

CHAPTER 1

The room was opulent – almost to the point of obscenity. It was a room that shouted a statement, not a statement of wealth, or of taste, but a statement about power. High in the French Alps, seven of the most powerful men on earth sat solemnly, talking little. Contemplating, absorbed in their own thoughts – waiting.

Power is a difficult concept to grasp. There are many people in the world who appear to wield it -- business moguls, giants of the music or film industries, newspaper magnates and the like. But such people are no more than children in the overall scheme of things. They may be rich, celebrated, and portrayed as forceful by the media, but in truth they are just like the rest of us, mere pawns in the game of life, acquiescing rather than dominating. Real power resides elsewhere.

But the seven men gathered in this room, solid, unglamorous and business like, would never appear on your television screen. They would never be written about in newspapers or pictured in glossy magazines. They were the unknowns, their very existence shrouded in secrecy. But these men were the real powerbrokers, men who could change the fate of giant industrial conglomerates with a phone-call, and who, if there were an economic crisis or the overthrow of a Government anywhere in the world, would undoubtedly be found lurking in the shadows.

Wealth, in itself, was unimportant to them. It came, of course -- it was a natural by-product of their operations -- but it was not their aim. Power was their aim. But more than that, power was their passion, their deepest desire, the air that they breathed and the very reason for their existence. Few people can comprehend such a need, but it exists and its presence was heavy in this room - as they waited.

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The epidural had begun to take effect and Judy felt happy and dreamlike, comfortable in the knowledge that, very shortly, she would hold the baby she had always yearned for.

The woman beside her stroked her hand and smiled, "Sorry", she said, "just one more injection".

Judy felt the warm liquid entering her body as a feeling of drowsiness started to overtake her.

She looked up and could see the surgeon working just behind a small green screen while the other woman stood next to her, now holding her hand. "I'm so lucky to have you with me – you've been like the big sister I never had," said Judy.

The other woman smiled back, "You've been a good friend to me as well but just relax and let me get on with my job. Any minute now it will all be over". She paused, aware that her last words were more than prophetic but she continued anyway. "You look so happy".

Happy! - Judy thought to herself, that's an understatement, I've got to be the luckiest woman in the whole world. She only wished that Paul could have been with her to share this magic moment.

Professor Dupont barked out a set of orders and Judy heard a little cry. "It's a boy", breathed her friend, the nurse, "a beautiful, perfectly formed boy".

Judy felt waves of emotion flood over her. Her face portraying nothing but peace and contentment, she closed her eyes and allowed the drugs to take effect. It took only a little while.

Nurse Helena turned to Dupont; "She's dead".

"Right", said the Professor, "Destroy that injection, check that there's no other incriminating evidence and let's get out of here".

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The solemnity of the seven men was suddenly interrupted by a knock on the door as Professor Dupont walked in. "Gentlemen", he said, holding out the baby, "May I present your son".

Six of the men turned to the seventh, smiles transforming their faces, "A toast," they said in unison, "To a job well done".

Paul smiled in acknowledgment -- he had indeed done well, "To all of us", he replied "and to the success of our project."

Chapter 2

25 years later

‘BRITAIN IN CHAOS’ screamed the headlines. It was becoming a familiar theme.

Two weeks previously there had been a major fault at the Kent central electricity terminal, resulting in the whole of the South of England being without power for six hours.

London had come to a virtual standstill and every walk of life was affected. The instant death of traffic lights had jammed the streets solid with vehicles, offices had emptied in mid-afternoon, public transport was non-existent, and even those essential services such as schools, hospitals and airports fortunate enough to have emergency generators could only work to the most limited of capacities.

But it was industry which suffered the most severe effects. Many factories in the South of England were geared to 24-hour operation and their processes, once interrupted, led to the furnaces and boilers congesting. They had to be allowed to slowly cool before the laborious task of crawling inside them to remove the ‘clinker’ could be undertaken. Days of production had been lost.

And now it had happened again.

Oliver Gill squinted under the bright studio arc lights, his face flushed, his lips dry.

He had been Prime Minister for two years now and had had a relatively easy ride. No major emergencies, high poll ratings, and no breaking of ranks from his supporters. As politicians go he was relatively well-liked. In fact, he was considered one of the more popular Premiers of the last fifteen years.

“So, Prime Minister”, Richard Beele, the interviewer, leaned forward and looked straight into his eyes, “what on earth is going on?”

“Well, obviously,” said the Prime Minister, “no-one is happy about what has occurred.”

“Occurred twice, in fact.” Added Richard

Oliver grinned thinly. “As you say. I can assure people however, that no effort is being spared to get to the root of the problem, and I have every reason to believe that such disruptions are extremely unlikely to recur in the future.”

The truth, in fact, was virtually the reverse, as Gill himself had only discovered the previous evening.

“So let me just try to get this straight”. Oliver’s façade of calm reasonableness fooled no-one in his immediate circle, particularly not Charles Green, his Energy Secretary, and decidedly not in the present situation. “The entire British electricity industry is liable to be brought to a standstill because of the failure of one...widget?”

“Well, it’s not exactly just a widget, Prime Minister.”

“Whatever...you’re telling me what?” barked Oliver

"The point is that this particular safety-valve has, unfortunately, turned out to be...well...faulty."

"And we can't just replace the bloody thing?"

"Well, naturally, we do have replacements in stock, but..."

"But they don't work either?"

"Broadly, er, no. After the first incident, the assumption was that it was just a one-off failure of one individual part. Of course, these things happen. The part was simply replaced. Unfortunately, the fact that the same component failed again in the same manner two weeks later, does tend to lead to the conclusion that the entire batch is faulty in some way."

"So replace the batch."

"Yes but the problem there is that the source of these valves, the manufacturer....."

"This German bunch?"

"Weiselstadt Grüning, yes. The problem is that they're temporarily out of commission. Arson attack on their plant. All stock destroyed."

"So use somebody else's bloody valve."

"I'm told that's rather difficult."

"Difficult?"

"Well, virtually impossible, I gather. The specifications in the original construction tender were extremely specific. Only WG were able to fulfill the contract at the price offered. Charles thought but didn't add - You pay peanuts and what do you get?"

"All right. But surely we're not the only people in the world using the blasted things. Can't we get them from someone else?"

"In theory, yes. But, of course, then, all sorts of political considerations come into play -- Prime Minister. The best bet is probably the French."

"The French?"

"Yes."

"Christ."

In the studio Richard Beele continued his interrogation. "I'm sure we all respect your assurances, Prime Minister," he said, expertly conveying that he did nothing of the sort, "but what actually was the cause of the problem and what steps are you actually taking to ensure that it doesn't happen again?"

Neither element of the question, as Gill was well aware, could possibly be answered with any approach to honesty. The real cause of the problem was not the defective part itself, but the chronic underfunding of the entire electricity industry. This had not only led to the cut-price procurement procedure which had landed power-stations with the part in the first place, it meant also that there was insufficient back-up capacity to compensate adequately for any unforeseen loss of production. As for what could be done, the correct answer was probably 'nothing at all'. The French had professed themselves almost overcome with their enthusiasm to help, but that help quickly revealed itself to be contingent on British agreement to a whopping increase in EU subsidies to French farmers. Since such an agreement would have been political suicide for any British government, the deal was refused, and the French politely offered their regrets. No other government would even enter into negotiations. That left the necessary supply of replacement parts squarely

in the hands of the fire-damaged German factory, which seemed likely to take months rather than weeks to be back in production. In the meantime, the strategy for avoiding further power-cuts amounted to little more than prayer, crossed-fingers, and care not to walk under ladders. Not, as Oliver Gill well knew, the answer the nation was waiting to hear.

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Billy Dempsey rolled over in bed, belched and reached for the remote control, turning up the volume to cover the shrieks of his children from downstairs.

It was his Sunday morning ritual to leave the rest of the family to their own devices for an hour or so while he gently recovered from the night before by reading the papers or watching television.

His white string vest rode slightly up over his enormous beer gut as he lit the first of his customary forty cigarettes a day. He flicked between channels finally settling on the one where the Right Honorable Oliver Gill, Prime Minister, was currently being grilled on the growing crisis in the electricity industry. His hackles rose to new heights as Oliver Gill's face beamed out at him. "Tell the truth", Billy shouted at the set, "You've no more bloody idea than me how to get us out of this mess, go on - admit it - tell the bloody truth"

Billy fancied himself as something of an expert on political matters. His concern with politics was not entirely a disinterested one. Ten years ago his wife's father had died and left them a sum of thirty thousand pounds and Billy, having automatically taken on the role of financial adviser, had soon come to realise that politics and financial affairs were closely intertwined. Take this electricity business for example, he thought -- odds were that shares in the power companies would fall, but equally, shares in, say, battery manufacturers might rise. Billy enjoyed trying to predict these kinds of swings and roundabouts; the trouble was that politicians like Oliver Gill kept putting their foot in it. Only last month Billy had just invested a small sum in his local brewery's shares when Oliver Gill had taken it upon himself to announce, completely off the cuff, that the Government intended to crack down on binge drinking. Brewery shares dropped like a stone, only for an official government spokesman to announce two days later that the Prime Minister had not been setting out any new government policy, merely giving a personal opinion. But by then the damage had been done. This episode had served to confirm two existing opinions in Billy's mind. First, that politics and the financial world were indeed intimately interconnected. And second, that Oliver Gill was a complete tosser.

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In the studio the Prime Minister continued his diatribe. "As you know, Richard," he said smoothly, "problems like these rarely have one simple cause, and I would be the first to admit that mistakes may have been made. I can assure the British people, however, that we have instigated the most thorough enquiry possible and that we are determined to get to the bottom of this matter as quickly as possible.

"And what areas exactly will you be focusing on?"

"You would hardly expect me to anticipate any findings that may be made, and it would be wrong of me to do so. I think it would be fair to say, however, that it would appear that the power companies may not have been as prudent in their forecasting as might have been expected, particularly given the huge sums of money the government has poured into the industry, and that is certainly something we shall be looking at as a matter of urgency."

"Well, you say 'huge sums', Prime Minister, but isn't it rather the case that this government has been determined to cut costs at every opportunity and has actually starved the electricity companies of cash?"