

Chapter One

BEIRUT. JUNE 1960

Vladimir Petrov collects the letter from the communal box in the foyer of a block of apartments in The Christian Quarter. Back in his flat on the third floor, he spreads out the two pages on the Formica-topped kitchen table.

Using a combination of ultraviolet light and the heat of his small stove, he deciphers a message written in invisible ink between the ten lines.

Vladimir works for the SVR, or the Soviet foreign intelligence agency which is focussed on the State's stability. His network recruit, "Alex", is a Kuwait-based deep cover tasked with providing useful information on potential targets to support Operation Oasis Palm Tree.

One of the aims of the mission is the destabilisation of British influence in the Middle East by supporting the drive towards Arab nationalism across the region. The ultimate objective is to restore the predominant position of the Soviet Union on the Arabian Peninsula. The SVR push the mantra 'Marxism as the

true path to freedom for all!

As the principle sea port, if Kuwait can be seized, the prize will be control of the busy shipping lanes of the Persian Gulf.

The sounds of the busy street waft up through the open window as he pores over the information which he will send on to his Soviet spymasters.

It is the fourth letter Vladimir has received. Alex is in full swing, harvesting the social opportunities within the close-knit Anglo-American community of Ahmadi, a town 40 kms south of Kuwait City and home to the Kuwait Oil Company.

Vladimir clips the report to the others. He lights a cigarette and paces back and forth in the small flat.

No. Alex has not disappointed. The details sent through to date list no less than eighteen names of people privy to inside knowledge either of the internal affairs of the oil industry or the political machinations going on in Kuwait.

The reports were padded with the customary fill from agents such as, 'So-and-so is the Swedish wife of high-ranking petrochemical engineer and having an affair with one of the Kuwaiti princes.'

In addition are details of several targets of significance for the SVR to assess and pass on to the KGB if appropriate.

'Went to a function at the Ahmadi Desert Motor Club and am working on a Russian-born member disaffected with colonials.'

Of real interest to the SVR were the targets vulnerable to blackmail.

'Senior pathologist driving research on cholera projects in desperate need of money due gambling debts.'

'Teacher at Anglo-American School. Former socialist activist at Cambridge University.'

'Everyone excited about the arrival of Ian Fleming in Novem-

ber. Opportunities to be exploited over visit.'

Those given codenames were of even greater interest. Such as MERRYWEATHER (access to the KOC I-Ahmadi Refinery Marine Department Sea Berth Loading Terminal Plans) and MADRELL (Face-to-face contact with access to plant servicing oil wells north of Ahmadi.)

One in particular caught Vladimir's attention.

'DERRICK is in charge of a programme to identify anthrax spores similar to those used in chemical production by the Iraqi Secret Service. Location of laboratory unknown.'

Oasis Palm Tree is time critical. Next year, Kuwait reverts from a Protectorate under an agreement signed in 1899 in India between Sheikh MustafaAl-Sabah and the British government because of threats to Kuwait's independence from its neighbours.

Without the assurance of British protection, its independence is at stake. Across the northern border, Iraq is voicing territorial claims based on the view they both belonged to the Ottoman Empire. In addition, support for the idea of a United Arab Republic is gaining momentum. Out of self-interest, the royal family of Kuwait is rumoured to be considering joining. Solidarity with the brotherhood also will increase the potential to restore Palestine.

Night falls and there's a ring on the doorbell.

Another Russian enters, and the two men drink coffee together. They discuss the report and decide on a plan of action. The unknown factor is can agent Alex be trusted?

Chapter 2

AHMADI, KUWAIT. AUGUST 1960

At 2.30 on Tuesday afternoon Gordon Carlisle polished and replaced his spectacles as he sat in his white-painted new office at Southwell Hospital.

Outside, the Kuwaiti heat scorched the paint off the walls, but inside the air conditioning made it necessary for Gordon to wear a long-sleeved shirt with his customary silk paisley cravat. It also made it vital to check the temperature of the cages of various live desert creatures which shared the room with him. The more poisonous, the more valuable for study into antidotes.

Gordon's wife described the office scene as something out of a horror story. It was a standing joke between the two of them. 'If I'd known it'd mean sharing you with half the desert animals in the world, the marriage would definitely have been off,' she'd jested on her first visit.

Gordon reflected on this and smiled. Newly married, after a long run as a bachelor, his friends had often referred to him in the past as wedded to his snakes. When Anita asserted on their first date she hated creepy crawlies, he'd kept quiet about his

reptile menagerie. Just in case it put her off.

The phone rang. It was the Head of Public Relations, John Dickson.

'Heard of Philip Foster? Also known as Pip Foster?'

The words set off Gordon's light stammer. 'P-p-p-'

'Writes for the Telegraph.'

'Can't say I have.'

'Well, he's out here. I wondered if I could send him over your way. He's doing a piece on Kuwait ahead of next year. Came in from Saudi. Travelling around the Middle East.'

Gordon Carlisle worked in the preventative medicine division. He'd been a permanent fixture in the department since arriving in the country three years after the Second World War ended.

'What perspective is he taking? Wouldn't Guthrie be of more use?' His lazy boss, who never lifted a finger but signed Gordon's reports with his own name to make out he did, would have been more appropriate.

'Fully tied up, I'm afraid. But anyway, he's bloody useless. And Pip asked for you specifically. I assume he got it from someplace.'

Puzzled, Carlisle rubbed his forehead. Why him? Had they met in the past somewhere?

'Ok. Well, if I can help at all. Would be good to learn a bit more of what he's after.'

'I'm devilled if I know, old boy. Cholera injections. Household water integrity. Whatever your department does. I'll send over one of his pieces so you can check out his writing.'

'No doubt I can conjure up something of interest.'

John rang off, leaving Gordon to ponder the out-of-the-blue request.

An hour later his trusted aide Mansour, who had taken Gordon's car to the garage to check the tyres, was despatched to collect a copy of the article from Dickson's office at company headquarters.

Gordon recognised it straight away as an editorial he'd flicked through some months back.

Kuwait enjoyed prosperity long before the oil industry arrived. Although hot and humid in August, for much of the rest of the year, it enjoys a cool, dry climate. As a result, the country has always been one of the healthiest seaports in the Gulf.

In the past, its dhows plied the expanse between Basra and the Persian ports and on into the Red Sea, to India and East Africa. Kuwaiti merchants financed over 400 vessels in the lucrative pearl fishery industry and sold the catch in Bombay and the Levant.

On the landward side, Kuwait was always a busy trading hub for the Bedouin tribes, who ranged over the scrubby pastures stretching into the Najd.

Caravans travelled from there into the desert and onwards to Damascus and Aleppo. Bazaars filled large tracts of land on the edge of the town, where there was a brisk trade in guns, cotton goods, cooking oil and other staple products.

OK. General historical stuff, Gordon thought. Nothing he couldn't handle, given a broad brief.

Reading the newspapers from London was one of Gordon's favourite pastimes. Or would have been if he'd got his hands on them more often. Or if a small-minded censor had not beaten him to it. The Telegraph and the Times turned up a week late normally, with large holes cut out of them and looking like a children's paper game.

He told all this to the journalist, who arrived the following afternoon in a pickup lent to him for his twenty-mile journey

from Kuwait City.

They met in the car park and hit it off straightaway.

‘It’s all censored. Any mention of Israel or Judaism gets the scissors. Or blacked out with a pen. They don’t care what’s on the other side. V-v-very frustrating to read.’

He bent slightly to open the door and show his guest to a solid steel chair;

‘Not very comfortable I’m afraid. As you can tell, we have just taken up occupation in this brand new building.’

At six foot four, Carlisle towered over Pip Foster by at least five inches, as he did most people he met.

‘Bloody hell. You’re right. Hard as a rock.’

Foster is at least ten years older than me, Gordon thought, taking in the handsome though somewhat lined face. His sandy-coloured hair had the odd silver fleck. He asked first off a general question. What attracted families from rainy old England to live in an unbearable, blistering climate like this?

‘The money and a pleasant way of life,’ Gordon replied, looking across his desk into a pair of bright blue eyes. ‘A high standard of living. And in the winter the temperature is rather pleasanter than it is today.’

‘I’m jolly certain it is.’

‘Perhaps you’d like me to show you around. Ask me whatever you want. If I-I-I can help, I will.’

They spoke at some length about risks to expats, and what vaccinations they required on arrival. Also whether the oil company had helped raise the living standards of normal citizens, such as the local Kuwaitis. Or just made the Westerners more affluent so they could double up on booze and cigarettes.

‘Absolutely, they’ve b-b-benefitted. Oil money’s given everyone free health care. They even treat animals on a no fee

basis.'

'That's excellent.'

'Most of the medical equipment is state-of-the art.'

'So I've picked up.'

'But no point in good treatment if you don't practice prevention.'

'Which is why your department is so busy, of course.'

'Vaccination programmes and education are essential.'

Foster shifted his gaze, and Gordon watched him closely. The journalist rubbed his chin, as if preparing an awkward question.

'Something I heard on the grapevine on you which caught my interest.'

Gordon Carlisle shifted forward, all attention. 'Which was?'

'Connected to a recent outbreak of anthrax.'

'There was one, it's true. Yes.'

'Found in carpets, wasn't it?'

'Ah.'

'Understand you were the one to pick it? Rather clever of you, I thought.' The journalist took out a shiny holder from his pocket, opened it and offered a cigarette. 'Smoke?'

'W-w-word gets around,' said Gordon, taking the Stuyvesant. He searched his desk for a lighter.

'Rather fancy doing a profile on you. If you're up for it, old boy. A little more interesting than a kid getting an injection in the arm, eh?'

'I don't know that I'd be much of a s-s-subject.' He blinked in the bright morning light and searched for an acceptable refusal. 'Surprised you got to hear of that?'

Foster inhaled a thick lungful of smoke. He fished a notepad from his hip pocket with his left hand. 'You're quite the detective, aren't you?'

CHAPTER 2

'It's all part of the job in a way.'

Chapter 3

A few months earlier Gordon might indeed have found the idea of an article written about him amusing. His sleuthing into an unexplained outbreak of anthrax had saved lives, for sure. As it was, five Kuwaitis had died. The common factor between the deaths had been a small carpet emporium in the city souk. And he had traced the source of the outbreak further back to a Bedouin tribe travelling south from Iraq, who had unwittingly woven the deadly spores into the rugs.

‘James Bond of the Desert.’

‘Hardly.’ Gordon wondered how he could deflect interest from the topic. Scurrying noises from behind Foster caused the journalist to spin around in his chair. A tiny creature hopped up on its hind legs inches from where he was sitting.

‘What is that?’

‘A jerboa. Type of desert rat. No two moves alike.’ Gordon got up to admire the small mammal he’d been nurturing, which someone had brought into his office weeks earlier. ‘Helps them evade the jaws of h-h-hungry predators.’

‘How many cages do you have here?’

‘Eleven. I get given what people find in their gardens or yards. T-t-take a look at the yellow fat tailed scorpion.’ Gordon

crossed the office to peer through the glass. 'He has his own little heater. We have to keep the cage warm to replicate the exact desert conditions.'

'An evil-looking thing.'

'Scorpions will try to kill anything that moves. Fortunately, only if it's smaller than them. So you needn't worry.'

Gordon hoisted the lid of the enclosure, put a hand in and picked up the eight-legged creature, plopping it down into the centre of his palm. It sat there waving its narrow tail from side to side. 'That's the bit you have to avoid,' he said, pointing at the stinger on the tip.

'I might not hold it all the same.'

Gordon Carlisle smiled then tenderly replaced the creature and checked the thermostat before turning back to his guest. 'Sometimes they find their way into homes. We encourage people to bring them here rather than kill them.'

'And that?' Foster appeared relieved to be safely away from the deadly scorpion and move on to the next container which housed an ash coloured snake.

'That's a horned viper. It's one of the most venomous snakes in the world. I f-f-found it myself out near the oil wells.'

'Do you have many of them?'

'No. They are becoming endangered. But I keep her cage at the bottom under another one. These snakes have a habit of escaping. She'll end up out at the Scientific Centre one of these days.'

Pip Foster flopped down again in his hellishly uncomfortable steel seat.

'Going back to the previous subject. Can I ask what became of the carpets?'

'With the anthrax? The ones we could trace had to be

destroyed.'

'Did they get compensation?'

'They weren't too h-h-happy, no. Not having spent their hard-earned rupees on them.'

Gordon suggested they do a walkabout of the new hospital. 'Would that interest you at all?'

By the reaction, a Cook's tour of the sterile and featureless offices was of no great interest. Nor what Foster was after, Carlisle sensed.

'That would be wonderful, old boy. But gosh, is that the time already?'

The journalist raised a wrist and checked his watch. 'I'm sure there's a lot to see. But I'm due back in Kuwait City for an evening appointment. Got to get the jeep returned.'

'Another day, perhaps. How long are you out for?'

'Just a week or two. I'd rather base out here in Ahmadi for a bit. By all accounts, it's quite a lively scene.'

'I'm sure John Dickson could arrange that. There's a comfortable Guest House here.'

'So I've heard. Would save driving back and forth, pissed as a newt.'

'Why don't I give you my telephone number at home. That way we can fix another meeting when we both have more time.'

Pip scribbled his details on a memo pad, tore off the sheet and handed it over.

It seemed to Gordon that Foster had cut the interview short because he wasn't getting the story he wanted. But that suited Gordon fine. He didn't want to elaborate on the carpet saga. Nor should he. Who was Foster, after all?

He reached across the desk to shake hands signalling the meeting was over.

After escorting his visitor out to the front of the hospital, he returned to his paperwork. But the biro stuck motionless between his fingers and he couldn't concentrate on anything but the interview. For ten minutes he gazed out of the window at the distant saplings being planted; speed growers reaching at least forty centimetres a year and hardy enough to survive in the barren sand.

Gordon reflected moodily on Foster's blunt questions.

Unlocking a gunmetal filing cabinet he took out a carbon copy of the original anthrax report. He had relayed it on through his head of department to a case officer working for the British political agent in Kuwait City. It was a standard protocol undertaken with any virus outbreak.

He lit a cigarette, sat back at his desk and thought about it all. How he and Mansour had gone back to check on the efficiency of the antibiotics and found the seven decomposing bodies.

The disease had not caused the deaths. An autopsy revealed evidence of poisoning. Gordon suspected foul play. A sample of their primitive water supply confirmed traces of pesticide, possibly a case of inter-tribal rivalry. The mystery was still under investigation by the police.

When he delivered a follow-up report on the affair, he received the following memorandum from Whitehall.

The subject: Possibility of a Soviet-backed chemical weapons experimental facility in Southern Iraq.

Documentation: Statement attached from Gordon Carlisle on the leak of anthrax spores from the establishment.

Action to be Taken: All information and findings on the above are considered classified.

He read through it again. Classified? The British authorities had speculated the Bedouin had chanced upon a chemical

weapons outpost. Maybe Iraqi. Or even some Soviet-backed laboratory preparing bioweapons to use on the civilian population of Kuwait. Far fetched? Perhaps not.

Selective scenes from that last trip into the desert ran through Gordon's head, none of them pleasant. The scorching Kuwaiti sun had been beating down on the bloated, fly-blown corpses for three days. The decaying bodies had turned black, and the stench was unbearable.

Gordon closed the file and returned it to the cabinet. Since receiving the memo from London he'd not spoken of the incident to anyone outside the department.

Once a week he stopped off at the swimming pool at the Hubara Club. Oil company employees' children spent their after-school hours dive bombing into the deep end while the parents sat gossiping on the raised terraces. His responsibility served principally to check that the attendants maintained the required level of chlorination. Occasionally, the inspection yielded a surprise result. Such as the fake bomb found under bushes close to the filtration plant.

Gordon decided to move his scheduled visit forward a day as a distraction to throw off his gloomy thoughts. He zipped up his portfolio and tucked it under his arm, pleased with the plan. In all likelihood, he would also see Anita there. By his reckoning, she would be on one of those very terraces sunning herself and reading a book.