



# GEOFFREY ARCHER

## SKYDANCER



**SECRETS ARE DANGEROUS, TOP SECRETS FATAL**

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## About the Book

Project Skydancer was the brainchild of the Ministry of Defence. Beautiful and terrifying in its simplicity, DS29 had designed new warheads for Polaris missiles, warheads that with consummate ease could evade the new batteries of anti-ballistic missiles the Russians had set up around their prime military targets. For Aldermaston scientist Peter Joyce, it was the pinnacle of his career.

Until his documents from the project turned up one chilly October morning on Parliament Hill, and the Ministry's prime suspect committed suicide leaving him with only two alternatives: write off a billion-pound project, or approve tests which could give Russia the power to wipe out the West at the touch of a button . . .

## About the Author

Geoffrey Archer is the former Defence and Diplomatic Correspondent for ITN's *News at Ten*. His work as a frontline broadcaster has provided him with the deep background for his thrillers - the bestselling *Skydancer*, *Shadow Hunter*, *Eagle Trap*, *Scorpion Trail*, *Java Spider*, *Fire Hawk*, *The Lucifer Network* and *The Burma Legacy*. A keen traveller, he now writes full time and lives with his wife and family in Surrey.

*ALSO BY GEOFFREY ARCHER*

*Shadow Hunter*  
*Eagle Trap*  
*Scorpion Trail*  
*Java Spider*  
*Fire Hawk*  
*The Lucifer Network*  
*The Burma Legacy*  
*Dark Angel*

# Skydancer

Geoffrey Archer



# Chapter One

THE STRENGTHENING SOUTH-WESTERLY wind scooped the slate-grey waters of the Gare Loch into small foam-crested peaks. To his right, towards the open sea, the angler watched a stubby naval launch butt its bows into the waves. At the sight of the white ensign streaming from its stern, he turned his head to one side and spat on to the ground in a private ritual. It was still early in the afternoon, but the sky had darkened as if it were dusk. Rain threatened.

The fisherman pulled up the zip of his drab-green waterproof to shut out the early autumn chill, and settled himself on to the canvas seat. His twelve-foot glass-fibre rod reached out from the tree-lined bank, the float cast well out on the water. His tackle box was well stocked, and a small bucket of maggots seethed by his side.

The man seemed curiously inattentive to his float, however, and before casting he had omitted to bait the hook.

‘Crawford’ was the name the angler used in the seedy drinking places that passed for bars on the Clyde Estuary. He had lived in the area for years, though no one seemed sure of his ancestry. He owned a small motor-boat and sometimes attended lobster-pots – with little enthusiasm.

Crawford found fishing a tough life, and a hard one in which to make money. But he had long since ceased to work at it, apart from for appearance’s sake. He had found an easier way to earn the price of a drink – just by watching the comings and goings on the other side of the loch.

The Royal Navy’s shore base at Faslane is the home of the 3rd and 10th Submarine Squadrons. To Crawford the vessels

that slipped silently to and from the quayside, with its towering cranes, were like iron sharks piloted by silent and secretive men with arrogant eyes.

At first the boats had all looked the same to him, black and sleek with smooth, square fins; but he knew better now, thanks to a man he had met one night in Kath's Bar in Helensburgh. 'Donald' was what he had called himself, but Crawford had not been fooled; the man's accent was foreign.

They had met again the next night and had talked about the sea. Crawford had begun his habitual slander of the men of the Royal Navy, 'toffee-nosed pansies' as he called them. He had loathed them since leaving school, when the Navy had rejected him for service. It had been a bitter blow not to have been accepted; from a young age he had boasted to his classmates that he would be a sailor when he grew up. He had never forgiven the callous indifference of the recruiting officer who had turned him away.

What the foreigner had offered him that second time they met was a chance to get even with the men in dark blue – and an easy way to make money took. 'Donald' had given him pictures of the different submarines that visited Faslane, showing him how to tell them apart. Crawford had agreed to phone London at prearranged times to report what he had seen, and for his trouble 'Donald' came north once a month to hand him an envelope full of banknotes.

The vessel Crawford was studying now, through a small but powerful pair of binoculars focused half-a-mile across the water, was the most deadly submarine of all, a Polaris boat, HMS *Retribution*. Behind the fin, the long blunt-ended casing housing the sixteen nuclear missiles made its identification unmistakable.

Suddenly he was startled by a noise. He snatched at the bucket of maggots and slipped the glasses under the recess of its base. On the road just twenty yards behind him, a

vehicle slowed to a halt, its rattling diesel sounding alarmingly like a police patrol from the dockyard opposite.

Checking that his float was still bobbing freely, he pulled a small square tin from his pocket, and began to roll a cigarette. His heart was pounding, fearing that his trick with the maggot bucket had been spotted. He felt the steely glare of the security men on the back of his neck, and he shivered.

It seemed as if they watched him for a full five minutes. Then he heard the crunch from the gearbox and the judder of the engine as the police van moved on again. When the noise faded he chanced a glance after it, confirming that his identification of the motor had been correct.

The police were ignoring him. He whistled with relief, then drew on his cigarette. The smoke bit sourly into his throat.

There was nothing illegal about fishing in the loch, nor about looking at submarines through binoculars, but if the security men took an interest in him and learned what he did with the information he gathered, he would be in trouble. Crawford did not know exactly who the foreigner was, but he knew damned well where the information went.

He did not consider it *spying*. There was nothing secret about the information 'Donald' wanted. After all, the Navy did not try to hide the comings and goings of their ships. But by ensuring that the 'other side' knew what those self-satisfied submariners were up to, his need for revenge was beginning to be fulfilled.

His brief use of the binoculars was enough for his purposes. He had seen fresh food being taken on board. HMS *Retribution* was making ready for sea. High tide was in two hours; Crawford guessed the submarine planned to sail when it ebbed.

Two days earlier he had watched *Retribution* emerge from the enclosed dock at Coulport, on the other side of the spit of land that separates the Gare Loch from the open sea. He knew it was there that the missiles were stored: the Polaris

rockets with their nuclear warheads. 'Donald' had told him the submarines never go to Coulport during normal routine because their missiles are kept on board, sealed beneath deck hatches.

But *Retribution* had gone there, so something was up – something out of the ordinary. 'Donald' had been most interested in that particular news when Crawford had phoned the London number to tell him about it. He had asked him to ring again as soon as the submarine had sailed.

Crawford shivered as the water gusted across the open water. That police patrol was certain to come back again before long. There was only one road around the loch.

He reeled in his line. The hook spun and danced in front of him. He grabbed for it and impaled a pair of maggots on its barb. He would have to be there for a few more hours yet, and the best way to curb the suspicions of the police was to catch some fish.

Two weeks later, in north London, General David Twining, British Army retired, struck out across Parliament Hill Fields for his early morning constitutional, sucking a throat pastille to counter the effects of the cold, damp air.

The dog at his feet looked ridiculously small to belong to such a tall man. Short-haired and almost legless, the bundle of wiry brown fur darted backwards and forwards across the path, tracing complex and invisible smells.

Mist clung firmly to the ground. It was late October and wet leaves made the path slippery where it passed under the almost bare trees. The sun had only recently risen, and showed no sign yet of burning through the grey.

Twining's bearing was unmistakeably military, his back parade-ground straight. A brown felt hat covered his balding head, and he wore a dark green loden coat, acquired during his days commanding a division of the British Rhine Army. Most mornings he could be seen striding up this path on

Parliament Hill, but only by the few who arose as early as he did. Recently his wife had urged him to choose a less lonely route for his morning walk; Hampstead Heath had become a haunt for muggers in the past few months. He had scoffed at her worries, but had to admit to himself that this morning the gaunt branches of the old oaks did look curiously menacing in the fog.

Suddenly his scurrying dog stopped dead in its tracks. Hackles raised like a worn scrubbing brush, the animal began to growl.

‘Ollie, you fool! What’s the matter?’ snapped the retired soldier. He shared some of the dog’s alarm, though, and strained to identify the vague noises he could hear above the dull dripping of the wet branches.

His walking stick had a heavy handle carved from bone, and he reversed the cane in his hand, ready to use as a weapon if necessary. The sound was eerie in the gloom – the rustling of paper and the clatter of tin cans. The general’s pulse quickened; he was not as young as he once was, and felt unsure whether he could defend himself against determined muggers, whatever blustering assurances he had given his wife.

The dog, still growling, had taken up a position behind his master now, as Twining walked cautiously forward towards the source of the noise. Slowly, through the mist, he began to make out a dark figure rummaging through the contents of a litter bin.

‘Huh! It’s a bloody tramp!’ Twining muttered to himself, slightly ashamed at having allowed himself to fear something worse.

The dog darted forward, hurling a torrent of barks at the figure wearing an oversized black coat, who pulled back in alarm from his investigation of the rubbish. The tramp’s face was obscured by upturned lapels and, with a curse and an ill-aimed kick at the dog, he turned and shuffled hurriedly off into the mist.

Ollie made as if to give chase to the departing itinerant, but after a sufficient show of bravery he scurried back to his master, wagging his tail in anticipation of praise.

‘Good boy, Ollie! Good boy!’ the General murmured, patting the animal as much to steady his own nerves as the dog’s.

‘Look at this mess!’ he exclaimed, as he straightened his back, and stared at the litter bin. In his eagerness to find something of interest, the tramp had strewn its contents all over the path. Twining swore angrily; he loathed litter, and would frequently clear up after untidy tourists on summer evenings here. He bent down and began slowly to collect the rubbish and return it to the bin, taking care there was nothing unsavoury amongst it to foul his pigskin gloves.

Halfway through his task, he suddenly stopped in surprise. In his hand he held something that had been tediously familiar during his military career – a buff-coloured folder with the letters MOD. stamped on it. The initials stood for Ministry of Defence, and the cardboard file looked fresh and clean.

Startled, he opened the folder and took out the single sheet of paper it contained. He had left his reading glasses at home but, holding the document at arm’s length, he could still make out the words ‘R.V. Separation Mechanism’, and the acronym AWRE.

‘Good God!’ he exclaimed under his breath. ‘That’s the Atomic Weapons place.’

A small group of protesters had been camping outside the gates of Aldermaston Research Establishment for several years now, on and off. Banners denouncing the evil of nuclear weapons hung on the chain-link fence – next to the camp washing.

Every morning and evening, the protesters’ numbers were augmented by a dozen or so local women, who came to wave their placards and to stare in stony reproach at the

thousands of Aldermaston employees entering or leaving the establishment. These protesters saw themselves as part of an international sorority struggling to save the world from nuclear destruction. From time to time their activities would feature in the national newspapers, and though the reports were frequently insulting, this only served to strengthen their sense of alienation from the Establishment.

Peter Joyce drove up to the gates of Aldermaston soon after eight o'clock on that particular October morning. He had taken to making an early start in recent months, to cope with the colossal workload that had built up for him. Joyce headed the project to which most of the Aldermaston's extensive facilities were currently devoted – the creation of an advanced new nuclear warhead for the Polaris missiles that Britain had maintained operational for over twenty years.

The design team had been assembled almost overnight two years ago, following a dramatic Government decision to cancel plans for replacing Polaris with the much larger and more sophisticated American Trident missiles. Faced with the danger that new Soviet Ballistic Missile Defences might make the ten-billion-pound Trident obsolete early in the next century, the Government had suddenly decided to save money by modernising Polaris instead.

Peter Joyce was a physicist by training and had developed a knowledge of military electronics that was unequalled in Britain. In his late forties, he looked fit and energetic. His square jaw gave him the appearance of a 1950s cricketer. Several major armaments manufacturers both at home and in the USA had tried to buy his talents over the years, but he had always resisted them. Working for the Government at Aldermaston did little to swell his bank account, but it gave him access to the most advanced technology in the world, the 'cutting edge' of research, with the use of vastly more comprehensive scientific facilities than any commercial arms manufacturer could afford to maintain.

Hundreds of millions of pounds had been spent on buying the most powerful computers in the world, including the massive number-crunching Crays. They had been worked around-the-clock to fulfil the Government's latest requirement: to develop a deception system that would enable the Polaris warheads to penetrate any defences the Soviet Union could devise this century.

It had been no easy task; packing the advanced electronic deception systems into the small nose-cone of a Polaris missile was 'like squeezing a Rolls-Royce engine into a Mini', as Peter muttered to his colleagues whenever the problems seemed insurmountable. But that task had now been nearly completed; unarmed warheads together with their decoy systems were about to be fired off in a Polaris test rocket, for the first time later that week.

Countless times each day, as the test launch drew nearer, Peter ran through his mental checklist, for fear some vital component of the system had been overlooked. To him the development process had been like a chess game, using his brainpower and ingenuity to outwit his Russian opponents. The weapons that he was developing may have the ability to slaughter millions of people, yet for him the exercise of designing them had been almost academic. It was inconceivable, he felt sure, that human beings would ever be mad enough to actually use them.

As he drove in through the gates of Aldermaston, the few dozen placard-waving protesters on the roadside had a rather less optimistic view of human nature. Few of those watching knew the identity or particular importance of the man behind the wheel of the grey Vauxhall. But one woman certainly did – she was his wife.

Sharp at nine o'clock, the Permanent Undersecretary at the Ministry of Defence was at his desk on the sixth floor of the bleak, grey military powerhouse in Whitehall. Sir Marcus Beckett was a punctual man, steeped in the ethic of

professionalism and academic excellence by which the British Civil Service likes to think it is characterised.

He was a short man, not quite five feet nine inches in his socks. Self-consciousness at his stature had fuelled his determination to succeed in a career where a height of more than six feet seemed a requisite for rapid promotion.

His last job had been at the Treasury, and he had arrived at the Defence Ministry fired by determination to cut the ever-growing cost of Defence, undaunted by the limited success his predecessors had enjoyed in that same task.

The phone rang just as he was saying 'Good morning' to his secretary. The caller was an anxious clerk in the main reception area downstairs.

'She says there's a retired general called Twining standing at the desk,' the secretary whispered to the PUS, covering the mouthpiece of the phone with her hand. 'He insists on talking to you personally; says it's a matter of national security. She's checked his ID, and he seems genuine.'

Beckett frowned. The country seemed to be full of retired generals, and his own connection with Defence had been too short to give him any memory of a man called Twining.

'Better get him escorted up here,' he muttered eventually, but added sharply, 'Be ready to have him thrown out if he turns out to be a nutter!'

Three minutes later, as General David Twining was ushered into his office, Beckett scrutinised him critically, concluding that the man certainly looked genuine. In two short sentences, the general summarised his military career by way of introduction, then, with a distinct sense of drama, he placed on the civil servant's desk the buff-coloured folder he had found that morning.

'I found this in a rubbish bin on Hampstead Heath. Parliament Hill to be exact,' he intoned, narrowing his eyes to observe Beckett's reaction.

The civil servant frowned as he opened the folder and stared at the single sheet of paper inside. Suddenly his

eyebrows shot upwards in undisguised horror.

‘Good Lord!’ he exploded. ‘In a rubbish bin? Are you sure?’

Twining looked affronted.

‘Well of course you’re sure. Otherwise you wouldn’t be here!’

Beckett swung round sharply to press the switch on his office intercom, asking his secretary to send immediately for the head of security.

‘Sit down. Sit down please, General,’ he gestured to a chair, while taking a longer and closer look at the document. After a moment he groaned softly. ‘This does *not* look good.’

He put the folder down again.

‘Anyone else know about this? Was anyone with you when you found it?’

Twining shook his head. ‘Only my dog.’

Sir Marcus winced.

There was a respectful tap at the door.

‘Come in!’ Beckett yelled. ‘Ah, Commander Duncan! We’ve got some work for you, I’m afraid.’

After brief introductions Sir Marcus slipped the buff folder across his desk towards his head of security.

‘What, er . . . what do you make of that then?’ he asked, after allowing the commander a few moments to study it.

‘Well, sir,’ Duncan answered grimly, ‘I know what it is, and I know which security vault it’s come from. What I don’t know is what it’s doing up here.’

‘*He* found it! This morning! Lying around on Hampstead Heath! General Twining here!’ Sir Marcus spluttered in his anger and concern. ‘How could it have got there, Commander?’

Duncan looked uncomfortable.

‘There’s clearly been some sort of lapse . . .’ he began lamely. ‘Clearly a major breach of security. And er . . .’ – glancing uneasily towards the retired general – ‘I think it’s something we should discuss in *private*, if you don’t mind, sir.’

‘Yes, of course,’ Beckett nodded. ‘General, would you like to explain to Commander Duncan just exactly what happened this morning, and then we won’t need to detain you any further.’

The security man pulled a pad from his pocket and began to take a careful long-hand note of Twining’s description of events. Then, with a request that the general keep himself available at home to help investigating officers later, Sir Marcus shook him warmly by the hand and thanked him profusely for his discretion in bringing the document to the Ministry directly.

‘Right! Tell me the worst!’ Sir Marcus barked as soon as the door had closed behind their elderly visitor.

‘It’s project Skydancer, sir. Here’s the identification code in the bottom right-hand corner. This paper is one of a set of engineering plans – classified “top secret”. This is probably a photocopy, but the originals are under the custody of the Strategic Nuclear Secretariat, down on the fifth floor. Must be only a handful of people with access to such a document.’

‘Bugger!’ Beckett exploded. ‘How the hell could this one have got loose?’

Commander Duncan felt a prickling at the back of his neck. By his tone the Permanent Undersecretary almost seemed to be blaming him for it.

‘I don’t know, sir. Give me a little time and I’ll try to find out,’ he answered as coolly as he could.

Sir Marcus paced over to the window and stared down at the passing traffic.

‘We’d better call a conference, right away,’ he decided, turning back towards his desk. ‘The key people in Skydancer – I’ll get them here, so we can evaluate the seriousness of this business. I mean . . . God Almighty! The whole bloody project might be compromised! It has to be the bloody Russians!’

Peter Joyce squealed the tyres of his car as he turned through the gates of Aldermaston in his hurry to reach the motorway for London. The gaggle of protesters had dispersed by now. The permanent residents of the 'peace camp' were settling down to their morning chores, while the other protesters – including his wife – had gone off to their daily work.

On the insecure telephone line from the Ministry of Defence, Sir Marcus Beckett had been understandably vague about the exact nature of the security breach. But his voice carried an edging of ice which had made that vagueness additionally disturbing.

The road from the atomic weapons plant wound through picturesque villages and over bridges, which were a pleasure to pass on any normal day. But Peter cursed them as he struggled unsuccessfully to overtake a slow-moving lorry. Eventually, with a surge of relief, he swung his car on to the motorway and, pressing his foot to the floor, raced towards the capital. He leaned forward in his seat, concentrating on the road ahead, his dark eyes focusing far in front. Occasionally he lifted a hand briefly to push back the hank of straight brown hair that fell across his forehead.

In less than two hours he had reached the Defence Ministry in Whitehall. In the PUS's office he found himself joined by Alec Anderson, the civil servant at the head of the Strategic Nuclear Secretariat. Unsuspectingly, Anderson had arrived a little late for work that morning, and now looked shocked and confused. He was a policy man, not a technician, and like Sir Marcus Beckett was waiting anxiously for Peter Joyce to reveal whether General Twining's discovery was as significant as they feared.

Several pairs of eyes focused on Joyce's tall figure as he scanned the page of secrets.

'Christ Almighty!' he breathed after the first glance. 'This *is* a page from the Skydancer plans. Shows the re-entry vehicle separation mechanism. The full set describes

precisely how the decoy system works, how it can defeat the Soviet defences. This page on its own is sensitive enough, but if someone's given the Russians the full set . . . it'll be a disaster!'

'Well let's not jump the gun,' Beckett countered hurriedly. 'It may not be as serious as that.'

As a personal friend of the Prime Minister, the civil servant was dreading the public outcry and political uproar that could result from a full-blown security leak in his Ministry. The previous government had been brought down by a top-level Soviet infiltration of the security service MI5.

'Commander Duncan,' Beckett turned hopefully to his security chief. 'What have you been able to find out?'

'Well, sir, I checked in the documents register and I've found there are only two sets of these papers in existence, one kept here and the other at Aldermaston. While Mr Joyce was on his way up here, I took the liberty of ringing George Dogson, head of security at AWRE, and got him to check the vaults. Hope you don't mind, Mr Joyce,' he added, looking across.

'Of course not. What did he say?'

'All in order. Nothing missing there. Now, as for the other set, the ones here in MOD, they are kept in a strictly controlled security room, but a room to which dozens of people have access. All of them with top-level clearance, of course. But the nuclear papers are kept in a special filing cabinet there, and the only people with keys to that cabinet are Mr Anderson here and his secretary Miss Maclean.'

'Well.' Alec Anderson felt sweat breaking out on his forehead. 'We'd better go and look, hadn't we?'

Now a deeply unhappy man, he led the commander down to his office, to check the file. Mary Maclean, an attractive dark-haired woman in her late thirties, looked up in surprise at the sight of her principal being escorted into the room by the stern-faced security chief. She blanched when Anderson asked her to collect the Skydancer technical file from the

secure room. Closing her eyes momentarily, she seemed to hesitate as if struck by some painful realisation.

The two men watched closely as she slowly opened her desk drawer, took from it a key, then stood up and walked rigidly from the room. Anderson and the commander looked at one another with silent alarm.

‘Do you always keep that key in your desk drawer?’ the policeman asked her icily when she returned with the file.

‘Yes, I do,’ Mary Maclean replied defensively. ‘But I keep the drawer locked whenever I’m out of the room. And I keep the key to the drawer in my handbag. It’s always with me, I can assure you.’

The Commander’s heart sank. This simple lapse of security procedures meant that his list of suspects had grown dramatically. Literally dozens of people could have attained access to the vital papers.

He watched intently as Anderson opened the file and checked through the sheaf of papers. The thirty sheets of paper were all numbered – and they were all there.

Duncan then took hold of the file and thumbed through the pages himself, until he found the one that matched the photocopy in the buff folder. Each sheet had been hand-stamped with a Ministry seal. He checked the angle of the imprint on the original and on the copy. They matched perfectly.

‘No doubt about that,’ he muttered to himself with a certain satisfaction.

‘May I . . . may I enquire what this is about?’ Mary asked uneasily.

‘Someone’s got at the file – and copied it,’ Duncan responded bluntly.

She gasped. ‘And you think it’s because . . .’ her voice faltered.

‘We’re not thinking anything yet, Mary,’ Anderson interposed as gently as he could.

‘Well I should hope not,’ she remarked almost indignantly. She had put in long service at the Ministry and was proud of her record. Skydancer had played a significant part in her recent life, and it was not solely because of her professional involvement. In the last three months there had been personal reasons why she found it painful just to hear mention of the project.

From the look on Alec Anderson’s face it was beginning to hurt him too.

‘Would you mind, Mary?’

Anderson was handing her the file.

‘Would you mind putting this back in the vault?’

As the two men re-entered the office of the Permanent Undersecretary, Sir Marcus Beckett’s face expressed his heartfelt wish that they could have solved the mystery. But the Commander’s brooding scowl and Anderson’s look of shocked bewilderment soon dashed his hopes.

‘How the hell could this have happened?’ he demanded when they had told him what they had learned. ‘These are about the most sensitive documents in the whole bloody building, for Christ’s sake! How on earth could someone make copies without your knowing?’

Anderson made as if to speak, but no words emerged.

‘What do you know about this, Anderson?’ Sir Marcus continued, looking ready to launch a physical attack on anyone he could hold responsible for the disaster.

‘Nothing at all, PUS,’ Anderson half stammered in reply. His face was flushed. ‘I’m shocked . . . utterly.’

‘I’ll start a review of procedure immediately, sir,’ the security man broke in, eager to press on with a detailed investigation.

‘It’s a bit bloody late for that!’ Beckett snapped. ‘The bird seems to have flown!’

He strode across the room to glare angrily out of the window at the Thames Embankment below. Peter Joyce

stared at the Undersecretary's hands clasped tightly behind him. The fingers of one hand turned white with the pressure of his grip, and then began to colour again as the sight of the slow-moving river traffic seemed to exert a calming effect.

'All right,' Sir Marcus said eventually, breaking the uneasy silence, 'let's look at the worse case scenario.'

He sat himself at his desk, and drew a blank sheet of paper from a drawer. Then he wrote the figure '1' at the top left-hand corner.

'We have to assume that every page of the document has been photocopied,' he began. 'There would be little purpose in doing just one, unless someone is simply trying to make a point.' He paused to look round at the expectant faces of the three men opposite.

'Well? Is someone trying to make a point?' he demanded. 'Someone who knew there was a weakness in the security system, and wanted to show it up?'

His enquiry was greeted by murmured denials and frowns.

'What about your secretary, Anderson? Could she be up to something? Any odd behaviour lately? Change of life, that sort of thing?'

'Oh . . . I hardly think so, PUS,' Alec Anderson answered hurriedly. 'She's a bit young for that, and although she's been careless with the keys, I'm sure her loyalty is not in question.'

Anderson cast a furtive glance at Peter Joyce, but the scientist stared back impassively.

Sir Marcus began to write.

'Then we have to assume we are talking about espionage,' he declared. 'The assumption must be that someone had copied the Skydancer plans and is feeding them to the Russians. But why was this single page found in a rubbish bin? Were the Russians meant to pick it up from there? It's damned odd; I mean there must be dozens of

safer places to make the handover – why choose a rubbish bin?’

‘I’ve already got someone observing the place, sir,’ the Commander interjected, ‘in case someone comes looking for the document. But I agree it’s an odd place.’

‘The big question,’ Beckett continued, as if he had not heard what the security man had just said, ‘is whether this bungle occurred at the start of the handover process, or whether the Russians already have all or most of the rest of the papers.’

There was no sure answer to that question, but as Peter Joyce had explained, the Skydancer plans were of critical national importance, and if the secrets were already largely in the Russians’ hands, several hundred million pounds of taxpayers’ money could now have been totally wasted. A political hornet’s nest of huge dimensions would be stirred up the moment news of this security leak emerged.

There was a chance, just the slightest chance that the mystery could be solved rapidly, Beckett thought to himself. In which case it might never need to become public knowledge, and the Prime Minister could be spared the damaging publicity and the taunting from the opposition in parliament. He would have to call in the security service immediately, that was clear, but he would hold back from telling his Secretary of State about it in the hope the matter could be quickly resolved, without the politicians’ involvement and the inevitable and damaging attention of the media that would follow.

Bringing the meeting to an abrupt end, he instructed his officials to return to their duties, and to discuss the matter with no one other than the men from the security departments. After they left the sixth-floor office, Alec Anderson and Peter Joyce paused in the corridor outside to look at one another uneasily. Each recognised alarm and suspicion on the other’s face. Then they nodded at one

another and walked off in different directions, without speaking.

Peter Joyce hardly noticed the road as he motored back to Aldermaston. From time to time he touched his forehead to push back those strands of hair that stubbornly refused to grow any way but forwards. His usual air of confidence had largely evaporated that morning.

He was driving back at only half the speed he had maintained on his journey up to London, his mind in turmoil as he began to assess what a devastating blow this security leak was about to deal him. For the moment he was less concerned by the critical national issue of the leakage of nuclear secrets; he was gripped instead by a personal foreboding, a fear that it could emerge that indirectly and unwittingly he himself had been somehow responsible for the leak – and that those closest to him would see this as just retribution on him.

He vividly remembered the day, three months earlier, when he had first taken that set of vital documents up to London. They were to form the core of a top-level briefing of Government ministers who demanded to know in detail what this vast amount of public money had been spent on. He remembered the occasion with painful clarity, because it was the last time he had spent an evening with Mary Maclean – the night on which he had to tell her that their relationship was over.

Their love affair had lasted two years. It had begun almost by accident, and had blossomed freely, without strains and complications, at a period when his marriage to Belinda was proving increasingly stressful. But eventually Mary had begun to make assumptions about their future together, assumptions involving steps he was not prepared to take.

She had been devastated when he had told her their affair must come to an end. It was the night before the ministerial briefing; and he had visited her flat. Guiltily he remembered

now that the top secret plans had been in his briefcase all the time. The crazy – but not so crazy – thought now passed through his mind, that she could have copied the papers later and given them to the Soviets in an act of revenge. ‘Hell hath no fury . . .’ But no – he could not really believe that.

Peter stamped on the brake pedal and swerved into the left-hand lane, as he realised he was about to overshoot the turning off the motorway. He cut in front of a lorry which hooted loudly.

‘Damn!’ the scientist hissed. He would end up crashing if he was not more careful. Heading for the country lanes leading back to Aldermaston, he slowed down further, and continued to ponder how events might develop.

His secret affair with Mary Maclean was bound to be uncovered. The security men would question him closely on his care of those secret papers, and be alarmed by what they learned. They would also talk to his wife, and discover she was a confirmed anti-nuclear activist – and an associate of political groupings well to the left of the normal British political spectrum. They might begin to speculate whether it really was only now that those secrets had gone missing, and not months or even years previously.

And what would they say to Belinda? Would the security men ask her how much she knew of her husband’s affair with Mary? She had not known anything – Peter was certain of that. But how would she react when she found out? Would she walk out on him? And what of the children, for whose sake he had finally chosen to reject his mistress and preserve his marriage – would he lose them after all?

‘What a mess!’ he muttered as he finally turned the car through the gates of Aldermaston.

Once back at his desk, he instructed his secretary to discourage telephone callers. Peter Joyce was a methodical man who had spent his working life confronting apparently insoluble problems. Pulling out a thick notepad, he sat back

and forced his brain to concentrate. First he had to list and analyse the dangers that both he and the Skydancer project now faced. Then he had to think of ways to counter them, or at least to limit the damage.

Three thousand miles away the surface of the western Atlantic heaved and surged in a long, lazy swell, the aftermath of a depression which had moved off to the east to dump its rain on the soft green hills of Ireland.

Five hundred feet below that surface, the dark, still waters were unaffected by the weather above. It was down there that HMS *Retribution* slipped silently westwards, her 8,400 tons of sleek, black steel propelled by the tireless energy of her nuclear reactor. Longer than a football pitch, the leviathan of the Clyde was in her true element down there, amongst the other weird creatures of the deep that relied on sound, and sound alone, to protect themselves from predators.

And predators there were, in increasing numbers, for these boats and their crews who lived under water for two months at a time. The normal role of ballistic missile submarines like HMS *Retribution* was to lie in wait, lurking in the Atlantic depths far enough from the Russian coast to go undetected, but close enough for the sixteen Polaris missiles on board to stay within range of their targets. To lie in wait in the fervent hope that the very existence of her weapons would deter a war, and that they would never have to fire the rockets that could destroy several Soviet cities and slaughter tens of millions of people.

The predators for HMS *Retribution* were the Russian hunter-killer submarines, whose task was to scour the oceans for Western missile boats. If a war was ever to start, the Russians would try to sink *Retribution* before her deadly missiles could be fired.

The navies of Nato had the reverse task of tracking the Soviet missile boats, and in peacetime the roles of hunter

and hunted were constantly rehearsed in a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek.

Evenly placed along the smooth flank of *Retribution's* hull were small, flat plates, the ears of the submarine which could hear other vessels hundreds of miles away. Trailing behind the boat's fan-like propeller, a cable hundreds of yards long towed an array of hydrophones which could listen for distant sounds, unencumbered by the tiny noises generated by the movement of the submarine itself through the water. This was the most powerful tool of all in the electronic armoury that had enabled the Royal Navy's 'bombers' – as the polaris boats were called – to stay ahead of the game, to hear the Russians before the Russians heard them, and to remain undetected on their Atlantic patrols.

In the belly of the submarine's massive carcass one hundred and forty-three men lived their lives, apparently oblivious of their great depth under water, the pressure of which was such that, without the protection of the steel hull, it would crush them to death within seconds.

It had been nearly two weeks since they had last seen daylight, and Commander Anthony Carrington, the captain of *Retribution*, was looking forward to smelling fresh air again. He had just announced on the boat's public address system that they were due to dock in Port Canaveral, Florida, the following day. An air of anticipation and readjustment had immediately swept through the boat.

Cut off as they were from the regulating influence of the sun, the crew's time on board was broken into periods of work and periods of rest, rather than of day and night. Men found it easy to lose their sense of time. Now, though, with the prospect of shore leave imminent, they began to adjust their watches from Greenwich Mean Time to the hours observed in the girly-bars of Florida.

Information about the submarine's activities was strictly rationed on board to those few who needed to know. On a normal patrol the majority of the crew would have no