

Running Blind
and
The Freedom Trap



Desmond Bagley

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HARPER

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RUNNING BLIND

*To: Torfi, Gudjon, Helga, Gisli, Herdis Valtýr, Gudmundur, Teitur, Soggi, and all the other
Icelanders.*

Thanks for lending me your country.

ONE

To be encumbered with a corpse is to be in a difficult position, especially when the corpse is without benefit of death certificate. True, any doctor, even one just hatched from medical school, would have been able to diagnose the cause of death. The man had died of heart failure or what the medical boys pompously call cardiac arrest.

The proximate cause of his pumper having stopped pumping was that someone had slid a sharp sliver of steel between his ribs just far enough to penetrate the great muscle of the heart and to cause serious and irreversible leakage of blood so that it stopped beating. Cardiac arrest, as I said.

I wasn't too anxious to find a doctor because the knife was mine and the hilt had been in my hand when the point pricked out his life. I stood on the open road with the body at my feet and I was scared so scared that my bowels loosened and the nausea rose in my throat to choke me. I don't know which is the worse—to kill someone you know or to kill a stranger. This particular body had been a stranger—in fact, he still was—I had never seen him before in my life.

And this was the way it happened.

Less than two hours previously the airliner had slid beneath the clouds and I saw the familiar, grim landscape of Southern Iceland. The aircraft lost height over the Reykjanes Peninsula and landed dead on time at Keflavik International Airport, where it was raining, a thin drizzle weeping from an iron grey sky.

I was unarmed, if you except the *sgian dubh*. Customs officers don't like guns so I didn't carry a pistol, and Slade said it wasn't necessary. The *sgian dubh*—the black knife of the Highlander—is a much underrated weapon if, these days, it is ever regarded as a weapon at all. One sees it in the stocking tops of sober Scotsmen when they are in the glory of national dress and it is just another piece of masculine costume jewellery.

Mine was more functional. It had been given to me by my grandfather who had it off his grandfather, so that made it at least a hundred and fifty years old. Like any good piece of killing equipment it had no unnecessary trimmings—even the apparent decorations had a function. The ebony haft was ribbed on one side in the classic Celtic basket-weave pattern to give a good grip when drawing, but smooth on the other side so it would draw clear without catching; the blade was less than four inches long, but long enough to reach a vital organ; even the gaudy cairngorm stone set in the pommel had its use—it balanced the knife so that it made a superlative throwing weapon.

It lived in a flat sheath in my left stocking top. Where else would you expect to keep a *sgian dubh*? The obvious way is often the best because most people don't see the obvious. The Customs officer didn't even look, not into my luggage and certainly not into the more intimate realms of my person. I had been in and out of the country so often that I am tolerably well known, and the fact I speak the language was a help—there are only 20,000 people who speak Icelandic and the Icelanders have a comical air of pleased surprise when they encounter a foreigner who has taken the trouble to learn it.

'Will you be fishing again, Mr Stewart?' asked the Customs officer.

I nodded. 'Yes, I hope to kill a few of your salmon. I've had my gear sterilized—here's the certificate.' The Icelanders are trying to keep out the salmon disease which has attacked the fish in

British rivers.

~~He took the certificate and waved me through the barrier. 'The best of luck,' he said.~~

I smiled at him and passed through into the concourse and went into the coffee shop in accordance with the instructions Slade had given me. I ordered coffee and presently someone sat next to me and laid down a copy of the *New York Times*. 'Gee!' he said. 'It's colder here than in the States

'It's even colder in Birmingham,' I said solemnly, and then, the silly business of the passwords over, we got down to business.

'It's wrapped in the newspaper,' he said.

He was a short, balding man with the worried look of the ulcerated executive. I tapped the newspaper. 'What is it?' I asked.

'I don't know. You know where to take it?'

'Akureyri,' I said. 'But why me? Why can't you take it?'

'Not me,' he said definitely. 'I take the next flight out to the States.' He seemed relieved at that simple fact.

'Let's be normal,' I said. 'I'll buy you a coffee.' I caught the eye of a waitress.

'Thanks,' he said, and laid down a key-ring. 'There's a car in the parking lot outside—the registration number is written alongside the masthead of *The Times* there.'

'Most obliging of you,' I said. 'I was going to take a taxi.'

'I don't do things to be obliging,' he said shortly. 'I do things because I'm told to do them, just like you—and right now I'm doing the telling and you're doing the doing. You don't drive along the main road to Reykjavik; you go by way of Krysuvik and Kleifavatn.'

I was sipping coffee when he said that and I spluttered. When I came to the surface and got my breath back I said, 'Why the hell should I do that? It's double the distance and along lousy roads.'

'I don't know,' he said. 'I'm just the guy who passes the word. But it was a last-minute instruction so maybe someone's got wind that maybe someone else is laying for you somewhere on the main road. I wouldn't know.'

'You don't know much, do you?' I said acidly, and tapped the newspaper. 'You don't know what's in here; you don't know why I should waste the afternoon in driving around the Reykjanes Peninsula. If I asked you the time of day I doubt if you'd tell me.'

He gave me a sly, sideways grin. 'I bet one thing,' he said. 'I bet I know more than you do.'

'That wouldn't be too difficult,' I said grumpily. It was all of a piece with everything Slade did; he worked on the 'need to know' principle and what you didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

He finished his coffee. 'That's it, buster—except for one thing. When you get to Reykjavik leave the car parked outside the Hotel Saga and just walk away from it. It'll be taken care of.'

He got up without another word and walked away, seemingly in a hurry to get away from me. All during our brief conversation he had seemed jittery, which worried me because it didn't square with Slade's description of the job. 'It'll be simple,' Slade had said. 'You're just a messenger boy.' The twist of his lips had added the implied sneer that it was all I was good for.

I stood and jammed the newspaper under my arm. The concealed package was moderately heavy but not obtrusive. I picked up my gear and went outside to look for the car; it proved to be a Ford Cortina, and minutes later I was on my way out of Keflavik and going south—away from Reykjavik. I wished I knew the idiot who said, 'The longest way round is the shortest way there.'

When I found a quiet piece of road I pulled on to the shoulder and picked up the newspaper from the seat where I had tossed it. The package was as Slade had described it—small and heavier than one would have expected. It was covered in brown hessian, neatly stitched up, and looked completely

anonymous. Careful tapping seemed to indicate that under the hessian was a metal box, and there were no rattles when it was shaken.

I regarded it thoughtfully but that didn't give me any clue, so I wrapped it in the newspaper again, dropped it on the back seat, and drove on. It had stopped raining and driving conditions weren't too bad—for Iceland. The average Icelandic road makes an English farm track look like a super-highway. Where there are roads, that is. In the interior, which Icelanders know as the *Óbyggdir*, there are no roads and in winter the *Óbyggdir* is pretty near as inaccessible as the moon unless you're the hearty explorer type. It looks very much like the moon, too; Neil Armstrong practised his moon-walk there.

I drove on and, at Krysuvik, I turned inland, past the distant vapour-covered slopes where super-heated steam boils from the guts of the earth. Not far short of the lake of Kleifavatn I saw a car ahead pulled off the road, and a man waving the universally recognized distress signal of the stranded motorist.

We were both damned fools; I because I stopped and he because he was alone. He spoke to me in bad Danish and then in good Swedish, both of which I understand. It turned out, quite naturally, that there was something wrong with his car and he couldn't get it to move.

I got out of the Cortina. 'Lindholm,' he said in the formal Swedish manner, and stuck out his hand which I pumped up and down once in the way which protocol dictates.

'I'm Stewart,' I said, and walked over to his Volkswagen and peered at the exposed rear engine.

I don't think he wanted to kill me at first or he would have used the gun straight away. As it was he took a swipe at me with a very professionally designed lead-loaded cosh. I think it was when he got behind me that I realized I was being a flaming idiot—that's a result of being out of practice. I turned my head and saw his upraised arm and dodged sideways. If the cosh had connected with my skull it would have jarred my brains loose; instead it hit my shoulder and my whole arm went numb.

I gave him the boot in the shin, raking down from knee to ankle, and he yelped and hopped back which gave me time to put the car between us, and groped for the *sgian dubh* as I went. Fortunately it's a left-handed weapon which was just as well because my right arm wasn't going to be of use.

He came for me again but when he saw the knife he hesitated, his lips curling away from his teeth. He dropped the cosh and dipped his hand beneath his jacket and it was my turn to hesitate. But his cosh was *too* well designed; it had a leather wrist loop and the dangling weapon impeded his draw and I jumped him just as the pistol came out.

I didn't stab him. He swung around and ran straight into the blade. There was a gush of blood over my hand and he sagged against me with a ludicrous look of surprise on his face. Then he went down at my feet and the knife came free and blood pulsed from his chest into the lava dust.

So there I was on a lonely road in Southern Iceland with a newly created corpse at my feet and a bloody knife in my hand, the taste of raw bile in my throat and a frozen brain. From the time I had got out of the Cortina to the moment of death had been less than two minutes.

I don't think I consciously thought of what I did next; I think that rigorous training took over. I jumped for the Cortina and ran it forward a little so that it covered the body. Lonely though the road might be that didn't mean a car couldn't pass at any time and a body in plain sight would take a hell of a lot of explaining away.

Then I took the *New York Times* which, its other virtues apart, contains more newsprint than practically any other newspaper in the world, and used it to line the boot of the car. That done, I reversed again, picked up the body and dumped it into the boot and slammed the lid down quickly. Lindholm—if that was his name—was now out of sight if not out of mind.

He had bled like a cow in a Moslem slaughter-house and there was a great pool of blood by the side of the road. My jacket and trousers were also liberally bedaubed. I couldn't do much about my clothing right then but I covered the blood pool with handfuls of lava dust. I closed the engine compartment of the Volkswagen, got behind the wheel and switched on. Lindholm had not only been an attempted murderer—he had also been a liar because the engine caught immediately. I reversed the car over the bloody bit of ground and left it there. It was too much to hope that the blood wouldn't be noticed when the car was taken away but I had to do what I could.

I got back into the Cortina after one last look at the scene of the crime and drove away, and it was then I began to think consciously. First I thought of Slade and damned his soul to hell and then I moved into more practicable channels of thought such as how to get rid of Lindholm. You'd think that in a country four-fifths the size of England with a population less than half of, say Plymouth, there'd be wide open spaces with enough nooks and crannies to hide an inconvenient body. True enough, but this particular bit of Iceland—the south-west—was also the most heavily populated and it wasn't going to be particularly easy.

Still, I knew the country and, after a little while, I began to get ideas. I checked the petrol gauge and settled down for a long drive, hoping that the car was in good trim. To stop and be found with a blood-smearred jacket would cause the asking of pointed questions. I had another outfit in my suitcase but all at once there were too many cars about and I preferred to change discreetly.

Most of Iceland is volcanic and the south-west is particularly so with bleak vistas of lava fields, ash cones and shield volcanoes, some of them extinct, some not. In my travels I had once come across a gas vent which now seemed an ideal place for the last repose of Lindholm, and it was there I was heading.

It was a two-hour drive and, towards the end, I had to leave the road and take to the open country bouncing across a waste of volcanic ash and scoria which did the Cortina no good. The last time I had been that way I had driven my Land-Rover which is made for that sort of country.

The place was exactly as I remembered it. There was an extinct crater with a riven side so that one could drive right into the caldera and in the middle was a rocky pustule with a hole in it through which the hot volcanic gases had driven in some long-gone eruption. The only sign that any other human being had been there since the creation of the world was the mark of tyre tracks driving up towards the lip of the crater. The Icelanders have their own peculiar form of motor sport; they drive into a crater and try to get out the hard way. I've never known anyone break his neck at this hazardous game but it's not for want of trying.

I drove the car as near to the gas vent as I could and then went forward on foot until I could look into the impenetrable darkness of the hole. I dropped a stone into it and there was a receding clatter which went on for a long time. Verne's hero who went to the centre of the earth might have had an easier time if he had picked this hole instead of Snaefellsjökull.

Before I popped Lindholm into his final resting-place I searched him. It was a messy business because the blood was still sticky and it was lucky I had not yet changed my suit. He had a Swedish passport made out in the name of Axel Lindholm, but that didn't mean a thing—passports are easy to come by. There were a few more bits and pieces but nothing of importance, and all I retained were the cosh and the pistol, a Smith & Wesson .38.

Then I carried him up to the vent and dropped him into it. There were a few soggy thumps and then silence—a silence I hoped would be eternal. I went back to the car and changed into a clean suit and pulled the stained clothing inside out so that the blood would not touch the inside of my suitcase. The cosh, the pistol and Slade's damned package I also tossed into the suitcase before I closed it, and

then I set off on the wearisome way to Reykjavik.

I was very tired.

II

It was late evening when I pulled up in front of the Hotel Saga, although it was still light with the brightness of the northern summer. My eyes were sore because I had been driving right into the western sun and I stayed in the car for a moment to rest them. If I had stayed in the car two minutes more the next fateful thing would not have happened, but I didn't; I got out and was just extracting the suitcase when a tall man came out of the hotel, paused, and hailed me. 'Alan Stewart!'

I looked up and cursed under my breath because the man in the uniform of an Icelandair pilot was the last man I wanted to see—Bjarni Ragnarsson. 'Hello, Bjarni,' I said.

We shook hands. 'Elin didn't tell me you were coming.'

'She didn't know,' I said. 'It was a last-minute decision; I didn't even have time to telephone.'

He looked at my suitcase resting on the pavement. 'You're not staying at the Saga!' he said in surprise.

It was a snap judgment and I had to make it fast. 'No,' I said. 'I'll be going to the apartment.' I didn't want to bring Elin into this but now her brother knew I was in Reykjavik he would be sure to tell her and I didn't want her to be hurt in that way. Elin was very special.

I saw Bjarni looking at the car. 'I'll leave it here,' I said lightly. 'It's just a delivery job for a friend. I'll take a taxi to the apartment.'

He accepted that, and said, 'Staying long?'

'For the rest of the summer, as usual,' I said easily.

'We must go fishing,' he said.

I agreed. 'Have you become a father yet?'

'Another month,' he said glumly. 'I'm dreading it.'

I laughed. 'I should think that's Kristin's worry; you aren't even in the country half the time. No nappy-changing for you.'

We spent another few minutes in the usual idle-small-talk of old friends just met and then he glanced at his watch. 'I have a flight to Greenland,' he said. 'I must go. I'll ring you in a couple of days.'

'Do that.' I watched him go and then captured a taxi which had just dropped a fare at the hotel and told the driver where to go. Outside the building I paid him off and then stood uncertainly on the pavement wondering whether I was doing the right thing.

Elin Ragnarsdottir was someone very special.

She was a schoolteacher but, like many other Icelanders of her type, she held down two jobs. There are certain factors about Iceland—the smallness of population, the size of the country and its situation in high northern latitudes—which result in a social system which outsiders are apt to find weird. But since the system is designed to suit Icelanders they don't give a damn what outsiders think which is just as it should be.

One result of this social system is that all the schools close down for four months in the summer and a lot of them are used as hotels. The teachers thus have a lot of spare time and many of them have quite a different summer occupation. When I first met her three years earlier, Elin had been a courier

for *Ferdaskrifstofaa Nordri*, a travel agency in Reykjavik, and had shown visitors around the country

~~A couple of seasons before, I had persuaded her to become my personal courier on a full-time summer basis. I had been afraid that her brother, Bjarni, might have thought that a touch irregular and put in an objection, but he didn't—presumably he thought his sister to be grown-up enough to handle her own affairs. She was an undemanding person and it was an easy relationship, but obviously it couldn't go on like that for ever and I intended to do something about it, but I doubted if this was the appropriate time—it takes someone with a stronger stomach than mine to propose marriage on the same day one has dropped a body down a hole.~~

I went up to the apartment and, although I had a key, I didn't use it; instead I knocked on the door. Elin opened it and looked at me with an expression of surprise changing to delight, and something in me jumped at the sight of her trim figure and corn-coloured hair. 'Alan!' she said. 'Why didn't you tell me you were coming?'

'A quick decision,' I said, and held up the cased fishing-rod. 'I've got a new one.'

Her lips curved down in mock glumness. 'That makes six,' she said severely, and held the door wide. 'Oh, come in, darling!'

I went in, dropped the suitcase and the rod, and took her in my arms. She held me closely and said, with her head against my chest, 'You didn't write, and I thought...'

'You thought I wasn't coming.' The reason I hadn't written was because of something Slade had said, but I couldn't tell her that. I said, 'I've been very busy, Elin.'

She drew back her head and looked at me intently. 'Yes, your face is drawn; you look tired.'

I smiled. 'But I feel hungry.'

She kissed me. 'I'll prepare something.' She broke away. 'Don't worry about unpacking your bag; I'll do it after supper.'

I thought of the bloody suit. 'Not to worry,' I said. 'I can do it.' I picked up the suitcase and the rod and took them into my room. I call it my room because it was the place where my gear was stored. Actually, the whole apartment was mine because, although it was in Elin's name, I paid the rent. Spending one-third of every year in Iceland, it was convenient to have a *pied-à-terre*.

I put the rod with the others and laid down the suitcase, wondering what to do with the suit. Until that moment I had never had any secrets I wanted to keep from Elin—with the one important exception—and there wasn't a lockable cupboard or drawer in the place. I opened the wardrobe and surveyed the line of suits and jackets, each on its hanger and neatly encased in its zippered plastic bag. It would be very risky to let the suit take its place in that line; Elin was meticulous in the care of my clothes and would be certain to find it.

In the end I emptied the suitcase of everything but the suit and the weapons, locked it, and heaved it on top of the wardrobe where it usually lived when not in use. It was unlikely that Elin would pull it down and even then it was locked, although that was not usual.

I took off my shirt and examined it closely and discovered a spot of blood on the front so I took it into the bathroom and cleaned it under the cold tap. Then I scrubbed my face in cold water and felt better for it. By the time Elin called that supper was ready I was cleaned up and already in the living-room looking through the window.

I was about to turn away when my attention was caught by a flicker of movement. On the other side of the street there was an alley between two buildings and it had seemed that someone had moved quickly out of sight when I twitched the curtains. I stared across the street but saw nothing more, but when Elin called again I was thoughtful as I turned to her.

Over supper I said, 'How's the Land-Rover?'

‘I didn’t know when you were coming but I had a complete overhaul done last week. It’s ready for anything.’

Icelandic roads being what they are, Land-Rovers are as thick as fleas on a dog. The Icelanders prefer the short wheelbase Land-Rover, but ours was the long wheelbase job, fitted out as a camping van. When we travelled we were self-contained and could, and did, spend many weeks away from civilization, only being driven into a town by running out of food. There were worse ways of spending a summer than to be alone for weeks on end with Elin Ragnarsdottir.

In other summers we had left as soon as I arrived in Reykjavik, but this time it had to be different because of Slade’s package, and I wondered how I was to get to Akureyri alone without arousing her suspicions. Slade had said the job was going to be easy but the late Mr Lindholm made all the difference and I didn’t want Elin involved in any part of it. Still, all I had to do was to deliver the package and the job would be over and the summer would be like all the other summers. It didn’t seem too difficult.

I was mulling this over when Elin said, ‘You really do look tired. You must have been overworking.’

I managed a smile. ‘An exhausting winter. There was too much snow on the hills—I lost a lot of stock.’ Suddenly I remembered. ‘You wanted to see what the glen was like; I brought you some photographs.’

I went and got the photographs and we pored over them. I pointed out Bheinn Fhada and Sgurr Dearg, but Elin was more interested in the river and the trees. ‘All those trees,’ she said luxuriously. ‘Scotland must be beautiful.’ That was an expected reaction from an Icelandic; the island is virtually treeless. ‘Are there salmon in your river?’

‘Just trout,’ I said. ‘I come to Iceland for salmon.’

She picked up another photograph—a wide landscape. ‘What on here is yours?’

I looked at it and grinned. ‘All you can see.’

‘Oh!’ She was silent for a while, then said a little shyly, ‘I’ve never really thought about it, Alar but you must be rich.’

‘I’m no Croesus,’ I said. ‘But I get by. Three thousand acres of heather isn’t very productive, but sheep on the hills and forestry in the glen bring in the bread, and Americans who come to shoot the deer put butter on the bread.’ I stroked her arm. ‘You’ll have to come to Scotland.’

‘I’d like that,’ she said simply.

I put it to her fast. ‘I have to see a man in Akureyri tomorrow—it’s a favour I’m doing for a friend. That means I’ll have to fly. Why don’t you take up the Land-Rover and meet me there? Or would it be too much for you to drive all that way?’

She laughed at me. ‘I can drive the Land-Rover better than you.’ She began to calculate. ‘It’s 45 kilometres; I wouldn’t want to do that in one day so I’d stop somewhere near Hvammstangi. I could be in Akureyri at mid-morning the next day.’

‘No need to break your neck,’ I said casually. I was relieved; I could fly to Akureyri, get rid of the package before Elin got there and all would be well. There was no need to involve her at all. I said ‘I’ll probably stay at the Hotel Vardborg. You can telephone me there.’

But when we went to bed I found I was strung up with unrelieved tensions and I could do nothing for her. While holding Elin in the darkness, Lindholm’s face hovered ghost-like in my inner vision and

again I tasted the nausea in my throat. I choked a little, and said, 'I'm sorry.'

~~'It doesn't matter, darling,' she said quietly. 'You're tired. Just go to sleep.'~~

But I couldn't. I lay on my back and reviewed the whole of an unpleasant day. I went over every word that had been said by my uncommunicative contact at Keflavik airport, the man whom Slade had said would pass me the package. '*Don't take the main road to Reykjavik,*' he had said. '*Go by Krysuvik.*'

So I had gone by Krysuvik and come within an ace of being killed. Chance or design? Would the same thing have happened had I gone by the main road? Had I been set up as a patsy deliberately?

The man at the airport had been Slade's man, or at least he had the password that Slade had arranged. But supposing he wasn't Slade's man and still had the password—it wasn't too hard to think up ways and means of that coming about. Then why had he set me up for Lindholm? Certainly not for the package—he already had the package! Scratch that one and start again.

Supposing he *had* been Slade's man and had still set me up for Lindholm—that made less sense. And, again, it couldn't have been for the package; he needn't have given it to me in the first place. It all boiled down to the fact that the man at the airport and Lindholm had nothing to do with each other.

But Lindholm had definitely been waiting for me. He had even made sure of my name before attacking. So how in hell did he know I'd be on the Krysuvik road? That was one I couldn't answer.

Presently, when I was sure Elin was sound asleep, I got out of bed quietly and went into the kitchen, not bothering to turn on a light. I opened the refrigerator and poured myself a glass of milk, then wandered into the living-room and sat by the window. The short northern night was almost over but it was still dark enough to see the sudden glow from the alley across the street as the watching man drew on a cigarette.

He worried me because I was no longer certain Elin was safe.

III

We were both up early, Elin because she wanted to make a quick start for Akureyri, and I because I wanted to get at the Land-Rover before Elin did. I had some things to stow in the Land-Rover that I didn't want Elin to know about; Lindholm's gun, for instance. I taped it securely to one of the main chassis girders and well out of sight. His cosh I put in my pocket. It had occurred to me that if things did not go well I might be in need of weaponry in Akureyri.

I didn't have to go out of the front door to get at the Land-Rover because the garage was at the back, and so the watcher in the alley got no sight of me. But I saw him because the next thing I did was to take a pair of field glasses one flight up to a landing where there was a window overlooking the street.

He was a tall, lean man with a neat moustache and he looked cold. If he had been there all night without a break he would be not only frozen to the marrow but starving. I made sure I would know him again if I saw him and lowered the glasses just as someone came downstairs from an upstairs flat. It was a middle-aged grey-haired woman who looked at me and then at the glasses and gave a meaningful sniff.

I grinned. It was the first time I had been suspected of voyeurism.

I enjoyed breakfast all the more because of my hungry friend across the street. 'You're looking more cheerful,' said Elin.

'It's your cooking,' I said.

~~She looked at the herring, the cheese, the bread and the eggs. 'What cooking? Anyone can boil an egg.'~~

'Not like you,' I assured her.

But I *was* more cheerful. The dark thoughts of the night had gone and in spite of all the unanswered questions the death of Lindholm no longer oppressed me. He had tried to kill me and failed, and had suffered the penalty for failure. The fact that I had killed him didn't weigh too heavily upon my conscience. My only lingering worry was for Elin.

I said, 'There's a flight for Akureyri from Reykjavik City Airport at eleven.'

'You'll have lunch there,' said Elin. 'Spare a thought for me bouncing about down in Kaldidalur.' She swallowed hot coffee hastily. 'I'd like to leave as soon as possible.'

I waved at the laden table. 'I'll clean up here.'

She got ready to leave, then picked up the binoculars. 'I thought these were in the Land-Rover.'

'I was just checking them,' I said. 'They seemed a bit out of focus last time I used them. They're all right, though.'

'Then I'll take them,' she said.

I went with her down to the garage and kissed her goodbye. She looked at me closely, and said, 'Everything is all right, isn't it, Alan?'

'Of course; why do you ask?'

'I don't really know. I'm just being feminine, I suppose. See you in Akureyri.'

I waved her off and watched as she drove away. Nobody seemed to bother; no heads popped around corners and no one followed in hot pursuit. I went back into the flat and checked on the watcher in the alley. He wasn't to be seen, so I made a mad dash for the upstairs landing from where I could get a better view and I breathed easier when I saw him leaning against the wall, beating his hands against his arms.

It would seem that he was not aware that Elin had left or, if he was, he didn't care. It lifted a considerable load off my mind.

I washed the breakfast crockery and then went to my room where I took a camera bag and emptied it of its contents. Then I took the hessian-covered steel box and found that it fitted neatly into the leather bag. From now on it was not going to leave my person until I handed it over in Akureyri.

At ten o'clock I rang for a taxi and left for the airport, a move which resulted in some action. I looked back along the street and saw a car draw up near the alley into which my watcher jumped. The car followed the taxi all the way to the airport, keeping a discreet distance.

On arrival I went to the reservation counter. 'I have a reservation on the flight to Akureyri. My name is Stewart.'

The receptionist checked a list. 'Oh, yes; Mr Stewart.' She looked at the clock. 'But you're early.'

'I'll have a coffee,' I said. 'It passes the time.'

She gave me the ticket and I paid for it, then she said, 'Your luggage is weighed over there.'

I touched the camera case. 'This is all I have. I travel light.'

She laughed. 'So I see, Mr Stewart. And may I compliment you on how you speak our language.'

'Thank you.' I turned and saw a recognized face lurking close by—my watcher was still watching. I ignored him and headed for the coffee-counter where I bought a newspaper and settled down to wait.

My man had a hurried conversation at the reservation counter, bought a ticket, and then came m

way and both of us ignored each other completely. He ordered a late breakfast and ate ravenously, his eyes flicking in my direction infrequently. Presently I had a stroke of luck; the announcement—loudspeaker cleared its throat and said in Icelandic, ‘Mr Buchner is wanted on the telephone.’ When repeated this in fluent German my man looked up, got to his feet, and went to answer the call.

At least I could now put a name to him, and whether the name was accurate or not was really immaterial.

He could see me from the telephone-box and spoke facing outwards as though he expected me to make a break for it. I disappointed him by languidly ordering another coffee and becoming immersed in a newspaper account of how many salmon Bing Crosby had caught on his latest visit to Iceland.

In airport waiting lounges time seems to stretch interminably and it was a couple of eons before the flight to Akureyri was announced. Herr Buchner was close behind me in the queue and in the stro across the apron towards the aircraft, and he chose a seat on the aisle just behind me.

We took off and flew across Iceland, over the cold glaciers of Langjd’kull and Hofsjd’kull, and soon enough we were circling over Eyjafjd’rdur preparatory to landing at Akureyri, a city of fully ten thousand souls, the metropolis of Northern Iceland. The aircraft lurched to a halt and I undid my seat belt, hearing the answering click as Buchner, behind me, did the same.

The attack, when it came, was made with smoothness and efficiency. I left the airport building and was walking towards the taxi rank when suddenly they were all about me—four of them. One stood in front of me and grabbed my right hand, pumping it up and down while babbling in a loud voice about how good it was to see me again and the enormous pleasure it would give him to show me the marvels of Akureyri.

The man on my left crowded hard and pinned my left arm. He put his mouth close to my ear, and said in Swedish, ‘Don’t make trouble, Herr Stewartsen; or you will be dead.’ I could believe him because the man behind me had a gun in my back.

I heard a snip and turned my head just as the man on my right cut through the shoulder-strap of the camera case with a small pair of shears. I felt the strap snake loose and then he was gone and the camera case with him, while the man behind me took his place with one arm thrown carelessly over my shoulder and the other digging the gun into my ribs.

I could see Buchner standing by a taxi about ten yards away. He looked at me with a blank face and then turned and bent to get into the car. It drove away and I saw the white smudge of his face as I looked through the back window.

They kept up the act for two minutes more to give the man with the camera case time to get clear and the man on my left said, again in Swedish, ‘Herr Stewartsen: we’re going to let you go now, but I wouldn’t do anything foolish if I were you.’

They released me and each took a step away, their faces hard and their eyes watchful. There were no guns in sight but that didn’t mean a damn thing. Not that I intended to start anything; the camera case was gone and the odds were too great anyway. As though someone had given a signal they all turned and walked away, each in a different direction, and left me standing there. There was quite a few people around but not one of the good people of Akureyri had any idea that anything untoward had just happened in their line of sight.

I felt ruffled so I straightened my jacket and then took a taxi to the Hotel Vardborg. There wasn’t anything else to do.

IV

Elin had been right; I was in time to lunch at the Vardborg. I had just stuck my fork into the mutton when Herr Buchner walked in, looked around and spotted me, and headed in my direction. He stood on the other side of the table, twitched his moustache, and said, 'Mr Stewart?'

I leaned back. 'Well, if it isn't Herr Buchner! What can I do for you?'

'My name is Graham,' he said coldly. 'And I'd like to talk to you.'

'You were Buchner this morning,' I said. 'But if I had a name like that I'd want to change it, too.' I waved him towards a chair. 'Be my guest—I can recommend the soup.'

He sat down stiffly. 'I'm not in the mood for acting straight man to your comedian,' he said, extracting his wallet from his pocket. 'My credentials.' He pushed a scrap of paper across the table.

I unfolded it to find the left half of a 100-kronur banknote. When I matched it against the other half from my own wallet the two halves fitted perfectly. I looked up at him. 'Well, Mr Graham; that seems to be in order. What can I do for you?'

'You can give me the package,' he said. 'That's all I want.'

I shook my head regretfully. 'You know better than that.'

He frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean that I can't give you the package because I haven't got it.'

His moustache twitched again and his eyes turned cold. 'Let's have no games, Stewart. The package.' He held out his hand.

'Damn it!' I said. 'You were there—you know what happened.'

'I don't know what you're talking about. I was where?'

'Outside Akureyri Airport. You were taking a taxi.'

His eyes flickered. 'Was I?' he said colourlessly. 'Go on!'

'They grabbed me before I knew what was happening, and they got clean away with the package. It was in my camera case.'

His voice cracked. 'You mean you haven't got it!'

I said sardonically, 'If you were supposed to be my bodyguard you did a bloody awful job. Slade isn't going to like it.'

'By God, he's not!' said Graham with feeling. A tic pulsed under his right eye. 'So it was in the camera case.'

'Where else would it be? It was the only luggage I carried. You ought to know that—you were standing right behind me with your big ears flapping when I checked in at Reykjavik airport.'

He gave me a look of dislike. 'You think you're clever, don't you?' He leaned forward. 'There's going to be a Godawful row about this. You'd better stay available, Stewart; you'd better be easy to find when I come back.'

I shrugged. 'Where would I go? Besides, I have the Scottish sense of thrift, and my room here is paid for.'

'You take this damned coolly.'

'What do you expect me to do? Burst into tears?' I laughed in his face. 'Grow up, Graham.'

His face tightened but he said nothing; instead he stood up and walked away. I put in fifteen minutes of deep thought while polishing off the mutton and at the end of that time I came to a decision, and the decision was that I could do with a drink, so I went to find one.

As I walked through the hotel foyer I saw Buchner-Graham hard at work in a telephone-box. Although it wasn't particularly warm he was sweating.

I came out of a dreamless sleep because someone was shaking me and hissing, 'Stewart, wake up!' I opened my eyes and found Graham leaning over me.

I blinked at him. 'Funny! I was under the impression I locked my door.'

He grinned humourlessly. 'You did. Wake up—you're going to be interviewed. You'd better have your wits sharpened.'

'What time is it?'

'Five a.m.'

I smiled. 'Gestapo technique, eh! Oh, well: I suppose I'll feel better when I've shaved.'

Graham seemed nervous. 'You'd better hurry. He'll be here in five minutes.'

'Who will?'

'You'll see.'

I ran hot water into the basin and began to lather my face. 'What *was* your function on this particular exercise, Graham? As a bodyguard you're a dead loss, so it can't have been that.'

'You'd better stop thinking about me and start to think about yourself,' he said. 'You have a lot of explaining to do.'

'True,' I said, and put down the brush and picked up the razor. The act of scraping one's face with a sliver of sharp metal always seems futile and a little depressing; I would have been happier in one of the hairier ages—counterespionage agent by appointment to Her Majesty Queen Victoria would have been the ideal ticket.

I must have been more nervous than I thought because I shaved myself down to the blood on the first pass. Then someone knocked perfunctorily on the door and Slade came into the room. He kicked the door shut with his foot and glowered at me with a scowl on his jowly face, his hands thrust deep into his overcoat pockets. Without an overture he said briefly, 'What's the story, Stewart?'

There's nothing more calculated to put a man off his stroke than having to embark on complicated explanations with a face full of drying lather. I turned back to the mirror and continued to shave—in silence.

Slade made one of those unspellable noises—an explosive outrush of air expelled through mouth and nose. He sat on the bed and the springs creaked in protest at the excessive weight. 'It had better be good,' he said. 'I dislike being hauled out of bed and flown to the frozen north.'

I continued to shave, thinking that whatever could bring Slade from London to Akureyri must be important. After the last tricky bit around the Adam's apple, I said, 'The package must have been more important than you told me.' I turned on the cold tap and rinsed the soap from my face.

'...that bloody package,' he said.

'I'm sorry,' I apologized. 'I didn't hear that. I had water in my ears.'

He contained himself with difficulty. 'Where's the package?' he asked with synthetic patience.

'As of this moment I couldn't tell you.' I dried my face vigorously. 'It was taken from me at midday yesterday by four unknown males—but you know that already from Graham.'

His voice rose. 'And you let them take it—just like that!'

'There wasn't much I could do about it at the time,' I said equably. 'I had a gun in my kidneys.' I nodded towards Graham. 'What was he supposed to be doing about it—if it isn't a rude answer?'

Slade folded his hands together across his stomach. 'We thought they'd tagged Graham—that's why we brought you in. We thought they'd tackle Graham and give you a free run to the goal line.'

I didn't think much of that one. If they—whoever they were—had tagged Graham, then it wasn't at all standard procedure for him to draw attention to me by lurking outside my flat. But I let it go because Slade always had been a slippery customer and I wanted to keep something in reserve.

Instead, I said, 'They didn't tackle Graham—they tackled me. But perhaps they don't know the rules of rugby football; it's not a game they go for in Sweden.' I gave myself a last dab behind the ear and dropped the towel. 'Or in Russia,' I added as an afterthought.

Slade looked up. 'And what makes you think of Russians?'

I grinned at him. 'I always think of Russians,' I said drily. 'Like the Frenchman who always thought of sex.' I leaned over him and picked up my cigarettes. 'Besides, they called me Stewartsen.'

'So?'

'So they knew who I was—not who I am now, but what I was once. There's a distinction.'

Slade shifted his eyes to Graham and said curtly, 'Wait outside.'

Graham looked hurt but obediently went to the door. When he'd closed it I said, 'Oh, goody; now the children are out of the room we can have a grown-up conversation. And where, for Christ's sake, did you get that one? I told you I wouldn't stand for trainees on the operation.'

'What makes you think he's a trainee?'

'Come, now; he's still wet behind the ears.'

'He's a good man,' said Slade, and shifted restlessly on the bed. He was silent for a while, then I said, 'Well, you've really cocked this one up, haven't you? Just a simple matter of carrying a small parcel from A to B and you fall down on it. I knew you were past it but, by God, I didn't think you were so bloody decrepit.' He wagged his finger. 'And they called you Stewartsen! You know what that means?'

'Kennikin,' I said, not relishing the thought. 'Is he here—in Iceland?'

Slade hunched his shoulders. 'Not that I know of.' He looked at me sideways. 'When you were contacted in Reykjavik what were you told?'

I shrugged. 'Not much. There was a car provided which I had to drive to Reykjavik by way of Krysuvik and leave parked outside the Saga. I did all that.'

Slade grunted in his throat. 'Run into any trouble?'

'Was I supposed to?' I asked blandly.

He shook his head irritably. 'We had word that something might happen. It seemed best to re-route you.' He stood up with a dissatisfied look on his face and went to the door. 'Graham!'

I said, 'I'm sorry about all this, Slade; I really am.'

'Being sorry butters no bloody parsnips. We'll just have to see what we can salvage from this mess. Hell, I brought you in because the Department is short-handed—and now we have a whole country to seal off because of your stupidity.' He turned to Graham. 'Put a call through to the Department in London; I'll take it downstairs. And talk to Captain Lee at the airport; I want that plane to be ready to take off at five minutes' notice. We may have to move fast.'

I coughed delicately. 'Me, too?'

Slade looked at me malevolently. 'You! You've caused enough of a shambles on this operation.'

'Well, what do I do?'

'You can go to hell for all I care,' he said. 'Go back to Reykjavik and shack up with your girlfriend for the rest of the summer.' He turned and bumped into Graham. 'What the hell are you waiting for?' he snarled, and Graham fled.

Slade paused at the door and said without turning, 'But you'd better watch out for Kennikin because I'll not lift a finger to stop him. By God, I hope he *does* nail you!'

The door slammed and I sat on the bed and brooded. I knew that if ever I met Kennikin again I would be meeting death.

TWO

Elin rang up as I was finishing breakfast. From the static and the slight fading I could tell she was using the radiotelephone in the Land-Rover. Most vehicles travelling long distances in Iceland are fitted with radio-telephones, a safety measure called for by the difficult nature of the terrain. That's the standard explanation, but not the whole truth. The fact is that Icelanders *like* telephoning and constitute one of the gabbiest nations on earth, coming just after the United States and Canada in the number of calls per head.

She asked if I had slept well and I assured her I had, then I said, 'When will you get here?'

'About eleven-thirty.'

'I'll meet you at the camp site,' I said.

That gave me two hours which I spent in walking around Akureyri like a tourist, ducking in and out of shops, unexpectedly retracing my steps and, in general acting the fool. But when I joined Elin at the camp site I was absolutely sure that I didn't have a tail. It seemed as though Slade had been telling the truth when he said he had no further use for me.

I opened the door of the Land-Rover, and said, 'Move over; I'll drive.'

Elin looked at me in surprise. 'Aren't we staying?'

'We'll drive a little way out of town and then have lunch. There's something I want to talk to you about.'

I drove along the north road by the coast, moving fast and keeping a close check behind. As it became clear that no one was following I began to relax, although not so much as to take the worry from Elin's eyes. She could see I was preoccupied and tactfully kept silent, but at last she said, 'There's something wrong, isn't there?'

'You're so damn right,' I said. 'That's what I want to discuss.'

Back in Scotland Slade had warned me about involving Elin in the operation; he had also invoked the Official Secrets Act with its penalties for blabbermouths. But if my future life with Elin was going to mean anything at all I had to tell her the truth and to hell with Slade and to hell with the Official Secrets Act.

I slowed down and left the road to bump over turf, and stopped overlooking the sea. The land fell away in a rumble of boulders to the grey water and in the distance the island of Grimsey loomed hazily through the mist. Apart from the scrap of land there wasn't a damned thing between us and the North Pole. This was the Arctic Ocean.

I said, 'What do you know about me, Elin?'

'That's a strange question. You're Alan Stewart—whom I like very much.'

'Is that all?'

She shrugged. 'What else do I need to know?'

I smiled. 'No curiosity. Elin?'

'Oh, I have my curiosity but I keep it under control. If you want me to know anything, you'll tell me,' she said tranquilly, then hesitated. 'I do know one thing about you.'

'What's that?'

She turned to face me. 'I know that you have been hurt, and it happened not long before we met.'

That is why I keep my questions to myself—I don't want to bring the hurt back.'

~~'You're very perceptive,' I said. 'I didn't think it showed. Would it surprise you to know I was once a British agent—a spy?'~~

She regarded me curiously. 'A spy,' she said slowly, as though rolling the word about her mouth to taste it. 'Yes, it surprises me very much. It is not a very honourable occupation—you are not the type.'

'So someone else told me recently,' I said sardonically. 'Nevertheless, it is true.'

She was silent for a while, then she said, 'You *were* a spy. Alan, what you were in the past doesn't matter. I know you as you are now.'

'Sometimes the past catches up with you,' I said. 'It did with me. There's a man called Slade...' I stopped, wondering if I was doing the right thing.

'Yes?' she prompted me.

'He came to see me in Scotland. I'll tell you about that—about Slade in Scotland.'

II

The shooting was bad that day. Something had disturbed the deer during the night because they had left the valley where my calculations had placed them and had drifted up the steep slopes of Bheinn Fhada. I could see them through the telescopic sight—pale grey-brown shapes grazing among the heather. The way the wind was blowing the only chance I had of getting near them was by sprouting wings and so, since it was the last day of the season, the deer were safe from Stewart for the rest of the summer.

At three in the afternoon I packed up and went home and was scrambling down Sgurr Mor when I saw the car parked outside the cottage and the minuscule figure of a man pacing up and down. The cottage is hard to get to—the rough track from the clachan discourages casual tourists—and so anyone who arrives usually wants to see me very much. The reverse doesn't always apply; I'm of a retiring nature and I don't encourage visitors.

So I was very careful as I approached and stopped under cover of the rocks by the burn. I unslung the rifle, checked it again to make sure it was unloaded, and set it to my shoulder. Through the telescopic sight the man sprang plainly to view. He had his back to me but when he turned I saw it was Slade.

I centred the cross-hairs on his large pallid face and gently squeezed the trigger, and the hammer snapped home with a harmless click. I wondered if I would have done the same had there been a bullet up the spout. The world would be a better place without men like Slade. But to load was too deliberate an act, so I put up the gun and walked towards the cottage. I should have loaded the gun.

As I approached he turned and waved. 'Good afternoon,' he called, as coolly as though he were a regular and welcome guest.

I stepped up to him. 'How did you find me?'

He shrugged. 'It wasn't too hard. You know my methods.'

I knew them and I didn't like them. I said, 'Quit playing Sherlock. What do you want?'

He waved towards the door of the cottage. 'Aren't you going to invite me inside?'

'Knowing you, I'll bet you've searched the place already.'

He held up his hands in mock horror. 'On my word of honour, I haven't.'

I nearly laughed in his face because the man had no honour. I turned from him and pushed open the door and he followed me inside, clicking his tongue deprecatingly. ‘Not locked? You’re very trusting.’

‘There’s nothing here worth stealing,’ I said indifferently.

‘Just your life,’ he said, and looked at me sharply.

I let that statement lie and put up the rifle on its rack. Slade looked about him curiously.

‘Primitive—but comfortable,’ he remarked. ‘But I don’t see why you don’t live in the big house.’

‘It happens to be none of your business.’

‘Perhaps,’ he said, and sat down. ‘So you hid yourself in Scotland and didn’t expect to be found. Protective coloration, eh? A Stewart hiding among a lot of Stewarts. You’ve caused us some little difficulty.’

‘Who said I was hiding? I am a Scot, you know.’

He smiled fatly. ‘Of a sort. Just by your paternal grandfather. It’s not long since you were a Swede—and before that you were Finnish. You were Stewartsen then, of course.’

‘Have you travelled five hundred miles just to talk of old times?’ I asked tiredly.

‘You’re looking very fit,’ he said.

‘I can’t say the same for you; you’re out of condition and running to fat,’ I said cruelly.

He chuckled. ‘The fleshpots, dear boy; the fleshpots—all those lunches at the expense of Her Majesty’s Government.’ He waved a pudgy hand. ‘But let’s get down to it, Alan.’

‘To you I’m Mr Stewart,’ I said deliberately.

‘Oh, you don’t like me,’ he said in a hurt voice. ‘But no matter—it makes no difference in the end. I...we...want you to do a job for us. Nothing too difficult, you understand.’

‘You must be out of your mind,’ I said.

‘I know how you must feel, but...’

‘You don’t know a damn thing,’ I said sharply. ‘If you expect me to work for you after what happened then you’re crazier than I thought.’

I was wrong, of course; Slade knew perfectly well how I felt—it was his business to know men and to use them like tools. I waited for him to put on the pressure and, sure enough, it came, but in his usual oblique manner.

‘So let’s talk of old times,’ he said. ‘You must remember Kennikin.’

I remembered—I’d have to have total amnesia to forget Kennikin. A vision of his face swam before me as I had last seen him; eyes like grey pebbles set above high Slavic cheekbones, and the scar ran from his right temple to the corner of his mouth standing out vividly against the suddenly pale skin. He had been angry enough to kill me at that moment.

‘What about Kennikin?’ I said slowly.

‘Just that I hear he’s been looking for you, too. You made a fool of him and he didn’t like it. He wants to have you...’ Slade paused as though groping for a thought. ‘What’s that delicate phrase our American colleagues of the CIA use? Oh, yes—Kennikin wants to have you “terminated with extreme prejudice.” Although I daresay the KGB don’t employ that exact wording.’

A damned nice term for a bullet in the back of the head one dark night. ‘So?’ I said.

‘He’s still looking for you,’ Slade pointed out.

‘Why?’ I asked. ‘I’m no longer with the Department.’

‘Ah, but Kennikin doesn’t know that.’ Slade examined his fingernails. ‘We’ve kept the information from him—quite successfully, I believe. It seemed useful to do so.’

I saw what was coming but I wanted to make Slade come right out with it, to commit himself in

plain language—something he abhorred. ‘But he doesn’t know where I am.’

‘Quite right, dear boy—but what if someone should tell him?’

I leaned forward and looked closely at Slade. ‘And who would tell him?’

‘I would,’ he said blandly. ‘If I thought it necessary. I’d have to do it tactfully and through a third party, of course; but it could be arranged.’

So there it was—the threat of betrayal. Nothing new for Slade; he made a life’s work out of corruption and betrayal. Not that I was one to throw stones; it had been my work too, once. But the difference between us was that Slade liked his work.

I let him waffle on, driving home the point unnecessarily. ‘Kennikin runs a very efficient *Mordgruppe*, as we know to our cost, don’t we? Several members of the Department have been...er... terminated by Kennikin’s men.’

‘Why don’t you just say murdered?’

He frowned and his piggy eyes sank deeper into the rolls of fat that larded his face. ‘You always were blunt, Stewart; perhaps too blunt for your own good. I haven’t forgotten the time you tried to get me in trouble with Taggart. I remember you mentioned that word then.’

‘I’ll mention it again,’ I said. ‘You murdered Jimmy Birkby.’

‘Did I?’ Slade asked softly. ‘Who put the gelignite in his car? Who carefully connected the wire from the detonator to the ignition system? You did!’ He cut me off with a chopping motion of his hand. ‘And it was only that which got you next to Kennikin, only that induced Kennikin to trust you enough so that we could break him. You did very well, Stewart—all things considered.’

‘Yes, you used me,’ I said.

‘And I’ll use you again,’ he said brutally. ‘Or would you rather be thrown to Kennikin?’ He laughed suddenly. ‘You know, I don’t think Kennikin gives a damn if you’re with the Department or not. He wants you for your own sweet self.’

I stared at him. ‘And what do you mean by that?’

‘Didn’t you know that Kennikin is impotent now?’ Slade said in surprise. ‘I know you intended to kill him with that last shot, but the light was bad and you thought you’d merely wounded him. Indeed you had, but not merely—you castrated the poor man.’ His hands, which were folded across his belly, shook with his sniggers. ‘To put it crudely—or bluntly, if you like, dear boy—you shot his balls off. Can you imagine what he’ll do to you if—and when—he catches up with you?’

I felt cold and there was a yawning emptiness in the pit of my stomach. ‘There’s only one way of opting out of the world and that’s by dying,’ said Slade with phoney philosophy. ‘You tried your way and it doesn’t work.’

He was right; I shouldn’t have expected otherwise. ‘What it comes to is this,’ I said. ‘You want me to do a job. If I don’t do it, you’ll tip off the opposition and the opposition will knock me off—and your hands will be theoretically clean.’

‘Very succinctly put,’ said Slade. ‘You always did write good, clear reports.’ He sounded like a schoolmaster complimenting a boy on a good essay.

‘What’s the job?’

‘Now you’re being sensible,’ he said approvingly. He produced a sheet of paper and consulted it. ‘We know you are in the habit of taking an annual holiday in Iceland.’ He looked up. ‘Still sticking to your northern heritage, I see. You couldn’t very well go back to Sweden—and Finland would be even more risky. Too close to the Russian border for comfort.’ He spread his hands. ‘But who goes to Iceland?’

‘So the job is in Iceland?’

‘Indeed it is.’ He tapped the paper with his fingernail. ‘You take long holidays—three and four months at a time. What it is to have a private income—the Department did very well by you.’—

‘The Department gave me nothing that wasn’t mine,’ I said shortly.

He ignored that. ‘I note you’ve been doing very well for yourself in Iceland. All the home comforts down to a love-nest. A young lady, I believe, is...’

‘We’ll leave her out of it.’

‘Just the point I’m making, dear boy. It would be most unwise if she became involved. It could be most dangerous for her, don’t you think? I wouldn’t tell her anything about it.’ His voice was kindly.

Slade had certainly done his homework. If he knew about Elin then he must have tapped me a long time before. All the time I thought I was in cover I’d been under a microscope.

‘Come to the job.’

‘You will collect a package at Keflavik International Airport.’ He sketched dimensions with his hands. ‘About eight inches by four inches by two inches. You will deliver it to a man in Akureyri—you know where that is?’

‘I know,’ I said, and waited for him to continue, but he didn’t. ‘That’s all?’ I asked.

‘That’s all; I’m sure you will be able to accomplish it quite easily.’

I stared at him incredulously. ‘Have you gone through all this rigmarole of blackmail just to give me a messenger boy’s job?’

‘I wish you wouldn’t use such crude language,’ he said peevishly. ‘It’s a job suitable for one who is out of practice, such as yourself. It’s important enough and you were to hand, so we’re using you.’

‘This is something that’s blown up quite quickly, isn’t it?’ I hazarded. ‘You’re forced to use me?’

Slade wagged his hand. ‘We’re a bit stretched for manpower, that’s all. Don’t get delusions of grandeur—in using you I’m scraping the bottom of the barrel.’

Slade could be blunt enough when it suited his purpose. I shrugged, and said, ‘Who is the man in Akureyri?’

‘He’ll make himself known,’ Slade took a slip of paper from his wallet and tore it jaggedly across. One piece he passed to me and it proved to be half of a 100-kronur banknote. ‘He’ll have the other half. Old ways are best, don’t you think? Effective and uncomplicated.’

I looked at the ruined Icelandic currency in my hand and said ironically, ‘I don’t suppose I’ll be paid for this enterprise?’

‘Of course you will, dear boy. Her Majesty’s Government is never niggardly when it comes to valuable services rendered. Shall we say two hundred pounds?’

‘Send it to Oxfam, you bastard.’

He shook his head deprecatingly. ‘Such language—but I shall do as you say. You may depend on it.’

I studied Slade and he looked back at me with eyes as candid as those of a baby. I didn’t like the smell of this operation—it sounded too damned phoney. It occurred to me that perhaps he was setting up a training exercise with me as the guinea pig. The Department frequently ran games of that sort to train the new boys, but all the participants usually knew the score. If Slade was ringing me into a training scheme without telling me I’d strangle the sadistic bastard.

To test him, I said, ‘Slade, if you’re using me as the football in a training game it could be dangerous. You could lose some of your budding spies that way.’

He looked shocked. ‘Oh, I wouldn’t do that to you.’

‘All right; what do I do if someone tries to take the package?’

‘Stop him,’ he said succinctly.

‘At any cost?’

He smiled. ‘~~You mean—should you kill? Do it any way you want. Just deliver the package to Akureyri.~~’ His paunch shook with amusement. ‘Killer Stewart!’ he mocked gently. ‘Well, well!’

I nodded. ‘I just wanted to know. I’d hate to make your manpower problems more difficult. After Akureyri—what happens then?’

‘Then you may go on your way rejoicing. Complete your holiday. Enjoy the company of your lady friend. Feel free as air.’

‘Until the next time you drop by.’

‘That is a highly unlikely eventuality,’ said Slade decisively. ‘The world has passed you by. Things are not the same in the Department as they were—techniques are different—many changes you would not understand. You would be quite useless, Stewart, in any real work; but this job is simple and you’re just a messenger boy.’ He looked around the room a little disdainfully. ‘No, you may come back here and rusticate peacefully.’

‘And Kennikin?’

‘Ah, I make no promises there. He may find you—he may not; but if he does it will not be because of my doing, I assure you.’

‘That’s not good enough,’ I said. ‘You’ll tell him I haven’t been a member of the Department for four years?’

‘I may,’ he said carelessly. ‘I may.’ He stood and buttoned his coat. ‘Of course, whether he would believe it is one thing, and whether it would make any difference is yet another. He has his own, strictly unprofessional, reasons for wanting to find you, and I’m inclined to think that he’ll want to operate on you with a sharp knife rather than to ask you to share his bottle of Calvados.’

He picked up his hat and moved over to the door. ‘You will receive further instructions about picking up the package before you leave. It’s been nice to see you again, Mr Stewart.’

‘I wish I could say the same,’ I said, and he laughed jollily.

I walked with him to his car and pointed to the rocks from where I had watched him waiting outside the cottage. ‘I had you in rifle sights from up there. I even squeezed the trigger. Unfortunately, the rifle wasn’t loaded.’

He looked at me, his face full of confidence. ‘If it had been loaded you wouldn’t have pulled the trigger. You’re a civilized man, Stewart; too civilized. I sometimes wonder how you lasted so long in the Department—you were always a little too soft-centred for the big jobs. If it had been my decision you’d have been out long before you decided to...er...retire.’

I looked into his pale cold eyes and knew that if it *had* been his decision I would never have been allowed to retire. He said, ‘I trust you remember the terms of the Official Secrets Act.’ Then he smiled. ‘But, of course, you remember.’

I said, ‘Where are you in the hierarchy now, Slade?’

‘Quite close to the top, as a matter of fact,’ he said cheerfully. ‘Right next to Taggart. I *do* make the decisions now. I get to have lunch with the Prime Minister from time to time.’ He gave a self-satisfied laugh and got into the car. He rolled down the window, and said, ‘There’s just one thing. The package—don’t open it, dear boy. Remember what curiosity did to the cat.’

He drove away, bumping down the track, and when he had disappeared the glen seemed cleaner. I looked up at Sgurr Mor and at Sgurr Dearg beyond and felt depressed. In less than twenty minutes my world had been smashed to pieces and I wondered how the hell I was going to pick up the bits.

And when I woke up next morning after a broken night I knew there was only one thing to do; to obey Slade, carry out his orders and deliver the damned package to Akureyri and hope to God I could

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