

Winter in Madrid

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Prologue

The Jarama Valley, Spain, February 1937

BERNIE HAD LAIN at the foot of the knoll for hours, half conscious.

The British Battalion had been brought up to the front two days before, rattling across the bare Castilian plain in an ancient locomotive; they had marched by night to the front line. The Battalion had a few older men, veterans of the Great War, but most of the soldiers were working-class boys without even the Officer Training Corps experience that Bernie and the smattering of other public-school men possessed. Even here in their own war the working class stood at a disadvantage.

The Republic had held a strong position, on top of a hill that sloped down steeply to the Jarama river valley, dotted with little knolls and planted with olive trees. In the far distance the grey smudge of Madrid was visible, the city that had withstood the Fascists since the generals' uprising last summer. Madrid, where Barbara was.

Franco's army had already crossed the river. There were Moroccan colonial troops down there, experts at using every fold in the ground as cover. The Battalion was ordered into position to defend the hill. Their rifles were old, there was a shortage of ammunition and many did not fire properly. They had been issued with French steel helmets from the Great War that the old soldiers said weren't bullet-proof.

Despite the Battalion's ragged fire, the Moors slipped gradually up the hill as the morning advanced, hundreds of silent deadly bundles in their grey ponchos, appearing and disappearing again among the olive trees, coming ever closer. Shelling from the Fascist positions began, the yellow earth around the Battalion positions exploding in huge fountains to the terror of the raw troops. Then in the

afternoon the order to retreat came. Everything turned to chaos. As they ran, Bernie saw the ground between the olive trees was strewn with books the soldiers had thrown from their packs to lighten them – poetry and Marxist primers and pornography from the Madrid street markets.

That night the Battalion survivors crouched exhausted in an old sunken road on the *meseta*. There was no news of how the battle had gone elsewhere along the line. Bernie slept from sheer exhaustion.

In the morning the Russian staff commander ordered the remnants of the Battalion to advance again. Bernie saw Captain Wintringham arguing with him, their heads outlined against a cold sky turning from purple-pink to blue as the sun rose. The Battalion was exhausted, outnumbered; the Moors were dug in now and had brought up machine guns. But the Russian was adamant, his face set.

The men were ordered to line up, huddling against the lip of the sunken road. The Fascists had begun firing again with the dawn and the noise was already tremendous, loud rifle cracks and the stutter of the machine guns. Standing waiting for the order to go over, Bernie was too tired to think. The phrase 'fucking done for, fucking done for' went round and round in his head, like a metronome. Many of the men were too exhausted to do anything but stare blindly ahead; others shook with fear.

Wintringham led the charge himself and went down almost at once with a bullet to the leg. Bernie winced and jerked as bullets cracked around him, watching the men he had trained with collapse with howls or sad little sighs as they were hit. A hundred yards out the desperate urge to fall and hug the ground became too strong and Bernie threw himself behind the shelter of a thick old olive tree.

He lay against the gnarled trunk for a long time, bullets whining and cracking around him, looking at the bodies of his comrades, blood turning the pale earth black as it soaked in. He twisted his body, trying to burrow as deep as he could into the ground.

Late in the morning the firing ceased, though Bernie could hear it continuing further up the line. To his right he saw a high, steep knoll covered with scrubby grass. He decided to make a dash for it. He got up and ran, crouched over almost double, and had almost reached cover when there was a crack and he felt a stinging blow in

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his right thigh. He spun over and hit the earth. He could feel blood trickling down his trousers but dared not look round. Using his elbows and his good leg he crawled frantically towards the shelter of the knoll, his old arm injury sending pain lancing into his shoulder. Another bullet made earth spit up around him but he made it to the knoll. He threw himself into the lee of the little hill and passed out.

WHEN HE CAME to it was afternoon; he was lying in a long shadow and the warmth of the day was receding. He had fallen against the incline of the hill and could see only a few feet of earth and stones ahead of him. He was conscious of a raging thirst. Everything was quiet and still; he could hear a bird singing in one of the olive trees but also a murmur of distant voices somewhere. They were talking Spanish so it must be the Fascists, unless the Spanish troops further north had made a breakthrough, which he couldn't believe after what had happened to his section. He lay still, his head cushioned in the dusty earth, conscious that his right leg was numb.

He drifted in and out of consciousness; still he could hear the murmuring voices, ahead and to the left somewhere. Some time later he woke properly, his head suddenly clear, his thirst agonizing. There was no sound of voices now, just the bird singing; surely not the same one.

Bernie had thought Spain would be hot; the memories of his visit with Harry six years ago were all of dry heat, hard as a hammer. But in February, although the days were warm enough, it grew cold at dusk, and he wasn't sure he could get through a night out here. He could feel the lice crawling in the thick down on his stomach. They had infested the base camp and Bernie hated their crawling itch. Pain was a strange thing: his leg was bearable but the urge to scratch his stomach was desperate. For all he knew, though, he could be surrounded by Fascist soldiers who had taken his still form for a corpse, and would open fire at any sign of movement.

He raised his head a little, gritting his teeth, dreading the impact of a bullet. Nothing. Above him only the bare hillside. Stiffly, he turned over. Pain shot through his leg like a knife and he had to clench his jaw shut against a scream. He pulled himself up on his elbows and looked down. Half his trouser leg was torn away and

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covering him. One of the soldiers pulled a pistol from his holster. There was a click as he slipped the safety catch. He stepped forward and descended the knoll.

Bernie leaned on one hand and raised the other in weary supplication.

The Fascist came to a halt three feet away. He was a tall, thin man with a little moustache like the Generalissimo's. His face was hard and angry.

'*Me entrego,*' Bernie said. 'I surrender.' It was all there was left to do.

'*¡Cabrón comunista!*' The man had a heavy southern accent. Bernie was still trying to make out the words as the Fascist brought up his pistol and aimed at his head.

PART ONE



AUTUMN

Chapter One

London, September 1940

A BOMB HAD FALLEN in Victoria Street. It had gouged a wide crater in the road and taken down the fronts of several shops. The street was roped off; ARP men and volunteers had formed a chain and were carefully moving rubble from one of the ruined buildings. Harry realized there must be someone under there. The efforts of the rescuers, old men and boys caked with the dust that hung round them in a pall, seemed pitiful against the huge piles of brick and plaster. He put down his suitcase.

Coming into Victoria on the train, he had seen other craters and shattered buildings. He had felt oddly distanced from the destruction, as he had since the big raids began ten days before. Down in Surrey, Uncle James had almost given himself a stroke looking at the photographs in the *Telegraph*. Harry had scarcely responded as his uncle snarled red-faced over this new example of German frightfulness. His mind had retreated from the fury.

It could not retreat, though, from the crater in Westminster suddenly and immediately before him. At once he was back at Dunkirk: German dive-bombers overhead, the sandy shoreline exploding. He clenched his hands, digging the nails into his palms as he took deep breaths. His heart began pounding but he didn't start shaking; he could control his reactions now.

An ARP warden strode across to him, a hard-faced man in his fifties with a grey pencil moustache and ramrod back, his black uniform streaked with dust.

'You can't come up 'ere,' he snapped briskly. 'Road's closed. Can't you see we've 'ad a bomb?' He looked suspicious, disapproving,

wondering no doubt why an apparently fit man in his early thirties was not in uniform.

'I'm sorry,' Harry said. 'I'm just up from the country. I hadn't realized it was so bad.'

Most Cockneys confronted with Harry's public school accent would have adopted a servile tone, but not this man. 'There's no escape anywhere,' he rasped. 'Not this time. Not in the tahn, not in the country either for long, if yer ask me.' The warden looked Harry over coldly. 'You on leave?'

'Invalidated out,' Harry said abruptly. 'Look, I have to get to Queen Anne's Gate. Official business.'

The warden's manner changed at once. He took Harry's arm and steered him round. 'Go up through Petty France. There was only the one bomb round here.'

'Thank you.'

'That's all right, sir.' The warden leaned in close. 'Were you at Dunkirk?'

'Yes.'

'There's blood and ruin down the Isle of Dogs. I was in the trenches last time, I knew it'd come again and this time everyone'd be in it, not just soldiering men. You'll get the chance to fight again, you wait and see. Bayonet into Jerry's guts, twist and then out again, eh?' He gave a strange smile, then stepped back and saluted, pale eyes glittering.

'Thank you.' Harry saluted and turned away, crossing into Gillingham Street. He frowned; the man's words had filled him with disgust.

AT VICTORIA it had been as busy as a normal Monday; it seemed the reports that London was carrying on as usual were true. As he walked on through the broad Georgian streets everything was quiet in the autumn sunlight. But for the white crosses of tape over the windows to protect against blast, you could have been back before the war. An occasional businessman in a bowler hat walked by, there were still nannies wheeling prams. People's expressions were normal, even cheerful. Many had left their gas masks at home, though Harry had his slung over his shoulder in its square box. He knew the defiant good humour most people had adopted hid the fear of invasion, but

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he preferred the pretence that things were normal to reminders that they now lived in a world where the wreck of the British army milled in chaos on a French beach, and deranged trench veterans stood in the streets happily forecasting Armageddon.

His mind went back to Rookwood, as it often did these days. The old quadrangle on a summer's day, masters in gowns and mortarboards walking under the great elms, boys strolling by in dark blue blazers or cricket whites. It was an escape to the other side of the looking glass, away from the madness. But sooner or later the heavy painful thought would always intrude: how the hell had it all changed from that to this?

ST ERMIN'S hotel had once been grand but the elegance was faded now; the chandelier in the entrance hall was dusty and there was a smell of cabbage and polish. Watercolours of stags and Highland lochs covered the oak-panelled walls. Somewhere a grandfather clock ticked somnolently.

There was nobody at the reception desk. Harry rang the bell and a bald, heavily built man in a commissionaire's uniform appeared. 'Good morning, sir,' he said in the relaxed, unctuous voice of a lifetime in service. 'I hope I haven't kept you waiting.'

'I've an appointment at two thirty with a Miss Maxse. Lieutenant Brett.' Harry pronounced the woman's name 'Macksie' as the caller from the Foreign Office had instructed.

The man nodded. 'If you would follow me, sir.' His footsteps soundless on the thick dusty carpet, he led Harry to a lounge full of easy chairs and coffee tables. It was empty apart from a man and woman sitting in a bay window.

'Lieutenant Brett, madam.' The receptionist bowed and left.

The two rose to their feet. The woman extended a hand. She was in her fifties, small and fine-boned, smartly dressed in a blue two-piece suit. She had tightly curled grey hair and a sharp, intelligent face. Keen grey eyes met Harry's.

'How do you do, so nice to meet you.' Her confident contralto made Harry think of a girls' school headmistress. 'Marjorie Maxse. I've been hearing all about you.'

'Nothing too bad, I hope.'

'Oh, quite the contrary. Let me introduce Roger Jebb.' The man took Harry's hand in a hard grip. He was about Miss Maxse's age, with a long tanned face and thinning black hair.

'What about some tea?' Miss Maxse asked.

'Thank you.'

A silver teapot and china cups had been laid out on a table. There was a plate of scones too, pots of jam and what looked like real cream. Miss Maxse began pouring tea. 'Any trouble getting here? I gather one or two came round here last night.'

'Victoria Street's closed off.'

'It is a nuisance. And it's going to go on for some time.' She spoke as though it were a spell of rain. She smiled. 'We prefer to meet new people here, for the first interview. The manager's an old friend of ours, so we won't be disturbed. Sugar?' she continued in the same conversational tone. 'Do have a scone, they're awfully good.'

'Thanks.' Harry scooped up jam and cream. He looked up to see Miss Maxse studying him closely; she gave him a sympathetic smile, unembarrassed.

'How are you getting on now? You were invalided out, weren't you? After Dunkirk?'

'Yes. A bomb landed twenty feet away. Threw up a lot of sand. I was lucky; it shielded me from the worst of the blast.' He saw Jebb studying him too, from flinty grey eyes.

'You had a bit of shell shock, I believe,' he said abruptly.

'It was very minor,' Harry said. 'I'm all right now.'

'Your face went blank there, just for a second,' Jebb said.

'It used to be a lot more than a second,' he replied quietly. 'And both hands used to tremble all the time. You might as well know.'

'And your hearing suffered, too, I believe?' Miss Maxse asked the question very quietly, but Harry caught it.

'That's almost back to normal as well. Just a little deafness in the left one.'

'Lucky, that,' Jebb observed. 'Hearing loss from blast, that's often permanent.' He produced a paperclip from his pocket and began absent-mindedly bending it open as he continued looking at Harry.

'The doctor said I was lucky.'

'The hearing damage means the end of active service, of course.'

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Miss Maxse went on. 'Even if it is minor. That must be a blow. You joined up straight away last September, didn't you?' She leaned forward, teacup enfolded in her hands.

'Yes. Yes, I did. Excuse me, Miss Maxse, but I'm a bit in the dark . . .'

She smiled again. 'Of course. What did the Foreign Office tell you when they rang?'

'Only that some people there thought there might be some work I could do.'

'Well, we're separate from the FO.' Miss Maxse smiled brightly. 'We're Intelligence.' She gave a tinkling laugh, as though overcome by the strangeness of it all.

'Oh,' Harry said.

Her voice became serious. 'Our work is crucial now, quite crucial. With France gone, the whole Continent is either allied to the Nazis or dependent on them. There aren't any normal diplomatic relationships any more.'

'We're the front line now,' Jebb added. 'Smoke?'

'No, thanks. I don't.'

'Your uncle's Colonel James Brett, isn't he?'

'Yes, sir, that's right.'

'Served with me in India. Back in 1910, believe it or not!' Jebb gave a harsh bark of laughter. 'How is he?'

'Retired now.' But judging by that tan you stayed on, Harry thought. Indian police, perhaps.

Miss Maxse put down her cup and clasped her hands together. 'How would you feel about working for us?' she asked.

Harry felt the old shrinking weariness again; but something else too, a spark of interest.

'I still want to help the war effort, of course.'

'D'you think you're fit to cope with demanding work?' Jebb asked. 'Honestly, now. If you're not you should say. It's nothing to be ashamed of,' he added gruffly. Miss Maxse smiled encouragingly.

'I think so,' Harry said carefully. 'I'm almost back to normal.'

'We're recruiting a lot of people, Harry,' Miss Maxse said. 'I may call you Harry, mayn't I? Some because we think they'd be suited to the kind of work we do, others because they can offer us something

particular. Now, you were a modern languages specialist before you joined up. Good degree at Cambridge, then a fellowship at King's till the war came.'

'Yes, that's right.' They knew a lot about him.

'How's your Spanish? Fluent?'

It was a surprising question. 'I'd say so.'

'French literature's your subject, isn't it?'

Harry frowned. 'Yes, but I keep my Spanish up. I'm a member of a Spanish Circle in Cambridge.'

Jebb nodded. 'Academics mainly, is it? Spanish plays and so on.'

'Yes.'

'Any exiles from the Civil War?'

'One or two.' He met Jebb's gaze. 'But the Circle's not political. We have a sort of unspoken agreement to avoid politics.'

Jebb laid the paperclip, tortured now into fantastic curls, on the table, and opened his briefcase. He pulled out a cardboard file with a diagonal red cross on the front.

'I'd like to take you back to 1931,' he said. 'Your second year at Cambridge. You went to Spain that summer, didn't you? With a friend from your school, Rookwood.'

Harry frowned again. How could they know all this? 'Yes.'

Jebb opened the file. 'One Bernard Piper, later of the British Communist Party. Went on to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Reported missing believed killed at the Battle of the Jarama, 1937.' He took out a photograph and laid it on the table. A row of men in untidy military uniforms stood on a bare hillside. Bernie stood in the middle, taller than the others, his blond hair cut short, smiling boyishly into the camera.

Harry looked up at Jebb. 'Was that taken in Spain?'

'Yes.' The hard little eyes narrowed. 'And you went out to try and find him.'

'At his family's request, as I spoke Spanish.'

'But no luck.'

'There were ten thousand dead at the Jarama,' Harry said bleakly. 'They weren't all accounted for. Bernie's probably in a mass grave somewhere outside Madrid. Sir, might I ask where you got this information? I think I've a right—'

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'You haven't actually. But since you ask, we keep files on all Communist Party members. Just as well, now Stalin's helped Hitler butcher Poland.'

Miss Maxse smiled placatingly. 'No one's associating you with them.'

'I should hope not,' Harry said stiffly.

'Would you say you had any politics?'

It wasn't the sort of question you expected in England. Their knowledge of his life, of Bernie's history, disturbed him. He hesitated before answering.

'I suppose I'm a sort of liberal Tory if anything.'

'You weren't tempted to go and fight for the Spanish Republic, like Piper?' Jebb asked. 'The crusade against fascism?'

'So far as I'm concerned, Spain before the Civil War was rotten with chaos, and the Fascists and Communists both took advantage. I came across some Russians in '37. They were swine.'

'That must have been quite an adventure,' Miss Maxse said brightly. 'Going to Madrid in the middle of the Civil War.'

'I went to try and find my friend. For his family, as I said.'

'You were close friends at school, weren't you?' Jebb asked.

'You've been asking questions at Rookwood?' The thought angered him.

'Yes.' Jebb nodded, unapologetic.

Harry's eyes widened suddenly. 'Is this about Bernie? Is he alive?'

'Our file on Bernard Piper's closed,' Jebb said, his tone unexpectedly gentle. 'So far as we know he died at the Jarama.'

Miss Maxse sat upright. 'You must understand, Harry, if we're to trust you to work for us, we do need to know all about you. But I think we're happy.' Jebb nodded, and she went on. 'I think it's time we got down to brass tacks. We wouldn't normally dive straight in like this but it's a question of time, you see. Urgency. We need information about someone. We think you can help us. It could be very important.'

Jebb leaned forward. 'Everything we tell you from now on is strictly confidential, is that understood? In fact, I have to warn you that if you discuss any of it outside this room, you'll be in serious trouble.'

Harry met his eyes. 'All right.'

'This isn't about Bernard Piper. It's another old schoolfriend of

yours, who's also developed some interesting political connections.' Jebb delved in his case again and laid another photograph on the table.

It was not a face Harry had ever expected to see again. Sandy Forsyth would be thirty-one now, a few months older than Harry, but he looked almost middle-aged. He had a Clark Gable moustache and heavily oiled hair, already starting to recede, swept back from his brow. His face had filled out and acquired new lines but the keen eyes, the Roman nose and wide thin-lipped mouth were the same. It was a posed photograph; Sandy was smiling at the camera with a film star's smile, half enigmatic and half inviting. He wasn't a handsome man but the photograph made him appear so. Harry looked up again.

'I wouldn't have called him a close friend,' he said quietly.

'You were friendly for a time, Harry,' Miss Maxse said. 'The year before he was expelled. After that business involving Mr Taylor. We've spoken to him, you see.'

'Mr Taylor.' Harry hesitated a moment. 'How is he?'

'He's all right these days,' Jebb said. 'No thanks to Forsyth. Now, when he was expelled, did you part on good terms?' He jabbed the paperclip at Harry. 'This is important.'

'Yes. I was Forsyth's only friend at Rookwood, really.'

'I wouldn't have thought you had an awful lot in common,' Miss Maxse said with a smile.

'We didn't, in a lot of ways.'

'Bit of a bad hat wasn't he, Forsyth? Didn't fit in. But you were always a steady chap.'

Harry sighed. 'Sandy had a good side too. Though . . .' He paused. Miss Maxse smiled encouragingly.

'I sometimes wondered why he wanted to be friends with me. When a lot of the people he mixed with were – well, bad hats, to use your phrase.'

'Anything sexual in it, Harry, d'you think?' Her tone was light and casual, as when she spoke of the bombs. Harry stared at her in astonishment for a moment, then gave an embarrassed laugh.

'Certainly not.'

'Sorry to embarrass you, but these things happen at public schools. You know, crushes.'

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'There was nothing like that.'

'After Forsyth left,' Jebb said, 'did you keep in touch?'

'We exchanged letters for a couple of years. Less and less as time went on. We hadn't much in common once Sandy left Rookwood.' He sighed. 'In fact, I'm not sure why he went on writing for so long. Maybe to impress – he wrote about clubs and girls and that sort of thing.' Jebb nodded encouragingly. 'In his last letter he said he was working for some bookie in London. He wrote about doping horses and fake bets as though it was all a joke.' But now Harry was remembering Sandy's other side: the walks over the Downs in search of fossils, the long talks. What did these people want?

'You still believe in traditional values, don't you?' Miss Maxse asked with a smile. 'The things Rookwood stands for.'

'I suppose so. Though . . .'

'Yes?'

'I wonder how the country got to this.' He met her eyes. 'We weren't ready for what happened in France. Defeat.'

'The jelly-backed French let us down.' Jebb grunted.

'We were forced to retreat too, sir,' Harry said. 'I was there.'

'You're right. We weren't properly prepared.' Miss Maxse spoke with sudden feeling. 'Perhaps we behaved too honourably at Munich. After the Great War we couldn't believe anyone would *want* war again. But we know now Hitler always did. He won't be happy till all of Europe's under his heel. The New Dark Age, as Winston calls it.'

There was a moment's silence, then Jebb coughed. 'OK, Harry. I want to talk about Spain. When France fell last June and Mussolini declared war on us, we expected Franco to follow. Hitler had won his Civil War for him, and of course Franco wants Gibraltar. With German help he could take it from the landward side and that'd be the Mediterranean choked off to us.'

'Spain's in ruins now,' Harry said. 'Franco couldn't fight another war.'

'But he could let Hitler in. There are Wehrmacht divisions waiting on the Franco-Spanish border. The Spanish Fascist Party wants to enter the war.' He inclined his head. 'On the other hand, most of the Royalist generals distrust the Falange and they're scared of a popular uprising if the Germans come in. They're not Fascists,

they just wanted to beat the Reds. It's a fluid situation, Franco could declare war any day. Our embassy people in Madrid are living on their nerves.'

'Franco's cautious,' Harry ventured. 'A lot of people think he could have won the Civil War earlier if he'd been bolder.'

Jebb grunted. 'I hope you're right. Sir Samuel Hoare's gone out there as ambassador to try and keep them out of the war.'

'I heard.'

'Their economy's in ruins, as you say. That weakness is our trump card, because the Royal Navy can still control what goes in and out.'

'The blockade.'

'Fortunately the Americans aren't challenging it. We're letting in just enough oil to keep Spain going, a bit less actually. And they've had another bad harvest. They're trying to import wheat and raise loans abroad to pay for it. Our reports say people are collapsing from hunger in the Barcelona factories.'

'It sounds as bad as during the Civil War.' Harry shook his head. 'What they've been through.'

'There are all sorts of rumours coming out of Spain now. Franco's exploring any number of schemes to gain economic self-sufficiency, some of them pretty crackpot. Last year an Austrian scientist claimed to have found a way of manufacturing synthetic oil from plant extracts and got money out of him to develop it. It was all a fraud, of course.' Jebb gave his bark of a laugh again. 'Then they claimed to have found huge gold reserves down at Badajoz. Another mare's nest. But now we hear they really *have* found gold deposits, in the sierras not far from Madrid. There's a geologist with South African experience working for them, one Alberto Otero. And they're keeping it quiet, which makes us more inclined to think there's something in it. The boffins say that geologically it's a possibility.'

'And that would make Spain less dependent on us?'

'They've no gold reserves to back the currency. Stalin made the Republic send the gold reserve to Moscow during the Civil War. And kept it, of course. That makes buying anything on the open market very difficult for them. At the moment they're trying to get export credits from us and the Yanks.'

'So if the rumours are true – they'd be less dependent on us?'

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'Exactly. And therefore more inclined to enter the war. Anything could tip the balance.'

'We're trying to perform a high-wire act out there,' Miss Maxse added. 'How much of a stick to wave, how many carrots to offer. How much wheat to allow through, how much oil.'

Jebb nodded. 'The point is, Brett, the man who introduced Otero to the regime was Sandy Forsyth.'

'He's in Spain?' Harry's eyes widened.

'Yes. I don't know if you saw the adverts in the newspapers a couple of years ago, tours of the Civil War battlefields?'

'I remember. The Nationalists ran the tours for English people. A propaganda stunt.'

'Somehow Forsyth got involved. Went to Spain as a tour guide. Franco's people paid him quite well. Then he stayed on, got involved in various business schemes, some of them pretty shady I would imagine. He's a clever businessman apparently, of the flashy sort.' Jebb's mouth crinkled with distaste, then he stared keenly at Harry. 'He has some important contacts now.'

Harry took a deep breath. 'May I ask how you know all this?'

Jebb shrugged. 'Sneaky beakies working out of our embassy. They pay minor functionaries for information. Madrid's full of spies. But no one's got near Forsyth himself. We've no agents in the Falange and it's the Falangist faction in the government that Forsyth's with. And word is he's clever, likely to smell a rat if a stranger appeared and started asking questions.'

'Yes.' Harry nodded. 'Sandy's clever.'

'But if you were to turn up in Madrid,' Miss Maxse said. 'As a translator attached to the embassy say, and run across him in a cafe? The way people do. Renew an old friendship.'

'We want you to find out what he's doing,' Jebb said bluntly. 'Perhaps get him on our side.'

So that was it. They wanted him to spy on Sandy, like Mr Taylor had all those years ago at Rookwood. Harry looked out of the window at the blue sky, where the barrage balloons floated like huge grey whales.

'How'd you feel about that?' Miss Maxse's voice was gentle.

'Sandy Forsyth working with the Falange.' Harry shook his head. 'It's not as if he needed to make money - his father's a bishop.'

'Sometimes it's the excitement as much as the politics, Harry. Sometimes the two go together.'

'Yes.' He remembered Sandy coming breathless into the study from one of his forbidden betting trips, opening his hand to show a five-pound note, white and crinkled. 'Look what I got from a nice gee-gee.'

'Working with the Falange,' Harry said reflectively. 'I suppose he was always a black sheep, but sometimes – a man can do something against the rules and get a bad name and that can make him worse.'

'We've nothing against black sheep,' Jebb said. 'Black sheep can make the best agents.' He laughed knowingly. Another memory of Sandy returned to Harry: staring angrily across the study table, his voice a bitter whisper. 'You see what they're like, how they control us, what they do if we try to break away.'

'I think you're someone who likes to play the game,' Miss Maxse said. 'That's what we expected. But we can't win this war playing a straight bat.' She shook her head sadly, the short curls bobbing. 'Not against this enemy. It means killing, you know that already, and it means deception too, I'm afraid.' She smiled apologetically.

Harry felt opposing emotions churn inside him, panic beginning to stir. The thought of going back to Spain both excited and appalled him. He had heard things were very bad from the Spanish exiles at Cambridge. In the newsreels he had seen Franco addressing ecstatic crowds who responded with Fascist salutes, but behind that, they said, was a world of denunciations and midnight arrests. And Sandy Forsyth in the middle of it all? He looked at the photo again. 'I'm not sure,' he said slowly. 'I mean, I'm not sure I could carry it off.'

'We'd give you training,' Jebb said. 'Bit of a crash course because the powers that be want an answer to this one ASAP.' He looked at Harry. 'People at the highest level.'

Part of Harry wanted to retreat now, go back to Surrey, forget it all. But he had spent the last three months fighting that panicky urge to hide.

'What sort of training?' he asked. 'I'm not sure I'd be any good at deception.'

'It's easier than you think,' Miss Maxse replied. 'If you believe in

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the cause you're lying for. And you would be lying, deceiving, let's not mince words. But we'd teach you all the black arts.'

Harry bit his lip. There was silence in the room for a long moment.

Miss Maxse said, 'We wouldn't expect you just to go in cold.'

'All right,' he said at length. 'Perhaps I could bring Sandy round. I can't believe he's a Fascist.'

'The hard part will be early on,' Jebb said. 'Working your way into his confidence. That's when it'll feel strange, difficult, and that's when you'll most need to pass it off.'

'Yes. Sandy's got the sort of mind that can see round corners.'

'So we gather.' Miss Maxse turned to Jebb. He hesitated a moment, then nodded.

'Good,' Miss Maxse said briskly.

'We'll need to move quickly,' Jebb said. 'Make some arrangements, put things in place for you. You'll need to be vetted properly, of course. Are you staying up tonight?'

'Yes, I'm going to my cousin's.'

He looked at Harry sharply again. 'No ties here, apart from your family?'

'No.' He shook his head.

Jebb took out a little notebook. 'Number?' Harry gave it to him.

'Someone will ring you tomorrow. Don't go out, please.'

'Yes, sir.'

They rose from their chairs. Miss Maxse shook Harry's hand warmly. 'Thank you, Harry,' she said.

Jebb gave Harry a tight little smile. 'Be ready for the siren tonight. We're expecting more raids.' He threw the twisted paperclip into a wastepaper basket.

'Dear me,' Miss Maxse said. 'That was government property. You are a squanderbug, Roger.' She smiled at Harry again, a smile of dismissal. 'We're grateful, Harry. This could be very important.'

Outside the lounge Harry paused a moment. A sad heavy feeling settled on his stomach. Black arts: what the hell did that mean? The term made him shudder. He realized that half consciously he was listening, as Sandy used to do at masters' doors, his good ear turned

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towards the door to catch what Jebb and Miss Maxse might be saying. But he could hear nothing. He turned to find the receptionist had appeared, his steps unheard on the dusty carpet. Harry smiled nervously and allowed himself to be led outside. Was he falling already into the habits of a – what? Sneak, spy, betrayer?