

From the bestselling author of **Old Enemies**

Michael DOBBS

The Edge of Madness

In two days the world will be destroyed.
Can anyone stop the bloodshed?

A HARRY JONES THRILLER



PROLOGUE

Arnie Edwards was no common or garden adulterer. He'd recently celebrated his silver wedding anniversary and was no longer in the prime of his manhood, but that left him with a sense of sexual urgency which screamed out for satisfaction. So much to do, so little time to do it, and Washington, DC was a town overflowing with opportunity. For a while, Arnie tried to take advantage of them all, wandering away from the kennel every chance he got. Bit of a selfish dog, was Arnie, and the excuses he made to himself were as prolific as they were predictable. His wife had other interests, was neglecting him, he couldn't remember the last time they'd spent an evening raking the embers. What did he expect when his wife was the President of the United States?

Screwing around by the First Laddie, as Arnie liked to refer to himself, required certain precautions. He couldn't bring the business home to the White House, he was unlikely to get away with booking a room at the Four Seasons under some assumed name, and there were always those wretched guys from the Secret Service hanging around. So when Arnie bumped into a clinically enhanced oil lobbyist from Texas named Gretchen who had her own apartment in the rabbit warren of the Watergate complex, the arrangement seemed ideal. He could pop round to her burrow almost any time. And he did.

Trouble was, her burrow quickly came to seem like home for Arnie in a way the White House could never be, and soon he began leaving his razor and toothbrush behind. He knew he was taking a risk, with his reputation, his marriage, even his complimentary tickets to the Redskins' games. Wouldn't do much for the institution of the presidency, either, but when you're lying between the thighs of a woman from Texas who's licking out your inner ear, you're no longer thinking with the right part of your anatomy. Responsibility? Nothing more than a strange word from a crossword puzzle. Six across, thirteen letters – or was it fourteen? By this time he couldn't even count, let alone reason.

The affair soon got to the point that Arnie was determined to continue with it, regardless. He came to that conclusion one evening after he had rolled over onto distressed sheets and felt as though he were twenty-three all over again. He could take it, no matter what the consequences.

Unfortunately for Arnie and many other people, he had no way of knowing that one of those consequences was going to help kick-start a global war.

There were to be no guns in this war, no missiles, no vapour trails stretching like accusing fingers across the skies, none of the obliterating explosions and sudden bursts of darkness you would expect. Not even a scream. There was nothing, save for the tentative striking of keys on a cheap keyboard. Yet make no mistake; this was warfare, it would bring the world to the edge of damnation. And the brilliance of the whole thing was that no one would realize it was happening.

Yet, like all weapons, the system required testing, and the first place they decided to test it was against the Russian nuclear plant at Sosnovy Bor. She was of the same era as Chernobyl, and her four RBMK-1000 reactors were almost identical in design. The grimy cooling towers of the Leningradskaya Atomnaya Elektrostantsiya squatted on the shore of the Gulf of Finland, scowling in the direction of the ancient Russian capital of St Petersburg that lay only fifty miles to the east.

She was an old lady, so far as nuclear plants went, and like many old women she creaked and complained. Thirty years earlier there had been rumours of a partial meltdown of one of the cores, but in true *Sovetskii*-style that couldn't conceive of failure, let alone own up to it, the incident was swept aside. Much of the basic plant was all nuts and old bolts that wouldn't have seemed out of place in one of Sergei Eisenstein's black-and-white masterpieces, but after Chernobyl had blown the top off its reactor, the international community had poured millions of dollars into Soviet nuclear plants to ensure there would be no repeat, and Sosnovy Bor had received its fair share. They'd used the funds to upgrade the computers to take away the guesswork, double-banking all the vital equipment and fitting the latest cut-outs and fail-safes.

There was always the problem of the safety culture, of course, getting sodden-brained workmen to take responsibility for fluid spills and dripping pipes rather than wandering off to piss their salaries into the Gulf of Finland, but Rosenergoatom had got round that, not by simply duplicating the important systems but making them entirely separate. So Sosnovy Bor had one set of controls operated by computers, and another operated without computers, a belt-and-braces affair that provided two entirely different means of support and which was regularly tested to ensure both belt and braces remained in prime condition. Only one very small snag in all this: in order to test the safety system, the belt or the braces had to be taken off.

With hindsight it was a pity that they chose to unbuckle the belt in the middle of a harsh winter when the power demand from St Petersburg was at its height, but you don't put off an important maintenance schedule simply because of a little snow. So the control system that *wasn't* based on computers was taken out of service. Only for an hour.

But Sosnovy Bor had only a few minutes to live.

The computer systems had been hacked, been lobotomized, but no one in the plant knew it. So they took the first safety system out of operation. Immediately, the second began to misbehave, allowing temperatures in the reactor core to soar. The process was instantaneous

and precipitous, and with extraordinary rapidity the temperatures rose above two thousand eight hundred degrees Celsius. At this point the uranium-dioxide rods at the heart of the core started to melt, but there was no sign of this in the control room. The screens suggested the reactor was behaving itself, because the systems controlling the screens had been tampered with, too. The huge secondary array of lights and dials began to light up and flicker but there was always some small irregularity, an oil leak or an open door, and for a few crucial moments no one paid much attention.

That changed when the build-up of steam in the reactor core blew the pressure-release valves. The noise sent out a scream that made all who heard it freeze with terror. Other alarm systems began to sound. Operators began to shout, to panic. The plant's huge turbines began to shake and shudder. Pipes cracked, seals blew. Inside the reactor, the rising temperature meant that more of the water supposed to cool the reaction was turning to steam, which made the temperature rise still faster. It became a race to disaster.

How close Sosnovy Bor came to the point of overwhelming catastrophe, no one from Rosenergoatom was ever able to ascertain, even with hindsight, but it was at this point in the enveloping crisis that the hackers decided they'd overstayed their welcome and put the instrumentation back to normal. At last the terrified controllers could see precisely what was going on, yet even before they could react, the computers did it for them. At Chernobyl it had been too late, even for this, the melting rods in the reactor core had stuck together, preventing the circulation of water between them and so ensuring the core couldn't be cooled down. It blew the entire lid off, leaving the radiation-spewing inferno open to the air and turning Chernobyl into the destroyer of children. But at Sosnovy Bor, the gods were on their side and, with agonizing slowness, the operators watched the reactor-core temperature begin to slip back down. Russia could breathe again. For the moment.

There was no leakage of radiation beyond the reactor circuit, and none to the outside world, but the rods had melted and it was impossible to deal with them. They never reopened that burnt-out reactor Number Three at Sosnovy Bor, they just locked it up and threw away the key. Russia had survived a great terror, yet for some of those who thought about it there was a still greater terror lurking in the shadows. Despite all the analysis and examination and brutal inquisitions of those officials and operators who might have been responsible, the committee of investigation couldn't find out what had gone wrong. They were blind. Which meant, as they quickly came to realize, that they had no way of preventing it happening all over again.

Wu Xiaoling sat twisting the silken ends of the belt on her gown, overwhelmed with a sense of abuse and uncertainty. She was twenty-six years of age, slim yet profiled, exquisitely so, with remarkably round eyes for a Chinese girl. Something Occidental had swum in the family's gene pool during their days way back in Hong Kong that provided Xiaoling with the allure of someone special, different – not that different was a welcome characteristic in the new China,

but that hadn't prevented her from becoming the most favoured mistress of the country's leader, Mao Yanming. Being so close to one so high gave her considerable privileges, but also placed upon her the most awesome responsibility for keeping Mao satisfied. And he was no easy man to satisfy. She had been summoned peremptorily to his private pavilion that was set next to the lake in Zhongnanhai, the protected quarter in Beijing beside the ancient Forbidden City that housed the country's government. As usual she had been met at a side gate to the compound by one of his personal guards who had led her directly to the pavilion, trying to shield her from enquiring eyes, but others knew, of course. Men are such fools; such things can never be kept secret. Even Mao's wife knew, Xiaoling had seen it in her eyes.

Mao had been waiting for her, but it had become immediately apparent that something was wrong. He had spent no time in small talk, had no little gift for her, but had screwed her roughly, brutally almost. Not that it had ever been Xiaoling's role to complain and in truth there was nothing he did that gave her any pleasure. He was a man of the provinces, not sophisticated, not even very clean. The road from his birthplace in Gansu had been long and dusty, and she was glad for the scent of honeysuckle and sweet camphor that filled these rooms and covered his trail. She had learned many ways of giving him pleasure, of distracting him from those avenues he sometimes liked to explore that gave her none, and she was skilled in easing away his cares with fingers whose touch was as light as an eagle's feathers. That was why he talked, and allowed her to steal his troubles from him, yet today he had uttered barely a word, except to give her instruction, and had taken her crudely, in a manner he knew she loathed. Afterwards she had cried quietly into her pillow while he made phone calls. Then he had returned, taking her again, hurting her, as though he were penalizing her and had seen through her wiles and little deceptions. It was as though he knew.

He had dressed and left, instructing her to remain in the outside sitting room, where she now sat tugging in distraction at her silken belt, staring at the ancient calligraphy scrolls hanging from the walls and the large all-too-modern photo-negative image of old Chairman Mao Zedong inside a heavy black-lacquered frame. The picture had two embellished red eyes. They seemed to be staring at her.

Then the door opened. Fu Zhang, one of Mao Yanming's closest personal colleagues, entered accompanied by a guard bearing a tray of tea, which was placed on a small formal table. Fu nodded a silent instruction and the guard left. Xiaoling disliked Fu, he was insidious, cold, a man who treated with contempt anyone who hadn't been with Mao as long as he had. That contempt increased ten-fold for women, for Xiaoling sensed that he saw no role in his life for the other sex. He was the sort who would prefer to sleep with goats, and probably did, yet now he invited her to join him at the table, where he was pouring tea, almost deferentially. Uncertain, hesitant, she exchanged the comfortable cushioned sofa for the hard, formal chair at the table. He invited her to drink. *Pu'er*, green tea, very old, as Mao liked it, with a hint of chrysanthemum.

‘I have been asked to tell you that our leader has held you in very high regard,’ Fu said as she took a few tentative sips. It took her several moments to realize that he had used the past tense. Why? she wondered. She was still gnawing away at the question when, with a rising sense of panic, she realized she could not move. Not her hand, nor a finger. Her limbs were frozen. The tea. The rest of her senses were still active, almost enhanced, her thoughts and sudden doubts scrambling over each other inside her mind, the scent of honeysuckle now almost powerful enough to drown her. And through it all, insistently, she could smell her own fear as with the silken cord of her gown Fu began binding her to the chair, looping it under her arms, tying it behind her, ensuring that she would not slip. Then he ripped her gown wide open, exposing her.

She was screaming inside, but not a sound passed her lips. She could not resist him. For a moment she felt sure he was going to rape her, but no, he was a powder boy, he had no desire for what she had to offer. Then, from a small case withdrawn from his pocket, he produced a knife. A surgeon’s knife, hardened, razor-sharp steel that glowed in the sun reflecting from the lake.

Within her mind she wriggled and thrashed, while in the chair she sat as passive as a rag doll.

‘You should not have betrayed us,’ Fu said, his fat lips wriggling like serpents.

Then he started to carve.

‘Ling Chi’, they called it. The Death of a Thousand Cuts. Its literal meaning was to climb a mountain, very slowly. It was a form of execution practised in imperial China and not formally abolished until 1905, but even then it continued to be used. It involved cutting the flesh from the body in small pieces while the victim still lived, and was intended to be the highest form of degradation. That’s why they had decided to use it on Xiaoling. Despite all their efforts they knew they could never completely erase the marks of her existence or cover up what she had done. She had betrayed Mao Yanming, poured humiliation upon him, caused him to lose face, but there would be no sniggering amongst those who knew or might hear of such things because they would remember nothing but the horror of what awaited those who crossed their leader. It was a lesson in terror they could never forget.

Wu Xiaoling felt no physical pain, but she saw her blood flowing thick and dark from the wounds on her arms, her thighs, and elsewhere. As her head dropped she wasn’t even able to avert her eyes. She was forced to watch every moment.

In the few months since Sosnovy Bor was pulled back from the edge of oblivion, there had been other mysterious incidents. These didn’t occur all at the same time or in the same corner of the world, but a pattern had begun to develop, one that was as yet so indistinct that almost no one recognized it for what it was. Instead of indulging in thoughts of conspiracy, most

people put this plague of misfortunes down to incompetence. All the fault of the politicians. It was an easy explanation to accept.

On the north-east coast of America, in the midst of a summer heatwave that was stretching the resources of the electricity grid to its limit, a power line went down. Nothing unusual in that, the lines get struck by lightning all the time. There are always alternatives, other routes that are made to work that little bit harder, so long as care is taken not to overload them, otherwise they cut out, too ... But imagine you have the capability to model the entire grid system on a computer, to simulate it, or steal its software, to copy the codes that control the switching, to check out its weak points and to see what happens when you take out this line, or that line. If you could do that, then you would become its master. Just flick the right switch at the wrong time, and you could get the whole cotton-picking power system to fall apart like a house of cards.

And that's what happened. At a time when the system was under acute pressure from all that air conditioning and beer refrigeration, and with one line down from a summer lightning strike, another line suddenly dropped out. There was no apparent reason for this, no one ever found out why, but soon power lines were tripping all over the place and large swathes of the east coast were being plunged into darkness. There was no undue panic; hell, it had all happened before, everyone remembered the blackout of 2003. America had been promised it would never happen again, of course, those who were responsible for these things had sworn on a stack of Bibles, but it did. Promises were cheap, yet action costs money, lots of it, and time. When the day came that their time ran out, millions of Americans were left to sit in the dark and sweat.

There were other incidents. The Pentagon, with twelve thousand computer networks and five million computers, was used to hackers having a go at it, but the number of incidents increased sharply. NASA and the Departments of State, Commerce and Homeland Security all reported similar infiltration alerts. *Time* magazine, in a lead article entitled 'Hack Attack', laid the blame at the feet of the ubiquitous Microsoft that supplied so many of the world's source codes. 'We are placing our security eggs in one basket,' it said, 'and one day someone is going to come along and steal the lot.' Yet it wasn't just in America. The banking system in Georgia was brought to a halt for three days, but not many people cared or even knew where Georgia was. And when the Parliamentary elections in Italy had to be held all over again because the new computer system that counted the votes deposited them in an impenetrable black hole, no one thought too much of the matter. It was, after all, Italy.

For all the misfortunes that struck others, none took the brunt more than Britain. Not all at once, of course, the game was spread over several months so that no one would guess the British were even in play. It kicked off when Egg, one of the country's largest Internet banks, made available its regular monthly statements online, yet when customers tried to access their personal and very private details, they were given someone else's. Intimate financial profiles

were scattered around like seed in front of pigeons, and these included not just the Joneses, Smiths and Browns but also many prominent personalities, much to the amusement of many. As a result the *News of the World* was able to reveal that the Sports Minister was paying regular monthly sums to an entirely unsuitable female acquaintance, who promptly sold the details of the Minister's off-duty entertainments to the following week's edition. It included a colourful description of the Minister rehearsing his speech for the party conference while stark naked and complimenting himself on the size of his standing ovation. The Minister almost died of humiliation, a process his wife vowed publicly to complete, and much of the country was left crippled with laughter.

The railway system was also crippled. Three times in five days inter-city trains found themselves heading towards each other on the same stretch of line. None of these incidents ended in crashes, although there was one close call, but when the rail operators tried to rectify the faults the entire system went down. For four days not a single train moved anywhere in the country.

Ten days later, it was the turn of the national benefit system to screw up. Payments were still made, but none of them was for the right amount. Some gremlin had burrowed into the accounting software and moved the decimal point around. Pensioners from Cornwall to Carlisle muttered in disbelief, but the First Minister of Scotland had to be recalled from a conference in the Bahamas to cope with the riots that broke out in Glasgow. And south of the border, a highly dangerous sex attacker was released thirteen years before the end of his sentence when his name appeared on the list of prisoners granted early parole. The nation united in outrage.

Yet most people knew nothing of what was perhaps the most serious foul-up. On the London Stock Exchange, in the heart of the City of London, many of the trades began to be recorded twice, which exaggerated the movements in the market, making everything much more volatile. One expects the casino to play by the rules, but suddenly the punters were playing with a marked deck and if that news had got out they'd have stopped playing the game. Overnight one of Britain's most lucrative industries would have been destroyed. That's why the story was buried down the deepest institutional mineshaft. Better to lie, find a quick fix, move on. Even the Treasury agreed.

Throughout July, in different ways and in diverse places, the country was spun round like a child's top until it was left wobbling on the edge of chaos. And the game had only just begun.

Millions might have died in this game in Britain, but they didn't, that wasn't the plan, although the Minister for Sport came close when his wife threw a large bowl of cereal at him in their kitchen. He ducked just in time. Yet elsewhere there was a handful of fatalities, and most of those were in the United States as a result of the power failure. Two people were killed in a head-on collision in New Jersey that occurred when the lights suddenly disappeared on a stretch of the Palisades Parkway, and a man in Brooklyn succumbed to a heart attack after

climbing seventeen flights of stairs because the elevator wouldn't work. A couple in upstate New York suffered carbon-monoxide poisoning after starting up their generator, and in Providence a family of immigrants was killed by a fire that started once the power had been restored. They'd been tampering with their ancient fuse box. Yet the electricity supply wasn't cut long enough for real damage to be inflicted.

The most important casualty, however, was a frail but remarkably spirited woman in her eighties named Abigail. She was feeling unwell and hadn't been on top form for some time, yet she was of a stubborn and independent nature and wasn't given to complaining. But the chest pains were insistent, and so was her doctor. Abigail was quickly transferred from her traditional New England clapboard home in Brookline to the cardiac unit of the nearby Massachusetts General Hospital in downtown Boston, where her doctor assured her she would be in the best possible hands. Despite her condition she remained feisty, issuing instructions, telling the doctors with a hidden smile that they weren't a patch on that cute Hugh Laurie, and above all insisting that they must not inform her daughter until all their test results had come in. No point in involving her unnecessarily, she told them, her daughter had other things to worry about. 'I got the legal right to silence and I'm exercising it,' she insisted.

Everything was done for the old lady's comfort. But still she died, one of the first casualties of war, from an overdose of insulin. When she was admitted she was diagnosed as having suffered a moderately serious heart attack, but the medical staff also discovered that she was acutely diabetic. It wasn't uncommon for a woman in her eighties and the treatment, even for a woman in Abigail's frail condition, was straightforward. Insulin. A regular measured dose pumping sufficient of the drug into her to stabilize her blood-sugar levels.

The dosage was critical. Too little and the blood-sugar level, already high following the stress of a heart attack, would soar. Too much and the blood-sugar level would fall, and since blood sugar is the body's basic fuel, life itself begins to fail. That's why they programmed the bedside computer to deliver just the right amount of insulin rather than leaving the process to the vagaries of human intervention. Life teeters on the brink for many frail old ladies, so she had little resistance when the infusion pump hit her with a massive overdose of insulin. Her blood-sugar level plummeted, and Abigail quickly started to sweat, her pulse racing as she fell into unconsciousness. The nurses on duty at the monitoring station scurried to respond, but it was too late. Within two minutes the patient was dead. They were left with little surprise, only a profound sense of disappointment – and a corpse. The wheel of life had turned one last time for Abigail, then stopped.

There were no recriminations. The medical staff had done all they could, had diagnosed the problem, devised the appropriate treatment, but in the end there was no coping with the vital organs of an elderly lady that had been placed under too much stress. They had no way of knowing that someone on the other side of the world had hacked into the hospital's systems, right up to the bedside of this particular patient, and temporarily boosted the dosage of insulin

ten-fold. The nurses weren't negligent, they were simply deceived by readings on their monitor that had also been interfered with; they had no idea what was happening, even when it was too late. They ran a routine diagnostic check on the system, of course, in order to ensure that nothing had malfunctioned, but by that time, like the nuclear plant in Sosnovy Bor, everything was back in order.

Nearly three-quarters of those with diabetes die of heart attack or stroke. Abigail became one more statistic.

She hadn't been an intended target but was what you might term collateral damage. Incidental to the main affair. And it happened so quietly that no one realized she was a victim, she just lay there and died, right under the noses of all those doctors and nurses. The trouble was, they weren't paying attention to her, instead they were concentrating on their computers, just as happens all the time in so much of the world.

So she passed away and was gone, accompanied by nothing more than the routine electronic beeping of her killer. One of those things, if it hadn't been for the fact that Abigail was Arnie Edwards' mother-in-law, and her daughter the President of the United States.

CHAPTER ONE

Tuesday lunchtime, late July. Central Beijing.

There wasn't much hint of elegance about most buildings in Beijing, the British ambassador thought as he fought his way through the dense traffic. Practical, brutal. A little like the Chinese themselves. Sweep away the old, throw up something new, most of which was hideous. There was another side to them, of course, the sort of China found in the Fragrant Hills on the outskirts of the city with its pavilions and ancient pagodas, where in autumn the foliage turned a deep red and in summer the air shimmered with the scent of pine, but here in the city so many of the old traditions had been lost, buried beneath concrete. Sir Wesley Lake glanced at his watch. He didn't wish to be late for his lunch appointment, which he was squeezing in before he left on a week's vacation – a trip to Eastern Ming Tombs a few hours' drive from the city, then on to the mountain resort at Chengde, where the imperial court used to withdraw during the summer to escape the heat. Lake liked to escape on his own, it had become something of a pleasing distraction since his wife had died four years earlier. He loved this country, despite its hard-nosed rulers, he had enough Mandarin to get by and was accustomed to losing himself and his lingering pain in the colour and gentle chaos that he found outside the cities. Truth be told, he didn't want lunch, but he had been invited by a former Chinese ambassador to Benin and it had been difficult to suggest that his invitation was less compelling than a five-hour drive through the countryside. And it was to be at the Beijing Hotel, near Tiananmen Square, one of the less ruthlessly modern of the city's watering holes. It might have been worse.

He was met in the foyer by a minion in a buttoned hotel jacket. 'Sir Wesley?' the man enquired, offering a bow of respect before leading the ambassador not to the dining room but to the elevator. He said nothing, and pressed the button for the top floor. The Englishman was surprised but also quietly delighted when he was led through into a carefully decorated suite filled with polished wood and silk trappings. Set in the window, in the sunshine, was a luncheon table prepared with flowers and cold meats. The man offered another reverential bow and departed.

The ambassador's delight slowly cooled when, after fifteen minutes, no one had appeared. His mood turned to astonishment and then anger when, ten minutes later, he discovered that the only exit from the suite was firmly locked, and no amount of banging and kicking on the door seemed to make any difference.

Tuesday evening. Heathrow Airport, London.

Five thousand miles and many time zones further east, the tyres of Air Force One scorched onto the tarmac of the runway as the presidential jet completed its landing. The American President had come to town. Blythe Elizabeth Harrison Edwards held a genuine affection for the British and their quaint pageantry and would normally have found her spirits lifting at this point, but a major problem had arisen that distracted her and dampened all her enthusiasm. It could be summed up in one word. Arnie.

It had been the day she had buried her mother, and she'd been sorting out what he should wear to the funeral. That's when she'd stumbled upon another woman's earring in her husband's pocket. Picked up from the floor at the last White House reception, he'd explained, yet despite all Arnie's dismissive logic, she trusted her instincts more than her husband. Then she'd found the number of his little tart plastered all over the White House call log. He couldn't even be bothered to cheat on her properly. And when, that evening, she had confronted him, he'd blamed her – her job, her absences, her distractions, and her lack of interest. John Kennedy had complained that he got a headache if he didn't have sex every two or three days, and Arnie said he felt the same. It was so brutally unfair, he'd wanted the White House as much as she had. Why was he punishing her, most of all on the day she had buried her mother? He'd told her that he wanted a divorce once they left the White House, that he'd only stuck with her for the sake of appearance. Her appearance. Made it sound as if he were doing her a favour. The prick. That's why he hadn't come on this trip to Britain, had stayed at home, looking after family business after Momma Harrison's death, so the official excuse had run. Truth was, Blythe couldn't bear to lay eyes on him, let alone to wake up beside him. Yet why did she feel guilty about that, too? As if it weren't bad enough that she hadn't seen her mother for a month or more before she died. Oh, God, she hurt.

He had promised to behave himself while she was away, so that they could talk like grown-ups when she got back, and even as Air Force One touched down she called him. But he was nowhere to be found. She didn't need the CIA to tell her where he was, but that was one number she wasn't going to call, not ever. As the Boeing rolled to a stop, Blythe gazed out of the window. It was a brilliant day but she could share in none of its joys. She'd been a fool, too soft, about Arnie, about everything, perhaps. Time to toughen up, girl, she scolded herself. For a fleeting moment she toyed with the idea of sending the Secret Service into the tart's apartment, along with television cameras, kicking down the door to catch him with his pants down, expose the wick-dipping little creep, but she knew that it was nothing more than a pathetic daydream because she would be the one to be exposed, as a failed woman, a failed wife. And they would say she wasn't up to being a president, either. Presidents aren't allowed a private life, not any more, they have no option but to wrap themselves in a blanket of heartlessness and get on with things. Can't ever break down in tears, no matter how much she wanted to. She shivered and pulled the blanket ever more tightly around her shoulders. She had no idea how much she was going to need that blanket before the week was out.

Tuesday afternoon. Seventh floor, the Beijing Hotel.

The well of outrage touches significant depths in most diplomats. Theirs is a profession guarded by centuries of custom and law, and the most fundamental rule in it all is that they remain personally inviolable and untouched. They're not supposed to find themselves locked up in a hotel room. It wasn't just his pride; Wesley Lake's foot hurt, too. He'd kicked the door so hard and so often that his shoe was threatening to burst at its seams. There had to be a better way.

The suite in which he was confined consisted of three main rooms, two bedrooms and a large central sitting room, along with two bathrooms and a small kitchen. As he explored he found one of the bathrooms had been equipped with an array of personal items such as toothbrush, hairbrush and razor, while the refrigerator in the kitchen was full of food. At the back of one of the shelves he discovered a dozen cans of beer. As he counted them, he realized this could turn into a long stay.

God, this was outrageous! You don't touch ambassadors, they have diplomatic immunity. You can shout at them, lie to them, deceive them, but you must never lay a finger on them. Those were the rules, except ... Richard Sykes had been shot in Holland, and Chris Ewart-Biggs blown up in his car in Ireland. The rules hadn't saved them.

Damn.

He stared out of the window, which lacked a balcony or any means of escape, turning the possibilities over in his mind and finding that each grew more lurid than the last. It was as he wondered whether he could or should throw a piece of heavy furniture through the window to attract attention that the door behind him opened quietly.

'My apologies for keeping you waiting, Ambassador.'

The man who entered with an apology and a bow of deference wasn't the former ambassador to Benin whom Lake had been expecting but a stranger – or was he? The Briton scoured his memory. Hadn't he seen this man somewhere before? He was on the small side, even for a Chinese, with a regulation haircut, impenetrable eyes, ordinary suit; everything about him was unexceptionable, except for the lips. These were surprisingly fleshy and expressive, and were now pinched in concentration. 'Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Fu Zhang. I am the Vice-Minister of State Security.'

Of course, that was why Lake both knew and did not know this man. The ambassador didn't deal with the State Security creeps who, like their counterparts all round the world, operated in the shadows. But he'd heard of Fu, one of Mao's closest associates, a man who came from the same small town in Gansu and had followed him all the way to Beijing, and who allegedly wielded far more influence than his secondary position in the ministry suggested.

‘What the hell am I doing here, Fu? Why am I being held?’ the ambassador barked, dispensing with the normal etiquettes. His face was flushed with anger.

The lips wriggled. ‘Held? Why, Sir Wesley, you are not being held, you are being protected. A thousand apologies for the inconvenience, but it appears that a threat has been made to your personal safety. We couldn’t allow that, so we are providing you with shelter until the threat has passed.’

The ambassador recognized the explanation for what it was – a cover story that both of them might find useful to paper over the cracks when it was all over. His spirit lifted; at least they didn’t mean to throw him out the window. Not yet, at least. He decided against any attempt to give them ideas by hurling furniture at it himself.

‘What threat?’

The lips smiled, but the eyes remained fixed and cold. ‘It appears that a young woman named Wu Xiaoling has been causing trouble. You know this person?’

The ambassador prayed he hadn’t flinched. So they had unearthed Xiaoling. He understood what that implied and felt sick. He reached for a starched napkin from the table laid for lunch in order to wipe his lips. ‘I’m not here to answer your damn-fool questions. I insist you let me leave!’

‘In any event,’ Fu continued calmly, ‘your name has been linked with her, and it seems that anyone in an association with this troublesome woman is now at risk.’

It was a threat, and Lake took it as such. ‘At risk? From whom?’

‘We are still attempting to establish the full circumstances.’

‘But you say I am not being held.’

‘Sheltered.’

‘Then I thank you for your concern, but I’ll look after myself, if you don’t mind.’ With a snort of exasperation Lake crossed to the door and flung it open. Standing immediately outside were two armed policemen, their carbines pointing directly at his stomach. Further down the hall he sensed there were others of their kind. He turned on Fu in accusation. ‘You will allow me to leave!’

‘I’m afraid that cannot be arranged, not yet, Ambassador – for your own safety, you understand. The Chinese authorities have a duty to ensure you are kept from harm. We cannot permit you to depart at this moment.’

‘Then which moment?’

‘As soon as we have cleared up the mystery of Wu Xiaoling and ensured there is no longer any threat.’

So that was it. They had nailed him for Wu Xiaoling and he knew the consequences of getting caught dirty-handed inside the Chinese leader’s bedroom would be immense. He tried to imagine what they would be doing to Xiaoling but his mind recoiled in horror, knowing that he, too, had entered a world in which there were no longer any rules to protect him. A

small piece of elastic snapped inside the ambassador and he sank despairingly into an armchair. In his mind he was counting the cans of beer in the refrigerator once more, like the scratch marks on a prison wall that marked off the days, and he grew a little afraid. He was going to suffer. Somehow he knew that this man Fu would insist on it.

Thursday lunchtime. Berkeley Square, London.

Harry Jones stood in the rain. Lots of it. The sort of rain that sharks could swim in and that ripped airplanes from the sky. Welcome to summer in the city. The resulting flood that spread across London had taken on biblical proportions with rain choking the gutters and filling the streets with misery. People scurried for shelter, heads down, heedless of the traffic and each other, their umbrellas snagging in the manner of fighting cocks, gouging eyes, while Harry stood forlornly on the corner in the hope of engaging a taxi. He was heading for lunch with Gabriella, a wonderfully architectural American he'd bumped into the previous week who'd mentioned she was celebrating a lucrative divorce and wondered if Harry might care to assist. It had been a disgracefully unambiguous proposition and he liked that, everything up front. So unlike Mel, but ... Mel was – *had been* – another story. Harry was going through one of those phases in his life following his divorce when he could be disgraceful without consequence to anyone but himself, so he'd accepted Gabbi's proposition. She had proved to be inspirational as well as insistent, and Harry had discovered he liked her, both in and out of bed. They'd even talked tentatively about spending the weekend together before she flew back home, and lunch had been arranged to nail down the details. Harry couldn't deny it and didn't even try; he was excited.

But now he was late. The traffic was winding slow and snake-like, and appeared to have swallowed up every available taxi. From somewhere nearby the horns of buses bleated like lost sheep. Harry was a man used to being punctual – as one of his former commanding officers had remarked: 'It seems there's scarcely a war anywhere in the world that can start until you've turned up, Jones' – and that, for twenty years of his life, had been pretty much the case. Sometimes, like now, he missed those times, yet through the midday gloom of the storm he could see salvation approaching in the form of a bright orange lamp. A free cab. He waved and began to collapse his umbrella as the taxi berthed itself near the kerb. The cabbie didn't risk lowering his window to ask the destination; gratefully, Harry clambered into the back. Yet no sooner had he sat down than the opposite door opened and another man heaved himself in. He had a heavy frame, a neck that swelled above his collar and an expression that mimicked roots sucking at dried dirt. He didn't beat about the bush.

'Fuck off,' the stranger snarled. 'Get out of my cab.'

'I think you're mistaken,' Harry replied calmly.

The man bristled with indignation. His eyes were darting, his clothes expensive, the shoes hand-sewn and sodden. A trader from the City, Harry guessed, with a bee up his butt. 'I got no time to argue with pricks like you,' the man spat. 'I hailed this cab. Now shove off.'

'Let's ask the cabbie, shall we?' Harry suggested.

But the driver was having none of it. 'What d'you think I am, from marriage guidance? Sort it out yerselves,' he said, and slid the connecting window shut.

'Already sorted. This creep goes in five seconds or he ends up in the gutter,' the stranger said, heat flushing into his cheeks.

Harry returned the stare. The man was younger than he was, perhaps late twenties, and was of impressive size, but Harry suspected that the once-solid frame had been softened by the temptations of City living. On the other hand, the overblown appearance might just be that he was wrapped in a raincoat. If it came to an inglorious wrestling match in such confined quarters, the other man had the advantage simply by dint of his weight.

'Five ...' the man snarled, counting.

'Are you threatening me?' Harry demanded, incredulous.

'That's it. That's exactly it. Four ...'

'Please. Look, I got in first. It's my cab.'

'Three!' The stranger's knuckles grew white.

'Come on, you can't be serious. You're not really going to hit me,' Harry suggested, determined to sound jovial.

'What part of "fuck off" don't you understand? You some sort of retard? You got two seconds, then you're out the door, on your own or on your arse. Your choice.'

Harry looked for help from the cabbie but the fellow had deliberately engaged his attention elsewhere, while the windows of the taxi were steamed up from the rain to the point of total opaqueness, depriving Harry of any chance of support from outside. He was on his own.

'One ...' The man snapped, leaning back and looking for all the world as though he was preparing to strike. That was the moment when Harry raised his elbow, catching the other man beneath the nose. There wasn't a huge amount of force behind it since to use all his strength would have risked killing him, driving the nasal bones into the brain. And Harry had done that. Once. On a dark, swirling night in the bandit country of Armagh in 1988.

The IRA had been holding a hostage in an isolated farm just the other side of the border, and the mission of Harry's unit had been to spring him. On a night blowing so hard it threatened to rip trees out by their roots, Harry had got within fifty yards of the milking shed when he'd stumbled straight into one of the IRA bastards about to take a piss against a tree, cock in one hand, Armalite in the other. There had been an unseemly scramble – Harry couldn't use his own gun, it would alert those inside, and he had no time for his knife because the other man had the drop on him. That's when Harry had raised his elbow, hit him, just one time, and the gunman had fallen back into the mud and cow crap, quite dead. Harry had no regrets; they'd

already used an electric drill on the hostage, straight through both kneecaps, and were about to do much, much worse. It had been another bit of dirty business in a despicable war which had few rules, but that was then and ... well, this was the middle of Mayfair. Harry was no longer a soldier but a politician, a Member of Parliament, and it wasn't his job any longer to go round London adding to his body count. As he raised his arm, he took care to use just enough force to mash the cartilage of the nasal passages. It caused the man to scream with pain.

'Oh, dear, you seem to have banged your nose on the door. I feel sure it's broken,' Harry said.

'You, you stinking ...' But the burble of protest was cut short by the handkerchief that he was forced to clamp against his nose to staunch the flow of blood.

'I think you know where the door is,' Harry added softly.

The taxi driver decided to become involved once more and began shouting at the wretch not to make a mess in his cab. Outnumbered, whimpering with rage and in considerable pain, the stranger stumbled back out into the rain, slamming the door shut.

The cabbie wasted no time in releasing the hand brake to lock the doors and prevent any further interruptions, revealing himself to be a man of instant loyalties. 'Pushy bastard got what he deserved, you ask me. So where to, guv?'

Harry was just about to give instructions when his mobile phone began to vibrate. He plucked it from his pocket and listened intently for a few seconds.

'Can't it wait? I've got a lunch,' he muttered with undisguised reluctance into the mouthpiece.

He said nothing more before the call ended. When it did, he sat back in the seat, his mind flooding with images of Gabbi and her manifold attractions. And that's how they would probably now stay, nothing but images. She was a girl from New York, lots of Latin blood, feisty, that's what made her such fun, and he was willing to take a large bet that she wasn't used to being stood up. Harry would call, do a little grovelling, try to firm up the weekend, but already he felt the moment slipping away. Anyway, she'd be back in New York by Wednesday, so not much point. But a pity. A very considerable pity, he decided.

The cabbie was staring at him insistently in the mirror. 'Where's it to be, guv?' he demanded once more.

'Downing Street,' Harry sighed. 'The back door.'