

Adam Hall

QUILLER KGB

A QUILLER
ADVENTURE

"QUILLER IS THE GREATEST!"
— *The New York Times*

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ADAM HALL [1989]

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Forced into liaison with the KGB, Quiller runs Quickstep through the hazardous streets of East Berlin, where life is dominated by the massive presence of the Wall. Hounded by the opposition, he carries with him the burden of appalling doubts - that he cannot trust the most ruthless intelligence organisation in the world to let him run free, nor trust his own people in London not to set him up as a target in the name of political expediency.

1 : BERLIN

My arm was getting numb but I didn't move. I wanted her to go on sleeping for as long as she could, dreaming of God knew what. The worst wasn't over yet, I knew that.

The next time she woke up she began shaking all over and I held her more tightly, telling her it was all right, though of course it wasn't. Then the sobbing came and she tried to stop it, burying her face against me while her whole body shook and the tears began falling onto my hand.

'Let it come,' I said, 'don't hold it in.'

It helped, I think; she was making more noise now. A stewardess came over with a box of Kleenex and I pulled out a handful.

'Is there anything she needs?'

I shook my head, and held the tissues against Corrine's hand so she could feel them.

'Oh, Christ,' she kept moaning.

We'd reached our ceiling and levelled off; the jets were quieter now. One of the people across the aisle was looking back, glancing across us with his eyes deliberately blank, wasn't even seeing us, just looking at the view. No one else was taking any notice; London had booked us first class for the sake of more privacy; decent of someone, or perhaps it had to do with guilt.

‘All I want to know...’ Corrine was saying now, a lot of it muffled, ‘All I want to know is whether he’d been sleeping with her...’

I tried to understand why it mattered.

‘No,’ I told her at once, lying, or probably lying. ‘She was just someone in his courier line, that was all.’

That was all, but sex too, probably; he’d been moving in to the end-phase and it was going to be dangerous. ‘He didn’t,’ Holmes had told me over the phone yesterday, ‘fancy his chances.’ And when we don’t fancy our chances, my friend, we look for the good graces of a woman, any woman, to help take the edge off and allow us to go in relaxed, less tense, less vulnerable. But no, that’s a lie too - lies come easily to us in this trade. The truth is that we want it on the principle of just-one-more-time, if that’s all there’s going to be.

‘I suppose it doesn’t make any sense,’ Corrine was saying, her head off my shoulder now as she messed about with the tissues.

I moved my arm at last and felt the tingling as the circulation got going again.

‘I mean, he won’t ever be able to -’ But that thought broke her up again, expectedly.

When she’d calmed down I said, ‘It doesn’t matter why it’s important to you. The thing is, she was just a courier, and that was all.’

We’re trained to lie in our teeth but this time it wasn’t to get me out of a death trap or anything; it was for personal reasons. I’d got the idea now: she couldn’t let herself go, couldn’t cry over the coffin and things like that, if she thought he’d gone out doing it with someone else. I suppose there was a certain raw logic in that.

‘How do you know?’ she asked me.

‘Because I knew him.’ A bit of false anger: ‘Do you think we ever have time, for Christ’s sake, when we’re pushing a mission at that pace?’

After a while she said, so softly that I only just caught it, ‘I so much want to believe you.’

‘Then you can.’

I had to protect him, too.

They were sending him back on a freight plane in the morning, the coffin, anyway, though God knew what they could have found to put in it. The opposition had set up an ambush and blown the car apart, both of them in it, the girl too, the courier, bits of her in the same coffin with him, unavoidably, and if that wasn’t the ultimate act of intimacy, what was it, what did the sex thing matter?

But Corrine was his wife - widow, yes - not just a girl-friend, so she'd expected some kind of fidelity from him, not knowing much about the job we do, the kind of stress we work under. The shadow executives don't often marry; there are no promises we stand much chance of keeping.

One of the flight crew, three rings, put his head through the doorway and spoke to a stewardess and went back onto the deck.

'He was good,' Corrine said, 'wasn't he?'

'One of the best.'

'They told me he helped someone get through, once.'

'Yes.' But there hadn't been much point because Thompson had spent the rest of his life - three weeks - in a hospital linked up with tubes and monitors until he'd got someone to smuggle a capsule in to his room.

'Not many people do that,' Corrine said.

Save lives. 'Very few.'

I suppose this was the way her grief was taking her: she had to create the idol she could later venerate, a hero, faithful to the last.

She uncrossed her legs and half-turned to look at me, her eyes puffy from crying. 'If you knew him like you say, this isn't much of a fun trip for you either, is it?'

'Not really.'

'Excuse me, sir.' The stewardess was leaning over me. 'You're Mr Stephen Ash?'

'Yes.' Cover-name for the assignment.

'They've got a call for you on the radio. May I show the captain some kind of identity?'

I gave her my Barclaycard and she went forward and tapped on the flight-deck door, three long, three short. Someone in London was panicking: we were due in at Rome in twenty minutes and they could have paged me there.

'Is something up?' Corrine asked. Her tone was like a robot's, with no feeling in it; the world was going on for everyone else and she was forcing herself to take an interest.

'Could be,' I said. They wouldn't call me in flight just to get my debriefing on Hubbard. They'd sent me to Bombay to see if we needed any smoke out after they'd got him, and to bring Corrine back, look after her. I couldn't see there was any rush to debrief me: I'd sent them a clear-field signal from Santa Cruz Airport.

‘Is everything all right?’ Corrine had turned to look at me again.

‘Perfectly. He left a clear field. Don’t worry.’ She worked in Codes and Ciphers and knew some of the routine when an agent blew it. She wanted to feel sure Hubbard hadn’t messed things up. ‘Feel like another drink?’

She thought about it and then said, ‘No. I’ve got no excuse to get smashed.’ I’d given her two brandies, one before take-off and one an hour ago.

‘Mr Ash?’

The stewardess gave me back my card and led me to the flight deck and the skipper introduced himself.

‘This phone here. George, can you shift over a bit?’

The flight engineer twisted out of his seat and passed me the phone.

‘Ash.’

‘Parole and countersign.’ Tinsley’s voice, from the signals room: I could hear the background.

‘Fanfare.’

‘North 5. We want you to change flights in Rome for West Berlin. There’s a Lufthansa leaving at 19:07 hours for Tegel airport direct, which gives you twenty-two minutes to switch. That’s ample. Have you got any baggage?’

‘No.’ But I didn’t understand. ‘Is this for debriefing?’

Just the slightest hesitation - I only just caught it. ‘Yes.’

‘In Berlin?’

‘What we want you to do,’ Tinsley said carefully, ‘is to put down at Tegel and go to the Hertz counter and wait there. You’ll be met by two of our people and the parole is for October. Have you got that?’

‘Yes.’

All I could think of was that Hubbard’s ambush had started making waves and either there was a West German connection or my debriefer was going to fly with me to London and go through it on the way. It was no good asking Tinsley anything: he’d just told me to shut up. I looked past the battery of circuit-breakers on the engineer’s panel at the lights of Rome glowing in the windscreen. Maybe he hadn’t left a clear field after all, Hubbard, and in London they were waiting for some kind of shit to hit the fan.

‘What about his wife?’ I asked Tinsley.

‘We’ve sent someone to meet your flight in Rome and take over the escort. A woman, name of Baker, October parole. How’s Corinne doing?’

‘All right. Look,’ I said, ‘I’ve told her he didn’t mess anything up. If he has, don’t let anyone tell her.’

‘I am not,’ Tinsley said evenly, ‘a total idiot. And how are you feeling?’

‘I’m used to it, and I’m not his wife.’ The floor of the deck shuddered slightly as the undercarriage went down and locked in.

‘How are you feeling in general?’

This time I didn’t let him get away with it. ‘I’ve no information for you if you’ve none for me.’

‘Over a telephone?’

With Tinsley you can’t win. ‘I’m feeling normal,’ I told him, ‘whatever that means.’ I waited for another question, one that might give me a clue. I was picking up some nasty vibrations in the background and they were reaching the nerves, because they’d been left exposed by the Hubbard thing: I’d known him for five years and worked with him twice and when someone gets blown apart there’s always the thought in our minds: it could have been me.

‘The two people,’ Tinsley said, ‘who are going to meet you at Tegel Airport are rather high in the echelon, and they’ll handle you extremely well. Total reliance. Is that understood?’

‘Roger.’ I knew one thing now: Hubbard couldn’t have left a clear field, and if high-echelon people were moving in to debrief me I didn’t want to think what kind of mess he’d made out there. I also knew another thing: they weren’t going to send me back there to clear it up. When I got back to my seat I found Corinne staring up at me with her eyes haunted. ‘What went wrong?’ she asked me.

‘Nothing went wrong.’ She was shivering, and I rubbed her hands. ‘They want me to switch flights, that’s all.’

She almost flinched. ‘You’re going back to Bombay?’

‘I am not going back to Bombay. I’m wanted in Berlin.’ We began lowering into the approach path.

She wouldn’t let it go at that. ‘What are you going to tell them, when you’re debriefed?’

'I'm going to tell them he left no traces, nobody involved, nothing that's ever going to blow up in anyone's face.' I could have bitten my tongue because there were better ways of putting it than that. 'Look,' I told her, 'he was doing his best and he bought it. Did you love him?'

'Yes.'

'Then settle for that. What else matters, for God's sake?'

They were standing near the Hertz desk in West Berlin, hands tucked behind their backs. I'd never seen them before; they could have been twins, both a bit overweight, pink-faced and recently-shaved, formal blue suits and bright polished shoes - I thought of Loman - and with an air of being totally in charge, not a thing for me to worry about, just leave it all to them, so forth.

Parole and countersign for October but they also asked for my card, the heavy one with the Queen's coat-of-arms embossed on it, kept in the lining, not in my wallet.

'Splendid,' one of them said, 'then we'll be on our way. No baggage, is that correct?'

They could almost be Foreign Office, not Bureau; except for one or two people like Loman we look like down-at-heel Fleet Street stringers out of a job, part of the cover - but then Tinsley had said these two were 'very high in the echelon', and that explained it: they spent their days in the rarified atmosphere of Administration, high under the roof of the building in Whitehall, with nothing much more to worry about than how to get the pigeon-shit off the windowsills. That's not actually true; it's just that we don't like the bastards - at any given hour they can hit their computers and bring up a man's name and put him down for a mission and send him headlong into God knows what kind of mayhem, ours not to reason why, so forth.

'I'm Chandler, and this is Elliott,' one of them said - the shorter one with the trimmed military moustache - and pushed open a swing door and got us into the Customs and Immigration hall. 'We shan't be delayed very long, just a formality.'

They guided me right past the end booth and told me to wait on the cleared side while Elliott spoke to a plainclothes immigration officer and flashed his identity and signed something and came back and joined us.

'Terribly cooperative chaps,' he said briskly, by which I suppose he meant we were sailing through the formalities under the NATO flag.

Just to debrief me on Hubbard?

'Car outside,' Chandler said. He spoke like a very quiet machine gun. 'Shan't be long now.'

'You're wasting your time,' I told him.

They both gave me a half-glance and Chandler coughed discreetly and no one spoke again until we'd got into the black 420 SEL outside and driven to the corner of the east car park and stopped and waited with the engine off but the side-lights still burning.

A cold drizzle blew around the overhead lamps and frosted the bonnet of the car.

'Wasting our time?' Chandler.

'Whatever kind of mess Hubbard left out there in Bombay, you'll have to get someone else to wipe it up.'

They've done that too often - pushed me into one red sector or another with a checkpoint blown apart or a body in the street with dangerous papers on it or a courier line scattered and one of them sitting under a bright light with his brains being picked. Not this time. Not again.

'We've got a few minutes,' Elliott said, and pulled out a mini-Sanyo and slipped a cassette into it and snapped the cover shut. 'Let's just do a little debriefing on that one, shall we?' Smoother than Chandler, not a machine gun at all, more like a soft shoe shuffle, almost apologetic.

He pressed the record button and held the thing closer to me and I'd got nothing to lose this far so I gave it to them again: they obviously hadn't recorded my signal earlier from Bombay. 'From what I could get out of the local sleepers, Hubbard got in the way of the security people at the Soviet consulate without knowing it and one of their station staff put a man on him and reached a contact and took him inside and grilled him - a Pakistani, not one of ours. When they'd got enough on Hubbard they must have thought it was safer to push him right of the picture and warn us off, so they did that.'

'You don't feel he could have told them anything useful first?' Elliott.

'Whether I do or not, they didn't, which is what matters. I don't know enough about his operation to give a valid opinion.'

Chandler, sitting at the wheel, kept his head turned to watch the nearest entrance to the car park.

'What about the woman?' Elliott asked me.

'She was the final link in the courier line and the instructions from the director in the field were for her to go with Hubbard as far as the rendezvous with the Afghan contact and the leave him and stand by in case she was needed.'

Elliott leaned with his arm on the back of the seat, holding the Sanyo at an angle between us. 'As regards timing, how long were Hubbard and the woman in the car before he started off and met with the ambush?'

‘Three hours. They had to wait for the Afghans to make a signal.’

‘Three hours.’ Elliott pressed the pause button while he did some thinking.

All I want to know is whether he’d been sleeping with her. Corinne, her eyes puffy with crying, brandy on her breath. How the hell did I know, but what are you going to do to pass the time for three hours closed up in a car with a young woman when you don’t have the slightest idea whether or not the rendezvous could have been compromised and you could be lying on the floor of a detention cell by this time tomorrow with nothing ahead of you but ten or twenty years in a forced-labour camp in the Gulag without a woman in sight?

No, she was just someone in his courier line, that was all. With one of her blackened finger-bones or the charred remnant of an ear lying inside the coffin by mistake, to be prayed over in ignorance by his grieving widow - how complicated life can be, my friend, how very poetic.

‘What traces might he have left?’ Elliott was asking me.

‘None at his safe-house: I went in there. All his signals were verbal, the last three to London by phone at a courier’s flat. His code book would have been on him in the car.’

The beam of some headlights swung across the windscreen as a BMW came into the car park and went past us, accelerating. Chandler started the engine.

‘What about the courier?’ Elliott asked me. ‘The woman?’

‘You mean traces?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t know. The whole line went to ground the minute the news got out. You’d have to check through their base.’

We started moving, following the BMW.

Elliott switched off the Sanyo and put it away, leaning forward and saying something to Chandler; all I caught was ‘till they signal’, or it sounded like that. Then he sat back again.

‘Is that it?’ I asked him.

‘Oh,’ he turned to me quickly, ‘yes, many thanks. We just needed it on the record, confirming your report from Bombay.’

‘So what am I doing in Berlin?’

‘We did the debriefing - ‘ he looked at his nails ‘ - because it was convenient. We want you here to meet someone.’ A quick smile. ‘Won’t take long.’

He was being too bloody reassuring, and I had the sudden feeling I was sitting here on my way to an execution. ‘Who?’

I shouldn’t have asked, but it was too late. Showing my nerves. It was six weeks since I’d got back from Singapore and I’d been standing by for a month and no one had remembered my existence until the phone call to the plane. The thing is, we come off the last time out with the blood still up and the nerves at the pitch where we’ve stopped being scared any more, and at that point they could send us straight out again and we wouldn’t miss a beat; but then there’s the debriefing and the medic exam and two weeks’ paid leave with an air ticket to wherever we want to go or a stint at the spa in Norfolk with breakfast in bed and Swedish massage and saunas and the whole treatment; and then we’re put on the list for standing by and the rot sets in - the nerves have come down and the blood’s cooled off and we’ve had time to remember that it was only a bit of luck that got us back the last time, or at least a calculated risk that worked out according to the book. We shouldn’t be here; we should have stayed stuck under that boat with the air-line still snarled or been pushed into a cell with the light still boring a hole in our head or found by the dustmen in the first grey light of the dawn with half the skull gone and the grin lopsided. So what do we want to go out again for, why push our luck?

The answer’s another question. What else is there?

Elliott’s voice came into my thoughts. ‘Do you remember Yasolev? Viktor Yasolev?’ Looking at his nails again.

‘Yes.’

‘Got on well with him, I believe.’

‘As well as could be expected.’

He smiled indulgently. As well as could be expected, considering that Viktor Yasolev was a colonel in the KGB and had come extremely close to throwing me into Lubyanka.

‘I mean,’ Elliott said carefully, ‘you found him, as an adversary, an honourable man?’

We turned left onto the Saaltwinkler Damm alongside the canal, with the windscreen wipers clearing the way through the drizzle and the rear lights of the BMW still ahead of us.

‘Yes.’ Viktor Yasolev: tough, dangerous, deadly in a corner, but yes, honourable. ‘Why?’

‘It is our hope,’ Elliott said carefully, ‘that you might agree to work with him.’

I swung my head and he gazed back at me steadily, his eyes expressionless.

In a moment I asked him, ‘When did he defect?’ ‘He didn’t. He’s still in the KGB.’

2 : ECHOES

‘We’ll get out here,’ Chandler said, and turned off the engine, prodding his seat-belt release.

The BMW had parked in the next aisle and there were three other cars further away among the concrete pillars. Two men were standing further away still, near the entrance, where the ramp sloped down from the street. Pilot lamps burned in here above the parking-bay numbers, throwing a bleak light through the gloom.

We got out and stood doing nothing for a minute, breathing in the exhaust gas.

‘Not Yasolev,’ Elliott said quietly. ‘We’re not meeting Yasolev here, of course. It’ll be Mr Shepley.’

I looked at him but he didn’t turn his head. He was watching the BMW. I’d heard of Shepley but never met him before; not many of us had. He was the head of the Bureau. His status was approximately that of God.

Shepley in Berlin.

According to legend he never left London; never, some said, left the building in Whitehall with the false door behind the lift shaft and the mole’s citadel of rooms above the street with no numbers to them, no names. Legend also had it that Shepley was a former colonel in the SAS and had taken a leading part in the raid on the Iranian Embassy in Princes’ Gate; but then legends, with or without substance, are to be expected in a place like the Bureau, where we bury ourselves in deep cover as a matter of principle.

‘Chilly,’ I heard Elliott say, ‘for this time of year.’ He gave me a faint smile, and it occurred to me that underneath his air of calm his own nerves were running close to the edge. It could have been because it doesn’t give me the giggles to be in the presence of people very high in the echelon. They get my back up, and I suppose he didn’t want it to happen now, with God here.

A police car went past the entrance very fast with its siren waking the night; then it was quiet again down here until a door of the BMW came open.

Elliott touched my arm. ‘It would be quite a good thing,’ he told me in an undertone, ‘to listen, and not say much. The final decision must be yours, remember, so you’ve nothing to worry about.’

Nerves on his sleeve. It didn't help.

Two men got out of the BMW and came round to this side and then someone else got out of the back and stood with his hands buried in the pockets of his raincoat, and for a moment looked at no one as we walked over and stopped near him, the soft echoes of our footsteps dying away.

I could actually hear Elliott's breathing, it was so quiet here. Chandler hadn't said anything since we'd got out of the car; he was on my other side, opposite Elliott, and they were both standing a little way back from me.

'Who are they?' The man in the raincoat had his head turned towards the entrance to the garage. His voice was so soft that I'd barely heard him.

'NATO guard, sir, major's rank.' It was one of the men who'd just got out of the BMW.

Shepley's head moved again. 'What about those?'

He was looking at a dark grey Mercedes in the far corner, with two faces only just visible behind the windscreen.

'Police, sir. In case anyone tries disturbing us.'

Shepley turned his head again and looked at me. He was nondescript, in some ways: average height, average weight, thinning straw-coloured hair, a bank clerk or an insurance man - nondescript except for his eyes, a washed-out blue but with a steadiness that made me feel he was quietly taking every nerve synapse in my brain apart and checking it for wear. Nondescript, too, except for his voice, which was so soft that you had to focus in on it and ignore all other sounds, if you wanted to hear what he was saying.

'You're the executive?'

Chandler spoke from slightly behind us. 'Quiller, sir.'

The pale eyes went on looking at me without any reaction; then, when he was ready, he brought his right hand out of his pocket and offered it to me. 'Good of you to come. I'm Shepley.'

A cold hand, hardened by holding things that might have blown up if he hadn't been careful - 'this was how I thought of it.'

'My privilege, sir.' To put poor old Elliott out of his misery. Shepley put his hand back into his raincoat and leaned against the car, his head turned a little to the right but his eyes watching me.

'You've been told we'd like you to work with the KGB on a certain assignment?'

‘Yes.’

‘How does it appeal?’

‘I’ll need more information.’

He looked away, at the guards by the entrance or beyond them: I think he’d stopped actually seeing the environment, and had slipped into alpha waves. I noticed pockmarks below his left ear, some kind of scarring left by an explosion, perhaps, a grenade. It would explain why he always turned his head to listen with his right ear.

‘More information,’ he said softly. ‘Of course.’ He looked back at me again. ‘This man Yasolev. Would you trust him?’

‘What with?’

‘Your life.’

I thought about it, then said, ‘I’d trust him to keep his word to me. If he said, for instance, that whatever the orders from Moscow he wouldn’t cut me down, I’d accept that.’

‘Would you.’

It wasn’t a question. I didn’t add anything; he was giving me the information I needed by asking me things and listening, so that he’d know what his next question should be. That sounds complicated but it isn’t really; it’s the classic technique for limiting the information to what the other man needs to know, so that the least amount of information possible is given. I wished him a lot of luck in this case because I was going to want a lot of data before I’d consider working with the KGB, and he knew that.

‘Would you be prepared to work inside the German Democratic Republic?’

‘Under what kind of cover?’

‘Whatever you felt comfortable with, plus the option of going clandestine at any given time.’

He meant I could bolt for a burrow if things got hot.

‘I’d want a guarantee,’ I told him, ‘that you’d pull me out of there if I made the request.’

It didn’t sound a lot to ask but he knew what I was saying. It could mean having to send a chopper across the frontier under the radar and locate me and get me out of whatever hole I was in, and do it in a rainstorm or in the dark with not much time left before the opposition closed right in on me or I lost too much blood or couldn’t signal

or give my position or lift a finger for that matter. Or it could mean calling a whole covey of sleeper agents and contacts and couriers out of the ground and sending them in to find me if they could, and that meant that Shepley could reach the point where he'd have to balance the value of this single shadow executive against the risk of exposing half the resident moles and sleepers and agents-in-place in the whole of East Berlin or the whole of East Germany, and if the scales didn't tip in my direction he'd have to go back on whatever guarantee he'd given me and throw me to the dogs.

He was watching me steadily.

'We can't do that,' he said, 'as you know.'

I'd just been trying to find out if he was ready to promise me the impossible in order to tempt me into the mission. So far he was playing straight.

'All right.' I shifted my stance, feeling the need for movement. Standing as close as this to Shepley was like standing under a high-voltage power line. Maybe he didn't always pack this amount of tension but he was doing it now. He hadn't, after all, come to Berlin to try the apfelstrudel. 'All right, then I'd want your guarantee that you wouldn't cut me down, whatever the pressure on you.'

He looked at his shoes.

I think someone made a movement beside me, Elliott, on my left, a more vulnerable man than Chandler, more easily embarrassed; or he knew - where perhaps Chandler didn't - that two missions ago London had put a bomb under me because I'd become suddenly and critically expendable, and I'd only got back because I'd found it and pulled out the flint. I didn't want them to do it again.

'That would be difficult,' Shepley said, and looked up at me with his pale mother-of-pearl eyes and began sorting out my synapses again to see what I was thinking.

'Yes, but that's what I'd need from you. From you personally.'

'That would be an irrevocable condition, if you agreed to work on this assignment?'

'Yes.'

It was warm in here, in this waste of cold concrete on an October night in latitude 52, the sweat creeping on my face, on my hands. I hadn't been ready for this when they'd told me to land in Berlin. With the head of the Bureau out here and with the timing so tight that they'd had to switch my flights without warning and shove me into an underground garage face to face with the stark proposal that I should work in liaison with the KGB, I was feeling the heat. God knew what the background was to this thing but it was obviously ultra-high-level and I suppose there was a degree of paranoia creeping in - I felt these people were pulling me into a vortex before I had a chance of getting clear; otherwise I'd never try making conditions like this without even

knowing what they wanted me to do.

‘By “cut you down”,’ Shepley’s soft voice came, ‘you mean order your death. Is that correct?’

I liked him for that. We’re all so fond of euphemisms like eliminate, terminate, cut down, so forth, but this man said what he meant.

‘Yes,’ I told him.

He didn’t look away. ‘You mean you’d put your life higher than the success of the mission? Of a mission as important as you must realise this one is?’

I turned and took a step, looking at the oil-stained concrete, kicking a broken chip of it with the toe of my shoe, watching it skitter and come to a stop against a pillar.

‘No,’ I told him. It was the only answer. It’s what we settle for when we sign up, and when we sign again at yearly intervals to confirm our commitment. It’s on this one that most of the new recruits back out, and I don’t blame them. I’d signed because this was the life I wanted, and I was ready to accept the death they might one day want of me.

At the Bureau we don’t have a licence to kill; we have a licence to die. ‘No, I wouldn’t put my life higher than the success of the mission. But look -’ I turned back and met his eyes again ‘- all I’m asking is that you’ll let me do it for myself, that’s all. If -’

‘There might not be time to ask you.’

‘But you wouldn’t have to. I’d know if -’

‘Not necessarily.’

‘Look, I’m seasoned, you know that. I’ve -’

‘You’re being impractical.’

‘With my life on the line, surely I -’

‘We can’t let you tie our hands.’

‘Oh for Christ’s sake, I’d have a capsule on me, so what are we talking about? I just don’t want to be stabbed in the -’ but I stopped right there because I could hear the tone in my voice, pitching a degree higher, showing my nerves, no better than bloody Elliott.

The sound of an engine came suddenly and headlights swung into the entrance, dipping as the car reached the ramp, and by this time we’d all turned and were standing with our backs to the light, our faces hidden, our shadows standing against the wall like a group photograph in silhouette, none of us moving as we stood listening

to the whimper of tyres as the brakes came on, a man's voice - one of the NATO guards - then another voice, fainter, from inside the car, the engine idling and then speeding up, the sound of the transmission in reverse, the group of silhouettes against the wall shifting to one side as the headlights swung away and the gloom came down again and we turned like puppets, taking up our positions again.

'You have a reputation,' Shepley's soft voice came, 'of showing resistance when offered a new mission. I'll suffer you not to waste my time.'

'This thing,' I said at once, 'was thrown at me cold.'

'I take your point. But time is of the essence. We need to hurry.'

'All right, but I need to know more, a lot more.'

'Of course. You'll be fully briefed. For the moment -' he began pacing suddenly and I joined him, glad of the chance of movement '- for the moment I simply want you to agree to a meeting with Yasolev. It would take place in East Berlin; he wouldn't come to you, but you would go to him. This was a concession on my part during the initial approach. For your protection - or for the protection, shall I say, of the executive undertaking the assignment - I pushed the KGB very hard for a hostage for us to hold in London, and they finally agreed to send a major-general of the Red Army.' We reached a wall and turned back, our footsteps raising small echoes. 'I also demanded four of our agents - SIS, not Bureau - to be freed from captivity in Moscow and returned to London, together with three Americans. I therefore offered the token concession of our meeting Yasolev on his home ground.'

'Alone?'

'Yes. Again, you'll be fully briefed. You should also know at this point that the mission is to be strictly confined to the intelligence community in London, with not the slightest involvement with the Foreign Office or overseas embassies - unless the circumstances of the mission call for it. But if you accepted the assignment you would have the full resources of the Bureau at your command, under my personal and constant supervision.'

He stopped short of where the other men stood waiting, and faced me with his head turned slightly to the right, his eyes trapping light from a pilot lamp overhead. 'This, I think, is as much as you need to know at this stage, but I'm prepared to answer any question, providing it's of the most vital consequence.'

He wouldn't give me long. He'd told me all he was going to tell me, because if I refused the mission he didn't want a critical mass of information loose in my head: any agent at any time can be got at and picked clean, even between assignments, if someone suspects he's loaded with some kind of product. Until I accepted this one I'd be told nothing more.

There was only one question I could ask Shepley that would give me an idea how big this assignment was, and whether I should even look at it. 'It wasn't Yasolev,' I said, 'who made the approach off his own bat. He's not big enough. So who was it?'

'General-Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev.'

3 : PICNIC

We inched forward again, the lamps sliding past the tinted windows of the Mercedes and throwing shadows across the driver's head. He hadn't spoken until a few minutes before, when we'd reached the checkpoint. 'We could go through the official-traffic lane, but we'd call more attention. Is that all right with you, sir?'

I'd said yes. Shepley had told me there'd be no delay getting through - no one would check us - but I wanted to attract as little notice as I could.

The driver had fallen silent again. The figures outside looked almost faceless through the smoked windows and my dark glasses; their voices were faint. It was four in the morning, a dead hour, with only half a dozen vehicles ahead of us.

We moved again, the engine's note soft, muted, the lights on the fascia glowing.

Are they going to interrogate us?

She was shivering, curled against me, her woollen coat soaked from melted snow. One of the guards outside the hut was coughing again, the cold air freezing his lungs.

Not you, no. You don't know enough.

Margaret. Margaret Someone. Jennings? Fenning? Something with 'ing' at the end. In three years you can forget your own name, in this trade.

'Which road are we taking?'

The driver turned his head slightly, his eyes in the mirror. 'Through Barnau. Be an hour, maybe. A bit more.'

Car doors slammed ahead of us. Peaked caps, the angular roofs of low buildings, the silhouette of an alarm siren against the haze beyond.

She can go, the guard said, coming in, his face muffled in wool against the cold. Come on - move! He kicked her foot.

She turned her head to look at me, but I said in English, Don't question it. Get going.

The Mercedes was new, smelling of leather, not the kind of transport you normally get from the Bureau. And a uniformed driver. Perhaps not the Bureau, then, perhaps by courtesy of the General-Secretary. I didn't think this was going to be my kind of thing,

too political, too distinguished, not the job for a ferret. But I'd nothing to lose.

We inched forward again, and the peaked caps gathered immediately outside, turned towards a civilian with papers in his gloved hand, orders.

But what about you?

I knew she'd say that.

I can look after myself. Get going, for Christ's sake, before they change their minds.

She struggled to her feet, giving me a last look, her eyes frightened but for me now, not for herself. It makes me feel awful.

I jerked a hand. Just get going.

The voices outside the car had stopped, and we moved on again, this time accelerating through barriers.

'Is that it?'

'Yes, sir.'

I looked at the clock on the fascia. An hour, maybe a bit more, would bring us to the rendezvous just before dawn.

She lurched to the door of the hut, her legs cramped from the long night, the long waiting, and when she'd gone I asked the guard in Russian, On whose orders?

Comrade Colonel Yasolev's.

I put away the sunglasses, and the environment took on brightness, colour: a steady 3,500 rpm on the revolution-counter, the star mascot outlined against the wash of the headlights, a signpost sliding by: Bernau 22km, Eberswalde 47km.

He'd known, of course, Comrade Colonel Yasolev, that it wouldn't have been worth putting her under the light, wearing her down, she knew almost nothing; she'd been a contact for the frontier line pulled in at the last minute to cover a gap in communications; she hadn't even been briefed, just told to get there and wait for instructions. She'd only made contact with me as a matter of routine to establish liaison, and that was when they'd caught us, holed up under the floorboards of a rotting wharf with our hands and faces darkened with some soot I'd scraped from a boiler and one of her feet shoeless, which was how they'd got on to us: the other shoe had come off when she'd run headlong for cover.

And what would have been the point, anyway, in their putting her on trial and sending her to a penal settlement? Another mouth to feed, however many mailbags she sewed, however much wood she hauled. But that wasn't why he'd let her go. It had been a,

gesture. I'd got to know Comrade Colonel Yasolev quite well during the three weeks of the mission and I'd picked up a few things about him from the KGB lieutenant I'd pinned down and grilled in a cellar in Klimovsk: Yasolev was the son of a Soviet Army general, and a graduate of the Moscow State University with a degree in Japanese and some post-graduate work put in at the Institute of Oriental Studies. In 1985 he'd served undercover for the KGB as Bureau Chief of the Soviet magazine *New Times* in Tokyo; then he'd been brought back to his homeland to run clandestine operations from Moscow, trapping Western spooks for the counterespionage division and pulling in Price-Baker, Johnson of the Company, Foxwell and Grant and Bellows from the SIS, all of them senior people, most of them now in the Gulag, Foxwell dead and Johnson exchanged for Pitovsky a year ago.

But the most interesting thing I'd picked up from the lieutenant in Klimovsk was that Yasolev was a chivalrous man, enlightened, though not soft: He bullied the prosecutors for the maximum term in every case, and got it. He also had a daughter, Ludmila, who was now studying at the Academy of Science in Moscow. All right, for Margaret read Ludmila; they'd be about the same age or at least the same generation. And reading a little closer, between the lines, yes, his casual act of clemency had been subjective, self-indulgent; but the fact remained that I'd been there in that freezing hut and I'd seen her small huddled figure go lurching through the doorway to freedom and when the guard had told me whose the orders were I'd felt a moment of warmth in that bitter cold and had been astonished by it, because in this trade the smallest act of charity can have the force of revelation.

There'd been a postcard, a month ago, from East Grinstead, just signed 'Margaret'; she still kept in touch.

'About another ten minutes,' the driver said.

It was still dark.

'Are you armed?'

His eyes flicked to look at me in the mirror. 'No, sir. Those were my instructions. You're not expecting any kind of trouble?'

'No.' If he'd had anything on him I'd have told him to throw it away. The rendezvous is to be made, Shepley had said, according to the strict protocol of a diplomatic exchange of courtesies, and both sides understand that. Otherwise I'd never have agreed to go through the Wall in the wrong direction, not on your bloody life.

I still can't believe you managed it, she'd said in her postcard. It means so much to me. Because when she'd gone through that doorway she was certain I was up for a life term in Siberia and so was I. But on the way to the railhead at Vaznesenkoe one of the guards had wrenched his ankle in a hole under the snow and there'd been a chance and I'd taken it and the best they could do was a bullet in the shoulder and a bit of scalp ripped off before I'd got some trees behind me and found a refuge and lain on my back

for three days under a snowdrift until they gave it up and left me for dead.

‘My instructions,’ the driver said, ‘are to wait for you, within sight. Is that right?’

‘Yes. How far is it now?’

‘We’re nearly there.’

‘I could be quite a time. Did you bring anything to eat?’

‘Got some sandwiches and a flask. They told me.’

I didn’t know who he was. Certainly not embassy; he’d been in the field, it was written all over him. I’d been told to ask no questions on this trip, give no answers, except at the rendezvous itself.

A crack of light had come into the sky ahead of us, above a mass of dark trees that rose on one side of the road. The driver pulled onto a patch of rough ground and cut the engine.

‘It’s here?’

‘Yes, sir.’ He hit his seat-belt release and got a folded sheet of paper from his pocket and opened it out and showed it to me. ‘Just up there, in the trees.’

I looked through the tinted window. He’d switched off his lights and I couldn’t see a thing so I pressed the button and got the window down as far as I needed. Cold air came in against my eyes. I still couldn’t see more than a dark mass of rising ground, heavily wooded, with no light, no signal from anywhere. It was very quiet.

‘Is he coming down here?’ He’ll be at the rendezvous alone, Shepley had said.

‘No, sir. You’re to walk into the trees.’ He folded the little map and put it away.

‘We’re seven minutes early.’

‘Yes, sir.’

I suppose he meant yes, we were seven minutes early but that didn’t have to stop me getting out and walking up there into the wood, better early than late, but then it wasn’t his bloody neck. Shepley had spelt it all out, the strict protocol of a diplomatic exchange of courtesies, so forth, and they’d got a Red Army general under house arrest in London and the head of the Bureau - the head of the Bureau - wasn’t likely to send one of his top executives straight into a trap, but the paperwork was over now and this was where the action was and I was sitting in a car at dawn on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain and I was expected to get out and walk into those trees and not question anything, doubt anything, but listen, I don’t like trees, standing as these were, deep as black water, with somewhere inside them a KGB officer waiting for me.