



AT RISK

STELLA RIMINGTON

A K N O P F  B O O K

At Risk

**STELLA
RIMINGTON**

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To my granddaughter Charlotte

1

With quiet finality, the tube train drew to a stop. A long hydraulic gasp, and then silence.

For several moments no one in the crowded carriage moved. And then, as the stillness and the silence deepened, eyes began to flicker. Standing passengers peered worriedly through the windows into the blackness, as if hoping for some explanatory vision or revelation.

They were halfway between Mornington Crescent and Euston, Liz Carlyle calculated. It was five past eight, it was Monday, and she was almost certainly going to be late for work. Around her pressed the smell of other people's damp clothes. A wet briefcase, not her own, rested in her lap.

Nestling her chin into her velvet scarf, Liz leaned back into her seat and cautiously extended her feet in front of her. She shouldn't have worn the pointed plum-coloured shoes. She'd bought them a couple of weeks earlier on a light-hearted and extravagant shopping trip, but now the toes were beginning to curl up from the soaking they'd received on the way to the station. From experience she knew that the rain would leave nasty indelible marks on the leather. Equally infuriatingly, the kitten heels had turned out to be just the right size to get wedged in the cracks between paving stones.

After ten years of employment at Thames House, Liz had never satisfactorily resolved the clothes issue. The accepted look, which most people seemed gradually to fall into, lay somewhere between sombre and invisible. Dark trouser suits, neat skirts and jackets, sensible shoes—the sort of stuff you found in John Lewis or Marks and Spencer.

While some of her colleagues took this to extremes, cultivating an almost Soviet drabness, Liz instinctively subverted it. She often spent Saturday afternoons combing the antique clothing stalls in Camden Market for quixotically stylish bargains which, while they infringed no Service rules, certainly raised a few eyebrows. It was a bit like school, and Liz smiled as she remembered the grey pleated skirts which could be dragged down to regulation length in the classroom and then hiked to a bum-freezing

six inches above the knee for the bus-ride home. A little fey to be fighting the same wars at thirty-four, perhaps, but something inside her still resisted being submerged by the gravity and secrecy of work at Thames House.

Intercepting her smile, a strap-hanging commuter looked her up and down. Avoiding his appreciative gaze, Liz ran a visual check on him in return, a process which was now second nature to her. He was dressed smartly, but with a subtly conservative fussiness which was not quite of the City. The upper slopes of academia, perhaps? No, the suit was hand-made. Medicine? The well-kept hands supported that idea, as did the benign but unmistakable arrogance of his appraisal. A consultant with a few years' private practice and a dozen pliant nurses behind him, Liz decided, headed for one of the larger teaching hospitals. And next to him a goth-girl. Purple hair extensions, Sisters of Mercy T-shirt under the bondage jacket, pierced everything. A bit early in the day, though, for one of her tribe to be up and about. Probably works in a clothes shop or music store or . . . no, got you. The faint shiny ridge on the thumb where the scissors pressed. She was a hairdresser, spending her days transforming nice girls from the suburbs into Hammer Horror vampires.

Inclining her head, Liz once again touched her cheek to the silky scarlet nap of her scarf, enveloping herself in a faint scented miasma which brought Mark's physical presence—his eyes and his mouth and his hair—rushing home to her. He had bought her the scent from Guerlain on the Champs Élysées (wildly unsuitable, needless to say) and the scarf from Dior on the Avenue Montaigne. He had paid cash, he later told her, so that there would be no paper trail. He had always had an unerring instinct for the tradecraft of adultery.

She remembered every detail of the evening. On the way back from Paris, where he had been interviewing an actress, he had arrived without warning at Liz's basement flat in Kentish Town. She'd been in the bath, listening to *La Bohème* and trying half-heartedly to make sense of an article in *The Economist*, and suddenly there he was, and the floor was strewn with expensive white tissue paper and the place was reeking—gorgeously and poignantly—of Vol de Nuit.

Afterwards they had opened a bottle of duty-free Moët and climbed back into the bath together. "Isn't Shauna expecting you?" Liz had asked guiltily.

"She's probably asleep," Mark answered cheerfully. "She's had her sister's kids all weekend."

"And you, meanwhile . . ."

"I know. It's a cruel world, isn't it?"

The thing that had baffled Liz at first was why he had married Shauna in the first place. From his descriptions of her, they seemed to have nothing in common whatever. Mark Callendar was feckless and pleasure-loving and possessed of an almost feline perceptiveness—a quality which made him one of the most sought-after profilists in

print journalism—while his wife was an unbendingly earnest feminist academic. She was forever hounding him for his unreliability; he was forever evading her humourless wrath. There seemed no purpose to any of it.

But Shauna was not Liz's problem. Mark was Liz's problem. The relationship was complete madness and, if she didn't do something about it soon, could well cost her her job. She didn't love Mark and she dreaded to think of what would happen if the whole thing was forced out into the open. For a long time it had looked as if he was going to leave Shauna, but he hadn't, and Liz now doubted that he ever would. Shauna, she had gradually come to understand, was the negative to his positive charge, the AC to his DC, the Wise to his Morecambe; between them they made up a fully functioning unit.

And sitting there in the halted train it occurred to her that what really excited Mark was the business of transformation. Descending on Liz, ruffling her feathers, laughing at her seriousness, magicking her into a bird of paradise. If she had lived in an airy modern flat overlooking one of the London parks, with wardrobes full of exquisite designer clothes, then she would have held no interest for him at all.

She really had to end it. She hadn't told her mother about him, needless to say, and in consequence, whenever she stayed the weekend with her in Wiltshire, she had to endure a well-intentioned homily about Meeting Someone Nice.

"I know it's difficult when you can't talk about your job," her mother had begun the night before, lifting her head from the photo album that she was sorting out, "but I read in the paper the other day that over two thousand people work in that building with you, and that there are all sorts of social activities you can do. Why don't you take up amateur dramatics or Latin American dancing or something?"

"Mum, please!" She imagined a group of Northern Ireland desk officers and A4 surveillance men descending on her with eyes blazing, maracas shaking, and coloured ruffles pinned to their shirts.

"Just a suggestion," said her mother mildly, and turned back to the album. A minute or two later she lifted out one of Liz's old class photos.

"Do you remember Robert Dewey?"

"Yes," said Liz cautiously. "Lived in Tisbury. Peed in his pants at the Stonehenge picnic."

"He's just opened a new restaurant in Salisbury. Round the corner from the Playhouse."

"Really?" murmured Liz. "Fancy that." This was a flanking attack, and what it was really about was her coming home. She had grown up in the small octagonal gatehouse of which her mother was now the sole tenant, and the unspoken hope was

that she should return to the country and “settle down,” before spinsterhood and the City of Dreadful Night claimed her for ever. Not necessarily with Rob Dewey—he of the sodden shorts—but with someone similar. Someone with whom, at intervals, she could enjoy “French cuisine” and “the theatre” and all the other metropolitan amenities to which she had no doubt grown accustomed.

Extricating herself from the maternal web last night had meant that Liz hadn’t got on to the motorway until 10 p.m., and hadn’t reached the Kentish Town flat until midnight. When she let herself in she found that the washing that she’d put on on Saturday morning was lying in six inches of cloudy water in the machine, which had stopped mid-cycle. It was now far too late to start it again without annoying the neighbours, so she rooted through the dry-cleaning pile for her least crumpled work outfit, hung it over the bath, and took a shower in the hope that the steam would restore a little of its élan. When she finally made it to bed it was almost 1 a.m. She had managed about five and a half hours’ sleep and felt puffy-eyed, adrift on a tide of fatigue.

With a gasp and a long, flatulent shudder, the tube train restarted. She was definitely going to be late.

2

Thames House, the headquarters of MI5, is on Millbank. A vast and imposing edifice of Portland stone, eight storeys in height, it crouches like a great pale ghost a few hundred yards south of the Palace of Westminster.

That morning, as always, Millbank smelt of diesel fumes and the river. Clutching her coat around her against the rain-charged wind, watching for the sodden plane-tree leaves on which it was all too easy to turn an ankle, Liz hurried up the entrance steps. Bag swinging, she pushed open one of the doors into the lobby, raised a quick hand in greeting to the security guards at the desk, and slotted her smart pass into the barrier. The front of one of the security capsules opened, she stepped inside, and was briefly enclosed. Then, as if she'd travelled light years in an instant, the rear door slid open, and she stepped out into another dimension. Thames House was a hive, a city of steel and frosted glass, and Liz felt a subtle shift inside herself as she crossed its security threshold and was borne noiselessly upwards to the fifth floor.

The lift doors opened and she turned left and moved at speed towards 5/AX, the agent-runners' section. This was a large open-plan office lit by strip lights and lent a faintly seedy character by the clothes stands that stood by each desk. These were hung with the agent-runners' work clothes—in Liz's case a worn pair of jeans, a black Karrimor fleece, and a zip-up leather jacket. Her desk was spare—a grey terminal, a touch-tone phone, an FBI mug—and flanked to one side by a combination-locked cupboard from which she took a dark blue folder.

“And, coming into the home straight . . .” murmured Dave Armstrong from the next desk, his eyes locked to his computer screen.

“Courtesy of the bloody Northern Line,” gasped Liz, spinning the cupboard lock. “The train just . . . *stopped*. For at least ten minutes. In the middle of nowhere.”

“Well, the driver could hardly sit and smoke a joint in the station, could he?” asked Armstrong reasonably.

But Liz, folder in hand and minus coat and scarf, was already halfway to the exit.

En route to Room 6/40, one flight up, she hurried into a washroom to check her appearance. The mirror returned an image of unexpected composure. Her fine, mid-brown hair fell more or less evenly about the pale oval of her face. The sage-green eyes were a little bruised by fatigue, perhaps, but the overall result would serve. Encouraged, she pressed on upwards.

The Joint Counter-Terrorist group, of which she had been a member for the best part of a year, met at 8:30 a.m. every Monday morning. The meetings' purpose was to coordinate operations relating to terror networks and to set weekly intelligence targets. The group was run by Liz's forty-five-year-old head of section, Charles Wetherby, and made up of MI5 investigators and agent-runners and liaison officers from MI6, GCHQ and Metropolitan Police Special Branch, with Home Office and Foreign Office attending as required. It had been created immediately after the World Trade Center atrocity, following the Prime Minister's insistence that there must be no question of terror-related intelligence being compromised by lack of communication or turf wars of any kind. This was not a point that anyone had been in a mood to argue with. In her ten years with the Service, Liz could not remember such unflinching unanimity of purpose.

To her relief, Liz saw that although the doors to the conference room were open, no one had yet sat down. *Thank you, God!* She would not have to endure all those patient male glances as she took her place at the long oval hardwood table. Just inside the doors, a bullish duo from Special Branch were regaling one of Liz's colleagues with the inside track on the *Daily Mirror's* cover story—a lurid tale involving a children's TV presenter, rent boys, and crack-fuelled orgies at a five-star Manchester hotel. The GCHQ representative, meanwhile, had stationed himself close enough to listen, but far enough away to pre-empt any suggestion of obvious prurience, while the man from the Home Office was reading his press cuttings.

Charles Wetherby had assumed an expectant attitude by the window, his pressed suit and polished Oxfords a mute reproach to Liz's clothes, on which the vaporous bathroom air had failed to work any significant magic. The ghost of a smile, however, touched his uneven features.

"We're waiting for Six," he murmured, glancing in the direction of Vauxhall Cross, half a mile upriver. "I suggest you catch your breath and adopt an attitude of saintly patience."

Liz attempted to do so. She looked out at the rain-slicked expanse of Lambeth Bridge. It was high tide, and the river was swollen and dark.

"Anything come up over the weekend?" she asked, placing the dark blue folder on the table.

"Nothing that's going to keep us here too long. How was your mama?"

"Annoyed that the weather isn't colder," said Liz. "She wants some frost to kill the

vine weevils.”

“Nothing like a good frost. I hate this running-together of the seasons.” He ran large-jointed fingers through his greying hair. “Six are bringing over someone new, apparently—one of their Pakistan people.”

“Anyone we know?”

“Mackay. Bruno Mackay.”

“And what’s the whisper on Mr. Mackay?”

“He’s an old Harrovian.”

“As in the story of the woman who walks into a room where there are three former public schoolboys. The Etonian asks her if she’d like to sit down, the Wykehamist pulls up a chair, and the Harrovian . . .”

“. . . sits on it,” said Wetherby with a pale smile. “Exactly.”

Liz turned back to the river, grateful that she had a superior officer with whom she could enjoy such exchanges. On the far side of the Thames she could see the rain-darkened walls of Lambeth Palace. Did Wetherby know about Mark? Almost certainly. He knew pretty much everything else about her.

“I think we finally have a full house,” he murmured, glancing over her shoulder.

MI6 were represented by Geoffrey Fane, their coordinator of counter-terrorist operations, and by the newcomer, Bruno Mackay. Hands were shaken and Wetherby moved smartly across the room to close the doors. A summary of weekend reports from overseas security services lay beside each place.

Mackay was welcomed to Thames House and introduced to the team. The MI6 officer had just returned from Islamabad, Wetherby informed them, where he had been a much-valued deputy head of station.

Mackay raised his hands in modest demurrals. Tanned and grey-eyed, his flannel suit murmuring unmistakably of Savile Row, he cut a glamorous figure in this generally nondescript gathering. As he leaned forward to reply to Wetherby, Geoffrey Fane watched with chilly approval. He had obviously gone to some effort to manoeuvre the younger man on to the team.

To Liz, imbued as she was with the restrained, self-deprecatory culture of Thames House, Mackay appeared slightly preposterous. For a man of his age, and he couldn’t have been more than thirty-two or -three, he was much too expensively got up. His good looks—the deep tan, the level grey gaze, the sculpted nose and mouth—were far too emphatic. This was an individual, and every ounce of her professional being rebelled against the idea, whom people would remember. For a moment, and without

expression, her eyes met Wetherby's.

With the courtesies done, the group began to work their way through the overseas reports. Geoffrey Fane started the ball rolling. A tall, aquiline figure—like a heron in chalk-stripes, Liz had always thought—Fane had built his career on MI6's Middle Eastern desk, where he had acquired a reputation for unswerving ruthlessness. His subject was the ITS—the Islamic Terror Syndicate—the generic title for groups like Al Qaeda, Islamic Jihad, Hamas, and the myriad others like them.

When Fane had finished speaking he darted his patrician gaze leftwards at his younger colleague. Leaning forward, Bruno Mackay shot his cuffs and addressed his notes. "If I might return briefly to my old stomping ground," he began, "Pakistan liaison has reported a sighting of Dawood al Safa. Their report suggests that al Safa has visited a training camp near Takht-i-Suleiman in the tribal north-west of the country, and may have made contact with a group known as the Children of Heaven, who are suspected of involvement in the murder of a US embassy guard in Islamabad six months ago."

To Liz's acute irritation Mackay pronounced the Islamic names in such a way as to make it abundantly clear that he was an Arabic speaker. Just what was it with these people? she wondered. Why did they all think they were T. E. Lawrence, or Ralph Fiennes in *The English Patient*? A complicit flicker from Wetherby told her that he shared her sentiments on the matter.

"Our feeling at Vauxhall is that this activity is significant," continued Mackay urbanely. "Two reasons. One: al Safa's principal role is as a bag man, moving cash between Riyadh and the Asian terror groups. If he's on the move, then something nasty's in the pipeline. Two: the Children of Heaven are one of the few ITS groups thought to have included Caucasians in their ranks. A Pakistani Intelligence Service surveillance report from about six months ago indicated the presence in the camp of, and I quote, 'two, perhaps three individuals of identifiably Western appearance.'"

He extended spatulate, sun-browned fingers on the table in front of him. "Our concern—and we've communicated this over the weekend to all stations—is that the opposition may be about to deploy an invisible."

He let the remark hang for a moment. The calculated theatricality of his delivery did not lessen the impact of his statement. An "invisible" was CIA-speak for the ultimate intelligence nightmare: the terrorist who, because he or she is an ethnic native of the target country, can cross its borders unchecked, move around that country unquestioned, and infiltrate its institutions with ease. An invisible was the worst possible news.

"That being the case," Mackay continued smoothly, "we would suggest that Immigration be brought into the loop."

The Home Office man frowned. "What's your view on likely targets and the timing

of all this? We should probably up the security status of all government buildings from black to red, but that causes administrative problems, and I don't want to move on it too soon."

Mackay glanced at his notes. "Pakistan is already checking all passenger lists out of the country, with particular reference to . . . let's see, non-business visitors under thirty-five whose stay has exceeded thirty days. So they're very much on to the case. No idea of targets yet, but we'll keep our ears very close to the ground." He looked across at Wetherby, and then at Liz. "And we need to stay in constant touch with our agents this end, too."

"That's already happening," said Wetherby. "If they hear about anything, so will we, but so far . . ." He glanced interrogatively at the GCHQ rep, who pursed his lips non-committally.

"We've had a bit more background noise than usual. No specific indicators though. Nothing approaching the traffic you'd associate with a major operation."

Liz looked covertly around the room. The Special Branch officers, as usual, had remained silent. Their habitual attitudes were those of busy men whose time was being wasted in a Whitehall talking-shop. But both were now sitting upright and alert.

Her eyes met Mackay's. He didn't smile or look away but stared straight back. She continued her scan of the room but knew that the MI6 officer was still watching her. Felt the slow, cold burn of his gaze.

Wetherby, in turn—his tired, forgettable features voided of all expression—was watching Mackay. The circuit held for a long, taut moment and then Fane cut in with a general question about MI5 agents in the UK's militant Islamic communities. "Just how close to the action are these people of yours?" he demanded. "Would they be amongst the need-to-knows if a major ITS operation was being mounted against this country?"

Wetherby let Liz field it. "In most cases probably not," she said, knowing from experience that optimism cut no ice with Fane. "But we've got people in the right orbits. Time will see them move closer to the centre."

"Time?"

"We're not in a position to accelerate the process."

She had decided not to mention Marzipan. The agent would have been a strong card to play but he had yet to prove his worth. Or, for that matter, his courage. At this early stage in his career as an agent she wasn't prepared to reveal him—certainly not to a circle as wide as this one.

Wetherby, inscrutable, was tapping his lips with a pencil, but Liz could tell from his

posture that he considered her decision the correct one. She had not allowed Fane to bump her into a statement that could later be held against them.

And Mackay, she realised with a faint sinking sensation, was still watching her. Was she unknowingly transmitting some kind of bat-like sexual sonar? Or was Mackay one of those men who felt that he had to establish a complicity with every woman who crossed his path, so that afterwards he could tell himself that he could have had her if he'd wanted? Either way, she felt more irritated than flattered.

Above their heads one of the tube lights began to flicker. It seemed to signal the meeting's end.

3

In Trumper's in Jermyn Street, a mile to the northwest, Peregrine Lakeby settled himself into the well-stuffed comfort of his chair. With some satisfaction, he surveyed himself in the angled mirror. It was not easy to look elegant while a barber fussed around you with his towels and brushes, but despite his sixty-two summers Perry Lakeby congratulated himself that he managed it. Not for him the thread veins, pouchy eyes and multiple chins that rendered his contemporaries so physically unappealing. Lakeby's gaze was a clear sea-blue, his skin was taut, his hair a backswept gunmetal mane.

Why he should have escaped time's attrition when others had not, Perry had no idea. He ate and drank, if not to excess, then certainly without moderation. The closest he got to exercise was the odd bout of adultery and, in season, a few days' shooting. If pressed, he would probably have attributed his well-preserved appearance to good breeding. The Lakebys, he was fond of informing people, descended from the Saxons.

"Good journey up to town, sir?"

Perry raised a dyspeptic eyebrow. "Not too bad, barring the mobile phone louts. People seem to think nothing of broadcasting the details of their ghastly lives to the world. And at balls-aching bloody length, too."

Mr. Park's scissors flickered. "I'm sorry to hear that, sir. Back to the country tonight, is it?"

"'Fraid so, yes. My wife's got people coming over. The most boring couple in Norfolk, but there you go."

"Indeed, sir. Just tilt the head, if you would."

Perry took the train down to London once a month, on average, and usually went straight to Trumper's. Something about the dark panelling and the badger-bristle brushes and the sensible, soapy smell of the place—some reminder of school, perhaps—was immensely comforting to him. Perry valued continuity, and he had been going

to Trumper's for several decades now. He could have gone to the barber-shop in Fakenham and achieved much the same result for a third of the price, but it would never have occurred to him to do so. His London trips were an escape—not least from the watchful eye of Anne, his spouse—and they had a ritual character that he had come to rely on.

“Chin up, sir, if you would.”

Perry obeyed, and Mr. Park patted his customer's jowls with sharp-scented spirit.

“Will there be anything else, sir?”

Perry sat there in a pleasing miasma of talcum powder and Essence of Sicilian Limes. Not even the prospect of Ralph and Diane Munday hovering up his gin could spoil the moment. “I don't think so, Mr. Park. Thank you.”

He stood, and was assisted into the velvet-collared coat that he wore to town. Ascending the stairs to street level, he saw that although the wind was up, the rain had stopped, which was about as much as you could reasonably ask of a December morning.

Furled umbrella in hand, Perry sauntered westwards towards St. James's, past the bespoke shoe shops, the hosiers, the hatters, the perfumers, the bathroom suppliers, the cuff-link emporia, and the traditional shirtmakers with their windows piled high with bolts of striped cloth. All of these establishments further heartened Perry Lakeby, confirming as they did that there was still a world where the old order counted for something, and deference was still accorded to people such as himself. And if some of the old places had closed—had been replaced by mobile phone outlets or brashly egalitarian men's outfitters—he turned a blind eye to the fact. He wasn't going to let it spoil his day.

Outside New and Lingwood he considered treating himself to a tie. He had a particular affection for New and Lingwood—there had been one of their shops at Eton when he was there, and indeed there probably still was one. At the last moment, however, he turned away from the door. He could hardly arrive home wearing a new tie without a present for Anne, and he wasn't going to have the time to buy one. Or, in truth, the money. He had had to tighten his belt in recent months and if he occasionally indulged himself in certain areas he did so out of his own private funds. These funds were strictly limited, and—whatever the mitigating circumstances—not to be squandered on Liberty silk squares or presentation bottles of stephanotis bath oil from Floris.

Cigars, however, were something else. Kipling once wrote that a woman is only a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke, and it was with precisely this dictum in mind that Perry crossed the street to Davidoff, on the corner of St. James's. The shop's proprietor greeted him politely, and showed him into the humidor room. This was one of Perry's favourite places on earth, and for several long moments he simply breathed the

Havana-scented air. The choice was, as always, exquisite, and Perry lingered indecisively over the Partagas, the Cohibas and the Bolivars. In the end the proprietor intervened, drawing his attention to a fine old canary-wood humidor containing a couple of dozen El Rey Del Mundos in various sizes. Perry took three, a Gran Corona and a couple of Lonsdales, and handed over two large-denomination banknotes in return.

Crossing St. James's, avoiding the taxis which, these days, seemed to offer pedestrians no quarter at all, Perry made for the discreetly grand entrance of Brooks's Club. It was his goddaughter's birthday, and he was due to give her lunch there at noon.

Miranda Munday was the youngest offspring of Perry's Norfolk neighbours, and Perry was still not quite sure how he had come to be responsible for her spiritual well-being. On the basis of past form, however, he had a fair idea of what the next couple of hours would hold. The twenty-four-year-old would be resolutely unimpressed by her surroundings—by the club's vaulted ceilings, gilded mouldings, heavy burgundy draperies and forest-green leather armchairs. Instead she would comment disparagingly on the paucity of female members, frown humourlessly at the dining room menu, choose a vegetable starter instead of a main course, refuse the club claret in favour of mineral water, insist on camomile tea instead of a pudding, and regale Perry at length with the jaw-droppingly dull details of her job in advertising. Why, he wondered, were the young so deadly *serious*? What the hell had happened to fun?

Striding through the club's entrance, he greeted Jenkins, the hall porter, disposed of his coat, and placed his umbrella in the long mahogany stand. Eleven thirty. Half an hour to wait.

On impulse, instead of going straight upstairs, he turned right into the club's backgammon room, where two members were finishing a game.

"Morning, Roddy," said Perry. "Simon."

Roderick Fox-Harper MP and Simon Farmilow regarded him for a moment without recognition. "Lakeby, isn't it?" asked Farmilow, eventually.

"Peregrine Lakeby. Time for a board?"

Farmilow's eyebrows rose. He was a well-known tournament player, but if this pigeon was offering himself on the altar . . .

"Tenner a point?" suggested Perry, driven by the other man's silence to reckless bravado.

The game did not take long. Farmilow's first throw was a double six, which automatically doubled the stakes. A couple of minutes later, his position established, he turned the doubling dice from two to four. Rather than concede, and go down to the

tune of £40, Perry accepted the raise with a faint smile—a smile which remained in place as, with faultless courtesy, Farmilow constructed a prime, closed Perry out, and gammoned him. A gammon, as both players knew, redoubled all existing stakes.

“Another?” asked Perry, his voice a little less steady than before.

“Why not?” agreed Farmilow.

This time things went a little better for Perry. A reasonable series of early throws encouraged him to double, but before long his opponent was bearing off his last counters.

“Call it a morning?” Farmilow suggested.

“I think I might,” murmured Perry. Moving to a table at one end of the room, he wrote out an IOU to Farmilow for £100 and placed it in the slotted wooden box. He might as well have bought Anne that damned scarf. Still, accounts didn’t have to be settled until the year’s end. The day wasn’t ruined.

Miranda Munday, her unremarkable figure enclosed in a beige suit, was waiting for him in the hall. As they climbed the winding staircase together Perry mused that at least she usually buggered off pretty quickly after lunch. With the help of a taxi he would easily be able to make his 2:30 appointment in Shepherd Market. At the thought of that appointment his hand tightened on the banister, the back of his neck prickled and his heart thumped like a regimental drum. Every man needs a secret life, he told himself.