

THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE EAGLE HAS LANDED*

JACK HIGGINS



A SEASON IN HELL



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Jack Higgins



For Shirley Cooper

'Revenge is a season in Hell'

—Sicilian proverb

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Just after four, as first light started to seep through the bamboo slats above his head, it rained again slowly at first, developing into a solid drenching downpour from which there was no escape.

Sean Egan crouched in a corner, arms folded, hands tucked into his armpits to conserve as much body heat as possible, not that there was much left after four days. The pit was four feet square so that it was impossible to lie down even if he'd wanted to. He remembered reading somewhere that gorillas were the only animals who lay in their own ordure and didn't mind. He hadn't reached that stage yet although he'd long since got used to the stench.

His feet were bare, but they'd left him with his camouflage jump jacket and pants. A khaki-green sweatband was wound around his head like a turban, desert style. Beneath it the face was gaunt, skin stretched tightly over prominent cheekbones. The eyes were china blue and without expression as he waited, rain drifting down through the bamboo slats twelve feet above. The clay walls were wet with mud and occasionally clods of earth broke free from the sides and fell into the bottom water, already three or four inches deep.

He waited, indifferent to all this, and finally heard the sound of footsteps, someone whistling flatly through the rain. The man above wore a camouflage uniform similar to his own, but slightly different—the Afghanistan pattern developed by the Russian Army for use during the occupation of that country. A sergeant, according to the rank badges on his collar tabs. Above the peak of his cap was the red star of the Soviet Army and the insignia of the 81st Regiment of Assault Paratroops.

Egan recognized all these things because it was his business. He looked up and waited in silence. The sergeant carried an AK assault rifle in one hand, an army-ration can in the other, a length of twine tied to the can.

“Still with us?” he called cheerfully in English, resting the AK beside him. “It must be wet down there?” Egan said nothing. He simply sat, waiting. “And still not talking? Ah, well, you will, my friend. They always do in the end.” The sergeant lowered the ration can through the slats. “Breakfast. Only coffee this morning, but then we don't want to build up your strength.”

Egan took the can and opened it. It was coffee, steaming in the damp air, surprisingly hot. He fought the wave of nausea—even the smell of coffee made him feel sick. To drink it was an impossibility, as his captors well knew.

The sergeant laughed. “But of course, you only drink tea. What a pity.” He unbuttoned his pants and urinated down through the slats. “What about a change?”

There was no way to avoid it. Egan stayed there, squatting in the corner, staring up, still not speaking.

The sergeant picked up the AK. “Five minutes and I'll be back, and I'll expect a nice clean can. Be a good boy and drink it up or I might have to punish you.”

He walked away and still Egan waited, an intent expression on his face. When the sound of the sergeant's footsteps had faded, he stood up. Five minutes. His only chance. He ripped the khaki sweatband from his head and it was immediately obvious that only the section visible to the eye was still whole; the rest had been torn into strips during the night, each one carefully plaited, the whole joined together in a crude rope.

He quickly fastened it under his arms and passed a loop around his neck, placing the loose end in his teeth. He braced his back against one wall of the pit and his feet against the other, working his way up until he could reach out and touch the bamboo slats. He took the tail of the rope from between his

teeth and passed it around two of the slats, tying it securely.

Silence, only the rain falling. He was aware of the sergeant's approach from a long way off. He waited, letting the seconds pass, then kicked his feet away from the wall and dropped, at the same time crying out.

The bamboo dipped above his head, his body bounced and swung. He turned his head to one side so that the line of the rope was visible across his neck and half-closed his eyes, the rope cutting under his arms as it supported his weight.

He knew the sergeant was above him now, heard the man's cry of dismay as he knelt, pulling a combat knife from his boot, reaching through the slats to sever the rope. Egan let himself fall hard, bouncing against the wall and collapsing in a heap in the water and filth below. He lay there, waiting, aware of the slats being pulled back above, the bamboo ladder being lowered.

The sergeant came down quickly and crouched. "You stupid bastard!" he said turning him over.

Egan's two hands came in from each side, perfectly pointed in a phoenix fist, center knuckles extended, targeting the neck below each ear. The sergeant never had time to cry out. A slight groan, his eyes rolled, and he was immediately unconscious.

Egan had the man's jump boots off in moments, pulled them on and fastened them quickly. Then he crammed the camouflage cap with the red star down low over his eyes and went up the ladder cautiously.

The clearing was deserted. There was a drift of smoke above the trees which would be the house, he knew that from his first interrogation. Down through the woods was the river, perhaps a quarter of a mile. Once across and he was safe, clear through to the mountains beyond. He picked up the AK and looked out across the wood at their snow-capped peaks, then started down through the trees.

There was a trip wire within fifty yards which he carefully negotiated, another a few feet farther on so close that they'd calculated it would not be expected. Egan stepped over it and moved through the waist-high bracken soaked with rain.

Getting out wasn't enough. Staying out was the hard part—an old SAS maxim that rang in his head as the trees on his right exploded. Not a land mine. If it had been he'd be lying in pieces. More like an alarm charge triggered by an electronic eye beam at ground level. All this was amply confirmed when a hooter echoed mournfully through the trees from the direction of the farmhouse.

He tightened his grip on the AK, holding it across his chest, and raced through the bracken.

He sensed movement on his left, and a figure in camouflage battle dress came out of the trees, heading down, to meet him. As they converged, Egan swerved, dropping to one knee, the other leg stretched out. The man tripped and Egan came up, kicked him in the side of the head and ran.

There was pain in his left knee, but, if anything, it sharpened him, and he kept on going, faster. As the hillside steepened, the bracken almost jungle high here. He burst out into a small clearing as three more soldiers came out of the trees on the other side.

He went in on the run, never hesitating, loosing off a burst from the AK; swinging the butt in on one man's face, shouldering another man aside, he carried on through the trees, very fast, too fast, losing his balance.

He picked himself up and started forward. The sound of a helicopter was somewhere close at hand but the weather was on his side and the bird wouldn't dare to come too low. Through a break in the trees he could see the river, half-obscured by mist and rain.

There was a tightness in his chest and the pain in his left knee was like fire, but he kept on going, sliding farther down the steep bank that brought him at last to the river. As he picked himself up, someone leaped from the bracken and drove the butt of a rifle into his kidneys.

Egan arched backward in pain, and the rifle came around in a second, braced against his throat. He dropped his AK and ran the heel of his right boot down the man's shin. There was a cry, and as the pressure of the rifle was released, Egan jerked his head back, hard into the face behind, following through with a short, savage blow with his left elbow.

As he turned, the knee let him down finally, the leg collapsing under him as the soldier, his face a mask of blood from the broken nose, raised his own knee into Egan's face, throwing him on his back. He moved in, foot raised to stamp. Egan got his hands on it and twisted, hurling the man to one side. As he tried to rise, Egan, already up on his good knee, delivered a devastating blow under the ribs. The soldier groaned and fell back.

The helicopter was not far away now; closer still was the sound of men's voices and the barking of dogs. Egan picked up the AK and limped to the river's edge. The mist was heavy here so that it was impossible to see the other side. Water rushed by, brown and flecked with foam, swollen by the rain. The current was fast, too fast for even the strongest swimmer, so cold that survival time would be minimal.

He moved farther along the bank. Here the flood waters had risen several feet, and a tree floated, its branches caught in a bush. Recognizing his one chance for survival, he jumped into the water, the voices very close now, and flailed toward the tree. He pushed hard. For a moment, it refused to move and then quite suddenly it was free, torn out by the current. The AK went as he grabbed for the security of the branches. Men on the bank now, dogs barking. A burst of firing, and then he was out in the mid-channel, cloaked by a curtain of mist and rain.

It was cold, colder than anything he had known in his life before, numbing the senses. The cold had even taken care of the pain in his knee. The current seemed slacker now, and he drifted more slowly, cocooned in the mist. The helicopter made a couple of passes overhead, but not low enough to cause him any trouble. After a while, it moved away.

It was very quiet, only the ripple of the water, the hiss of the falling rain. His final chance, and now long to take it, with the cold eating into his bones like acid. He started to kick hard, still hanging on to the tree, pushing for the other side.

It was exhausting work, but he kept at it, aware of his own heavy breathing and then something else. A dull, muted rumbling behind him. As he turned to glance over his shoulder, a motorboat nosed out of the mist and nudged into the branches of the tree.

Half a dozen soldiers were aboard but only one stood out—the officer who leaned over the rail to look down at him. He was in his early thirties, young to be a lieutenant colonel, of medium height with dark, watchful eyes and black hair that was far too long by any kind of army's standards. At some time his nose had been broken. Just now he wore a camouflage jump jacket and a beige beret with the officer's version of the SAS cap badge, silver wire wings with the regimental motto, "Who dare win," all outlined in red on a blue background. He reached strong arms into the water to haul Egan out.

"Colonel Villiers," Egan said weakly. "Didn't expect to see you here."

"I'm your control officer on this one, Sean," Villiers told him.

"Seems like I've cocked it up," Egan said.

Villiers smiled with considerable charm. "Actually, I think you were bloody marvelous. Now, let me get you out of here."

The 22nd Regiment Special Air Service is probably the most elite unit of any army in the world, its members all volunteers. Its selection procedure is so rigorous that it is not uncommon for only 1

percent of applicants to succeed. The ultimate test is the endurance march of forty-five miles twenty hours, carrying eighty pounds of equipment over the Brecon Beacons in Wales, some of the roughest terrain in Britain—a course which has quite literally killed men attempting it.

Standing at the window of the farmhouse looking out across the trees as rain swept in across the river Wye, Tony Villiers thought of the man who had just come within inches of destruction. “My God, it really is a bloody awful place in weather like this.”

The young officer sitting at the desk behind him smiled. The name on his desk said Captain Daniel Warden and he was in charge of the proving-ground courses in the Brecons. He and Villiers shared another distinction besides being serving officers in the SAS. Both were also Grenadier Guardsmen.

He opened the file in front of him. “I’ve got Egan’s record here from the computer, sir. Really quite outstanding. Military Medal for gallantry in the field in Ireland, reasons unspecified.”

“I know about that,” Villiers told him. “He was working with me at the time. Undercover. South Armagh.”

“Distinguished Conduct Medal in the Falklands. Badly wounded. Eight months’ hospitalization. Left knee plastic and stainless steel or what have you. Speaks French, Italian and Irish. That’s a nice one.”

“His father was Irish,” Villiers said.

“Another interesting point. He went to quite a reasonable public school,” Warden added. “Dulwich College.”

Like Villiers, he was an Old Etonian, and the colonel said, “Don’t be a snob, Daniel. A very good school. Good enough for Raymond Chandler.”

“Really, sir? I never knew that. Thought he was an American.”

“He was, you idiot.” Villiers crossed to the desk, helped himself to tea from a china pot and sat on the window seat. “Let me give it to you, chapter and verse, on Sean Egan, all Group Four information and most of it very definitely not on your computer. A lot of remarkable things about our Sean. To start with, he has a rather unusual uncle. Maybe you’ve heard of him? One Jack Shelley?”

Warden frowned. “The gangster?”

“A long time ago. In the good, bad old days he was as important as the Kray brothers and the Richardson gang. Very well liked in the East End of London. The people’s hero. Robin Hood in a Jaguar. Made his money from gambling and protection, night clubs and so on. Nothing nasty like drugs or prostitution. And he was clever. Too clever to end up serving life like the Krays. When he discovered he could make just as much money legitimately he moved into a different world. Television, computers, high tech. He must be worth twenty million at least.”

“And Egan?”

“Shelley’s sister married a London Irishman called Patrick Egan. He was an ex-boxer who ran a pub somewhere on the river. Shelley didn’t approve. He himself never married.” Villiers lit another cigarette. “And there’s one thing you should get straight about him. He may be a multimillionaire who owns half of Wapping, but he’s still Jack Shelley to every crook in London and a name to be reckoned with. He took a fancy to young Sean. He was the one who paid for him to go to Dulwich College, and Sean was good. Got a scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge. Intended to read Moral Philosophy. Can you beat that, Jack Shelley’s nephew reading Moral Philosophy?”

Warden was well hooked by now. “What went wrong?”

“In the spring of seventy-six, Pat Egan and his wife went across to Ulster to visit relatives in Portadown. Unfortunately they parked next to the wrong truck.”

“A bomb?” Warden asked.

“Big one. Took out half the street. They were only two of the people killed. Egan was seventeen and a half. Turned his back on Cambridge and joined the Paratroopers. His uncle was furious, but there wasn't much he could do.”

“Is Egan Shelley's only relative?”

“No, there's some woman in her sixties, Sean's cousin, I think. He told me once. She runs his father's old pub.” Villiers frowned, thinking. “Ida, that was it. Aunt Ida. Girl called Sally, too, adopted by Pat Egan and his wife. I think her parents died when she was a baby. Shelley didn't count her—no family. He's like that. She went to live with his Aunt Ida when Sean joined up.”

“Sean, sir?” Warden said. “Isn't that a little familiar between a half-colonel and a sergeant?”

“Sean Egan and I have worked together a dozen times undercover in Ireland. That alters things.” Villiers's clipped public school tones changed to the accents of Belfast. “You can't work on a building site on the Falls Road with a man, risk your life every waking minute, and expect him to call you sir.”

Warden leaned back in his chair. “Am I right in thinking that Egan joined the army looking for some sort of revenge on the people who'd killed his parents?”

“Of course he did. The Provisional IRA claimed responsibility for that bomb. It was the kind of reaction you'd expect from a boy of seventeen.”

“But wouldn't that make him suspect, sir? I mean, his psychological assessment would throw it all up. Must have.”

“Or perfect for our requirements, Daniel, it depends on your point of view. When he was a year old his parents moved to South Armagh from London, then to Belfast. When he was twelve they came back to London because they'd had enough of the situation over there. So, a boy with an Ulster background, a Catholic, for what it's worth, who even spoke reasonable Irish because his father had taught him. The kind of brain which earned a scholarship to Cambridge. Come on, Daniel, he was pulled out of the crowd within six months of joining the army. And then, he does possess one other very special attribute.”

“What's that, sir?”

Villiers walked to the window and peered out into the rain. “He's a killer by instinct, Daniel. No hesitation. I've never seen anyone quite like him. As an undercover agent in Ireland he's assassinated eighteen terrorists to my certain knowledge. IRA, INLA ...”

“His own people, sir?”

“Just because he's a Catholic?” Villiers demanded. “Come off it, Daniel. Nairac was a Catholic. He was also an officer in the Grenadier Guards and that's all that concerned the IRA when they killed him. Anyway, Sean Egan has never played favorites. He's also taken care of several leading gunmen on the Protestant side. UVF and Red Hand of Ulster.”

Warden looked down at the file. “Quite a man. And now you've got to tell him he's finished at twenty-five years of age.”

“Exactly,” Villiers said. “So let's have him in and get it over with.”

When Sean Egan entered the room he was in shirtsleeve order, creases razor sharp, the beige beret tilted at the exact regulation angle. He wore shoulderstrap rank slides with sergeant's chevrons. On his right sleeve were the usual SAS wings. Above his left shirt pocket he also wore the wings of an Army Air Corps pilot. Below them were the ribbons for the Distinguished Conduct Medal, the Military Medal for Bravery in the Field and campaign ribbons for Ireland and the Falklands. He stood rigidly at attention in front of Warden, who sat behind his desk. Villiers remained in the window seat smoking a cigarette.

Warden said, "At ease, Sergeant. This is completely informal." He indicated a chair. "Sit down."

Egan did as he was told. Villiers got up and took a tin of cigarettes from his pocket. "Smoke?"

"Given it up, sir. When I got my packet in the Falklands, one bullet chose the left lung."

"Some good in everything, I suppose," Villiers said. "Filthy habit."

He was filling time and they all knew it. Warden said awkwardly, "Colonel Villiers is your controlling officer on this one, Egan."

"So I understand, sir."

There was a pause while Warden fiddled with the papers as if uncertain what to say. Villiers broke in. "Daniel," he said to Warden, "I wonder if you'd mind if Sergeant Egan and I had a word private?"

Warden's relief was plain. "Of course, sir."

The door closed behind him. Villiers said, "It's been a long time, Sean."

"I didn't think you were still with the regiment, sir."

"On and off. A lot of my time's taken up with Group Four. You did a job for us in Sicily, as I recall. Just before the Falklands."

"That's right, sir. Still part of DI5?"

"On paper only. Antiterrorism is still the name of the game though. My boss is responsible only to the Prime Minister."

"Would that still be Brigadier Ferguson, sir?"

"That's it. You're well informed—as usual."

"You used to tell me that's all that kept you alive in Belfast and Derry, undercover. Being well informed."

Villiers laughed. "A damned Shinner, right to the end, aren't you, Sean, just like your Dad? Only dyed-in-the-wool Ulster Catholic would call Londonderry Derry."

"I don't like the way they use bombs. That doesn't mean I think they haven't got a point of view."

Villiers nodded. "Seen your uncle lately?"

"He visited me in Maudsley Military Hospital a few months ago."

"Was it as difficult as usual?"

Egan nodded. "He never was much of a patriot. To him the army is just a big waste of time." There was another pause and he continued, "Look, sir, let's make this easy for you. I wasn't up to scratch, was I?"

Villiers turned. "You did fine. First time anyone has actually got out of the pit. Very ingenious, though. But the knee, Sean." He came round the desk and opened the file. "It's all here in the medical report. I mean, they've done a clever job in putting it together again."

Egan said, "Stainless steel and plastic. The original bionic man, only not quite as good as new."

"It will never be a hundred percent. Your own personal evaluation report on the exercise." Villiers picked it up. "When did you write this? An hour ago? You say here yourself that the knee let you down."

"That's right," Egan agreed calmly.

"Could have been the death of you in action. All right ninety percent of the time, but it's the ten percent that matters."

Egan said, "So, I'm out?"

"Of the regiment, yes. However, it's not as black as it looks. You're entitled to a discharge and pension, but there's no need for that. The army still needs you."

"No thanks." Egan shook his head. "If it isn't SAS, then I'm not interested."

Villiers said, "Are you sure about that?"

"Absolutely, sir."

Villiers sat back, watching him, a slight frown on his face. "There's more to this, isn't there?"

Egan shrugged. "Maybe. All those months in hospital gave me time to think. When I joined up seven years ago I had my reasons and you know what they were. I was just a kid and full of all sorts of wild ideas. I wanted to pay them back for my parents."

"And?"

"You don't pay anyone back. The bill will always be outstanding. Never paid in full. So much Irish time." He got up and walked to the window. "How many have I knocked off over there and for what? It just goes on and on, and it didn't bring my folks back."

"Perhaps you need a rest," Villiers suggested.

Sean Egan adjusted his beret. "Sir, with the greatest respect to the colonel, what I need is out."

Villiers stared at him, then stood up.

"Fine. If that's what you want, you've earned it. There is another alternative, of course."

"What's that, sir?"

"You could come and work with me for Brigadier Ferguson at Group Four."

"Out of the frying pan into the fire? I don't think so."

"What will you do, go back to your uncle?"

Egan laughed harshly. "God save us, I'd rather work for the Devil himself."

"Cambridge then? Not too late."

"I don't really see myself fitting into that kind of cloistered calm. I'd feel uncomfortable, and the poor old dons certainly would."

"Oh, I don't know," Villiers said. "I used to know an Oxford professor who was an SOE agent during the Second World War. Still ..."

"Something will turn up, sir."

"I expect so." Villiers looked at his watch. "The helicopter is leaving for regimental headquarters Hereford in ten minutes. Grab your kit and be on it. I'll arrange for your discharge to be expedited."

"Thank you, sir."

Egan moved to the door and Villiers said, "By the way, I was just remembering your foster sister Sally. How is she?"

Egan turned, a hand on the doorknob. "Sally died, Colonel, about four months ago."

Villiers was genuinely horrified. "My God, how? She couldn't have been more than eighteen."

"She was drowned. They found her in the Thames near Wapping. I was in the middle of major surgery at the time so there was nothing I could do. My uncle took care of the funeral for me. She's buried in Highgate Cemetery, quite close to Karl Marx. She liked it up there." His face was blank, his voice calm. "Can I go now, sir?"

"Of course."

The door closed. Villiers lit another cigarette, shocked and disturbed. The door opened again and Captain Warden came in. "He told me you wanted him on the helicopter, back to regiment."

"That's right."

"He's taking his discharge?" Warden frowned. "But there's no need for that, sir. He can't continue to serve in SAS, yes, but there are plenty of units who'd give their eyeteeth to get their hands on him."

"No way. He's quite adamant about that. He's changed. Maybe the Falklands did it, and all those months in hospital. He's going and that's it."

"A hell of a pity, sir."

“Yes, well, there may be ways and means of handling him yet. I offered him a job with Group Four. He turned it down flat.”

“Do you think he might change his mind?”

“We’ll have to see what a few months on the outside does to him. I can’t see him sitting in the corner of an insurance office, not that he would need to. That pub of his father’s—he owns it. He always happens to be Jack Shelley’s sole heir. But never mind that now. He just gave me a shock. Told me that foster sister of his was drowned in the Thames a few months ago.” He nodded to the computer at the corner. “We can pull in stuff from Central Records Office at Scotland Yard with that thing, can’t we?”

“No problem, sir. Matter of seconds.”

“See what they’ve got on Sally Baines Egan. No, make that Sarah.”

Warden sat down at the computer. Villiers stood at the window looking out at the rain. Beyond the trees he heard the roaring of the helicopter engine starting up.

“Here we are, sir. Sarah Baines Egan, age eighteen. Next of kin, Ida Shelley, Jordan Lane, Wapping. It’s a pub called The Bargee.”

“Anything interesting?”

“Found on a mudbank. Been dead around four days. Drug addict. Four convictions for prostitution.”

“What in the hell are you talking about?” Villiers turned to the computer. “You must have the wrong girl.”

“I don’t think so, sir.”

Villiers stared at the screen intently, then straightened. The helicopter passed overhead and he glanced up. “My God!” he whispered. “I wonder if he knows?”

Paris, on the right occasion, can seem the most desirable city on earth, but not at one o'clock on a November morning by the Seine with rain drifting across the river in a solid curtain.

Eric Talbot turned the corner from rue de la Croix and found himself on a small quay. He wore jeans and a parka, the hood pulled up over his head and a backpack hanging from his left shoulder. He looked like a typical student, or so he appeared, and yet there was something else. An impression of frailness, unusual in a boy of nineteen, eyes sunken into dark holes, the skin stretched too tightly over the cheekbones.

He paused under a streetlamp and looked across at the café which was his destination. La Belle Aurore. He managed a smile in spite of the fact that his hands wouldn't stop shaking. La Belle Aurore had been the name of the café in the Paris sequence in *Casablanca*—not that there seemed anything romantic in the establishment across the quay.

He started forward and suddenly became aware of the glow of a cigarette in the darkness of a doorway to his right. The man who stepped out was a gendarme, a heavy, old-fashioned cap protecting his shoulders against the rain.

“And where do you think you're going?”

The boy answered him in reasonable French, nodding across the quay. “The café, monsieur.”

“Ah, English.” The gendarme snapped his fingers. “Papers.”

The boy unzipped his parka, took out his wallet and produced a British passport. The gendarme examined it. “Walker—George Walker. Student.” He handed the passport back and the boy's hands trembled violently. “Are you ill?”

The boy managed a smile. “Just a touch of flu.”

The gendarme shrugged. “Well, you won't find a cure for it over there. Take my advice and find yourself a bed for the night.”

He flicked what was left of his cigarette into the water, turned and walked away, his heavy boots ringing on the cobbles. The boy waited until he had turned the corner, then crossed the quay quickly, opened the door of La Belle Aurore and went inside.

It was a poor sort of place, of a type common on that part of the waterfront, frequented by sailors and stevedores during the day and prostitutes by night. There was the usual zinc-topped counter, rows of bottles on the shelves behind, a cracked mirror advertising Gitanes.

The woman who sat behind the bar reading an ancient copy of *Paris Match* wore a black bombazine dress and was incredibly fat, with stringy peroxidized hair. She glanced up and looked at the boy.

“Monsieur?”

There was a row of booths down one side of the café, a small fire opposite. The room was empty aside from one man seated beside the fire at a marble-topped table. He was of medium height with a pale, rather aristocratic face. The thin white line of a scar bisected his left cheek, running from his eye to the corner of his mouth. He wore a dark-blue Burberry trench coat.

Eric Talbot's head ached painfully, mainly at the sides behind the ears, and his nose wouldn't stop running. He wiped it quickly with the back of his hand and managed a painful smile. “Agnés, madame. I'm looking for Agnés.”

“No Agnés here, young man.” She frowned. “You don't look so good.” She reached for a bottle of cognac and poured a little into a glass. “Drink that like a good boy, then you'd better be on your way.”

His hand trembled as he raised the glass, a dazed look on his face. “But Mr. Smith sent me. I was

told she'd be expecting me."

"And so she is, *chéri*."

The young woman who leaned out of the booth at the far end of the room stood up and came toward him. She had dark hair held back under a scarlet beret, a heart-shaped face, the lips full and insolent. She wore a black plastic raincoat, scarlet sweater to match the beret, black miniskirt and high-heeled ankle boots. She was very small, almost childlike, which increased the impression of a kind of overbearing corruption.

"You don't look too good, *chéri*. Come and sit down and tell me all about it." She nodded to the French woman. "I'll take care of it, Marie."

She took his arm and led him toward the booth past the man by the fire, who ignored them. "All right, let's see your passport."

Eric Talbot passed it across and she examined it quickly. "George Walker, Cambridge. Good—very good." She passed it back. "We'll talk English if you like. I talk good English. You don't look too well. What are you on, heroin?" The boy nodded. "Well, I can't help you there, not right now, but how about a little coke to keep you going? Just the thing to get you through a rainy night by the Seine."

"Oh, my God, that would be wonderful."

She rummaged in her handbag, took out a small white package and a straw and pushed them across the table. In the mirror above the fire, the man in the blue trench coat was looking at her inquiringly. She nodded, he emptied his glass, got up and went out.

Talbot had the packet open and inhaled the cocaine through the straw. His eyes closed and Agnes poured a little cognac in her glass from the bottle on the table. The boy leaned back, eyes still closed as she took a small vial from her handbag. She added a few drops of the colorless liquid to the cognac and replaced the vial in her handbag. The boy opened his eyes and managed a smile.

"Better?" she asked.

"Oh, yes." He nodded.

She pushed the glass across. "Drink that and let's get down to business."

He did as he was told, taking one tentative sip, then swallowing it all. He placed the glass on the table and she offered him a Gauloise. The smoke caught the back of his throat harshly and he coughed. "All right, what happens now?"

"Back to my place. You catch the British Airways flight to London that leaves at noon. Carry your goods through in a body belt, only not dressed like that, *chéri*. Jeans and parka always get you stopped at customs."

"So what do I do?" Eric Talbot had never felt so light-headed, so remote, and his voice seemed to come from somewhere outside himself.

"Oh, I've got a nice blue suit for you, umbrella and briefcase. You'll look quite the businessman."

She took his arm and helped him up. As they reached Marie at the bar, the boy started to laugh. She glanced up. "You find me amusing, young man?"

"Oh, no, madame, not you. It's this place. La Belle Aurore. That's the name of the café in *Casablanca* where Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman have their last glass of champagne before the Nazis come."

"I'm sorry, monsieur, but I do not see films," she replied gravely.

"Oh, come, madame, but everyone knows *Casablanca*." He lectured her with the careful, slow graveness of the drunk. "My mother died when I was born, and when I was twelve I got a new one. My wonderful, wonderful stepmother, lovely Sarah. My father was away a lot in the army, but Sarah made up for everything, and in the holidays she let me sit up to watch the Midnight Movie on television."

whenever it was *Casablanca*.” He leaned closer. “Sarah said *Casablanca* should be a compulsory part of everyone’s education because she didn’t think there was enough romance in the world.”

“Now on that, I agree with her.” She patted his face. “Go to bed.”

It was the last conscious thing Eric Talbot remembered, for by the time he reached the door he was in a state of total, chemically induced hypnosis. He crossed the quay, moving with the certainty of a sleepwalker, Agnés’s hand on his arm. They turned onto a small wharf by some warehouses, a cobblestone slipway running down into the river.

They paused and Agnés called softly, “Valentin?”

The man who stepped out of the shadows was hard and dangerous-looking. His shoulders enhanced a generally large physical frame, but there was already a touch of dissolution about him, a little too much flesh, and the long black hair and thick sideburns gave him a strangely old-fashioned appearance.

“How many drops did you give him?”

“Five.” She shrugged.

“Maybe six or seven.”

“Amazing stuff, scopolamine,” Valentin said. “If we left him now, he’d wake up in three days without the ability to remember anything he’d done, even murder.”

“But you won’t let him wake up in three days?”

“Of course not. That’s why we’re here, isn’t it?”

She shivered. “You frighten me, you truly do.”

“Good,” he said, and took Talbot’s arm. “Now let’s get on with it.”

“I can’t watch,” she said. “I can’t.”

“Suit yourself,” he told her calmly.

She turned away and he took the boy by the arm and led him down the slipway. The boy followed without hesitation. When they reached the end, Valentin paused, then said, “All right, in you go.”

Talbot stepped off the edge and disappeared. He surfaced a moment later and gazed up at the Frenchman with unseeing eyes. Valentin went down on one knee at the edge of the slipway and leaned over, putting a hand on the boy’s head. “Goodbye, my friend.”

It was so shockingly easy. The boy went under as Valentin pushed, stayed under with no struggle at all, only air bubbles disturbing the surface until they, too, stopped. Valentin towed the lifeless body round the edged parapet and left it sprawled on the end of the slipway, almost entirely submerged.

He walked back to Agnés, drying his hands on a handkerchief. “You can make your phone call. I’ll see you at my place later.”

She waited until the sound of his footsteps had faded and then started to walk along the quay. There was a movement in the shadows of a doorway and she recoiled in panic. “Who’s there?”

As he lit a cigarette, the face of the man who’d been sitting in the café was illuminated. “No need to arouse the neighborhood, old girl.”

He spoke in English, the kind that had a public school edge to it, and there was a weary good humor there tinged with a kind of contempt.

“Oh, it’s you, Jago,” she replied in the same language. “God, how I hate you. You talk to me as if I was something from under a stone.”

“My dear old thing,” he drawled. “Haven’t I always behaved like a perfect gentleman?”

“Oh, yes,” she said. “You kill with a smile. Always very good-mannered. You remind me of the man who said to the French customs officer, ‘No I’m not a foreigner, I’m English.’ ”

“To be perfectly accurate, Welsh, but you wouldn’t appreciate the difference. I presume Valentin has been as revoltingly efficient as usual?”

“If you mean has he done your dirty work for you, yes.”

“Not mine, Smith’s.”

“The same difference. You kill for Smith when it suits you.”

“Of course.” There was a kind of bewildered amusement on his face. “But with style, my sweet Valentin, on the other hand, would kill his grandmother if he thought he could get a good price for her body at the School of Anatomy. And while we’re at it, remind that pimp of yours that I expect him to keep in close touch, just in case the court processes the body sooner than usual.”

“He’s not my pimp, he’s my boyfriend.”

“A third-rate gangster, walking the streets with those friends of his, trying to imagine he’s Alain Delon in *Borsalino*. If it wasn’t for the girls he couldn’t even pay for his cigarettes.”

He turned and walked off without another word, whistling tunelessly, and Agnès left too, pausing only at the first public telephone she came to, to call the police.

“Emergency?” she demanded. “I was just walking past the slipway up from rue de la Croix when I saw what looked like a body in the water.”

“Name, please,” the duty officer said, but she had already replaced the receiver and was hurrying away.

The duty officer filled details of the incident on the right form and passed it to the dispatcher. “Better send a car.”

“Do you think it might be a crank?”

The other shook his head. “More likely some whore doing the night beat by the river who just doesn’t want to get involved.”

The dispatcher nodded and passed the details on to a patrol car in the area. Not that it mattered, for at that very moment, the gendarme who had spoken to Eric Talbot earlier walked down the slipway for the purposes of nature and discovered the body for himself.

Given the circumstances, the police investigation was understandably perfunctory. The gendarme who had found the body interviewed Marie at La Belle Aurore, but she had long since learned that in her line of business it paid to see and hear nothing. Yes, the young man had visited the café. He’d asked where he might get a room. He’d seemed ill and asked for a cognac.

She’d given him a couple of addresses and he’d left. End of story.

There was the usual postmortem the following morning, and three days later an inquest at which, in view of the medical evidence, the coroner reached the only possible verdict: death by drowning while under the influence of alcohol and drugs.

The same afternoon the body of the boy known as Walker was delivered to the public mortuary on the rue St. Martin, a superior name for a very mean street, where appropriate documentation was to be prepared for the British Embassy—not that such documentation ever arrived, thanks to a cousin of Valentin, an old lady employed as a cleaner and washer of bodies, who intercepted the necessary package before it left the building.

No possible query could be raised the following morning when Jago presented himself, in the guise of a cultural attaché from the British Embassy, with all the necessary documentation. The much-respected firm of undertakers, Chabert & Sons, would take charge of the body, providing it with a suitable coffin. The grief-stricken family had arranged for it to be flown by a charter aircraft the following day from a small airfield called Vigny, a few miles out of Paris. From there the flight plan

would take it to Woodchurch in Kent where the remains would be received by the funeral firm of Hartley Brothers. All was in order. The documents were countersigned, the regulation black hearse appeared to bear the body away.

The premises of Chabert & Son were situated by the river and, by coincidence, not too far away from where Eric Talbot had met his death. The building dated from the turn of the century, a splendid mausoleum of a place with twenty chapels of rest where relatives could visit the loved one to mourn with some decent privacy before the burial.

As with many such old-established firms in most European capitals, Chabert's had a night attendant, a row of bells above his head. There was a bell for each chapel of rest, a cord placed between the corpse's hands against the unlikely event of an unexpected resurrection.

But at ten o'clock that evening the attendant was snoring loudly in a drunken stupor, thanks to the bottle of cognac thoughtfully left on his desk by some grieving relative. He was long gone when Valentin carefully unlocked the rear door with a duplicate key and entered, followed by Jago. They each carried a canvas holdall.

They paused beside the glass-walled office. Jago nodded at the attendant. "He's well away."

"Bloody old drunk," Valentin said contemptuously. "One sniff of a barmaid's apron is all he needs."

They proceeded along the corridor flanked by chapels of rest on either side. There was the smell of flowers everywhere, and Jago said in French, "Enough to put you off roses for the rest of your life."

He paused at the door of one chapel and glanced in. The coffin was raised on an incline, the lid had come down, a young woman visible, the face touched with unnatural color by the embalmer.

Jago lit a cigarette with one hand and paused. "Like a horror movie," he said cheerfully. "*Dracula* or something like that. Any minute now, her eyes will open and she'll reach for your throat."

"For God's sake, shut up," Valentin croaked. "You know I hate this part."

"Oh, I don't know," Jago told him as they continued along the corridor. "I think you've done very well. What is this, the seventh?"

"It doesn't get any easier," the Frenchman said.

"Intimations of mortality, old stick."

Valentin frowned. "And what in the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You'd need an English public school education to understand." Jago paused and glanced in the last chapel on the right. "This must be it."

The coffin was the only one closed. It was constructed of dark mahogany, the handles and studs of gilded plastic in case cremation was favored. Normally, international regulations concerning the air freight of corpses required a sealed metallic interior, but this was habitually waived in the case of small aircraft flying at under ten thousand feet.

"All right," Jago said.

Valentin unscrewed the lid and parted the linen shroud underneath to reveal the body of Eric Talbot. There were two enormous scars running from chest to the lower stomach, roughly stitched together with the relics of the postmortem. Valentin had spent two years as a conscript in the French Army, had served as a medical orderly. He'd seen plenty of corpses in Chad when he was on attachment to the Foreign Legion, but this was something he could never get used to. Sometimes he cursed the day he'd met Jago, but then the money ...

He opened one of the holdalls, took out an instrument case, selected a scalpel and started to work on the stitches, pausing only to wipe sweat from his forehead.

"Get on with it," Jago told him impatiently. "We haven't got all night."

The air was tainted now, the sickly-sweet smell of corrupt flesh, quite unmistakable. Valentin finally removed the last stitches, paused, then eased the body open. Normally, the internal organs were replaced after the postmortem, but in a case such as this, where the body faced a considerable delay before burial, they were usually destroyed. The chest cavity and abdomen were empty. Valentin paused, hands trembling.

“A sentimentalist at heart. I always knew it.” Jago opened the other holdall and took out one plastic bag of heroin after another, passing them across. “Hurry it up. I’ve got a date.”

Valentin inserted one bag into the chest cavity and reached for another. “Boy or girl?” he said viciously.

“My goodness, I see I’m going to have to chastise you again, you French ape.” Jago smiled gently but the look in his eyes was terrible to see.

Valentin managed a weak laugh. “Only joking. Nothing intended.”

“Of course. Now get the rest of it inside and sew him up again. I want to get out of here.”

Jago lit another cigarette and went out, moving along the corridor to the chapel at the end. There were a few chairs, a sanctuary lamp casting a glow over the small altar and brass crucifix. All very simple, but then, he liked that. Always had done since he was a boy in the family pew in the village church, his father’s tenants sitting respectfully behind. There was a stained-glass window with the family coat of arms dating from the fourteenth century, with the family motto: I do my will. It summed up his own philosophy exactly, not that it had gotten him anywhere in particular. He tipped his chair back against the wall.

“Where did it all go wrong, old son?” he asked himself softly.

After all, he’d had every advantage. An ancient and honorable name, not the one he used now, of course, but then one had to preserve the decencies. Public school, Sandhurst, a fine regiment. Captain at twenty-four with a Military Cross for undercover work in Belfast, and then that unfortunate Sunday night in South Armagh and four very dead members of the IRA whom Jago hadn’t seen any point in taking in alive. Had taken every pleasure in finishing them off himself. But then that sniveling rat of a sergeant had turned him in, and the British Army, of course, did not operate a shoot-to-kill policy.

It wasn’t so much that he’d minded being quietly cashiered, although it had nearly killed his father. It was the fact that the bastards had taken the Military Cross back. Still, old history now. Long gone.

The Selous Scouts hadn’t been too particular in the closing year in Rhodesia before independence. Glad to get him, as were the South Africans for work with their commandos in Angola. Later, there was the war in Chad where he’d first met Valentin; he’d been lucky to get out of that one alive.

And then Smith, the mysterious Mr. Smith, and three very lucrative years—and the most extraordinary thing was that they had never met, or at least not so far as Jago knew. He didn’t even know what had put Smith on to him in the first place. Not that it mattered. All that did matter was that there was almost a million pounds in his Geneva account. He wondered what his father would say about that, then got up and returned to the chapel of rest.

Valentin had carefully restitched the body and was replacing the shroud. Jago said, “Five million pounds street value. He’s richer in death than he knows.”

Valentin screwed down the lid again. “Six, maybe seven if it was diluted.”

Jago smiled. “Now what kind of rat would pull a stroke like that? Come on, let’s get moving.”

They went past the office where the attendant still slept, and stepped out into the alley. It was raining and Jago turned up his collar. “Okay, you and Agnès be at Vigny tomorrow, one o’clock sharp for the departure. When the plane lifts off, ring the usual number in Kent.”

“Of course.” They had reached the end of the alley. Valentin said awkwardly, “We were wondering

That is, Agnés was wondering.”

“Yes?” Jago said.

“Things have been going well. We thought a little more money might be in order?”

“We’ll see,” Jago said. “I’ll mention it to Smith. I’ll be in touch.”

He walked away along the waterfront thinking about Valentin. A nasty bit of work. Rubbish, of course. No style. A true wharf rat, but a rat was still a rat and needed watching. He turned into the first all-night café he came to five minutes later and changed a hundred-franc note for coins at the bar, then went into a telephone booth in the corner where he dialed a London number.

He spoke quietly into the tape recorder at the other end. “Mr. Smith. Jago here.” He twice repeated the number of the telephone he was using, replaced the receiver and lit a cigarette.

They had always operated this way: Smith with his answerphone and presumably an automatic beeper to alert him to messages so that he was always the one to phone you. Surprisingly simple and no way to trace him. Foolproof.

The phone rang and Jago picked it up. “Jago.”

“Smith here.” The voice, as usual, was muffled, disguised. “How are you?”

“Fine.”

“Any problems?”

“None. Everything as normal. The consignment leaves Vigny at one tomorrow.”

“Good. Our friends will pick it up as normal. It should be making us money within a week.”

“That’s good.”

“Your account will be credited with the usual amount plus ten percent on the last day of the month.”

“That’s nice.”

“The laborer is worthy of his hire....”

“And all that good old British nonsense.” Jago laughed.

“Exactly. I’ll be in touch.”

Jago replaced the receiver and returned to the bar, where he had a quick cognac. It was still raining when he went out into the street, but he didn’t mind that. It made him feel good, and he was whistling again as he walked away along the uneven pavement.

But at Vigny the following afternoon the weather was not good—low cloud and rain and a ground mist that reduced visibility to four hundred yards. It was only a small airfield with a control tower and two hangars. Valentin and Agnés stayed in her Citroën on the edge of the runway and watched as the hearse arrived and the coffin was maneuvered inside the small Cessna plane. The hearse departed. The pilot disappeared inside the control tower.

“It doesn’t look good,” Agnés said.

“I know. We could be here all day,” Valentin told her. “I’ll see what’s happening.”

He put a raincoat over his shoulders and strolled across to the main hangar where he found a lone mechanic in stained white overalls working on a Piper Comanche.

“Cigarette?” Valentin offered him a Gauloise. “My English cousin is expecting the body of his son this afternoon. He asked me to check things out. I saw the hearse arrive. I mean, is the flight on or not?”

“A temporary hitch,” the mechanic said. “No trouble taking off here, but it’s not so good at the other end. The captain tells me he’s expecting clearance around four o’clock.”

“Thanks.” Valentin took a half bottle of whiskey from his pocket. “Help yourself. You don’t mind if I use your phone?”

The mechanic drank from the bottle with enthusiasm. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I don't pay the bills; be my guest."

Valentin took out a slip of paper and dialed the number written on it. It was a Kent exchange which he knew was south of London, but other than that he knew nothing of the mysterious Hartley Brothers.

The voice at the other end simply said, "Yes?"

Valentin replied in his bad English, "Hartley Brothers? Vigny here."

The voice sharpened. "Any problem?"

"Yes, the weather, but they expect to be away at four."

"Good. Call me again to confirm."

Valentin nodded to the mechanic. "Keep the Scotch. I'll be back."

He returned to Agn s in the Citro n. "That's it. All off until four. Let's try that caf  down the road."

The man he had been speaking to replaced the telephone and clasped his hands together, leaning forward toward the weeping woman in front of him. He was sixty and slightly balding, wore gold pince-nez glasses, black tie and jacket, white shirt pristine, striped trousers immaculate. The gold painted name-plate on his desk said Asa Bird.

"Mrs. Davies. I can assure you that here at Deepdene, your husband will receive only the very best attention. His ashes may be strewn in our own garden of rest if you wish."

The room was half in shadow on that dull November afternoon, but the flowers massed in the corners, the oak paneling, were reassuring as was his soothing, slightly avuncular voice that had the touch of the parson about it.

"That would be wonderful," she said.

He patted her hand. "Just a few formalities. Forms to fill in. Regulations, I'm afraid."

He pressed a bell on his desk, sat back, selected a handkerchief and proceeded to polish his glasses, standing up and peering out of the window into the immaculate garden that always filled him with conscious pleasure. Not bad for a boy born on the wrong side of the blanket in the worst slum in Liverpool that had fitted him for nothing but a life of petty crime. Eighteen offenses by the age of twenty-four. Everything from larceny to, although he preferred to forget about it now, manslaughter and prostitution, which had led him to the chance of a lifetime, his relationship with the aging Henry Brown, an undertaker with his own long-established firm in Manchester.

He'd taken young Asa in, not that that was his name then, and groomed him in every way. Asa had loved the death business at once, taken to it like a duck to water, soon becoming an expert on every aspect, including embalming. And then old Mr. Henry had died, leaving only Mrs. Brown, who had never had a son of her own and doted on Asa, making perhaps only one mistake. Told him that she had made him her sole heir, an error which had led to her untimely death from pneumonia, helped on his way by Asa's unfortunately leaving the windows of her room wide open on a December night after first removing the bedclothes.

Mrs. Brown's thoughtful bequest had taken him to his own establishment, developed from an eighteenth-century country house. Deepdene Garden of Rest, with its own cremation facilities. You wouldn't find better in California, and his association with the mysterious Mr. Smith hadn't done him any harm.

The door opened and a handsome young black man entered. He was tall and muscular, and the well-cut chauffeur's uniform showed him to advantage. "You rang, Mr. Bird?"

"Yes, Albert. The package from France. It will be later than we thought."

"That's a shame, Mr. Bird."

“Oh, I expect we’ll manage. Is the transport ready?”

“In the rear garage, sir.”

“Good. I’ll just have a look.” Bird turned to Mrs. Davies. “I’ll leave you for a few minutes to complete those forms and then I’ll help you choose a suitable coffin.”

She nodded gratefully. He patted her shoulder and went out. Albert opened a large umbrella and held it over Bird’s head as they crossed the cobbled yard.

“Bloody weather,” Bird said. “Always seems to be pissing down these days.”

“Dreadful, Mr. Bird,” Albert agreed, and got the garage door open. When he pulled a dust sheet away, a gleaming black hearse stood revealed. “There you are.”

Beautifully painted on the side was the legend, “Hartley Brothers, Funeral Directors,” in gold.

“Excellent,” Bird said. “Where did you get it?”

“Knocked it off myself in North London, Thursday.

The logbook and tax disc are from a write-off I found in a scrapyard in Brixton.”

“You’re certain you won’t be remembered?”

Albert laughed. “In Brixton? You, they’d remember, but me? In Brixton, just another brother, just another black face. Do we go the usual way?”

“Yes, you take the hearse. I’ll follow in the Jaguar.”

Which Albert knew meant just in case anything went wrong, which really meant that he would be left carrying the can while the old bastard did a runner. Not that it mattered. His day would come. Albert was certain.

“That’s fine, Mr. Bird.”

Bird patted his face. “You’re a good boy, Albert, a lovely boy. I must think of some way to reward you.”

“Not necessary, Mr. Bird.” Albert smiled as he opened the umbrella again. “Serving you is reward enough,” he said and they started back across the yard.

Agnés and Valentin arrived back at Vigny at four to discover that the plane had already departed. She watched Valentin hurry across to the hangar and speak to the mechanic again. She lit a cigarette and waited. Valentin returned in a little while.

“Left fifteen minutes ago.”

“Did you phone?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said as he switched on the engine. “And a funny thing happened. You know how sometimes an answering tape stays on even though someone has picked up the receiver?”

“Yes.”

“Well, as my usual man answered, I heard a tape playing.”

“What did it say?”

“It said: This is Deepdene Garden of Rest. We regret there is no one here at the moment, but leave your number and we’ll get back to you.”

“Now that is interesting, *chéri*.” Agnés smiled, managing to look quite vicious. “A chunk of Monsieur Jago’s armor that could be worth a great deal.”

Woodchurch Airfield was not much bigger than Vigny. An aero club really, used occasionally for charter or freight flights. Situated in the depths of the Kent countryside, it had no customs facilities which meant that the customs officer who received the Cessna with Eric Talbot’s coffin had to drive all the way from Canterbury. He was not pleased by the delay, wanted only to be on his way.

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