

ALL THE
OLD KNIVES

ALSO BY OLEN STEINHAUER

The Cairo Affair

An American Spy

The Nearest Exit

The Tourist

Victory Square

Liberation Movements

36 Yalta Boulevard

The Confession

The Bridge of Sighs

ALL THE
OLD KNIVES
OLEN STEINHAUER



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of
the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

ALL THE OLD KNIVES.

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FOR SLAVICA

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The seed of this story was planted in California while watching the *Masterpiece* dramatization of Christopher Reid's wonderful poem *The Song of Lunch*. Transfixed by Alan Rickman's and Emma Thompson's performances, I wondered if I could write an espionage tale that took place entirely around a restaurant table. (Not *entirely*, it turned out, but mostly.)

It took time, though. Initially I scribbled some notes before returning to the book at hand (*The Cairo Affair*). A year later, suffering through a blistering August with in-laws in Novi Sad, Serbia, I discovered the old notes. After a year percolating in the unconscious, the story presented itself to me all

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at once, and when I started typing I couldn't stop. For the next month, I didn't.

Such moments of inspiration are unheard of in my experience, and for a writer to take advantage of them he or she needs an infrastructure of support that allows for a monthlong escape from reality.

So, I want to thank my father-in-law, Gavra Pilić, in whose home this book was composed, and my family, who saw that something odd was going on with me and chose to let me have at it.

HENRY

1

There's a delay taking off from San Francisco—caused, I'm guessing, by an overburdened airport, but no one will tell us for sure. At times like this, sitting stalled on the tarmac, it's easy to think apocalyptically—airports at the bursting point, highways clogged with SUVs helmed by citizens in meltdown, smog alerts and gridlocked emergency rooms, corridors lined with the bleeding. When you're in California this kind of vision explodes into grandiosity, and you imagine the earth ripping apart, spilling all this overconsumption, all the cell phones and seaside villas and hopeful young starlets noisily into the sea. It almost feels like a blessing.

Or maybe it's just me. For all we know, the delay is due to a technical problem. We get over-the-speaker

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apologies, "thank you for your patience," and occasional attention from already haggard SkyWest stewards who shrug in answer to questions, tossing around "sorry" as if it's the easiest word in the English language. The woman next to me fans herself with a brochure for Presidio Park; redwoods and dense foliage flash, sending a little stale air my way. She says, "Another day, another delay."

"Tell me about it."

"Someone here's bringing bad karma."

I give her a smile, not quite trusting myself to reply out loud.

It's a small plane, an Embraer turboprop that can seat thirty, though on this one there are no more than twenty, all texting whoever's waiting for them in Monterey. My neighbor takes out a phone and thumbs in her own message, something that starts with "U wont believe . . ."

I keep my phone locked away. After fifteen hours flying six thousand miles, then suffering through the mass psychosis of American passport control, the precise time of my arrival feels unimportant.

Were I younger, I might feel differently. International flights used to be a chance to rest up for the coming adventure, but at some point I lost the ability to doze in the air—in 2006, I think, after turning thirty-nine. After . . . well, after the Flughafen. Once you've watched the high-definition video of a

hundred and twenty corpses on an airplane, you know you'll never relax again in coach. So by the time I enter California I'm dry with fatigue. My fingers feel shorter and fatter, and my cheeks are alternately warm and cold; a chill sweat periodically soaks my undershirt.

I'm trying not to think too much about planes, and instead look ahead to my destination. Celia Favreau, née Harrison. She will wait, or she won't. For a few minutes, I even convince myself that I don't care. No heartbreak, because at this moment I don't have a heart to break. If she's not at the restaurant, I will simply order a dry martini and some fried shellfish, contemplate civilization's imminent collapse, then head back to the airport for an evening flight back to San Francisco. One last phone call to cover my bases, then fly back to Vienna, where I can finally collapse. I've traveled for too many years, and in far worse conditions, to be unnerved by minor inconveniences. Besides, not having to look her in the eyes would certainly make my job, and my life, a lot easier.

It's four thirty by the time we take off—a half hour late. The propellers whine outside the window as my seatmate pulls out a Kindle. I ask what she's reading, and this leads to a discussion of the virtues and deficits of the contemporary spy novel. She's half-way through an old Len Deighton, in which a hunt

for a mole leads the narrator to his own wife. "They just don't make stories like this anymore," she says wistfully. "You knew who the bad guys were back then. These days . . ."

I try to help her out. "Radical Islam?"

"Right. I mean, what kind of an enemy is that?"

An elusive one, I want to say. Again, though, I think better of it.

By the time we land an hour later, I've learned a lot about this woman. Her name is Barbara Jakes. She was raised in Seattle but moved to Monterey with her first husband, who eventually fled to L.A. with a Salinas waitress. After a few months, the waitress abandoned him for a film producer. He still calls, begging for reconciliation, but she has remarried and is now a mother of two sons—holy terrors, she calls them—and works in the health industry. She reads old thrillers in her spare time and watches NFL football with her boys. She's beginning to suspect her new husband is cheating on her. "You start to wonder," she tells me, "if maybe it's something you're doing that's making them stray."

I shake my head with authority. "Blaming the victim. Don't fall into that trap."

I haven't been in the States for a couple of years, and I've forgotten how readily Americans open up. An hour-long acquaintance, and she's already taking my advice on her emotional health. It seems ludi-

crous, but perhaps it isn't. Perhaps it's only those who don't know us at all who are able to see us most clearly. Perhaps strangers are our best friends.

In Monterey I catch a glimpse of her husband—a man whose body had been sculpted by soft office chairs, whose casual clothes are made more ridiculous by the addition of a well-worn fanny pack—and from a distance I try to assess the possibility that he's cheating on Barbara. I watch him gather her overnight bag and kiss her briefly on the lips before leading the way out to the parking lot, but I just can't see it. I wonder if Barbara is jumping to conclusions. I wonder if her experiences with her first husband have made her paranoid. I wonder—and I know how much projection is going on—if the scars of her life are beginning to fester, and if they will soon damage those closest to her.

There's only one person ahead of me at the Hertz counter, an overweight businessman, sandpaper scalp, early sixties. I don't remember him from the flight, where I was distracted by Barbara's problems and by not thinking too much about air travel. Now he's disputing the hidden charges for a hatchback—insurance, taxes, fees—and the clerk, a cheery example of California hospitality, explains everything to him as if he were a child. Finally, he stomps off with a new set of keys, lugging only a small shoulder bag. The clerk shows me an opaque smile. "Sir?"

I take a look at their available cars and request a Chevy Impala, but then ask how much for their high-end convertible, a Volvo C70. Twice as much. The clerk waits with Zen-like serenity as I deliberate and finally shrug. "The convertible."

"Yes, sir."

I sign a few papers, use an old Texas driver's license to identify myself, and put everything on my Company card. Soon I'm strolling out under a cloudy October sky, but it's warm enough for me to slip out of my jacket. I use the remote to unlock the car. A few fenders away, the overweight traveler is arguing loudly with someone on his phone as he sits in his idling hatchback, the window up so that I can't make out his words.

I take out my own phone and turn it on. Eventually it connects to AT&T, and a message bleeps. Despite five years and what I've come to do, my heart skips a beat when I see her name on the screen. Turns out I do still have a heart.

You'll be there, right? Text back either way.

I send Celia a single letter—Y—then get into the car. It starts like a dream.

2

From: Henry Pelham <hpelham@state.gov>
Date: September 28, 2012
To: Celia Favreau <celiafavreau@yahoo.com>
Subject: Hey

C,

I hear from Sarah that you're keeping busy on the West Coast, boosting genius children into the world and making a ruckus of an otherwise quiet enclave. Wien is as it ever was—you're not missing much. Jake says hi. I told him you won't remember him, so please don't pretend you do. Klaus Heller tells me he still owes you some security deposit. Austrians are scrupulously honest, as ever. It's adorable.

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How's Drew? There were some whispers of a heart operation, but hopefully they're unfounded. Hanna showed me pics of Evan and Ginny, which were shocking. How does anyone make such adorable children . . . with Drew?? Ginny reminds me of you.

I'm actually going to be in your neck of the woods in a few weeks. Some company thing in Santa Cruz. But I'll have a free day on October 16, a Tuesday, and I'd love to buy you dinner. Name the place, and I'll bill the government. And if you like, I'll ask Klaus for that check. The stars are handing out excellent financial tidings, it seems.

Much love,

H

3

I'm on my own. I feel the truth of this as, roof stylishly retracted, I merge onto Highway 1, where trees bloom over the breakdown lanes and, up ahead, the mountains of California's Central Coast loom. In gorgeous landscapes loneliness is more acute—it's something I've noticed. Maybe it's just that there's no one to share the view with you. I don't know.

I turn up the radio. Robert Plant wails about the land of ice and snow.

Though my rental could easily sweep down the road in a handful of minutes, I move to the right and take it easy, the wind gusting in from all sides. It's a comfortable road, so much more accommodating than the roads I've been driving the past decade—the windy, traffic-clogged European lanes where people

pull up onto the sidewalk and leave their cars angled, so you have to be a pro to get by without scraping. Also, this road is full of California drivers—easygoing, in no hurry, so unlike European men in their tiny cars, riding your tail in a ridiculous show of machismo. It's easy driving; it feels like an easy life. I can see why she retired here.

Vick said as much in his office up on the embassy's fifth floor, high above Boltzmannngasse. "She's gone," he said. "She's happy. You're wasting your time."

What could I say to that? "I know, Vick. Two kids, after all."

"No, I don't think you do know. I think you're still holding a torch for that woman."

Vick never quite forgave Celia for leaving the station as suddenly as she did, which is why he tends not to say her name anymore. "We're still friends," I said.

Vick laughed. Behind him, a bright Austrian sky filled the window. A plane was riding low, heading toward Flughafen Wien, where in the morning I would be strolling the corridors with my shoulder bag, noticing, as I always did, the Austrian efficiency that had completely airbrushed away the trauma of 2006. "No," Vick said finally. "You *aren't* still friends. That's not how breakups work. And she'll be able to tell, just like I can, that you're still head over heels. After five years, a marriage, and kids, you're the last person she wants to see."

"I think you've got a warped history of romantic entanglements, Vick."

This, at least, provoked a smile. "Let's send Mack. You give him the questions, and he'll bring the answers gift wrapped. You don't need to go."

"Mack won't know if she's lying."

"He's good at his job."

"He doesn't *know* her."

"You don't, either. Not anymore."

I wasn't sure how to rebut that. I couldn't tell him why I needed to go myself, but I at least should have had a ready-made line in my pocket, something rational and irrefutable to throw at him. It's a sign of my eroding capabilities that I had nothing.

He said, "She'll get a restraining order."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"If I were her, I would."

We both let it rest a moment. The plane was gone. I said, "Look, it's an excuse to get out of the basement for a few days. See an old friend. I'll ask her some questions about Frankler, and Uncle Sam can pay for dinner."

"And then you'll wrap it up?" he asked. "Frankler, I mean."

Frankler was the investigation that had kept me in the basement nearly two months, and as I had done plenty of times during our years together, I lied to Vick. "It's tricky. We're trying to cover our

asses here—I just want to make sure every inch is covered."

"But you don't have a suspect, right? No actual evidence of wrongdoing?"

"Just one man's word."

"A terrorist's word."

I shrugged.

"And soon afterward he drowned in a pail of water," Vick said. "So it's not like he's going to be taking the stand."

"True."

"Then close it down. Chalk 2006 up to bad luck."

He was even more eager than I was to end this thing. "I'll find out if Celia has anything to add, and when I get back I'll push on for another week. Okay? Then we'll close it."

"You're eating up our budget, you know."

"Really, Vick? I wander around the basement all day, pulling out old files."

"You fly, too."

"Twice. Over two months I've taken two trips to talk with old hands. Bill Compton and Gene Wilcox. That's hardly extravagant."

He stared at me with those lazy eyes, hesitating, then said, "You ever think about what you'd do if you actually pinned it on someone?"

I had thought about little else. But I said, "Why don't you tell me?"

Vick sighed. I've known him my whole Austrian decade, and he uses sighs the way others crack knuckles or chain-smoke. "You know the score, Henry. We can't afford the embarrassment of a prosecution, and it's not like we're going to do a prisoner swap with the jihadis. Ideally, I wouldn't even want Langley to hear about it."

"So what you're saying is you'd like me to execute the traitor."

He frowned. "I don't believe I said anything of the sort."

We watched each other a moment. I said, "Well, let's hope I don't find anyone to blame it on."

He sighed again and gazed at my hands; I moved them into my pockets. "What does Daniels say?" he asked.

Larry Daniels was the one who'd brought up the theory in the first place. He'd flown in from Langley two months ago in order to have a sit-down with Vick about some new material that had been taken from a prisoner in Gitmo, one Ilyas Shishani, who had been picked up during a raid in Afghanistan. Among the many items he'd spilled, he told the interrogators that the 2006 Vienna Airport disaster had been aided by a source within the U.S. embassy. We'd all been around then—Vick, me, Celia, Gene, and Celia's boss, Bill. After listening to Larry's pitch, Vick had asked me

to head the investigation that he'd code-named Frankler.

"Larry's twenty-eight," I reminded him, just as I had when he'd given me Frankler. "He's building a case off of a terrorist's disinformation. He's also desperate to fill his CV."

"Then let's bury it right now. It'll piss off Daniels, but his bosses would be happy to knock him down a few pegs while avoiding a scandal."

It was an idea I'd toyed with for two months. I didn't like Larry Daniels—few who'd met him during his occasional appearances in Vienna did. He was small and itchy to look at, with oily hair and a high, raspy voice. He emanated the conviction that he knew better than anyone else in the room what was going on. But he was also smart, and if I buried Frankler Daniels would dig it up again and dust it off and make a stink. More important, he would take the investigation out of my hands, and that was something I couldn't allow.

I said, "How do you think we'd look once Daniels started shouting around Langley? I've got to follow this as far as it goes—not talking to Celia would leave a gaping hole. He would shove us into it."

Another sigh. "Just try to wrap it up quickly, will you? Tomorrow's giving us enough headaches without having to pick apart yesterday. Remember that when you're harassing your girlfriend."

But I was already ahead of Vick, and wrapping up Frankler is what makes me slow down in the thickening traffic and peer at signs, trying without success not to think about Celia, and what kind of a meeting she's anticipating. A few hours of reminiscence, something official, or . . . something more interesting?

On the radio the DJ tells me he's busy getting the Led out, and I'm surprised that in the last three decades, ever since I played that old transistor radio in my high school bedroom, DJs haven't come up with a better way of proclaiming their love for Zeppelin. He goes on, predicting a "Beatles Block" in the next hour, and telling his listeners to call in for his "awesome two for Tuesday."

Really? Did commercial radio reach its creative peak in 1982? I switch it off.

To my left is a high school, and on the right a sign points me into the trees and down Ocean Avenue, which rolls downhill toward the coast, splitting the town of Carmel-by-the-Sea in half. The speed limit drops to twenty-five, and I ease along between two tricked-out SUVs. Carmel long ago rid itself of traffic lights, so every few blocks a four-way stop hides among the trees and cottages. I feel like I've been slipped a mild tranquilizer. It's the freshest air I've breathed in my life.

Eventually, after brief views of small homes

through the trees, the shopping district appears, cut down the center by a median strip full of cultivated trees and lined on either side with cottage-themed local stores. Chains are prohibited, and the town center looks like a cinematic version of a quaint English village. Not a real English village, mind, but the kind in which Miss Marple might find herself stumbling around, discovering corpses among the antiques. I drive through the center, all the way down to the sea, passing retirement-aged shoppers dressed like golfers as they walk their little dogs, then take the sandy parking loop to get a glimpse of the clean, white beach and rough waves in the quickly fading light. There are tourists driving behind me, so I only get a moment of serenity before heading back up into the center.

I park near the corner of Lincoln and wait behind the wheel as evening descends. A smattering of locals and tourists, each one his own particular shade of white, wander the sidewalks. I'm in the middle of an idealized vision of a seaside village, rather than the real thing. An image of an image, which is a perfect place to live if you want to be something other than what you once were.

But it's nice, and I wonder if I should have reserved a room for the night instead of a seat on the red-eye back to San Francisco. I can see myself waking in this village and joining the golfers for their

dawn constitutionals along the shore. The morning breeze, the sea—the kinds of things that can clean you out after a decade in the Vienna embassy. A salt wash for the soul.

After tonight, though, it'll take more than a pretty beach to scrub my soul clean, and I suspect that by the time I settle into my return flight all I'll want to do is run from Carmel-by-the-Sea as fast as my little legs can carry me.

After raising the roof with another button press and locking it into place, I take a phone out of my shoulder bag. It's a Siemens push-button I abandoned years ago for the lure of touch-screen technology. It's neither shiny nor minimalist, but it has an excellent microphone I sometimes use to record conversations inconspicuously. I power it up, check the battery, and set up the recording software. I'm the kind of person who likes a record of his life. If not for posterity, then in order to cover my ass.

Back in Vienna I used cash to refill the Siemen's prepaid SIM, and now I dial a number I used a week ago; before that I hadn't used it in more than three years, when I made the call for Bill Compton, who was once Celia's boss. After three rings a gruff-sounding man answers. I've never seen him, so I don't have a face to imagine. I say, "Is this Treble?"

He thinks a moment. His own code name changes depending on the speaker, so in his head (or, for all

I know, on an old envelope beside his phone) he goes through a list of names. Treble means that he's speaking to . . . "Hello, Piccolo. How are you?"

"We're still on?"

"A small roadster," he says. "Very feminine. In Carmel-by-the-Sea."

"Exactly."

He hesitates. "You said there were a couple mopeds and an older Chevy, right?"

"But they won't need any work."

"Yes, yes." His manner doesn't instill confidence, and I wonder how old he is. "Yes, it's all fine. I'm there."

"In Carmel?"

"Of course."

I hadn't expected him to arrive so soon.

"When do you need it, again?" he asks.

"Not immediately, but in the next few days."

"Okay, then."

"There's a chance," I say quickly, worrying about his memory, "that it won't be necessary."

"Yes, you told me this before."

"In that case, I cover travel and half your regular fee."

"I know. It's fair."

"Good. I'll call you again soon."

"Be seeing you," he says, and when he hangs up I think, *I sure as hell hope not.*