1975

BUCHAREST

Chapter 1

It made no difference whether I tried to sneak out by using the lift or the stairs. He was always waiting for me before I got outside.

'Ted!' Vasile managed to convey exactly the same amount of surprise each time. 'How are things for you today?'

'I'm still waiting to get to the studio.'

'I know, I know. Directors.' He tutted, and smiled in his wide, insincere way. 'I am going to sort that out, don't you worry.' He looked me up and down. 'Another pair of trousers?' He was obsessed with my clothes.

'No, I wore these on the first day.'

'Of course, of course.' He nodded, his hands open in front of him. 'Shall we get something to eat?'

'I was just going for a walk.'

'But how will they tell you when your car is available?'

They were never going to tell me when my car was available. I was never going to get to interview that film director, I would lose my job and my landlady would throw me out. I was never going to leave this hotel. My shoulders slumped.

'It's going to be fine.' He slapped my shoulder. 'Nici o problema.'

Nothing was ever a 'problema' for Vasile, but nothing was ever achieved either. Days of postponements were nothing to him, but it wasn't as if there were daily flights back to London. My booked flight had already taken off, and the rearranged one was in two days' time.

Still, I looked at his hopeful face and agreed. He led me to the dining room.

'After I eat I'll go for a walk,' I said. 'They aren't going to send a car after three, are they?'

He looked at his watch. 'Maybe after three that will be safe, yes. I will check with the travel service, just to make sure.'

I was starting to believe that nothing would ever be certain in Bucharest. Everything was fluid, especially faithful promises and fixed arrangements. I didn't think it was Vasile's fault. He seemed genuinely upset to have to tell me 'not today', over and over.

We sat at the same table as usual, the sun falling on my face. Sometimes he'd turn to the window and point out things of interest: pretty girls, foreign cars. He was a little younger than me, maybe twenty, but wearing an overly large suit with worn elbows. He had tacked the sleeve hems up so that, if it had buttons, they were hidden. He frequently pulled the

sleeves down, as if the suit was too small, and I wondered if he'd picked up the habit from watching someone else.

The waiter stumbled across and Vasile gave our orders. I smoothed down the white table linen, rearranged the cutlery and looked out of the window, but it was the same view as ever at the lunch service. The buses and trams, with the bottom half red and top half cream, were crammed with bodies spilling from the doors and, occasionally, clinging to the sides. So many people. Could they all be on shift work, or did they go home for lunch? Vasile became edgy when I asked questions, so I tried not to ask too many.

Vasile sighed. When I looked at him he'd closed his eyes. He murmured, 'Hotel Continental.' This was another habit of his, to sit back, forgetting I was there, say something to himself, and shake his head. 'It's the greatest hotel in the world, don't you think?'

'Have you been here before?' I asked.

He opened his eyes, looking confused. 'I saw you here yesterday and the day before.'

'I mean before I came.'

'Ah, no.' He leaned towards me. 'This is my first job as a guide.'

'Your English is very good,' I said.

He lowered his gaze and smiled more widely than usual. 'I study very hard. I hope to be the best guide.' He pulled at his suit sleeve again, then joined his hands together on the table.

'Do you live at home?'

His smile faded. 'Of course I live in a home.'

'At home with your parents, I mean.'

'Ah.' His face clouded and he turned to fix on a distant point outside. He tilted his head as if he'd remembered something. 'If Mircea Drăgan is not available, would you be open to interviewing another director instead?'

I knew he'd been leading up to something like this.

'No, it has to be Drăgan. That's why I'm here.'

Vasile persisted. 'Elisabeta Bostan isn't directing this week. She is the director of fifteen films, some very popular musicals.' He raised his eyebrows.

I shrugged. 'It has to be Drăgan. I don't get to choose who I interview, I'm afraid.'

'Do the British not enjoy musicals?'

'Some do. But Mircea Drăgan has been entered into three Moscow International Film Festivals and won awards at each, and was on the jury in another. He has more of a profile abroad.' Supposedly. Not that I'd heard of him until shortly before I was sent on this trip.

'I understand.'

The waiter arrived back with our beers, and Vasile gratefully began talking to him. I was happy with his timing too. I had never heard of Bostan, and wouldn't know what to ask her. I had only seen Drăgan's last film, so all my questions were based on that. It wasn't great. An ocean liner on fire, it didn't compare well to *The Poseidon Adventure*, out the year before, but my boss had fixed on Drăgan to compete with *Sight and Sound*. 'They can have Tarkovsky, but we'll get Drăgan. He'll be so much bigger.'

I had my doubts. Even I had heard of *Solaris*.

Vasile and the waiter were chatting fast, very excited about something. Most of Vasile's beer had gone as he drank from his glass and handed the waiter the bottle to drink from.

'Six one!' he shouted at me. 'We beat Denmark, six one!'

I clinked my glass to his. I gathered it was a qualifications match for the UEFA Championship, and Vasile could now visualise the Romanians on the winners' podium, kissing their medals.

Sport. I'd already heard way too much about Ilie Năstase, a tennis player I had heard of, and a load of gymnasts I hadn't. It was going to be a long afternoon.

'Do you see? If we can beat the capitalists at soccer and tennis, we prove ourselves.' He burped. 'I don't mean any offence.'

'That's all right. I'm not sure that I'm a capitalist.' I hoped he would take me back soon. I wouldn't be able to keep my eyes open for much longer, and I seemed to keep slipping from the bench. We had left the restaurant at dusk, some time ago, but I couldn't quite remember how we'd got to this park.

'Oh. I must note that. That's interesting.' He wriggled to right himself and nodded.

'Note it?' I asked.

He whispered loudly, 'I make notes. I am always learning more about your people.'

I nodded. 'Me too.'

He squinted to look at me. 'I haven't told you anything.'

'Don't worry, I'm not taking notes. I meant – no, I've forgotten what I meant. Romania won the football, though, I remember that. I'll let everyone know when I get back to London.'

'Ted, your voice doesn't sound like you are from London. Where did you live before?'

I couldn't be bothered to explain where Harwich was. It was too complicated. 'Nowhere. Just London. I'd never been out of the country until I came here and I'm booked to go to the festival in Moscow. I'd prefer Cannes, to be honest, but it's exciting to be abroad.'

'And how did you get your job?'

'I'm not sure, really. I just applied.' Mr Benstrup had hinted that his wife had liked my application letter, but I wasn't going to admit that.

Vasile mumbled a word to himself, then yawned and looked around. ‘Where are we?’

‘I have no idea.’ There were trees around the bench we sat on, and I could hear some water. I couldn’t hear any cars. Now I was thinking, it was pleasantly cool. The days had been warm, from my position at the window, waiting, waiting, waiting. But as for where we were, it could have been anywhere in the world. ‘I hope we’re somewhere in Bucharest.’

Vasile laughed, and then stopped suddenly. ‘Ted, I need to ask you something.’

‘Please don’t ask me how we get back to the hotel.’

‘No. Will you give me your trousers?’

‘What?’ I lit a cigarette and his face was illuminated. He looked serious as he helped himself to my packet and flicked his Zippo lighter open and closed.

‘When you leave, can I have your trousers?’

I looked at my trousers. ‘I’m wearing them.’

‘But you have another pair.’

‘I need two pairs. They have to be washed, now and again.’

‘Bine, bine.’ He looked sad, his head to one side. ‘So you are a capitalist after all. That was a joke. But I have a serious question to ask.’

‘OK.’

He lit his cigarette and edged closer to me. ‘Will you take a trip for me and write an article about it?’

‘A trip?’

‘A historical trip to Transylvania. It explores the history behind all the Dracula rubbish. It would be very good for you to write about. I would be very grateful.’

I tried to edge away, but I was on the end of the bench. ‘I’m a film reviewer. I don’t write about travel.’

‘Yes, but you are a journalist first. A great journalist. You can spread your ideas.’

‘I really don’t have time for travelling. I need to get back to London.’

‘Right.’

His voice was flat. He stood up and held his hand out. I stumbled to my feet.

‘Time to go back.’

We walked along paths, under trees, and along dark roads until the hotel was there in front of me. He saw me across the road and to the main doors.

‘See you tomorrow, Ted,’ he said.

I grabbed onto the door handle and somehow negotiated my way through. I slid along banisters and walls, and found the intimidating floor attendant sitting at her desk.

‘Room 313, please.’ I think I said that. I could have said anything, in the knowledge that she knew who I was.

‘You have your key.’

I checked my jacket, then each trouser pocket in a slow but thorough way. ‘No, I left it with you.’

‘It’s in your left trouser pocket.’

It was. I looked at her as if she had placed it there while I blinked. Sixtyish, stern, with every hair pulled back into a bun, and magical. I’d never have expected it of her.

‘Thank you,’ I said.

‘Good night,’ she said, and went back to looking at the empty staircase.

I let myself into my room, flung myself at the bed, and stared at the ceiling with its bare bulb. There were things I wasn’t happy about in this room. Things moved, ever so slightly, when I wasn’t looking. There were strange noises in the skirting board, and that stain on the bathroom floor, but it was a relief to be alone.

I sat up and the room steadied. Letter. I could use this time to write the letter I had meant to write this afternoon. I needed to explain, and that was always easier on paper. I wouldn’t have to look anyone in the eye.

I tore a page from my notebook and sat by the window which I had opened fully to still the queasiness in my stomach. The night was cool and quiet, the streetlights all out. I heard a clatter in the distance. In London that would be a person, drunk or being beaten, but here it would be something pleasant. Like a fox. No one roamed the streets. It was nice in that way, at least.

I started to write, one eye closed for precision.

Romanian Ministry of the Interior

Compilation of REPORTS on REGINALD EDWARD WALKER

9 – 15 May 1975

Day 1

The subject arrived at Otopeni airport at 13.45 on 9th May and was collected by STARLING who escorted him to the Hotel Continental, Bucharest. He is booked into room 313.

At 17:00 STARLING accompanied the subject to the restaurant, allowing LEAF to examine the subject's possessions, among which were: two pairs of white underpants (Marks and Spencer), one pair of black socks (no label, worn, 2mm hole in one) and one pair of burgundy cotton trousers (C&A), a grey shirt (C&A), and a tweed jacket (chest size 40, too large for the subject). The relative quality of the jacket prompted further attention.

On examination, this jacket was found to have a label (Towncraft, Penneys) indicating it was a style made more than ten years earlier in the USA – two buttons to the front, one on each sleeve, narrow lapels, chest pocket, two flap pockets and two back vents. Fabric is wool (mostly blue with a thin gold-brown stripe) with rayon lining (grey). Considering his age and the fact this is larger than his shirts, it is possible either the subject was given it by an older relative, or purchased it second hand. He may, however, have ties to the USA which are unknown.

A copy was taken of the information in his British Passport, as follows:

Cover: Reginald Edward Walker – uses 'Ted', a potentially misleading name

p. 2 Occupation – Journalist; Place of birth – Harwich; Date of birth – 3rd July 1953; Residence – 159C Griffin Road; Height – 5'9"; Distinguishing marks – none; Spouse and Children – left blank

p. 3 black and white photo, good likeness which shows that his hair can be tidier with effort

Continuing with the suitcase contents, which had not been fully unpacked:

materials for bathing and shaving

two house keys (copies made)

an exercise notebook

one black Bic pen

one red pencil with black lead

a copy of *Journalism – Made Simple* by David Wainwright

a copy of *Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler. Contained within this book [p.46] was a business card reading 'Mr Attridge, Travel Service Whitehall 3636' – possibly used as a bookmark, but this could indicate something of significance on p 46 which has not yet been ascertained. On calling this number, LEAF was unconvinced that this was an authentic business owing to a perceptible buzz on the line.

The ashtray held three butts, identified as 'Kent' brand. There were no matches, and he has been observed using a lighter, identified by STARLING as a 'Ronson Varaflame'.

The appearance of the subject is relatively clean yet his clothes have not been ironed since they were last laundered. He is currently wearing brown corded trousers, a cream shirt, presumably further underpants and socks, and a pair of brown brogues. He appears to be physically able, and prefers his right hand to his left.

He presents as having a genuine interest in Romania generally, and the film industry in particular. The book on journalism and cited 'occupation' as journalist are potential pressure points, as his true role is 'film reviewer'. The subject seems to know little about film reviewing so it has been decided to keep the subject away from the Buftea film studios until more is known about his intentions. While we have been told that subject is happy to act as a courier on behalf of his employer, we need to be certain that we do not expose our practices unnecessarily. LEAF is particularly concerned that the business card could indicate that he is acting for another party. Before we make our planned advances, STARLING has been instructed to view the subject as potentially hostile, and close observation continues.

Service T has put phone and light intercepts in place and these are being monitored.

No phone calls scheduled for this night.