

PART ONE

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1960

One Friday afternoon Dexter asked me if I'd like to go out to dinner tomorrow with the greatest spy in American history: Alger Hiss. Public Enemy Number One.

"Alger Hiss!" I cried. "*The* Alger Hiss?"

"The very one. How about the des Artistes?"

Our apartment was on Manhattan's Upper West Side just off the Hudson River. Early summer and already very hot. Manhattan was boiling. A sweaty taxi drive to a restaurant off Central Park. A sweaty ride back. The staff at the Café des Artistes were friendly, helpful, welcoming. At least they were with their ordinary customers like Dexter and me. But how would they react to Alger Hiss of all people? I'm scared of confrontations. I'd remembered the name because my civics book in the ninth grade had said that he was the most dangerous traitor in the history of the United States. He was America's Judas Iscariot, and the glee in Dexter's voice told me that his reputation hadn't changed all that much.

"Why don't I make us something here?" I said.

But then I'm scared of people as well as confrontations. And Alger Hiss just had to be one of the scariest people around.

When the doorbell rang on Saturday evening, Dexter said, "You answer it."

"No."

"Come on."

"No!"

"He's not going to bite you."

I still remember unlocking the door. I still remember opening it. Usually I'm bad at faces. I didn't even recognize my own sister when I hadn't seen her for a few years. But I recognised this criminal at once from my schoolbook. He'd been decidedly handsome in that picture – boyish, clean-featured, wide-spread eyes, high cheek-bones – even though the photographer had caught him in a police van being carted off to jail. He was handcuffed. He wore a dangerous-looking 1940s hat that shaded one eye. The youthful good looks somehow made him more sinister than ever, and the name! Alger *Hiss*! How could anybody with a name like that be other than a villain?

There'd been a mere ten years between the photo in my schoolbook and this hot Manhattan evening; the once-boyish Alger Hiss who stood in the hallway had been recast as a mediaeval flagellant, tall and gaunt, all bone and shadows.

He wore a dark suit, tie, white shirt that was a little loose around his neck.

I couldn't think of a single word to say.

"You must be Joanie," he said.

I nodded.

"I'm Alger. This is Isabel."

I nodded.

"Do you think perhaps we might come in?"

I was twenty years old. Dexter was fifty-two. When his wife had died a year and a half before, I'd offered myself up on a plate; I'd been sharing his apartment for several months, and by now I knew I wanted him more than I wanted to dance. Not that I was telling anybody about it. Ballet was the first thing I'd been good at. I really was good at it too, newly apprenticed to the New York City Ballet company itself, just waiting for my contract to come through.

Fortunately nobody in the company cared about the oddities of my private life.

Dexter was Dexter Masters, old family friend, director of an organisation called Consumers Union that to this day puts out a magazine called *Consumer Reports*, the American equivalent of *Which*. The way I saw it, Consumers Union was the dullest creation on earth. Testing shoes and soap and underwear. What was a man like Dexter doing with junk like that? I excused him because I knew he needed the money; he'd got into debt finishing a novel. That was more like it. Writing novels and getting into debt suited him. He looked every inch a novelist in a Hollywood blockbuster. Joseph Cotten maybe. He was often mistaken for Cotten.

So. A dinner to produce for a novelist who looked like a movie star and his new friend, the famous spy.

When I'd forced myself into Dexter's life, I couldn't cook at all. I'd bought a book by a man called James Beard because page one opened with a recipe for how to boil water, and that's where I'd had to start. Since then, my repertoire had become serviceable if limited. Herbed shrimp, beef Bourguignon, crème brûlée: that just might live up to Dexter's elegant Riverside Drive apartment.

Dexter lived in one of those glorious old apartments with oak panelling and marble fireplaces. Strange things sat side by side, a Chinese monkey, a stone baby's head, an ancient pewter hookah, all mixed in with *New Yorker* covers by his dead wife. I resented the pictures – if not quite as much as I thought I should – but I had no idea how he managed to get this mishmash to add up to something rich and deep-textured. Always changing too. He'd bought some napkins at a junk shop for this evening's occasion, very pretty napkins even if many-times laundered, a floral print, hemmed by hand. This sounds like a meaningless detail, but these napkins play an important role – if a tiny one – in the way I've come to think of Alger Hiss and what happened to him.

Criminals have always fascinated me. I'm your usual moviegoer and thriller-reader: the romance of guys who choose their own moral code or have no moral code. That's probably why I'd remembered the name Alger Hiss. Stories about him did appear regularly in the papers, but I didn't read newspapers. Too boring. I think if anybody had asked, I'd have said he was as dead as America's other great traitor, Benedict Arnold. But then I'd have said they'd hanged Benedict Arnold, when in fact he fathered eight children and died warm in his own bed. Which is to say that part of the reason I was so tongue-tied seeing Alger Hiss at the door was sheer disappointment.

This was no villain out of a fantasy. Here was a Boy Scout who'd had a tough life. Virtue shone from every pore. It was very dispiriting. He'd never cross a street against a traffic light. The idea of him doing something treasonable seemed absurd.

But then I'm a lousy judge of character. Always have been.

Another part of what turned me mute was pure Greek tragedy: How could somebody like this have got himself into the mess he did?

The high ceilings in those old apartments were designed to keep rooms cool on days like this, and we had the windows open. But it was hot. Dexter offered to take Alger's jacket. He declined.

I was abruptly irritated. I didn't even know why. I mean, really, if a man doesn't mind sweltering in his jacket, it's his own damned business. Alger had spent years in prison wearing a convict's fatigues; probably his jacket had meanings for him that people like me can only guess at. Not long before this, the movie *Twelve Angry Men* had come out with a character who'd done the same thing in a very hot jury room. One of the other jurors – the rest of them were dripping – was as irritable about it as I was and asked something like, “What's the matter with you? Don't you sweat?” The guy in the movie didn't.

Alger didn't seem to either. Which annoyed me all over again.

Dexter went off to make martinis, leaving me to entertain Alger and the woman who'd come with him. Her name was Isabel Johnson. Dexter had told me that she'd been a *Vogue* model, photographed by Edward Steichen and Alfred Steiglitz, and that she'd slept with practically every famous left-wing intellectual in America. I figured this arch-traitor was just one more notch on her rifle. I still think so. She'd even married a couple of these guys. Not Alger though. At least not yet. She was a dreamy, preoccupied woman, early fifties, willowy, fine-featured, draped over a chair with graceful professionalism that was part coy and part disdainful. To a harsh young eye like mine, the skin was shot and the hair was dyed.

She left the small talk to Alger and me.

I wasn't very good at situations like these although I'd been in them quite a number of times since my conquest of Dexter. Most of his friends were sophisticated New Yorkers, unfazed by the irregular relationship, if not agreeably titillated by it. But they were old enough to be my parents, and most of them treated me as they did each other's grown-up children, that slightly too-enthusiastic interest in somebody who bored them out of their skulls.

After the customary complaints about weather and New York traffic, Alger introduced ballet as Dexter's friends often did.

Yes, I was a dancer.

Yes, ballet was very demanding physically.

No, the pay wasn't good.

With the ones I hadn't met before, I'd usually go on to say that my father – once an eminent economist at the University of California at Berkeley – used to pontificate at me, “The rewards are not commensurate with the effort entailed.” Usually they laughed. Alger did too.

By this time Dexter would be back with drinks, and conversation would take off in some other direction. Which was fine with me. But tonight's conversation wasn't usual. While Dexter poured out martinis for everybody, Alger kept his attention on me. He was telling me how hugely he admired Balanchine's musicality, that he'd seen the New York City Ballet's *Concerto Barocco* not long ago and been awed by it.

Lots of people – I'm one of them – think that George Balanchine is the greatest choreographer the world has ever known. But back then, he wasn't famous outside the ballet world. Dexter had never heard of him before I started talking about him, and Dexter was a highly literate man. Nor had his friends. Most of them didn't think much of ballet at the best of times. Like my parents, they were interested in books, politics, newspapers, magazines. Theatre and concerts yes. Baseball yes. Tennis too. Lots of things. But not ballet.

On top of that, *Concerto Barocco* just happened to be my favourite ballet.

Alger was leaning forward in his chair as he talked. Economical gestures and a gravity of movement rather like a fencer in the presence of a famous sword, nothing phoney though, none of Isabel's professionalism. Tense. Intense too. His interest in what I said seemed unfeigned, deeply personal but completely without sexual overtones. For all practical purposes, this man had been the first Secretary General of the United Nations. He'd held lots of other elegant titles too. People had assumed he was on his way to being Secretary of State. And I slowly became aware that he was talking to me exactly as he must have talked to President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill. Maybe to the King of England for all I knew. I wasn't just the most powerful person in the room; what I said was itself something of import, something to be assessed and weighed, not for the sake of flattery but for the sake of its intrinsic worth.

Unsettling. Disconcerting. *Very* disconcerting. I escaped as soon as I could.

In the kitchen, I worried that the beef wasn't yet cooked, turned up the gas under it and looked away to check the shrimp, only to smell cloth burning. Pot holder on fire. I doused it, heart racing. At least they'd be smoking out in the living room; they wouldn't smell it. Everybody smoked in those days. Everybody except me, that is. Not because I was a dancer, only because my sister Judy had started smoking when she was no more than twelve, and I'd thought a little girl looked silly playing at Marlene Dietrich gestures with a cigarette. At least I smelled the beef before I heard it. Burning around the edges. I added water and prayed.

Back in the living room, conversation seemed to be going on well – Isabel now contributing – but I'd hardly sat down when I was abruptly unsure how high I'd set the gas under that beef. I got up to check. Alger got up too.

“Oh, Joanie, please sit with us for a moment,” he said.

I sat down at once, again unsettled, disconcerted. Dexter's other friends politely ignored the cook's comings and goings. Or offered help. Dexter gave me an amused glance of reassurance and turned to offer Isabel another cigarette. She took it and waited for him to light it, very much at home with those Marlene Dietrich gestures that had made Judy look silly.

He offered the pack to Alger.

Alger shook his head. “Thank you, no.”

“You don't smoke?” Dexter asked.

Alger shook his head again. “I gave up in prison.”

I was stunned. It had never occurred to me that he'd be open about any part of what had happened to him, much less that part. And yet that was a part I really wanted to hear about: what goes on there, how *real* criminals manage metal bars every day and guards and ritual humiliation, not just guys in books. “Why?” I blurted out.

He said that he'd been a pack-a-day smoker but that Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary, where he'd served his sentence, allowed only one pack per prisoner per week. His family sent his quota regularly. Most prisoners didn't have families who helped out, so he shared his with the men on his wing. Dividing one pack among sixty men meant only half a cigarette each, and sometimes there were disputes.

"It was easier to give up altogether," he said.

He told this story as though he were describing a change in habit such as a Christian diplomat might make in a Muslim country. He seemed amused at his inability to find a more suitable solution, but there was no trace of anger, shame, resentment. Nor was there any sense of contempt for, censure of or superiority to his fellow inmates or the prison's rules or the people who enforced them.

I didn't know what I was watching now any more than I understood why I found the man both annoying and disconcerting. Strength of character? Simple stoicism? A martyrdom consistent with the flagellant's appearance? *Why* no anger, or bitterness? Why no contempt or censure? Where was evidence of what *I* would feel in his situation?

Dexter told me that when Alger got out of prison he no money and no job prospects. Working for a manufacturer of women's hair-clips came first. Then he met a man who owned a printing plant and had just bought an old-fashioned stationery store called Davison-Bluth on the west side of Manhattan. Alger became a salesman for \$50 a week against monthly commissions. People who might have refused to see a representative from so insignificant an operation were sometimes intrigued enough to listen when he announced, "This is Alger Hiss."

"I thought maybe he could handle the paper for the *Reports*," Dexter said, as intrigued as others had been when he heard the salesman's name. But the circulation of *Consumer*

Reports was somewhere near a half-million, and Davison-Bluth was too small to supply a print run that large. So Dexter asked him to dinner instead.

Those pretty, secondhand napkins that Dexter bought: when we sat down at the table, Alger carefully set his aside and put a Kleenex tissue from his pocket into his lap instead. He wasn't ostentatious about it, but he wasn't furtive either. I assumed that I'd missed something, that the napkin I'd given him was stained or torn.

"I'll get you another," I said.

He stopped me, saying that the napkin itself was fine – perfect – but that it always bothered him to use napkins when somebody had spent time washing and ironing them. Besides, a Kleenex did the job just as well. He said this with a touch of humour; it appeared to be concern for Dexter's maid – or for me – and very fetching in its way, and yet...

Dammit all, that *really* annoyed me. Far more than the jacket.

It made me feel that I'd somehow lost a moral high ground I'd never tried to claim.

But he was politeness itself when it came to the beef, which hadn't benefited from burning around the edges. We were happily past that – onto the crème brûlée – when the discussion turned to his case. He explained that the charges brought against him gave him his first experience as a defendant in a trial and that he hadn't realized in all the years he'd worked as a lawyer that the defendant was just another onlooker. What matters is the "gladiatorial contest" – his phrase – between the two opposing attorneys. Nothing else.

He was as calm and non-judgemental about all this as he had been when he talked about giving up cigarettes.

When I was small my mother told me about a nun in a convent who was admired by all the other nuns for her serenity. One young novice, filled with her own demons and unsure of her vocation, sought out the calm nun, begged for her secret. The calm nun drew up her habit and revealed an open, suppurating ulcer on her thigh. The story still gives me the creeps. But

it was at least a theory as to how Alger managed to live, one I accepted for a very long time. The reality – I’m certain of it – was far simpler, but there’s nothing in the world harder to grasp than simplicity. For the time being though, the nun had to serve as an explanation for what looked to me like a surreal detachment in a person describing the battle that had ripped apart everything that was meaningful to him right in front of his very eyes.

“How can anybody call that *fair*?” Isabel demanded. It was the first time that evening she’d seemed really engaged.

“Fair’ isn’t what courts are about,” Alger said.

“How can you *say* that?” She was as annoyed as I’d been. “Look what they did to you. They convicted an innocent man. Trials are supposed to find the truth. Courts are supposed to be about justice.”

Alger shook his head. “Courts are about law, Isabel. Not justice. Sometimes the jury does deliver justice. This time they didn’t come to the right conclusion.”

Dexter was a much better judge of character than I am. “Was Alger really a spy?” I asked after they’d left.

“I don’t know,” he said. He didn’t seem to care one way or the other. “I never could decide. Still can’t.”

