

ANTHONY PRICE

TOMORROW'S GHOST

"A SUPERB STORY."
EVENING STANDARD



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CHAPTER 1

AFTER ONLY A WEEK of exposure to her, Gary the Messenger Boy was ready to die for Marilyn the Temporary Secretary, Frances judged. So it was his good fortune that the scenario did not envisage his role as being self-sacrificial.

‘Any urgent letters. Miss?’ he inquired, leaning hopefully over her desk as far as he dared. He had invented several extra collections a day since her arrival, and this was the first of them. The secretaries had never had better service.

‘Thank you, Gary.’ Frances smiled at him and threw out Marilyn’s chest for his entertainment and she sealed the first of Mr Cavendish’s morning letters into their envelopes. The gratification of Gary’s adolescent daydreams was not the worst thing she had ever done, if hardly the most admirable: it was simply the best and quickest way of doing what had to be done.

‘Thank you, Gary.’ She offered him another smile with the sealed letters, leaning forward slightly as she did so. Although she lacked the measurements for a really spectacular view, the top three buttons had been carefully left undone to offer what there was.

‘Thank you. Miss.’ Gary wiped his sweaty paw on the seat of his jeans before accepting the gift. But then, instead of turning to Mrs Simmonds at the next desk, he lingered in front of her, rocking on his three-inch heels until she began to wonder if the lungful of over-applied April Violets which he had inhaled was about to knock him out.

‘Yes, Gary?’

He summoned up his courage. ‘Got another story for you, Miss—true story.’

Mrs Simmonds sniffed disapprovingly, though whether it was at Gary or the April Violets, Frances wasn’t sure.

‘Yes, Gary? A true story?’

‘The letters, Gary!’ snapped Mrs Simmonds.

Frances ran the tip of her tongue deliberately over Marilyn’s Glory Rose lipstick and gazed expectantly at Gary. Mrs Simmonds rated nowhere, compared with Gary; she was just a secretary, and (which was more to the point) she didn’t gossip round the office like Gary.

‘I read it in this book,’ began Gary breathlessly. ‘There was this Indian uprising, see—’

It had been an Indian uprising last time. Gary’s reading was either limited or highly specialised.

‘Comanches, they were. In Texas—’

Perhaps Gary’s mother had fancied the hero of *High Noon* so much that she had imprinted him with an obsession to go with his name.

‘And there was this girl they took prisoner—a blonde like you. Miss—’ His eyes feasted on the dyed curls ‘—and they started to take ... to take her clothes off. Miss—’

‘Gary!’ Mrs Simmonds fired his name like a warning shot.

‘But she was wearing this—this thing—’ he floundered ‘—it’s all laced up, with bones in it—?’ He blinked desperately at Marilyn.

‘Whalebone,’ said Frances. ‘A corset?’

‘That’s it. Miss—a corset!’

‘Charming!’ murmured Mrs Simmonds, her back now as rigid as if it was also whaleboned and laced-up, but interested in the Texan maiden’s fate against her better judgement.

‘And they couldn’t get it off, see—the Comanches couldn’t. So when they got her down they couldn’t—’

‘That’s enough!’ snapped Mrs Simmonds. ‘Quite enough.’

Gary shook his head at her. ‘But it’s true, Mrs Simmonds—honestly it is. I can show it to you in this book.’

‘I believe you,’ said Marilyn encouragingly.

‘But that isn’t the end of it, Miss—’ the words rushed out ‘—they shot arrows at her, only the arrows stuck in the—the—in the bones—an’ she was saved by the Texas Rangers.’

Before Mrs Simmonds could draw a bead on him he snatched the letters from her hand and scuttled out of the door.

Mrs Simmonds traversed her sights on to Marilyn. ‘*Miss Francis ... I know you’re only a temp ... and you won’t be here with us very long ... But you really should know better—*’

The door swung half open and Gary’s grinning face appeared in the gap. ‘If they’d caught you, Miss—the Comanches—you wouldn’t ‘uv stood a chance!’ he delivered his punch-line.

‘Don’t be cheeky!’ Mrs Simmonds’ anger bounced off the closing door. She turned back to Marilyn. ‘There! That’s exactly what I mean. If you give the dirty little beast a chance—but you positively encourage him!’

Marilyn examined her Glory Rose nail polish critically. That was also exactly true, though Frances, making a mental note to uproot any roses in her garden at home which might even remind her of this particular shade of red. And (looking down past her nails to what Gary had tried to se

Marilyn certainly wouldn't have stood a chance with the Comanches either, that was also true.

Marilyn shrugged. 'He's harmless.'

'Nothing in trousers is harmless.' Mrs Simmonds caught her tongue as she stared at Marilyn, and Frances knew what she was thinking: that anything in trousers was as much Target for Tonight as Marilyn Francis as Marilyn Francis was for anything in trousers.

Well, that was the trick—since there was no time for a more unobtrusive approach, in order not to be seen she had to be obvious. And there was nothing more unimaginably obvious than the pink, red-blonde, brazen and bra-less Marilyn, with her eyes on all men from sixteen to sixty.

'It's all very well for you—' Mrs Simmonds began bitterly, and then brightened '—you won't be here very long...'

'Oh, I don't know about that...' Frances toyed with the idea of touching up Marilyn's lipstick. The trouble was, it would mean looking at her face, and that was not something she particularly enjoyed. '... I quite like it here.'

Mrs Simmonds bristled. 'Mr Cavendish's *proper* secretary—' there was a heavy emphasis on the adjective '—will be back from hospital in a fortnight.'

'There are other jobs that come up. Girls are always leaving, as I should know ... I'm a bit cheesed off with this temping—I think it's time to dig in somewhere comfy, like here.'

The time was just about right to plant the shape of things to come, anyway. 'I hear there's a secretary leaving in Research and Development—' she winked at Mrs Simmonds '—where all those groovy scientists are.'

Mrs Simmonds regarded her incredulously. 'You're joking—?'

Marilyn gazed into space. 'Some of them are quite young. There's one that's got a smashing sports car—I've seen him in the canteen. And he's seen *me*, too—'

That was true. She'd made sure of that. And groovy Dr Garfield also worked right alongside ungroovy Dr Harrison, who just might be selling out British-American's research and development to the Other Side, what was more.

'Hmm...' Mrs Simmonds' lips were compressed so tightly that she found it hard to speak. 'Well, you may not find that so easy. They don't take just anyone in R and D, you know. You have to have security clearance, for a start.'

Marilyn giggled. 'No problem, dearie. I'm absolutely secure.'

And that was also true. With the Security Officer already primed by the Special Branch, Marilyn's translation to the rich pastures of R and D was a *fait accompli*, whatever the opposition.

‘No problem.’ But that wasn’t the reason which Gary would put into circulation.

‘With my qualifications I can push ‘em over any time—no problem.’ Marilyn fluttered her false eyelashes and decided to examine her lipstick.

‘Hmm...’ What drove Mrs Simmonds beyond words was the knowledge that Marilyn’s shorthand and typing speeds, not to mention her actual secretarial qualifications and efficiency, were as far above reproach as her morals were beneath it.

And it was nettling her more than somewhat, thought Frances, that she also suspected the unspeakable Marilyn was relying on her almost-see-through blouse and three undone buttons as much as 140 words a minute.

‘Hmm...’ Mrs Simmonds drew a shuddering breath. ‘Well, if that’s what you want, you won’t help yourself by making up to young Gary, I can tell you. He’s a proper little chatterbox, that one—and what he says doesn’t lose in the telling, either. You know he’s already going round, telling everyone that you are—’ Mrs Simmonds clenched her jaws ‘—“hot stuff—do you know that?’

When it was all over, decided Frances, she would pad her expenses and buy Gary a copy of Jack Schaefer’s *The Canyon*, and maybe Howard Fast’s *The Last Frontier* too. Not even the KGB disinformation experts could have done better.

‘He can say what he likes, I don’t care.’ She rummaged in her bag for the tawdry compact and the Glory Rose lipstick.

‘Well, you ought to.’ The phone buzzed at Mrs Simmonds’ elbow. ‘He fancies you. And you can’t possibly fancy him.’

‘That’ll be the day! He should be so lucky...’ Marilyn opened the compact, and Frances examined the ghastly little painted doll’s face. There was no accounting for male taste, as she knew by bitter experience. She could only hope that the thing wouldn’t drag on so long that Marilyn took over completely, because then she would only let her down in bed, as always.

The phone was still buzzing, unanswered. Which only went to prove that the prospect of temporary Marilyn converted into a permanent one was as unnerving for Mrs Simmonds as it was for her.

Because it wasn’t like Mrs Simmonds to ignore the phone.

‘Hadn’t you better see who it is?’ said Frances without turning from Marilyn’s reflection. The eerie fact about that little face was that it no longer belonged to a stranger, it was her face now. A week ago it had been an awful might-have-been; now it was a real face, on the way to becoming a should-have-been.

‘The way he looks at you—and not just him, either. I think you’re asking for trouble, young lady.’

‘I can look after myself.’ It’s looking *at* myself that frightens me, thought Frances.

‘I’ve heard that before.’ Mrs Simmonds reached for the phone. ‘All right, *all right!*’

She lifted the receiver. ‘British-American Computers—’ she began with uncharacteristic abruptness, then caught her breath and shifted into her secretarial purr ‘—Mr Henderson’s personal assistant, can-I-help-you?’

Frances put the compact back into her bag and picked up her desk diary.

‘No—’ said Mrs Simmonds in her severest voice, dropping the “sir”, ‘—no, it *isn’t*. I’m afraid you’ve been put through to the wrong extension.’

Miss Francis relaxed. It was her contact, deliberately asking for Mrs Simmonds’ number in order to establish himself as one of the string of Marilyn Francis’s boyfriends.

‘Is this a business call?’ Mrs Simmonds’ voice was like a carving knife.

Frances concentrated on the schedule. Cavendish was actually interviewing two R & D men at 10.30, presumably to brief himself on the sales pitch for the Saudi Arabians at 11.15 tomorrow. It would be advisable to double-check the booking at the Royal County Hotel, and the menu there too—

Pink, red, blonde, brazen, bra-less, but also efficient.

The opportunity for demonstrating the last in front of the R & D men was not to be missed. Perhaps she might even purchase some real coffee out of the petty cash for that 11.15 meeting: the Saudis would not know much about advanced guidance systems, but they would certainly know their coffee. .. And after that it would be an easy day, with consequent opportunities for further voyages of discovery and Marilyn-flaunting within the British-American labyrinth.

Contact was taking rather a long time, but judging from the grave and serious expression on Mrs Simmonds’ face he wasn’t actually being offensive.

‘Oh...’ Mrs Simmonds gave her a strange look. ‘Yes, of course I will ... It’s for you, dear—the switchboard is hopeless... Yes, of course I will, don’t worry. I’m putting you through now.’

She punched the extension numbers and then turned again to Marilyn, still wearing the serious expression.

‘It’s your father, dear.’

‘My *father?*’ Miss Francis did not have to simulate surprise. It was contact’s job to handle all routine communications up to and including Alerts. ‘Father’ himself would never intervene except in cases of emergency.

Emergency.

Frances grabbed her phone. ‘Dad? Is that you?’

‘Marilyn love?’

‘It’s me. Dad. What’s the matter?’

‘Marilyn love—’

The recognition sign was repetition.

‘It’s me, Dad. What’s the matter? Are you all right?’ For once the recognition jargon ran absolutely true.

Emergency.

‘It’s your mother, love—she’s been taken very bad. You must come home at once.’

‘What!’ Frances piled shock on surprise.

‘I’m sorry, love—springing this on you when you’ve just started your new job ... But she needs you, your mother does. We both need you. You must come home to look after her.’

Sod it! *Sod it—*

‘Home—?’ Frances caught her anger just in time and transformed it into concern.

‘Right now?’

‘Yes, love. Right this minute. The doctor’s coming again this afternoon, and you must be there for him.’

Frances looked at the clock. *Home—right this minute* was a categorical order which left no room for argument: after all the time and careful planning that had gone into Marilyn Francis, and just when things were shaping up nicely, they were pulling her out and aborting the operation.

‘Yes, Dad—of course. I’ll leave this minute.’

‘There’s a good girl. I knew you wouldn’t let your old dad down.’

Sod it! thought Frances again. Something had gone wrong somewhere, but it couldn’t be anything she’d done, or not done, because at this stage she’d done nothing except be Miss Marilyn Francis, and Miss Francis as yet hadn’t gone anywhere near Research and Development.

‘I’ll get the bus to Morden, Dad. I can get a tube from there.’

‘No need to, love. A friend of Tommy’s is coming down to collect you—young Mitch.

You’ve met him, when he was in the army. He’ll pick you up at that cafe where Tommy came the time, in about half an hour, say. Okay?’

‘Okay, Dad. Don’t worry. I’ll be there.’

‘Goodbye then, love.’

‘Goodbye, Dad.’

She replaced the receiver automatically and sat staring at it for a moment. She had wasted fortnight of her life as Marilyn, but now it was over and done with, and Marilyn was fading away, gaudy little flower who had blushed unseen and wasted her April Violets and Faberge Babe on Gary nose. It was enough to make her weep.

‘Are you all right, dear?’ asked Mrs Simmonds solicitously.

But there was no time for tears: Marilyn Francis could not die just yet. Or rather, she must die as she had lived.

‘Yes ... I’m okay.’

Mrs Simmonds reached across and patted her arm. ‘Of course you are, dear.’

So Control had already planted the information.

‘But my Mum’s very ill, my Dad says.’

‘Yes, I know. Your father told me.’ Mrs Simmonds nodded. ‘But you mustn’t worry.

There are these drugs they’ve got now ... and they’re finding new ones all the time, you know.’

Plainly, he had gone even further: in order to remove the daughter convincingly and quickly he had made the illness terminal. Nothing less than such a confidence could have turned Mrs Simmonds’ anger into sympathy.

But that was the last thing Marilyn Francis would have noticed at this moment, with a sick mother and an inadequate dad on her hands, and young Mitch to meet in half an hour.

She turned to Mrs Simmonds. ‘I’ve got to go and look after her—my Mum. My Dad’s dead, useless.’

Mrs Simmonds winced at the adjective, but managed to keep the Awful Truth secret.

‘Yes, dear—naturally.’

‘I mean, I’ve got to go right now.’ Miss Francis reached for her typewriter cover. ‘The doctor’s coming to see her this afternoon. So I haven’t time to see Mr Cavendish. Will you tell him?’

‘Of course I will. Don’t you worry about that.’ Mrs Simmonds frowned suddenly.

‘Are you all right for money ... to tide you over, I mean?’

‘Money?’ Frances realised suddenly that tomorrow was pay day.

Go directly home. Do not pass Go. Do not collect £58.55.

Mrs Simmonds reached for her bag. ‘I could let you have five pounds, dear.’

In the circumstances that was true sisterly generosity.

‘And I’ll phone up the Agency and tell them what’s happened,’ said Mrs Simmonds.

‘So don’t you worry about that either.’

It wasn’t sisterly generosity at all; the old bitch had decided that the instant departure of Marilyn was cheap at £5, especially when the chance of ordering a better class of girl from the Agency was included in the price.

Frances wondered whether Sir Frederick Clinton had a better class of female operative to hand off his books, complete with 140 words a minute Pitman’s.

But that was his problem now. More to the point, she wondered whether little Miss Marilyn Francis, painted and dyed, would have enough cash to tide her over at this stage of the week, and what she would do if she hadn’t, and her mum was very ill and she was having to throw up her job.

Poor little Marilyn!

Marilyn burst into tears.

CHAPTER 2

IN FACT, poor little Marilyn revenged herself twice over on Mrs Frances Fitzgibbon before Paul Mitchell arrived at the transport cafe, once in the person of an elderly lorry-driver who obviously feared that she was running away from home, and advised her against seeking her fortune in Central London, and the second time by a leather-jacketed youth of indeterminate age who obviously hoped she was running away from home, and offered to bear her to the bright lights on the back of his Kawasaki.

So she had been forced to re-animate Marilyn briefly, first to shake her head at the lorry-driver and then to send the Kawasaki owner about his business—

‘Bug off! I’m waiting for someone.’

‘Suit yourself, scrubber!’

* * *

‘You’re late.’ The lorry-driver’s concern and the youth’s knowing contempt combined with the strains of the morning to fray Frances’s nerves.

‘Christ! You look awful!’ Paul planted a kiss on her cheek before she could avoid him. ‘And what’s more—you smell awful too!’

‘And you’re still late. I thought there was an emergency of some sort?’

‘There is. But I’m not James Hunt—and if I was it wouldn’t have made any difference.

I’ve come all the way from Yorkshire this morning, non-stop except for the times the Police flagged me down for breaking the speed limit on the motorway—they should have sent a chopper for you, but all they had to spare was me. So get moving, Frances dear—’ Paul picked up her cup and finished off its contents ‘—Ugh! Because there are leagues to be covered ‘ere 14.30 hours.’

He held the door open for her. The lorry-driver frowned and the Kawasaki youth gave her a jeering look.

‘Where are we going?’

Paul pointed to the yellow Rover directly ahead of them. ‘Back to Yorkshire again double-quick, Jack Butler’s new car holds together so long. I would have preferred mine, but like you say—it’s an emergency.’

She waited until he had settled down into the traffic. ‘What’s the emergency in Yorkshire?’

‘Ah ... now there you’ve got me, sweetie. So far as I was concerned, everything was going according to plan. By now there’s probably total confusion, without Mitchell to put things right. But when I left everything was A-Okay.’

Frances thought for a moment. ‘You know they pulled me off a job?’

Mitchell shook his head and put his foot down.

‘Nope. Or, at least, I didn’t know you were working until I saw you just now ... and from our past acquaintance I’m assuming that you don’t normally spend your free time dressed like a two-bit dollbird. Not that it doesn’t suit you—’

‘Don’t be offensive.’

‘I wasn’t being offensive. I was just admiring the skilful way you have thrown yourself into your cover, whatever it may be, respectable Mrs Fitzgibbon. In fact, if I hadn’t known you, I wouldn’t have known you, if you see what I mean—even apart from the smell, that is.’

Frances took hold of her temper, recalling Paul’s technique of old. Once upon a time he had fancied his chances, and this was his juvenile response to being brushed off; but she must not let it blind her to the knowledge that he was clever and efficient, and ambitious with it.

The effort of exercising will-power was steady and soothing. They hadn’t pulled her out of British-American because anything had gone wrong there, but because something more important had come up elsewhere. And, by the same logic, they wouldn’t have wasted Paul on a chauffeur’s job without good reason when he was involved in that same more important something.

‘Are you supposed to be briefing me—is that the idea, Paul?’

He grinned at her. ‘Good on you, Frances! That’s Jack Butler’s idea exactly.’

‘Colonel Butler?’

‘*Colonel* Butler as ever is, yes. Fighting Jack, no less—the Thin Red Line in person.’

‘He asked for me?’ Frances frowned at the road ahead. She knew Colonel Butler by sight, and a little by reputation, but had never worked under him.

‘No-o-o. Fighting Jack did not ask for you.’ This time he grinned privately. ‘Not for this little lark he wouldn’t.’

‘What lark?’

‘What lark...’ Paul tailed off as he waited to leave the slip-road for the motorway proper. The Rover coasted for a moment, then surged forward across the slow and fast lanes straight into the overtaking one. Frances watched the needle build up far beyond the speed limit.

‘What lark.’ Paul settled back comfortably. ‘I take it you’ve heard of O’Leary, Frances?’

‘Michael O’Leary?’

‘The one and only. Ireland’s answer to Carlos the Jackal.’

‘The Irish Freedom Fighters, you mean?’

‘Sure and begorrah, I do. De Oirish Fraydom Foighfers—yes.’

Frances swallowed. ‘But I’m not cleared for Irish assignments, even in England.’

Paul nodded. ‘So I gather. But apparently there’s a Papal dispensation in the case of Michael O’Leary and his boyos. And on the very best of grounds, too, I’m telling you, to be sure.’

‘On what grounds?’

There was a Jaguar ahead hogging the overtaking lane—far ahead a moment ago, but not far ahead now. Paul flashed his lights fiercely.

‘Get over, you bastard! Make way for Her Majesty’s Servants, by God!’ Paul murmured. ‘You’re breaking the bloody law, that’s what you’re doing.’

The Jaguar moved over, and flashed back angrily as they swept past him.

‘On what grounds? ... Well, for a guess, on the grounds that O’Leary is about as Irish as—say—the Russian ambassador in Dublin. Or if, by any remote chance, there is a drop or two of the old Emerald Isle stuff in his veins ... then because he’s not really concerned with foightin’ fer Oirish fraydom—a guess, quite the reverse, if you take my point.’

Frances took his point. It was what her poor romantic Robbie had always maintained, she recalled with a dull ache of memory: to him the Irish had always been more victims than villains, even the psychos whom he hunted, and who had hunted him—hog-tied by ancient history which was no longer relevant, financed by Irish Americans who had no idea what was really happening to their dollars, but ultimately manipulated by some of the very best trained KGB cover-men in the business. It didn’t help the ache to recall that she hadn’t believed him, because he found Reds under every bed; though at least she hadn’t argued with him, because it helped him to fight more in sorrow than in anger, even after three beastly tours of duty; she’d even been oddly relieved, that last time, to learn that they hadn’t been responsible, his victims—at least not directly—for what had happened to him.

‘It’s not surprising, really,’ mused Paul, taking it for granted that she had taken his point. ‘Whenever there’s trouble in Ireland, someone else has to cash in—you can’t blame the buggers. The Spaniards did, and then the French, and the Germans. The KGB’s only bowing to history.’

Frances thrust Robbie back into his filing cabinet in the furthest corner of her memory, where he belonged. ‘We know that for sure?’

‘Not for sure. Nothing Irish is for sure. But it was the IRA that told us.’

Frances waited. Because she wasn't cleared for Ireland she didn't know much about the tangle of Irish security beyond what she had read in the weekly sheets in the department in her secretarial days when she had had to type them out. But even those days the IFF had amounted to little more than an abbreviation for Michael O'Leary's expertise with the booby-trap and the high-velocity rifle.

'They don't quite know what to make of O'Leary. They smell sulphur, if not Vodka—though Vodka doesn't smell, does it! Say caviare, then...' He nodded to himself, watching the road. 'They've been prepared to take the credit for his hits—in Ulster.'

'But now he's come to England?'

'That's right. "To take the war into the enemy country", as he puts it. We think *they* think he may make the war a bit too hot for them—so they've dropped us the word.

Only they don't know where he is, and nor do we.'

'He's pretty elusive, then.'

'The Scarlet Pimpernel's got nothing on Michael O'Leary. But we do rather think he's using some of the KGB ultra-safe houses in Yorkshire, as a matter of fact. Just a hint we've picked up.'

Back to Yorkshire double-quick.

Frances nodded. 'And just what is his war, exactly?'

'Ah ... well, you see he's got a little list. Of Criminals Sentenced by Military Tribunal for Crimes Against Ireland, as he calls it.'

'But that's old hat.'

'Sure it is. So everything in Ireland is old hat—it's all just a re-run of the same old late-night film we've seen half a dozen times before. Only this time maybe the KGB has bought the natural breaks to advertise their product.'

And that did make a difference, thought Frances grimly. It might even change the end of the film itself.

'I see. And the top name on the list is to be found in Yorkshire, presumably—is that it?'

'Yes ... and no—' Paul stopped as he glanced in his mirror.

'What does that mean—yes or no?'

'It means ... hold on to your seat-belt, Frances dear. We are about to be flagged down by the Police—' Paul gave her a quick reassuring smile as he decelerated and began to pull across the lanes toward the hard shoulder '—but nothing to worry about.'

The car crunched on loose gravel. The silence inside it was suddenly unnerving, punctuated as it was by the intermittent roar and shock-wave of passing lorries labouring their way to the industrial

north. Frances watched the sleek police car pull in just ahead of them, a Rover identical to their own except that it was white and ornamented with a dashing blue-red-blue stripe along its flank.

A tall young constable got out cautiously and came back to them. Paul wound down his window and fumbled inside his jacket.

The policeman bent down and peered in at them. Frances saw his eyes widen and was instantly aware that Marilyn's split skirt had divided to an indecent level.

'Paul Mitchell,' said Paul, opening his identification folder. 'And I'm in an official hurry. Please check with your superiors as quickly as you can.'

The young policeman's eyes glazed over with the effort of not looking at what they were looking at, and then switched to Paul's identification.

'Mr Mitchell—yes, sir.' The young policeman swallowed bravely. 'We have been informed about you—'

A derisive hoot cut him off: the Jaguar they had elbowed out of the road flashed by triumphantly.

'If you would be so good as to follow us, we'll clear the way for you, sir. There's a hold-up about six miles ahead ... we'll get you past it.'

'Thank you very much, officer.' Paul's politeness to the Civil Power was impeccably according to the regulations. 'We've a scheduled stop just beyond Wetherby, at the Crossways Motel. We shall be there for fifteen minutes. If you can give us ten miles after that it will be sufficient, thank you.'

'Very good, sir.' The policeman saluted. 'Just follow us.'

Paul turned to Frances. 'Well, at least the system is working now. I was supposed to be cleared the way down, but I nearly got arrested for reckless driving instead.' He glanced down. 'And if I'd had you with me I probably *would* have been arrested—the view isn't conducive to careful driving. Not that it isn't enchanting also ... though I thought suspender belts were strictly for the kinky trade.'

'Keep your eyes on the road.'

'Pull your skirt together and I'll try to.'

Frances draped her plastic raincoat across her knees. 'You said "yes and no".'

'Eh?'

'The top name on the list.'

'Oh, yes ... in Yorkshire. Well, it isn't normally, but it is today.'

'Is where?'

'At the University of North Yorkshire, for the conferring of honorary degrees and the opening of the new English Faculty Library.'

‘You mean ... he’s receiving a degree?’

‘That’s right. A Doctorate of Civil Law, to be exact. For trying to make peace in Ireland, doctorate in England ... and a death sentence in Ireland. He shouldn’t have tried so hard.’

‘The Minister?’

‘Ex-minister ... no, the Minister, that’s right. It’s the ex-minister who’s conferring the degree—he’s the Chancellor of the University now. He tried hard too, so he’s also on the list. A damn unforgiving lot, the IFF, putting him on the list is purely vindictive if you ask me. And the IRA’s no much better—I can’t help thinking that they leaked this to us in the first place just to screw us up knots.’ Paul shook his head. ‘Which, of course, is what it’s doing.’

He shook his head again, and Frances observed him with a mounting sense of disquiet. This wasn’t the cool analysis that accompanied proper security, it was more like an acceptance of the inevitable—the sort of fatalism she imagined soldiers in the very front line must have on the eve of an enemy offensive.

But if that was so then the doubling of the targets didn’t make sense.

‘But Paul—d’you mean to say we’ve let two people on the list get together in the same place?’

‘Three, actually.’

‘*Three?*’ Frances heard her voice rise. ‘You’re joking!’

‘No.’ Paul appeared to concentrate on the police car ahead. ‘The Lord-Lieutenant will be there, and he was General Officer Commanding in Ulster a few years back. Now he’s one of the top advisers to the Minister’s opposite number on the shadow cabinet—which puts him right at the head of the list alongside the Minister himself in fact. Because he’s a smart fellow.’

Frances found herself staring in the same direction, at the flashing hazard lights of the police car as they overtook a clot of traffic which had formed behind two juggernaut lorries racing each other up the motorway. With Michael O’Leary on the loose it was nothing short of insanity to assemble three prime targets on one spot; or, at least, on one spot away from the maximum security zone of Westminster and Whitehall where such assemblies were acceptable.

‘I know what you’re thinking,’ said Paul.

But Frances was by no means sure what she was thinking. There was obviously some sort of emergency, no matter what Paul had said to the contrary. It was difficult not to jump to the conclusion that it was directly related to the insanity—the irresistible bait which some fool had dangled in front of O’Leary. Perhaps they were panicking now because they’d only just realised what they’d done.

‘Huh!’ She simulated contempt. If Paul thought he knew what she was thinking she had to encourage him to think aloud.

He gave a quick nod. ‘That’s the way I feel, exactly. But then I thought—North Atlantic, ‘43-‘44—U-boats versus escorts—same problem, same answer.’

‘North Atlantic—?’ Frances caught herself just in time. Not so very long before Paul Mitchell had been a budding young military historian, and one hangover from that lost career was his irritating habit of trying to reduce every situation to some obscure military analogy which could then be solved by the application of Clausewitz or Liddell-Heart. But this time, instead of deriding his theories, she could use them to establish what was really going on.

‘I don’t see how the North Atlantic comes into things, Paul. Enlighten me.’

‘It’s simple. The Atlantic is very big and a U-boat is very small.’

‘And it spends most of its time underwater anyway.’

He looked at her quickly. ‘You’ve got the point?’ He sounded a little disappointed.

‘No. But I thought that was how submarines behaved. Go on.’

‘An ...’ He brightened. ‘So of course they’re awfully difficult to find, unless you’re lucky.’

‘I thought we had radar for that.’

‘Don’t complicate matters. That isn’t the point.’

‘Sorry.’ Frances curbed her impatience.

‘The point is that you don’t have to find a submarine. Because if it’s any good it’s going to find you—you being a convoy.’ Again he glanced at her quickly. ‘And don’t start telling me it’s the convoy’s job to avoid the U-boat, I know that. I’m simplifying things, that’s all.’ He turned back to the road. ‘There’s no avoiding O’Leary, anyway.’

‘I see. So O’Leary’s a U-boat, and we’re the convoy escorts—and we just sit around and wait for him to turn up?’ Frances frowned at the banality of the image. ‘That doesn’t seem very profound either as a metaphor or as a piece of naval tactics.’

‘Uh-huh? Well, that’s where you’re wrong ... In fact, it’s a typical armchair critic’s mistake. Everything’s simple when you know how to do it.’

His patronising tone galled Frances. ‘Well, I don’t pretend to be an expert on naval tactics, Paul.’

‘You don’t have to be. It’s just elementary geometry: double the size of the convoy and you don’t double its circumference—it took the admiralty years to discover that allegedly simple fact.’

‘So what?’

He gave her a pitying look. ‘So you haven’t actually doubled the size of the target.’

But you have doubled the number of escorts... We’ve trebled the target on the university campus this afternoon—but as they’re in the same place we can concentrate three times as many counter-

terrorism experts in the same place. The mathematics are more favourable for guarding human beings than they are for ships, so we can put more than half our people on the look-out for O'Leary. They're the equivalent of what the Navy used to call "hunter-killer groups" attached to the convoys—instead of just guarding the bloody targets for once we've actually got the manpower to hunt the bastard as soon as he comes in range.'

'Always supposing that he chooses to oblige you by turning up.'

This time it was a half-grin.

'Oh—he's coming right enough.'

Frances started to add up the facts. If Paul was so sure that an attempt was going to be made there was inside information, and it would probably have come from the IRA itself ... And it was undeniably true that there was always a chronic shortage of skilled manpower—and womanpower—because so much of it was needed for protection of high-risk targets that there was always too little left over to do the better job of eliminating the risk; that was the penalty which inflation imposed on internal security and law enforcement alike along with the stresses it inflicted on the mortgage repayments and the groceries bill. So there was a certain logic in the analogy of Paul's 'big convoy' theory, she could see that.

But it was also an appallingly cold-blooded logic, because for all his high-flown naval history in reality they were doing no more than set an old-fashioned domestic mouse-trap, with three human beings as the piece of cheese.

'You're deliberately using them for bait, for God's sake!'

'Oh no we're not, Frances dear.' Paul shook his head decisively. 'The Chancellor wanted to give the Minister his degree, it wasn't our idea. And the Minister wanted to come—and the Lord Lieutenant wanted to be there to talk to them both about the latest Government initiative in Ulster. We didn't set them up.' He shook his head again. 'The security hazards were pointed out to them too—in writing. I saw the departmental minute myself.'

There was a lump of ice in Frances's stomach: that was the absolute give-away, the written warning which the top security bureaucrats issued to protect themselves when they weren't sure they could protect anyone else. She could protest now until she was blue in the face that the ceremony should have been delayed, if not vetoed altogether, but it wouldn't do any good. What was more, Paul knew it, and had known it from the start.

This was the moment, ordinarily, when she might have been tempted to a small controlled explosion of anger, which Paul would shrug off as a piece of feminine temperament, male chauvinist pig that he always pretended to be in her presence. But she did not wish to give him that satisfaction and besides, the lump of ice had a decidedly cooling effect on her responses.

‘I see. So everything in the garden’s lovely.’

‘As much as it ever can be. At least we’ve got enough men and equipment for once, so we won’t fail for lack of resources.’

Resignation again. Basically, Paul Mitchell was quite a cold fish under the boyish charm.

‘And yet I’m required as a reinforcement? Doesn’t that strike you as odd?’

He shrugged and grinned. ‘The more, the merrier. Not that Fighting Jack is exactly merry at the moment. In fact, he’s decidedly feisty at the moment, is our Jack.’

‘Colonel Butler’s in charge?’ Frances had never operated under Colonel Butler’s direction, and when she tried to conjure him up in her mind’s eye all she could manage was the memory of two other men with very blue eyes registering disapproval. Either the Colonel didn’t approve of young women in general or (since he could hardly disapprove of her personally) he objected to women in this type of work in particular; neither of which conclusions suggested that he would welcome Mrs Fitzgibbon with open arms as a reinforcement.

She realised that Paul had nodded to the question.

‘But he’s not satisfied with things?’ That would be an understatement, I suspect.’

‘What things?’ Frances remembered also that the formidable Dr Audley, who was one of the department’s heavyweights, had a high opinion of Colonel Butler; and a choice between David Audley’s opinion and Paul Mitchell’s was no choice at all.

‘Oh, he doesn’t say—not in front of the hired help. Fighting Jack’s a bit old-fashioned that was all. Not quite “Damn your impertinence—do your duty, sir”, but near enough.’

‘He sounds rather admirable. A pleasant change, even,’ said Frances tartly.

Paul thought about the Colonel for a moment. ‘The funny thing is ... that he *is* rather admirable in many ways. He’s got all the old pre-1914 virtues, you might say. Like ... he’d never pass the buck to anyone else, it wouldn’t even occur to him. And he’ll ball you out to your face, and then defend you behind your back—real officer-and-gentleman stuff.’ He smiled at her. ‘Except I suspect he wasn’t born to it.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘Well, there’s the faintest touch of broad Lancashire under his Sandhurst accent I rather think. Not quite out of the top drawer, is our Jack.’

Frances grimaced at him. ‘I never knew you were a snob, Paul.’

‘I’m not. Nothing wrong with dropping your aitches—Field Marshal Robertson ‘adn’t got a “haitch” in ‘is vocabulary, and ‘e was none the worse for it. It’s the same with Fighting Jack, excep

that he's learnt the language better. But he does seem to be playing a part.'

'Aren't we all?' Frances looked down at Marilyn's platform shoes on her feet. Against all her expectations she'd found them easy to wear. Indeed, when she thought about it, she'd found everything about Marilyn disconcertingly easy, almost disturbingly easy.

'Oh, I know. "All the world's a stage" and all that. But just a minute or two back you were disapproving of this university lark of ours, and it's my belief that Fighting Jack feels the same way. Only the difference is that if he'd got really bolshie about it he might have scuppered the operation. Paul kept his eyes on the road ahead, but he was no longer smiling, Frances noted. 'But he didn't,' he concluded grimly. 'He didn't.'

This was the true face concealed behind the front line fatalism and the naval tactics, though Frances. With Colonel Butler playing a 1914 Colonel, Paul had naturally chosen a 1914 subaltern as his model. Yet beneath the role the real Paul didn't like the situation one bit either.

'Why didn't he?'

He shrugged. 'I suppose ... because his idea of Colonel Butler is of someone who obeys and gets on with the dirty jobs that other lesser breeds and bloody desk-wallahs wouldn't touch with a barge-pole. Which is a noble thought, but maybe not really what the late 1970s require.' As though he'd suddenly realised that he was giving himself away he glanced quickly at her and grinned his subaltern's grin at her. 'So instead he just exudes disgust and disapproval at the world, and bites my head off every time I open my mouth. I suppose I'm just not his type, really.'

If she'd ever had a chance of asking the real Paul what in particular scared him about the operation other than the actual prospect of encountering Comrade O'Leary round some unexpected corner, she'd lost it now, realised Frances irritably. At the best of times he disliked admitting human weaknesses and he certainly wasn't going to do so this time.

'But then neither are you, Frances dear.' The grin broadened. 'So it didn't exactly cheer him this morning when they told him you were coming, believe me...' He trailed off.

Whereas now... thought Frances, contemplating the plastic mac and the platform shoes... where now he'd probably burst a blood-vessel at the sight of her. The memory of the Colonel's reaction to her proper mousey self, casually encountered in the corridor, was vivid enough. She blanched at the prospect of his reaction to Marilyn.

'I can't possibly turn up like this at the University,' she snapped.

'Very true,' agreed Paul. 'Not that there aren't some proper little dollies among the students, and you could still pass for one, believe me, with your looks ... Except we're not infiltrating the delectable student body on this one—so your station this afternoon is inside the new Library, and that's out of

bounds to students today. Which means we've got to do a quick respectability job on you at the Crossways Motel—a de-tarting process, one might call it in the circumstances.'

'What d'you mean?' The prospect of another cover identity alarmed Frances. Covers were not to be taken lightly, they required detailed and careful preparation. Even Marilyn, who had been a rush job, had been allowed a week's cramming.

'Oh, nothing elaborate,' Paul reassured her. 'Nothing you can't do with your eyes closed. And they've supplied me with a suitcase full of your own clothes—I picked it up twenty minutes before I picked you up. You'll be playing yourself, near enough.'

They had been to the cottage, thought Frances. Some stranger had gone to her wardrobe and the bottom old chest-of-drawers, and the dressing table, and had sifted through her belongings, choosing her own personal things. She shivered involuntarily at the thought.

You'll be playing yourself, near enough.

There was something creepy about that, too. After the last three years that was a role she was no longer sure she wanted to play ever again, always supposing she could recall the character and the lines clearly.

'You can wash that muck off your face at the motel,' went on Paul. 'We can't do anything about that ghastly hair-do except put a wig on it—there'll be a selection waiting at the motel by now. There isn't time to do anything else, but you'll be wearing an academic cap anyway—and a gown, because it's full academic battle-dress this afternoon. Perhaps a pair of spectacles to make you look a bit more scholarly, instead of your contact lenses. Then you'll pass all right.'

'Pass for what?'

'Post-graduate research fellow. There are a couple of dozen new ones in the English faculty, and a term's only just started they hardly know each other—and you are an English graduate yourself, Frances, aren't you? Bristol, was it? Or Durham?' Paul's Cambridge superiority surfaced momentarily. 'You should be able to speak the language.'

'That was seven years ago.' Frances ignored the gibe.

'So long? Well, your supervisor will vouch for you—Professor Crowe. He has full clearance and knows the score.' Paul gave her another reassuring look. 'Don't worry, Frances. All you're doing really is releasing one of Fighting Jack's blue-eyed boys for a more sensitive job. We're not expecting any trouble in the library.'

Famous last words, thought Frances. Apart from being male chauvinist pig patronising words. Obviously Colonel Butler and Paul Mitchell had mentally relegated her to *Kirche, Kinder* and *Kuchel* as being sexually equipped for nothing else.

But she would not give him the satisfaction of observing her anger. Not so long as there was chance of catching him out.

‘I see ... And might an English post-graduate research fellow know what she is supposed to be researching? That’s the first thing she’ll get asked.’

Paul nodded. ‘Ah... now as it happens I had a hand in that little detail, as I’ve been a research fellow myself in my time, you see.’

There was nothing more insufferably pompous than an insufferably pompous young ex-Cambridge male pig, decided Frances.

‘Indeed? And your research included me, did it?’

‘Let’s say, I know where your special interest lies in literature. That one time you invited me down to that little cottage of yours I took a look at your bookshelves, Frances.’

‘My—bookshelves?’

‘That’s right. You can tell a lot about a person by the books on their shelves. Their books don’t lie about them.’

‘But—’ The words dried up on Frances’s tongue.

‘You’ve got all the books I’d expect an English graduate to have—Chaucer to Hemingway, by way of Fielding and Hardy. And the usual spread of poetry.’ He paused. ‘But you’ve also got three full shelves of folk-lore and fairy stories ... *La Belle au Bois Dormant* in the original French, and a nineteenth-century German copy of *Domroschen*... right down to *The Lord of the Rings* and a first edition of *The Hobbit*. All well-thumbed and dust-free—a dead give-away.’

All well-thumbed and dust-free. Frances stared at him helplessly.

Of course they were well-thumbed and dust-free. Dusting Robbie’s favourite books was one of her compulsive habits. Once she’d decided not to throw them out it had seemed obscene to let them gather dust.

He took her silence for speechless admiration, or something like. ‘So all I did was to tell Professor Crowe about your collection, and he jumped at the idea. By now he’ll have put it around that the title of your thesis is “The Land of Faerie: From Spenser to Tolkien”. He’s putting in Tolkien because with *The Silmarillion* just out, and the Carpenter biography, Tolkien-lore will be all the rage.’

She had read *The Lord of the Rings*, all three volumes of it, because Robbie had adored it, and was always quoting from it. Its awful poetry apart, it had seemed to her an absolutely marvellous adventure story for romantically-inclined 14-year-olds. But since Robbie had been a 24-year-old SA lieutenant she had never said so aloud for fear of offending him. And if Professor Crowe thought otherwise perhaps Robbie had been right and she had been wrong, in this as in other matters.

Paul looked at her expectantly, with just the faintest touch of innocence waiting for approbation. But she couldn't think of anything to say. She had seen that look on Robbie's face.

He turned back to the road in disappointment. A big sign bearing the legend 'The North' flashed by.

'Well ... I thought you could probably have a ball in the new Library, talking Tolkien, while Fighting Jack and I sweated on the outside—that's all.' He sniffed.

Frances swallowed. 'Yes, I'm sure I shall, Paul.'

'That's the ticket.' He grinned at her, quickly reassured that he'd been right all the time. 'You can be our Sleeping Princess in the Library, and I shall come and wake you with a kiss when we've killed the wicked O'Leary.'

CHAPTER 3

THERE WAS more than one faerie kingdom, Frances decided nervously as she followed Professor Crow up the main staircase of the new English Library: hardly ten minutes before, she had left Colonel Butler in one such kingdom of magic and illusion, and she had been profoundly sorry for him; now she herself was entering another, and she would need all her wits about her to play her part in it.

* * *

‘Frankly, Mrs Fitzgibbon, I don’t know why you are here.’

To which she had wanted for a moment to reply *Well, that makes two of us. Colonel*, except the way he had said it had somehow suggested to her that he really wished they were both somewhere else, and that had been the beginning of sympathy.

Or perhaps the sympathy had already germinated as she passed through the banks of chattering and flickering surveillance equipment which had been established on the top floor of the half-occupied Science Tower of the new—or fairly new—University of North Yorkshire, and which reminded her of nothing so much as a television studio girding itself to provide live coverage of a Third World War.

In the midst of which sat Colonel Butler.

He wasn’t exactly brooding over it all, if anything he seemed to have its operators rather well under his control, from what Frances could observe. But his face, as he glanced past her at them from time to time, bore the same expression of heavily-censored contempt which she had noticed on the face of the American air force general who had once lectured her on the development of one-way remotely controlled pilotless vehicles (he, who had three times brought back a damaged Phantom from the Hanoi bridges) and the psychological hang-ups of the ‘pilots’ who ‘flew’ the RPVs from the depths of their concrete bunkers (‘Those goddamn pinball wizards get to like being briefed by computers...’).

* * *

‘But since you are here I’m putting you into the library, to take James Cable’s place.’

No, it wasn’t quite contempt. (She had studied the Colonel’s face carefully. All the features which had gone to make Charlton Heston a box office idol—the forehead, and the bone structure of cheek and jaw, and the artfully broken nose—added up on his face to ugliness, like a miss that was as good as a mile; yet, at the same time, it was an oddly reassuring ugliness, without any hint of cruelty or brutality.) Not contempt, but rather resigned acceptance of another inevitable change for the worse. S

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