

MI6 – Borough – Monday

STEVE WAS SITTING IN Sheena Ferguson's office, holding a mug of strong black coffee in both hands. Sheena put down the sheaf of papers she had been reading, and said, 'Thank you for coming in so promptly, Steve. If you don't mind, we'll skip the chit-chat.'

Steve shook his head silently to indicate that he had absolutely no objection to the absence of chit-chat.

Sheena tapped her fingertips together pensively. 'It has come to our attention that a young woman whom you knew in East Berlin as Inge has recently been released from a Stasi jail and has now arrived in London. We think it possible, indeed likely, that she will seek to make contact with you.'

Steve, realising this must have been on Sheena's mind when she invited him to supper, said, 'But why was she in jail? You told me last year you were under the impression she was a Stasi operative.'

Sheena, with just the hint of a raised eyebrow, looked carefully at Steve over her steepled fingers. 'Perhaps we were wrong, but we don't think so.'

'But it's almost impossible to leave the DDR.'

'Not if the DDR actually wants you to leave for some reason, which is often hard currency related, but is also sometimes for reasons of political meddling. And not if the West German state can be persuaded to cough up that hard currency for you.'

'So West Germany has paid a ransom for Inge?'

'Yes, that does seem to be the case.'

'Is she considered that important?'

‘That is the problem; she is not. So how is it that she has been included in a batch of much higher-profile dissidents?’

‘Her spell in prison was a ruse, and she is on a mission for the external department of the Stasi.’

‘In a nutshell. Collingwood is always saying good things about how quick you are.’

‘And her task is to hook up with Müller?’

‘You really are getting the hang of this.’

‘How do I come into this?’

‘If she were to immediately set up shop with Müller, it would arouse suspicions. So she needs to have an alternative reason to be here. And that reason is that she fell in love with you that very wet day in East Berlin. In that sense, you’re an intermediate step on her way to Müller. They will then reprise their roles for public consumption as eminent intellectual and star student, while getting up to no good on behalf of the Stasi.’

‘And it is my job to thwart her?’

‘Quite the opposite. It is your job to assist her as plausibly as possible. It is convenient, therefore, that the relationship you have been conducting with the young actress since you left Cambridge has now come to an end.’

‘In what way?’

‘I am aware that you are what is called successful with women. But I would like you to refrain from finding a substitute for the actress until we have brought this Müller business to a successful conclusion.’

‘Are you saying I shouldn’t have other girlfriends?’

‘Well, that would be the ideal, but I know you may find that an unnatural restriction on your libidinal rights. So what I am saying is that you shouldn’t bring other women back to your flat.’

‘Are you watching my flat?’

‘We’re not the only ones. So be sensible. Once we have sorted this matter out, you can have as much pussy as you want.’

Steve was taken aback by Sheena’s sudden bluntness and perturbed that his first formal job for the service required him to limit his sexual encounters, the exact inverse of the James Bond model. ‘Well, how long is the operation likely to take?’

‘No idea. The sooner we can help them get the show on the road, the sooner we can bust them. And while we’re on the subject, let us, for the purposes of this conversation, call her Ulrike.’

‘Is that her real name?’

‘Who knows, but that’s what’s on her West German passport.’

‘How will she find me? She only knows me as Tom, a student of architecture.’

Sheena now broke out in peals of laughter. ‘Steve, I think you’re underestimating this girl. A frequent error made by male members of the intelligence community. She will find you, have no fear.’

‘Sheena...’

‘In these offices, you address me as *ma’am*. Understood?’

Shocked by the sudden note of authority in her voice, Steve nodded weakly.

‘Good. Now go off and have breakfast with Collingwood and he will tell you more.’

In a much less confident tone of voice, Steve said, ‘I’ve got to get to work.’

Still imperious, Sheena said, ‘This is your work. Your role at that toddlers’ playground that calls itself a magazine is your cover. So until this operation is over, make sure you hold on to the job. And if your bosses chide you because you are late in today, tell them you’ve been to the clap clinic. It always works. And when Ulrike does catch up with you, remember to call her Inge, until she has brought you up to date with her current identity.’

Steve was speechless. Sheena rose from her armchair and strode to her desk. Even Collingwood, silent throughout the conversation, was staring at her in amazement.

Without looking up from her desk, Sheena said, ‘Don’t stand there like a couple of showroom dummies. Go and get reacquainted.’

The two young men looked at each other and stepped silently into the corridor.