

## The Blague

I was in a cell by myself waiting to be shot. They'd gone through some form of court martial. Mostly, I think, it was because they remembered my father. They'd probably beaten me up less than they wanted to, for the same reason. But the verdict was unavoidable. I was as guilty as the devil.

The Colonel came to see me. He looked around the stinking cell and shook his narrow, ascetic head. His voice was as harsh as ever when I was a kid.

"Piotrek. This is foolish. They'll shoot you tomorrow. Insubordination. Causing the death of an NCO."

"Sir. Forgive me for not standing. It hurts. And I shot him. I didn't cause his death."

"Did your conscience suddenly awaken? After all you've seen. All you've done. In this war. The gesture was both too late and pointless. Do I understand? You draw your gun. You tell this sergeant you'll shoot him if they rape the girl. They knock you down. They hold you up to make you look on. They rape the girl. They let you go and you blow the sergeant's head off. And here you are."

"Here I am, sir. As you say."

"Not good enough, Piotrek. I *will* get you out of this."

"I never asked."

He brushed some dust from his sleeve. His voice lowered.

"I will not let your father's son be shot in some provincial hole this side of the border because of a whim. You will be released and the charges dropped. The squad you were with will be broken up. I could have them charged with a war crime. Believe it or not, there are still regulations in our army. But that is beyond even my cynicism. You will go back to another unit. Your reputation will scare your new comrades. Conflict about a girl. They'll

appreciate that. You will see out this war, which we will lose badly, with heroism. When it is over, if you survive, you will go back to university and finish your law degree. You will join the police force in the capital.”

“I’ll become a cop?”

“You will.”

“And you’ll have your man there.”

“Do not flatter yourself. I do already. Yes, I will. I will own your soul, your body. But that is not why I’m doing this.”

“Why then?”

“I am doing this because your father and I were together all those years in the mountains. Because he should be here now, and not these clowns who have brought us to this pass.”

He cleared his throat and stared through the bars of the cell. You could see grey clouds full of rain.

“Next time,” he said, “ make sure you get the unit on your side, make sure you get the girl away. Blow the sergeant’s head off in the dark night down a muddy lane.”

My father was a hero. The Colonel was right. My father and he fought the invaders for four years in the mountains. Within the terms of that kind of war, they were successful. Then they fought the monarchists after the War was over. They were, in this, equally successful. They were part of the new government. My father became political. Before the War he had been to university in the capital and in Paris. He knew languages. He was an intellectual, but one they could trust. He could get his hands dirty. His hands were dirty. I grew up very privileged. The Republic was ours. Then he went to Berlin and an exiled monarchist shot him.

The state funeral was huge. My mother and I moved into a smaller flat. The Colonel came by occasionally. We were looked after.

When the Civil War started, I could have run to Germany or France or England. I stayed. I joined up. In fact, I was glad to walk out on those law studies. It was like 1914 again. We marched through the streets and girls threw flowers. It was like 1914 again in another way too. We got thumped. The equipment was rubbish. The top brass had been running a police force for twenty years. The Colonel was a partisan, not a modern commander. They ignored him anyway. We behaved very badly in the occupied territories. Then the Americans and NATO decided to bomb the shit out of us. We retreated. We behaved worse.

The Colonel was right. My access of conscience came too late and was useless. I'd just had enough. I was tired. I had very dirty hands already.

The district police only called us out because they thought it was an *organizacja* murder. I shook hands with the sergeant on duty. He and my assistant Dimath nodded to each other. It was one of the cobbled streets by the river – peeling houses on one side, scrubby grass and low maple on the other.

“*Kommissar*, the truck sideswipes the Fiat. Both spin out of control. The car ends up over there by the lamppost. The truck hits the side of the bridge over there. The truck driver runs away. We decide to look in the back of the truck. It's refrigerated. We find the body.”

“The Fiat? The Fiat driver?” Dimath asked.

“He was in a hurry to get to work. In the paper factory over the river. His papers were in order. He clearly didn't cause the accident. We have his address. We let him go. His car wasn't even badly damaged. One headlight gone, scrapes down the driver's side. His insurance will cover it.”

“I suppose we should see the body,” I said.

It was the usual crime-related murder: male, no head, no hands, no feet. The driver must have been taking it to dump it. The body was middle aged. It must have been tall, one meter eighty maybe.

“Close it up,” I said. “Send the body to the mortuary lab. Ask them to run whatever tests they like. Talk to the people in the houses. Ask if anyone saw anything. Though they won’t, I suppose. That time of the morning, all the *patologia* will be shut up with their vodka. All the people who still work will be long gone. No corner shop. Send your report on to us.”

We walked back to our car. “*Organizacja* written all over,” said Dimath.

I nodded.

Before the Colonel died, he asked me to meet him in a café on Topiel Street. It was one of the old ones, left over from the Habsburgs. Of course, he *would* like it for that. They’d been being discreet there since Franz Joseph was a young man. It was a freezing winter. The wind came all the way from deepest Russia. He was with the junior minister in the security.

“I wanted you to meet,” he said. He sipped his *Verlängerter*. We nodded slowly to each other. She was ten years older than me. I’d seen her pictures in the newspapers. Up close you felt her polished hard shell, the intense focus.

“I love it here,” the Colonel said. “A sense of history. Every regime since the Habsburg governors. For the Ottomans you have to go down the road somewhat.”

We actually made small talk. We exchanged light political and artistic gossip. The EU application. Better relations with the US. The repertoire at the Philharmonic. Innocuous chat.

When they got up to leave, I helped the Colonel on with his coat. He was very frail. He had never been a big man physically, and that in a country where middle aged men become bloated. Now he was paper thin. When I turned, she was standing there already in her coat. It was expensive leather with fur trimmings. She held out her ungloved hand.

“*Kommissar* Wittlin.”

“Madame Brozis.”

I had been passed on to her special care. The Colonel’s last political gift to me. Her special care, or observation.

Kasprzak the pathologist was standing in the darkness of my stair well. A shaft of light from outside hit his face from the side. It was three days since the accident on Tamka Street. I stood very still.

“Don’t put on the light, for God’s sake,” he whispered.

I came closer to him. I could smell his sweat, the alcohol, and his fear.

“I couldn’t phone,” he said. “Come with me. You’ll see why.”

My car was in the workshop. He wouldn’t let me call a taxi. We travelled separately by two different trams to the lab. Of course, it doesn’t matter what you do. If you don’t want to be seen, you usually will be. Nowicki from internal affairs was passing in another tram as I got off in the street near the lab. He pretended he didn’t see me. That’s always a bad sign.

Kasprzak wasn’t scared. He was terrified. The basement was lit by the street lamps outside. We sat at the low desk in the middle of the room.

“We ran the bloodwork on the body from the freezer truck,” he said very slowly, as if he were pulling the words out one by one. “Then I thought I’d check the data against our files. We came up with a match.”

“That’s good,” I said.

“No. Look. Here are the two files. Look at them.”

“Switch on the light, then. For what good it’ll do.”

I stood up. I opened the two folders. There was a mass of lines, symbols, and numbers, and little graphs. They meant nothing to me. Dirty scribbles. I read the generic at the top of the left-hand file. From the date - our man from the freezer. The name on the right-hand file was Seweryn Parkhuts. The name of the President of the Republic.

I stared at the pattern of grey lines on the formica surface of the table.

“Put the light out,” I said. I sat down.

We sat in the darkness.

“They’re identical?”

Kasprzak nodded.

“You’re sure?”

He nodded again. “I ran the tests myself. I filled out the values.”

“And the other one is . . . correct?”

He nodded.

“Why do you have the . . . that bloodwork?”

“The paternity suit. Three years ago. We’re the best official lab in the country. The data is right.”

A tramcar went by. The light and shadows moved on the walls.

“Why. Why have you told me?”

Kasprzak leant forward. His hand was shaking. “I’ve known you since the war. You’re a straight cop. And you have connections up.”

I nodded.

“What will we do?” he asked.

I straightened my glasses.

“Bury that deep. Somewhere safe. Don’t tell anyone. I need to think. Just carry on as normal. I’ll be back the day after to tomorrow. I’ll come to the lab.”

I stood up.

“Does that bloodwork mean what I think it does?”

He nodded again.

“I should kill you now,” I said.

“I know. Please don’t, Piotrek. I won’t talk.”

“You will. If you have to. And now I know.”

I made an appointment to see the Minister the next day. I had a direct number. She always picked up. An excuse? Something about her visit to London in the autumn.

International police cooperation. I was lucky. She was free.

We had met alone four times since the time in the café in winter with the Colonel. She had asked to see me. I had done some things for her. She had risen very high. Interior Minister. They said people in the central committee listened to her. Even the President and General Ligor paid attention, they said.

She sat behind her desk with the darkened glass wall behind her. I could see out into the central square. The maples and oaks were heavy with green.

I didn’t touch the coffee in front of me.

“How secure is the office?” I asked.

“Very,” she answered, watching me the whole time.

I had thought all night how to say what I wanted to.

“Madame Minister. I have reason to question whether the President of the Republic is the President.”

She didn’t miss a beat. “You might want to explain that, *Kommissar*.”

I did.

“What would you like to do? What would you like me to do?”

“I need protection. The pathologist needs protection.”

“Yes, I see that.”

“I want to follow this up.”

“Why?”

“Because if the President . . . is not the president, then . . . .”

“*Some intrigue is afoot*. As our national poet writes. Yes. And?”

“I could say that I took an oath to defend the state. I could say my father died for the Republic. Or I could say that now I know this, I can hide or run away. But I can’t unknow it. If it is true, they – whoever they are, and they are surely powerful – will come for me and my family. I know our history. The only way is to take the fight to them.”

“With my help. How do you know that I am not part of this? Whatever it is.”

“Madame Minister. If this involves Parkhuts – or (what shall we call him?) a fake Parkhuts – it also involves General Ligor. I know enough to know there are tensions between you and him. And besides I know no one more powerful than you. No one who will pick up when I call.”

“Get me the files. Call me on this number.” She said it to me. It was an Austrian mobile number. I memorized it. “Ask to talk to Basia. Speak German. I will get back to you within the hour.”

In my work there is always an excuse to go to central pathology. I found one and went there the next morning. The girl in reception was in a tizzy. Kasprzak’s assistant came out of the back room all hang-dog to tell me his boss had been killed in a car accident that night. He was in the morgue in back.

So that was it.

I took a look at the body. I'm no pathologist. He looked badly marked up. There was bruising on his arms, but then there was bruising all over his body.

I went to where the accident happened. He'd been working late and walked home by the river. A hit and run, they told me at the local station. There was an open stretch of cobbled road. No houses. A boarded up old factory from before the war. The usual scrubby trees and tall grass leading down to the river. I walked up to the bridge that he'd been heading for. It was a recent one. People's Republic concrete with the usual wash of unintelligible graffiti. Unintelligible now. Always that way? The concrete was crumbling already and brown rusty metal stuck out in places. The colours of the graffiti scribbles were faded. I followed a break in the grass line and a small track. In the tall grass and shrubs by the bridge I found a trampled area. Sides of cardboard boxes laid out. A greasy blanket. Two empty bottles. Ashes of a small fire. The stench of unwashed bodies. I looked back up the road.

There were three of them. They hadn't lit their fire. It was a hot night. The crickets sounded loud. The moon gave plenty of light.

Two were sitting by the bridge wall. One sat with his back to the river. There was a bottle of something in the hands of the one in the middle. They looked up.

We were three too. Me, Dimath, and the biggest, meanest uniformed cop I could find.

"Get up, you heaps of shit," I said. We shone torches in their faces. The one in the middle looked like he had still some of his wits left.

I nodded to the cop. "The one on the left," I said.

The uniform hit the bum on the shoulder with his stick. The guy went down like an empty bag. He twitched on the greasy earth.

“Now, tell me, you bastards. Tell me quick. Last night. Out on the road. An accident. What did you see? Don’t tell me nothing.”

I was right. One guy just dribbled and swayed. The one with the bottle could still speak. The voice was strangely half-educated. The whine you use to try to reason with insane, violent authority.

“Sir. Sir. Yes, sure. Sir. Out there.” He gestured towards the road. “Big moon. I saw it all. Two cars. Stop. A guy gets out of one. Voices. Drives off. The other comes so fast. Hits him. I heard the thump. We didn’t go near him. Waited. Cleared out that night. We didn’t touch him. Sir.”

“Remember this. Remember we know you. Take your buddy. Vanish.” I threw a couple of banknotes on the ground. The guy with the bottle eyed them.

On the road, I nodded to the big uniform. He went off towards his car. Dimath and I walked towards ours.

“Don’t ask me to do something like that again, boss,” Dimath said softly.

“Those people are excrement,” I said.

“Yes, but they’re human excrement.”

“Maybe.”

Even so, I thought that was the end of it. I had no idea what to do. I had to tell the Minister. I had to beg for protection somehow. At least for Ewa and the girls.

But then when I went into the department the next day, there was the envelope on my desk. It had come that morning. Internal mail. I sat at my desk. Looked at the computer screen. Made a few notes. Eventually opened the letter. Took out the files. Glanced at them.

Put them back in. Stretched. Yawned. Went over to Dunst's desk. Asked her about some paperwork for the Stavros case. Made myself a cup of coffee.

*For God's sake. Now you're exaggerating. You never drink this crap.*

I stared out the window at the high trees.

I went to the photocopy room.

I found an excuse to travel to Graudenz. Stavros's girl friend had come from there. I needed to talk to her brothers. They ran a chain of shops in the town. After that, I took a train back up the line to Nowe. It's a small dusty town with an old square with arcades. There are ugly People's Republic blocks of flats and half-built factories on its edges. According to the official biography, Parkhuts was born there right at the end of the Patriotic War, just as the Germans cleared out. His mother had been stranded there. She'd stayed with some cousins of her husband and worked on a farm by the river. I wanted to see the records. There are always records.

Except when there aren't.

I'd invented a shadow case. I wanted to see the records for one Oskar Przymas who'd emigrated to the US as a young man and who'd just been arrested in Baltimore for racketeering. I happened to be in the area. I wonder if I could check the birth records. I reckoned, of course, looking for one P would let me look for another. The lady archivist in the Town Hall was kind. She was sorry I'd come all this way. There had been records – good ones, for her predecessors had been quite efficient and well-trained, and, she sighed, they'd had some resources – but the basement had flooded ten years ago, and they hadn't been able to save the Ps. The Ss and the Ws, but not the Ps. I commiserated.

“But,” she said, “that year I know women working in farms by the river – that's what you say this Przymas's mother did – just like our President's mom, of course – well, they

often gave birth in the clinic in Sadlinki down by the river. They might have some records there. It's still running as a health centre. You could ask."

I thanked her, caught a bus to Rusinowo, and walked along a country road between fields of rapeseed, tobacco, and cabbage the five kilometers to Sadlinki. There was a single street, a squat brick church, a general store, small houses from before the First War, fields with wooden fences and old crouching fruit trees. The clinic was still open when I got there. I showed my badge. No records from then. They'd all been sent on to Nowe decades ago. The lady was chilly and busy.

I walked out on to the levée that the Hapsburg engineers from Brno had built. It ran eight meters high, covered in thick grass, for kilometers along the river's flood plain. There was a path running along the top. I sat down and looked over the lush meadows, the ponds, the tethered cattle. The river moved slowly, it seemed, and massively beyond trees. Martins and swallows swooped and rose again.

The old lady came slowly up the path to the top of the levée. She came towards me. I stood up. She nodded and stopped by my side. We looked towards the river together.

"You're Josef Wittlin's son," she said.

"Yes."

"I knew it. I saw you when you came out of the clinic. I was in the orchard next door. You didn't see me. I knew you must be his son."

"Did you know my father?"

"Did I know your father? I was in Gniew when he came down from the mountains with the partisans. I saw him in the Russian jeep when they had their victory parade. He was so handsome. I read about him in the papers. I thought . . . but yes, I saw him all suntanned and young with his black curly hair. He made a speech on the town hall steps. He was a good man. Then he died. Like all our good men."

I didn't know what to say. I'd barely known him.

"You're here about Parkhuts, aren't you?" The old lady spoke slowly. I nodded. She came up to my shoulder. Her thin grey hair was pulled back tight in a small shiny bun.

"You're the second this year. I used to work at the clinic. Sometimes I still have tea with the nurse."

She didn't speak for a moment. She was a very old lady. Her face was lined and brown from the sun. Her hands were gnarled.

"There were twins, you see," she said. "I knew the midwife. She told me one night. Said I must never tell anyone. Never. Now it doesn't matter. Not to me. They took one twin up north in the first Civil War. The one with the King's people. Left the other with the mother. It was very common in those days. Both boys. Identical twins. I wonder what became of the brother."

Again she waited for a moment.

"I didn't tell the other man from the city. I've told you. Because that afternoon your father was so beautiful. And now he's dead."

I met the Minister in the late afternoon in the garden of a small house on the outskirts of the capital. There were pear trees with ripening fruit. Little golden tree lights. I told her what I knew.

She sat on a greying weathered wooden bench, her legs crossed, smoking one of her small brown cigarettes. I stood in the grass. It was beautifully warm there in the shade. Sunlight played through the thick leaves.

"It is just possible," she said slowly. "The face damaged from the bomb attack five years ago. The very small circle of people he lets get very close. Even in cabinet meetings, he

sits right at the top of the table. Shades down because of his eyes. Anyway, who would ever think it? Who ever looks closely at him?"

"But why?" I asked. "Why now especially?"

"Well, *Kommissar*, maybe there's an answer to that too." She looked up. "You could ask – although you haven't – if Ligor has the whole show under control, why bother? Actually, he doesn't. People like you – who enforce the system – don't like the way the Republic has been turned into an *entrepôt* for everything from girls to cigarettes to North Korean spare parts. Russian weapons going places you don't want to know. Seriously illegal US software. I don't like it either." She looked at me hard. "But I think you know that. I know lots of the gossip about me in the city bars. Some of it's true." She smiled. She flicked the ash from her cigarette. "You don't like laying off *organizacja* people. You don't like the sneers when you talk to your German or British colleagues. You're also not sure the Republic is going to be very safe for your daughters. Some of you also believe in what people like your father and the Colonel said and did after the War. Am I right?"

I nodded. She went on.

"Well, it's the same in the Cabinet and the ministries. And the Europeans and the Americans have started to become annoyed. To push at the edges. That case your department's dealing with. . . ."

"Stavros. Przymas."

"They're going to stop just poking at the edges very soon. Especially once the EU membership negotiations begin seriously. We actually meet some of the criteria already. Can you believe it? Better than . . . others. Ligor hates the Europeans and the US. He hates the travel ban slapped on his family and friends. Not because he's dying to go to Paris. But because it embarrasses his daughter. He hates the way he has to pay huge percentages to move

money around. He hates the idea that there's a case being prepared against him in the Hague. And he hates, hates, hates the USA for the bombing in the Civil War."

She took a drag at her cigarette.

"I suppose you can see his point. But . . . . And he hates the fact that we arranged for our President to meet the US President next Thursday in New York."

I stood very still. Small birds twittered in the roof of the old house.

"Yes. Well, not many people know. It'll be very brief. At the UN. Neutral territory. Symbolic reconciliation. A first step."

"And the fake Parkhuts will do something to ruin it." I could see her thinking. She made a grimace. Very brief, but a grimace.

My policeman's brain started shouting at me.

"He'll kill the President of the USA."

We parted by the gate of the front garden. Her gleaming black car was waiting.

"Your wife and children."

"Yes, Minister."

"Can you get them abroad? Somewhere safe. Somewhere civilized."

"Ewa has a sister in Berlin. The girls like it there."

"See to it. Tonight. My people will arrange the visas with the Germans. They'll be ready tomorrow afternoon."

I set off to walk through the woods to the nearest tram stop. German visas by tomorrow afternoon. Now that was impressive.

Back at the office, I went to Dimath's desk.

“Listen,” I said. “Smile. We’re just having a light conversation about Stavros. I need you. But I have to give you a chance to say no. I’ll be in the Malczewski Cemetery in thirty minutes. If you want, come to talk to me there. If not, no problem. I’ll understand.”

She smiled at me. “Bad?”

“The very baddest.”

We laughed.

We sat on a metal bench surrounded by the dead. Memorials to the famous. Memorials to the almost forgotten. Memorials to people no one had ever known. Dying flowers and burnt out candles were scattered by them.

I told her what I knew. Or thought I knew.

She was very still for a moment.

“You can still walk away,” I said. “You can’t unknow this. But you could still run.”

“No, boss. You’ve put me in it now. I’d have to run quite far.”

“Yes. I suppose so.”

“I’m not angry. You gave me fair warning. They’d come after me anyway, wouldn’t they? We work together too much.”

“Yes. I’m afraid so.”

“So what we’re doing is taking the fight to them. This way, we might just win. The other way, we’re bound to lose.”

“That’s it. Sometimes, I suppose, that’s what life’s about.”

“So tell me what you want me to do.”

“Well, first, go to Poland.”

We packed the kids' things. We got them to the airport in time. Ewa had shrugged when I told her about Berlin, sat for a while by the window, and then called her sister. She gave me the shortest of hugs at the airport. I made the flight to Munich.

I thought if they were on to me, they'd come for me in Munich. But they didn't. On the plane to DC I couldn't sleep. I had to pitch this nonsense to the Americans.

They picked me up beyond immigration and took me to Langley. The Americans always do things in big numbers. They're like the Germans that way. Lots of heads at once. But if they take you seriously, there will always be one guy at one point who says nothing. He's the one who decides.

I'd dealt with them before – CIA, FBI, DEA, NSA, INRS. You get dizzy with the acronyms. You look forward to dealing with plain US Naval Intelligence.

My English is OK. My mother was a philologist at the university. She said my father and she wanted it. I worked hard. I always did. My German's better though. Bring back the Hapsburgs. Why not?

I was spacey with tiredness. And worry.

At this level the Americans are all very clever. They listen. They know the politics, the history, the geography better than you do. The Empire. Maybe the Hapsburgs are back. Or at least Byzantium. I told the story four times to shifting groups of men and women. A whole range of faces and clothes. Some looked like they were there on the roof of the Saigon Embassy, others like they graduated college yesterday. Clothes to match. One woman even talked to me in a fairly good version of our own language. Why don't we just call off the meeting? Because we don't want to offend these people more than we have. We need them to come into the fold. We want a stop to these arm shipments to the Iranians through their Adriatic ports. We want them in the EU, maybe NATO down the road. Because the Russians are nosing around there. Yes, because the Russians. . . .

That was one of my big selling points. Partly Ligor didn't give a damn about not going to Paris because he could go to the Crimea. And the Americans didn't want to lose our Republic like they'd lost that, and a few other two-bit former satellites.

Then I told them about Stavros. We'd become interested because his girlfriend disappeared. Her brothers got annoyed. People got whacked on both sides. We were warned to lay off. But someone at the State Bank was on the take from Stavros. The Finance Minister backed us. We dug around. Stavros had gone big time. He was shipping a bit more than spare parts to the North Koreans. Something very big was coming through. We'd already fed the American Przymas in Baltimore. We had some more names – a *pot pourri* of the world of darkness.

“These are bastards,” I said. “I want them stopped. I don't want my daughters growing up in some 1960s Albania run by gangsters. If we mess this up, and Ligor gets whatever it is he wants – and *that's* the problem, because I don't know what that is – then that's what we'll have.”

And you'll have chaos down by the Adriatic.

I placed the pen drive on the table in front of me. Names. Shipping manifests. Account numbers. We have some smart girls and guys too. And good software now.

Then the last person came in. She sat at the side away from the table. But we all knew there was a shark in the room.

After the fifth telling, there was a pause. No one said anything. The woman to my right even stopped playing with her pen.

“Brozis vouches for this guy, right?” said the silver-haired woman over her glasses.

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Right then. Keep the meeting with POTUS live. Give him what he wants.”

“You know, if this goes wrong, we will bomb the shit out of your miserable little rathole.”

My CIA liaison was called Radner. He had a tired lined face. Maybe he'd been on the roof in Saigon. He wasn't happy that they'd agreed to let this play out for a while.

I was very tired.

“And maybe, you know, it would be better if you did,” I said. “The cretinous poisonous politicians. The soldiers on the take. The corrupt police. The bought up judges. The Russian businessmen. And then there's just normal. The guys with fat bellies who know it all. The sour faces. The crapily built buildings. The ugly little towns. The senseless graffiti everywhere. The insane advertisements. The bums roaring curses. The oily priests. The young with their sense of pale entitlement, aping the out-of-date fashions from Brooklyn. The shitty courts. The arrogant bastards in every office in every institution in every goddamn building. You're a petitioner to everybody unless they're scared of you. The total incompetence. The dreadful food that kills men quick. The idiotic schools. The stag parties off cheap flights from Luton. Maybe it would be better if we could start from zero again. Maybe we wouldn't screw it up so much a second time.”

Radner looked at me for the first time. “Jesus, Pete,” he said. “How'd you get to feel that way?”

“Just hope you never find out, Mike. Just hope you never find out.”

I could have added a marriage that's gone dead on us.

We pour over the possibilities, me and Radner, and a shifting group of five or seven others. Explosives? No the detectors would pick them up. Strangle him by hand? Not really an option, is it? No firearm. No. A contagious disease? Maybe, but not fast or spectacular enough. Poison? Radiation? Scratch the skin. But, again, not fast enough.

They showed me the latest line photographs of Parkhuts. Anything? Anything?

“He’s changed his glasses,” I said.

“So?” they said.

“*Godfather Part III.*” They looked bemused. “Don’t you watch old movies? I know it doesn’t have quite the status of the first two parts, but I like it. The hit-man that kills the Italian politician who’s crossed Michael Corleone. He gets close and stabs him with his glasses. If this is a fake Parkhuts and this is what he’s about, he’ll do it that way.”

Radner picked up his phone.

*Why is Ligor doing this? Because he was worried Parkhuts was going to sell out to the Americans and the Europeans. Deliver him over to the Hague. Or Guantanamo Bay. Because he wants his revenge on the US for the bombing, the humiliation. For the war he lost so badly. And because – watch for the money, they say – it’s absolutely in his interests to do this. The Republic becomes a pariah state. They won’t invade. He’s cleared a Security Council veto with the Russians and the Chinese already. But they slap on sanctions. Patrol the coast at least for a bit. Everyone loses except him and his cronies. Who are in charge of the smuggling, the shifting of everything. Everything. And the Russian route will still be open. It’ll just cost a sight more.*

*But. . . .*

*Brozis vouches for this guy, right?*

*That takes some thinking on.*

“We have a word for chaos in our country. It’s *zajgon*. Pronounced like the city in South Vietnam. In a state of chaos Ligor will make a killing. Big time. The bastard.”

They thought hard about that one. Maybe I hurt their feelings about Saigon. But it was the truth, wasn't it?

“You hate the old guy, don't you.”

“Our families go way back.”

And then we got to Thursday. The meeting was to take place at twelve noon. In a side room at the UN building. We'd gone up to New York the night before. Parkhuts was at our Embassy guest house. Brozis was in the party that had flown in. A lot of journalists. They'd been tipped off something important was going to happen.

Two big security guys were to be on either side of POTUS. If Parkhuts took off his glasses and got too close, they were to take the bullet. These were very hard men, I was assured.

The Americans wanted rid of me. In truth, this was their show now. Brozis called me as I drank a coffee in a Starbuck's on Broadway and fourth. She told me to come to an address near the Embassy. We had a live feed from the UN Building.

When I got out of the subway, I saw that three numbers had called my phone ten times in the last ten minutes. I forgot the thing didn't work in the tunnels. There was a Polish country code there. I called back. The traffic was very loud. Sirens whooped. Ordinary New York.

“Where were you, boss?” Dimath asked. “Listen. There's tanks on the streets already. Someone says the army's moving towards the TV building and the University. The trams are still running though. But listen. Three things. First, the twin died in Bydgoszcz three years after the war. I've seen the record. Hundred per cent. Second, Kasprzak, your pathologist friend, knew the people who took him to the river. When he got out of the car, he was laughing with them.”

“How’d you find out that?”

“I found the bums and asked them. Nicely this time. They were forthcoming.”

“Damn.”

“Third, the guy in the Fiat that the refrigerator truck hit. He’s kosher, all right. But he didn’t claim on his car insurance.”

“Like *Double Indemnity*.”

“Yeah. Boss, we’ve been set up.”

“Sonja, you’re brilliant,” I said.

And started running to the house.

I knew the First Secretary, Stiller, from university. He was in the big windowless clean room. Brozis was on the phone, listening not speaking. I saw shapes of four or five others. Two screens showed a corridor in the UN and an empty room. They were both completely still. Nothing. Another screen showed the main TV channel from the Republic with the sound turned off. Normal programming. No pictures of tanks.

“For Christ’s sake, Piotr,” Stiller said. “The tanks are moving out of barracks again. It’s a fucking *coup*.”

“I want the room cleared,” I said. “Just you, me, and the Minister. Now.”

Brozis muttered something into her phone and clicked off. We were alone. Even she looked on edge.

“We were set up. There is no fake Parkhuts. That’s the real thing there. If the Americans grab him, and they will, that’s a major incident, an insult. The one Ligor needs to pull off the *coup*.” I spoke to the Minister directly. “Minister, you have to call the president and tell him to call off the meeting with POTUS. If we call it off, there’s no scandal. He claims an eye infection. A migraine. Whatever.”

“The Americans have taken away their phones,” she said. “New security.”

“OK.” I thought for a second. “I’ll talk to them. In the meantime, Minister, please call people in country. Stop the *coup* now. Promise them anything.”

She nodded. I called Radner. He picked up. *Thank the gods that look after stupid cops.*

“Mike, it was a fix. That’s the real thing in there. No, I don’t want you to stand down. I know you won’t. I want a line to our President. We’ll have him call off. Yeah. Now.”

Brozis looked up.

“Make him back out of the meeting,” I said.

“What if he won’t?” she asked.

“Tell him this. Tell him I have the Stavros file. Tell him I have photographs of him and the girl on the island. Where she’s buried. Tell him I have the bank account numbers in Switzerland and the US. Tell him if he doesn’t agree the Americans will bust him for sexual misconduct like they did Strauss-Kahn, and hold him. But in the end they’ll send him down for fifty years in a maximum security prison in Mississippi. He can’t pull any immunity for any of what I know.”

Radner came back on. “Your Ambassador, Pete.”

I held out the phone to Brozis. “Tell him, Minister. And tell him to call off the *coup*, and he can live out the rest of his life in a *dacha* in the Crimea. And take some of the money with him.”

So she did.

The meeting was called off with no fuss. All our journalists were anyway glued to screens and phones to find out about the *coup*. Which never happened. The tanks turned back. Three young colonels arrested Ligor. The other older officers kept their heads down. The TV screens showed happy crowds in the streets of the capital. They were chanting and waving at

the cameras. They had lots of pictures of Parkhuts for sure, but there were more of the Minister. Beer sales were enormous. The sun was shining. A group of musicians from the Philharmonic were playing Strauss waltzes.

What do you do when you save the Republic? At least if you're from a certain generation from the Republic? Stiller ordered ice creams and greasy bread pizzas. "There's a canteen downstairs," he said with a smile. "Essentially they do primary school lunch cooking. The Embassy workers love it. Madame Minister?"

"As I recall, they have good white wine too. A bottle, please."

"I need vodka," said Stiller. "Piotrek, you?"

"I'll go with the wine."

"That's right," he said undoing his tie. "If the Minister permits."

She nodded.

"The curse of the Republic and the working classes. You always used to call it that."

"Yes, his father said that too," said Brozis quietly.

So we sat in a room with a window and ate greasy bread pizzas and drank wine. I thought no one could eat them elegantly. Madame Minister almost managed. Stiller answered the phone from time to time. I took a call from Dimath. I told her the Republic and the Minister were very grateful. She said the uniforms were very happy. They were all on overtime doing crowd control – happy crowd control. Like our football team had won a game. Which never happens. Brozis put her feet up on the chaise longue.

"Why didn't you tell us about this Stavros file earlier? It does exist, I assume."

"Yes, Madame Minister. It most certainly does. Why not? My father apparently said you should always have one more card in your pocket. Or one more bullet in your belt. Some such. In case. And maybe for the honour of the Republic. Parkhuts and Ligor are our affair.

Our bad men. That generation. I didn't want to blacken them more than they have been already."

Brozis smiled. She looked at Stiller.

"Mr Secretary, I wonder if you could leave me and the *Kommissar* alone for a short while."

Little Edward had become a very smooth diplomat. He bowed and was gone. Like a spirit in one of our national bard's plays.

"I fucked it up," I said to her.

"No. No. *Kommissar*, you were played. Ligor was clever. If the Americans called off, it was an outrage and he could call out the troops. If they did anything, that was an outrage too. And ditto. He couldn't lose."

I got up and went to the table where the wine was. I held out the bottle. "Madame Minister?" I walked over. I filled her glass. I walked back to the table. I could hear traffic on the street outside. I turned and looked for a moment at a tree in front of the bay window.

"Yes, but Madame Minister, perhaps Ligor wasn't the only one who thought it was impossible to lose."

She did not move. Her eyes were on me already. They were almost black, I saw.

"Let's consider. Parkhuts is discredited whatever. An outrage takes place whatever. Bigger or smaller. The Americans cry off. Outrage. Discredit. The Americans jump on Parkhuts. Outrage. Discredit. Ligor calls out the tanks whatever. But you wound up the *coup* - may I say? - very rapidly. Your people would restore order whatever. I know two of those colonels you sent to arrest the General. They've been dying for a chance to fix the old guy for years. For good reasons and bad. But most of all because they want to go to Brussels and Fort Bragg. The Russian equipment stinks and Voronezh *oblast* is a hole. They'll enjoy delivering him to the Hague. Or shoving him in a deep cell on one of the islands. And the crowds have

your picture as well as ones of Parkhuts. With the Stavros file, you can get rid off him quicker, but that's all. Just quicker. Honourable retirement? A one-way ticket to a Crimean resort? Send *him* to Voronezh."

She kept staring at me.

"The old lady at Langley. Whoever she is. A mean dame. She let slip, or was telling me deliberately. Who knows? 'Brozis vouches for this guy, right?' Now that made me think. And what I think is – *you* win whatever."

She finished her glass of wine and held it out for me to refill. I poured out some more. A *cuvée* from the south, I noticed. Still cold. Wet from the ice bucket. I went back to the table.

She swung her legs back on to the floor.

"Yes, *Kommissar*. Very clever. I didn't think it up. But I let it play. And now we've won. Thanks to you. And your pretty assistant. Promotions all round? I think so. Part of the new Republic. But you. What will I do with you?"

She stood up. She straightened her skirt.

"I think you've seen *my* file, haven't you? A special police one, hidden deep in the Tamka Street building. You know my tastes. I get tired of all this power sometimes. This achievement. I like a bit of – shall we say? why not? – rough trade. From time to time. Come with me. Out there. And in here."

"Minister. I'm married."

"Oh, yes. Dirty hands. You don't like them. We know that. Wittlin's boy. The last relatively honest senior cop in the Republic. But clever enough to survive. And dirty enough sometimes when it suits him. Listen, *Kommissar*. What about you father and his *partyzantki*? You know about them, don't you? He led your poor mother a pretty dance after the War. And the shooting in Berlin. Political? Personal? I'm not sure we want to disentangle that one, do

we? Could we take back the state funeral? The portrait in the National Gallery? Your marriage now. Alive or dead? I hear dead. It's a small town. A small country. Your girls like Berlin. We'll arrange a very long study grant for Ewa at the Humboldt or the Frei, whichever she wants. The girls will go to real schools there. They'll come back stars. Ready to run a decent state. Which you and I will put in order for them. What about it, Piotr?"

We looked at each other across the room. She walked slowly towards me.

"And in the meantime, after all today's excitement and achievement, I want a bit of my rough trade." Her voice was a whisper. "As they say. Humiliate me. Insult me. Call me a dirty whore. You'll enjoy it. And then we'll fix the Republic. We'll get our hands very dirty. In every way."

She hitched her skirt up and sashayed down in front of me. She looked up and smiled and reached for the fastening on my trousers.