

1

What does an ex-MI5 man in need of a boost to his pension do with the rest of his life? For Tony Underwood the question arose when a note on his desk invited him to a meeting with the head of personnel. A bad moment. Judith Thornberry was new in the job. Her predecessor, a chum from Tony's Cold War days, had told him not to trouble himself about his official retirement date, he'd be all right for a few years yet. Thornberry, on the other hand, was said to have a brisk way with old-timers, and there was talk of premature retirements.

Four-thirty that afternoon, the note specified, for Tony a less-than-ideal time: the first he saw of it was when he got back from lunch exuding a warm glow and a whiff of cigar a little after 3.30. On the way to the lift he put his head round the door of Dick Welby, the friend whose birthday they'd been celebrating, and who'd worked with Thornberry on the IRA in her early years in the service.

'I've been summoned by la Thornberry. Our paths never crossed, what's she like?'

'Judith?'

Dick's sharp nose and oblong glasses seemed designed for contemplation. Before answering, for a long moment he examined the wall above his desk.

'Did a great job in Belfast. No jitters, cool as they come.'

'A one-word description is all I need.'

Dick thought some more.

'Metallic, it has to be. Gutsy as hell but a bit of a dum-dum bullet, and now she's up there in personnel it'll be your guts she's after. Good luck.'

Tony took the lift to her floor.

'Sorry to call you in at short notice,' Thornberry's secretary told

him. 'The four-thirty slot was meant for someone else but he called in sick at the last minute.'

He took a seat, and waited. Was this the end of the line? He thought back to the day they'd taken him on, in the old HQ in Curzon Street, Mayfair, before MI5 moved to Thames House on the Embankment. *A4, Intelligence Resources and Operations* was the branch he'd been assigned to, and to a twenty-three year-old the words had sounded imposing. What they meant was that he was to be trained as a humble watcher before taking his place in a team specializing in the routine surveillance of diplomatic personnel.

After nearly forty years service on communist countries, Northern Ireland, then in the anti-terrorism branch he'd risen above that level, though not too far. Now he was back in the diplomatic surveillance business, a middle-ranking post where his job was to oversee people younger than himself and watch them rise past him.

Not that he resented his lack of advancement. It was the way of the world. In the security game the importance of a good background and education were the same as anywhere, only more so, and having neither one nor the other – his father had been a tobacconist and he'd never made it to university – for Tony the ceiling on promotion wasn't glass, it was concrete.

He wasn't a complainer. He'd done all right for himself, though a top job, a comfortable income and a rewarding family life – none of them had come his way and it was too late now. What kept him going all those years had been a plain man's patriotism, that and the club-like feeling, the belonging. He'd had his place in the intelligence family, he got on with people and in his undemonstrative way he'd enjoyed it mightily. Now he felt differently. The idea that there might no longer be a place for him, that they might throw him out early, filled him with a numb fury.

Four-thirty came and went. Another poor superannuated sod must be in there, on his knees pleading for a stay of execution. He wouldn't do that – though he'd given no thought to a post-retirement job. Where would he get one, and what would it pay? The way things were going in his family God knows he would need the money.

Had Dick been joking about Thornberry? Maybe she wasn't so bad, and if it came to the worst he could appeal to her better nature. *I know I've had my day, but could we look at the human angle? It isn't just the vacant days I'm afraid of. The truth is I need the money. It's to do with my daughter, you see, Penny. It's taken her till the age of thirty-six to get off drugs, and we still have to support her.*

Then there's Heather, her ten-year-old. Fatherless, naturally. A delicate girl, but so gifted. I can't tell you the pain of seeing her grow up in a rubbishy school in a down-market part of London. We need to get her into a good area and properly taught, but my wife Jean had to give up her job prematurely – muscular dystrophy – and spend her savings on private treatment. So if there's any flexibility, if you could see your way to keeping me on for another couple of years...

*

'Good lunch?'

Thornberry put the question without looking up, her eyes on her papers. Tony had sat down opposite, his breath vaporized alcohol and the smell of his half-smoked cigar seeping from his breast pocket, polluting the sanitized air.

'Very good, thank you.' He pried open a smile. 'HMG didn't pay, I assure you. A private celebration...'

Her eyes flicked to the top of the page.

'It's not your birthday.'

She read on. He stared at her clean-cut, close-trimmed auburn hair. He didn't like that hair, any more than the functional desk, the new bookcase with its prissily-ranged volumes, or the blown-up copies of MI5 recruitment ads pinned to the wall. It wasn't the personnel office he remembered, with its armchairs, ashtrays, drinks cabinet and comradely chats.

The fact that he faced being dismissed by a woman did nothing to put him at ease. There'd been women in the service he'd joined all those years back, though in junior positions mostly. Now they had degrees, spoke hard languages and could be technologically savvy. Accomplishments he had never mastered.

‘Tony.’

Thornberry looked up from her papers. His name came out in admonitory fashion, like a teacher addressing a child. Then, her hands joined before her, she began.

‘My predecessor indicated that it might be possible for you to stay on beyond your retirement date.’

‘Three years was the number mentioned, as I recall.’

‘A verbal assurance, was it? I’m sorry Tony, that may have been the way things were done in the past but it’s not how I intend to run matters now. I know the years you have given to the service. I’m conversant with your background and no one is questioning the breadth of your experience. The Soviet bloc, the IRA, Muslim fundamentalism, I see here. A meritorious record over several decades...’

Oh Christ, he thought, it sounded like a farewell speech.

‘...It’s just that the timing is unfortunate. New blood is always needed and there’s been a rush of well-qualified recruits as a result of the recession. We have to press on with restructuring the service.’

She pointed to one of the framed recruitment ads.

Around 3,800 people work for the Security Service. 41% are women, 56% under the age of 40. 8% are from black and ethnic minority backgrounds, and 3% have a disability.

‘Then there’s the question of qualifications. It’s graduates and technicians we’re after now. Especially Farsi and Urdu speakers.’

Wrong age, wrong sex, wrong ethnicity, no degrees and lamentably able-bodied. Dick had it right, Thornberry was a dum-dum bullet. Gets under your skin then mushrooms, to maximize the pain.

‘But what about this?’

He pointed to another recruitment ad:

‘*Opportunities throughout your career;*’ it says. I’m not arguing against diversification, but don’t you need to keep some of the old lags around to help bring the young ones on? Experience it used to be called, stuff you build up over time. Now it’s like something you clear out like lumber from a shed.’

‘No-one is underestimating your contribution, Tony, but we have our career structure to think about. So I’m going to have to include

you in our premature retirement programme. There'll be the usual compensations.'

Tony stared at his lap with a blank expression. It was one that came naturally. His was an expressionless face, one that had settled over the years into a default mode of non-expectation. Not that it had aged him: good health and a placid nature had kept him youthful-looking for his fifty-nine years. A smudge of grey at the temples, a line or two on his cheeks when he smiled, which from time to time he did, quietly, and that was all.

For a moment he sat on, staring down. He wasn't interested in the usual compensations. He wanted a regular income, a job of work to do, the comradeship that had become a substitute over the years for his dysfunctional family life. He felt crushed, wounded – and afraid. Was this the time to say his piece about his daughter, her child, his wife, his financial problems?

Out of the question. When he looked back up at her he couldn't bring himself to do it.

'So that's it?' he said.

'I fear so.'

As he got up she held out a sheet of paper.

'What's that? A P45, is it? I've been here so long I've forgotten about them.'

'No – my secretary will be giving you that. It's your terms of service. Confidentiality and all that. A copy of what you signed when you joined, a reminder of what you can and can't do after you leave the service. If you're interested in another job you may like to refresh your memory.'

Tony took the paper and turned to go.

'Anyway, all the best for the future, Tony. And I'm sorry.'

The words felt like pennies thrown at his back. *No you're not, if you were you wouldn't have fucked up the rest of my life and my family's future.* Anger in a placid man can be volcanic, and it took an effort not to say it.

'Don't worry,' he muttered over his shoulder. 'I'll get something, no problem. As for what I'll do I'll make my own judgments, if you

don't mind. I don't think I've got too many obligations left to HMG in that regard.'

Looking back later, after the drama and the mayhem, it occurred to him that his parting words to Judith Thornberry could have been construed as a threat. But then he wasn't to know that within months of leaving the service he would find himself embroiled in a conspiracy to assassinate a President.

2

D*on't worry, I'll get something, no problem.* It was bullshit of course, bravado. Three weeks spent replying to advertisements on the Internet had resulted in a single response. The job was security manager for a chain of half a dozen high street jewellery stores, the interview in an office above a shop in Shepherds Bush.

The owner, Mr Forbes, wore a black leather jerkin, sideburns and a sceptical smile.

'So what kind of money you looking for?'

'Well, maybe fifty.'

It was no random figure. His early retirement money would go to help pay down his mortgage. The amount he would need on top of his pension, he'd worked out, was £30,000 post-tax at least: £10,000 for a bigger loan on a better flat for his daughter, £15,000 to get Heather into a private day school, the remainder for medical expenses for Jean.

'Fifty *grand*?'

Mr Forbes' intonation was not encouraging.

'*Salary depending on qualifications and experience*, the ad said, and I've had almost forty years in the Security Service.'

'That MI5?'

'It is.'

Digging his hands deeper into the pockets of his jerkin, the manager lay back in his chair.

'I looked at you and I thought, maybe a soldier? That'd be fine, but MI5? Jesus! We don't want someone to bump people off, just stop the bastards smashing in windows. And if we was to take you on who'd you be working for, us or the government?' He gave a nervous laugh. 'Any rate, we don't pay that kind of money. Still,

thanks for coming. Now I can tell my son I've met a real live spook.'

There were other interviews, other failures. With a detective agency specializing in marital breakdowns, £32,000 plus performance-related bonus. As a sales representative for home alarms, £30,000. And so on, down. The best-paid job (£55,000) was the least enticing: deputy chairman, officer training board, Tanzanian security authority, Dar Es Salaam.

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Then the breakthrough, courtesy of Dick Welby. A few years older than himself and a former specialist in the recruitment of Soviet agents, Dick had been a colleague in his Russian days. By now he was senior to Tony – most people were – but somehow the two of them had stayed close.

A tiny man with a confidence-inviting manner, Dick's personal style helped explain why he'd been so good at getting the opposition to work for him. Knowing of his friend's family problems, he'd been mortified at his news and listened sympathetically when Tony had vented his feelings. What troubled him was when, after a few drinks, he'd begun sounding off about Thornberry and her kind.

'When she told me I had this urge to explain why I needed the job. Her being a woman, I thought, maybe she'd understand? Just as well I didn't. Afterwards I looked her up. Well-to-do background, private school – the usual. Imagine me explaining to little Miss Prim with her preachy fucking recruitment ads all over the wall what it's like to have to downsize from a nice house to a two-bedroom cottage so as to put a deposit on some ghastly flat south of the river for your druggy daughter. Or that you need to get your granddaughter out of a lousy inner-city school into something decent.

'She'd think I was a screaming racist. And if I'd said the NHS performance with Jean was a scandal I'd have got a talking to about that too. Oh yes, Ms Thornberry will have insurance, won't she, plus she looks as healthy as a horse.'

'Come on, Tony, you can't hold people's backgrounds against

them. That's a travesty. I worked with her, and she's no daddy's girl I can tell you. OK she's got to be a bit officious, but she's smart and she's tough and she's professional. We were on a job once in South Armagh, in an unmarked car, when this guy just steps out into the road with an AK 47 and she –'

' – I don't care what she did to the opposition, it's what she's doing to the service. And to me.'

Dick let it go, though he'd worried about his friend. What Tony needed was a new job, fast. Without telling him, so as not to raise his hopes, he'd been on the lookout for a position in the private security business, and six weeks later something had come up.

'Fella who used to work for me is in the market for someone from the service.'

'You don't say. And who's that?'

Tony looked back, sceptical.

'Russian émigré, name of Golosov, Mikhail Golosov. Not his real name, what we ended up calling him. Businessman and occasional informant of mine in the old days. Now he works for Arshile Grekov, the billionaire.'

'And ex-GRU colonel in military intelligence, I seem to recall,' Tony laughed. 'I'm mad as hell with the service but I wasn't thinking of defecting.'

'Grekov's been out of all that for a long time now. He's not some cosmopolitan fly-by-night, lives here full-time and taken to England in a big way. Thinks we're a model for his country, that what the Russians need is a constitutional monarchy.'

'He has political ambitions?'

'Too old for that. His first ambition is for himself and his son to stay alive. Which is why he wants someone from the service to head up his security. A man with his background and money needs to watch his step.'

'How did he make the money?'

'First it was the swords-to-ploughshares stuff – converting arms factories to car plants after communism collapsed. Then agribusiness.'

‘So our ex-GRU man is a sort of ethical investor?’

‘He’s a man with ideals, the cleanest oligarch around. Another thing the Kremlin don’t like about him. Gives them no hold over him. They can’t imagine that someone who doesn’t kowtow isn’t up to something, so they’re always trying to get alongside him.’

‘Plants?’

‘Man called Dombrovsky got himself appointed as his head of his security. Turned out he was in our bad books – something to do with criminal contacts – and we tipped him off. Since then he’s conceived this immoderate admiration for British security. Ultimate guarantor of our lives and liberties and all that. He’d buy MI5 if he could. I told Mikhail he should do the next best thing – take on a retired officer. He sounded out his boss and the boss said yes.’

‘So what would be the job exactly?’

‘The slip-up over Dombrovsky shook him. The first thing would be to check out his security team. Then you’d be monitoring any threats from hit men, mafia types or political intriguers – not to mention the FSB.’

‘You say there’s a son. He need protecting too?’

‘Sounds like that’d be a big part of the job. Sasha is what you’d expect – Eton and Oxford – but maybe not as smart as he thinks. Mikhail says he’s got himself involved in Russian émigré politics and his father’s finding it hard to keep tabs on what he’s up to.’

Tony considered.

‘Want me to mention your name?’ Dick persisted. ‘Or are you worried what the service might think?’

‘Absolutely not!’ Tony flared. ‘They can’t throw me out then dictate where I can and can’t work. It’s just that I never expected to end my career working for the other side. Anything to do with Russian intelligence, post-communist included, and you’re in trouble. Shit doesn’t just stink, it sticks. And whatever you say your friend Grekov is a GRU man.’

‘*Ex*, Tony, *ex*! The Russians have a saying: “That was a long time ago and it was never true anyway.” Grekov is basically a businessman, a philanthropist and a thinker. Kind of Russian George Soros. And

the salary would be competitive I imagine. Shall I tell Mikhail you'd be prepared to be interviewed? Nothing against an interview, is there?'

Nothing at all, Tony finally decided. And if Judith Thornberry had the nerve to object there'd be trouble. There was no shortage of ex-diplomats and politicians pulling in easy money on the boards of Russian companies, dodgy or otherwise, whose owners had been in the intelligence game. And a competitive salary from a billionaire sounded good.

*

One of the humiliations of serving out his notice were the restrictions on what he could and couldn't see, though with a little help from Dick he got hold of Grekov's security file. The Russian had served in France and Britain under diplomatic cover. One of those nailed by a KGB defector in the Seventies, he'd been thrown out during the expulsions of intelligence men from Britain that had followed. Thirty years later he was back in London, an oligarch with a two-billion fortune.

His business interests were international, though that wasn't the only reason he'd left Russia. Someone in the FSB seemed to think he'd been recruited by MI6 in his intelligence days: that before the British had thrown him out they'd turned him, and that he'd worked for them till the Berlin Wall came down. Not true, as it happened, the file confirmed, but something the Russians continued to suspect. No wonder Grekov kept a seven-man security team.

His wife had died some years earlier and in émigré circles he had the reputation of a recluse and an eccentric, who lived alone with his son. Sasha, his only child by his second wife, was 27. His father was 76, and unwell.

His poor health and unusual working habits, Dick had warned, meant that his office might not be able to give him a precise time for their meeting. And so it turned out. The date was fixed for April 10 and notice of the hour, his personal assistant told him, would come

in the course of the day.

Tony got into his interview clothes and waited. The morning passed, then the afternoon. At seven o'clock he stood himself down, poured a whisky and told Jean that he'd be in for dinner. At twenty minutes past the personal assistant rang to say the interview would be at eleven.

'In the morning?'

'No, Mr Underwood. Tonight.'

'Ah.'

The woman, whose sensual foreign accent made 'wood' in Underwood come out like *woood*, sounded sympathetic.

'I'm sorry you've been waiting all day. Sometimes Mr Grekov likes to work late in the evening.'

The white stucco house in Belgravia was one of a terrace, with colonnaded porches and glass canopies shading first floor balconies. For a billionaire it didn't seem extravagantly large – till you entered. The single house was in fact composed of three, a lateral conversion taking in its neighbours on either side.

For all Grekov's anglophilia there was no feeling of an English mansion. A vast entrance hall, with corridors disappearing into the distance, made it feel more like an embassy than a home, and everything in the place seemed foreign: the servant who relieved him of his coat ('I take for you, Sir?'), the heavy, central-European décor, the portraits of dignitaries lining the hall.

The largest was of a luxuriantly moustachioed figure in black uniform with a blue sash, a chest full of medals and a ceremonial sword. He glanced at the label: *Alexander II of Russia, 1855-1881*. Beneath a second label had been appended: *The Czar-Reformer*.

He waited on in the hall. Three burly fellows (chauffeurs, bodyguards?) sat in a corner talking Russian, fingering cigarette packets longingly and taking turns to go outside for a smoke. A pretty maid in a white headband and Russian pinafore walked past, followed by their mournful eyes.

'Mr Underwood?'

He looked up. A woman was descending the curved mahogany

staircase. Forty or so and dressed in a high-necked blouse and old-fashioned pleated skirt, she would have looked prim were it not for the smile she threw him over the banister. The penumbra of the hall lightened a shade.

'I'm Lisa, Mr Grekov's personal assistant. We spoke on the phone. I apologize for keeping you waiting. Thank you for coming so late.'

She took him up the stairs to the first floor and along a corridor cut into the adjoining building. Now the house began to feel like a hotel, except that the rooms on either side looked like offices. One of the doors was ajar, a light slicing across the hall. As they passed a young man's voice roared:

'Oh fuck off, Eddie, you bastard. I was only kidding!'

No foreign accent there: the voice was public-school, loud, slightly tipsy.

Lisa turned to smile.

'That is the office of Sasha, Mr Grekov's son.'

'He works late, like his father.'

'Only when he has to.'

Lisa ushered him into her office.

'I will tell Mr Grekov you have arrived.'

She pressed an intercom, waited, shrugged.

'I may have to ask you to wait some more. Sometimes he takes a nap before work.' In a smaller voice she added: 'His health.'

'Of course.'

'Can I get you anything? A coffee?'

I don't drink late-night coffee, it keeps me awake, he was about to reply, but didn't. It would make him sound old and, for all her sober clothes, something in Lisa made him feel younger.

'I'm fine. He must have a busy social schedule.'

'Before, yes, but now not so busy. He is not like, I don't know, Abramovitch or the others.'

Tony nodded understandingly, as if a confidant of them all.

'Please take a seat.'

The moment he did the intercom buzzed. A low voice, like a

grunt, reached him.

‘Sooner would be better. He is waiting.’

Another grunt.

She got up, opened the door, and indicated that he should follow.

Grekov’s office was at the end of the corridor. The demands of Tony’s career had taken him to some fancy places (embassy premises at night time, unattended private houses, luxury hotel suites before the occupants were due to arrive), though never to an oligarch’s office. When Lisa opened the door he hesitated before stepping in.

It was as if the room was in darkness. The walls, wood-panelled, were lined with unlit portraits peering from the shadows. Except for a small TV on the modest-sized antique desk every taint of modernity had gone.

The only light in the room was a green-shaded standard lamp by the desk, scarcely enough to illuminate the figure behind it. As they stood in the entrance Grekov said nothing, his head bowed low. For a moment Tony thought he’d fallen asleep.

‘Mr Underwood,’ Lisa announced.

‘Where?’

The figure looked up, its eyes searching the semi-darkness.

‘Here, beside me.’

‘I can’t see him. There’s no light.’

‘That’s because you turned it off.’

Lisa reached for a panel by the door. A slow glow lit the room: first the pictures – Old Masters, more portraits of worthies with sashes and medals, more imposing beards – then gradually the depths of the cavernous office, the size of a small ballroom.

‘Not too much!’

Lisa adjusted the panel. The pictures receded, the rest of the room became shadowy.

‘Come in then.’

Tony walked towards him. It seemed a long way to the desk. Behind it he made out a chaise longue, with a pillow that was still indented. Grekov must have just got up.

‘That’s better. Sit down, Mr – ’

‘ – Underwood.’

‘Underwood, yes, very good, I like that name. For a security man it is perfect. It has something confidential about it.’

Still half in shadow, the man smiled. Taking his seat Tony saw a long, thin face that finished in a smallish beard.

‘Lisa is a fine woman,’ the voice said when she’d closed the door behind her. ‘I told her not to wait, my son would let you in, but she is loyal.’

‘She seems very efficient.’

‘You like women?’

‘I’m married...’

‘ – no no, I mean as people.’

‘I have no problem with women.’ For something to say he added: ‘40% of my former colleagues were women.’

‘Good, because I am a feminist, a historical feminist, a feminist before it came into fashion. Queen Elizabeth, Queen Victoria, Catherine the Great of Russia... The best sovereign Russia ever had. And she was a reformer.’

‘Like Alexander II,’ Tony got in quickly.

A silence. After a minute he felt the need to break it.

‘You must travel a lot.’

‘Not so much now,’ Grekov replied in a regretful tone. ‘And before you ask, no, I do not own a football team and I do not have a yacht. For not having a yacht I am famous. But we must talk. Do you know what I want you for?’

‘I gather it was to oversee your security arrangements.’

‘You put it diplomatically. In London there are two kinds of Russians: those who come here for the security and those who come to kill them. So the job is to keep me alive, together with my son.’

‘Are there threats?’

‘That is for you to discover. There have been problems...’

‘Because of your attitude to the regime?’

‘About the regime I say nothing. But they know my view of them.’

As he spoke, with an effort Grekov got to his feet. At first Tony thought he was wearing a dressing gown, but it seemed to be some sort of antique cape.

‘But if you don’t say anything, I don’t see why they’re afraid of you.’

‘That is *why* they are afraid. Afraid of my silence. They think there is something happening they know nothing about.’

‘You said there’d been problems.’

‘They told you about Dombrovsky, I imagine? To think I appointed such a man to head my security! It was my fault, my guard was down, I am getting old... So your first task will be to clean up after him. Get rid of anyone unreliable.’

His eyes glinted. Paranoid? For a Russian oligarch in London that would be natural, a default state...

‘I know about these things,’ Grekov went on. ‘I worked for the GRU, in London and Paris. MI5 was better than French security at tracking us, I remember.’

‘You were in London in the Seventies, I gather, when I was working on Soviet diplomatic personnel. Maybe I tracked you myself?’

‘You must have done it well. I was never aware – except once. Somebody kept breaking into my car, though nothing was taken, and eventually we saw why it was. In those days it was no use bugging the car radio. You could wire it up, but the transcribers had a problem disentangling the engine noise from the conversation. So your people built a microphone into the chassis. The trouble was they had to renew the battery from inside.’

‘Every time it was the same person who did it. I knew because there was always a faint smell of cigar – a cheap cigarillo. When we discovered the microphone I left a box of cigarillos on the dashboard, with a note saying please smoke these before breaking into my car next time, they smell better. And you know what? When they came in to replace the battery and found the mic had gone, they took them...’

They’d been top quality, Tony remembered. Delicious, miniature

Havasas.

'I hate smoking. You smoke, Mr Underwood?'

'I, er –'

' – so it wasn't you. A pity. We could have reminisced about the games we used to play in those days. And then you threw us all out, myself included.'

'I remember. We had a big celebration.'

'Later I celebrated too. It was the best thing that happened to me. My name was blown, I couldn't be sent anywhere interesting abroad, so I resigned. Got out before the collapse of the whole rotten system. You know what Brodsky said about stealing secrets?'

'I'm afraid –'

' – the Russian poet, Joseph Brodsky. He said that when you steal secrets the theft possesses you. And it was true. We were good at stealing people's secrets, but not at thinking about the future of the country.'

'Now I have made money I have to take care of my security, so again I am in the intelligence business. As a Russian you never escape it. I am glad I came to London. In my years here I came to admire your country. Its Parliament, its monarchy, its traditions...'

His eyes lightened. 'You admire your monarchy, Mr Underwood?'

Well, yes and no, was Tony's position.

'It helps give us stability,' he said.

'More than that – dignity. It was stupid to kill your king, no?'

'Charles I? Of course, very stupid,' Tony said, decisively now, his royalism growing by the minute.

Another silence. Where was this going? Grekov was shuffling up and down behind his desk, the conversation erratic. It wasn't that his mind was wandering, it just didn't stay in the same place for long.

The intercom buzzed. Lisa's voice:

'You have a visitor.'

'One minute.'

He turned to Tony.

'Good, it is agreed. In one week you will start. You will see Mikhail about money. Also about the people you will oversee. I await

the result of your purge.’

Grekov bent over his desk and began fiddling with some papers. He seemed in a hurry to be on his own. Tony got up.

‘Can I say how –’

‘– me too, I am glad you will work for me. Well good night, Mr Underwood.’

*

He walked back to Lisa’s office. There was no-one there and the lights were out. So no visitor. The message must have been pre-arranged to get him out.

He made his way towards the stairs. The light was still on in Sasha’s room, the door open. After he’d passed a voice called out after him:

‘Hey, Mr Underwood.’

He turned. A tall, heavy, flaxen-haired figure had lurched from the office and was lumbering towards him.

‘Hello, I’m Sasha. Lisa said to look out for you. I’m just leaving. Let me give you a lift.’

‘I’ll get a taxi.’

‘No no, it’s late. Come on, I have to go out, I’ll drive you.’

As they passed through the hall, one of the bodyguards made to get up from his chair. Sasha waved him down. His car was a small convertible, a Maserati GranCabrio, less than ideal for his six-foot-three frame. From twenty metres away Sasha zapped the doors and canopy open.

Following him as they walked towards it, Tony was struck by his shambling gait, a combination of Russian torpor and old Etonian languor, it seemed to him. The sight of him cramming himself behind the wheel of the Maserati was a study in dislocation.

In the car he turned towards him, so close he caught the smell of his vodka-laden breath.

‘So where is it you live?’

‘Chiswick. If it’s out of your way –’

‘ – no problem. And we can have a chat as we go.’

The engine revved, and they roared off.

‘So how did you find my dad?’

‘He’s very...distinguished.’

‘He’s that all right, but he’s not well. Has these problems no one can explain. Sometimes I think someone’s doing something to him.’

‘You think that’s possible?’

‘Well they did the polonium thing, didn’t they? And no one knew about it till the guy was dead. If they think dad was a traitor they’re capable of anything.’

‘But he wasn’t, was he?’

‘Absolutely not! But it’s not just that. The Kremlin hates anyone they can’t control.’

As he spoke, Sasha’s flushed, meaty face was turned towards him. At the speed they were taking Hammersmith Broadway Tony would have preferred him to keep his eyes on the road. To him they looked a little crazed as he went on:

‘All they need is to feed him something, slowly. A few grammes a day, right?’

‘I can check out the cooks.’

‘Yeah, do that. None of them are Russian but the way those bastards spray money around all it takes is, you know –’

‘ – I know,’ Tony said, gravely.

‘People laugh at my dad for going on about the Russian royal family, but it’s not so weird. Technically we’re still a monarchy, you know that? A line of descent interrupted by the assassination of the Romanovs. Even that the communists botched. Murdering bastards shot them, then stabbed them to death with bayonets. But the succession was only suspended, and there’s still Romanovs alive...’

Tony nodded dutifully, his eyes on the red lights Sasha was about to run. A few more minutes on the return of the Romanovs and he was back on the President:

‘Only things my dad and him have in common is that they were both spies and neither of them drink. The difference is my dad’s smarter. Him, you seen how he ponces around the Kremlin?’

'Like a monarch himself,' Tony threw in.

'That's right! Think of it – a KGB dynasty! A dynasty of thieves and assassins...'

It was well after midnight on the dead streets, and in a little more than a quarter of an hour they were at Tony's house in Chiswick. They drew up.

'That was kind.'

'Good to have you aboard, Tony. Any problems, let me know. We work as a team, me and dad. Close as lips and teeth.'

Inside the house he watched from the darkened window while the car made its three-point turn. Immature, none-too-bright and obsessive were the kinder descriptions of Sasha that occurred to him. There'd be problems with that boy, he could sense it coming.