a kind, sallow skinned with cropped dark hair and sullen, resentful eyes. With their intercom speakers switched off they worked painfully slowly, their heads down, ignoring the strident, impatient demands of the applicants. Only five of the eighteen booths were manned.

Behind these men stood their PYRAMID supervisor, a huge tubby dark-Mediterranean skinned thirty-something man wearing a name tag which identified him as "Ric Royston". Maisie decided that a direct confrontation was the best approach. She went to an unoccupied booth and banged hard on the thick plastic screen:

'Hey, Ric, mee fine handsome boy. I'll be needing a bit o' service here.'

She saw at once that Ric Royston was unsure what to do with this aggressive woman. The five PYRAMID assessors were glancing round at him and at each other. Maisie added pressure by continuing to bang vigorously at the Perspex divider.

Ric Royston leaned forward to activate the intercom.

'Stop, please, lady.'

Spanish Sparrows

Raising her voice to a shout she replied:

'Are ye deaf in there Ric, mee boy, eh? Look, did you not get the word from the US Consulate, eh? I've got clearance all sorted. Just you be asking Denton Smith now, he'll tell you 'imself, so he will.'

She could tell from his haunted look that Ric's mind was racing. The whole room on both sides of the Perspex divider was silent now, watching and waiting for an outcome. Keeping up the pressure, she kept banging loudly to push him into a decision, guessing he would not want to lose face in front of his minions.

'Ric, get me Denton Smith in here, boyo. He's the man for this, right?'

The name of Denton Smith had panicked him, she believed. Tom had been right, it seemed Denton Smith was a very important person. Some of her media colleagues were now taking notes.

Ric's face beamed an insincere smile as he swung open the door to invite her through. Once she was behind the screen, he closed and re-locked the door, shutting out the renewed hubbub of the media circus. He ushered her into an anteroom that appeared to be his office. There was a sickly smell of aftershave and sweat. He offered a seat which she ignored, moving closer into his personal space, leering, playing a vamp, licking her lips and then puckering them invitingly. Ric lurched backwards and moved to sit behind the desk to what he assumed was a place of safety, to the place where he thought he could wield his power of position over her. Harry followed him, hoisted herself onto his desk to sit close to him while crossing her legs and swinging her right foot, wiggling closer to rub her thigh against his bare forearm.

'Ah, thanks be to yee, Ric. You're a fine figure of a man, are you not? And not married I see, eh, no band of gold to tie you down, a Free Agent like myself, eh? Now let me think, Ric Royston, now did yer father not play for Maple Leafs alongside Todd Sloan back in the 50's? And are ye still a player yersel? Ah but ye won't be getting much ice time out here now will yee?'

'I'm sorry but my English she is not good enough to understand what you saying.'

Maisie could see the panic back in his eyes as she switched to her version of French-Canadian:

'So you must be from Montreal, then Ric? A Frenchie? So, do you follow the Canadiens?'

After a pause he replied in slow but clearer English:

Spanish Sparrows

'Yes, yes. They are great. I love soccer. When I am boy, I play it every day. I am the one between the sticks of the goal. Yes, the Canadians are the favourite of me but I am to be here so many years to Africa, I am forgotten of the names, OK?'

She switched back to Boston-Irish English.

'Sure Ric, ye look like a great goalie, eh? Now, can I have my pass or what? Here's my form. Is Denton Smith around? I'd sure love to meet him. Nancy over at the US Consulate said Buck Tansett has signed off on it. So, Ric, what's the issue, eh? C'mon, let's go and have a word with Dentie, eh? Give him a good ol' grillin' about these delays and all? Eh?'

'No! No! Sorry, it is not permitted to see him. I'm sorry to be saying that Mr Smith is not yet in town at the momentary. Sorry.'

'Oh, well, how about the other guy. Is Buck Tansett around?'

'Yes, eh, no, sorry, Miss Dooley, I am meant to say the no. Mr Buck, he today is very, very busy. Yes, here is the stamping and the signing for the 'Approval' of you. Now I take you to the person who is the badging up of you, OK?'

Harry trailed Ric along the corridor to another room, deliberately bumping against him, staying in his personal space, continuing with her bird-like chattered inanities. The huge man's body language showed he was edgy, desperate to be rid of her and he snapped at the man who made up the badges.

'Faites-lui un badge, vite maintenant!'

Maisie watched his reaction. The tiny man glared back at Ric with a single red-pink eye then flashed an angry glance at Harry before looking down, avoiding her gaze, a resentful curl showing on that part of his mouth that was visible. His hands moved to the accredited form which Ric had dropped in front of him.

Only one pink eye? Surely this is not the famous Denton Smith I see before me? What happened to his face? Acid burns? Some sort of flesh-eating infection?

Like Ric, this seated man also wore a "Red Badge" which identified him as "Marc Tripper".

It was unsurprising that they kept this man from public view. His face was hard to look at; the left half was mostly missing, including his left eye which had been replaced by a poorly made artificial one. The left side of his face was covered by a skin-coloured prosthetic mask which incorporated a dark hairpiece perched on his bald head like a small jaunty beret. Maisie had seen such faces before, on US soldiers burned by misplaced napalm bombs in Vietnam. There was an unusual odour from Tripper, reminiscent of Germolene antiseptic ointment. The right

Spanish Sparrows

side of his face was 'normal'. In his previous life he would probably have been a good-looking man, attractive, almost beautiful, the kind of man that some women might feel safe with, because of his diminutive stature. Tripper clearly resented her presence and this showed in his demeanour and his angry, irritable body language.

Harry smiled coyly for the photograph and kept up a steady stream of irritating nonsense, leaping between her versions of Boston-Irish English and near perfect French-Canadian. While they were concentrating on her face, she used her *BlackBerry* in video mode to capture them for reference.

Ric, not wanting to become involved in answering further 'difficult' questions, was avoiding eye contact and Mark Tripper kept his head down, encapsulating her photograph into a "Blue Badge", concentrating on using the complicated and very noisy sealing press.

Neither noticed when Harry swiped a large handful of ready-prepared blanks for badges into her tote bag from the pile on the table beside the camera. She now had the means to create other such badges, she hoped. It had taken only a second. She waited for them to notice that the pile had diminished, launching into another soliloquy on the merits of Women's Ice Hockey as another step forward for the female of the species.

Wearing her new "Blue Area" badge, Harry was escorted back to a side door and ushered through, out into the public side of the security screen.

'Sure now but yer a star, so ye are, Ric Royston. Keep up yer good work in there now, won't you, and don't keep these good lads here waiting too long now, eh?'

The media crowd was suddenly silent, looking daggers at her; she could almost feel the hatred from their angry mutterings. Flouncing out of the room with a nonchalant wave over her shoulder, she thought:

So, globe trotters, now that I am a pariah, there will be no need to fraternise and share our gripes and dubious war stories then?

Spanish Sparrows

Bat Sounds

As an accredited Media Reporter, Harry immediately made her way back to the Main Entrance. The PYRAMID security guard had changed. Walking urgently, she sailed up to the new guy, feigning pre-occupation, looking past him, intent on her purpose, visualising the layout ahead from the plans that Tom had provided. Without breaking stride she flashed her badge and kept walking. The man did not challenge her. Rotating through the large revolving door into the air-conditioned space beyond, she turned sharp left and found a quiet corner. Out of sight, she stopped to get her bearings. Had the guard been in her employ she would have sacked him on the spot.

Maisie ignored the lift - she seldom used them - and following the layout in her head, she climbed two flights to the Stadium Control Centre in search of Smith or Tansett, the camera on her *BlackBerry* at the ready to snap a mug shot if she got a chance.

The door to the SCC was wide open. A group of five technicians wearing yellow polo shirts were working on a sound desk. Wires and connector boxes were strewn everywhere. On the back of their shirts was a French horn logo with the words "BakkerSound.com". Their heads were down, concentrating. In silence she watched and listened to their desultory conversation. This was a good team, she judged, confident and competent. She entered quietly and waited just inside the door, her back to the wall.

After many minutes, a middle-aged red-haired man with a slight paunch and a wispy beard glanced up and saw her. His "Red Area" badge showed "Jimmy Bakker". He smiled across the void that separated them and she smiled back.

'Kinna help yees?' said Jimmy, immediately revealing his West of Scotland roots.

'To be sure an' maybe you can an' all Jimmy,' Harry drawled, sticking to her Boston-Irish twang. 'I'm looking to be getting myself an angle on this whole shebang. It's something different I'm after, something off-beat, ye know, for my adoring public. And I should have said an' all, but I'm Harry Dooley, a freelance sportswriter.'

'Sorry, Harry, nae tinned pigeon. Ma lips urr sealed. Everything to the Press his tae go through the big man, Buck Tansett.'

'No tinned pigeon?'

'Sorry, *no can doo*, as in pigeon. Sorry, it's a Scottish joke, if you get me.'

Spanish Sparrows

'Ah, so why did ye not just say that, Jimmy. Time is money in my world. So where is the Big Man, then, this great Oracle, this Buck Tansett who holds the keys to Paradise, eh?'

'Nae idea, so long as he's no' here crawlin' ower me! This place is gettin' oan my, eh, naw, naw, bettar no go there Jimmy, sorry. Look hen, we're a bit stressed oot here, if ye don't mind.'

'Sure Jimmy, I'll just get out my rifle, eh, hunt down the Big Buck for myself. But what's your problem here? I keep hearing this PA System testing going off screechin' endlessly.'

'Ultrasound - like there's a giant bat flying roond the stadium. Bang on 28,000 Hertz. Keeps happnin', but random. So far as we kin tell it insnae oor gear. This is the third time we've stripped this sound desk doon fur a complete re-build. Crazy, man, crazy, crazy.'

'Good man ye are, Jimmy! That's the sort of thing I'm after. Let's see now, how about: "Giant Bat gnaws out PA System for Benin Games".'

'Oh, fur God's sake, Ms Dooley, if Smith sees that he'll slaughter us. Look, let's dae a deal? If Ah tell you whur tae find Tansett, will ye leave aff on me? This is ma life here. Ah'm jist tryin' to dae ma best for me and ma guys. Ah jist want tae get this workin', signed aff and git oor money due, right? Then me and ma boys'll be oot of here, back to Glesga as fast as we can git BA tae fly us. You've nae idea whit it's like here in this pit of a place. Bloody purgatory. Never again wull Ah try to make quick money like this. It's the recession, ye see, otherwise...'

'OK Jimmy Bakker, spill the beans, boyo. Who is Smith?'

'Look, Ms Dooley, kin we step ootside fur a minute, please. I see noo yer badge is Blue so yee shoodna even be in here. Yee need a Rid badge fur the SCC.'

Maisie felt sympathy for Jimmy Bakker but now that she had him cornered, she knew she must squeeze him hard. It took nearly twenty minutes of vicious prodding but eventually she was sure that she had all he knew. In any case Jimmy had wanted to give his side of the story, to get it off his chest. He had been pushed into this by Scottish Enterprise, one of their initiatives called "Expanding Horizons", aimed at getting work on the world stage for successful Scottish companies who were struggling during the construction recession in the UK.

00000

Armed with this information, Harry minced back across the concourse to Bashir's apartment on her green pumps, entered, checked for possible intruders and, when satisfied, took her MacBook from its hiding place, connected to the internet to share what she had learned and issue her further instructions to Prof Mell, Anisa, Sumo and Biscuit, copied to Tom:

- Paid visit to Stade de Benin. Now have Blue Badge as media reporter.

Spanish Sparrows

- Jimmy Bakker (BakkerSound.com, registered Scotland) earwigged Denton Smith chewing out Buck Tansett in what he thinks was Russian. JB says the whole PYRAMID Team are fakes, definitely not Canadian. JB has a Canadian wife and lots of Canadian relatives.
- This confirms Tom's impression and tallies with my chat with PYRAMID Supervisor Ric Royston.
- Attached *BlackBerry* video clips of a "Ric Royston" and a "Marc Tripper" and Jimmy Bakker. Prof Mel please check these out - URGENT.
- Tom is trying for digital photos of other PYRAMID personnel. When I get them to you Prof M, please treat as URGENT!
- JB believes DS and BT are in Ghana for special meeting, due back tomorrow morning, Friday 15th February.
- Possible meet with The S and BYT and ? and ? and ?.
- Possible three PYRAMID protectors in Ghana with DP and BT?
- Biscuit to try for digital photos and pass direct to Prof M, please. Copy to me.
- Prof M and A concentrate on PYRAMID - check EVERYTHING!
- PYRAMID may contain 'mirror' hit squad. Check this carefully.
- Why is 28 kilo-Hertz important? Is this a ruse to delay BakkerSound? What is causing it? Anis, check this out - URGENT.
- Sumo to board *African Rose* and search for WHAT? Take great care - there may be toxic/nuclear waste on board.
- For completeness run an in-depth check on JB and BakkerSound.com. Almost certain he is real deal, a genuine guy.

00000

Maisie's Harry Dooley "Blue Area" badge allowed only very restricted access. Four of the blank badges she had swiped were "Red Area" badges. Using a magnifying glass, she compared both types, to satisfy herself that there were no embedded RFID chips in either version, Red or Blue. By the standards Maisie was used to, PYRAMID was running a rather weak security system. It took her ten careful minutes to create a new security badge incorporating the photograph of Maisie as Lena Selznick, a German Freelance Photographer. With her PYRAMID Red Area badge, Lena could, in theory, go anywhere she wished.

In appearance Lena was a much less flamboyant character than Harry Dooley, almost dowdy by comparison. The German photographer wore a faded Khaki trouser suit and dark brown suede desert boots. By the application of stage make-up, Maisie's face now looked mannish. Her wig of dowdy greying brown hair was pinned up under a black Nikon skipped cap. Her eyes were no longer Maisie's sky blue but were now dark brown, courtesy of cosmetic contact lenses.

The only colour this dowdy woman displayed was her purple pan drop earrings. In an emergency these could become delayed action mini-firecrackers, creating a disorienting ear-splitting explosion. She was otherwise unarmed in case she was scanned and searched. All Lena carried

Spanish Sparrows

was Maisie's *BlackBerry*, with a back-up *Nokia* gun-phone in the false bottom of her camera bag.

Spanish Sparrows

A Closer Look

At half-past eleven, two hours after she had left the apartment as Harry, Maisie left as Lena Selznick. The primary purpose of this outing was to test her new badge, to see if it passed muster. Anything else which presented itself would be a bonus.

Lena walked with longer paces in an almost military stride, re-affirming her mannishness, completing her transformation. Lena was from Stuttgart, and if called upon to speak, she would do so in a south-German regional accent, or in fractured and strongly accented English. A Nikon DX3 FX DSLR camera with 150-500mm telephoto lens dangled from her neck and the camera bag hung at her hip. Inside the bag, concealed within a pack of six dummy batteries, she carried an array of listening and interception devices which she hoped to deploy, should opportunities arise.

As she approached the Stadium, she stopped short, remaining at a distance, half-expecting to be challenged. Taking care to frame her shots professionally, as she had learned to do on the 'Making Digital Images' course at Glasgow's Strathclyde University, she took a series of wide angle and telephoto images. The guard by the Main Entrance stood in the shade, smoking, watching her, bored, she judged. She studied his face closely through her telephoto lens and took several close-ups. This was a further different guard from earlier.

Keeping her distance from the stadium she circled it, taking further shots, getting a feel for how the security camera system worked, watching the teams working to complete the final tasks as the Stadium received its finishing touches.

Eventually she reached her target - the VIP Entrance. Every few minutes contractors would enter of leave, in ones and twos, confirming that this area was not yet completed. She was hoping to get into the Presidential Suite to plant a few devices. There was a PYRAMID guard on duty. Through the telephoto lens she studied his face and took a photograph. It was Rufus Frent the guard who had refused her entry at the Main Entrance earlier, when she had posed as the unbadged as Harry Dooley.

Would Frent realise Lena was also Harry? Would her fake Red Badge pass his inspection?

Carpe Diem!

Lena 'marched' towards him with long strides and waved her pass at him as before. She was signalled to stop by his upraised hand. She brought out a handkerchief and pretended to blow her nose. He scrutinised her pass closely, looking from the photograph to her face before

Spanish Sparrows

deciding she was who she claimed to be. Then he rummaged through her camera bag before waving her through.

Despite his apparent thoroughness, Rufus is untrained.

When the White House Protection Squad arrives, they will tighten everything up. Although President Bush was now in his second last year of his second term, often seen as the valedictory period, security around him would still be drum tight.

Lena made directly for the Presidential Suite. Three large chubby cleaning women were lolling on the plush seats, chatting and laughing. They looked up and she scowled at them, took out her notepad and stared at their badges, making a show of noting their names. The women scrambled to their feet and made a noisy show of vacuuming, wiping down with damp cloths and muttering to each other in dialect. Lena placed her camera bag on top of the huge ring of keys then drifted across the room to stand by the large window. She could feel their animosity like heat on the back of her neck, which is what she hoped for.

Although the stadium was set up for a football match, it was clearly intended primarily for field sports with an eight-lane running track around the perimeter and areas set aside for long jump, high jump, javelin, shot putt and the like. The contractors, tiny from this height and distance, were still moving around, checking and finishing. She raised her camera to take a few shots. Although the glass screen was reasonably clean, she tutted loudly and brought out her handkerchief, making a show of cleaning it.

'Ah, no, no Maa-ma, look she go down, she easy,' said the eldest of the three women, pressing a button on the wall, pleased to be able to show off her knowledge. With a quiet hum the thick glass window slowly trundled down into a slot and the suite became open to the stadium.

"TESTING, TESTING.
ONE TWO THREE FOUR FIVE.
ZEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEERREEECH."

'Beh, too noisy, no Maa-ma, I close?'

'Nein, nein danke,' Lena snapped angrily. 'No! Das ist gut für mich, besser. Leave open, bitte.'

"TESTING, TESTING.
ONE TWO THREE FOUR FIVE.
ZEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEERREEECH"

Spanish Sparrows

The woman muttered something to her companions and the three packed up their cleaning things and left. Lena immediately moved to the door, blocked it shut with a thin aluminium wedge, then moved to the adjacent service kitchen and wedged its door to the corridor.

Maisie checked the keyring, noting that each key had a small number tag disk attached. It appeared to be a complete master set. In any case, Maisie was an expert lock-picker. She zipped the keyring into the false bottom of her camera bag and moving quickly but deliberately, she went about her task, Tom's instructions running in her head.

00000

Fifteen minutes later, with her surveillance equipment deployed, she buzzed the glass screen back up, retrieved her wedges and slipped into the corridor. The cleaning women were in the next room along, sitting and chatting. She skipped past them without notice, headed to the end of the corridor and descended two levels to the Administration Offices. Contrary to safety regulations, the door from the fire escape stairway into this corridor was locked. She looked above the door for the number tab, found the matching key and turned it quietly. She opened the door to a crack and listened. Apart from the rattle of the air-con there was no sound or movement. She opened the door further and looked through the gap. The corridor was empty. She wedged the door fully open to secure a clear escape route, if required.

In her left hand, her slightly better hand, Lena held what appeared to be a large old-fashioned *Nokia* mobile phone with a short stubby hollow antenna. This weapon was an improved version of the original developed by Mossad, the Israeli Intelligence Service. Like the weapon Tom had carried during his *Das Rote Haus* incursion, the *Nokia* also used compressed air but was intended for close range work, up to about five metres. Its keypad was silent and although it could function as a basic mobile phone if required, it could be activated as a weapon by entering a six-digit code. In this mode a double press of the numeral "5" would cause it to fire a tiny dart. When required, the *Nokia* could be converted to a direct contact syringe by a double press of numeral "8".

The *Nokia* was almost silent in operation and contained a cassette of ten tiny self-loading darts. It had been dubbed the "Hangover Popgun". Each dart encapsulated a miniature hypodermic syringe which injected a nerve agent, a chemical which caused rapid anaesthesia and short-term memory loss. A single successful hit would cause the recipient to slump slowly to the floor, as if drunk, to remain comatose for around four hours, depending on body weight, unless revived by an antidote injection. Thereafter the target would remain groggy and suffer a blinding headache for a few hours, caused by the breakdown of the invading chemicals as they were attacked by the recipient's metabolism, making its residues difficult to detect by normal blood tests.

The administration of a single dart would leave victims with no memory of what they had seen or done during the previous twenty-four hours, making it hard for them to claim that they had

Spanish Sparrows

not been on a bender. Two darts would normally take a victim 'out' for around twenty-four hours. Three might kill although a simpler method might be to fire the second dart directly into the spinal column, just below the cranium, causing the brain to 'freeze frame', stopping the heart pumping. As with the more powerful dart gun, the Standard Operating Procedure for the Nokia required that all used darts be retrieved, bagged, and removed from the scene. Residual pinpricks on the victim could only be detected by close forensic examination.

The corridor seemed empty. She crept along, listening at each closed door in turn, found the one she had hoped for and listened outside it for several minutes until she was sure it was empty. Moving back to the stairwell door, she removed the wedge and closed the door but left it unlocked then returned to the door marked "Denton Smith", key at the ready. As she was about to insert the key, a telephone rang inside. She retraced her steps and waited on the escape stair landing, listening through a gap in the corridor door. After ninety seconds the telephone rang out unanswered.

Forcing herself back into the corridor she stopped for a second time outside the door marked "Denton Smith". With the Nokia primed, she knocked quietly. No reply. She knocked louder. No reply. She turned the key quietly, easing the door open, but only slightly. The room was inky black, windowless. The only sound was a rattle from the air conditioning unit above the ceiling.

Lena stepped in, closed, locked and wedged the door then allowed herself a few minutes to recover her breathing, to steady herself. Unlike Tom, Maisie was largely self-trained, coming at these incursions from her background in amateur dramatics. She switched the room lights "ON" briefly, to study the room, then "OFF" again. Using her head-torch Maisie forced herself to work methodically, checking everything twice, as she had been trained to do by Tom. She worked at the answering machine, implanting a listening bug then planted the other devices.

It took almost thirty minutes until she returned to the door, stowed her head-torch and switched the room lights to "ON" scanning carefully to ensure that everything was as she remembered it. With the room in darkness and her ear pressed against the door, she waited, listening. With her Nokia activated, she opened the door.

The corridor was empty.

Lena stepped out. As she was about to lock the door, Denton's telephone rang, very loudly. The voice of Ric Royston boomed out from the answering machine.

It was 'OFF' before! I must have turned it on by accident.

Maisie stepped inside again and turned on the light, reaching into her rucksack. Royston sounded Slavic but in a dialect she did not recognise. Using her digital Dictaphone, she recorded a twenty-second clip to send to Prof Mel for voice matching before deleting the message and turning the answerphone to 'OFF'.

Spanish Sparrows

Now in the corridor, Lena locked the door and trotted back to the fire escape door.

No shouted challenge followed her.

She passed through the fire door onto the staircase, re-locking the door behind her.

Hopefully her visit had not been detected.

00000

When Lena Selznick returned to the penthouse, Tom was already showered, wearing an off-white polo shirt and lime green slacks, patting their salad leaves dry on a paper towel.

'Ah, no, dear one,' piped Tom shaking his head. 'Gawd's sake, what a libido quencher that get up is! Why don't you put Lena to bed, so to speak, have a shower and I'll set us up for lunch out on the terrace?'

Maisie had been moving non-stop, working under stress for nearly four hours. Although now in a safe location, she was still pumped up, adrenaline and other hormones buzzing through her body. However, she understood herself well enough to know that, in part, this was why she put herself in such danger and that discipline and time urgency dictated that gratification would have to wait.

'No, let's eat indoors. No flies and no din from Jimmy Bakker's crazy PA System.'

'Ah, so you've met our Jimmy have you, dear one. Nice chap, when he's sober. In his cups, he'd fight the Devil for a tenner. Used to be one of my squaddies long years back, but if he clocked me he hid it well. You Scots sure know how to breed 'em in Clydebank. Spits rivets when he gets riled, does our Jimmy. Shall I...'

'NO! I don't want my back sponged. Well, not yet, anyway. Give me ten minutes. Did you get those photographs?'

Tom passed her a tiny phone data card.

Using her MacBook, Maisie sent emails activating the surveillance devices she had planted. Now she could hear and record everything that happened in both the VIP Suite and Denton Smith's office and, hopefully, monitor the internet traffic on the comms cabling from his computer. She downloaded the images from Tom's BlackBerry and from the Nikon, and the sound files from the Dictaphone and sent them to Prof Mel under a covering email.

Spanish Sparrows

Duty done, it was time to relax and accept Tom's proffered massage. But first she took a quick shower to rid herself of the make-up and hair dye. The 'coming down' which followed field operations like this always left her needing to be cosseted, to be consumed. As she had joked earlier, Tom truly did have magical hands, and she always found that her mind worked better after sex.

Spanish Sparrows

Rest and Recreation

The bedroom was dark and cool. Outside, in the blazing heat of the afternoon sun, the stadium PA testing continued, with Jimmy booming his mantra and the 'bat interference' responding with its banshee 'screech', thankfully muted by the double glazing.

Maisie switched on the dim bedside lamp. Tom lay on his back, his mouth open, snoring quietly. He looked younger than his forty-nine years, more like the youthful man she had fallen for two decades earlier, when she had been newly appointed to GCHQ. Although they had never married, early in their relationship they had agreed that there would be no offspring, and Tom had consented to being 'snipped', to allow more natural sex and experimentation.

She smiled.

Earlier they had coupled twice.

Her mind segued and she began to relive these experiences:

Maisie took the lead during their first lovemaking, riding high in the saddle, easing up and down slowly, concentrating, eyes closed, tantric. Tom's hands, working independently, were exploring, caressing, squeezing, teasing while hers, working in unison were re-discovering his face, his lips, his eyes, coming to rest on his shoulders, levering herself up, up, up, up, slowly, slowly, holding, rubbing her g-spot softly against his fullness, resisting, waiting until the first rush subsided before pressing down to achieve full penetration, pushing hard while gyrating and grinding slowly, then back up, up, up, up slowly, slowly, repeating the cycle over and over and over. Eventually, when the pressure could no longer be resisted, she had squeezed his ear lobes, mewling for him to 'complete her' as he began his slow rhythmic upward heaves, gradually increasing pace to finish with rhythmic thudding thrusts before arching himself upwards in a spasm of release, bringing forth her final moaning crescendo, releasing tears of joy and fulfilment.

After a soapy, slippery shower together they had rinsed with tepid water before drying themselves then heading back to the bed where, cuddled in his arms under a single crisp white sheet, she half-listened to his detailed plans to extend his stud farm adding accommodation for a mix of ten additional stallions to cope with increasing demand from rare breed owners.

When he ran out of words, they snoozed.

Spanish Sparrows

For their second coupling, Tom took charge, standing to the side of the bed in an upright quasi-missionary position. Masie, her buttocks supported by pillows, arched herself into a yoga position with her knees hooked over his shoulders as he pushed into her energetically and powerfully with long deep strokes mimicking one of his stallions at stud.

After a second shower, they lay side by side, fully spent.

Tom, renowned for his ability to call forth sleep at his bidding, was soon curled into a ball, fast asleep. Maisie had long since decided that she would never give this up; when the dreaded menopause arrived, she would opt for HRT, despite its risks. The need for sex was fundamental to her, as it had been for her mother, Myra¹².

¹² Read "Living with Myra" by John Bonthron (due later in 2024).

Spanish Sparrows

Footsteps

After her mother's death, Maisie had read through every document in the large trunk accessed by the key provided by their family solicitor. The manuscripts of Myra's hundreds of short stories, all neatly typed, created under a raft of pen names, were tied in date-ordered bundles with dark blue ribbon. Over a two-day period, still frozen by grief, she read and re-read these final drafts trying to understand why such a strong-willed and talented woman would betray her only child by taking her own life. Most of these stories had been published in magazines, clearly written to a formula crafted to please her potential working-class readers. Often paperclipped to a manuscript would be a reader's letter giving comments and compliments or criticisms, items snipped from letters pages.

Others, manuscripts of longer stories aimed at a better-educated audience, had been published as a series of novellas by the Glasgow-based publisher *William Collins and Sons*, under their '*Mystery and Romance*' banner.

The second group of stories, bundled and secured with red ribbon, were also fiction, or so Maisie had believed on first reading. Trying to make sense of these seemingly bizarre scripts neatly handwritten in pencil in old school jotters, she had first thought them to be mere outlines for stories which had not progressed to a final, publishable format.

However, months later, by comparing what Myra had written against 'relevant facts' unearthed by Maisie's detailed research in the archives of contemporaneous newspapers and official records, it was evident that these handwritten 'red ribbon' stories were a true record of Myra Kaywood's dozens of 'acts of justice', each carried to completion by her 'lone wolf' mother as the expeditor and, where required, the executioner.

What had begun as an acorn of suspicion eventually became a fully grown oak tree, each branch represented by its own red ribbon story, each story recording another act of *silent justice*.

In a further batch of red ribbon stories, those Maisie dubbed '*True Confessions*', she read dozens of uncensored accounts of her mother's adulterous encounters during the years of her sham marriage to Sandy Kaywood. It was years later as a teenager that Maisie had finally met Alexander Kaywood, the man whose surname she bore. However, the only 'father' Maisie had ever known was Bill Brotherton, although there seemed to be nothing of his gentle, compliant nature in her own make-up.

Why had she been called Kaywood, not Brotherton?

Spanish Sparrows

After Myra's death Maisie had asked Sandy Kaywood directly. Clearly embarrassed, he had stoutly denied he was her father, confessing that their marriage had never been 'physical'.

Perhaps her real father had been someone from Myra's days teaching at Glasgow University? Perhaps someone who might not know that Maisie existed? Like Sandy, her true father might yet be alive, although with each passing year that possibility diminished.

In the early months of bereavement, while studying at Cambridge University and later working at GCHQ, Maisie had been drawn into the same mindset and, by her own deliberate choice, had elected to follow the same trajectory her mother had pursued, knowing it was a pathway which Myra had never suggested or even hinted at.

However, following her mother's suicide, Maisie discovered there was another hidden side to Myra Kaywood's story - the vast millions held in the *Margaret Miller Foundation (MMF)* which Maisie had inherited as sole heir. This wealth, the source of which Maisie eventually deduced had been garnered from her targets, was money which continued to compensate victims and others, anonymously supporting hundreds of noble causes, doing good works by stealth.

This *MMF* money had also provided Maisie with sufficient funds to sustain and grow her XCD team, enabling her to operate as an agency acting for justice and the common good, unfettered by politics and bureaucracy.

Intermittent attempts by Maisie to understand her own behaviour had led her to the conclusion her actions were genetic, hardwired by genes inherited from her mother.

00000

During the decades which had followed, Maisie was also regularly haunted by a recurring thought:

Perhaps Myra had also derived satisfaction and fulfilment from the intellectual and physical challenges her attempts to deliver justice by stealth required?

With growing dread, she recalled her mother's final years confined to a wheelchair and latterly to bed by a rare form of congenital arthritis, a disease which had led her mother to commit suicide.

Maisie had already suffered the first twinges of this condition and, after exhausting avenues of hope in the UK had travelled to America, meeting with the world's leading experts and researchers, submitting herself to their arduous and painful tests to conclude her little known and scarcely understood condition was a rogue version of seropositive rheumatoid arthritis which had slowly and painfully crippled Myra Kaywood. Maisie, with a similar genetic profile to

Spanish Sparrows

her mother, was almost certainly on the same trajectory, facing a future as a wheelchair bound, tortured cripple.

In Myra's case she had relied on her soulmate and helper Bill Brotherton. Within weeks of Bill's sudden death Myra had followed him, determined not to burden Maisie, or become dependent on others.

Maisie had come to believe that it was the aftermath of heighten sex that yielded her true reward and that now, during this post-coital period as the natural release of dopamine subdued her left brain, her right brain took over, enabling those synapses to fire faster, ever faster.

Had it been the same for Myra? Was that why she had been promiscuous, seeking out so many anonymous, one-time-only lovers?

Spanish Sparrows

Back to the Future

This familiar post-coital reverie about her mother and her health drifted away.

Outside, the testing of the PA system continued.

Maisie closed her eyes, waiting for her brain to process what she had learned earlier and to formulate her next moves to counter The Sheik's planned hit.

Her mind began to roam, moving like a cat prowling off into the night.

Over many years Maisie had trained herself to visualise future possibilities in her head, using a giant mental mind map, making strong and weak links, notating, adding images and voices. And there were words describing each scenario, like a screenplay, like one of Myra's jotter stories, but without the rubbing out and re-writing.

The afternoon drifted on into early evening and still they lay together, Maisie's mind playing out alternative scenarios, imagining what Biscuit and Sumo were doing, stepping through each of the next crucial days, hour by hour, second guessing, like playing chess on multiple scenario boards, with TIME as the crucial variable: fast forwarding, slowing, stopping, re-winding, adding options, reviewing, going off at a tangent by starting a new story to run in parallel.

Spanish Sparrows

Those in Peril

Well clear of coastal traffic and fishermen, the *African Rose* was heaving and plunging in the rising swell, struggling to hold its downwind heading under the combination of a make-shift drogue (sea anchor) and recently added bow thrusters operated under manual control. Around fifty nautical miles to the east, the dull grey-green coast of the Bight of Benin lurked like a muddy smudge.

Ten miles further offshore and over the horizon making it invisible to her quarry, the *Cape Gannet* was being held on a sixpence by its GPS controller and six powerful automated thrusters. The dive ship with a top speed of 23 knots to the elderly research vessel's maximum of 9 knots, could easily overhaul her target before she could reach striking distance of the coast.

'Let's have a dekko at her, Sumo, shall we?' said Kit Lucas.

'You mean up in the Lynx?'

'If you wish but I've got another toy. Let's have a play, shall we? Come and meet your new best friend.'

"Radley", named after Kit's Labradoodle back in the UK, was a sophisticated, high endurance quad-copter just under a metre in diameter, ruggedized for use in marine environments. Early versions of this model had been deployed in Northern Ireland during the troubles. Kit's Radley was a commercial derivative, used for oil rig inspections. Its primary function was to provide a stable platform for a sophisticated digital camera which sent back live images to the computer on the dive ship.

Although the international waters off the West Africa coast in the Bight of Benin were also considered a Marine High-Risk Area (MHRA), raids were usually by 'free enterprise pirates' seeking ransom or protection money, unlike true terrorist attacks by politically motivated groups in the Somalia region of East Africa. Kit had adapted Radley to carry light-weight ordnance such as tear gas mortars and firecrackers (miniature stun grenades) which he had used successfully to deter several pirate attacks over the years.

Sumo sat with Tom in *Cape Gannet's* bridge watching as Kit operated the remote controls to fly Radley up and away, 'parking' it under gyro-stabilised GPS control at 750 meters directly above the *African Rose*. At this height Radley was invisible and could not be heard above normal shipboard sounds. Kit manipulated the camera to scan the entire horizon on a long, slow sweep.

Spanish Sparrows

When certain there were no other ships in the area, Kit zoomed in on the *African Rose*. Not quite stationary, the scruffy research vessel was deploying her huge observation balloon. As it soared upwards from the research vessel, the balloon disappeared into the murky clouds of the approaching storm. Kit sent Radley upwards until he re-established visual contact.

'I would say its altitude is about 1500 meters,' said Kit. 'But why, Sumo? Think of the cable handling and the hours of winching required to recover it, to pump back the helium. Surely they could use a smaller balloon with a camera to watch their whales? Or a 'Radley', like us?'

'Kit, do you think they might spot us?'

'Only if they are looking in our direction with very powerful binos but I bet that standing on that balloon's platform is a nightmare in this breeze, look at it swing about. It must be more than thirty-five knots up there, don't you think? Bloody madness.'

'Can you zoom in on the platform?'

'**Oh-ho-ho-ho!** Look at that, Sumo. Nine of them. But why so many?'

'Look, Kit, look at what they're wearing!'

'Oh my God Sumo, look at that! Two of them have deliberately jumped off, in free fall. They'll kill themselves from that height!'

'No, look, their chutes have opened, they're paragliding! There they go, in pairs, just like Tenerife. It must be the Germans, as we suspected.'

Kit swung Radley a kilometre to the starboard side of the *African Rose* and reduced altitude to 200 metres to allow the camera to track the descent of the paragliders. Despite the gusting wind the Germans were highly proficient, soaring downwards in a controlled spiral towards the *African Rose*, four groups of two, followed by the singleton.

They watched with rising dread as the first of the leading pair approached the landing area and touched down, soon followed by his flight partner. All nine landed without mishap, each expertly retrieving his large nylon sail quickly then clearing the postage stamp zone for the next man, drawing an admiring comment from Kit Luca, a man well-versed in the hazards of landing helicopters at sea under dangerous conditions:

'That's what I call 'accomplished'. Very impressive.'

'Yip, four pairs and a singleton - that must be the Frenchie, the instructor.'

Spanish Sparrows

'They're better than good, Sumo. Landing on that speck of a deck in this breeze is not easy. The ship should be making way, not trying to remain stationary. I suppose their problem is the drag of the balloon, the pressure on the winch. But steaming ahead, even at 5 knots would make it so much easier for them to land. If they had missed the deck and ended up in the drink, they would be fish-food by now. There're quite a few *Great Whites* cruising in these waters.'

On landing, each of the team of eight immediately left the deck, disappearing into the superstructure. Only the Frenchie remained visible to Radley, leaning on the main deck gunwale, smoking and drinking from a bottle of beer.

Sumo and Kit watched the first few minutes of the balloon recovery procedure before Kit made another slow sweep of the horizon, to check who else might have observed what had just happened. The ocean was empty as far as its horizon.

What Radley could not see was the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70) with her attendant fleet of support vessels and protective screen. The Carrier Group was under pressure, still thirty hours away, steaming northwards at full speed to provide a naval presence in support of her President's visit to West Africa.

00000

'I've been in touch with Control,' said Sumo. 'I've explained what we've seen. I've been tasked to go in tonight, on the PWC¹³, take a shufti, maybe leave them a few little presents.'

'Great, I'll come, drive it for you.'

'NO! No way, Kit! I've lined up Billy Borland - he's right up for it. Billy's an old SBS mucker of mine; we went through dive school together, back in the day. But I'm going on board alone. He'll drift off astern and wait for my retrieve signal. I need you here to take charge if we hit a snag, to try to get us out.'

'Spoilsport! You get all the fun. Your boss, does he have any need for another willing recruit?'

'Well, we'll see. I'll mention it Kit, but only if we get through this one successfully. You've got to earn your spurs with our lady.'

'A lady? Who?'

'Need to know, Kit, remember, you're a hired hand.'

'OK. But I wonder how Biscuit's doing?'

¹³ PWC = Personal Water Craft or Water Scooter or Jet-Ski.

Spanish Sparrows

'Not for us to concern ourselves with, Kit. He's in a different 'box' now. Let's go and pass this video clip edit onto Control, check if we are allowed any news of him. If he gets compromised, you and I may have to fly in and rescue him. That could get tasty.'

Spanish Sparrows

Cabal

Biscuit Abernethy was sprawled on the roof of the multi-storey apartment building opposite the Sheraton Lagos Airport Hotel. For nearly twenty hours he had been in position observing The Sheik's luxury penthouse suite, moving only to use his pee bottle or to sip the glucose/salt mixture through the tube which snaked across his shoulder to dangle beside his lips. By day his camouflaged mosquito net provided only partial relief from the pounding heat. Under the fierce afternoon sun, the minutes ticked by slowly. In his SAS days Abernethy had learned to ignore the discomfort. He had been in worse places, many times, and preferred heat to cold.

He wore a blue and yellow coverall with the logo "K-Kool Air-Con", purloined from a van parked with its rear door carelessly ajar. The black nylon zipper bag/rucksack by his side contained several weapons. Other than to preserve his life, he would need Maisie's authority before use. Like Tom, Abernethy's preference was always to kill with his bare hands, or with a 'stubby', a short triangular blade worn as a knuckle duster, often one for each hand, earning him the alternative moniker of The Ferret. A single judicial slice or, if required a flurry of scything blows, would normally render one or more targets or assailants dead or incapacitated.

When his target was at a distance, Biscuit would employ his sniper's rifle. In his bag was the latest KAC XM100 with sound suppressor, telescopic lens and bipod support. Normally Abernethy could be expected to hit a stationary target no larger than a two-pound coin at up to 300 meters or a moving target at up to 150 meters, depending on the target's speed and trajectory. Working as a Ghillie culling red deer in the mountains of Scotland was excellent practice for such 'punishment' tasks. Currently his rifle was disassembled and stowed in its carry case inside the rucksack.

Beside his right hand was a dart gun of the type that Tom had carried in Tenerife, a backup weapon for personal protection, should he be accosted during his observation task.

Abernethy's current assignment was not to assassinate but to observe only, and to snatch photographs of The Sheik and his expected visitors which he would send to Maisie in Contonou who would consider them before making a possible further 'request'. The thought of this word brought a smile. Although always polite and courteous, when Maisie made an operational 'request' it was clearly an order, to be executed with skill, vigour and persistence. His SOP¹⁴ demanded he minimise voice traffic and his *BlackBerry* was set to vibrate only.

¹⁴ Standard Operating Procedure. A list of pre-agreed responses which normally applied to all deployments, unless otherwise agreed or varied in advance.

Spanish Sparrows

He watched the scene below through a ruggedized version of the Nikon digital camera that Maisie used. With a stabilising mini-tripod and a 300 mm telephoto lens this camera provided a close-up view almost as good as his day/night binoculars. Importantly, the camera's high-speed processor offered the possibility of an instant snap should someone of interest be in frame even only for a microsecond.

Abernethy considered this expensive camera equipment merely as another 'implement', a tool needed to complete his task, just like the other items of kit in his rucksack. Accordingly, he and Fida had practised with the Nikon by 'shooting' stags and golden eagles. Unlike his artistic wife, Biscuit was a technician, using the camera dispassionately with high proficiency, like all his other devices. By contrast, Fida was a self-styled photo-artist who could easily have made a living by selling her images but this option was forbidden under their agreement; Maisie demanded they maintain a low profile both in their local community and online.

00000

At 15:42 hours the dynamic changed.

Room Service staff arrived with three trolleys and set out a buffet and bar in the dining area. Abernethy had a perfect view and looked at what was on offer, suppressing his hunger. The Sheik, dressed in a white robe and checked red and white headscarf, dismissed the waiters and stood by the food, sipping a glass filled from a bottle with the distinctive Krug gold label.

At five minutes to the hour two men arrived, one huge, one tiny, both dressed in dark grey business suits. The Sheik acknowledged them with a dip of his head but did not offer food or refreshments. Snapping rapidly, Abernethy tracked the pair as they moved to stand to one side, grabbing shots together, alone, head and shoulders, and zooming to snap close-ups of their faces. Biscuit reckoned the taller man would be Buck Tansett and the smaller, the Albino with the reddish eyes, would be Denton Smith.

Just after four o'clock a further group of men arrived. Two were dressed in white robes and wore colourful sashes and headgear; a third wore a dark blue suit with a military cut, but no insignia, no medals. The fourth was dressed in a poorly tailored black suit which failed to conceal his holstered weapon. Black Suit subjected The Sheik and the PYRAMID men to a cursory patting down, checking for weapons. He then left the room, presumably to stand guard outside the door.

From the mug shots circulated by Prof Mell, Abernethy identified The Sheik's guests as he snapped their faces. The men in robes were Mathieu Kérékou aka The Chameleon, twice previously a President of Benin. The other was Olusegun Obasanjo a former President of Nigeria. The suited man was former Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings, ex-President of Ghana. Abernethy captured the apparent warmth of the handshakes and hugs exchanged with The Sheik. The two men from PYRAMID were excluded from the bonhomie, left to stand and wait

Spanish Sparrows

as the four principals picked at the buffet. While they continued to socialise, Abernethy inserted a fresh SD card in the camera, loaded the original into the transfer module and using the encryption app on his *BlackBerry*, set it the slow task of sending these first high-definition images to Maisie.

Ten minutes elapsed before The Sheik and his guests took seats. Throughout this period the two from PYRAMID Security had been ignored but now they called into the spotlight, to be questioned closely by the three guests. Abernethy changed the Nikon to video mode and focussed on their faces. Tom had once said the Maisie was an expert at reading lips and body language. Fida was moderately good at lip reading but his own efforts were so poor they were hilarious.

The date and time stamp pulsed at the bottom of the screen:

Sat 16 Feb 08: 16.33

The minutes ticked past: the SD card was filling. It seemed to Abernethy that the PYRAMID pair were giving a report, answering questions. Biscuit was certain Maisie would want to see the meeting 'live', as it were, and in its entirety. This volume of data could not be transmitted from his *BlackBerry*; for this he would need his MacBook, which was locked in his hotel room safe.

Jerry Rawlings became agitated, leapt to his feet and hurtled across to the two men pushing his face up into that of Buck Tansett, who had evidently given a reply which did not please. After a short finger-wagging tirade Rawlings broke off, grabbed a fresh bottle of Krug from the ice tray, popped it open and topped up his glass. As an afterthought, he moved back to the three others on the loungers and topped up their flutes before resuming his seat, placing the half-full bottle on the floor to the side of his lounge.

After a few minutes of further questioning The Sheik rose, crossed the room, spoke to Tansett and Smith whose heads nodded vigorously. Dismissed, the PYRAMID men left without ceremony. The Sheik left his guests briefly to return with a briefcase, unlocked it, throwing open the lid theatrically. Three small gold-coloured boxes were displayed, opened then closed in turn. Hands were shaken warmly then the three Africans left, each carrying their gift box.

It seemed the meeting was over. Biscuit changed to his third and final high-speed SD card.

On a hunch, Abernethy waited, deliberately delaying the transmission of his report to Maisie in Contonou. What had just passed had felt like a re-run of events from Biscuit Abernethy's past, a flashback from his time in Northern Ireland where the double-dealing and personal avarice of certain 'true friends of the cause' had astounded him. Just as Abernethy was beginning to think he was wrong, Jerry Rawlings returned alone. His visit was brief but cordial. When Rawlings left his briefcase contained two further golden boxes.

Spanish Sparrows

Abernethy waited for a further fifteen minutes during which time The Sheik stood alone on his terrace overlooking the enclosed courtyard of the hotel far below him, talking continuously on his sat phone. When he began his third call, Biscuit noted the time as 17:39 local. To compile the video material and make his report to Maisie he needed a fast broadband connection. His MacBook was in the Sheraton, two floors below The Sheik, where Abernethy had a Junior Suite in the name of Truman McKinlay Hellsborg III. Abernethy withdrew to the relative comfort of the air con equipment plant room on the roof behind him, took a quick dry shave to remove his stubble, changed into a jogging suit and lifted a tennis racket from the bag, now serving as a sports rucksack.

Passing through Reception at the Sheraton, to the concierge staff he was now a tennis aficionado returning from a tough match, hot and sweaty.

Entering his compact but luxurious suite, he checked the traps he had set for signs of intrusion. Satisfied, he removed his ruggedized MacBook from the room safe, downloaded the video data from the SIM cards attaching these files to an report which he encrypted before sending it off to 'fly' directly to Maisie.

With the MacBook back in the safe, he ordered a carefully chosen light meal from room service, for delivery at 19:00 hours. Working quickly and methodically, he stripped, cleaned and reassembled every item of equipment then re-packed the rucksack, preparing to return to his surveillance post if so directed. Lastly, he enjoyed the indulgence of a ten-minute shower to wash away the dirt and sweat of his twenty-four hours on the roof opposite.

Unknown to Abernethy The Sheik was already on the move. Fortunately, Anisa had captured The Sheik's satellite phone calls and Masie already had this information. The Sheik was heading back to Frankfurt, probably to await the outcome of his plans to attack the US President and to be on hand to liaise with Tomasz Druerber, ready to move his wealth to exploit his planned disruption to the world's money markets.

At 19:55 The Ferret re-booted his MacBook to discover a new coded message 'requesting' his immediate relocation to Contonou, to assist Maisie and Tom.

Spanish Sparrows

Night Ride

David Abernethy's Junior Suite at the Sheraton in the name of Truman McKinlay Hellgsborg III was fully pre-paid for a further five days. From his room telephone using his mid-Atlantic drawl, TruMac asked Reception to arrange for a limousine to take him to the airport, telling the night porter he expected to return in two or maybe three days.

The tropical sun had set several hours earlier. The night was dark and steamy under a heavy covering of clouds, ideal for what he planned. The limousine arrived. It was black, also ideal.

Sporting his name badge and dressed in his dark blue 'uniform' suit, his driver leapt out to greet his new client, managing to conceal his surprise when the small man insisted on carrying his heavy rucksack which he placed not in the boot, but inside the cabin on the seat beside him.

Fifty-five-year-old Davide Duebit had worked his way up to this top job over many years and the foibles of rich people no longer surprised him. It had been a long, slow day and he had already decided to head home after the drop-off at the airport.

The second thing which did not surprise Duebit was the change of destination. He was now heading for Contonou, around three hours away. When the man made this request, Davide groaned inwardly, smiled outwardly, admitting to himself he had been half-expecting it. When he named his inflated price of \$200 US for his six to seven-hour round trip, it was accepted without any hassle.

This too made Davide suspicious. In his experience most rich white guys liked to beat down the price by at least fifty percent. As he swung onto the new route heading for the coastal highway connecting Lagos and Contonou, using his rear-view mirror he watched his fare closely, wondering if he might pop a pill or sniff a line of cocaine.

Fortunately, the small ginger-haired Mr Hellgsborg was not talkative, which Davide considered to be a blessing. Some of his clients were overbearing and hard to 'entertain'. Davide kept a surreptitious watch in his rear-view mirror and after a few minutes the man closed his eyes and seemed to be dozing. Davide's instinct told him this was a sham. The man's right hand was out of sight under his large black rucksack, perhaps holding a weapon, Davide concluded. He had a weapon of his own concealed under the dash, which he had used only once, many years earlier, on an aggressive Russian high on alcohol and drugs, out of control. His corpse had been left deep in the jungle and there had been no repercussions.

Fifteen minutes into their journey, the man Hellgsborg was awake again, leaning forward, conspiratorial:

Spanish Sparrows

'Mr Duebit, I am not in a hurry to get to my next meeting. In fact, I don't want to arrive early. No, that would be a mistake. So, there is no rush. Indeed, what I desire above all is a smooth, hassle-free journey. I'm sure you understand. And to be honest, I detest those long queues at border checkpoints and the sordid business of paying off grubby officials. Perhaps there is a quieter route? I will be happy to pay your extra costs. You will find I am a generous man by nature.'

If Davide allowed himself to think about what his passenger was doing, he would have thought only one thing - *drugs*. In his younger days Davide Duebit had done this before, many times, for his other special clients. With quiet assurance, he answered in a neutral voice:

'Certainly sir, I fully understand. Shall we say \$500 US?

'Sounds about right. Yes, go for it. Thanks.'

Checking that his client was once again 'dozing', Davide slipped on his earbuds to listen to his *iPod* and drove through the night for Contonou by the long route, his free hand caressing the down payment of \$300 US which the man had given him to smooth their passage, pay for the extra fuel and to cover any 'up front' payments required should they be stopped by police or freebooters on side roads.

00000

The Mercedes limousine arrived without incident in Contonou just before dawn on Sunday 17th February. Hellgsborg asked to be dropped at the best hotel and Davide recommended the Benin Royal. Mr Hellgsborg paid a second instalment of \$350 US to include a bonus.

Before releasing his grip on the money, Abernethy made his request:

'Davide, if anyone asks, please say you dropped me off at Lagos airport.'

'Absolutely sir, I dropped you at Lagos airport.'

'Thank you. I *will* hold you to that promise.'

As Davide drove away, he saw Mr Hellgsborg talking on his *BlackBerry*.

00000

Two minutes later, from a side street behind the hotel, Biscuit took a local taxi to the outskirts of the sprawling city of Contonou then walked the last kilometre to seek out the accommodation that Tom had rented for him in the name of Rupert Thibaut, a South African freelance

Spanish Sparrows

photographer in Contonou to cover the games. At the concierge station of the aparthotel, Biscuit showed his convincing Thibaut passport and collected the security-sealed plastic box that Tom had left for him.

Inside his room, with his door locked and jammed with a wedge from his kitbag, the Venetian blinds down and the curtains drawn, he carefully opened the box in accordance with the agreed SOP routine, eased out the small explosive incendiary charge and neutralised it.

The box contained a Stade de Benin "Red Area" security badge for "Rupert Thibaut", and two USB drives.

One drive was labelled:

'first, memorise'.

Plugging it into his MacBook, he viewed Tom's booklet of A3 architectural drawings. A particular room was shaded, lightly, in pale yellow, very hard to spot. There was also a key which Biscuit rightly assumed gave access to this 'yellow' room.

The second drive was labelled:

'second, SOP password required'.

He slipped the stick into his computer, entered the password "Fida@CorgarffXmas98" then ran the programme to reveal Maisie's 'polite requests'. He scanned her 'Think-List' and smiled, re-read the details and committed them to memory.

Ahead of his departure from the aparthotel, he must remain on Thirty Minute Standby (30MS), awaiting a code number by text to his *BlackBerry* to correspond to his SOP list:

- | | |
|-----|--|
| 123 | CARPE DIEM. GO NOW. (This might involve taking risks) |
| 8 | Proceed as plan and with utmost caution. |
| 14 | W for Wait. (Remain on 30MS until next signal.) |
| 27 | Abort with caution, retrieval instructions to follow. |
| 99 | ABORT NOW ASAP. Mission blown, you are in danger, go with best speed to EvacOne and wait for further signal. |

Her plan was for him to make his intrusion at midnight, allowing him around seventeen hours to prepare and rest ahead of his next challenge.

'30MS' was easy to achieve.

Spanish Sparrows

Biscuit could awaken from what might seem to be a deep sleep, dress and make ready for action, including any complicated body-armour, check and load his gear and be on the move in five minutes or less. This target time he could achieve in calm/training conditions. He could do it slightly faster under fire or imminent threat. His SAS training records would show he remained the fastest from all cohorts by a clear margin. More importantly, he had done it in the field, in Northern Ireland, in the Balkans and in Iraq, deep behind enemy lines. This speed and his ferocity in hand-to-hand combat were the reasons he had earned the additional nickname of The Ferret.

For his new tasking Abernethy would dress in what had been dubbed 'wearable stealth technology'. He opened a slim package containing a lightweight dark grey low-reflectivity all-in-one cat suit. Before entering the suit he must dowse himself in talc. This garment had been made to his exact dimensions and could be used only once. Its neck incorporated a snug hood and facemask of breathable fabric leaving only eyeholes. Its legs ended in elasticated stocking feet and the arms in tightly fitting glove-like gripping hands. He laid this thin but tough suit on the floor beside his non-logo black climbing Vibram-soled webbed-feet glove shoes.

He laid out and checked his lightweight climbing helmet which incorporated an array of tiny infra-red lamps and light gathering lenses, this item to be used with compact night sight split focus goggles, the left eye giving a light-enhanced 'daylit clear view', the right eye providing an infra-red 'heat map view'.

Satisfied with his arrangements, he again disassembled, cleaned and re-checked his weaponry, re-loaded his dart pistol and his Nokia hangover weapon, inserted both hand weapons into their holsters, prepared his body-belt, loading the tools and devices he would use into their pouches.

He then assembled and checked his crossbow with its compressed air canister and the grappling hook attached to a spool of super-strong fine cord which had been woven into a lightweight climbing 'ladder'. This item was made by the Swiss company Mammut¹⁵, the type used by Special Forces throughout the world.

Working systematically, he converted his black kit bag, turning it inside out, removing and relocating the various Velcro-ed pockets inside to transform the rucksack into an equivalent sized streamlined non-reflective dark grey rucksack to match his cat suit. He loaded his MacBook, other clothes and back-up gear into the rear section and put his ready-use equipment, weapons, and body belt in the front section with the rolled up "K-Kool Air-Con" coverall and mosquito net and its lightweight collapsible frame on top. He switched out the room lights and inspected the rucksack critically, searching for reflections, flaws. None.

Satisfied, he switched on the room lights and unloaded the bag, checked every item again to be sure it was fully functional. This was not a sign of nerves or lack of confidence nor was it a

¹⁵ Mammut, Swiss manufacture of high-performance lightweight climbing ropes.

Spanish Sparrows

comfort or displacement routine. It came from his training, an ingrained mode of behaviour practised by all good soldiers preparing for the action to come while waiting inside a safe haven. He was not working slowly, but rapidly, in accord with his reputation. When he was certain sure that every item was clean, defect free and fully functional, he re-packed it, switched out the lights, checked again for glints which might betray his presence. None.

Satisfied, he again checked the time. Moving to the bathroom, he defecated, flushed three times to fully clear his production, drank a litre of water, ate three bananas, brushed his teeth, shaved, showered, cleaned and dried the shower cubical thoroughly with the towel provided with the room. This towel would leave the apartment with him to be dumped at a safe distance.

Dressed in his stealth clothing with his gear prepped, he was ready to move.

As an after-thought he rose and checked the window operation, easing it with a tiny squirt of WD 40 before closing it again to keep out the mosquitos.

Satisfied, he switched out the lights, lay on the bed, put his hands behind his head and, as he had been trained to do, went through a visualisation routine. It was a method that had succeeded for him many times in the past. He checked the time on his *BlackBerry*. From entering his aparthotel room, the entire routine to reach this stage had taken fifty-two minutes.

Now fully in the mind-set of *The Ferret*, Abernethy seemed to be asleep, on his back with his hands by his side. Nestled in his left hand, he held his back-up weapon, a 150 mm stainless steel throwing knife. With a flick of his wrist, he could hit the bull's-eye on a dart board at up to fifteen metres while moving at speed towards any assailant. In his right hand he held his *BlackBerry*, set to vibrate, ready to respond to whatever code *Maisie* transmitted.

His left was his best hand, dominant, a fact he had trained himself to conceal by deliberately preferring his right to the extent he was almost ambidextrous.

According to his plan he would leave the first-floor apartment by the window, walk the two miles to the *Stade de Benin*, using dark back streets. If he judged it appropriate, he would use the blue and yellow coverall to negotiate a busier area. He would leave nothing behind in the room and only a detailed and expert forensic examination would reveal he had been present.

Later, after the 'incident', unless he was otherwise directed, he would remain in place inside the stadium for as long as required until he judged he could exit undetected. At that stage, if he judged it safe to do so, he would return to this room in the aparthotel and await further 'requests' from *Maisie*. If compromised inside the stadium, he would change clothes and become *Rupert Thibaut*, use firecrackers as necessary to create diversions, and leave his *Ferret* gear behind in the rucksack to be cremated by a fierce high temperature incendiary canister activated by a time-delayed fuse.

Spanish Sparrows

All The Ferret needed now was a "Go" signal code from Maisie.

Spanish Sparrows

Jitters

By mid-afternoon on Sunday 17th February, Jimmy Bakker was almost certain he had eliminated the 'bat screech glitch'. If asked what he had found, he would have scratched his head. Throughout Jimmy and his team had been convinced the interference was not in their equipment but from an external agency. What it had been, they could not imagine. Deciding to be thankful rather than curious, they raced ahead with their PA system commissioning.

On completion, Jimmy ended with:

THANK YOU TO ALL OUR LISTENERS
SEE YOU AT THE PUB
THE MILKY BARS ARE ON ME
THEN WE'RE OUTTA HERE

00000

At seven o'clock Tom returned to the penthouse from his shift.

'Well dear one, at last we have a fully operational system. Now that the external speakers are screech free, we have the PA system re-connected to the internal spaces. It's been all hands to the pump. . .'

'**NO!** No clichés, please. And what does that mean, a fully operational system? And please, the simple explanation only.'

'Sorry, dear one. Well, it means that the PA system can now reach every part of the stadium, and that it is fully holistic, integrated, interconnected with the Fire Alarms, the Automated Crowd Safety Warnings Sys. . .'

'**Stop!** Tom, can the PA system reach every single room?'

'Yes, dear one, even the loos, in fact especially the. . .'

'Tom, this is vital: can someone speak from the Control Room to every part of the stadium, reach every room, no exceptions?'

'Yes, dearest, is that not what I just said?'

Spanish Sparrows

'Which means, in theory. . . Mmmm. . . Tom, we have work to do!'

'Oh Gawd - not again!

00000

By ten o'clock they were back inside the Stade de Benin. They had entered separately on fake Red Area passes, choosing PYRAMID guards who had not seen them before. Tom was in the Control Room. The lights were out. Maisie was on the far side of the stadium, standing in the dimness of the Presidential Suite waiting to hear his whispered test signal from the Internal PA speaker above her head.

It took an hour of experimentation before Tom cracked how to bypass the PA system controls and plant his devices.

'*Maisie had a little lamb*'.

He recited the entire ditty in his softest voice.

She sent a 'Got It' code to his *BlackBerry*.

Her own *BlackBerry* vibrated. The code told her to 'WAIT'.

Thirty-three minutes later Tom's soft voice repeated the ditty:

'*Maisie had a little lamb*'.

Her *BlackBerry* vibrated again.

This code told her that Tom was doing this remotely, from Bashir Wiltshire's penthouse.

By text to his *BlackBerry*, Maisie confirmed the code for 'A-OK'.

Tom responded with a quiet double click of his tongue over the PA system.

Maisie sent a code "8" to Biscuit (Proceed as plan and with utmost caution.).

As per his SOP he responded with an 'On the Move' code.

There was a rattle of keys at the door. Maisie retreated to crouch in a dark corner, Nokia dart gun in her hand, primed, ready to fire. Eventually, the patrolling guard realised the door was unlocked, entered, switched on the lights, scanned the room then switched the lights off, locked the door and left.

Spanish Sparrows

Would he make a report to his control centre that the room had been found unlocked?

Would this mean a full-scale alert, a detailed search for an intruder?

Using her lockpick she moved to a room across the corridor, a domestic service closet where she locked herself inside, standing in darkness. Motionless, she waited for a further thirty minutes, listening for some sort of reaction from a PYRAMID Security patrol before deciding that their intrusion had been undetected.

00000

Maisie arrived back at the Penthouse just before midnight. As always after a physical incursion, they were both frisky. She rated her third tantric climax as the best sex with Tom that she could remember. It was almost good enough to block out the weight of responsibility which pressed down on her. She checked her *BlackBerry*:

Mon 18-Feb-08

02:09

With Tom snoring beside her, she gave up the search for sleep and re-examined her plan of action, node by node, being ultra-critical, nit-picking. In theory, it was a good plan, she believed.

Sumo's incursion was in progress and The Ferret had sent his simple 'A-OK' signal to confirm that he was now in position, high in the superstructure of the Stadium, lying on the roof of the Electrical Distribution Room, a location which gave him a perfect sniper's view of the approach to the VIP Entrance where the Bush cavalcade would dismount.

Earlier, she had convinced herself that two rounds of vigorous sex would help her to shake off her jitters. But it had not worked, not this time. The same subconscious niggles returned to torment her, droning inside her head like angry hornets.

Repeatedly her subconscious mind shouted at her:

"There is something out there that you have not covered!"

Spanish Sparrows

Look-See

During the hours since sundown, the *Cape Gannet* had approached her target by first racing North, then West before turning South-West, closing steadily on the target's stern.

The earlier rough weather had abated and the *African Rose* was moving slowly, heading towards the coastline of the Bight of Benin at a steady 4.5 knots under autopilot control.

Long experience of sailing at night suggested the watch keepers on the bridge of the research ship would be looking ahead. Had they looked aft, the *Cape Gannet* would have been difficult to spot. Contrary to maritime regulations the dive ship was stopped, nearly silent, her AIS transponder switched off, hovering in darkened ship mode with no navigation or other lights showing, held in position by the variable speed propellers of her six thrusters, controlled by her SAT-NAV system streaming positioning data from an array of overhead satellites.

The two ships were approximately one nautical mile apart, the distance increasing slowly as the *African Rose* sailed away from the stationary *Cape Gannet* on course for Contonou, fifteen miles away.

00000

From the Bridge, Kit Lucas could no longer see the PWC in the slow swell. Billy Bilstrand had the *Cape Gannet*'s coordinates in his GPS guidance system. In theory he could retrace his track, avoiding the risk of becoming lost in the dark vastness of the Atlantic Ocean. It had been agreed if the PWC did not return by 04:30, Lucas would send up Radley with an infra-red camera to take a look-see. However, night-flying the quadcopter was not a good option. Without deck lights it would be especially fraught landing the tiny aircraft back onto the deck of the dive ship.

Lucas still missed the spice of danger his twenty-two years stint in the Royal Navy as a helicopter pilot had provided, serving in real and training wars around the world. His speciality had been low level flying, occasionally to facilitate SBS/SAS incursions but mainly on reconnaissance sorties with a cameraman. Much of the tasking during his service days was now done by satellites or by drones, usually larger and more sophisticated versions of his quadcopter.

However, in Kit's mind nothing could replace his Lynx, not even Radley.

At 03:05 hours on Monday 18th February, now using an electric outboard under battery power, the two-man PWC covered the last hundred metres to hide under the research ship's stern.

Spanish Sparrows

Sumo clearly understood that Maisie's rules of engagement for his 'look-see' inspection meant the ship's crew must never know that someone had been aboard: therefore he must not kill unless compromised. Like Dopey, Sumo also lived by the "better sure than sorry" mantra. Because of its silent nature the dart gun was his weapon of first resort. His ruggedised marine version was waterproof, held inside the open-topped holster by a stiff elasticated lanyard. Should the lanyard monitoring system detect that the weapon had been dropped, the dart gun would be forcefully reeled back into the holster, freeing both hands. He also carried a Beretta 93R machine pistol and silencer in his waterproof rucksack, a weapon authorised by Maisie for emergencies only.

The plastic-coated grappling hook flew up from the crossbow. At the third attempt, it connected. Sumo tugged hard, checking. Even at forty-seven, he was still capable of hauling his 110 kg bulk plus his 50 kg rucksack of equipment vertically upwards through the twenty odd meters to the deck. However, the PWC was a workboat and using its small electric-hydraulic winch through a double-hauler pulley made this exhausting climb unnecessary.

With his dart gun set to "KILL" but still in its pouch, Sumo put his left foot in the loop and grabbed the climbing rope, now dangling, bumping against the side of the vessel, staring upwards, checking to see if his incursion had been spotted.

Nothing.

He waited, his hand covering the dart gun. Two minutes passed.

He nodded and was immediately rising steadily upwards under the control of his winchman Billy Bilsland. At the gunwale he looped his left elbow over and slashed the air sideways with his right hand, giving the signal to stop hauling. Suspended, on his elbow with his left foot in the climbing loop, his eyes just above the rim, his weapon ready, he checked all around to be sure he had not been detected.

All clear.

He straddled up and over the gunwale onto the deck where he remained crouched, tensed against a challenging shout, tracking left and right, the dart gun extended forwards in both hands for stability. When he was sure he was alone on the stern of the ship, moving slowly, he holstered the weapon and fished out his infra-red night-vision goggles. Everything lit up. He was alone.

He released the grappling hook and threw it forcefully away to the port side, well clear of the *African Rose's* slowly churning propeller. As soon as the line went slack, Bilsland wound it in, stowed it, then backed away to stand off 500 metres directly behind the *African Rose*, hiding in the swell to await the repeated dot-dash-dot "RETRIEVE" signal.

Spanish Sparrows

As part of the planning while still aboard *Cape Gannet*, Sumo had spent several hours closeted with Kit Lucas studying the Radley video clips of the *African Rose*. They also reviewed the infra-red images provided by a second camera used to scan for 'hot spots' indicating equipment overheating which might lead to failures. It was from this latter information they had decided Sumo's target was the most forward door on the port side of the superstructure which they hoped would lead to the fo'c's'le hold, a zone glowing brightly, well above ambient temperature. This part of the ship seemed to be a 'no go zone' for both the Filipino crew and the German Triathletes.

What secrets lay behind this door?

To reach it Sumo had to pass five other doors. Just beyond the second, the next door ahead swung open then banged shut. A small man turned and scuttled towards Sumo, a freshly lit cigarette dangling from his lips. The man saw the dark shape in his path and stopped. The cigarette fell from his mouth creating a fireworks effect in Sumo's goggles. Before the man could utter his shout of astonishment, Sumo raised the pistol, pressed it against the man's eye socket and fired. The dart killed the Filipino instantly, saving him from a future death from incurable and agonising bone cancer. Sumo caught him by the throat, lifted the corpse like a doll, dropped it over the side, then stooped to retrieve the cigarette, dropping it to join its owner, mouthing silently:

'Nasty thing smoking pal, very bad for your health.'

On a ship like this, the loss of a Filipino crew member would be unlikely to raise a stir. In heavy weather the loss of a shipmate was often by accident. In calm weather such losses often resulted from shipboard squabbles and their aftermath.

The target door was locked but easily picked. Once inside Sumo made a quick check for signs of an alarm system, expecting the sound of running feet. The Geiger counter began to beep an alarm. He muted it, checked the reading then pressed the 'monitor' button to create a personal record and a vigorous early warning vibration before he reached his safe exposure limit.

Switching from goggles to a head torch, he scanned the door frame and nearby bulkhead for tell-tale wires or PIR detectors. He found neither. He rammed thin polypropylene wedges into the levers of the outer door mechanism to simulate a jammed door. Using night goggles, he crept down the steep companionway into the humid darkness of the forward hold.

In his SBS days Sumo had carried out dozens of such searches, for weapons, drugs, illegals or women and children being traded as sex slaves. This had given him a good knowledge of ship construction and his instinct took him at once to the fake bulkhead. He checked - the Geiger counter was now reading higher, on the edge of the danger zone. He must work quickly.

Spanish Sparrows

The impressive padlock on the door to the forward hold raised the suspicion that it might be alarmed. Using his head-torch and a magnifying glass, he checked for tell-tail signs hoping it was not emitting a radio monitoring signal. Once he was persuaded that it was as it appeared, merely an expensive key-operated padlock, it was easily defeated. Digital padlocks were usually more problematic but the judicious application of squirts of acid to corrode the innards or failing that, to eat through the shackle, left an unmistakable trail.

Before opening the door to the forward hold, he made a further careful inspection, searching the door frame and bulkhead for signs of a trip alarm. He found none. He changed back to his goggles and taking the padlock with him, he entered and again wedged this door shut behind him. Entirely lead lined, the unventilated hold space was very hot, making his skin slick with sweat. During his twenty-minute visit, inside his Vibrams, sweat would gradually fill his wet suit socks.

The dummy gas bottles lit up like huge candles in his infra-red goggles, making him nervous. He checked the Geiger counter again: higher still but not immediately dangerous. He snapped on his head torch and used his *BlackBerry* to record the scene in high definition.

The heavy metal trunk was bolted to the deck. There was no padlock. He eased open the lid to reveal neat layers of bubble wrap. Taking record photographs at each stage, he removed the padding to expose eight soccer balls resting on gimbals. Clearly these balls were volatile, possibly bombs. He lifted one gingerly and weighed it on his palm, rotating it slowly for the *BlackBerry*. Although it seemed 'normal', he treated it with great caution. He repeated the process for each ball in turn. As he re-packed, he checked his earlier snaps to ensure that everything was exactly as it had been. Satisfied, he eased the lid back into place.

With the bulkhead door cracked ajar, he listened. After a few minutes he stuck his head out to scan the darkness through his goggles, checking the fo'c's'le hold was still clear. He moved out of the lead-lined chamber then secured the door with its padlock. A systematic check of the remainder of the hold revealed nothing out of the ordinary. The Geiger counter monitor alarm zipped inside his trouser pocket shuddered, warning him to leave.

Returning to the open deck he relocked the outer door then crawled forward out onto the foredeck to lie beside the base of the balloon winch. Here he placed plastic explosive charges primed with acoustic detonators around each of the eight sturdy bolts holding the winch base to the deck. At a crouch he slid back along the deck to the stern and sought out the hydraulic control pipelines that powered the rudder. Here he placed further charges, taking care to pack these out of sight, in the gap behind the pipe brackets and the inner sheath of the ship's hull.

At 03:58 hours Sumo eased his long legs over the stern gunwale, dangling from his left hand and pointing his head directly astern, he signalled a string of "Rs" from his head torch.

Spanish Sparrows

Expecting his pick-up at 04.00, Billy B had already closed-up and soon emerged out of the blackness. Sumo released his grip and plopped into the sea beside the PWC.

Twenty-three minutes later the ex-SBS men were back aboard the *Cape Gannet*, just in time to disappoint Kit Lucas who had already prepped both Radley and the Lynx.

Gripping the handholds of the PWC tightly to steady themselves, Sumo and Billy B were hoisted back on board. Following a private conversation with Kit Lucas, Sumo explained what had occurred, expressing his concern about his contaminated clothing. He then stripped off to his bare skin, placed everything he had taken with him in a large kit bag made of tough PVC. The bag was then heavily weighted. With the air removed, it was sealed then dumped overboard, its GPS location noted for the record. Sumo was then hosed down for several minutes with sea water from a powerful deck wash hose before being led away shivering to recover under a long hot shower.

Spanish Sparrows

Here Comes the President

Concurrent with the incursion of the *African Rose*, south of the *Cape Gannet* and well below the horizon, the Hanger Deck of the aircraft carrier *USS Carl Vinson* was buzzing with activity.

The fly-ops teams were working their way through their pre-flight checks to ready six Sikorsky SH 60 Seahawk helicopters. Four aircraft had been designated as 'rapid response standby', each manned by ten elite US Marines trained in HRM Ops (Hostage Rescue and Medivac operations). The other two SH 60s were rigged for ASW-SAR-Ops (Anti-Submarine Warfare-Search and Rescue operations).

As part of the *Carl Vinson's* protective screen these two helicopters would fly off at first light to 'dip their wicks', (hydrophones) and drop sonar buoys, searching for intruding unfriendly submarines and possible enemy Underwater Drones.

As an additional part of her protective shield, the *USS Carl Vinson* also had access to six of the latest Northrop Grumman LR36 drones, these held in readiness on board the US Los Angeles class submarine *USS Jefferson*, currently lurking ahead in the Bight of Benin, waiting in near silence while listening to and logging all ship movements, looking for any suspicious activity.

These new ultra-secret weapons had been designated as USADs (Underwater Surveillance and Attack Drones). However, in trials these had proved 'temperamental', losing contact and running free, unable to be retrieved, failing to respond to recall signals, eventually running out of battery power and sinking to the depths of the ocean where they should, in theory, explode to ensure enemies could not capture them.

Worryingly, the CIA and its competing military intelligence agencies were unsure if the Russians, Chinese, North Koreans or other countries already possessed or were developing similar weapons.

00000

Responding to this latest threat to all seagoing vessels and military coastal installations, in an urgent and highly resourced development programme, the US Navy had several competing types of Underwater Drone.

The latest and most favoured version from Northrop Grumman, designated as an USAD-LR (Underwater Surveillance and Attack Drone-Long Range) had been offered as a

Spanish Sparrows

'stealth weapon', claimed by its manufacturer to be virtually undetectable. In the Beta version, this oddly shaped torpedo derivative was coated with a thick layer of special Active-Passive Acoustic Foam (APAF). This material, combined with the odd shape of the drone had been shown to absorb and deflect sonar emissions depending on frequency. By moving slowly to remain undetected, the current LR36 version under test had an endurance of 36 hours with the promise of an extended range version allowing seven-day autonomous patrols.

Because of its strange angular stealth profile, it was quickly nicknamed the Sawshark¹⁶.

To facilitate its launch by a charge of high-pressure air, this drone was encased in an opaque plastic 'shell', giving the Sawshark the temporary appearance of a conventional torpedo. Free of its launch platform, this casing was then 'shed' by small explosive charges, creating undetectable rice grain shards, freeing the Sawshark to set out towards its pre-programmed search area. While operating autonomously, the Sawshark probed its patrol zone in total comms silence. Only when 'objects of interest' had been discovered, inspected and classified by its on-board computer, did the drone drift lazily to the surface to communicate its findings to its host vessel or shore defence station via a satellite link.

Using its APAF coating to remain undetected while evaluating incoming acoustic data, the Sawshark could also approach, monitor and track enemy target surface ships and submarines. If authorised in advance or by releasing a tiny sat-comms buoy on a trailing lead to take instruction from its control centre, the Sawshark could switch to attack mode and when close enough to avoid counter measures, accelerate to Impact Detonation Speed (IDS).

00000

On board the *Carl Vinson*, in a separate screened off area from the six *Seahawks*, stood two *VH-60N Whitehawk* helicopters, either of which might be designated as *Marine One*, should its crew be honoured with the task of flying their President. These aircraft were guarded at all times by members of the elite *Presidential Protection Group (PPG)*

Three decks below the *Hanger Deck*, the *Flight Crews* and *Marines* were being roused to prepare for the day ahead. During the past week these men and women had received numerous detailed briefings on the President's visit to *Africa* and were considered to be in a high state of readiness.

On the open *Flight Deck* directly above the *Hanger Deck*, stood four *MQ-9 Reaper Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs)* also openly called *drones*. The *Reaper* drones were under a temporary

¹⁶ Sawshark facts, visit <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sawshark>

Spanish Sparrows

hemi-spherical hanger to shield them from the opposition's spy satellites. At first light the Reapers would be launched simultaneously, to sweep to and fro along the coast of Benin.

From the UAV Intel Centre deep inside the *Carl Vinson*, the drone pilots and their support technicians would fly their aircraft at low altitude (terrain hugging) along a pre-arranged grid. Their task would be to collect a continuous stream of high-definition digital images and infrared snapshots of the landscape and buildings within a five-mile radius of the intended presence of the President. During the previous six weeks US surveillance satellites had subjected this area to intense scrutiny. The data to be collected by the Reapers would be subjected to high-speed digital analysis, searching for anomalies. The whole game was to look for tiny differences which might suggest unusual activity, such as the preparation of a launch site for SAMs (surface to air missiles).

00000

In Air Force One President George W. Bush and his entourage were preparing for the hectic day ahead. This flying fortress of an aircraft, which routinely flew well above the altitude authorised for commercial traffic, was starting its slow descent to Contonou International Airport under the watchful eye of a Boeing E-3 Sentry AWACS plane circling at 55,000 feet, making a lazy orbit centred on the Bight of Benin far below.

The US President's Africa visit had been on his wish list since the start of his second term. Stalling him, the CIA, backed by the entire US Intelligence Community, had counselled strongly against it, stating that it would generate an avoidable Class 8 Exposure to Risk (ETR) scenario. President Bush, nearing his final months of authority and exasperated at being continually thwarted by his bureaucrats, had overruled them.

Despite their misgivings the Protective Agencies were well-trained and confident. However, as a petty punishment for their obstinacy, the CIA's proposed budget for the trip had been squeezed hard by the White House insiders. From the outset of the announced trip the US Navy chiefs had been bullish, claiming their President's visit as a good opportunity to show off their global reach and latest ordnance. They also spun the added hope that this display of strength might help garner a few new arms sales to the wealthy Nigerians. It might also persuade other friendly nations of the area to buy American, rather than choose French, British, Swiss or Israeli weapons.

Since this 'wish list baby' had been around for a long time, the CIA had made a wise investment by ensuring that Buck Tansett and his guys from PYRAMID Security had been shooed-in for the Stade de Benin project, easing sideways the French incumbents SecurMAX. Back in the day Buck Tansett had been a minor legend in the CIA, before he was 'cannonballed' for having a hot fling with the previous Assistant Director's dishy Personal Assistant. The scuttlebutt whispered the PA had been deemed 'Holy Ground', reserved only for the great man himself.

Spanish Sparrows

The CIA Human Resources Division also knew that working in Africa always threw up medical claims from Field Staff. Everyone in the CIA knew that the area was rife with malaria, AIDS and other nasties such as Ebola which lurked in these tropical jungles. Everyone also knew that there was little kudos to be gained on this particular operation - babysitting an outgoing President at the tail-end of his powers. The smart money was looking ahead, to the next guy in line. As a result suddenly all the best people were 'unavailable', for a variety of highly plausible reasons.

The PYRAMID deal had come on a plate, brokered by one of Buck's contacts, a man based at the European Central Bank in Frankfurt, using his influence to set it up for a small additional consultancy fee. At only \$750,000 US, the one off 'premium payment' to the French Stadium Contractor to ensure that Buck's crew got the contract had been a snip. Anyhow, it was argued, since PYRAMID would earn back most of this easement money, it would be recycled into the economy of North America. A rough estimate showed that the payment was less than a quarter of what they might have had to pay for 'full-blown CIA access', since the French were always sticky when it came to accommodating their US allies. Putting PYRAMID in place as their cipher also avoided the further cost and hassle of carrying out weeks of difficult forward investigation and surveillance, in a zone fraught with time-wasting corruption and intrigue.

On the above basis, the CIA hierarchy were happy they could leave the Stade de Benin to Buck Tansett and his team, allowing CIA personnel to concentrate their efforts on covering the incoming and outgoing access routes for their President and securing the main and back-up hotel accommodation.

00000

The sun was peeping up over the dark outline of the West African coast. Sumo and Kit stood on the bridge of the *Cape Gannet* watching the dark smudge of the *African Rose* disappear over the lightening horizon. Sumo had uploaded his intrusion video clips to Maisie and Prof Mel, covered by his terse voice report and his views. He had not included reference to his impromptu disposal of the Filipino.

At just before eight o'clock the bright sun spilled over the horizon and began its steep rise out of the lush greenness of tropical Africa.

Eighty nautical miles to the South the desk-jockey pilots on the *Carl Vinson* sent out the first of their drone missions of the day. During daylight hours they would aim to fly at least three of the four drones at any one time. By flying over the land, the drones would be looking in the wrong place.

The *African Rose* drifted slowly forwards. Again, to keep up appearances as a research vessel, she flew her observation balloon, but now with its platform empty. For the moment the Germans remained out of sight.

Spanish Sparrows

The countdown to the President's visit to Contonou had begun.

Spanish Sparrows

Foreboding

Tom was fast asleep, curled in a foetal position, his face half-buried in the bedsheet, exhausted by Maisie's earlier demands. The room was cool and black, the low hum of the air conditioning unit the only competition to Tom's occasional explosive grunts. He had had a long busy day, with extended shifts fulfilling his role a supervisor with SecurMAX, a cover he needed to maintain so that he could continue to act from the inside the Stade de Benin over the vital hours to come.

Maisie checked her *BlackBerry*:

Sun 18-Feb-08
05:39

Her mind swung backwards, reviewing once again.

Since their initial romp she had not slept a wink. Then, alerted by the soft pulsing of the wake-up alarm on her MacBook, she had left Tom asleep to check Sumo's video and overlaid voice report. She had viewed it ten or more times, re-winding and fast-forwarding, putting herself in the fo'c's'le hold with Sumo, the gas bottles radiating nuclear contamination, the footballs which must be bombs of some sort. At each viewing she had become ever more jittery.

From Biscuit's earlier report of The Sheik's meeting with the Cabal it was clear that her opponent had made elaborate long-range preparations. She could not convince herself that this careful man would rely only on some sort of low-tech aerial attack, no matter how proficient the German paragliders might be. He must also have a back-up plan - it was in his nature, she reasoned. But what was it?

After this disturbing MacBook session, Maisie was needy, seeking re-assurance and had roused Tom for a further brief coupling, hoping her tried and tested formula would release her brain into a reverie to reveal the clue she was convinced lay buried deep in her sub-conscious. So far this ploy had not worked and she was stuck, as if suspended in a mist of uncertainty.

Alone with her thoughts and fears, Maisie considered the unwelcome option of trying to gain direct back door access using her lapsed GCHQ keycodes to pass an anonymous warning to the CIA at Langley. Experience shouted "NO!" Later, inevitably, regardless of the operational outcome, the CIA would track-back the source of this warning, relentlessly, generating a high

Spanish Sparrows

risk of discovery. If the CIA found her, recognised her, they might at first offer grudging thanks for her warning.

However, she knew this bonhomie would soon evaporate when they realised hers was a small freelance outfit, not amenable to manipulation and hence, *de facto*, a rival. Inevitably, the CIA would huddle up to their Brit pals in the Foreign Office bureaucracy and spill the beans. The bruised egos in MI6/GCHQ would delight in serving retribution on her. At minimum they would obliterate her XCD Team, ending the excitement and satisfaction that these self-directed operations gave her, cutting off the financial harvest which funded her good works. She might even risk prosecution, incarceration, or elimination, depending on how deeply they probed.

There was also Sir Donald MacCorquindale and the Scottish contingent to consider. In the heat of the response to protect their President, the CIA would immediately relegate the Scots to a 'low priority', if they were even considered at all. Americans would always deploy their resources to protect their President as their first and over-riding primacy, just as MI6/GCHQ had almost certainly done over the Glasgow Airport car bomb attack, by focussing their resources predominantly on London, its airports and transport infrastructure. By sheer chance and the bravery of one man, no one had died at Glasgow. But for his intervention the outcome could have been so different.

It was that image of the devastation at Glasgow Airport, still raw, and what she and Sir Donald had learned in its aftermath that helped Maisie to her decision. She must hold firm, hold the initiative, and depend only on herself and her small XCD group.

At a few minutes before six o'clock she slipped out of bed, moved into the shower room and closed the door quietly. She did not want Tom pacing around, 'helping' her by his way of it, offering to make an early breakfast, cleaning up forensically after her, changing bed linen, vacuuming, cosying up behind her, nibbling at her ears, slipping his hands under her tee-shirt, tempting her. It was better that he slept on, so that he would be fully rested, sharp and energetic, ready for whatever she might demand of him during the crucial day that loomed ahead.

Fifteen minutes later, her hair still damp, naked under her lime green shorts and a pale yellow tee-shirt, she was perched in the Lotus position, her knees tucked under the coffee table with a large cafetiere to hand and her MacBook humming softly as she scrolled slowly through the wealth of data streaming to her from Prof Mel and Anisa.

Feeling the psychic wave approach, fully concentrated, Maisie closed her eyes.

Two hours later she drifted up out of her reverie. Her Think List, which had been last circulated prior to their nocturnal visit to the Stade de Benin, needed to be updated.

- The Sheik is bribing three ex-Presidents, probably with certified diamonds.

Spanish Sparrows

- It appears Jerry Rawlings (Ghana) is more important. Why?
- Rawlings is not happy with PYRAMID about something. Why?
- Or was this a ploy to extract more from The Sheik for his services.
- The Sheik has returned to Frankfurt. Anisa is tracking his phones but so far, nothing juicy.
- Crucially, no call yet from his sat phone to the *African Rose*.

She tapped out a priority action email and forwarded her updated Think List then added her requests:

- **Anisa:** I need transcript of any such call to AR. IMMEDIATE priority, please.
- **Prof Mel:** watch for large cash movements in The Sheik's accounts. Set up MiMics so that you can track any transactions. Advise IMMEDIATE movements, please.
- See video clip with Sumo's report. Sumo has also fessed up to leaving a few 'noisy' presents on AR. Good work, lad!
- The 'footballs' on AR are clearly unstable, probably toxic. Nerve agents? Any ideas? OUR TOP PRIORITY.
- The gas bottles are almost certainly nuclear waste. This may be one for our Cousins to deal with, I will advise.
- Knowing the mind-set of The Sheik, there MUST be a back-up plan that we are missing. WORRIED!
- And what do we make of the following?
 - Buck Tansett is ex-CIA.
 - Photo-file cross-check confirms ident.
 - Drummed out for silk sheets offence.
 - Or is he still on CIA payroll?
 - Or is he being coerced?
 - Find out about his family: Wife: Kids: Locations?
 - Denton Smith has no official footprint, so far. URGENT! URGENT!
 - Denton Smith is the KEY!
 - Do we have anyone in Belarus we can trust?
 - Pay for help if necessary: cloak us as Mossad.
 - Biscuit is in place. Plan DIVERT is now in process.

Spanish Sparrows

Action This Day

By ten o'clock the sun was rising fast towards its zenith. The Stade de Benin was filling slowly, everyone getting ready for the grand opening when President George W. Bush would arrive for the naming ceremony, scheduled for 13:00.

Maisie stood on the penthouse terrace scanning the growing crowds through her binoculars. She was changed into her new persona, made-up, ready for action, now a chubby man with a goatee beard and spectacles with grey lenses. Maisie was wearing a SecurMAX uniform displaying a Red Area pass. His cover story was he had been drafted recently to assist the Bakker Sound team to ensure they had full access to all areas to allow them to finalise the operation of the PA System.

Under the padding inside the loose-fitting uniform yellow tunic and blue open-necked shirt and matching blue trousers, Maisie was wearing a small front-facing belly rucksack loaded with the tools and weapons she might need.

Tom had provided the finalised schedule for the Presidential visit and was now down there in his SecurMAX uniform, making his way to the Athletes' Village to watch over the Scottish contingent, as their unofficial minder. Tom also had a Red Area pass.

According to Tom's information, *GWB* would speak briefly (8 minutes maximum) directly from the Presidential Suite, using the PA system, just ahead of the inaugural event, a soccer match between *Washington All-Stars* and *Benin Bight Electrics*, lavishly sponsored by the US Government.

The minutes seemed to pass ever more slowly, as it always did in times of tension before the main action was expected.

00000

Using her binoculars, Maisie spotted Sir Donald seated in the VIP area just below the Presidential Suite. He was reading a book, relaxed, unaware of the impending danger. Tom came into view, wearing his distinctive fluorescent green SecurMAX uniform with its crimson shoulder flashes. He leaned close to Sir Donald, whispered in his ear then left without engaging in discussion.

Masie watched. Sir Donald remained seated as before, but his demeanour had changed. He now sat up, alert, his head scanning the scene slowly with an experienced eye, checking for anything out of kilter. Unexpectedly, Jimmy Bakker excused his way along the row. He greeted Sir

Spanish Sparrows

Donald. Standing, they hugged, as old friends, a connection Maisie knew nothing about. Jimmy sat down and Sir Donald immediately began whispering in his friend's ear.

Time was now moving ahead with increasing speed, ticking up towards *GWB's* arrival. Security gave the appearance of being tight. The supposedly innocuous CIA 'helpers' were stand-outs, most of them obvious white faces among black, all wearing dark Western suits, white shirts and ties, like uniforms.

The MacBook sounded on the dining table.

Anisa reported:

- Located BT home in Hamilton, Ontario.
- Called as phone company checking line.
- Housekeeper says BT overseas, in Africa.
- Wife (Marissa) and three kids also overseas, visiting grandparents in Europe.
- No record of border crossings. Are they still in Canada? Hostages?
- Check shows Marissa Tansett has family name of Kovačević.
- Prof Mel alerted, and now searching for connections.

Prof Mel reported:

- Photo-scan of Bosnian war “dead”, reveals Denton Smith = Dario Kovačević. (Kovačević means “Blacksmith”.) Apologies for missing this during earlier search.
- DS/DK known to have studied in Moscow and Belarus.
- A trusted contractor for KGB.
- DS/DK handler was Tomasz Drueber.
- DS/DK and TD believed to have organised the assassination of Serbian PM Zoran Dindic.
- DK has been dubbed “The Ghost of Kosovo” because of his ability to disappear after reeking death and destruction.
- GCHQ ‘Bizarre-Links’ algorithm shows excerpt below, (my emphasis)

“Slobodan Mizdrak, a physicist from Zagreb, Croatia, recently visited Visoko for the fifth time. During his stay, he recorded electromagnetic phenomena on the top of the **Bosnian Pyramid of the Sun**. Several TV cameras followed Mizdrak while he conducted his research.

Spanish Sparrows

Prof. Mizdrak has detected and measured an electromagnetic beam which goes through the tip of the Bosnian Pyramid of the Sun. He discovered that the beam has the radius of 4.5 meters and a frequency **of 28 kHz.**

While the radiation measured outside of the 4.5 metre radius is minimal, radiation measured inside of the beam on the top of the pyramid is 1.9V. When measurements are taken 3 meters above the top of the pyramid, the intensity increases to 3.9 V. The measured beam is continuous and increases in strength as it moves up and away from the top of the pyramid.”

Anisa further reported:

- Phone records for all Kovačević numbers in the database show numerous calls from Denton Smith line in Stade de France Administration Office to Ernad Kovačević at address in Lukavica, outskirts of Sarajevo, Bosnia.
- Voiceprints reveal Buck Tansett and A.N. Other, presumed Denton Smith/ Dario Kovačević, speaking to female in mixture of English and Serbo-Croatian.
- Transcript (attached) reveals hostage situation.
- Last call ended 01:43 hrs today your time (also 01:43 hrs Sarajevo).
- Suggest I block the line?

Maisie sent back "YES, immediate!"

Maisie's BlackBerry pinged the arrival of a text from Tom:

- Eight-man Ghana Triathlon team failed to return from light training run.
- Buck Tansett says that I don't have to worry, he said everything is under control!
- BT said it is part of a special surprise to welcome the US President!!!!!!!!!!!!

Sumo reported by email:

- AR now one mile from coast at Contonou.
- Currently deploying balloon platform.
- 8 man Jump Team on board. No sighting of Colonel D.
- Light onshore wind, estimate 10-20 minutes glide time to Stadium.
- Permission to act?"

Maisie sent back: " Yes, immediate."

Spanish Sparrows

Ten seconds later Radley soared high into the air then dipped to fly at two meters above the waves, making the quadcopter virtually impossible to detect from the *African Rose*. Kit Lucas estimated the flight time as 7 minutes, expecting to drop the firecrackers at 12:51.

The Stade de Benin PA system blared the "Star Spangled Banner" and Maisie moved to the terrace to see the cavalcade of limousines and motor-cycle policemen approximately 50 meters distant racing towards the Main Entrance.

Lying in his eyrie, Biscuit zeroed the scope, breathed out slowly, held his breath and squeezed. The silenced weapon coughed softly and he re-focussed.

The first plastic-tipped bullet hit the bonnet of the Presidential car with a dull thud, removing the American Flag in spectacular fashion before ricocheting away harmlessly. The second bullet crazed the front windscreen and the third hit the rear windscreen as the armour-plated car accelerated away from the Stade de Benin.

The CIA Leader in the front passenger seat called in the Code Red Alert on his secure sat phone, speaking directly to Admiral Ben Fleeting who was standing in the Bridge of the *USS Carl Vinson*. The ship's Executive Officer, listening in to this exchange in his ear bud, acted on the Admiral's nod and pressed the two-tone SCRAMBLE Klaxon.

Appropriate and well-rehearsed responses were set in train in accordance with the Presidential EVAC plan. In the first minutes the cooperating teams did not know if they were responding to a real emergency or if this was yet another training exercise.

The Presidential Marine Security Detail, who had been sitting in the shade cabin at Code 4 Alert status since Air Force One landed two hours earlier, bounded across and jumped into the helicopter. They were at Code 5 and began checking their equipment for the hundredth time before settling to a crouch, ready for action, fingers caressing the safety slides on their weapons. This helicopter, now designated Marine One, took off within 30 seconds of the SCRAMBLE Klaxon.

The rotors on the 6 Seahawks were already turning. The Hostage Rescue Medivac Ops Marines were already fully kitted up, wearing Kevlar body armour, sporting weapons for close combat, and hefting small rucksacks containing flash-bangs (stun grenades) and Smoke and CS canisters. All carried NCD (Nuclear Chemical Defence) hooded headsets in a net across their chests. Two men in each team wore wet suits, carried snorkel masks and were shod in flippers, ready to drop into the ocean, if required.

On *USS Carl Vinson* the Flight Deck 'Captain' checked his stopwatch: from the SCRAMBLE Klaxon to the last helicopter taking its place in the tight protective ball formation around Marine One had taken just under three minutes. The seven helicopters were now wave-hopping, hurtling towards the Benin coast, and winding up to their top speed of 146 knots (168 mph).

Spanish Sparrows

At 12:57, from the Bridge of the *USS Carl Vinson* a relieved Admiral Ben Fleeting handed command and control of his Marine One squadron to the EVAC Commander on the AWACS plane flying high above the unfolding drama. The estimated flight time to the pre-arranged Evacuation Rendezvous One (EVAC-R-One) was now 8 minutes away.

The standby helicopter Marine Two was now centre stage on the Flight Deck, fuelled, with its rotors turning. The first two of a further squadron of ten Seahawks were being moved up from the Hanger Deck to the Flight Deck and readied for action, including the fitting of live ordnance.

Two of the Reapers were under recall to be fitted with weaponry and the other two were circling, streaming high-definition digital images to the AWACS bird overhead, as the Presidential cavalcade raced to the helipad at the fortified out-of-town hotel (now designated EVAC-R-One). This would have been the hotel where the President would have stayed overnight if his visit had not been disrupted.

Instead, *GWB* would be re-located to the floating fortress of the *USS Carl Vinson*, until the situation was clarified.

00000

At 13:04 hours Maisie's left earbud came alive with a voice-activated transmission from Denton Smith's office.

'So, mister big CIA man Buck Tansett, you have failed me. Our Fat American Pig has escaped. Believe this mister, if the rest of this mission fails, you and your family will die before the Sun sets this day.'

This voice was high, thin and accented. It must be The Ghost, she surmised.

'You listen to me, you little piece of dog crap, it was one of your dopes that gave it up. Try that half-wit Ric Royston, your so-called electronics expert. Where did you dig him up from? Took him bloody weeks to get your special tweeter horns working properly, didn't it? He's up to something, I'm sure of it. I'm surprised Bakker didn't spot what he was up to. I had to run a lot of heat on that bastard to keep him diverted.'

'Hey, don't you dare to sit down! Get out of here Tansett, NOW! Get back up to the Control Room! See if you can get some order back into the proceedings, we might be able to recover it if we can get the Germans to drop on the car. Their back-up hotel should still be reachable, yes?'

Spanish Sparrows

'So that's the plan, is it? I'm the dummy who has to go back out there, is that it? While you stay down here, in the protected area? No way Jose! Anyway the whole US Navy will be round our President like angry wasps. Face it, dope head, it's over. Get me my wife on the phone! Now! You little bastard or I'll....'

The thud of a silenced bullet hitting a human skull ended the conversation. Two minutes later the sound of a door being slammed shut and double locked ended the voice-activated transmission from Denton Smith's office.

The MacBook pinged. Sumo reported:

- Presents left on *African Rose* have been 'opened' successfully.
- Explosions!
- Balloon unleashed and currently at estimated 2,000 metres and rising fast.
- 2 No. dunked, chutes failed to open, presumed dead on impact.
- 6 No. still aboard balloon.
- Kit requests permission to chase/kill in Lynx.
- 7 No. US helicopters heading for Contonou from *USS Carl Vinson*.

Maisie sent back:

"Monitor only. No Lynx. Stay with AR, unfinished business."

From a distance, the first of the local Police and Ambulance sirens began to sound, getting louder by the second.

Maisie sent the word "Extract" to Tom's *BlackBerry* and then ran the software package to transfer control of the Stade de Benin PA system to her MacBook right earbud.

She spoke firstly in clear, slow French, knowing it was the most understood language in this former French colony. Her accent was that of a haughty, imperious Parisian, as might be heard from a lady announcer at Charles de Gaulle Airport.

She then repeated her message in slow, clear, BBC English as used in the early days of radio.

Please pay close attention to this announcement. Please pay close attention to this announcement. This stadium is under attack by terrorists. I repeat; this stadium is under attack by terrorists. Your lives are in danger. This message applies to everyone, including security personnel. Take care of each other. Do not panic. Leave the stadium immediately. This is a first and final warning. The PA system is about to be shut down for security reasons.

Spanish Sparrows

Maisie then repeated the message in slow German and then finally again in English.

Maisie's BlackBerry signalled a reply from Tom:

- All Little Lambs now safe in fold at Safe Base One.
- Big Cat on the Prowl.
- Will I go look-see, retrieve?

She replied: "No, take Little Lambs to Safe Base Two, by whatever means."

Maisie added a further announcement, in English, in her normal Glasgow lilt:

*Big Cat, Big Cat, this is not a hoax.
Big Cat, this is real.
Masie has our Little Lambs.
Get out now!*

Checking with her binoculars, Corky was no longer findable in the melee. Knowing he would react according to instinct and training, taking command of his immediate surroundings, calming those in his orbit, organising them, managing them to safety, Maisie knew she must leave him to follow his instinct and hope he survived unscathed.

She keyed the code-word for "FIRE" and hit return. In the empty Control Room there followed a series of tiny explosions, wrecking the key components inside Jimmy Bakker's Sound Desk, although superficially the PA system might appear able to function.

Immediately, Maisie left Bashir Wiltshire's penthouse wearing oversized heavy-duty boots which required four pairs of socks to make them wearable. Her face was a more masculine variation of Lena Selznick. Her home-made Red Area badge identified her as "Martin Schaeffer". If required, Maisie could provide the irritable Martin with a convincing South African light baritone voice, speaking English with a harsh Afrikaans inflection.

Now fully focussed in her new persona, she clumped down the stairs, out of the building, heading towards the Stade de France, shuffling like the older and stiffer middle-aged man she had now become.

Police and the PYRAMID and SecurMAX teams were playing catch-up, trying to manage the unplanned emergency evacuation. Despite Maisie's plea for calm, there was chaos in the Stade de Benin, with the excitable African crowd shouting to each other. Those who had mislaid a child or family member were screaming and wailing, struggling to get back through the security cordon to search for them.

Spanish Sparrows

What if Tom finds Denton Smith/Dario Kovačević and take matters into his own hands?

The Ghost of Kosovo had information that Maisie needed to extract from him before he died.

Spanish Sparrows

Drop Dead

On approaching the *African Rose*, Radley swooped upwards to hover at 50 metres above the ocean. On the screen Kit Lucas viewed the forward deck below and released the cluster of tiny firecrackers which rained down like pebbles. Hitting the deck smashed their fragile fuse phials, causing a rapid series of hammer-blow explosions masked in part by the restless whine of the balloon winch. The impulsive force from the firecrackers activated the fuses buried in plastic explosive charges which in turn blew out the deck bolts holding the winch anchor plate, freeing the balloon tether hawser which began to spool out without restraint. The fail-safe locking brake dropped into its slot. The enormous uplift force from the balloon did the rest, ripping the anchor plate and heavy winch base away from the deck creating a two-ton pendulum loaded at the end of nearly 1.5 km of hawser.

As the winch base accelerated upwards it slewed forwards and smashed into the side of the bridge, destroying the satellite dish and the AIS pod beyond repair.

Minutes later the second batch of firecrackers exploded on the aft deck and several lengths of tele-motor piping blew off brackets and fractured, spraying hot greasy hydraulic fluid onto the deck, creating a temporary mini skating rink.

With her rudder now powerless, the *African Rose* began to yaw, turning slowly head to wind. Within a few minutes her stern was pointing towards the Benin shoreline, now less than three kilometres away. One of her twin screws, snagged by pipework debris from the aft deck explosion, was bent out of shape, virtually useless.

Untethered, the huge balloon began to climb rapidly and below it, on the end of the hawser, the winch anchor plate began to swirl, like the end of a giant lasso moving in slow motion far below the balloon platform. By design the platform was open sided, its wooden deck covered by a fine nylon cord 'carpet' like a taut fishing net, intended to prevent feet slipping. At the end of the hawser the heavy winch base continued to rotate, gradually building momentum, causing the platform to spin wildly making the balloon suspension cords weave themselves into a tight hour-glass knot. This action caused the balloon platform to slowly rotate winding the suspension cords ever more tightly.

Caused by the violent swing motion of the platform, these suspension cords were bundled unevenly and as the weave knot tightened, the twisting motion slowed as the platform began to tip up, slowly at first and then with increasing pace, swinging steeply from the horizontal. Two members of the eight-man 'German' Triathlon Team became unbalanced and slid off. The others

Spanish Sparrows

clung to the mesh on the floor, screaming at the unexpected situation for which they had not been trained.

Hans was crouched low on the platform, holding tightly to a corner suspension cord. He peered over the edge but he could see nothing of the two lost members of his team. Far below, invisible, the two men were plummeting to their deaths, screaming with fear. In their panic they had deployed both the main parafoil and the smaller emergency (lollipop) parachute simultaneously, causing them to become entangled so that neither functioned correctly. When they hit the ocean surface, the high impact caused their footballs to explode spectacularly, like the miniature battlefield tactical nuclear weapon which had provided the basis for their design.

These explosive sounds were at once collected and analysed by the *USS Carl Vinson* and her escorts. All sensors were immediately re-focussed to this otherwise 'blank' area of the ocean's surface. The various computers compared all known data. Within the fleet in total over eight hundred sharp and well-trained minds dissected the outputs. The "NULL RETURN" caused great consternation and head-scratching. Several theories were proffered as to what had happened, generating a confusing swirl of debate.

In parallel with this discussion the raw data from the two high intensity surface explosions were being disseminated to many other parties on the Integrated Naval Command Network (INCN) located in over a hundred dispirit centres around the globe, to be re-analysed repeatedly, in the search for missed clues and nuances in the data.

This info-net included the US Los Angeles class submarine *SSN 759, USS Jefferson City* - short code *Jeff City*) commanded by the aggressive red-haired Captain Todd Garner, knick-named 'The Bulldog'. His role was to add to the protective screen by scanning the underwater environment for hostile submarines and the new threat of underwater drones. Todd's team had also recorded these surface explosions, but only faintly as the major part of the explosive energy had been reflected upwards from the ocean surface. Prior to receiving these data from the info-net what *had* been occupying the *Jeff City* were the unexplained bangs, explosions and bizarre behaviour of the research vessel *African Rose*, previously classified as 'risk-free'.

Todd set his team to work on these new data from the info-net but before Garner could make his report, a further signal arrived demanding that he explain why he had missed this hostile activity, now assumed to have emanated from an undetected underwater source. Thirteen seconds later Todd Garner confirmed that the seas below the location of these explosions was 'clean' and suggested that the explosions had originated from an aerial attack, perhaps from a land-based launch site.

This report from the *Jeff City* was not well received because its tone ruffled many feathers. The explosions must have come from an underwater source, the other commanders reasoned. But because Todd Garner was well respected the search focus now moved landward. This required a detailed play back-analysis of the data-log from the Reapers, to determine if

Spanish Sparrows

undetected Shore-to-Ship missiles had strayed off course or alternatively, if undetected attack airborne drones had been deployed outwards from Benin towards the Carrier Group but had failed and strayed off course. As a result, all sensors and minds were looking landward, not at the balloon soaring ever higher above the Carrier Group. And, crucially, since the balloon was *moving away*, the SKY-VU software monitoring the automated array of upward-looking sensors dropped this now tiny speck from its watch list without reporting it as a threat.

The balloon continued its steady ascent. The air around it was cooling rapidly and the wind speed was increasing. The cords began to unwind, causing the platform to spin in the opposite direction, and the whole sequence began again, but in reverse.

As the balloon soared through the 5,000-metre altitude level, (more than half the height of Mount Everest), the surrounding air temperature could have been measured at around *minus 30 Celsius*. This lighter colder air was turbulent, gusting between 40 to 50 knots, buffeting the platform. Crucially for the men clinging to it, this airstream was pushing them away from Benin towards the vastness of the open ocean.

As the platform swung almost level, it paused. In Han's earpiece the voice of Colonel D was screaming, telling him to get himself and the others off the platform, to get them flying before it was too late. But the other Jihadists were out of Han's reach, at the far side of the platform, nearer to Wolfie.

'Get them off Wolfie!' screamed Hans. 'Stamp on their fingers, kick them, but get them off! Then jump yourself!'

When Colonel D began his next tirade, Hans ripped out the earpiece and tried to concentrate. If he let go of his cord he might slither across out of control and smash into one of the others which, he thought, might cause their football bombs to explode prematurely.

The Martyrs knew these footballs were bombs but had been told nothing of the acoustic detonator mechanisms inside the footballs they carried strapped to their chests and could not know that these detonators were set to respond to an inaudible 28 kHz signal, to be generated by the Stade de Benin PA system. Nor did they know that the seven active football bombs would create shock waves that would kill everyone within a two-mile radius.

What Hans *had* been told was that his role was crucial. He had been awarded the extra glory of making a video from his head-camera. These images would be uploaded by the communications pack strapped to his back, sending them live to the geo-stationary satellite which would instantly beam them down to a computer in a safe location in Belarus. (This was another lie: the computer was in Frankfurt under the control of The Sheik.) Hans had been told that this would make him a hero, that his name would be remembered by the Sons of Allah forever. For this reason Hans must be the last to approach the stadium so that he could capture

Spanish Sparrows

their attack on *The Great Satan*, while it was in progress. Hans had not been told that his bomb was faulty to ensure that he captured the entire horrific scene.

Like the others, once inside the airspace of the Stade de Benin, Hans must aim himself and his football bomb directly at the Presidential Suite. They had been promised that the protective heavy glass screen would be opened for them as they approached. And they had been warned that the CIA would riddle them with bullets but that when the balls exploded their deaths would be quick and virtually pain free.

If Wolfie heard Hans's cry above the rush of the air, he did not respond to its command. Wolfie was lost, frozen with fear. The platform began to swing up again. Hans decided he must risk it, and lunged across, skidding and scrabbling, using his feet to gain traction on the mesh, he almost slipped over the edge, seized onto his friend with his left hand and snatched at the floor mesh with his right and clung on, his breath coming in great gulps, filling his lungs with cold, thin air.

Now that the weight distributed on the platform had changed, it began to spin more rapidly and as it angled up towards 60 degrees, the extra weight of Hans holding onto Wolfie caused his friend's frozen fingers to prise open. With a cry of despair, Wolfie let go and he fell over the edge, with Hans clinging to his friend's harness with left hand, gripping the floor mesh with his right.

'Wolfie, we can still do it,' Hans screamed. 'I'm going to push you away and rip open your Main. Right? *GO!*'

Hans let go the harness and grabbed at Wolfie's ripcord handle then shoved hard against his friend's chest.

Wolfie tumbled away. His main parafoil jerked open violently. As the parafoil snatched at the thin air, the whiplash effect caused by this sudden deceleration snapped Wolfie's neck. Without skilful hands to guide it in the turbulent air, Wolfie's parafoil stalled.

Hans leapt from the platform and hurtled downwards, trying to keep his head up and his feet pointing downwards while focussing on his friend ahead of him, deliberately holding off pulling on his ripcord to make sure he was ahead of his friend, desperate to retain his role as their leader.

Unaware of what had happened to Wolfie, Hans plummeted onwards in free-fall, counted to ten, tucked in his chin and pulled the handle to release his main. It jerked him up violently. The sudden deceleration was like a blow to his solar plexus, winding him, causing him to black-out momentarily, his hands reacting by instinct and training, grabbing at the guide cords to stabilise his parafoil.

Spanish Sparrows

Far below the semi-conscious Hans, wrapped in the parafoil and its control lines like an untidy ball of string, Wolfie's corpse was accelerating towards its terminal velocity. When it hit the ocean, it was travelling at nearly 120 mph and the surface seemed like solid concrete. Wolfie's football exploded and his body was blown to smithereens.

Hans returned to a woozy consciousness but was disoriented. At first all he could see was blue. It might have been the blue of the sky or blue of the ocean. He tugged down hard with his right hand, the aerofoil responded. Hans was back in charge, higher than he had ever flown, gasping for breath, shivering in the strong sub-zero wind. In the far distance he saw the thin green line of Africa. Now that he had a reference horizon, Hans began to function better and forced the chute into a wide shallow arc to take stock, checking in vain for his friend Wolfie.

The Carrier Group registered the further explosion from Wolfie's football but assumed that it had been another failed Shore-to-Ship missile so the entire focus remained on hunting for the Benin based launch site they were sure must exist.

Far above Hans, the huge balloon continued its upward journey, reaching twice the height of Mount Everest. The four remaining men, starved of oxygen and frozen by the sub-zero temperature, were near to death from hypothermia, but clung to the floor mesh through instinct. Depressurisation had caused the plastic shells of their footballs to rupture and collapse, destroying the firing mechanisms.

The relative higher internal pressure caused the reinforced fabric of the huge balloon to split and the helium charge leaked away. The balloon slowed to a stop then began its downward journey, its speed increasing as gravity re-claimed it. As it fell the platform overturned and the men, now unconscious, dropped free, tiny specks hurtling towards the vastness of the ocean below.

Gravity tugged harder and the platform continued its gradual downward trajectory, trailing the remaining shreds of the balloon.

Far below, Hans knew nothing of this, heard no sound, saw no falling debris. Searching the skies, he accepted he was now alone.

He checked his wrist altimeter: 2,400 metres. It also showed the time as 13:18 and he knew he had missed the window of opportunity. He estimated that the distance to landfall was 15 to 20 kilometres and judged that even with the benefit of the light prevailing onshore wind the glide distance to the Stade de Benin was unachievable from this remaining altitude.

With his prime target lost to him forever, tears of self-pity and frustration came to him. It was so unfair. Because of a fault in the balloon tethering mechanism, he had been denied *Shaheed*, the Martyrdom he had earned, that he deserved. Without *Shaheed* Hans knew that his many past sins would count against him. He would not enter Paradise. What he faced instead

Spanish Sparrows

was a lonely death by drowning, far from shore with the risk of being eaten by the many sharks he had been told inhabited these waters.

In his despair he lost concentration, causing the foil to stall.

Recovering but see-sawing violently, Hans saw directly below him the huge outline of the *USS Carl Vinson*, its *Old Glory* flag fluttering from the short mast behind the Bridge superstructure.

His heart surged and he swung the chute round in another wide arc and swooped down towards *The Great Enemy*.

On board the aircraft carrier the entire crew were at Battle Stations, awaiting the arrival of their President in *Marine One* together with her escorts. These incoming aircraft were now two miles distant. Every piece of ordnance on the *USS Carl Vinson* and her supporting *Defensive Screen* was 'up and ready'. The shipboard sensors on every vessel in the *Carrier Group* were now tracking Hans, although no human had sighted him. The *SKY-VU* sensor intelligence regarding this slow-moving object was shared automatically, and its software classified it as "BIRD".

At 1700 m above the flight deck Hans punched the emergency release pad on his harness and, freed of the collapsing aerofoil, he began to accelerate, plummeting downwards to his target.

Viewed by the naked eye from the aircraft carrier, Hans would be seen only as a tiny spec. But now, with his increasing downward velocity, the auto-assessment of Hans's 'signature' was changed by the *SKY-VU* software and Hans was re-classified as an "INCOMER".

The *IAWDS*, (*Integrated Automated Weapons Defensive System*) was already *ENABLED* and reacted without the need for human intervention. It began its sequence by emitting an array of anti-aircraft decoys and magnetic pulses. A bright flare whizzed past Hans making a loud zinging whine. This flare, one of hundreds fired in a starburst formation, emitted a full spectrum of acoustic and magnetic interference intended to disrupt and deceive the guidance systems of all known ordnance, including that of friendlies. Had Hans's football-bomb been functional it would have exploded.

Milliseconds behind these flares flew a virtual wall of high-speed metal from the *Phalanx CIWS* (*Close-In Weapons System*). The *Phalanx*, known to all aboard as *R2-D2* because of its shape, was firing thousands of 20mm hard-tipped projectiles every minute. The burst lasted ninety seconds. A few seconds later a further hail of exploding shells arrived from the *Miniguns* firing from the other vessels in the *Defensive Screen*.

Before he reached 900 metres, *Kasim Ariff* aka *Johannes (Hans) Groote* was history, shredded into a million pieces, his short life ended as anonymously as he had lived it.

Spanish Sparrows

Warned off by Admiral Ben Fleeting on the USS Carl Vinson, Marine One and her escorts wheeled away from the aircraft carrier and headed back to the coast, making for the second back-up safe location in Ghana to wait while the situation around the Carrier Group was clarified.

The whole Nimitz Class Carrier Group would remain on high alert for the next few hours, while they tried to identify the source of the attack by an unknown and un-see-able enemy.

Chaos Theory

Maisie flashed her Martin Schaeffer badge at the young Policeman manning the outer cordon, squeezed past him and shuffled onwards. There was no PYRAMID security presence at the Main Entrance and Maisie went directly upstairs, heading for the Control Room.

Moving quietly along the corridor, she heard two voices engaged in an acrimonious debate. The Control Room door was wide open but she could see only part of the room. She edged toward it, her back to the wall. Jimmy Bakker had the cover off the PA Sound Desk and was staring at it with a puzzled expression on his face.

'Fix it or else he dies.'

From the room bug, this was the thin high voice of Denton Smith.

Maisie squinted through the gap between the door frame and the edge of the door. Sir Donald was sitting in a roller chair, his wrists and ankles fixed to the chair with cable ties, his mouth sealed with duct tape.

'Look, pal, even God Almighty coodnae fix this. Some bastart has blown every key component. Look fur yerself. A right professional job if ever Ah saw wan, done bi sumbuddy who knows whit thur daein.'

'Only you and I have keys, right?'

'Whit about this half-wit Royston here, he's eywiz sticking he is neb intae things he duz nae understand. Fuckin' pest of the furst watter, this yin. Where did ye get him? In a fuckin' Lucky Bag?'

'Da li ću ga učiniti, šefe ?' barked Ric Royston. (*Will I do him, Boss?*)

Maisie could not see Ric Royston who was standing in the blind spot, but she knew his voice.

In her dominant left hand she held her Hangover Pop-Gun with its safety now set at "FIRE". In her right hand, with her thumb on its plunger, was a stubby syringe.

Spanish Sparrows

Stepping quietly back along the corridor for five paces, she accelerated into the Control Room and swung a heavy boot at the tiny Albino, catching him under the patella of his right knee, displacing it, bringing a scream of rage as he went down.

Ric Royston was too slow.

'Hej, ko si sad pa ti ...' (*Hey, who the hell are you...*)

The dart hit the man's throat, slightly to the left of his Adam's apple, and he collapsed in front of Sir Donald, temporarily unconscious.

Maisie kneeled beside The Ghost of Kosovo and stabbed through his trouser into his groin, near to his femoral artery, she hoped, pressing down hard on the plunger. The man's eyes glazed over and he became motionless. This was the first time she had seen this man in the flesh. She was surprised. Apart from odd wispy white-gold hair and strange red-pink eyes, he resembled the man called Mark Tripper, the man with half his face missing, the man who had once been good-looking.

Perhaps they were related?

Stunned by what had just happened, Jimmy Bakker eased backwards towards his friend Corky, spreading his arms protectively, wary, unsure what might happen next.

Enjoying her role as Martin Schaeffer, Maisie rose stiffly, speaking in Harry Dooley's Boston Irish drawl:

'Jimmy, boyho, now look at ye, eh? Consortin' wid the wrong types, so ye are now.'

'And who the fuck are you?'

'Look now, Jimmy, will ye be getting yer man there free and right out o' this building before something bad happens? Here, use this wee knife now.'

Jimmy caught the throwing knife deftly.

'Whit the fuck is this? Whit the fuckin' hell is going on here?'

'Listen, Jimmy, tink like the Marine you used to be and GET A BLOODY MOVE ON MAN! Alright?'

'God, it is you, Harry! Christ man, whit next in this bloody place. Cum oan Donnie, let's git ye right oot o' here. Ah telt ye we shoodnae cum up here, didn't Ah?'

Spanish Sparrows

As Jimmy bent to slash the cable ties, Maisie winked to Corky who winked back.

'Thanks Jimmy, let's go,' boomed Sir Donald's using his command-and-control voice. 'Trust me lad, I know this person; let's leave her to it, she works better alone. Let's go and find the Scottish squad, check that they're all safe and well.'

The door banged shut.

Maisie crossed and locked it, leaving the key in the lock, the other keys dangling on the ring filched from the cleaning ladies.

She checked that Royston was 'under but not out' then removed and stowed the used dart.

Maisie eased a soft, padded, in-flight sleeping mask over Denton Smith's eyes then injected the second component of the truth drug, rousing him near to consciousness while creating a sense of euphoria, destroying his inhibitions and loosening his tongue. Kneeling beside the tiny monster responsible for so many deaths and so much suffering, she eased the slider switch on the digital Dictaphone to the "Record" position and , held it to his lips, leaned closer to whisper in his ear, speaking slowly in Russian, using an East German accent:

'Well, now Dario Kovačević, it's time for your de-briefing. All your friends have left you, even Ric. This mission has not gone well for you, Dario. Tell comrade sister Yuliya everything and I'll make it right, make sure you get what you deserve.'

'Speak only in English, Dario.'

'Speak only in English, Dario.'

'Speak only in English, Dario.'

'Start by telling me your full name and aliases, the names of your Controllers and their contact details. Tell me about your Paymasters, all of them, and about The Sheik and his friends, especially the three Africans that you met at the Sheraton in Lagos.'

'Tell me what is in those gas bottles on the African Rose. And tell me where the hole-up will be if things went to rat-shit, as they have done. I have unfinished business with your Colonel D.'

'But first Dario, tell me about the back-up explosives for The Sheik's Plan B, where are they are located and how they were to be detonated.'

'Speak only in English, Dario.'

Spanish Sparrows

Under the effects of the truth drug, and guided by Maisie as Yuliya, the monotone robotic voice of the Albino droned for almost an hour. Each time he lapsed from English she stopped him, made him go back and re-tell his tale. When she was sure she had everything, she changed the SD Card in the Dictaphone and had him speak again, now identifying himself as Denton Smith, Head of Security at PYRAMID Security.

As she had done earlier, Yuliya insisted that he speak in clear English to describe again and in precise detail where the explosives were located and provide every detail about their booby traps.

Satisfied *Dario Kovačević* was no longer needed, Maisie gave The Ghost what she had promised, the justice he deserved. Her final injection would not give him a quick, pain-free death he might have been hoping for. Instead, it would cause his metabolism to go into overdrive, making his brain overheat, filling his mind with bizarre and frightening dreams. Given the dose she had used, and the tiny size of the man, in five or six hours either his heart or his brain would explode, releasing him to the Hell he fully deserved. This further injection was a 'one time, no antidote' death sentence drug, developed originally by the KGB, an irony Maisie enjoyed.

What she had heard convinced her that Ric Royston, The Ghost's long-term associate and enforcer, also deserved to die. But first she gave Royston an antidote to bring him back from his temporary coma, so that he might suffer the full effect of his second lethal injection.

She smiled:

Perhaps the pair would meet again in each other's nightmares?

00000

Maisie was convinced that The Ghost had revealed all that he knew.

Repeated tests had shown this latest version of the truth drug could not be duped or resisted. Mostly what he told was in broad outline. However, only when he described the back-up plan to blow the stadium apart whether the Germans arrived or not, did he provide fine detail, a certain sign that he had been personally involved.

- The primary motivation for The Sheik was money, to be made by exploiting money markets.
- Given the ferocity of the planned explosion the authorities would be in chaos, uncertain what had occurred, unable to point blame.
- At a precise and pre-arranged moment to be judged by The Sheik, Han's attack video was to be posted on "You Tube", with flash links to every major stock exchange.
- This stunning revelation would provide the first harvest for The Sheik and his fellow conspirators.

Spanish Sparrows

- A few hours later the Washington Post and the Times of London would both receive an anonymous tip off advising that the "You Tube" clip had been sent from an email address registered to a CIA safe house in New York, the financial capital of the world.
- A few minutes later, before this false 'revelation' could be suppressed, the story would be leaked to other media.
- In the turmoil to follow further great fortunes would be made and lost on the World's money markets, as had happened in the churning wake of the Twin Towers attack.
- During the inevitable and painstaking forensic examination of the Stade de Benin, it was expected that the damaged remains of Hans's faulty bomb would survive, to be used by CIA forensic scientists to trace certain key parts to the manufacturing plant in China.
- This, it was hoped, would cause a further wave of political unrest and re-alignments, allowing emerging nations such as Kosovo to consolidate their strangleholds on their peoples.
- Further money would also be made from investments in arms sales and further currency speculation.
- The other cynical part of the deal, taking advantage of the initial chaos in Benin, the *African Rose* was scheduled to call at a quiet port in nearby Ghana where her deadly cargo would be transferred ashore.
- The intent was that it would travel in a military style convoy, first heading inland to the northern territories of Ghana.
- The convoy would then turn East, cross the narrow strip of the Republic of Togo and terminate in Benin where the 'gas bottles' would be buried in the depths of a worked-out gold mine.
- This entire import process would be covered by false documents, enabled by bribes and would, on the face of it, appear to be 'legal'.

00000

Before leaving the Control Room, Maisie turned off the air conditioning, allowing the temperature to soar, to enhance the effect of the torture drug and encourage the decomposition process when they died. In the corridor she locked the door and squeezed Superglue into the keyhole, to render the lock inoperable.

On exiting the stadium, Martin Schaeffer sought out the most senior policeman he could find and handed him the Dictaphone with the second SD card loaded. Schaeffer explained that he had been ordered by Buck Tansett, his Supervisor at PYRAMID, to deliver the information given on the Dictaphone to the Police Commander. Schaeffer emphasised this message contained top priority information regarding explosives which had been placed throughout the stadium with a huge concentration in the vicinity of the Presidential Suite.

In the commotion that followed, Martin shuffled away to wander through the mix of policemen and soldiers, never to be seen again.

Spanish Sparrows

00000

The focus of the search which followed centred on the Presidential Suite. Dozens of booby-trapped explosives and incendiary charges with remotely operated radio detonators were discovered, arranged to also detonate sympathetically by the shockwaves from the exploding footballs or by the 28 kHz acoustic detonators, whichever activated them first.

By necessity the search and clearance exercise was slow, painstaking, and occupied the small inexperienced team of Benin Bomb Disposal experts for many long hours. This initial work would be followed by a further detailed search of all other areas of the Stade de Benin looking for possible secondary booby-trapped explosives devices.

When this search eventually reached the Control Room, its sabotaged lock would arouse great fear and suspicion. The two bloated bodies were finally recovered two days later. By the time the corpses reached the morgue, the neuro-chemicals Maisie had injected had morphed to become undetectable.

Given what had been found and fearing other hidden devices, the committee convened and decided to defer the Pan-African Games until a later date. No mention was made of what might be done with the huge pot of sponsorship money still held by the committee.

Spanish Sparrows

Who Goes There?

Following the earlier exchange with the aircraft carrier *Carl Vinson*, the submarine *Jeff City* had remained on station, hovering at 30 metres above the seabed, five miles due West of Contonou Airport. Throughout the drama of the sniper attack on *GWB*, the submarine had remained closed-up to silent stations, on 'passive' listening watch, virtually undetectable.

Despite the apparent calm efficiency which a casual observer might witness, for the submarine crew the last few hours had been tense, fraught, unlike the usual serenity which normally pervaded any Todd Garner submarine.

Four miles distant and clearly disabled, the *African Rose*, reversing in long slow arcs with her starboard screw running intermittently at top speed, then stopping for a few minutes before re-starting, as if trying to escape from her steady drift towards the Benin coastline now less than a mile away.

Garner and his team had first studied this elderly ship twenty-eight hours earlier. By searching the usual databases and requesting images via the satellites above, they had quickly confirmed her as the *African Rose*, a 4,500-ton inshore cargo ship converted to a marine research vessel in 2006. According to the registered data, the ship was captained by a Scotsman named Archibald Strang. Everything checked out and the 'target' had been relegated to the lowest risk category.

Monitoring this bizarre activity, *Jeff City* remained 'anchored' to a tiny electronic pod which 'tethered' her precisely at this fixed location using her ultra-secret Underwater Near-Field Communications System (UNFCS), a system akin to a terrestrial *Bluetooth* link. This anchor pod had been implanted on the ocean floor two days earlier at the location which Todd Garner had chosen after taking a satellite-star fix to check *Jeff City's* gyro-backed Underwater Positioning System (UPS). The UPS in turn fed data to her Sub-sea Hover Autopilot Control System (SHACS) which in turn operated her near silent thrusters. Although complex, the system had proved secure and reliable during three years of use.

If required, the submarine could remain hovering automatically and near silently like this for days, weeks, or even months, listening and recording anything which might suggest another unwanted underwater presence. *Jeff City* had done this many times, waiting silently near both 'hostile' and 'friendly' naval bases around the World, simply gathering data but always alert, ready to respond in a crisis with her array of weapons.

Spanish Sparrows

In a future Todd did not want to contemplate, this listening work might be devolved to the new wave of Underwater Drones like those he carried in his forward torpedo locker.

When operating independently, *Jeff City* would upload any crucial data arising directly to one of the many military satellites which roamed the skies 22 miles above. This Sat-Com was enabled by a tiny antenna about the size of a teacup floating on the surface above at the end of a thin cable. However, with the AWACS 'Eye in the Sky' circling lazily on station above Benin at 50,000 feet, the teacup antenna was hooked into the *USS Carl Vinson* Carrier Group Info-Net, making her a fully integrated part of its Defensive Screen.

Todd Garner was acknowledged by all as an expert at underwater surveillance. It was claimed his *Jefferson* team could 'hear a minnow's fart up to 200 miles away'.

Jeff City had heard and recorded the two series of explosions on the *African Rose*. The automated analyses computer had compared this data with its databank and classified them as "minor shipboard explosions, perhaps a natural gas canister, perhaps a fuel line". The system had zeroed the ship with her sensors and listened intently, but there had been no further obvious developments, apart from subsequent erratic activity from the vessel's twin screws.

Of greater interest to the listeners aboard *Jeff City* was the nearby dive ship, the *Cape Gannet* who from her recent manoeuvres seemed to be tracking the *African Rose*. A check via satellite had shown it was skippered by Lt. Commander Kit Lucas (Rtd), an ex-Royal Navy man whose NATO records revealed he had enjoyed an 'interesting service record'. Todd Garner's concern was that Kit Lucas might be now feral, that he had become a mercenary, despite his many awards and decorations.

This problem solved itself. Shortly after the explosions on the *African Rose*, the *Cape Gannet* had steamed away at high speed. A projection of her track inferred that she was on course for Accra, in Ghana.

Garner lost interest in the *Cape Gannet* and refocused his attentions on the antics of the *African Rose*. It seemed clear that the aging ship had lost steerage way and from the uneven thrash of her twin propellers was limping along the coast, travelling very slowly, and in reverse. Signals traffic analysis had not revealed an SOS. Indeed, the elderly vessel seemed intent on maintaining radio silence and seemed to have disabled her AIS pod.

Following the surface explosions nearly fifteen miles from the submarine, which had occurred in an otherwise 'silent' sector of the ocean, Garner had been drawn reluctantly into the signals mayhem that followed. The initial two explosions had generated a terse demand for a report on hostile underwater activity. The wording of this enquiry had suggested that the submarine must have failed to pick up the cause. Garner's reply had been professional but firm, explaining that the record clearly demonstrated the underwater zone in the vicinity of the explosions

Spanish Sparrows

was 'clean'. Reference to the *African Rose* and her problems and the recently departed *Cape Gannet* was not included, considered irrelevant and did not therefor enter the signals record.

Following the third explosion, (when Wolfie's corpse hit the surface), Garner again confirmed that no underwater source was responsible. He refused the 'suggestion' that he leave his watch station and go to the area to investigate. Undeclared, he did order a complete and detailed calibration check of all his equipment. This showed that everything was functioning to specification.

There followed a further round of signals traffic and repeated 'suggestions' from various surface ships and from the AWACS Commander that it would be 'prudent' for him 'to take a look-see'. For a second time Garner resisted, repeating that this was unnecessary and would be against his written orders.

These three surface explosions, which had occurred without warning and for which no land-based or aerial 'source' could be identified, were now being openly discussed in the signals traffic as a 'failed attack' on the Carrier Group. Egos and corners were being defended, and since the Reaper drone and AWACS surveillance analyses could find no source of a shore-based rocket launching site, the attention repeatedly returned to the *USS Jefferson City* and her apparent 'failure'. At each turn Garner insisted that the source must be land based.

Exasperated by what he read as Garner's lack of cooperation, and keen to have his President safely 're-homed' aboard his ship, Admiral Ben Fleeting snapped and issued a direct order:

USS Jefferson City must re-position herself to patrol the sector where the three explosions occurred.

The order came with the unnecessary rider:

"WITHOUT DELAY OR FURTHER DEBATE".

Reluctantly but promptly Todd Garner acknowledged receipt of this order.

Jeff City immediately turned from 'Passive' to 'Active' status. Detaching from her watch station buoy, she sent it a signal to self-destruct, preventing even the remotest chance of its discovery and the revelation of the top-secret technology it contained.

Within minutes the submarine turned away from the Bight of Benin and headed out to the deeper waters of the vast Atlantic Ocean. Accelerating to her top speed (classified) and with her forward-looking sonar blasting the seas ahead of her, the *Jeff City* team were searching for a hostile echo they were already certain they would not find.

Spanish Sparrows

Todd Garner understood what was happening; Ben Fleeting had done this before, setting Todd up as a 'scapegoat'. Garner made a mental note to have his 'afters' later, served cold and supported by his own data and auto-log to be presented at the inevitable de-briefing when it was all over.

The Bulldog knew he had the records to prove that these explosions, whatever had caused them, did **not** emanate from the underwater domain that he knew he 'owned', thus proving that any 'failures of detection' had been perpetrated **above** the surface of the ocean, not below it.

Spanish Sparrows

Desertion and Demise

Initially the launch of the balloon from the *African Rose* was going well.

Rasheed had been on the foredeck operating the winch controls. When the eight-man team of German Triathletes had left the platform to paraglide to the Stade de Contonou, the Pakistani was under instruction from the Frenchman to fully release the winch and allow the hawser to run off the spool, setting the balloon free to soar up into the stratosphere.

What Rasheed did not know was that at 60,000 feet, dozens of pressure sensitive detonators would ignite their incendiary charges, causing the balloon and its platform to burn fiercely to ashes, leaving no trace.

With all eyes focussed on the balloon, no one had spotted the drone overhead. The first sign of danger was the sound of machine-gun like explosions from the tiny firecrackers fore and aft.

Colonel D's first thought was that the *African Rose* was under attack from pirates. This assumption was swept away when louder explosions caused the winch deck plates to break free, causing the heavy winch to career across the deck and smash against the Bridge before swinging upwards, wildly out of control.

Watching on his binoculars, he saw the platform swinging and spinning wildly. None of the paragliders left the platform. Screaming a Hans through the radio had no effect.

The balloon disappeared above the clouds.

Shortly afterwards he heard two distant explosions followed a few minutes later by a third.

Rasheed was now on the Bridge, shouting that the ship was rudderless and that one of the propellers was out of action. Rasheed disappeared. The ship began to rotate, then stop, before moving astern at a slow crawl, slewing in a wide arc.

To get a better understanding of his situation, Colonel D raced up to the narrow wrap-round open deck surrounding the Bridge. The coastline now seemed very near and getting closer by the minute. There was no sign of pirates. Given the extent and nature of the damage fore and aft, his next thought was that this attack had been carefully planned and timed. Sabotage. His psychopathic bitterness swung on the Filipino crew. Seeing the anger on his face, they scuttled into hiding.

Spanish Sparrows

The *African Rose* and its deadly cargo were not his responsibility. That part of the deal had been struck independently between Archie Strang, Rasheed and The Sheik. The Frenchman had been a non-participant, saying nothing but in his opinion the additional use of the ship to transport illegal nuclear waste was an unwanted complication. He guessed the money must be good and presumed it would give The Sheik some leverage with the Russians.

In a cold rage he made a detailed inspection of the damage to the winch base and the hydraulic pipes on the aft deck and reasoned it the sabotage must have been caused by someone on board, someone set on defeating his carefully planned attack. The Filipinos were not capable of this level of sophistication. That left only three possibilities.

He had done his part. It was time to cut and run to move ahead to the next stage, make the best of it. Seething at this failure and these added complications, he struggled to keep his fury under control. It was time to meet out justice, punishment.

He returned to his three suspects.

Mohamed:

The small swarthy man from the ghettos of Paris had been aboard for months. Colonel D was a professional, working for money. His attachment to Islam was cynical, only ever used as a front. He had never liked or trusted fanatics, although he had to accept that Mohamed had been important in creating the suicide mentality essential for 'The Jihad Attack'. However, like many fanatics, the Imam was arrogant, unyielding, refusing to acknowledge the Colonel's authority over him.

Colonel D concluded that the cleric was probably bright enough to attempt double-dealing and conceal it. A law unto himself, Mohamed had had ample opportunity. Perhaps he had discovered last minute doubts in his faith, or more likely had always been a double agent. After a brief but inconclusive interrogation, the babbling Parisian changed tack, realising too late what the outcome of his interrogation must be, begging that he must not be thrown overboard as he could not swim. Pressed for time, Colonel D rammed the pistol into the babbling mouth and pulled the trigger giving him the martyr's death he had pleaded for.

In any case the cleric had been scheduled for execution to prevent him revealing details, boasting of his role. It was a pity to have to dispose of him so abruptly; Colonel D had planned a long, slow and humiliating death as a reward to himself.

Archie Strang:

The man was a drink and drug addict, but shrewd, although unlikely to have been sober enough to work with explosives without blowing himself apart. After another brief interrogation during which Archie garbled his drunken replies, making repeated tearful references to someone

Spanish Sparrows

called "Cissie" and to his "Mammie", Colonel D made his decision. Now that it was almost impossible for Strang to complete his delivery, the Scotsman must also die. The Colonel put two shots into Strang's bloated stomach, punishment for Strang's insolence on the few occasions when he had been sober. The Colonel locked the dying Scotsman in his cabin and snapped the key in the lock putting Strang's screams for help beyond the reach of the Filipino crew. From experience Colonel D knew the Scotsman's death would take many hours.

Rasheed:

By a process of elimination, this must be the man who had betrayed them, Colonel D concluded.

He found the Pakistani on the Bridge, trying to work out how best to control the rudderless ship. Rasheed proved defiant and superior, desperate not to lose face in front of his crew. As Colonel D raised his pistol to dispatch the Pakistani, the man had lunged at him with a switchblade, opening a large gash in the Frenchman's left forearm.

Rasheed died instantly, his eyes filled with rage and frustration, leaving the on-looking Filipinos stunned.

Those nearby fell to their knees before the Frenchman, expecting to be executed for a reason they did not understand.

The catastrophe unfolding on board the *African Rose* was not of his making and Colonel Pierre Depardieu knew he must move on, put this set-back behind him, try to collect his money from the Kosovan Denton Smith. For this he needed a head start. To be caught on board when the ship ran aground was not an option.

He did not rate the Filipinos important enough to consult although he enjoyed seeing the fear and awe in their eyes when they dared to look at him. Thankfully, they did not understand that he needed their cooperation, at least for a few hours.

He ordered them to prepare and launch the RIB on the pretext he wanted to be put ashore to try to find a salvage ship to come to their rescue. Colonel D ordered the Filipino first aider to patch up his arm then cleared everyone from the Bridge down onto the open deck.

Unaware that it was unnecessary, he then systematically sabotaged the wireless equipment, smashing the satellite phone system to smithereens. He did not want to leave anyone aboard with the means to reveal to the authorities he had left the ship, heading for shore. He locked the Bridge doors and sabotaged the locks as before to prevent access to the steering and engine controls.

00000

Spanish Sparrows

Dressed in jungle fatigues without insignia, a pistol in a hip holster, his basic essentials stowed in a waterproof holdall by his side, the tall Frenchman's small craft was racing along the shore towards Ghana, heading to the villa at Lome where he expected to meet Denton Smith. Provided the back-up plan to explode the Presidential Suite had proved successful, Colonel D had further money to collect. His two boat companions would be disposed of immediately he reached the small dock near the villa.

Even though *USS Jefferson City's* was moving away from the *African Rose* at high speed, the sensors on her towed sonar array tracked the RIB's initial progress. When its signature became very faint, it was automatically dropped from the multi-target watch list.

The assumption aboard *Jeff City* was that the *African Rose's* captain had sent someone ashore to get help, to raise a salvage operation. Whatever was happening aboard the aged research vessel, it did not appear to pose a threat to the Carrier Group and was manually demoted to 'tertiary' on the watch list.

00000

With the departure of Colonel D, the Filipinos aboard the *African Rose* hacked their way into the bridge and kept up the losing battle to operate the controls to try to prevent her from drifting ashore.

When they did finally beach their ship on a lonely sandy shore, they were surprised to find a very hostile welcome committee arrived within a few minutes to arrest them.

This interception had been arranged by the new President of Benin, who had received an anonymous letter providing details and a video record of what the *African Rose* carried in her forward hold. A cryptic explanation with copies of bank statements identified those involved. The dossier also gave full details of the original source of the nuclear waste, information pieced together by Prof Mel from her interrogation of The Sheik's offshore bank accounts. A detailed download from the AIS automatic tracking system records gave a printout of the *African Rose's* recent voyages, including her visit to Russia.

This info-pack had been delivered to the president's personal residence by a tall thin man wearing a fluorescent purple lycra cat suit and riding a folding bicycle.

After a short diplomatic struggle between the Russians and the Benin Authorities, the Russians organised a salvage tug to tow the *African Rose* and her Filipino crew back to Russia.

By the time the ship reached the Severomesk Naval Base, the Filipinos were no more, all buried at sea during the long slow voyage.

Spanish Sparrows

Spanish Sparrows

Afters

Shortly after five o'clock on the afternoon of Monday 18 February, four hours after the sniper attack on the President of the United States of America, the Stade de Benin was surrounded by a tight security cordon of military vehicles. The Police, it seemed, had been relegated to a secondary role on the grounds that Bomb Disposal was a military matter.

As the short, sharp twilight approached the sun was dropping towards the horizon but it was still sunny and searingly hot.

High above this activity Abernethy remained in a prone position, lying in the shade of the roof, wearing the "K-Kool Air-Con" coverall, his weapon disassembled and stowed, awaiting an opportunity to sneak down and out of the stadium during the coming darkness.

Sir Donald and the Scottish squad had been moved to a resort hotel further along the coast, the block booking paid for by the altruistic Truman McKinlay Hellgsborg III, who had been pleased to exercise his patriotic Gold Card to cover the costs of transport and accommodation.

Masie sat in Bashir Wiltshire's Penthouse, at the coffee table, in the Lotus position, her knees tucked under, her back upright, her mind focussed and her fingers flying over the keyboard, the SD card in the slot of the docking device. From time to time she re-wound the Kosovan's confession to be sure she had the correct numbers and passwords to his accounts. For most people recalling such long strings of numbers would be considered impossible. The power of the truth drug never failed to amaze her. In this modern era brutality and torture were old fashioned, unnecessary, and almost always yielded information riddled with errors.

Maisie was nearing the end of the process of retrieving and re-positioning the considerable wealth that Dario Kovačević (aka The Ghost of Kosovo) had accumulated over his fifty-three years as an insurgent and terrorist. As she worked, Tom was on his way to the Hole-Up location that Kosovan had divulged. On this occasion he had taken Bashir Wiltshire's aging Mercedes, fitted with a strap-on Taxi sign.

On board the *Cape Gannet* the Lynx was being prepared for an outing. Kit Lucas was very pleased to have another chance to fly his favourite toy.

00000

Spanish Sparrows

Maisie had prepared Tom for his outing. He was now a darker skinned Rasta calling himself Imani, with a wig of long corded black hair under a large floppy red, green and yellow hat. The tape in the Mercedes was thudding out Bob Marley and the car windows were down, so that the music could be shared for free with the World as Bob had intended, radiating fiercely from the old car as it weaved its way along the country roads.

Maisie had suggested they leave Colonel D to rot, but Tom had insisted that he fulfil his promise to himself, the one he had made in Tenerife in the wake of his discovery of the four desecrated corpses in the walk-in vault at *Das Rote Haus*.

Using *Google Earth*, Tom and Maisie had studied the location of the Villa on the beach near Lome. From the way that the shrub had been cleared on both inside and outside of the high perimeter fence, he expected he would have to deal with a security force of some kind. The safer option would have been to sneak in during the early hours of the following morning when the household would be asleep and its security at a reduced state of alertness. But Maisie had deemed that they must re-locate to Frankfurt urgently, to deal with The Sheik and Drueber. Seats were already booked out of Contonou, courtesy of Fida.

00000

Out of the thick, humid early evening darkness, the Mercedes raced up the final stretch of dirt road towards the villa high above the coast. Security floods were switched on, bathing the entrance in a harsh white light. The car skidded to a stop twenty paces short of the closed perimeter gates. Imani stalled the engine and slumped forward over the wheel, pretending to be asleep, stoned on Ganja, like any self-respecting Rastafarian man of his ilk. The air was filled with Bob Marley.

Behind the gate the guards debated for several minutes before deciding what to do about him. The right hand gate swung ajar and two guards approached, their silenced M3¹⁷ machine pistols held nervously out in front of them at full stretch, revealing their amateur status. One guard was short and thin, the other taller with a huge belly. The remaining guard, an older man with a sergeant's insignia, stood just outside the partially open gate.

Through his half-closed eyes Imani could tell by their actions that all three were poorly trained thugs, not soldiers. The main problem now would come if there were others lurking unseen. When the pair reached five paces from the Mercedes Tom released the door lock and fell outwards, sprawling half in and half out of the car, letting out a groan.

The thinner of the two guards turned and shouted to his sergeant:

¹⁷ By the 2008, the ever-popular M3 machine pistol although considered reliable was no longer in service by the major military forces but still attractive to mercenaries because of its low prices and availability in a variety of upgraded models.

Spanish Sparrows

'He big drunk guy, Boss. He stoned, Boss. What d'ya want me do him, Boss?'

The burly guard moved forward to kick out at Tom's head, at which point everything changed.

Tom grabbed his assailant's ankle with both hands, tugging hard and twisting him off balance, turning him away from the Mercedes. As he fell forwards, the burly guard's finger closed on the trigger, letting off a wild burst of gunfire, clipping his smaller companion. Falling forwards the man loosed off a second, longer volley which caught the older guard who slumped forward dropping his weapon. As the burly man scrabbled away on his hands and knees, Tom chased at a crouch, grabbed his hair and placing his knee in the upper part of his victim's back, jerked his head back viciously, severing the atlanto-occipital joint at the point where the cranium sits on top of the spinal column.

Leaning forward to check for a pulse and finding none, Tom whispered:

'Sayonara.'

The Bob Marley tape ended.

The sergeant was clearly dead, having taken several bullets in the chest and neck.

Nearer to the Mercedes, the smaller guard was bleating like a lost kitten, gut shot, his blood seeping onto the dark brown earth, his eyes glazing over as he also headed for oblivion.

Moving just inside the gat to take cover beside the security cabin, Tom crouched down into a ball, minimising his profile as a target by removing his hat and wig combination, thankful the weapon fired was silenced.

The mewling from the short guard ceased.

The sounds of the approaching tropical twilight filled the air, building to a crescendo. Tom waited, listening intently, hearing only the intense buzz of swarming insects and occasional raucous bird calls but no running feet, no sign of sudden movement and no telltale hissing or contact bleeping of personal radios. Scanning slowly, he checked for CCTV cameras and found none. He opened the cabin and checked. No radio equipment, no laptops, just a small, insulated drinks box and three magazines for the M3s, still shrink-wrapped.

This is a cheapskate operation.

No longer Imani the doped-up Rasta taxi driver, moving at the double Tom retrieved a roll of thin, clear polythene sheeting from the boot and taped it carefully inside the front and rear of the car to protect Bashir's upholstery. He bundled the sergeant into the front passenger seat, fixing him in the upright position with a cable tie around his neck fastened to the

Spanish Sparrows

headrest. He repeated the process with the other two guards, seating them upright in the rear of the limousine, again fixing their necks to the headrests with cable ties. From a few yards away, with the mud smeared doors closed, he was satisfied the guards looked like drunken passengers. Using a reel of thin translucent heavy-duty polythene cord from his boot, he tethered the entry gates in a wide-open position in case he might need to make a quick escape.

As a final act of preparation, he moved to the ancient dark green Renault 6. The keys were in the ignition, the doors unlocked. He released the bonnet and trashed the ignition electrics then checked by turning the key. *Kaput!* For added insurance, he popped off a silenced M3 bullet into each tyre, rendering the vehicle inoperable.

Checking the other two M3's fired freely, he replaced all three magazines, fired a single test shot from each, set them to "SAFE", stowing them out of sight as backups in the front passenger footwell between the sergeant's legs.

Standing well clear of the Mercedes, he made a slow, careful, three-sixty scan of the scene. When satisfied he was alone, he checked the time then made the RV call to Kit Lucas and Sumo in the Lynx.

Refitting his wig and hat combo, Tom dusted himself down and eased back into the driver's seat becoming Imani the Rasta taxi driver. Starting the engine, he accelerated wildly with the Bob Marley tape once again blaring reggae music at full volume, intent on delivering his customers to the big house.

As he approached the villa, two other thugs descended the steps to investigate. One was white, wearing a sergeant's stripes, a cigarillo dangling from his lips; the other was sallow skinned, nervous, eyes blinking as if he had been roused from sleeping. Both were armed with silenced M3s, dangling casually on lanyards, not 'at the ready'.

Imani skidded to a halt and stalled the engine with a double jerk. Like his customers, the Rasta driver would also be stoned. Repeating his performance at the entry gate, Dopey fell out of the taxi, keeping it between him and the guards, an M3 in each hand. Keeping close to the vehicle, he made a half-hearted attempt to stand up before slumping to the ground behind the car, out of sight.

As they moved nearer, the two guards saw no danger in the situation. Recognising the outlines of their colleagues in the taxi, seemingly drunk or stoned from smoking dope, their first instinct was to try to cover up for them, desperate to avoid the embarrassment of another tirade from the angry Frenchman. Drinking heavily since his arrival, Colonel D had become increasingly violent, frustrated because the small Albino man called Denton Smith did not answer his phone.

Spanish Sparrows

The guards slung their weapons over their shoulders and shuffled forwards. As they reached into the car to help their colleagues, Tom came round behind them and fired "KILL" darts into the side of their necks, aiming at the carotid artery. Both men collapsed slowly.

'Hey, what is this?' shouted the voice.

Imani turned to see the tall Frenchman framed in the doorway. The man also had an M3 which he held lightly, professionally. Tom whipped off his Rasta hat and wig, tossed it through the open window of the taxi, turned back, clicked his heels, standing smartly to attention, changing persona to Major Thomas Farquarson-Wright, the man he had once been. Sauntering towards the Colonel, head down, squinting at the screen, making a show of checking his *Nokia* while moving forwards and speaking conversationally in a 'pukka' English drawl, deliberately avoiding any French intonation:

'Ah, Colonel Depardieu, there you are at last, old chap. I've been almost everywhere looking for you. But your friends here, well, what can I say, amateurs? Sheik Aarzam sends his felicitations and apologises for the change of plan. Our transport is on its way with our mutual friend the Kosovan on board with your settlement fee. The backup plan worked a treat.'

'Ah, good. But who are you?'

Tom stopped just outside the Frenchman's personal space, turning to look out towards the dark ocean beyond the coastline.

'Best without names, perhaps? Think of me only as your *agent de transport*. Ah, listen, here she comes, right on time.'

Below them in the distance the Lynx was scudding towards the villa at 10 metres above the waves, flying at top speed, buzzing like an angry bee. The Colonel could not resist a glance and in that instant Tom fired a STUN dart at his neck. The man slumped forwards onto his knees and Tom leaned forward, grabbed the M3, eased the slider to "SAFE". Unclipping its lanyard from the recumbent Frenchman, Tom re-clipped the weapon to himself, holding it at the ready with his right-hand while dragging his victim by the scruff of the neck by his left to the centre of the large lawn.

Kneeling, Tom frisked the man professionally, checking for hidden pockets. As expected, he found nothing of interest. The man's bank details and valuables must still be in the villa with his possessions.

From behind the villa, he heard a car engine starting and put on his wig and hat combo to restore his Imani the Rasta taxi driver persona.

Spanish Sparrows

A small white car careered around the corner from the rear of the building its headlight on full beam. Tom spun round, snapping the M3 safety to "FIRE", and pooped out the headlights. The car braked hard, stopping, Tom walked closer. The car contained two beefy and very frightened African men, possibly housekeepers and cooks. Tom slid the safety back to "SAFE" and waved them on, allowing the ancient Clio to skid down the driveway, disappearing into a sheet of mud thrown up by its spinning tyres.

The Lynx descended and hovered at 50 metres above the centre of the area that had once been a tennis court. Using cable ties Tom hobbled his prize at both ankles and wrists then dragged him feet first on his back across the driveway and down to the foot of the steps at the edge of the clearing.

With the earphone in his left ear activated and holding his *BlackBerry* close to his mouth, Tom said:

'Gentlemen, your package is ready for collection and disposal. He's all yours.'

Tom retreated to the top of the steps, the M3 at the ready should any further guards come on the scene.

The Lynx descended, hovering expertly without grounding. Sumo leapt out, hefted the Colonel onto his shoulder, ran back to the helicopter, threw his package aboard, and climbed in after it. The helicopter rose, dipped in salute, then wheeled away. The uplift had taken less than ninety seconds.

00000

Tom turned his attention to the sprawling villa, a place already crumbling due to years of neglect. From his SAS training he was highly experienced in carrying out house searches and found what he needed within a few minutes.

Beginning the clean-up phase, he bundled his five victims wrapped in polythene sheeting into the kitchen.

At the large vintage cooking range, he turned every LPG gas outlet to "ON".

Checking his watch, Tom set the timer on the radio-activated switch to detonate the ten incendiary packs he had placed, choosing a countdown period to give sufficient leeway to access the coastal highway on his return to Contonou before the training camp villa was destroyed in an inferno.

As a back-up, he set up a single larger explosive device to be activated by a tripwire attached to the swing door to the internal corridor.

Spanish Sparrows

Before exiting, he checked his lightweight backpack to be sure he had all his weapons and gizmos then placed the six M3 machine pistols on top of the range. Outside the side door, he snapped off the external handle and squirted superglue into the locking mechanism.

At the Mercedes Tom removed Imani's TAXI sign, put the Rasta wig and hat combo into his rucksack on the passenger seat beside the Colonel's well-worn leather attaché case containing his two mobile phones, a laptop, four USB flash drives, a sheaf of bank statements, a mixture of personal papers, three passports and cash in various currencies including bundles of US dollars and Euros with an estimated total value of around £123,000.

Now that the loose ends of The Sheik's spectacular assassination plan had been tidied up, Tom's part of the combined extraction action of the Frenchman was over.

Before re-joining Maisie in the penthouse, he had a package to deliver to the home of the recently elected President of Benin.

00000

The Frenchman, still 'frozen' physically but injected with a 'terror' drug to make him fully alert mentally, would be dropped approximately 120 nautical miles due west of Contonou. His medicated torso would be supported by a lifejacket which trailed a small buoy containing dried tuna blood. The reconstituted blood would be released over a forty-eight-hour period, more than sufficient to attract one or more Great White sharks. This scenario would be explained to the Colonel who, unable to move his limbs for at least twenty-four hours, would be forced to await his violent death fully aware of what was to come, satisfying Tom's promise of vengeance for the Frenchman's acts of violation and execution of the three young women and pre-pubescent boy at *Das Rote Haus One*.

00000

Tom returned to Contonou by the longer 'porous route' avoiding the expense and intrusion of official checkpoints. Bob Marley was silent now and the windows were up, the air con running.

Parking the Mercedes in a side street about half a mile from his first port of call, Tom assembled his bicycle from its constituent parts carried in the boot, changed into his cycling gear then rode off into the night to deliver the package Maisie had prepared.

At the penthouse, he delivered Colonel D's attaché case. Maisie soon discovered that the Frenchman had a very woolly idea of what constituted cyber-security. It took little effort to re-home the Frenchman's sizeable fortune into her own safe keeping.

Spanish Sparrows

Later, back in Glasgow, by channelling it through the Margaret Miller Foundation, she planned to fund selected local agencies to enable them to award educational support grants in memory of the lost girls from Liverpool, the ones Tom had dubbed *his Spanish Sparrows*.

Maisie's final act in Benin was to compile selected extracts of that part of The Ghost's confession which gave details of the location and names of the men he identified as the persons holding his hostage Marissa Tansett and her three daughters in Lukavica. Maisie copied this information onto an SD card, wiped its surface clean of her prints, and using surgical gloves placed it inside a sturdy cardboard package then into an envelope which she addressed to the Security Officer at the US Embassy in Sarajevo. Unwilling to trust the Benin postal service, she would forward this package first class from Frankfurt airport.

Tom, reverting to his guise as an off-the-wall Rasta taxi driver, delivered Maisie to Contonou Airport in the Mercedes. Maisie made this journey as Veronique DuBois, completing the entry/exit loops at both airports, should anyone care to check their records.

Now alone, Tom initiated his clean-up by valeting and re-fuelling the Mercedes before returning it to its lock-up. He then cleaned the penthouse with such forensic detail that, should anyone be inclined to try, they would be very lucky to find any trace of Tom and Maisie's recent occupation.

Once more in the persona of the rather boorish farmer called Jim Butterworth, a man enjoying the early months of his retirement by touring the world, Tom drove back to Contonou Airport, returned his rented Renault Clio and checked-in for his early morning flight to Frankfurt.

Spanish Sparrows

Extraction

At 03:21 on Tuesday 19th February, two hours before Tom arrived at Contonou airport, Biscuit Abernethy began his long, slow, careful self-extraction from the Stade de Benin. At 04:23 he stood in the shadows, 300 metres from the stadium and made the *BlackBerry* call before slipping through the dark side streets towards the shore.

Just before dawn a local fishing boat approached the shingle beach, its engine burbling quietly to nudge and hold its prow against the ebbing tide, directly below the enormous telephone mast built high above the shore. The huge man driving the small boat was whistling "Speed Bonnie Boat", quietly, and in perfect tune.

A few minutes later Biscuit stepped out of the shadows onto the deserted shore and ran at a crouch towards his transport. The whistling stopped. The gearbox clunked into "REVERSE". Biscuit lowered his large kit bag carefully onto the wooden deck then swung his slim frame over the gunwale to lie down beside it. Still in reverse, the boat motored slowly out to sea as quietly as in had arrived. As a precaution, Sumo held a silenced UZI Pro sub machine gun scanning the receding shoreline.

When the boat was half a mile from the shore its gearbox clunked into "FORWARD" and Sumo opened the throttle sending the two men racing out towards the waiting *Cape Gannet*.

As the dive ship built up speed, several hundred meters behind her the dull thud of the plastic explosive created a large hole in the aged fishing boat which sank swiftly to the seabed.

While the *Cape Gannet* made her way towards her base port of Sekondi-Takoradi, Sumo and Biscuit stripped, cleaned and re-packed each item of equipment and weaponry into Willie Munro's special containers, now marked "Used Drill Parts - for Refurbishment" to be returned via cut-out addresses first to Hamburg and then to Oslo before eventually arriving at the secure storage shed in Aberdeen. Then, after a period of quarantine, they would be collected by Willie's team. Finally, following detailed checking and servicing the equipment would be rehomed in the armoury located in the bowels of Corgarff Castle.

The two XCD men, posing as returning offshore oil workers, were now scheduled to fly out of Ghana's Kotoka International Airport on the scheduled British Airways flight that would leave at noon on Tuesday 19th February. They would overnight in London at the Special Forces Club, located anonymously in the leafy suburb of Knightsbridge where they would enjoy a late meal then a quiet drink while ruminating with others of their brotherhood about the 'good old days' in active service.

Spanish Sparrows

Late the following morning they would catch a flight back up to *Glasgow*, shake hands and part after their short holiday together, to resume their normal lives as if nothing had happened. It seemed that their part of this operation was now over, although they would remain close to home with their *BlackBerrys* to hand, still on 12 hour-standby until formally stood down by *Maisie*, when she was certain they would no longer be needed.

Spanish Sparrows

Sheik Down

In the departure lounge at Cononou Airport, travelling as Veronique DuBois, Maisie used her MacBook to catch up on her *Facebook* messages and update her email inbox, diverting her posts from Prof Mel and Anisa into a separate folder for decryption when she was back in the secure environment of her rented apartment in Frankfurt.

When she was otherwise up to date with everyone else, she downloaded the on-line editions of *The Guardian* and *The (Glasgow) Herald* covering recent weeks, to begin the process of catching up on the world outside her recent sojourn in West Africa.

As she scanned the pages of *The Herald*, she jolted to a stop and paged back to a face she recognised.

"Do you know this man?" the banner enquired.

Álvaro Domingo Quintanilla's boyish good looks had gone. The face in the photograph was that of a haggard, painfully thin dark-haired man who looked very unwell. The eyes that stared up from her MacBook were vacant, lost. The article explained that the man was being cared for in a psychiatric ward at Glasgow's Gartnavel Royal Hospital and asked anyone who could assist to please get in touch, giving a name and contact number.

During the flight Maisie drafted a password protected email to Corky's wife explaining the background, attaching an edited account of Prof Mel's file on Alvarez. Lady Teresa MacCorquindale was a member of the Greater Glasgow Health Board. Less well-known, the saintly Teresa was also a Trustee of the Margaret Miller Foundation (MMF), supervising its day-to-day operations, regulating the outflow of its funds to many good causes. Maisie's request asked that Teresa arrange through one of her MMF charities to send an experienced counsellor to Tenerife to accompany Álvaro's mother to Glasgow to be with her son.

This email and several others were dispatched from Maisie's outbox only when she hooked into the secure router in her Frankfurt apartment.

00000

Jim Butterworth, now with a different backstory, claimed to be a recently retired dairy farmer from the English Cotswolds, with a broad accent to match. Tom knew the Cotswold area well; it was where his "F-W Stud" was located. The garrulous Butterworth, a confirmed bachelor, was recently released after long years of 'Servitude Under the Cow', he often whined. Now

Spanish Sparrows

that Farmer Jim was free and footloose, he was enjoying a round-the-world-trip, discovering very many things he found irritatingly different from 'Good Old Blighty'. Butterworth had a thousand boring stories to share, should anyone dare to give him a chance. However, once aboard the flight to Frankfurt, and mercifully for the prim elderly lady seated beside him, Farmer Jim promptly dozed off. He did not rouse himself until the aircraft was being readied for landing.

A few minutes before five o'clock on the afternoon of Wednesday 20th February, the Door Entry CCTV screen in Maisie's Westendplatz serviced apartment showed the tall thin figure of Jim Butterworth wearing a pork pie hat. She buzzed him in and he bounded up the four flights of steps. Like Maisie, Tom had an aversion to lifts.

'Gawd Maisie, it's good to be on terra firma again. Come, dear one, I need a cuddle.'

'Are you hungry?'

'Mmmm, yes, very,' nibbling her ear. 'You smell wonderful.'

'Right then, shower first while I shut down the MacBook. NO! Shower *first!* Off you trot!'

Two hours later, Tom was curled in his usual foetal position, alone in the king-sized bed. Re-energised from their couplings, and now showered, changed into a fluffy lemon coloured track suit, fortified by a large cafetiere, Maisie examined the latest data that Prof Mel and Anisa had provided.

She created a Think List to share the salient facts:

- Since my arrival yesterday The Sheik has not ventured from his Westendplatz residence.
- Since Monday 18th February the sat-phone record shows he attempted to contact the *African Rose* six times. He also tried repeatedly to call the training camp villa near Lome. All calls were unsuccessful.
- Herr Frei has been reading newswires online, presumably hoping to hear of a high-profile event!
- To the best of our knowledge, he has not been moving money around his accounts.
- He appears to be waiting and hoping for the best, mainly spending his time on SKYPE to Saudi Arabia where his father is recovering from a recent heart by-pass operation.
- Insofar as I can detect there is no boy-child companion with him.
- I judge he is in Limbo and although he thinks his plan has stalled or perhaps failed, he still believes he is safe, physically and financially.
- It is time to nudge him into action, get him out of the townhouse where we can deal with him or at least distract him while I raid his funds.

00000

Spanish Sparrows

Over an early breakfast, she explained her plan. It was time for Biffy and Al to pay The Sheik a visit by SKYPE, this time 'from Paris'. By mid-morning, Biffy and Al were ready for rehearsals, set up with a mini projector providing a realistic video background outside a small café on the Champs Elysees with the Arche de Triomphe in the far distance, a fake projection lasting ten minutes before repeating.

This confection was made even more convincing by replacing the narrator's New York accented French commentary with a soundtrack of passing traffic. The video clip had been snipped from a US made-for-TV film called "It's Gay Paree for Me", a 'blockbuster flop' which had suffered from a wafer-thin plot. Although the ham acting had been panned by the critics, its photography had been acclaimed for its authentic atmosphere. With this backdrop, Biffy and Al appeared to be sitting in front of a small café table somewhere in Paris.

Maisie took them through several rehearsals then made a trial video using her MacBook camera. After reviewing it forensically, she concluded that they could pass muster.

Monitoring his PC, she waited until The Sheik's current SKYPE call to Saudi Arabia ended then immediately pressed the Video Call button on her MacBook. Her hope was he would assume it was his family calling back to add to what had been discussed.

'Äh, hallo, wer ist es, der ruft, bitte?' (Eh, who is this calling, please?)

'Oh, Hi Helmie, it's us again, Biffy and Al Antaar, Antaar Antiques, you know, "You want it, we got it!" Listen Helmie, I have to say sorry about that last time. But hey, that's a great house you got there, truly gorgeous. I've been telling all my friends about it. It's like you are royalty or something. Are you, Helmie? Are you *secret* royalty? You know, related to you know who? Are you *descended*? Eh? Is that why you want all his personal stuff? Well, guess what? I kept it for you Helmie! All of it! Just for you. I think you've earned it, because of the "bathroom problem". I would have been in touch earlier, but hey, Helmie, I was embarrassed, and then that nice friend of yours, WHAT'S HIS NAME, AL, HELMIE'S FRIEND, WHAT'S THAT GUY'S NAME?'

'WHO THE HELL IS THAT GUY?'

'OK AL, FORGET IT. Anyway Helmie, what's his name suggested we SKYPE you and hey presto, and abracadabra, here we are, right in your nice house with you.'

'BATHROOM!'

Al stumbled out of shot.

Spanish Sparrows

'OK AL, I'LL COME IN A MINUTE, HONEY. So, Helmie, will you come to collect? Or will I put it over to the Sotheby's guys? Al's getting real bad. I need to get him back home to New York for treatment. You know the plumbing over here is crap, sorry to be brutal but it is. Our names are on some sort of hotel blacklist now and anyway we've done Europe and I need back to my cats.'

'So, Mrs Antaar, you still have the special items for me?'

'Yeah, Helmie. Sotheby's backstop estimate is a minimum of two-point-seven mill in U-S-D but Al thinks we should hold out for more. The market's hot over here, everyone says so. And I do have the DNA certificates, remember?'

'I can be with you in a few hours by fast train, Mrs Antaar, where shall we meet?'

'Do you know the Champs Elysees, Helmie?'

'Of course.'

'How about we treat you to dinner with real American food at McDonald's, the one just next to the Big Arch thing. Can you make it for seven tonight?' You see we're on the overnight to New York so, well. . .'

'Yes, MacDonal'd's at the Arche de Triomphe. I can be there, at seven o'clock.'

'Right, Helmie, I gotta go, Al's having a meltdown in there. Just one thing, Helmie, it's gotta be Bearer Bonds or cash or a mix, OK?'

'Understood. Tonight, then. Au revoir.'

00000

Thirty minutes later The Sheik and his protectors were on the move heading for Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof station booked on the non-stop train for Paris. Tom was already at this station, near the gate leading to the Inter-Continental Express signed for Paris.

Jim Butterworth had checked with Maisie to be sure he had the correct train before renting a simple tourist wheelchair. As part of this one-day hire, Jim had paid an additional surety of 700 Euros, doled out in crisp new 50 Euro notes, a price which he thought was on the high side for the rather scruffy piece of equipment now stowed in the spacious First Class toilet compartment which was rather disappointingly unavailable, sealed with strips of red and white tape and a hand-written notice:

Spanish Sparrows

Gesundheitsgefährlich - nicht in Gebrauch

Now back on the concourse, carrying his Nokia dart gun and wearing a bulky rucksack containing his other weapons and change of clothing, Jim Butterworth was trailing a jaunty young man pushing a narrow on-board drinks and snacks trolley and heading towards his storeroom on the far side of the station.

00000

With The Sheik off on a wild goose chase, Maisie immediately set to work.

From Tom's listening bugs planted weeks earlier, Maisie judged the townhouse at Westendplatz was now unoccupied. Using the information provided by the MiMics Tom had implanted during his first incursion, she logged into The Sheik's PC located in the study, a room directly across from her on the other side of Westendplatz, clearly visible through her camera telephoto lens.

She began with his Butterfield Bank account and moved a trial amount of 5% of his deposit (an amount of \$1.2 million US) sideways into another Butterfield Bank account that she had created for herself during her earlier surveillance period. In this way the net assets of the Bank would remain unchanged and, she hoped, no digital alerts would be sounded to the IT system administrators. However, there was always the possibility that The Sheik would receive an automated alert on his phone, but she had to hope for the best.

Later, when she got clearance from Tom, she would revisit this account and remove a further 94% from Herr Frei's wealth, sending it onwards in ten random tranches, each heading on separate round-about journeys through multiple cut-outs before landing in her already sizable Swiss account at her Zug bank. This was one of several similar accounts which dripped down funds to the MMF at the main branch of the Bank of Scotland in Glasgow.

Over the next two hours she repeated similar procedures by visiting The Sheik's accounts in Jersey, the Isle of Man, Zurich, and Singapore, these transfers also ending their journey at her account in Zug.

Finally, she visited and inspected The Sheik's Moscow account which contained only \$550,000 US. When Tom's *WhatsApp* confirmed his action had proved successful, she intended to drain it entirely in one single hit before ponderously moving the money through The Sheik's accounts, first to Singapore, then on to London, then back to Singapore again, then on to New York, back to London and finally to Frankfurt, placing it in an account under the name of Tomasz Drueber. During these transfers to the Drueber account which she alone controlled, she would not deploy her usual extra precautions, leaving a ripe scent along this money transfer trail, as she intended.

00000

Spanish Sparrows

The Inter-City-Express train, one of the latest versions of the ICE-T2 evolution, hurtled towards the Franco-German border at 230 KPH (140 MPH). As it approached the long high-speed bend it tilted slightly to maintain traction without causing undue discomfort for its passengers. Scheduled to make several stops, these would increase the journey time to just over four hours.

Herr Helmut Adolf Frei sat alone in the First Class compartment. His two minders were in the second-class area directly behind him. Dreaming ahead to what he hoped to purchase in Paris, in his iPod earbuds Helmut was listening to a playlist of rousing Nazi songs. Many of these were specialised recordings which included the Führer's distinctive voice. Had he been at home, Helmut would have sung along with them in his high tenor register.

The fingers of his right hand tapped out the beat on the small slim briefcase that was attached to his left wrist by a plastic covered high tensile steel cord. The briefcase contained a mixture of Certified Bank Drafts and Bearer Bonds issued by the Swiss Bank USA. The face value totalled US \$3.5 million but could be worth much more in the internecine world of international money laundering. The Sheik also carried a further US \$500,000 in used \$50 notes. He did not expect to win his prize at the original stated price. These were items of clothing he had dreamed of wearing for many years and he was determined to own them.

Helmut's eyes were closed, fantasising about the contents of the suitcase the woman had promised him. Like Hitler, Helmut was 1.73 m (5' 8") tall with a similar build and believed the clothes she had described would fit him perfectly. After the disappointment in Benin, he needed something to give him a lift, get his libido back to normal, find a suitable boy and get back to his old life again.

At least there had been no comebacks from the Frenchman or the Kosovan. If they dared to raise their heads above the parapet, he would have them assassinated.

The protectors saw the tall man with the poor toupee and thick spectacles approach with his cart of drinks and snacks. The actual cart-salesman was 'asleep', locked in his small storage locker at Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof. Tom stopped beside the pair and offered each a DB Gift Card in the amount of 20 Euros. This was a Deutsche Bahn promotion, he explained. They would have preferred beers but were professionals and both opted for Kaffee und Kuchen. The cart-man served them and passed on, heading for the First Class section where all snacks and drinks were served free. After a few sips of their coffees the two men drifted off to the land of nod.

Helmut, humming and tapping to the *Horst-Wessel-Lied*, did not hear or see the tall man's approach. The first that he was aware of him was when the syringe stabbed into his neck. After that, everything around him seemed surreal, as if in a dream. Although he tried his hardest, he

Spanish Sparrows

discovered he was unable to move even a fingertip, unable to call out for help. The cart-salesman moved through to the next section of the train leaving Helmut frozen.

A few minutes later Jim Butterworth emerged from the toilet wheeling the rented wheelchair, exchanged for the drinks trolley. Tom was now a First Class passenger with a ticket from Frankfurt to Saarbrücken and carrying a travel rug over his arm.

Tom sent a cryptic WhatsApp message to Maisie:

"Bird in Hand."

A few minutes later the ICE slowed to a gentle stop, two men left the train, Herr Frei wheeled by his taller companion wearing a bulky rucksack and sporting a pork pie hat.

00000

Axel Sterne, one of Maisie's European XCD sleepers, was waiting in the car park with the rear doors open and the ramp deployed, ready to assist his old friend Dopey with his 'package' for disposal.

A few minutes later Herr Frei was facing backwards, his wrists and ankles secured to the wheelchair by cable ties. A blackout hood was dropped over his head to increase his feeling of disorientation. This hood was secured to the rear of the wheelchair to ensure his head remained upright.

When these arrangements were completed, the dark blue VW Transporter T5 wearing tasteful decals identifying it as a "Privater Krankenwagen" (Private Ambulance) headed out of the station car park, driving slowly in deference to its patient.

In a quiet layby clear of Saarbrücken, the van's decals were removed and its number plates changed, making the unmarked T5 anonymous. With Axel in the front driving and Tom in the rear, sitting behind The Sheik, they were heading for the drop off point. As they rolled along at a steady pace, Tom gave his captive two injections: first, the antidote to the 'freeze' drug, enabling the Saudi to speak. Then, to free Sheik Aarzam Abdullah Mohamed Al-Hemmendah from fear and inhibitions and to loosen his tongue and clarify his memory, Tom injected the truth serum.

Dopey interrogated his captive gently, using the same approach that Maisie had used with the Kosovan. He recorded everything on his digital Dictaphone. Gently but relentlessly, he covered every aspect of the Sheik's life.

Five hours later, when he was certain he had every detail of every bank account and the entire sad history of the Sons of Allah and the Benin plot, Tom put The Sheik under again.

Spanish Sparrows

As the sun was setting, they stopped at a small bespoke hotel famed for its excellent restaurant where Alex and Dopey visited the toilet, had a light snack and a coffee, giving Tom access to its high-speed Wi-Fi to enable him to upload the encrypted versions of the Helmut Frei interrogation files to the temporary *G-Drive* account he shared with Maisie then sent her a download link invitation.

It was fully dark when the Transporter eventually arrived at the Eifel National Park. Axel headed towards the area of the park known as its 'Lake District'. The Transporter parked in darkness at a high viewpoint, 150 metres above the deepest part of the lake. The Sheik was still frozen. Tom applied additional cable ties and bindings to ensure the Saudi did not separate from the wheelchair during the long drop or on impact.

Tom applied a further injection bringing his captive fully awake.

Throughout the next few minutes Tom recited in clear English what he was being punished for and what would now happen to him. If the man could have screamed for mercy he would have done so.

With the rear doors of the Transporter fully open, the wheelchair was eased forward to the top of the ramp, its wheels locked. With the hood removed, The Sheik was perched, staring into the darkness, but still held securely until he was released to roll to oblivion. With The Sheik observing by the dim light from the van's courtesy lamp, Axel removed a section of safety fence then positioned the large heavy-duty canvas builder's bag precariously at the very edge of the drop, securing it to the remaining fence posts with cords. He then filled the bag with rocks, sealed the top by lashing its carry handles together then attached the stainless-steel chain to the bag in readiness for the final phase of the disposal.

A gag was inserted and fixed with a wide Velcro strap.

At seven pm the final (punishment) injection was administered, filling The Sheik's mind with nightmares generated by his fevered brain.

This purgatory would continue through the night hours ahead.

Two hours before dawn Tom gave The Sheik his final injection. This brought him back to a semblance of himself, rousing him to awareness of a sort, although still unable to speak or move.

By torchlight, Herr Helmut Adolf Frie was able to see Axel attach the chain to the chassis of the wheelchair and to hear Tom describe the drop and his impending death by drowning.

Axel slashed at the restraining cords and gave the bag a shove with his foot. In concert, Tom unlocked the wheel brakes. The bag hovered, slid then rushed forwards over the edge whipping

Spanish Sparrows

the wheelchair behind it. A few seconds later a soft double splash was heard above the sound of the pre-dawn birdsong. Axel repositioned the T5 and switched on dimmed headlights before replacing the section of safety fence, checking carefully for debris and using a stiff brush to remove all signs of what had occurred.

Taking a direct route, the Transporter was nearing the outskirts of Saarbrücken, a kilometre shy of the station. Jim Butterworth completed his journey on foot to the platform where he caught the early morning Inter-City-Express back to Frankfurt.

00000

Later that morning, Maisie entered the Commerzbank in Frankfurt armed with the necessary passwords and with a forged Mandate of Authority to Act, conveniently 'signed' by Herr Drueber.

She was dressed as a slim, dapper man of medium height carrying a silver-topped cane, wearing shiny black shoes with her blue eyes hidden behind grey tinted spectacles. Identifying himself as Herr Tobias von Schwarzerbruwen, the man presented an authentic Swiss passport.

This was a document which had been airfreighted by Fida from her archive at Corgarff Castle under the auspices of Excalibur Executive Expediting (EEE). Tobias had once been an arms dealer and like The Sheik and several others continued to live on in the ether after his disposal at the Eifel National Park five years earlier.

Tobias spoke German with a melodic Swiss accent, in a thin shrill register. On behalf of his client, the talkative Tobias made a withdrawal from the Tomasz Drueber account in Euros, cash, in an amount equivalent to \$549,900 US, leaving a standing balance of \$100 US as a legacy, providing completion of the trail for the expected followers.

00000

On Thursday 29th February, Maisie was at her penthouse home in Glasgow.

On the internal website of the European Central Bank (ECB) she read that a Willi Hirsch, Deputy Head of the Internal Security Team, had resigned on grounds of ill-health, leaving the employ of the European Central Bank. Maisie checked the ECB personnel files and found the handsome smirking face of said Willi Hirsch aka Tomasz Drueber. Smiling, she was hoping his ex-KGB masters had at last found an appropriate 'final solution' for their rogue employee, the debonair fop who had promised so much but delivered so little, exposing his fraud and incompetence by attempting to flee with misappropriated funds.

A few days later, the boy brothel in Frankfurt was closed by the Municipal Authorities. The children were taken into care by the "Frankfurter Safe Houses" (FSH) project, a recent

Spanish Sparrows

charity whose aim is to home, rehabilitate and provide educational support for abused youngsters.

On its website FSH noted that two 'safe houses' had been donated by the mysterious Herr Frei, a reclusive philanthropist, who had sent best wishes for the continuing success of the worthy project and his apologies for non-attendance due to pressing business issues in South Africa.

The FSH inauguration event was hosted by Sir Donald and Lady Teresa MacCorquindale, in their roles as Trustees of the Margaret Miller Foundation, a Glasgow-based charity with a world-wide reach. This charity had funded the conversion works at Westendplatz and Schumannstrasse and had committed to provide ongoing funds to cover rehabilitation and care costs for the sixty-three boys who had been rescued from their Kosovan gangmaster, now under arrest.

Spanish Sparrows

Missing

Maisie's return to Tenerife was delayed for a myriad of reasons, not least of which was the ongoing turmoil in the world's financial system, requiring her to devote herself almost full-time to ameliorating the damage to her portfolio of investments and ensure a steady income to fund her good causes.

Additionally, inevitably, depressingly, there had been several funerals to attend, as older members of her extended circle of family and friends bowed to their final curtains.

With two clear weeks in prospect, Maisie returned to Corky's *Spanish Sparrows* villa on Wednesday 14th May 2008. This time she was alone, free at last of encumbrances, and determined to make progress with her steamy romance, the momentum of which had been derailed by events during her brief January visit.

Fida had advised that Álvaro Quintanilla and his mother Juliana would travel on the same flight, seated behind her, near the rear of the plane. The mother and son knew nothing of Maisie's part in his rescue.

In Arrivals, she made her way past the noisy and tearful group of family and friends meeting their lost boy and moved to car rentals to collect her pre-booked Fiat Panda.

The expensive antiretroviral HIV treatment (AZT - Zidovudine) was clearly having a positive effect on Álvaro: he was much improved physically. However, Teresa had advised his mental health problems would take longer to heal. Hopefully living at home amid familiar surroundings would help. The MMF monthly payments to Senora Quintanilla would continue for as long as required. Maisie's hope was that his plight would prove a powerful deterrent for other youngsters, those who knew him and others who had heard of his trauma.

00000

By nine o'clock the following morning Maisie was settled on the terrace, in the shade of a huge parasol, with Andrea Bocelli serenading her earbuds with '*Con te partirò*' while she tapped steadily at a new chapter of her story.

A polite cough brought her back to reality. As the woman approached, Maisie lifted her eyes, smiled, pulled out the earbuds and closed the lid of the MacBook.

Spanish Sparrows

'Oh Meesa Ma-haysee, I am being muchos sorree at disturb to you, I am despreeet need to speak you, please to God.'

'Ah, let me guess, you must be Jaqui's sister Natasha? Of course, take a seat, please.'

This was Maisie's first direct encounter with the woman who had provided 'inside information' about the occupants of *Das Rote Haus* and their disappearance after Tom's incursion, details related second hand by Jaqui. She now understood why this woman Natasha was such a font of knowledge: who could resist her intelligent and penetrating gaze? Maisie flipped down her dark glasses as protection against the woman's power and glanced at the taller figure of Jaqui now approaching with a tray.

Seen together the two women were unmistakably sisters, although Tasha was about a head shorter and very much slimmer. Unlike her rather plain sister, Tasha had an odd beauty, with soft dark laughing eyes like those of Jaqui, but spaced more widely, making her seem younger, and more innocent than her fifty-odd years would imply, particularly given the hardships that Maisie had learned that both women had endured.

'Meesa Ma-haysee, I have bring to you fresh coffee, yes?'

'Yes, that would be good, thanks, Jaqui.'

Maisie had seen the glance - this was a set up.

'Meesa Ma-haysee, please to call at Tasha, everyone they say at me, Tasha.'

'Well Tasha, thank you for all your help, you information, when I was here in January.'

'Si, *Das Rote Haus*, she be reckoned now. But I to hear that more other boughtened, yes?'

'Oh, really? Who has taken it on, do you know?'

'No, but I finds out to you, if you needs, yes? But please, only when Ireena get back home to us, yes?'

'Yes, if you would, knowledge is always useful, I'm sure you will agree?'

'Yes, I ask to the dope one Barbara at the property agenceea, but she no say nutting, jus make-up and to smoking dope. It Ireena, she knowsa teengs, everyteengs, and shee no here no more. Shee losses, go-ways, Barbara say. Two-a months shee go-ways now, yes? Barbara ees worries muchos.'

'Irene is missing? Two months is a long time.'

Spanish Sparrows

'Yes, how you say so, Ireena shee solo halffa mamma at Barbara. So, Ireena she no been make at agenceea longtime at go. It make to muchos meesterio, yes? I you to make for Ireena, yes? Make she live, please to God on hy-ee, yes?'

'I see.'

'Yes, Meesa Ma-haysee, I know to say you. You clever woman Meesa Ma-haysee, how you say. "smart woman", yes? But make to them simple, yes? You do make Álvaro for Juliana, please to God, yes? So, I say at Jaqui, "Meesa Ma-haysee, she find to Ireena to me, yes?" I Tasha, look to all places, please to God, yes? Tasha no make Ireena eev-ra-where!'

'Maybe this woman Irene has gone off the island, to visit a relative, perhaps?'

'No! No! No, please to God! Ireena no make way at here. Ireena no make pass-a-porta again. I watch to her incenda, yes? To die at end old life?'

'Mmm, I see. Have you tried the Police, Tasha, filed a missing person report?'

'Beh! I no say Poleesa nutteengs! Poleesa make muchos lajaze. Make look Álvaro, please to God? Beh! Poleesa make muchos carta but no make dammat teeng! Ireena nowantaa me at Poleesa, incassa pass-a-porta make problema, no? So, anajways, Ireena un segredo, no make pass-a-porta, yes?'

'Mmm, well Tasha, where would a person start?'

'Here, I make my son, Fillipo, to make itta on his computer, in Ingleese. He clever Fillipo. I make he typeeng, typeeng everryteeengs to me. So, Ireena make a problema to herself, yes? But no to get to her bad theengs, please to God. You make good persona, Meesa Ma-haysee, I see you make theengs. I hearing at you voice. So, I need to you make my Ireena, please to God, yes?'

'Right, then. Thanks for this. I'll do what I can, Tasha.'

'Tanks at you, muchos tanks at you, Meesa Ma-haysee. You need Tasha by helping at you? Make to Jaqui, I do to you, pronta! So, you muchos busee, I muchos busee. So, Adios, amica-mee-a.'

The woman marched, literally, her arms swinging, as if she was a little soldier. The words, 'a force of nature' raised a smile on Maisie's lips - Natasha seemed almost irresistible.

00000

Filippo's epistle, which appeared to be a literal and unedited version of what his mother had rattled at him, extended to nearly four A4 sides of closely packed words. It was full of

Spanish Sparrows

repetitions and what Maisie thought must be suppositions, but the English was perfect in all aspects of grammar and spelling, although phrased in a Spanish idiom.

Two hours and a litre of strong coffee later she moved from the sun-lounger to the long dining table and opened her MacBook to write a new Think List.

Missing - Irene Smith, owner of La Caleta Properties.

- Irene Smith, nee Irena Bieda, born Krakow circa 1958 (age about 60).
- Photo attached, taken with my *BlackBerry*, January 2008.
- About 5' 10" (1.78 metres) well made, size 16, kind eyes, tidy appearance.
- Marriage, in Serbia, to Marco Kovaakek (Filippo's spelling) could it be Kovačević?
- **Prof Mel:** please look for this man Marco: URGENT. Perhaps as Mark Smith aka Mark Tripper?
- As newly-weds they moved to Algeciras near Gibraltar immediately after marriage, with child of his previous marriage, Besjana (Barbara) (then 2 years old). Marco provides new passports for them as Mark, Irene and Barbara Smith, and they are now UK (!!) citizens - Prof Mel, check this please.
- Many visitors from Albania/Kosovo pass through their small house in poor part of Algeciras which is used as a stop-over for people on the run from the authorities.
- Irene later learns from overheard mutterings that Marco's cousin Dario (!!) may have murdered Marco's previous wife, reason unknown. When challenged on this Marco says this is a lie and beats Irene for suggesting it.
- Soon after this incident, Marco disappears, without explanation, leaving Irene penniless.
- Tasha, a neighbour, helps Irene, financially and emotionally.
- Tasha decides to try her luck in Tenerife.
- Irene with Barbara, now aged 4, moves to Tenerife with Tasha and Filippo to make a new life. Jaqui follows them to Tenerife within a few months.
- Irene last seen by Tasha on Tuesday 26th February, when she ate at Tasha's house.
- **Anisa:** please search for mobile phones for Irene and for Barbara, check records: URGENT.
- According to Tasha, Barbara has no knowledge of her own background or any memory of her life before Tenerife and believes that Irene is her true mother.
- Barbara also believes her father to be a "John Smith", who fled the island back to London to escape debts when his "Los Americanos Disco Bar" failed, leaving Irene and Barbara destitute.
- This story is nearly true, there was a John Smith, a much older man who returned to London when his pub failed, but Irene only worked for him, and was not his bed-partner. If JS is alive he may be ninety.
- **Prof Mel:** although a very long shot, please check for this John Smith: URGENT. Can there be some bizarre link between this **John** Smith, Denton Smith, Dario Smith and Marco Smith?
- On her return to Tenerife, Barbara boasts that she met this John Smith in London.

Spanish Sparrows

- According to Barbara, Irene received a phone call from this John Smith, and drove off to meet him, mid-morning, Wednesday 27th February.
- **Anisa:** please also check for a mobile phone for this John Smith: URGENT.
- On this basis Irene has been 'missing' for ten weeks.
- According to Tasha, Irene has never in all her years in Tenerife been any further from home in La Caleta than Los Cristianos.

00000

An hour later, still as Maisie, but with two large bags of clothing ensembles and equipment, she drove her Panda hire car to Tenerife Sur Airport, parked in the long term car park, removed the large bags from the boot and headed into the main airport building. Thirty minutes later she emerged from the toilet, once again in the persona of Veronique DuBois, a Belgian authoress looking to rent a place to write. Now in a rented Renault Clio, Veronique drove to La Caleta, found a parking spot in the shade, strolled down the hill, stopped outside Irene's office to check the properties on offer, and made a note of what she was looking for by taking a photo on her *BlackBerry*. Noting the contact number, she made the call.

At a corner table at the back of the small café bar where she had a good view of *La Caleta Properties* fifty paces away, she ordered a double-shot Americano and a bottle of sparkling water, set up her MacBook, plugged in her earbuds, appeared lost in the world of her novella and settled-in to await the arrival of Barbara.

The girl arrived, on huge heels, staggering slightly, clearly high, smoking and wittering to someone, her mobile phone cradled on her shoulder as she juggled with her shoulder bag and keys while fumbling to open the office. The genes of the Kovačević/Smith dynasty were clear to see in her small stature and her narrow but attractive face although her miniature Barbie Doll persona was ruined by her clown-like pancake make-up.

Maisie decided she would not risk the office and its carcinogenic fumes. She waited until the girl finished her conversation and, just as she reached to ignite another death stick, Maisie pressed the speed-dial button, to call the office phone.

'Yeah, La Caleta Properties?'

'Bounjour, Madame. I am the speaking again to Miss Irene?'

'Nada, Mummy's not here. I run this place now.'

'Ah, but NO! I not so long far to Miss Irene am speaking, she is saying avec beaucoup d'enthousiasme, there is a nice big house the naming is *Das Rote Haus*, she is to sell for me, one time.'

Spanish Sparrows

'What is it you want, eh?'

'Ah, you are not with me understanding, I am sorree, most sorree. My English she is not so bad, no? To who is speaking me, please?'

'Barbara, Barbara Smith, the Owner.'

'Ah, Je ai fait une grosse erreur! YOU are le propriétaire! To you I am being most sorree. Pardon, pardon!'

'OK, apology accepted. So, whoever you are, are you buying, selling or renting? What is it to be?'

'I wish to buy, de toute urgence. It is how you say beautiful! I am the standing beside the gate of the apartments of the El Beril. Je ai connu de Miss Irene que ce est une possible réduction possible de juin par cash, in Euros, no? Je ai thèses trésorerie aujourd'hui, maintenant je veux avoir thise lieu de vous aujourd'hui. To buy today, no?'

'OK,OK, hold on. Let me get this. You have cash, in Euros, and with you right now? And you want to buy this place at El Beril, right?'

'Oui! Certainement! Yes, today! But I must be saying, no upping of the price, to me. NON! Je veux une réduction! Je dois aussi me montrer un autre endroit très agréable, à proximité!'

'OK, OK, calm it, OK?'

'Donc, you are the coming to me, immédiatement?'

'Yeah, yeah, just give me the property number and I'll get over there, OK?'

The girl did not ask for a name and Maisie did not offer one.

Over the next few minutes Masie watched through the open door as the girl, fumbling in her handbag, found the tiny packet, sniffed it up, popped a few pills, sloshed them down with water, lit her next cigarette, checked her make-up, consulted her scribbled note, removed a bunch of keys from the small wall cupboard behind her. Locking the office, Barbara was on the move clumping past the café where Maisie sat in the shadows.

Veronique moved quickly to the Clio and saw Barbara get into a Polo that was pointing in the wrong direction. Veronique accelerated away to the El Beril apartments, moving ahead of her quarry.

00000

Spanish Sparrows

Veronique waited in the car outside the gate of Number 8. Barbara arrived in her small silver car. The girl exited the car, spat out her cigarette butt, and ground it out with the sole of her dainty shoe while automatically flipping another into her vermilion lips, to ignite it with a Zippo: clearly this was a well-honed move.

'Hiya, I'm Barbara. You want to see it, see around?'

Veronique held a scented handkerchief to her face against to blown smoke and feigned a bout of coughing.

'Oh se il vous plaît, non, ne pas fumer. No smokering. Je ai de l'asthme, how yous are saying ti Assmaar? Et non peuvent être exposés, merci!'

'Sure, calm down. There. How's that!' She threw the newly lit cigarette onto the roadway. 'Right, let's make this quick, eh?'

'Merci. Merci beaucoup, il est besoin medical.'

They climbed the stairway and entered what seemed to be a smallish townhouse and made their way along a narrow corridor which opened onto a large bright, south-facing Lounge with good views of the coastline and the silent bulk of the island of La Gomera in the near distance, resplendent with its 'hat' of rainclouds.

Barbara threw herself onto the white leather sofa, kicked off her shoes and let out a sigh.

'Here we are, help yourself to a tour. Anything you want to know is in that brochure, on the sideboard over there.'

As the girl stretched her arms above her head and closed her eyes, Veronique administered the injection, as she had done as at Stade de Benin to the man who must surely have been her Uncle Dario, The Ghost of Kosovo.

It took less than twenty minutes of careful cross-questioning to clear this immature, dope-taking girl of any involvement in her mother's disappearance. Maisie, curious as to how the girl had let herself drift into the world of drugs, continued with her questions.

Barbara revealed that for the last ten years or so, since her split from Filippo, caused by her dabbling in drugs, she had lived in a state of constant conflict with her mother. The trip to London to find her father had been fruitless. She had hated London, to big, too dirty, and very frightening. She had only the money she had taken from her mother's purse and the cost of everything, especially accommodation was exorbitant. She had tried to find a job but no one

Spanish Sparrows

wanted her, because of the recession. She had lasted only three weeks until her stash of money had run out.

But it had been worthwhile, life-changing, she hoped. She had decided to return to Tenerife, to try to make a go of the property centre. Because Barbara had stolen from her, her mother had been angry. Barbara had tried to apologise, but the usual slanging match had started and angry words had been said on both sides. In the fight, Barbara had taunted her mother by telling her about her invented meeting with her father, how **he** still loved her, how **he** wanted her to stay in London, that **he** was mega-rich. But it had all been a lie.

The next afternoon, the day after the big fight, when Barbara wakened up, her mother was gone. Barbara had waited, expecting Irene to return at any minute but after a few days of nagging by Tasha, Barbara had got rid of her by saying that Irene had gone to London, to try to persuade her 'father' to leave Barbara alone. Yes, she admitted, she had been worried about her mother but felt sure she was alright. Maybe she had found a new boyfriend and moved in with him. She was a good-looking woman and had found men easy to attract over the years, although she had always been discreet, never 'sharing' about them. At least Irene had left the Polo, the car she and her mother had always shared.

Satisfied she had all the useful information she could get from the girl, Maisie gave her a 'Hangover' injection, drew the drapes, and made her comfortable for the twenty-four hours ahead. As a final check, Masie sifted through Barbara's handbag, removed the crack cocaine, the marijuana and pills in various colours, flushed them, removed the cigarettes and the Zippo to drop them in the rubbish bin later.

She also checked Barbara's *Sony Ericsson* for emails and text messages, surprised that these were mainly from people trying to sell her things, none from friends. Clearly Barbara lived a lonely life.

Out of nosiness Maisie inspected the apartment. The thin information brochure revealed that it was being sold by a firm of solicitors on behalf of the estate of a Mrs Emilia Hinton of Cheltenham (deceased) complete with furniture and contents, suggesting it was an ideal property to rent as a holiday apartment business. Maisie rated it as 8 out of 10, very suitable for a writer like Veronique. Although it did not compare to the luxury and amenity of *Spanish Sparrows*, it had the distinct merit of being more anonymous, particularly because she could enter almost directly from the street, and that once inside, being on the highest tier, she would not be visible to the other occupants in the development. This property had been on the market for many months, nearly a year, and the price seemed reasonable.

Barbara slept on, probably enjoying the best sleep that she had had since she was a child. It was regrettable that she would awaken the next day with a thumping headache and no memory of what had happened during her 'outage'. Hopefully the girl would pull herself out of her self-destructive rut, deny her genes and make a proper life for herself.

Spanish Sparrows

During her tour of inspection Maisie discovered a wireless router, the passcode on a white label stuck to the top of the box. Sitting on the sundeck, under the large sunshade sipping from a bottle of sparkling mineral water, Maisie fired up her MacBook, logged on and checked her emails from Prof Mel and Anisa. Decrypted, these yielded a deluge of information, much of it interesting but probably irrelevant. Nothing had been uncovered about Irene to reveal her movements but from what she read Maisie sensed that *Operation Spanish Sparrows* was not yet over. She would need help, certainly from Tom, and perhaps Sumo and Biscuit.

Maisie made a new Think List to add pertinent data to her previous findings, to bring selected XCD Team members up to speed.

Barbara Smith, daughter of Irene

- 'Interview' with Barbara reveals her as innocent of involvement in Irene's disappearance.
- The mobile number for Barbara discovered by Anisa checks with the one in her handbag.
- Checks on Barbara voice traffic records reveal nothing untoward, merely normal 'adolescent' chatting and messaging. This twenty-nine-year-old has yet to grow up.
- Prof Mel checks show nothing significant on the girl. Spent twenty-three nights in London, various B&Bs, moving to cheaper and cheaper accommodation, moving further and further from the centre with final three nights at the London Backpackers' Hostel in Hendon.
- This also accords with my 'Interview'.
- **Anisa:** Please monitor Barbara's mobile in case Irene contacts her.
- Prof Mel's checks on Irene have drawn a near blank. If our target is off the island, she is either travelling under a cover we do not yet know or has left 'blind' without passing through any passport control check. Perhaps leaving on a costal trader or fishing boat?
- Our best lead is that at 08:19 on the morning of Wednesday 27th February, a withdrawal of Euro 500 (the maximum permitted) against Irene's bank account, leaving a balance of Euro 4,382. This money was taken from an ATM in Los Cristianos.
- There has been no further activity on this bank card or on her two credit cards.
- Clearly, this is not a good sign, unless she is with someone who is helping or harbouring her or **possibly holding her hostage?**

Spanish Sparrows

- Currently she is in default for non-payment of her credit balances on both of her cards and they have now both been 'suspended'.
- The search for Marco Kovačević/Mark Tripper/Mark Smith or derivatives has so far drawn a blank.
- Can Irene be fleeing from her past, on the run again from Marco?
- Clearly there is another darker answer, but we must check everything else first, to be sure.
- I will visit Los Cristianos to check-out the ATM.
- I seem to be in a cul de sac. **Ideas, please?**

It was this last item which made her chose "ALL XCD" before clicking on "Send". The encrypted email and its Think List attachment flew off at light speed to find the entire XCD Core Team, a thing Maisie seldom allowed.

Later she reasoned this action must have been driven by something deep in her subconscious.

00000

Veronique left the apartment with Barbara still 'under' and drove to Los Cristianos. She found a busy café near the corner where the ATM of interest was located. She checked that it was working, by making a withdrawal from her Caxton pre-loaded Euro Debit Card, an additional Euro 1,000. Maisie liked cash, because of its anonymity, and the extra purchasing power that such anonymity often provided.

To a casual observer Veronique was an attractive foreign woman, perhaps French, sipping coffee, playing with her *BlackBerry*. Like Veronique, and because of its location, most of the ATM users were clearly tourists. However, she noticed this particular ATM was also used by single men, some wearing what might pass as uniforms. It was these individuals which caught her attention. She watched them arrive, make a withdrawal then leave. Most approached and returned from the same direction - the Ferry Terminal, with its large car park full of vehicles.

Maisie paid the café girl and left, following the latest man to make a withdrawal. He wore a boilersuit with the logo "FredOlsenCruises.com" showing across his shoulders.

At the terminal she studied the ferry timetable, noting a weekly departure for La Gomera on Wednesdays at 09.00.

As she studied the conditions of booking, her *BlackBerry* pinged in a text.

Spanish Sparrows

'Maisie, check your emails, **urgent**, Fida.'

There was no Wi-Fi at the Ferry Terminal. Twenty minutes later she found a suitable café bar with good reception. She was the only customer in the dim interior, the others all outside, soaking up the sun.

From Fida:

Suggest you try La Gomera, the 5-Star Suntrap Resort Hotel. You may recall you sold up this TruMac 'investment' shortly after The Event¹⁸. I once spent a week there in my past, helping TruMac to close a deal, supplying 'materials and equipment' - you can guess! Even back in those pre-Perestroika days it was stuffed with oligarch and regime favourite Russians and their 'personal friends' (both genders). I've checked on the grapevine. La Gomera airport is still 'porous', at the right price. *Ergo*, there may be no record of our 'target' if he arrived by executive jet. I've checked, wearing my travel hat. Suntrap Spa still flourishes; offers complete 'exclusivity' at a price. Shall I book you a room? What name?

Maisie replied:

Yes.

Biffy deserves an outing after all her problems with Al. Best of everything, I want to fit in! Get them to collect me at the San Sebastian Ferry Terminal. I'll speak to Dopey. Book a flight for him and put Biscuit and Sumo on standby, please. This looks like unfinished business from you know where.

¹⁸ Read "Fidelity" at www.thebuzzinbee.co.uk

Spanish Sparrows

Suntrap

Mid-morning, Thursday 15th May. Los Cristianos. ferry terminal.

On foot, the Clio parked in the ferry terminal car park, shuffling towards the gangway trailing a huge roller suitcase, Biffy saw from those ahead of her that it was unlikely she would be asked to produce her US passport on Boarding. While rigorous checks were standard practice when travelling from mainland Spain to any of its islands, such checks on the inter-island ferries between the Canaries were uncommon.

This could explain why Irene, without a passport, could easily have crossed to La Gomera unrecorded.

At San Sebastian the Suntrap chauffeur, complete with dark green cap and tailored blazer stood at the foot of the gangway holding a sign, gold letters on a black background.

Mrs Biffy Antaar Antaar Antiques

From the moment she entered the hotel, wearing her £5,600 Zeiss binoculars, Biffy Antaar broadcast repeatedly in her New York twang that she was an "arnathalagist" as well as an Antiques Dealer, spraying around her catchphrase:

"Antaar Antiques - You want it? We got it!"

The Suntrap Resort Hotel and Spa proudly declared it was "Independent". Fida had arranged a Platinum Suite, comprising three en-suite bedrooms, two public rooms, an additional 12-person Dining room, a Visitor's Bath and Shower Room, and a small service Kitchen to facilitate in-room entertaining. A long bank of folding French doors led out onto a large sundeck scattered with an assortment of loungers, hammocks and parasols. There was also a well-stocked bar area. A tasteful sign advised this would be manned day and night, on request. The rate was exclusive of food and drinks, this balance to be paid for as an extra, to include an obligatory 20% gratuity.

The total cost was already guaranteed by Antaar Antiques Gold Card Account, arranged by Mrs Antaar's travel agent, "All American Travel" (AAT). AAT's European 'doorplate' address was in Bayswater, London, one of several 'fronts' for Excalibur Executive Expediting (EEE) based at Corgarff Castle, Scotland. Biffy's suite was in the main building, on the Penthouse tier, with spectacular views back across to Tenerife and Mount Teide. As expected from studying their

Spanish Sparrows

website, this original section of the hotel was opulent, and although dated by its 1980's Architectural style and décor, it was maintained in first class order.

Tom was in-flight from Heathrow to Tenerife Sur and would follow, not as Al Antaar but as Jim Butterworth, to be collected from a later ferry. Initially the two new guests would not know each other, but might well become friends, if circumstances required. Butterworth's accommodation would be a much simpler Junior Executive Suite on the ground floor, comprising a single en-suite Double Bedroom, a Lounge, Visitor WC, and a small two-person balcony opening to a communal landscaped area. His one-week package had been pre-booked and paid by "Cheltenham Farmers' Travel" (CFT), which like AAT was operated by Fida. As for Biffy, Jim's extras and gratuities would be charged to the credit card number provided by CFT.

Pre-armed with a downloaded PDF of the Suntrap Resort layout, obtained without difficulty by simply asking Reception, Fida had ensured Jim would occupy a room located directly below Biffy's suite. Back at *Spanish Sparrows* Maisie had printed this PDF at A3 size in colour.

Fida knew from her travel industry sources that occupancy rates at the Suntrap were often extremely low. Despite this, it had proved impossible to negotiate downward on the exorbitant rates demanded. Knowing how it had operated during pre-millennium times, Fida surmised that apparently genuine guests like Biffy Antaar and Jim Butterworth were no more than a useful cover to be tolerated, rather than pampered in the hope of wooing them back as future regulars.

This confirmed her suspicion, shared by Maisie, that the Suntrap finances were dependent on funny money, not guest receipts.

00000

In keeping with her Biffy persona, Maisie changed into a pale pink shell suit with a matching long-brimmed skip cap and garish purple trainers. Carrying a half-litre mug of coffee and notebook and pen, she moved to the edge of her deck and set them down on the wide wooden top of the glass-sided balustrade. With her camera at the ready she scanned slowly with her binoculars, ostensibly searching for rarer species to add to her 'birder's list.

After a first pass, the place felt empty, almost abandoned. Or perhaps the other guests preferred not to mix.

Working slowly and carefully, she began again, scanning the entire campus, indulging her passion for birdwatching. Only now did she realise the full extent of the place. It was like a small village, each accommodation unit (dubbed a "hacienda") was widely spaced and concealed in its own micro-world of lush planting. When full, according to Fida, Suntrap catered for only 100 guests in the main (original) three-storey building where she stood, and up to a further 240 guests in the twenty self-contained twelve-person haciendas.

Spanish Sparrows

What neither Fida's PDF layout nor *Google Earth* had revealed was that each hacienda had its own perimeter fence and controlled entry point, measures masked by clever landscaping. If Irene was here, it was almost certain she would be in one of these secure enclosures, not in the main hotel. There was no evident security foot patrol, only what seemed to be genuine gardeners, mostly darker-skinned women wearing wide brimmed 'coolie-style' hats.

Further study uncovered well-hidden CCTV cameras, with tell-tale infra-red lamps, offering confirmation that Suntrap was a highly secure location, and a place to meet and greet inconspicuously. Using her Nikon with its 500mm telephoto lens, she made a record of these CCTV cameras by annotating their locations on her copy of the PDF layout.

Running in her mind was the thought:

For those with the right connections and able to pay, a Suntrap hacienda might serve as a luxury hide-away during a period of turmoil or unrest while awaiting a return to 'business as usual'.

While at *Spanish Sparrows* the previous evening, by calling on the services of Prof Mel and Anisa, they had failed to uncover signs of involvement of the usual clandestine agencies such as MI6, the CIA, or the SVR FR (the new version of the KGB). However, seeing the hacienda fortresses laid out before her, Maisie wondered if Suntrap was operating as an entirely 'commercial' business, perhaps controlled at far hand by the Sicilian Mafia or its Russian equivalent.

It was at once clear there would be no possibility of making 'social calls' on the hacienda residents of the type she had used with Herr Frei in Frankfurt. As with *Das Rote Haus*, she must send in Tom. However, given the investment in perimeter security, each villa would almost certainly have several armed operatives *inside* the perimeter fence, possibly ex-special forces.

She must emphasise to Tom that stealth and discretion must be paramount:

This project is to rescue Irene, if she is here, not to stir up a hornet's nest and spark a firefight.

Even if Tom was able to identify where Irene was being held hostage, perhaps she should wait until she had Biscuit and Sumo in place, perhaps others too, depending on the strength of the opposition.

Softly, softly, one step at a time.

And then it happened: ***Maisie saw Tomasz Drueber!***

Spanish Sparrows

Snatching up her camera, crouching below her balustrade and peeking through the glass siding, she focused her telephoto lens to capture a sighting of this rare bird.

Drueber was dressed in shorts and a polo shirt, wearing a skipped cap, a sweat towel round his neck. He exited from his hacienda through the security gate, his tennis racket swinging in his left hand. Glancing upwards, catching her watching then looking ahead towards the tennis courts in the far distance, his eyes were in shade and she did not capture his puzzled frown.

Drueber was still as tall, slim, elegant and handsome as the first time she had seen him almost seventeen years earlier, in September 1991, at a reception in the Russian Embassy in Minsk in the early days of the new Republic of Belarus. Working for MI6/GCHQ, she had attended posing as an accredited Belgian Trade Delegate, an expert in the manufacture of agrichemicals, seeking to source 'potash' from the new regime. This had been at the start of her long campaign of DINT leading to the disintegration of the old regime in Russia, with Maisie Kaywood playing mouse to his cat, a long game during which Tomasz Drueber had almost stolen her heart and her soul.

For Maisie, it had ended in supreme frustration. Tomasz Drueber had outmanoeuvred her, relieving her of Euro 1.2 million in used notes, bait money she had intended for a corrupt KGB officer who had been discovered dead in a bath at his hotel with an empty bottle of *Glenfiddich*, his throat and wrists slashed, set up as an apparent suicide. Later tests showed he had been drugged, with traces of a truth serum in his blood and an absence of alcohol.

It had been a lesson which she had learned but it still rankled.

The urge to meet out revenge surged but her training constrained her, told her at once that she must not risk following him. At close quarters, in this location where she would stand out, he would almost certainly spot her. She replayed the video recording from her camera and concluded Drueber had not recognised her, had not realised he was being recorded.

*The coincidence of Drueber being here was too great. Irene **must** be here, in Drueber's hacienda!*

She must contact Tom ASAP and put an alternative plan in place. They must rescue Irene first, find a way to deal with Drueber later.

Maisie panned back to the gate to read the sign: "Hacienda del Clavel".

At her MacBook, Maisie *Googled* it: *Clavel*: Carnation: the national flower of Spain.

Closing her eyes, she allowed her mind to slow down and move into creative mode. After about half an hour or so, her fingers reached for the MacBook keyboard. . .

Spanish Sparrows

Inspection

It was late afternoon. Retired farmer Jim Butterworth was registered and installed in his Suntrap accommodation on the ground floor. Following instructions set out in a long text from Maisie two floors above, he made his preparations then set off, as directed.

Standing far back from the panoramic window in the shadows of her master bedroom, Maisie was watching Dopey through her binoculars as he limped slowly along the meandering paths around the haciendas. He was dressed in a bizarre mixture of items from his Al Antaar and Jim Butterworth wardrobes, sporting knee length shorts (bright canary yellow) a rumpled, long-sleeved polo shirt (muted purple), his no compromise tan coloured pork pie hat perched on his head and his eyes concealed behind mirrored wraparound sunglasses. What amused her most were the elasticated garters supporting his thin black socks and his 'proper' English brogues. Inside the heel of his left shoe there was a Euro coin to remind him which of his knees he must 'favour'.

Hiding in plain view, Dopey's tour of inspection was conducted slowly, deliberately, stopping to rest and massage his knee at spots where he had a good view of a concealed CCTV camera or other feature of interest. Noting the extensive provision of physical and electronic security measures, he gained the impression he was exploring a high-security prison rather than a luxury hotel and spa complex. Oddly, it was this aspect of the haciendas and the absence of any internal or external security patrols which pleased him most. Although he knew from long experience that trying to keep human guards alert and focussed was difficult, their absence was re-assuring.

What Tom was seeing was a huge challenge but he was confident he could achieve his rescue mission alone, given a bit of disruptive help from Maisie of the kind he had in mind.

00000

As the sun was dipping below the horizon, now back on his deck two floors below her, Tom sent Maisie another text giving her the bare bones of what he needed. An hour later, when it was fully dark, changed into black stealth clothing including a balaclava, his world illuminated by infra-red goggles and shod in Vibram five-fingered rock-climbing shoes, the ex-SAS man ghosted up the face of the building onto Maisie's deck and slipped through the drapes behind the French doors to join her.

Spanish Sparrows

Over the next hour they dissected what they had found, forensically discussing what they had observed since arriving before tweaking her earlier plan. Both agreed that if Irene was at Suntrap, it was almost certain she was incarcerated in Hacienda de Clavel with Drueber. Irene's only feasible link with Drueber must be her abusive ex-husband Marco Kovačević aka Mark Tripper/Mark Smith, father of Barbara.

It was now time to act - *Carpe Diem*.

From her MacBook, using a protective firewall, she visited the Suntrap website, posing as a potential future guest, posting a request for information, using one of her many email aliases routed via a re-mailer cut-out service. The reply from Alicia Gatorres at Suntrap Reception had provided the first step, revealing the woman's in-house email address on the Suntrap network. Maisie then responded further, attaching a photograph of Prof Mel's pet parrot, knowing full well from the Suntrap website the strict hotel policy was "No Pets - of any description". As expected, Alicia had opened the photo-file to view Paragon (of Virtue) before responding to 'regret' that even parrots as handsome as Paragon were not allowed. Before Alicia had deleted the photo, the MiMic spyware had already moved on to implant itself deep inside the Suntrap intranet server, permitting Maisie free access.

Searching the Suntrap computer hard drive, she located the operating manual PDF for the hacienda CCTV cameras including a diagram with the locations for 163 cameras. A linked PDF gave details of the master software controlling the entire security system, including the main hotel building.

Upgraded in 2007, the system was state of the art, deploying motorised cameras and auto-detection zoom lenses as used at military and other sensitive establishments. In normal operation the articulation of each camera was restricted to prohibit surveillance inside the perimeter of any hacienda, thereby ensuring complete privacy for its occupants. However, external cameras were linked to a supporting network of Passive Infra-Red Detectors (PIRs) dotted around inside each hacienda 'compound'. Should a hacienda PIR detect a 'presence', associated cameras would auto-override into full surveillance mode, guided by the PIRs affected.

With Tom advising, Maisie 'experimented' with the Security and CCTV system controls, creating a few 'false alarms' to discover how the Suntrap security team responded. The short answer was - *lazily*.

Such was the level of automation that only three security men were on duty overnight, to cover the entire complex. Conveniently Maisie discovered that she could watch them on her MacBook, courtesy of the ceiling mounted camera (vision only) which monitored the Security Control Office (SCO).

Spanish Sparrows

A check of the 72-hour rolling archive showed these men spent most of their time in the SCO and did not make night patrols of the grounds, relying entirely on the cameras. As she watched them live, it was evident the three guards were already settled, watching a football match, with several beers already consumed and ashtrays filling.

While experimenting, Maisie also discovered a quirk of the security system, a facility called a "delay test". With this, from her MacBook she could 'freeze' all hacienda cameras and sensors for up to eight minutes. The manual was vague about why this facility was incorporated in the software. Tom thought this might be to allow security personnel to act freely without alerting the hacienda occupants but thought it must surely cause a sounder to bleep to warn the guards in the Security Control Office.

Holding her breath, Maisie ran a thirty-second "delay test" while watching the guards from the ceiling camera.

They did not react.

This seemed to confirm the "delay test" was 'silent', no warning beeper. If there was a warning light on the control console, they had missed it.

Tom was scathing of this weakness even though the documentation revealed that running such a delay test beyond the eight-minute limit would generate a "potential intruder event" causing the system to sound a SCRAM alert to all haciendas. According to Tom's interpretation, an error in specification had been made with speakers rated for **outdoor** use installed indoors. If these high-powered SCRAM speakers were activated, they would expose occupants to a gross overload of high-pitched acoustic energy resulting in disorientation and possible deafness.

Tom had also discovered an inadequacy in the back-up power for the Suntrap complex. If the incoming main power was interrupted, the under-rated backup generators would attempt to auto-start then shut down on overload plunging the entire complex into darkness and disabling the CCTV cameras and the entire security system.

To do this in the early hours of the morning while most hacienda occupants were asleep, might well cause temporary chaos, with interesting results and opportunities.

Tom slipped out onto the deck to descend to revisit his suite and make his final preparations.

00000

Using her global access to the Suntrap intranet afforded by the MiMic implant, Maisie browsed the reception files for "All Guests". Almost from the outset, she began to doubt the veracity of these records.

Spanish Sparrows

Currently the Hacienda del Clavel with its ten double bedrooms was being occupied by only three men, named as:

Open Account: Friday 5th January 2008:

Alfredo Ricardo - Av de José Gárate, 14, 28823 Coslada, Madrid, Spain

Davide Blanc- Calle de la Mancha, 6, 28823 Coslada, Madrid, Spain

Josias de Rouse- Av de la Constitución, 87, 28823, Madrid, Spain

Maisie forwarded the data on these men to Prof Mel and Anisa for analysis and comment.

A scan of the records archive showed that these same men had visited several times over the past few years, always staying at the Hacienda del Clavel. More strangely, the Clavel accommodation had apparently remained 'unoccupied' at other times of the year. Hacienda del Clavel did not appear on the Booking System as 'available' at any time during this period, indicating it was either owned by an outside entity or was in permanent 'reserved for guests' mode. This occupancy pattern reached back to the spring of 2003 despite rental costs for other haciendas ranging from Euro 25,000 to 35,000 per month, depending on time of year. Hacienda del Clavel was very definitely the most costly and underused holiday home in the complex.

Her inbox pinged: a message from Prof Mel:

“Initial Interactive Manual Search shows no digital footprints. It seems these people do not exist. Global Automated Search continues”.

Given Drueber's involvement, using aliases which were easily discoverable as false seemed poor, a weakness, suggesting to Maisie that perhaps her attempted exposure of the ex-KGB man in Frankfurt had partially worked.

Was Drueber on the run and calling in a favour, using Suntrap as his temporary emergency bolthole.

If Irene was being held hostage or visiting voluntarily but not being recorded in the register of occupants by Suntrap, perhaps there would be others hiding out in the Hacienda del Clavel. There was certainly plenty of space. Provided they lived quietly, if they were patient, they could probably remain undetected for long periods, especially if someone high enough in the Suntrap hierarchy was party to the arrangement.

Perhaps entertaining unrecorded visitors was commonplace in these haciendas.

Maisie sifted through the records for all hacienda residents listed over the past five years and sent the details off to Prof Mel and Anisa. If as she suspected, their searches found matches on the various CIA international drugs and financial crimes watchlists, this would

Spanish Sparrows

enable her to judiciously leak this information highlighting the Suntrap operation in the hope the CIA might swoop and clean out what could be a nest of vipers.

Like dealing with Drueber, this must remain as a side issue, of secondary merit. Her first priority must be Irene. Only then, if the opportunity arose, she would attempt to deal with Drueber, in the hope of catching him alive and pumping him for the information he must hold before sending him to meet the fishes.

Employing another approach Maisie moved on, searching the Suntrap records for restaurant deliveries to the Hacienda de Clavel since the three mystery men had arrived in early January.

Friday 5th January 2008
Open account: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner.
Food for 3 persons:
Re-stock Wine Cellar and Bars
Waiter Service - No.
All charges to Suntrap Internal Platinum Account.

This daily requirement for food and drinks service for 3 persons repeated until:

Wednesday 20th February 2008
Open account: Breakfast, (3 persons).
Lunch and Dinner (4 persons)
Re-stock Wine Cellar and Bars
Waiter service - No.
All charges to Suntrap Internal Platinum Account.

Wednesday 20th February was the day Irene had gone missing, withdrawing cash from the ATM near the Los Cristianos ferry terminal. This coincidence was too strong - this additional person must be Irene, either as a guest or as a hostage.

The requirement for food and service for 4 persons repeated until:

Saturday 23rd February 2008
Open account: Breakfast and Lunch (4 persons) Dinner (6 persons).
Re-stock Wine Cellar and Bars
Waiter Service - No.
All charges to Suntrap Internal Platinum Account.

Saturday 23rd February was the day after Maisie's 'withdrawal' of Drueber's Moscow money from the Commerzbank in Frankfurt.

Another coincidence?

She skipped forward to yesterday. This requirement for food for 6 persons continued.

Spanish Sparrows

Suddenly, silently, Tom was by her side to advise he had set up the battery-operated hoist on her deck, ready for later should he find Irene.

Maisie shared what she had discovered. If Irene was in Hacienda de Clavel, Tom was up against three minders, Drueber and (probably) , Marco Kovačević aka Mark Tripper aka Marc Smith.

The pair cross-checked their watches to be sure they were in sync. Timing would be crucial.

Then Tom was gone, slipping off again into the darkness, wearing his rucksack containing his weapons and equipment.

Spanish Sparrows

On Closer Inspection

Standing in darkness at her bedroom window, dressed entirely in black and wearing a balaclava and a matching night vision helmet paired to Tom's, Maisie watched in real time as he scuttled off into the night. Overhead the cloud was low but no rain. It was fully dark, nearly midnight - ideal for their purpose.

Closing the automated drapes, she returned to sit at the two MacBooks, switching the video output from Tom's helmet to stream to his laptop screen then diverting the sound to her left earbud.

A GPS transmitter on his helmet revealed his location to Maisie as a tiny blinking green disc superimposed on the PDF layout diagram of the Suntrap grounds.

Before discovering the test delay facility, the initial worry had been that the network of CCTV surveillance cameras might detect Tom's infra-red image as he passed through their fields of view. Hopefully, but only if necessary, that risk was now under Maisie's control. On her own laptop she was watching the CCTV alerts register, ready to stop, rewind then freeze a particular camera as soon as Tom 'showed' on it. She had not yet spotted him: his stealth technology was working, so far.

Tom, with his face blacked and dressed in the same make of grey-black clothing which Biscuit had worn in Contonou, was making a slow but steady approach to the target hacienda. Moving at around ten metres per minute, either at a crouch or on his hands and knees, sneaking quick peeks to keep himself oriented, Tom was hidden under a light-weight cape secured to his wrists and ankles with elasticated straps, his smaller field rucksack forming a dome above him.

Externally, the cape was a wrinkly shell of matt black foil material akin to a survival blanket. On the inside, it was highly insulated to prevent his body heat increasing the outer surface temperature above the ambient surroundings.

This stealth shroud was designed to absorb the emissions from the infra-red lamps associated with the night-vision CCTV cameras he had studied earlier during his limping inspection. However, should a camera spot him, he was reasonably confident that Maisie would cover for him.

His main worry was the PIR sensors *inside* the security fence, mounted at eaves level on the building perimeter. Another concern was that the Suntrap operating manuals gave no details of

Spanish Sparrows

any further enhancements which individual hacienda occupants may have deployed, such as security sensors on doors, windows or hidden pressure pads in the grounds. His failure to avoid detection at *Das Rote Haus* still nagged.

His light-weight coms helmet incorporated goggles which operated with an infra-red array designed to transmit images to their special optical eyepieces, allowing him to view what was being imaged in fine detail. In parallel the headcam audio-visual feed was being transmitted live to his own MacBook, running alongside Maisie's in her penthouse.

Only *in extremis* would he use his throat mic to whisper to Maisie, then wait for her to reply using a series of clicks using their SOP codes routed to the bud in his left ear.

During his progress he had been listening to Maisie's contact codeword clicked to him every few minutes giving reassurance that all was quiet in the Security Control Room and that he was undetected, so far.

He was counting elapsed time in his head, only checking his *BlackBerry* occasionally. From his room it had taken 43 minutes to traverse to the perimeter fence of the Hacienda del Clavel.

If Irene was in there, the plan was to use either the *Nokia* or the dart gun to administer a "SLEEP" dose to her, to avoid any attempt at a fraught explanation which might get them both killed.

At his chosen location, hidden from the access path behind a bushy plant, Tom tested the 2-metre-high mesh fence checking for electrical and electromagnetic force fields, holding the detector before the head cam so that Maisie could observe the readings, confirmed by her clicking the expected code word. Hoping he had not missed any other trip devices he snipped three sides of a neat rectangular opening in the fence and bent the 'door' back to one side along the remaining vertical axis, providing an opening large enough to make his escape with a 'sleeping' Irene hoisted over his shoulder in a fireman's carry.

Tom re-checked the fence for electrical and electromagnetic anomalies - still negative.

On exiting, if time allowed, he would re-fit the door, binding it closed with tiny cable ties, hoping to mask his incursion should someone physically check the integrity of the fence during the hours of darkness.

Maisie watched the live images from his headcam as he crawled inch by inch beneath his stealth shroud heading towards the rear of the Hacienda del Clavel. When he was standing on the deck outside an access door, the image transmitted to Tom's laptop flared brightly then adjusted to a higher lighting level inside the room as the lens looked through a gap at the edge of a drape. From the Suntrap internal layouts, this was the Library. The rear outline of a figure was visible but not recognisable. It lay prone on a couch about two metres from Tom. A few minutes passed.

Spanish Sparrows

The image suddenly darkened, the headcam adjusted to this lower lighting level and switched to infra-red.

With his dart gun primed, Tom eased sideways across the deck area, towards the French doors which opened out from the Library. These drapes were almost fully closed and he could not see into the room. Tom attached a listening bug to the glass of the door. Through his comms helmet the sounds from the sensor were being relayed to Maisie, enabling her to create voice files for remote analysis by Prof Mel and Anisa.

The first sounds were from a film, in German, rumbling quietly in the background.

A voice, which Maisie immediately advised Tom was Drueber's, announced that its owner had had enough, that it was time for bed. A shape passed the tiny slit in the curtains and a soft footfall marked his departure.

A plaintive female voice asked:

'Marco, when can I go home? I hate it here with these creeps. God, this is a dump, it stinks. Do they ever allow housekeeping in here?'

Maisie's whisper advised in Tom's ear:

"Irene. Most definitely".

'Shut it, bitch ! Više od tebe i ja ću slomiti još jednu, zar ne!'

'Please Marco, please. I keep telling you, I don't know anything. Why would I know? I'm only his Property Agent. He tells me nothing. Surely the German knows where Herr Frei is?'

'You fucking bitch! Jebena kučko ! Jebeno te upozorio! Ako mi ne kažeš uskoro.'

'No Marco. No, please. No, don't, please. Marco, stop it, please, please.'

'I send them, get Barbaru. **Aaah...** Dajte mi još jednu tabletu, another pill, brzo, brzo, quick... **Aaaah!**

Tom used the sound of Marco's shouting to work his lockpick. The door opened outwards, he slipped in, closed it behind him and stood in the gap behind the drapes. Through the slit he could see only part of the room but not the man or the woman. Irene returned to the room, carrying a glass with water, her left palm held outwards, offering a pill.

Tom risked moving the drape slightly.

Spanish Sparrows

Maisie had said Irene was sixty, well presented with a good figure although slightly overweight. This woman was thin, haggard. Her clothes hung on her. Her skin was sallow, her hair long, lank, very grey, and matted. She looked about eighty. The hand holding the glass, her right hand, was bandaged. The bandage was blood-stained, fresh blood.

The man was sobbing, whining, muttering in what Tom took to be Serbian.

The woman was talking gently to him, as to a child, comforting him.

Tom, who had been involved in several hostage rescues, recognised Irene was exhibiting Stockholm syndrome behaviour. If Irene was fully under Marco's thrall, Tom knew she might fight against him, side with her abuser.

The German film rumbled on with the sound level very low, almost inaudible. It was a documentary of some kind, Tom thought. He waited, sensing there may be others in the room, observing but silent, out of sight. Taking care not to disturb the drapes, Tom unclipped the headcam from his helmet and attached it to a telescopic bracket. Extending the lens very slowly upwards to peek over the top of the drapes, he scanned the room with the images relaying to his goggles and, in parallel back to Maisie at the penthouse.

This sequence of images revealed only two people: Irene Smith and a small man lying on a sofa bed, clutching his chest, writhing in pain, his crotch wet with urine. He was not wearing his prosthetic mask, but he was definitely the same man she had seen with Ric Royston in the badging centre at the Stade de Benin, back in February.

In Tom's ear Maisie whispered:

'This one is Marco Kovačević, aka Mark Tripper aka Mark Smith, father of Barbara and unmistakably the brother of Dario Kovačević aka Denton Smith aka The Ghost of Kosovo.'

Tom whispered:

'Looks like he is having a heart attack. Shall I put him out of his pain?'

'Yes, do it if the chance arises but Irene is your priority.'

The door crashed open and three men entered, carrying guns, small calibre pistols fitted with silencers. All three men were right-handed, fit looking. Tom pulled the headcam down and re-attached it to his helmet.

'Down bitch, flat, arms and legs wide. Right, Irene, why did you open the door?'

Spanish Sparrows

This man's voice spoke clear, harsh English with a Scottish undertone.

'What door? No, no, don't stand on my hand again. **No, PLEASE! Aaah!** Oh God, no. **NO!** It must have been Marco, when I went for his pill, his water.'

Maisie felt the man's voice snag in her memory and re-wound the images to a few seconds earlier when the men had been in view. At first she did not recognise him but it was the voice that did it.

The talker was Alfred Richardson! When Maisie and Alfie were in fourth year at Shawlands Academy in Glasgow, she had gone out with him to the pictures, but only once. Alfie, captain of the rugby team, Alfie with the wandering hands, the tall rakish muscular boy who had joined the Army as soon as he was old enough.

At GCHQ, when she was senior enough to be allowed full access to all military records, she had looked him up, curious to see how he had progressed. In subsequent years she had tracked him, intermittently, until he had been cashiered out.

The other two men were muttering, banging doors open, checking adjacent rooms.

Maisie whispered urgently in Tom's ear:

'Our fake Madrileños! Take very great care, Tom dear, the Scottish one is Alfie Richardson, you may have heard of him. He is ex-SAS and a very bitter man since he was thrown out for beating up his officer, leaving the man for dead in a bombed-out building in Serbia. I have the "SCRAM" tab ready to sound, double click if you want it. They look competent - watch yourself.'

Alfie was talking again, kneeling, grabbing the small man's hand, bending his pinkie finger backwards, threatening to break it:

'Hey Marco, wake up! **Marco**, did you open the door to the deck? Eh?'

'Leave him, let him sleep. He needs to sleep, he needs rest,' pleaded Irene.

'Fuckin' dope-head. He's bombed again. Right, Dave, looks like we may have a visitor. Check that door.'

'No, dickhead, the one that opens onto the deck, remember?'

Tom gambled, moved, pressing his shoulder to the corner of the recess, and set his dart gun in his right hand to "FIRE" then thumbed the code into the Nokia held in his left hand.

Spanish Sparrows

As Tom had guessed, Dave used his free left hand to haul back one half of the heavy drape sufficient to test the door handle, first pulling then pushing. The door swung outwards.

'Shit Alfie, this fucker is unlocked? D'you think someone's been in here? Fucking hell!'

'Get out after him Dave but watch it. Make sure you do him. And you, Yosef, get that fuckin' TV off, right now.'

A loud German voice suddenly boomed into the room until Yosef found the 'OFF' button.

Dave swung the door fully open put a foot out through the door onto the deck then craned his head out. Tom stabbed the *Nokia* into the nape of Dave's neck, injecting the neurochemicals directly into his spinal cord, pressing the FIRE button three times.

Dave was dead less than a second later, his weight supported by Tom who eased him down and out onto the deck, stepped back inside, then quietly closed the door again.

With the drape half open, Tom had a clear view of the room.

'Yosef, quick, you get upstairs, tell Drueber. I'll ring those scum at Control, get them off their fat backsides, get them to check the CCTV records, and make them do a physical check of our perimeter. No, Yosef, HOLD IT! Fuckin' ringin' out! Those fat bastards! They're fuckin' drunk again!'

'But Alfie, there should always be one of them there, remember?'

'Aye, yer right Yosef, maybe they're down? Eh?'

'Shit, Alfie, remember what happened at *Das Rote Haus*? Could it be. . .'

'Fuck! Yer right Yosef Gavrić, you're fuckin' right. We're out of here.'

'But what will we do, Alfie?'

'First, we'll do these two here! They know who we are and their dead meat anyway. And fuck Drueber! He's on his own now. Fuckin' stupid idea getting' us all to sit here on our arses.'

Remember him, eh, over and over:

"Just wait, gentlemen, you'll see. The Sheik will turn up in his own good time. Probably off to Saudi, visiting his father."

Spanish Sparrows

'It is complete **bullshit**, Yosef. It's fuckin' weeks we've been stuck here. Fuckin', fuckin' bullshit! Mark my word Yosef, son, The Sheik's a goner too, like Dario! And what the fuck happened to Colonel D? Eh? He's fucked off as well, just as we should have done. We're out of here, Yosef. This must be the CIA. Or maybe Drueber's Russian pals have tracked him here.'

'But Alfie, what about our money, we're owed big time, right?'

'Too right, Yosef, son. But remember there's that safe at *Das Rote House*, right? And guess who knows the code, eh?'

'Alfie, you fly bastard. You kept that one quiet. OK, OK, you're right. I'll go and get Dave back, then we'll go and get the Mercedes, drive it back here and get the bodies out, right?'

'No, fuckin' leave the bodies to Drueber, he can . . .'

'**Aha**, what do we have here, gentlemen? Ah, **no!** Drop them! Kick them over here. On your knees, gentlemen, with hands behind your heads, please.'

'Mr Charles, you got it wrong. It's Marco. They've turned him. She's in on ...'

The silenced weapon sounded only a soft "phut". Alfie died with a surprised look on his face and a neat dark red hole in the centre of his forehead. Another "phut" sent Marco to oblivion. A backhand elbow in her stomach bent Irene double.

In Tom's ear came Maisie's whisper:

'Charles the Butler from Frankfurt! I think he's been here since we dealt with The Sheik. I wondered where he had gone.'

'Now, Yosef Gavrić, tell me what exactly is going on here? Everything, in English, **now!**

Tom inserted his ear protector buds and started to count inside his head.

'Maisie, SCRAM, please. On my count.....ThreeTwo.....SCRAM!'

Throughout the Hacienda de Clavel, the indoor klaxons wailed into life.

As Tom had predicted, the decibel level was painful, disorienting.

Tom stepped from behind the drape and shot Charles the Butler in the neck with a KILL dart then did the same to the hapless Yosef.

Spanish Sparrows

In his head he was counting down the period he had agreed with Maisie after which the sirens would be shut down.

Moving swiftly at a crouch, he reached out and stabbed Irene on her buttock then lifted her onto his shoulder and moved her through the door onto the deck where he lowered her gently.

He dragged Dave's corpse into the room, retrieved both KILL darts placing them in a heavy-duty plastic bag, stowing it in the front pouch of his rucksack.

Stepping outside, he closed the drapes, re-locked the patio door from the outside, still counting in his head, with the dart gun in his hand and set to SAFE.

At 60 seconds Maisie switched off the external floodlights, plunging the Main Building and hacienda complex into darkness.

The sirens still sounding in Hacienda de Clavel were joined by the SCRAM sirens in the remaining nineteen haciendas, activated by Maisie.

At 1 minute 33 seconds Tom had re-sealed the escape door in the perimeter fence with cable ties and was hoisting Irene over his shoulder.

At 2 minutes 56 seconds he was standing in the shadows beside his small balcony with the unconscious Irene over his shoulder.

Out there in inky blackness he could hear angry screams and cursing.

From the other haciendas the sound of cars being revved was accompanied by frantic shouts as drowsy men and women were bundled into them and driven off into the night.

At 3 minutes 08 seconds all external floodlights were switched on again by someone, probably from the Security Control Room.

A few seconds later Maisie responded by shutting down the entire Security System and the floodlights were extinguished for a second time, returning the external area to darkness.

The SCRAM siren in the haciendas raged on unceasing. As these sirens had never operated before, no one on the payroll at Suntrap knew how to switch them off.

At 3 minutes 14 seconds a rope snaked down to Tom.

Still with Irene on his shoulder Tom stepped into the foot loop, as Sumo had done under the stern of the *African Rose*. Tom pressed his Clicker three times and Maisie started the portable electric hoist to lift Tom and his burden up to her terrace.

Spanish Sparrows

At 3 minutes 32 seconds Irene was laid out on a bed and Maisie was sponging her damaged hand with a dilute solution of Dettol in warm water.

Kneeling on Maisie's deck, Tom stowed all his gear into the larger kit bag, carefully checking he had every item, lowered it down onto his own deck before climbing down to join it.

Slipping indoors, he closed and locked his patio door, closed his drapes and started the methodical business on sorting, checking, cleaning and servicing his equipment before re-loading his larger rucksack with the smaller field rucksack inside, on top, ready to be re-deployed at a moment's notice, once again adopting the persona of the top echelon soldier he had been.

His heart rate and blood pressure were back to normal.

At 7 minutes 8 seconds he stopped counting and made a *BlackBerry* call to Maisie who asked him to stand down until it was time for the three of them to make a controlled departure in good time to catch the mid-morning return ferry to Los Cristianos.

00000

Showered, he treated himself to a large *G&T* from the minibar, doused the lights, lay down on his bed wearing his striped pyjamas and fleecy beige dressing gown, once again in the persona of retired Farmer Jim Butterworth.

A few minutes later he could be taken for a man asleep but this would have been a foolish assumption.

The radio alarm clock showed 01:39. The *SCRAM* sirens in the twenty haciendas were still wailing.

At 02:31, inexplicably, the sirens ceased their whine and the Security System re-booted.

Maisie smiled and closed her laptop.

There were no *CCTV* tape records in the archive, nothing for the last few days. On closer inspection, it was discovered that all system records had been wiped including guest records and associated billing.

00000

08:07, Friday 16th May.

Spanish Sparrows

The Staff in Concierge and Reception at the Suntrap Resort Hotel and Spa were under siege from angry Guests, many demanding explanations, others merely shrugging their shoulders, signing off on their guesstimated invoices and leaving for quieter, safer locations.

No one noticed when Maisie, now dressed as a nurse, wheeled her elderly charge swathed in blankets out through the doors into a private ambulance driven by a tall, thin, balding man in green paramedic fatigues.

Earlier Tom had cleaned both suites, removing virtually all traces of their presence. As part of this process, he had exchanged their bed linen and towels with fresh items from the Housekeeper's closet.

00000

There were no records in the Suntrap billing system for Biffy Antaar and Jim Butterworth and no emails linking them to Fida and her travel agencies.

Two days later Fida would arrange for the car rental firm to collect the Transit 'ambulance' minus its temporary decals from the long-term car park at Tenerife Sur Airport.

Had anyone searched for fingerprints or DNA they would have done so in vain.

Spanish Sparrows

Reunion

Friday 16th May 2008, late afternoon.

Irene drifted up into wakefulness.

She listened.

Was she alone?

Everything seemed fuzzy, as if she was in a slo-mo video.

She felt sad, remorseful and slightly fearful.

Just before dawn she had been injected by Maisie with an antidote for the Nokia SLEEP injection.

Her wounds had been attended to 'professionally' by Tom, a trained field-ops paramedic.

She could remember nothing of what had happened since mid-afternoon on the previous day.

She did not know that she had been rescued, that she was safe at No 8 El Beril.

When she tried to lift her head, it ached.

She moved her hands from under the duvet and held them high above her, inspected them.

She felt no pain in her damaged right hand.

There was a fresh dressing over two finger stalls, everything enclosed in a tightly bound crepe bandage fashioned into a makeshift mitt, designed to restrict movement of her fingers.

She was in a clean bed, under a light duvet, wearing a clean nightie, clean knickers.

Her hair had been washed and felt shiny clean.

The nails on her left hand had been manicured - with pale pink nail varnish.

The room was filled with the smell of lavender.

Spanish Sparrows

Moving her head slowly, she looked around - furtively.

Why have those creeps moved me here?

Why have they treated my hand?

Are they intending to ransom me?

She could hear voices, far away, female.

Her hearing had not yet recovered from the SCRAM sirens.

Birds were chirping, chirping, chirping.

She looked towards the sound.

On the small table, across the room near the open door, there was a bottle of water and a bowl overflowing with fruit, snack biscuits and two large brown bread sandwiches wrapped in Cling film.

The sight of the water made her feel thirsty.

She tried to move.

It was difficult. Everything was difficult.

She stood up, swayed then wobbled across the few paces towards the bowl.

She looked past the table to the open French doors, to the blue sky.

Far below one of the voices laughed and the others joined in.

It was the first genuine laughter she could remember hearing for weeks.

She moved onto the small balcony.

She looked out over the low wall, looked down.

Tears came to her eyes. She was in Adeje, at El Beril.

The doorbell pinged and she was fearful.

Keys rattled and the door opened.

Spanish Sparrows

It was Barbara!

And Tasha!

And Jaqui!

And Filippo!

And in the background the tiny form of Tommy, Jaqui's Scottish boyfriend.

'Oh Mummy, Mummy, what did you do to yourself? Where have you been?'

Irene fainted and Barbara caught her, held her.

Tasha took charge:

'Here girl. Give her at me. Darle a mí, ella es mi amigo, yo cuidaré de ella.

(Give her to me, she is my friend, I will look after her.)

'No, Tasha, she is my Mummy. I want to look after her.'

Jaqui spoke:

'No, Barbara, leave Irene to Tasha. Look, Irene she bad, she thin, ill near to ghost. Give at Tasha, now, at once!'

'If she needs a Doctor, I'll get her one,' snapped Barbara.

Tasha took hold of Irene and eased Barbara away, gently but firmly:

'NO! No Doctor. No, médico no. Yo curaré a mi amiga, ya verás. Vete, por favor, déjamela a mí. ¡Vete! ¡Vete!'

(No, not a doctor. I will heal my friend, you will see. Go away, please, leave her to me. Go! Go!)

'Come, Barbara, leave it to Mamma', said Filippo, tugging Barbara away. 'It is what your Mummy would want, OK?'

'Are you sure, Fillipo?'

'Yes, Barbara. We will return when Mamma telephones. Come, please.'

Spanish Sparrows

00000

Wednesday 21st May, early evening, at Spanish Sparrows.

Maisie has just returned from her impromptu visit to Gran Canaria.

Tom was already there, having arrived a few hours earlier, from London, he said.

From Tommy they learned Irene is now at her own house being cared for by Barbara, Tasha and Jaqui.

Whatever story Irene spun to cover her long absence did not go further than Tasha.

After a further few days of additional mutual therapy at *Spanish Sparrows*, Tom flew back to his stud farm in the Cotswolds.

When they parted at the airport Maisie drove back in her rented Panda to No 8 El Beril, a property now owned by her friend and fellow writer, Veronique de Bois.

Veronique's publishing deadline was looming but now at last she had the peace and quiet she had sought to work on her novel.

Although once again Tomasz Drueber had eluded Maisie, Prof Mel and Anisa were actively watching for him. In the modern world everyone leaves a trail: digital breadcrumbs.

One day soon Maisie Kaywood and her XCD team would find him and eradicate him forever, but only after a full de-briefing and long overdue punishment.