



GEOFFREY ARCHER

FIRE | HAWK



ITS THREAT WILL COVER THE WORLD

Contents

Also by Geoffrey Archer

Title Page

Epigraph

Dedication

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Chapter 38

Chapter 39

Chapter 40

Chapter 41

Chapter 42

Chapter 43

Chapter 44

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Sky Dancer
Shadow Hunter
Eagle Trap
Scorpion Trail
Java Spider
The Lucifer Network
The Burma Legacy
Dark Angel

Fire Hawk

Geoffrey Archer



Terrorism is perpetrated by individuals with a strong commitment to the causes in which they believe.

The widespread changes occurring within the last two decades have allowed international organised crime groups to become increasingly active worldwide.

*Louis J. Freeh
Director, Federal Bureau of
Investigation
28 January 1998*

For Eva, Ali and James

Prologue

THE ENGLISHMAN WAS naked. His hands were tied and his eyes were blinded by a rancid hood. His terror was unspeakable. They'd hurt him dreadfully and would hurt him again, searching for the moment when he could take no more.

The unseen interrogator stood close, smelling of tobacco and cheap after-shave. There were salivary noises from his mouth. The Englishman sensed his eyes on his bruised body, choosing which part to work on first.

Sam Packer struggled to close his mind to what was about to happen. Tried instead to picture something far away from this hell he was in. His mind focused on a face – the face of the woman he'd entrusted with his life.

Then they clubbed him behind the knees and brought him down.

Three days earlier. Baghdad, Iraq.

They'd been friends for a long time – the middle aged Iraqi and the man he was about to double-cross. His decision to betray the secret they shared had been blocked by fear until now. The others would kill him when they learned what he'd done. But if the loss of his own life saved the thousands that the Colonel planned to murder, it would not have been lost in vain.

He sat hunched in the rear of the new-smelling military saloon, heart thumping, sweat dripping inside his shirt. The car had left behind the dust and poverty of the souks, crossing the Tigris towards the administrative sector of

Baghdad. His breathing hurt – from fear and from the bad chest that had forced his retirement from the army a year after the Kuwait war, where he had served under the same Colonel who would soon be ordering his death.

He would do it just as they'd told him to, handing over the letter with its cryptic warning. But he would do something else, something they couldn't suspect, whispering in the Englishman's ear a secret so shocking he would move mountains to get it to his masters.

The road widened to a broad avenue. Looming on the right was the Rashid Hotel where the foreigners stayed.

Haji Abbas clutched his knees. All along, they'd kept him on the fringes of the conspiracy. Little more than an extra pair of hands. A doubter, but one bound to the Colonel by a loyalty that had now been tested too far. His knowledge of the plan and his complicity in it had become a shame he could no longer bear. The men in the front of the car were also tense. Their loyalty to the Colonel was unswerving yet their lives too were on the line. The Major, black-haired and moustached like their president, and the broad-shouldered Lieutenant behind the wheel whom he hardly knew.

The hotel gate guard lifted the pole and the driver swung in to the right and parked. Stepping inside the hotel's grand entrance, the three men trod solemnly on the face of George Bush painted where visitors would walk on it. Beyond it and to one side, long-faced men from Iraq's impoverished middle-classes sat at tables selling heirlooms to the few foreigners who ventured here.

They knew the Englishman was in the hotel. The Colonel had checked a short while ago. Abbas made for the elevators. Room 217, he'd been told. A room booked in the spy's cover name Terry Malone. As Abbas approached the lifts the Major touched his arm.

'No,' he hissed. 'Over there.'

Abbas looked across the lobby. The Englishman was sitting on a settee with a newspaper in his hands. Grey trousers,

white shirt and dark tie. The British spy had a strong, square face with a determined chin, thick, dark hair and steady eyes that registered all they saw. The gritty face of a military man. *Ex-military*, though still in his thirties. Navy.

Abbas crossed the polished floor, tugging the envelope from his jacket. The Englishman looked up. Fear flashed in his eyes like an animal sensing a trap. The Arab's hand shot forward with the letter, the back of his neck prickling from the gaze of the men who'd driven him here.

'For you, Mister Packer.'

Shock in the eyes then quick recovery. 'That's not my name. I'm Terry Malone.'

But Packer *was* his name. His real one.

'You read please.' Abbas spoke hoarsely, his throat dry. With the letter passed, his duty to his friends had been fulfilled.

'Wrong man, old boy,' Packer insisted. 'Malone's the name.'

Heart in his mouth, Abbas leaned forward for the unscripted act that would betray his Colonel. Trembling lips close to the Englishman's ear, he unburdened his conscience of its dreadful secret. Words that might yet save thousands from a dreadful fate, but which he knew would seal his own.

Wednesday, 25 September 1996
Odessa, Ukraine

IT WAS A little after seven in the morning when the two black Mercedes SL500 limousines sped through the elegant, tree-lined boulevards of Odessa. The sleek machines swept past the grey-green edifice in vulitsya Evreyska that used to house the KGB headquarters, the cars' heavy-set occupants giving it barely a glance. They'd feared the place in the old days. Feared the authority it represented. But today in this much-changed land it was they who held the power.

Gliding past two rattling Volgas and a packed bus belching soot, the limousines turned left by the Shevchenko Park. Then, tyres drumming on the cobbles, they pounded down the long, straight avenue to the Memorial to the Great Patriotic War, its obelisk set between a V of trees like the needle on a gun sight.

In the first car, two bodyguards rode up front, silently respectful of the man behind them dressed in a dark grey Armani suit and an expensively tasteful silk tie. Vladimir Filipovich Grimov sat on the central squab, keeping his distance from the armoured side windows. His close-cropped hair had the stiffness of a brush and his dark eyes were out of line with each other because one was made of glass.

The cobbled avenue ended in a paved circle. Parking was forbidden here, but these men had nothing to fear from the Militsia. The two Mercs pulled up a couple of metres apart in front of a red marble tablet engraved with the dates 1941-1945. Beyond lay a small flower bed bursting with red

geraniums, and beyond that a narrow, well-trimmed lawn flanked by flagstones stretched two hundred metres down the slope to the monument itself.

The doors of the second car were the first to open. Four men in black got out and spread through the trees, looking for shadows that moved. But at this early hour there was no one else here, as Grimov had expected. He strode down the slope to the terrace where the obelisk stood, ignoring the eternal flame flickering at its foot. He wasn't a man who paid homage. The terrace was edged by a waist-high wall. Like a preacher in a pulpit, he gripped its rim and looked down. Below and to his left lay the ugly sprawl of the docks. Beyond the cranes, most of them idle, a breakwater reached into the Black Sea, a small, white lighthouse at its tip.

The morning was clear and bright. He searched for the pier where the vessel had been due to dock. He held out a hand and an aide pressed binoculars into it. He raised them to his eyes, adjusting focus for the good one until he could read the names of the vessels below. He smiled. The container ship had arrived. As an ex-military man, it pleased him when things ran to plan. He lowered the glasses and watched the containers being swung from the deck to the quay, taking pleasure in knowing that those huge, powerful cranes were in part working for him. There was just one rust-red container on that ship that concerned him. It was his box, although his name and that of his organisation could never be linked with it.

The vessel had come from Piraeus, picking up cargoes there that had been gathered from ports all over the eastern Mediterranean. His container had been shipped from Haifa, packed with cartons of Israeli fruit and vegetable juices that were well past their sell-by dates and had been bought for next to nothing. The great plan he'd evolved for his foreign clients was going to make him very rich indeed. Their motives concerned him not one jot. Responsibility for the gruesome deaths would be his clients', not his. The one

thing that *did* concern him was the complexity of the plan. Too much scope for things to go wrong.

He began to run through in his mind what lay immediately ahead.

In a few hours, if all went to schedule, the container would be delivered to a warehouse. A customs officer would turn up, to be greeted by the warehouse manager, who knew him well. The two men would drink tea together in the site office and talk about football, the customs man quoting from the match report in the morning paper which he would leave folded on the table when they went back outside. In the yard they would break the Israeli customs seals on the forty-foot steel box and open the doors.

Both men would recoil from the stench erupting from inside. Naturally. Both would click their tongues at the sight of the bursting cartons. The warehouse manager would curse the Israelis for sending them such rubbish, giving vent to his deep-rooted anti-Semitism. The load would have to go back. No question. But first the customs official would want it fully unloaded, to check for hidden drugs. Once that was done, and the box was found to contain nothing but rotting juice, the two men would retire to the site office again for a shot of pepper vodka. The customs official would agree to return in a few days' time to reseal the container, once a ship had been found for its return to Israel. There'd be no need to inspect the foul-smelling contents again, he would say. Of course not. No need at all. Then, after another shot of Pertsovka, the customs officer would pocket his folded newspaper – heavier now there was an envelope inside it – and be on his way.

Usually it was stolen icons that slipped out of the country this way. What it was to be this time the customs man would neither know nor care.

Vladimir Filipovich Grimov brushed imagined dust from the sleeves of his Armani suit and cast a last glance down at the harbour. He sniffed the crisp morning air. He had a good

feeling about this one. A confidence that, despite its complexity, the plan would work.

He turned away from the view, handed the binoculars to his aide and strode back up the slope towards the cars.

It had begun.

**Saturday, 28 September
Baghdad**

THE DUSTY YARD behind the old, three-storey imports warehouse in eastern Baghdad had been little used since 1991 when the UN cut Iraq off from the outside world. Just large enough for a small truck to enter through its dilapidated wooden gates, it was shielded from prying eyes by a high breeze-block wall.

A small pickup in the dark green of the Iraqi army stopped in the alley at the back, a canvas awning covering its load area. Its uniformed driver undid the heavy, new-looking padlock on the gates and swung them open. Then he reversed in until the closed tailboard of the pickup was just a metre from a small doorway into the building. He quickly shut the gates again, glancing furtively at the empty neighbouring blocks for signs that his arrival might have been observed.

Then he went inside.

A few minutes later a different man emerged from the warehouse, also dressed in the dark green of Iraq's armed forces. Dark-haired and with a moustache that was a copy of his much-feared president's, he had the bearing of a middle-ranking officer. He stood beside the truck and listened.

It was early morning still. In the maze of mean streets behind the warehouse lived some of Baghdad's poorest. For them another miserable day was beginning. The officer heard a baby cry, children shouting and mothers jabbering

in efforts to shut them up. Smoke with an acid bite drifted into the yard. Many families, he knew, had been reduced to cooking on fires fuelled by refuse.

He checked the windows of neighbouring buildings, then, as satisfied as he could be that he was not being watched, he unfastened the tarpaulin at the rear of the truck and lowered the tailboard.

A minute later the pickup's driver reappeared, his left hand gripping the pinioned arm of a prisoner hooded by a black bag with a small breathing hole cut in it. The captive, who wore a white shirt, grey trousers and no shoes, stumbled as if his feet had been cut by broken glass.

'Where am I going?' An English voice. Weak. 'Where are you taking me?'

'No speaking!'

'I want to know, damn you!' Stronger now.

Silently the officer with the moustache stepped forward and punched him in the stomach. The Englishman buckled. As they bundled him into the rear of the pickup, his damaged shins scraped the tailboard and he yelped with pain. Crouching beside the prisoner on the ribbed metal floor the guard sat the Englishman upright, then unlocked the cuffs that held his hands behind his back.

'Tch, tch,' he clucked. 'I told you, no questions. It is better for you.'

He saw blood seeping through the prisoner's trousers. It had been several days since the beatings, but shins took a long time to heal. On the floor of the pickup was a stretcher. He told the Englishman to lie on it.

'Look, what the hell is this? Where am I being taken?'

'You soon see,' the guard whispered, tying the man's arms to the poles. 'If you lucky this finish quick for you.'

The Englishman felt as if his heart had stopped. The bastards were going to kill him.

The green pickup wove through the narrow alleys of the market district, squeezing past dusty tinsmithies where shutters were being rolled up for the day's business. The driver braked frequently to avoid crushing boys balancing trays of tea. Pungent smells wafted in through the open window. The moustached officer sat silently beside the driver, glaring out of the window, revelling in the intimidating effect his green uniform had on those who saw it.

The vehicle's jolting on the rutted back alleys of Shaikh Omar turned the stretcher Sam Packer was lying on into a bed of nails. He was a strong, fit man, just under six feet tall, but a couple of weeks of being battered by what he'd assumed to be the Mukhabarat – the Iraqi secret police – had reduced his strength to a girl's. Above all else he wanted to see again. Since the day they'd grabbed him they'd removed the foul-smelling hood from his head just once, and then only for a desperate purpose. None of the training he'd been given upon joining the Intelligence Service six years earlier had prepared him for what they'd put him through. But he'd told them nothing of what they wanted to hear. To confess to being a spy meant the gallows, and death had no appeal for him. A terrible dread, however, told him that death was now to be his fate, confession or not.

It had been the middle of September when he'd arrived in Baghdad, but how many days had passed since then he had little idea. His visa application had given his employer as Entryline Exhibitions of Egham, Surrey. The job was genuine enough. So was the purpose of his visit: to survey arrangements for a trade fair the following year. But his second job was the one that mattered: listening out for hints of which European and Asian businessmen had plans to satisfy Iraq's appetite for arms once UN sanctions were lifted.

The moment of his entrapment was a scene he'd relived countless times as he lay on the stone floor of the latrine-like cell waiting to be beaten again. It had happened out of the blue. No inkling. Sitting in the lobby of the Rashid Hotel on his fourth evening in Iraq, he'd been glancing at a week-old *Herald Tribune* a German had passed on to him when a middle-aged Iraqi had approached. Small and scruffy, with pale, strangely dead eyes, the man was a creature he'd never seen before.

'For you, Mister Packer.'

It had been terrifying to hear his real name used, terrifying to hear it spoken by this stranger. The Iraqi had ignored his denials, leaning forward until his mouth was just inches from his ear. Then he'd begun to whisper, a warning that had taken Sam's breath away: *'Anthrax warheads - they have been taken outside Iraq and will soon be used.'*

Anthrax. Biological warfare. BW - the UN's living nightmare, the primary target now of its five-year-long inspection regime inside Iraq. *Will soon be used . . .* Where? And when? Before he could ask the man was gone.

His mind had cartwheeled. Was the warning true, or a trick? The man had known his name. Not Terry Malone, the name on his passport and the hotel register, but Packer. Sam Packer. And if they knew his real name, they knew he was a spy, and *they* must be Iraqi counter-intelligence. He'd felt caught in a spotlight. He'd scanned the lobby for watching eyes. The hotel was riddled with hidden cameras and microphones. *Someone* would have recorded the contact made with him. Slowly he'd stood up, slipping the envelope into the pocket of his jacket and making for the lifts.

Up in his bedroom, unmasked and a very long way from home, he'd felt the first shiver of panic. He'd locked himself in the bathroom and hidden behind the shower curtain to avoid covert lenses. Inside the envelope he'd found a single

sheet of lined note-paper. On it, two sentences of four words each.

Beware of Salah Khalil. He is Saddam's man.

The name had meant nothing to him. Two messages passed to him; one written, one verbal, one about a man, one about a plague. No obvious connection between the two.

He'd memorised the words on the note, then burned it, flushing the ash down the drain. Common sense had told him this was a trap – the Mukhabarat feeding him phoney intelligence in the hope of catching him passing it to London. Yet his guts had told him something else, that the messenger had been risking his neck to speak to him. That the man was in fear of his life. With no time in which to think, he'd concluded the warnings could be genuine, and since the danger from anthrax weapons was so great, the tip-off, however vague, had to be passed on fast. Direct communication with London was impossible. No phone was safe. But he'd remembered the German businessman who'd given him the newspaper, remembered he was heading home via Amman that evening.

He'd set to work fast, squatting on the loo seat and searching the newspaper for the crossword. Filling in blanks in its matrix, he'd scrawled K-H-A-L-I-L S-U-S-P-E-C-T and B-W A-T-T-A-C-K A-L-E-R-T – there'd been no time for code. Then he'd buried a phone number on the small ads page. Not the direct line for his controller at SIS – too risky if the German were to be stopped by the Mukhabarat – but a personal number, someone whose reaction to the message would be as instinctive as his.

Chrissie Kessler, his lover until three months ago.

Downstairs, the German had had the taxi door open when Sam found him.

'Your paper. You wanted it back,' he'd declared, willing the man to understand. In a whisper he'd added, 'Look inside.'

Later, not now. Ring the number on page six. It's London. Ask for Chrissie. Read her the crossword. Please.'

Not wavering for a moment, the German had climbed into the taxi and driven off.

Three minutes later, back in the hotel lobby, Packer had been arrested. The Mukhabarat had seen everything. A trap after all. Two men had hustled him to a car, one of them with shiny black hair and a Saddam moustache. And now, God knew how many days later, here he was, strapped to a stretcher in the back of some truck that smelled of piss, heading for whatever fate they'd decided on. He was helpless. On his own. They could do what they liked with him – and they would.

The bumping of the wheels that had been causing him such discomfort ended suddenly. The truck's tyres began humming on smooth tarmac. There was no more stopping for lights or crossroads. They were on some highway now. He forced himself to concentrate, to make an intelligent guess at what was happening. He knew what the pattern was. Foreigners arrested in the past had been interrogated in police cells, then moved after a farce of a trial to the main prison at Abu Ghraib, west of the city. Abu Ghraib. A place of misery and executions. His heart turned over again. Did they give prisoners fair warning when they were about to kill them, or did they just string them up?

In the days that had followed his arrest, the worst part for him had been the isolation. Not knowing what was happening or why. No comfort call from the Red Cross. No diplomatic visit from the Russians who looked after British interests in Baghdad. It was as if the outside world had forgotten he even existed. He knew that once caught, a spy must expect to be disowned by his own people, but the reality of it had been hard to stomach.

At first they'd questioned him without physical violence. His interrogator who'd spoken in a plummy English accent acquired, he guessed, at a British staff college several years

back, had demanded he confess to spying and name his contacts. But he'd denied everything, maintaining he truly was Terry Malone, an exhibition contractor. Then after a couple of days the atmosphere had changed. They'd begun to rough him up. Instead of the catch-all about spying, the interrogator, whom he'd nicknamed 'Sandhurst', had posed a different question: what was it the middle-aged informant had whispered to him in the Rashid Hotel lobby?

The switch of question had thrown him. Why were they asking it if the informant had simply been acting on Mukhabarat orders - and he must have been, he'd reasoned, because he knew his real name. Only a counter-intelligence service could have broken his cover, and he had no clue how. He'd begun to wonder if the tip-off man had gone further than his Mukhabarat masters had intended and revealed a secret in that fear-laden whisper. He'd bluffed it out with his questioner, pretending the informant had simply exhorted him to read the letter then destroy it. The interrogator's response had been brutal. Concentrating first on the small of his back, the blows had knocked the air from his lungs. But he'd told them nothing. In later sessions they'd used sticks on his shins and glowing cigarettes on his chest. But he'd still said not a word about anthrax.

Between beatings they'd returned him to his cell and deprived him of sleep and nourishment. How often the cycle had been repeated he didn't know. He'd lost sense of time and place, floating on a cushion of pain, kept alive by his certainty that to admit anything at all would mean certain death. As his strength had faded, two questions had circled unanswered in his head. How the hell had the Iraqis broken his cover? And had they received his message in London - had Chrissie ever been given it and had she passed it on?

Confirmation that the thin-faced informant must have exceeded his instructions had arrived soon after. They'd been interrogating Packer again, punctuating their questions with blows to his feet. Then suddenly they'd stopped,

dragging him to another room and whipping the hood off. Dangling in front of him was a corpse, naked like himself. The anthrax messenger had been suspended from a rope by hands bound behind his back. His arms were half wrenched from their sockets, his eyes were cataract white, his belly black from the beating that had ruptured his innards.

‘This will happen to you, Packer,’ Sandhurst had hissed from behind his head. ‘Unless you tell me what he told you.’

Back in the interrogation room his captors had forgotten to replace the hood at first. For the first time since his arrest he could see his surroundings. The room was some sort of store, large and bare, its windows blacked-out with cardboard. And for the first time too he had seen the faces of his tormentors.

Sandhurst, he’d finally realised, was the creature with the Saddam moustache who’d arrested him at the Rashid, dressed now in a dark green uniform which bore no insignia. The guard who’d carried out the beatings on Sandhurst’s orders had been the second man at the arrest.

And there’d been a third person in the room, a man whose presence he’d been unaware of until then. A commanding figure sitting a few feet away from the others, motionless and silent, eyeing him with a brooding intensity, his dog-like face leathery and lined, his hair and mournful moustache a distinguished sandy-grey. This was the man in charge. The man who controlled his fate. For several seconds he’d felt the intensity of his gaze, the commanding presence. This sand-blasted figure was a veritable Saladin of a man. And it was him, this one, he’d decided, who was so desperate to discover what the messenger had whispered to him.

Suddenly the Labrador eyes had turned angry, the man’s chisel chin jerking forward involuntarily. He’d shouted at his subordinates. He’d been seen by the prisoner and didn’t want to be. The hood had been jammed back on.

Then, two days ago, Packer had had the feeling they were giving up, that he’d defeated them. Yesterday there’d been

no interrogation session at all and they'd let him sleep out his exhaustion. At the end of the day they'd disconnected his arm from the heating pipe to which he'd been shackled, moved him from the stinking toilet of a cell whose vile, shit-caked confines he'd defied through touch on day one of his incarceration, then never again, and hosed him down with icy water. After that they'd let him eat something that tasted like food instead of sewage, and given him a room with a bed instead of a stone floor. He'd felt absurdly relieved. Almost euphoric.

This morning, however, when his guard told him he was being moved, his fear had returned. Something new was in store and they wouldn't say what. A show trial perhaps? Some travesty of a court process? A spy hearing for which there was only ever one sentence in Iraq?

It was hot in the back of the truck now. The tyres had hummed for what seemed like hours. If it was Abu Ghraib they were heading for, they should surely have arrived already. But if not Abu Ghraib, where else? The road they were on sounded smooth and felt straight. The only route from the capital that he knew personally was the motorway to Jordan. With no flights, all commercial visitors to Iraq had to take the ten-hour drive from Amman. But there were other main roads from Baghdad – north, south and east. They could be taking him anywhere.

If you lucky this finish quick for you. At that moment the guard's words had only one meaning for him. Death. The noose over the head, the tightening at the throat, the floor dropping away. He ordered himself not to think about it.

From time to time during the past days he'd felt intense, bitter anger at his masters at SIS for failing to get him out of there. What were they doing in London? There'd been nothing from the world he knew. Not a word. And Chrissie – surely to God she would have moved heaven and earth for him.

From time to time, too, he'd ruminated on what madness it was that had made him want to be a spy in the first place. A thirst for excitement had been one motive, and as he lay there in his own filth in the bare cell it had seemed a damned stupid one. But there'd been more to it than that – a fundamental belief that the dissemblers of this world needed sorting out and that he should be one of those to do it. For now, however, the dissemblers had won. He was their prisoner.

Suddenly the truck slowed down, bumping onto the rough verge and coming to a juddering halt. The sun had turned the rear of the vehicle into an oven. Sam's throat felt parched. He heard the flap being unlaced and someone climbing into the back.

'What's going on?' He felt panicky again. 'What's happening?'

He imagined a pistol being put to his head. His arms were untied and he was jerked up into a sitting position.

'We have stopped to urinate, Packer. That is all.' Sandhurst's mellow tones. It surprised him the interrogator was still with him. 'We don't want you making a mess of our vehicle.'

Why was Sandhurst here? Interrogators weren't normally involved in transporting prisoners around the country.

'Then take this damn hood off so I can see what I'm doing.'

'You're not allowed to see. You're a *spy*, Packer.'

Gingerly, Sam felt for the edge of the platform and swung his legs over. When his feet hit the ground he yelped with pain. Hands gripped him and he was marched a few paces.

'This will do.' Sandhurst's voice again. 'You can do it here. What is it you call it in the Navy? Pumping ship?'

'Something like that.'

The Navy . . . *How* did this man know so much about him?

Packer fumbled with the unfamiliar buttons of the trousers given to him to wear that morning. Unable to see what he

was doing, the flow didn't come easily. Behind him on the road he heard the swish of heavy vehicles passing, confirming they were on a main highway. And from the strength of the sun above he guessed it was midday or later. Must have dozed a little in the truck.

After he had buttoned up, the hands were back on his elbows, spinning him round and steering him to the truck.

'Look,' he protested gently, 'for the love of God, can't you tell me where we're going?'

'You'll find out soon enough,' Sandhurst snapped, shoving him against the tailboard so he could feel the ledge. 'Get in. There's some water in a bottle if you want it.'

'What about food? I've had nothing.'

'Oh, really? Haven't you heard?' Sandhurst mocked. 'There's a food shortage in Iraq. UN sanctions, you know.'

Sam eased his backside onto the tailboard and swung his legs up. His shins burned horribly. He edged backwards until he found the stretcher again. A plastic water bottle was pressed into his hands. He unscrewed the top and raised the rim to his lips. The water was warm and unpleasant, but he drank gratefully. He heard breathing. His hearing, made more sensitive by his inability to see, told him it was the guard beside him rather than Sandhurst.

'What's going to happen to me?' he whispered. 'You can tell me.' Between the beatings this man had shown a degree of kindness to him in the past few days.

'Tch!'

Sam held out the bottle.

'No. You must drink more. You get dehydrate.'

He felt he'd had enough, but took several more swigs.

'Where are we going, friend? Tell me.'

'Tch, tch,' the Iraqi repeated, taking the bottle and pushing Sam down onto the stretcher. He retied his arms. 'You are spy. Soon finish for you.'

God! That word 'finish' was like a bell tolling.

'What d'you mean?'

'This night. All finish for you,' the guard whispered, then scurried away.

Tonight. Within hours. The ambiguity of the words tortured him. He tensed his arms, testing the strength of the ties. No chance of escape. He heard the canvas flaps being fastened, then the cab doors banging shut. The engine coughed back into life and they began to move again.

As the tyres picked up speed on the highway, his mind filled with the image of a face. The face of the woman whom he'd entrusted with his life. A face framed by silky chestnut hair and dominated by cool grey eyes.

Chrissie.

It had been a whim to put her phone number in the German's newspaper. An instinctive act, stemming from a belief that she still cared for him. She'd been Christine White when they first met, although she'd used a different surname as her cover. Christine Kessler now, the wife of a department head at MI6. Ironically it had been here in Iraq their affair had begun, six years ago. With Iraq's army massing on the border with Kuwait, Western intelligence had been short of agents in place. Newly transferred to the Intelligence Service from the Royal Navy, he'd been despatched to Baghdad as an extra on a trade mission. A few days later the Iraqi army had invaded Kuwait, and when the West threatened retaliation most foreigners in Iraq, including himself, had been rounded up as hostages.

He'd been told before his mission that there was another MI6 agent in Baghdad, but not her name. A woman whose cover job was with a British company running a construction contract. He knew that she'd been told about him too. At the hotel where most of the Britons were being held by the Iraqi security services, they'd identified one another through a process of elimination.

She'd attracted him instantly. Physically at least. From the crown of her red-brown hair to the immaculately pedicured toes peeping from a pair of slingback sandals, she'd oozed

style and sensuality. Her character had grated at first – she'd tried to pull rank because she'd worked for the Intelligence Service longer than him. But the antipathy hadn't lasted. Thrown together by confinement to the hotel, their relationship had become close and equal.

But not intimate at first, not until the Iraqi announcement that the foreigners were to be used as human shields against American bombers. Then a change had come about in her. The fear spreading through the hostages that they would all be killed had gripped her with an irrational intensity. She'd kept her cool in public, but alone with him in the privacy of his room she'd gone to pieces. She'd shared his bed that night and he'd done what he'd wanted to do since first clapping eyes on her. The next day, when the hostages had been shipped off to be held at strategic targets, Sam had been separated from her. Only at Christmas when they were repatriated to Britain had they met again. Only then had she told him that she was engaged to be married. To Martin Kessler, a senior official at SIS.

He'd expected that to be the end of the matter – a sexual interlude in a moment of crisis – but the bond forged in Baghdad was not to be broken so easily. A few months after her wedding she'd contacted him again, inviting herself to his apartment one Sunday afternoon. Within minutes of walking through the door she'd told him her marriage had been a terrible mistake. That her husband lacked bedroom skills and seemed disinclined to acquire any.

She'd made no secret of the purpose of her visit. Her directness had disarmed him. He wasn't used to women declaring so openly that they wanted sex, particularly women who attracted him as much as Chrissie. Despite qualms about what he was getting into, he'd obliged her, because when she'd unbuttoned her shirt in his living room that Sunday afternoon, the reasons for doing so had seemed infinitely more appealing than those against. Their affair had

lasted for over five years on and off, until three months ago, when she'd announced her 'final and irreversible' decision to commit herself to her husband. No good reason given. At least, none that had made sense to him.

The truck hit a pothole suddenly, shooting pain through his bruised back.

How stupid. How incredibly ill-judged, he realised now, to have sent his message to a woman who'd rejected him. Phoned through to the home she shared with the man he'd cuckolded, a man who could by definition be no friend of his, a man high up in MI6 who had the power to decide that a spy whose cover was blown in Iraq should be left to rot there.

'Stupid,' he mouthed to himself. 'Fucking stupid.'

Despair engulfed him. He was utterly alone – and he felt it.

It was hot in the back of the truck and getting hotter. He would have given anything for some more of that water, despite its unpleasant taste, but if the bottle was there, his pinioned arms were preventing him getting to it. An irresistible drowsiness began to creep over him.

When he came to, his head throbbed and he had no idea how much more time had passed. The truck had stopped. A cool draught of air blowing over him told him that the canvas flap had been lifted and it was night. How could he have slept so long? He tried to snap awake, but his mind was a fog. Suddenly it occurred to him that the water he'd drunk could have been drugged.

Minutes passed. He listened but heard nothing that would tell him where he was. Then through the rough fabric of the hood he saw a light being shone on him. Thick rubber soles thumped up onto the truck's steel floor. He had company. Someone who reeked of sweat. The sleeve of his shirt was pulled up, fingers tapping on his veins.

'What the fuck . . .?'

Terror hit him. Sheer, blind terror.

‘What’re you doing?’

He strained at the ties binding him to the stretcher. A needle jabbed in and a flush of coolness spread up his arm.

‘Oh no. *No!*’

Not like that. Not so soon. Not when he wasn’t ready.

Amman, Jordan

THE AIRBUS TURBOFANS whimpered into silence and the dozen business-class passengers began to unclip their belts. Cabin staff delved into hanging spaces for jackets, their eyes betraying an eagerness to be rid of their passengers. It had been a long flight.

Towards the back of the cabin an English woman in her mid-thirties, whose red-brown hair fell in wisps across her forehead, had given the appearance of being asleep through most of the flight. Now she sat up straight and made a bleary-eyed check that nothing had fallen from her handbag. Then she stood up to extricate her small suitcase from the overhead locker.

‘Let me.’

A steward reached up for her and lowered the bag to the floor.

‘Thanks.’

She flashed him her warmest of looks and noted the interest in his eyes. At least one of them wasn’t gay.

‘Hope we’ll see you again soon, Mrs Taylor.’

‘Thank you. I hope so too.’

A stewardess held out a cream linen jacket for her.

‘Thanks. I’m glad half of me won’t look creased,’ she said, brushing her lap in an attempt to smooth the wrinkles of the matching skirt. ‘I’d have done better wearing jeans.’ She slipped the jacket on. ‘What did they say the temperature was outside?’