

Crisis Ukraine

Raiders Black Ops, #1

by Eric Meyer, ...

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Chapter 1

Sevastopol, Ukraine – December 2013

The street in the dingy suburb was empty, and I waited for it to start. The rooftop was cold. An icy wind blew in from the Russian steppes, but I forced myself to ignore it and concentrate on the job. I kept looking for the target. Then a tiny hint of shadow betrayed movement. They were coming. Several seconds later, the crowd came into view, a dense mass of humanity. They spilled out of alleyways and dark places, like water from a leaking reservoir.

Most were men, their faces contorted in a rictus of hate-filled frenzy. They carried an assortment of weapons. Kalashnikovs, AK-47s with varnished wooden stocks. There were several of the newer AK-74s, and shotguns. A few carried knives, machetes, scythes, old hunting rifles; a couple of them were even armed with sledgehammers. There were women too, baying for blood, like a pack of hounds driving the fox to earth. Some children ran alongside, ragged and dirty. They brandished heavy sticks and mouthed the insults and taunts they'd learned from their mothers and fathers. They all had one thing they shared, a common language. Russian. Yet this wasn't Russia.

They neared the target of their fury. A humble grocery store, incongruous, innocent, bedecked with signs trumpeting the merchandise on sale inside, fruit, vegetables, fresh food, deli, dry goods, and hardware. Discounts! Special offers! The words were written in a strange language. Not Russian. It was December, and there were a few dusty decorations strung in the window, a portent of the upcoming Christmas celebration. A time of peace and goodwill to men. Or so they told me.

It should have been a picture of innocence; just a simple mom and pop store like ten thousand others in the US, but this wasn't the US. This was Sevastopol, part of Ukraine, despite the Russian language shouted by the mob. The name of the owner, Shevchenko, was a Ukrainian name. He was not Russian.

Through the high power lens, I watched them draw nearer as I waited to shoot. I felt helpless, there was no way I could change what was about to happen. Watching and waiting as a hostile crowd innocent menaced an innocent old man.

There was nothing I could do to stop it. Before, it would have been different. Before, I would have had the means to bring down a fiery warning on those people, and an awesome retribution if they failed to halt their savage intentions.

For the thousandth time, my mind drifted back three years, to a different time and another world.

Helmand, Afghanistan – April 2010

It was a killing ground, a nation torn by war; a people where the very concept of peace was alien to its inhabitants. I was in country to lead a four-man Navy SEAL fireteam, and this operation was important, at least to me. It was to be my last mission before I left the service, the US Navy SEALs. I'd had my fill of streets washed with innocent blood. Of the unending misery, the cries of agony that never ended in this muddle-headed war. But that wasn't the reason.

The truth was more simple. The life of a squid made normal family life next to impossible even though I'd tried. God knows I'd tried real hard. It wasn't made any easier by my wife, Mariyah, who'd become increasingly venomous. Spiteful, poisonous, and dangerous, like many others in her profession. She was a lawyer.

Unless we could patch things up, our only child Abigail was going to suffer. I knew from some of my wife's lawyer friends that she was already exploring the options to block me out of my daughter's life. 'Sole custody' was the phrase. It meant she would be denied her father. And Mariyah could make it happen. If she'd been born a fish, she would have been a Great White Shark.

I'd had no choice but to return home and re-enter civilian life. A life for which I was totally unprepared. I'd trained to blow things up, to infiltrate enemy territory under cover of night or underwater, often both. I'd also trained to kill people, and like all Navy SEALs, I was good at it. But in my twenty-ninth year, I didn't have much to offer the civilian world. I was tough enough, that was a given for a SEAL. I left college with a degree in history, so maybe a dead-end teaching job would be on the cards. Physical education could be possible. I was very fit, and at a whisker over six feet, I could still throw a mean basket, so yeah, maybe a position as a High School coach. But it wouldn't be the same.

Joe nudged me, and I made an effort to focus. I wore my dark-blond hair surfer style, longer than average, and I tucked a stray lock into my sweatband. Like many Special Forces operators, it was a bad idea to be recognizable as a member of the military. Buzz cuts can be a dead giveaway.

"Chief, you see him? I make it nine hundred and eighty meters."

It was no time to woolgather. My buddy, Joe Nguyen, was staring into the distance. We were perched on top of a four-story apartment building in Kabul. It was late evening, and the place was still alive with the sounds of people going about their lives. Adults arguing, children crying, lovers pouring out their thoughts to each other, with a background of music, a strange mix of Western and Eastern tunes.

I squinted through the night vision scope, and sure enough, the target swam into view. Sheikh Rashid al-Sawalha, an Egyptian who'd arrived in Afghanistan to take up the mantle left vacant since the death of bin Laden. So far, he'd been

successful, helped more than a little by his personal style. His beard was long, and he wore white robes and a turban, a conscious imitation of his famous predecessor. The government of Hamid Karzai regarded al-Sawalha in the same light as Osama; he'd be better occupied feeding the fish in the Indian Ocean. Their ISAF partners concurred and called in the SEALs to take care of it.

This time he wasn't holed up in a Pakistan compound, only meters away from a military base. Al-Sawalha needed to win over the Taliban and Al-Qaeda commanders, and so he moved around inside the country. This night, we knew he was traveling to a safe house to meet with a senior man who'd traveled from Herat to beg funds for weapons. Unlike al-Sawalha, he hadn't learned about cellphone intercepts. Our intel guys happened to listen in on his call. Specifically, an electronic countermeasures lieutenant jg on board a Northrop Grumman EA-6B Prowler, flying a fixed grid pattern over the north of the country.

It came in two hours ago. They analyzed the signal and transmitted the contents to a ground station inside Bagram Air Base. The receiving officer felt it important enough to drag the brass from the officers' club to look at what they had, and our bosses made the decision to put Mr. al-Sawalha into permanent retirement.

We were already staking out another target inside the capital, a local bomb maker busily making a name for himself. They ordered us to split the team, so Joe and me got the short straw and we went to take care of the al-Sawalha kill. It required an approach in absolute silence and secrecy, so we crept through narrow lanes filled with the miasmatic stench of broken sewage and rotting humanity, to take up a stand on the apartment building overlooking the target.

"I got him. Ten seconds, and he'll be out in the open, so I'll hit him then. Are we secure to take the shot?"

A pause. "I think so."

"You think?" It wasn't like Joe to be unsure. He was tough, as tough as the grandfather who'd left Vietnam at the end of 'that' war, and almost singlehandedly paddled a boat across shark-infested seas to give his family a new life in the West. Like most Vietnamese, he looked young for his age, and he wore a small mustache to try and compensate. He was short, slim, and wiry; he was also immensely tough and resourceful. It wasn't like him to be unsure. I felt a surge of adrenaline send a warning to my brain.

"I heard something just a few seconds ago. It may be nothing."

"Remember, this building is home to more than a few of our Taliban friends."

"I know. I'll go check it out."

"You do that. I'm about to take the shot, and then we get out of here fast. Make sure our exit is clear."

"Copy that."

I sighted on the robed, bearded, and turbaned figure. It wasn't an optimum shoot, for he was in an area where a flow of other locals were walking nearby. I wasn't worried about missing and hitting them. When I fired, it was 'goodnight Mr. al-Sawalha.' My concern was what happened after he went down. If there were hostiles in this building close to our position, they'd come swarming out like angry hornets. We'd soon have a bunch of angry ragheads wanting to spill our blood. Not good.

I sighted through the Leupold 4.5x14 Vari-X Scope and fitted the target in the cross hairs. I made a slight adjustment on my weapon, an M107, commonly known as the Barrett. Mine had the latest flash and noise suppressor fitted, which would help reduce the signature. Even so, a 0.50 caliber bullet is big and heavy, and it makes a lot of noise. There was little choice, al-Sawalha was known to wear a ballistic vest under his clothing, as did the other guy we'd been sent to kill, the bomb maker. It was best go for overkill, and a Barrett has enough overkill to take down an armored elephant.

I controlled my breathing and gently took up the pressure on the trigger. The target was walking in front of a truck, and I timed it to put the bullet into the engine block when it exited his body. The force of the bullet would destroy most targets, soft or hard, and people were generally soft. Forget the armored vest. He could've been standing behind a concrete wall, and the result would be the same.

I murmured, "Give 'em hell," as I eased the trigger and fired. It'd become a ritual every time we went on a raid and started the attack. Soldiers are keen on their fixed rituals. It's like pushing the front door to make sure the lock is latched. Besides, that was what we'd trained to do. Give 'em hell.

The round smashed into the target and blew Al-Sawalha apart. Pieces of his flesh decorated the ruined vehicle behind him. I'd aimed for the body, a safety shot at long-range. Besides, there was no need for fancy shooting with a Barrett. The bullet took him in the center of the chest. Bull's-eye.

Several things happened. The noise in the building downstairs abruptly stopped. Gunshots in Kabul were a serious business, and this wasn't the first time they'd heard a Barrett fire. Down in the street, people stopped walking. A few dived for cover when they saw al-Sawalha go down. A couple of men unslung their AKs and looked for something to shoot.

As I catapulted to my feet and gathered up my rifle, I could already sense the change of mood. In seconds, the hostility that was always close to the surface in Kabul began to crescendo. It almost became a living, breathing monster, a fire-breathing dragon. Howls of fury, the ululating of women bent on revenge, children hooting with glee at the unexpected diversion from their dull routine; and footsteps, lots of them. Close.

"They're coming up the stairs!" Joe murmured. "It sounds like a stampede."

"Roger that. Let's get out of here."

There was no need to use our headsets. They knew we were here, the American infidels, and they were coming to kill us. They were the fighting bull, and we were the red cloak. A cloak we'd waved under their noses. This area was Taliban turf, and we'd dared to enter. We only had two options, to fight or to run. There may have been fifty hostiles, a hundred even; there was no way to know. We took option two, and ran.

Joe dropped a thin nylon line over the side of the roof and fastened it to an iron safety rail. He looked at me. I nodded for him to go, and he began abseiling down while I covered our rear. I was about to follow when a man appeared in the doorway at the head of the narrow staircase. Wild-eyed, black turbaned, bearded, AK-47. Taliban or Al Qaeda, it made no difference. He was here to kill us. Three more men followed in a line behind him. There wasn't room on the staircase for anything but single file, and I fired one shot.

At long-range, the fifty-caliber bullet does a great deal of damage. At twenty meters, it demolishes everything in its path. The round pierced the first man, and he had yet to start screaming his death agony when it exited his back, entered the next man, through the third and then the fourth man in line. It finally buried itself in the concrete structure of the building. They tumbled in a heap, a corpse barricade enough to temporarily block the staircase, and I exited the roof, abseiling down the line to Joe Nguyen. He was waiting on the ground and had his rifle aimed at a crowd of men who looked like trouble.

They'd rushed to the sound of the commotion and were spoiling for a fight. Their mouths were open, snarling, exposing blackened and rotting stumps of bared teeth. There were maybe twenty of them, some armed with Russian assault rifles; others with knives, and one man an ancient scimitar. The sight of Joe with his HK-410 pointed at their guts gave them pause for thought, but only for a few seconds. They babbled, they shouted, they drooled, and they screamed, working up the courage to charge at us.

"Hit them," I shouted at Joe, as I swung up the Barrett and fired two quick shots. I slung the rifle on my back in readiness to leave and pulled my sidearm. The heavy rounds blew three of the hostiles apart, but others were shooting at us. A half dozen 7.62mm bullets chipped concrete from the apartment building, and some unlucky soul screamed from inside, hit by friendly fire. Joe was still shooting, and I pulled the trigger of the Sig Sauer to lend support. The Barrett was lethal but cumbersome and likely to hit anything that stood in its way, friend or foe. The Sig 9 mm was the better option at short range in a crowded city.

I kept firing as he switched mags and then snapped a new mag into my own gun. I searched for a new target, but the enemy had disappeared from the street; apart from eight bodies I counted lying in the squalid filth of the fetid alleyway. But it wasn't over. The survivors began to snipe at us from inside a nearby bar where they'd taken cover. A half dozen shots thumped against my armored vest, and I looked for the source. One of the ragheads was leaning out the window, snapping off single shots and pulling back behind cover. I heard a meaty *thunk* beside me as hot lead pierced flesh.

"Fuck, I'm hit," Joe snarled as the hostile popped off a couple more shots.

"How bad?"

"Top of the leg, I'll be okay."

I looked down, sure enough blood was pouring from a ragged tear in his pants. He'd soon be unconscious from the blood loss, so a withdrawal on foot was out of the question. I stabbed for the transmit button.

"This is Foxtrot Two. We need urgent extraction. Taking fire, one man hit, wounded."

I heard nothing. When I looked at the transmitter, I could see where an enemy bullet had pierced it.

Shit!

We were on our own. I unslung the Barrett, brought it into the aiming position, and fired. There was no time for niceties. The first two shots went through the wall of the bar, and the shooter howled as he went down. Muzzle flashes betrayed the other shooters, and I pumped a couple of shots at each of them, destroying the

best part of the front wall of the bar in the process. The enemy fire stopped, for now.

I shouted at Joe, "We have to go, now. Our best option is back through the apartment block and out the back way. We'll try and lose..."

He wasn't next to me. I looked down and saw him slumped on the ground, lying in a dark pool of his blood.

"Joe!"

No answer, he was out of it. I slung the rifle, picked up his body, and threw it over my shoulder. Then I ran for my life, for both of our lives.

It's no easy task to run carrying an unconscious soldier, as well as weapons, armored vest, and of course, the Barrett; unless you have a howling bunch of armed Islamists in your rear, screaming for your blood. In which case, it's an incentive like no other. I raced along, snagging lines of washing strung across stinking alleyways, dodging, swerving, taking cover, doubling back, and keeping to the shadows. Panting, gasping for air, sucking in the precious oxygen through searing lungs until I found myself staring into the barrel of an assault rifle. An American rifle, a Heckler and Koch HK-416.

"You in a hurry, Chief?"

I stared gratefully at the faces of the other two members of my fireteam. Al Miller, the tough, black demolitions expert, who'd spoken, and his buddy Waite Sullivan, the laconic, white Southerner. We called them 'the fishermen'. They were avid anglers, they talked about little else, even thought about buying a pricey Grand Banks or Chris Craft fast fishing boat to pursue their passion. It was different in the field. They fished for something different. Men.

The two men were as different as it was possible to be. Al was almost jet black, a slim, tall, handsome man, like a fit, young Will Smith. His hair was almost completely shaved, which gave him a fierce, warlike appearance. Waite Sullivan was white, below average height at five six, and big muscled. Blue eyes, with straw colored hair, he seemed fleshy, until you looked closer and saw the hard as iron strength that lay beneath the surface. They were as devoted to each other almost as much as two heterosexual men could be, as much as they were devoted to their love of fishing. Joe and me also had something in common. We hated fishing.

"Thank Christ, how did you find us?"

"You kicked up enough noise to wake President Karzai," Al Miller smiled, showing ivory-white teeth in his black face, "What happened?"

"Joe got hit, he's hurt bad. He needs a medic, and fast."

Waite emptied a clip at our pursuers as more shots kicked up dust around us, and Al joined in to make them think twice about chasing us.

As he slammed in a new clip, he said, "We've got wheels around the corner."

Thank Christ.

"Help me with him. I'll bandage the wound when we're moving."

"You got it."

Al drove away at high speed, and we got Joe Nguyen to the ER room at Bagram with minutes to spare. The medic said he'd almost bled out enough to kill an ordinary man, but they managed to fix him up.

It was the last time I worked with him. He was too ill for my leaving party, but I visited him in the hospital almost daily before I left Afghanistan for the last time.

I went home to a shitload of trouble. That's what they call a bunch of lawyers, a real-live shitload of trouble. They were led by my soon to be ex-wife, the biggest shit of them all. Mariyah Raider, a senior partner of Vann, Ruben, and Turner, the most lethal bunch of legal shysters south of the Mason Dixon line. Paul Vann, the founding partner, was Mariyah's father. A former soldier, he'd come to America from Eastern Europe, and discovered how much more damage a lawyer could do with his briefcase than a gun.

They were corporate fixers, devious enough to have sprung Bernie Madoff from all charges. They put me in their sights, a target to be taken down, they were more like Taliban snipers than a legal firm. What followed was months of wrangling between them and my own lawyer, who was useless.

He acted like a rabbit caught in the headlights, and almost before I realized it I was divorced, with only limited visitation of Abigail.

One day a month! And that was under review.

I felt like planting demolition charges around their snooty office building. Although I never did. It's hard to see your daughter, even once a month, when you're inside a maximum-security prison.

The rest was history; futile appeals that went nowhere, a dark descent into the bottle, and a close brush with the law on a drunken assault charge. Something about lawyers made me see red, and when one of Mariyah's associates told me how lawyers were that much better trained and more honorable than Special Forces operators, I lost my cool. He lost several of his teeth.

Joe Nguyen saved me. He'd left the SEALs by then. He was hitting the upper age limit and decided to take retirement after that last encounter with a Taliban bullet. Afterward, he ran security for some corporate outfit. He found me when I was close to dropping out entirely, lonely, embittered, and drinking breakfast out of a bottle. He helped me get my bearings and find a direction.

I talked to him of my love for photography when I was younger, for recording people and places with images which would be saved for all time. He forced me to open my eyes and see how low I'd fallen, and more important, the way forward.

"John, you carry on like that, and you'll be dead inside five years. You must hate what you're becoming, why not rekindle that old passion?"

"I don't have a camera."

He'd gone silent for a moment. Then we both burst out laughing. It was that stupid remark that finally made me see how bad it was. Joe dried me out and frog marched me into an intensive photojournalism course. I fell back in love with viewing the world through a camera lens instead of the lens of a telescopic sight. And I found work, good, well-paid work that I enjoyed. It culminated in a choice assignment commissioned by a major charity. A billionaire philanthropist, Alexander Dragan, funded the Dragan Foundation, and it brought me to one of the world's newest trouble spots.

Sevastopol, Ukraine – December 2013

I was in country to complete a freelance assignment for Dragan, one that I hoped would help make my name in the tough business of photojournalism. It had

brought me to this lonely rooftop where I'd been lying up since 0400. Waiting. For what, I didn't know, but I'd had the whisper from the nervous cab driver who took me to my hotel.

"Mister, if you're looking for a story, you need to be near Hero's Square on Friday morning. There's a meeting in the town hall. When they come out, they'll be spoiling for trouble."

"What kind of trouble? Will the police be involved? Is it going to be a riot?"

He smiled. "You could call it that. No cops."

"Why not?"

A chuckle. "Take it from me. No cops. They're all good Russians."

"This is Ukraine, not Russia."

He'd laughed. "This is Crimea, my friend."

I didn't understand what he meant, not then. Now I understood more.

The storeowner made a big mistake. He came out on the street and tried to reason with them. I watched him walk up to them open-handed, to show he meant them no harm. As if an overweight, elderly Ukrainian could threaten a vicious, armed mob. I saw his lips move as he spoke to the two men in front, and I could sense the desperation in his pleas. These were men who'd been his neighbors, his customers, and he was begging them not to destroy everything.

I was taking shot after shot, firing my Nikon D3X like a sub-machine gun. The lens was a stabilized prime chunk of glass, an 800mm, that I was still paying for with a bank loan. But it was worth it. Fitted to a Gitzo tripod, I could guarantee pin sharp images from vast distances. Provided I wasn't dodging stray bullets at the time. I grabbed scores of pictures, expressions of hate, gestures that threatened violence, weaponry that promised to kill. All of it directed at that single, elderly, frightened storekeeper.

I flinched when one of the two leaders fired a long burst from his AK. Yet his intention was to terrorize more than to kill. Others joined in the fun, shooting into the sky. Their aim was awful, bullets sprayed the buildings around me, and a couple of rounds chipped stonework from the parapet behind where I crouched. I ducked down; reflex making me reach for my assault rifle, and finding the camera instead. I fired more pictures, images instead of bullets. Images of feral faces, crazed, like crack addicts looking for the next fix. Except they weren't on crack, and there was only one salve for their madness. Russification. And their drug of choice was the bullet.

With horror, I watched the two men who led the crowd move in on the storekeeper. I could see now he looked Jewish, with a long beard and a hooked, Semitic nose. Yet it was his Ukrainian ethnicity that was the target for their hate, not his religion. The two leaders crowded him, and one of them brandished a pistol. I swallowed my surprise, he looked familiar, a tall, hugely muscled man with a bull-like face. I could swear I'd encountered him before. The other man was a stranger, shorter, more slightly built, pale, and with Slavic features.

Through my long lens, I could see the bull-like man's gun was a big automatic, like a Russian Stechkin. He aimed it at the belly of the elderly Jew, and at first I thought it was just a threat. To my horror, he pulled the trigger and kept pulling. The man sagged to the ground, his face creased in shock and agony. Incredibly, he was still alive. There was worse to come.

The smaller man fired his AK at the fallen storekeeper, and his body jerked as he fired again and again. Then the two leaders turned to the crowd and yelled encouragement.

Men rushed forward and hacked at the corpse with their blades. If there'd been any life left in the body, it was gone now, chopped to pieces by the savage blades. The crowd was still howling for bloodshed, and even from a distance, the keening evoked memories of previous times. Different places, yet the cause was the same. Death.

The women were still keening their hate when the man with the sledgehammer smashed the store window. It was a signal for the looting to start, and they made a rush for the door. Then they stopped. An elderly woman had appeared in the doorway, gray haired, tiny, thin, and elderly like the dead storeowner. His wife, for sure. She was weeping, shrieking at them in her torment. They ignored her and moved forward to attack. They used blades, clubs, and boots, with mindless ferocity. When they swept inside the store to loot the contents, there were two corpses lying on the street.

I'd stopped shooting, stunned by the appalling brutality. I forced myself to concentrate, and fired off more shots before I began to pack the gear away. My guts were like stone, shocked by what I'd just witnessed. I was also wracked with guilt over my inability to go to the aid of those poor folks, although I'd had no choice. It was survivor's guilt, I knew that, but it didn't change anything. I itched for the touch of a weapon. Any weapon, the bigger the better. Right then, I would have given anything, including my expensive gear, for the chance to hit back, to kill those two bastards who'd led that crowd to inflict such savage slaughter. All that mattered was to extract justice for those two elderly people, preferably at the point of a gun.

It wasn't to be. The crowd had what they wanted, two dead Ukrainians and the looted contents of the store. Tomorrow, they'd likely do it all over again to some other innocents with no means to defend themselves. I finished packing my gear in the trusty old Billingham bag, hefted it on my shoulder, and started to leave. I'd had enough, more than enough. All I wanted was a stiff drink, preferably a whole bottle. Yet it would have to wait. I had to sort through the digital images, weed out the crap and the dupes, and upload the good stuff to my sponsor, the Dragan Foundation.

I decided to print out some of the more shocking images and send them to the local cops here in Crimea. I didn't expect it to make a difference, but after what I'd seen, I could do no less. It wouldn't make me feel any better.

The drive to the hotel took less than ten minutes, and I made a single stop on the way for a bottle of bourbon. Later, when I'd reviewed the images, I knew I'd need it. Something to numb the rage over what I'd witnessed a second time in those blood-soaked images.

I checked the date on my laptop. It was December 24, Christmas Eve. I still had several weeks work to complete in a number of cities around Ukraine, which meant I'd miss another Christmas with my daughter back in New York City. My return flight was booked for February, and when I got back, I knew the photos I'd taken from that rooftop would be the only epitaph for those murdered Ukrainians. I was wrong.

New York City – February 2014

It was late February, Crimea was in turmoil, Ukraine had dumped its President, and I was more than happy to get out of it. There were also the discomforts of traveling long distance in coach. When I walked into the terminal at JFK, my mind was still back in Ukraine, still wracked with the double murder I'd witnessed. It is a common lot of the survivor to suffer endless turmoil for violence they've witnessed, yet not suffered, some kind of compensatory mechanism. I was so preoccupied I almost missed the girl who was waiting to meet me outside arrivals. I must have been bad. She was unmissable.

"John Raider?"

I guessed she was about mid-twenties, slim with good legs, blonde hair, and a ten thousand dollar smile.

"Yep, that's me."

"You've been away a long time. I've been looking for you."

"You from the Dragan Foundation?"

Her smile remained fixed in place; the way those beauty pageant competitors manage to achieve it, in spite of them wanting to poison their fellow contestants.

"Dragan Foundation? No, Sir, I'm sorry. I work for Vann, Ruben, and Turner." She handed me a document, "You're served. Have a nice day, Mr. Raider."

Fuck you, lady. Maybe she wasn't so pretty.

The last I saw of her, she still held that fixed smile as she threaded her way from the terminal. I shrugged, some you win, some you lose. I walked through the arrivals hall, heading for the exit.

"Raider!"

Another voice, a man this time. I didn't even bother to turn. One court order was enough for one day.

"Fuck off, shithead!"

"Hey, John, it's me."

I stopped and turned. I should have recognized the voice first time, even amidst the bustle and blaring announcements over the loudspeaker system. This time, I smiled. He was Vietnamese, erect, a former SEAL, one of the good guys.

"Joe! You're looking good."

My old buddy from the SEALs grinned back at me. He hadn't changed, he was the old Joe, fully recovered from his wound, tough as sprung steel. The man who'd baled me out when my civilian life fell apart. He looked something like a young Vo Nguyen Giap, architect of the North Vietnamese Army during the long war. His face was leaner than Giap's, but he had the same good looks, the air of intelligent self-possession and determination.

"You look a bit worn yourself, my friend. How's the new job going?"

I grimaced. "I've been dodging the bullets out in Ukraine for the past few weeks. Just like the old days."

"Ouch! How about we find some coffee before I take you to the office, chat about old times?"

"The office? How do you mean?"

There was no way he could know where I worked, or for whom I worked. At least, I didn't think so.

"They sent me to pick you up."

"Who sent you?"

He looked serious. "It's a long story, my friend. Why don't we grab that coffee, and I'll tell you everything."

I was intrigued to know what was going on, but it would have made no difference. I owed him everything.

"Sure."

His wheels were in the short-term car park adjacent to Terminal One. I tossed my bag in the back and climbed into the front passenger seat. It was impressive, a Porsche Cayenne SUV, black with smoked windows. The kind of vehicle you drive for showing off or making out, or for clandestine surveillance of a hostile target.

"Nice wheels," I commented, "Business must be good."

He nodded but didn't reply. We made small talk as he drove through the early morning traffic. I told him about the service of the writ and the potential loss of my visitation rights.

"That sounds like a bummer. What's it say?"

"I haven't read it yet, but it's nothing good, believe me."

"Anything I can do?"

"You mean like take out the ex-wife with a long-range sniper shot?"

He laughed. "I doubt you're the first guy to have that idea. I was thinking of something more practical. You have a good lawyer?"

"A good lawyer, isn't that an oxymoron? No, I don't have a good lawyer. My guy's something of a joke. "

"So get someone else."

"The kind of money I can afford doesn't buy good lawyers, Joe. The real problem is Mariyah's firm, they're heavy hitters. All I can afford is someone fresh from law school and prepared to work for peanuts, so they're going to have a hard time. The last I heard, she was claiming I caused Abigail emotional distress, desertion; you name it. I guess this writ is something along the same lines. She never forgave me for being away so much."

"You were in the service, what did she expect? She knew what you did when she married you."

"She expected to have things her way."

He made a few sympathetic noises. "So what would it take, to get you out of this fix?"

I'd wondered the same thing, over and over. All I ever got was more and more frustrated. I looked at Joe.

"It would need a legal firm big and tough enough to take on her outfit. That means money. Lots of money, more than I could ever dream of making."

"You're a good photojournalist, John. I thought the job paid well."

"Not that kind of dough. Wall Street brokers, bankers, those people make the kind of money I'd need. Maybe drug dealers too."

"And mercenaries."

I didn't pick up the hint, not then. We stopped near a coffee shop, Blue Bottle Coffee on West 15th. The Java was good, more than good. It cheered me up

enough to face looking at the writ. Joe waited in silence. Finally, I tossed it on the table. I didn't know whether to weep or go kill someone. He picked up the vibe.

"What is it?"

"She intends to deny me all access to Abigail. Permanently. The visitation rights I have now are on hold, pending the next court hearing."

"Bummer. What was it supposed to be, once a month?" I nodded, "That's not much, what's her beef?"

"She says it's confusing Abigail, causing her to suffer extraordinary trauma that's unacceptable in a young kid. It's a heap of crap."

"How old is your girl?"

"Four, nearly five."

"She needs her father."

"I know that. She knows that. But Mariyah doesn't give a shit. I guess her partner's at back of this as well. He never did like me."

"He's a lawyer as well?"

"Yep, another fucking packrat. He's still sore."

He chuckled, picking up the vibe. "What did you do to him, John?"

I shrugged. "Broke his nose is all. We were having a disagreement."

"What about?"

"About me knocking out a few of his squash partner's teeth. He's another lawyer."

Joe smiled. "Ouch."

"He deserved it too, the bastard."

"I'll bet he did. John, there's something I need to talk to you about."

Here it comes. This meeting wasn't accidental.

"My job takes me all over the world, mostly to Europe, and I get invited to do occasional work for our old friends in Langley."

"You're a spook?"

He looked alarmed. "Not so loud. No, it's nothing like that. It's just when I go somewhere and they need something done, a man to contact, a package to be delivered, I help them out. After you've talked to Dragan, I need a word with you."

"You work for Dragan?"

"Kind of."

That explained a lot.

"And CIA?"

He shrugged. "Now and again. Not often. Look, it's not easy talking in here. Let's go see Dragan first, he'll explain it better."

It was strange, and I wouldn't have accepted anything so vague from anyone, anyone other than Joe Nguyen.. Also, I was on my way to the Dragan Foundation anyway. We finished our coffee in friendly silence and returned to the Porsche. Fifteen minutes later he put a smartcard into the barrier, and we drove into the underground car park below the Dragan Foundation.

He parked in a space marked 'J. Nguyen', we climbed out, and he used the same smartcard to operate a locked elevator.

Interesting. Whatever he does, he isn't a mailroom clerk.

We ascended toward the twenty-second floor. Executive country, and as I recalled, it included the office suite of billionaire Alexander Dragan. The man who'd bankrolled my Ukrainian excursion. I stared at my old friend as we rode up.

"Okay, Joe, what exactly do you do here?"

"I work as a security consultant."

"Right."

Security consultant. It was the kind of euphemism used by merc outfits like Blackwater. I wondered what his real duties were. However, I had other things on my mind. Specifically, how to prevent the lawyers from tearing up my relationship with my daughter, Abigail?

We exited the elevator, and as we walked through the plush carpeted hallway, I chewed over the options left to me, everything from storming into her residence and taking my daughter by force, to talking it over with her mother. I could try to persuade Mariyah to cut the bullshit, and come to a reasonable agreement between two parents. I discounted both options. Force would achieve nothing, except give her high-priced law firm more ammunition. And a reasonable discussion with Mariyah was a pipe dream. I know; I'd tried on many occasions. She saw a discussion between two people as something akin to a blood sport, and she always played to win. No holds barred.

We negotiated the lengthy hallways, drawing nearer to the seat of power. Finally, I decided to pump Joe for what was going down.

"You're obviously highly placed here. How did you come to work for this outfit? I mean, did you answer a classified ad in 'Soldier of Fortune' or something?"

"Or something. They headhunted me. Alexander Dragan called me personally. The pay was good, so I thought, what the hell? And here I am."

"Got it. What was it you said you did?"

He hesitated, and I waited for the lie I knew was coming.

"I just look after security, that's all. Make sure no one gets near enough to pop a shot at him. Check out threatening letters from crazies, that kind of thing. Sweeping his offices and home for bugs."

I nodded. It wasn't a complete lie, but neither was it the whole truth. Not with a Porsche Cayenne and a personal parking space in Manhattan which was worth almost as much as an apartment in the Dakota Building.

He sure didn't warrant the expensive wheels for checking out threatening letters, or driving freelance photographers around New York. So I wondered what he really did. One phrase came to mind. Black Ops. I shrugged mentally. If that was his thing, it wasn't my business.

We finally reached the 'sanctum sanctorum', the holy of holies, and the offices of Alexander Dragan. A single secretary, an attractive, intelligent-looking woman in her mid-forties guarded them. She looked as if she worked out, and I wondered if she carried a small pistol under her mini-skirt to defend her boss. Finding out could be fun.

She looked up as we arrived, smiled, and said, "He's expecting you."

Joe thanked her as we walked past and through a door. I noted that despite the lavish oak paneling, the door was a sandwich. Between the outer sheets of oak would be bulletproof material, most likely Kevlar. We plowed through carpet so

thick it would have benefited from a combine harvester, finally reaching the great man himself.

He was sitting behind a gleaming, polished walnut desk, surrounded by an Aladdin's cave of weaponry, all of it antique and very rare. Knives, swords, revolvers, muskets, rifles, a Gatling gun in one corner, and a cabinet containing fine, old dueling pieces. If he ever needed to build a new office building, he could sell his collection, and it would cover the building costs with money left over for the furnishings. On a marble plinth, in a place of honor, he had a chessboard set up as if ready to play. Nothing unusual about that, except I guessed the pieces were solid gold. Billionaires tend to do things differently to the rest of us. There was another striking artifact that caught my eye. A battered rifle fitted with a telescopic sight; a sniper's weapon displayed on the wall behind his desk. He saw the direction of my glance.

"You recognize it?"

I nodded. "Moisin Nagant, Soviet piece. World War Two?"

"Yes, but it is much more than a simple rifle. It belonged to Vasily Grigoryevich Zaytsev. A legend, even if he was a Russian." He almost spat out the word Russian, his face creased in an expression of contempt, "This is the actual weapon he used at the Battle of Stalingrad. A piece of history."

I nodded. "I've heard of Zaytsev."

Who hadn't? The incredible shooting of Zaytsev and other snipers had helped turn the tide of the Nazi onslaught at Stalingrad. His supposed *duel* with a master German sniper was even the subject of a film.

He got to his feet with his hand outstretched to greet us. When he walked, I noticed he had a very slight limp.

"I am Alexander Dragan, Mr. Raider. So far, I haven't had an opportunity to thank you for the work you do for my foundation."

He wasn't tall, maybe five feet six, with a medium build, but he moved with the grace of an athlete, apart from that limp. His shoulder length hair was gray and wavy, and together with his neatly trimmed beard, he reminded me of Kris Kristofferson. He carried himself with the erect bearing of a soldier, and I got the impression of considerable physical strength beneath the five thousand dollar suit, although the handshake was normal, if slightly firm. A man like Dragan would have no need to impress anyone with a bone-crushing shake.

I returned the greeting and waited. Billionaires don't pass the time of day for no reason, at least, not with me. Not ever. Whatever he wanted, it wasn't a couple of portrait shots of his girlfriend or a wedding shoot for his daughter.

"I looked at those images you uploaded from Ukraine. Powerful stuff."

I nodded. "That's something of an understatement, Sir. It was..."

I tailed off. I couldn't find the words to describe what I'd seen. It was too fresh, too horrific. He picked it up straight away.

"You felt it? The guilt of a survivor?"

I looked at him, startled. Exactly what I'd been thinking. It was almost as if he'd read my mind.

"Perhaps. It was hard. You know, being there, watching like some kind of a voyeur, and unable to help those folks."

"I know exactly what you mean."

I stared at him. "How could you know what I mean? You weren't there. Believe me, it wasn't nice."

He glanced at Joe Nguyen, "What do you know about me, Raider?"

"It's John. And the answer is you're rich. That's about it."

I'd often wondered how he made his money, but I'd never found out.

"I'm also Jewish."

I shrugged. "So is my ex-wife."

But I won't hold that against you. You're not a lawyer.

"Yes, I know. Do you bring your daughter Abigail up in the faith?"

I wondered how he knew about her, but I shook my head. "My ex-wife isn't religious. She encourages our daughter to keep an open mind until she's older."

"Good, good. How is Abigail these days? Do you get on well with her, see much of her? It must be difficult."

Has he been checking up on me?

"I don't see her as much as I'd like. We're okay."

His eyes flickered, and I knew he'd seen through the lie. He was no fool.

"Good," he said again, "As to how I know what you went through in Crimea, I did some work inside Ukraine. When I was younger that is, I went back and volunteered for the ZSU, the Ukrainian Armed Forces, the Zbroyni Syly Ukrayiny."

"You were Special Forces?"

This was no ordinary man.

"Yes, I was a captain with Berkut. I guess you may have heard of them."

A bunch of men who were not afraid to roughhouse it with Ukraine's enemies, but lately, they'd fallen out of grace; after the late government sent them to tangle with and murder anti-Russian demonstrators.

"I've heard of them."

"Nothing good, I know. But many years ago, when I joined, they were dedicated to maintaining freedom and democracy in Ukraine. I served for two years, until I got into a scrape inside Simferopol and came home with this." He indicated the leg, "During my service I saw many scenes like the one you witnessed in Sevastopol. I watched Ukrainians beaten and killed by fellow Ukrainians, and my superiors were unwilling to halt the violence, until I'd had enough and returned to America."

"It's the way it was when I was over there," I told him.

"It is not the whole story," he objected, "We've had problems, several changes of government. Yanukovych was the worse. But Crimea is different. It's a Russian enclave. You can imagine how I feel when the Kremlin bleats about Ukrainian excesses, while their stooges murder our citizens. However, there was one important difference between what you witnessed."

I waited. I sensed we were getting to the reason he'd brought me here.

"The people in those photos, I knew them. I used to visit that store when I was a kid. They were distant family, my own kin. I could hardly believe it when I saw what you had sent back. I hadn't seen them for many years, and you can imagine my feelings when I saw that collection of photos."

I gaped at him. It's hard to sympathize with someone who can write a check for a billion dollars without blinking. But I felt genuinely sorry for him.

"You're sure it was them? You said it'd been a long time."

"Of course I'm sure. His name is even on the shingle, there's no doubt. Lev Shevchenko was the second cousin of my Uncle Samuel. His wife Clara was an unbelievable woman. She spent all her time helping people, regardless of race or religion. In the end, it made no difference. They slaughtered them both."

Dear God, I watched and took pictures while they slaughtered his family.

If I'd felt bad before, I felt a whole lot worse.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dragan. That's terrible."

He made a movement with his hand, as if to brush aside his grief. He was suffering inside. It didn't need a psych to know that. His family, and he first saw it in my photos.

"Yes."

I looked at him, and then at Joe, who was alternately looking at his boss, then at me. There was something they wanted, and they couldn't just spit it out. I'd had enough.

"What is it you want? I mean, why am I here? If it's a question of giving you the sole rights to those images and deleting them from my hard drive, that's no problem."

Again, he made that brushing movement, as if to dismiss my comments. "Tell me, what is it YOU want, Mr. Raider?"

In that moment, I knew that he knew. Of course he knew about my problems. Men like Dragan don't get where they are without being one hundred and ten percent informed about the other side of a deal under discussion. Which in this case, was me. I nodded to him.

"I think we can cut the crap. Go ahead, tell me about it."

He took a breath, and then it came out. "I want revenge."

"You what?"

"I want revenge," he repeated. He seemed to stare into the distance, "God ordered the Israelites to take revenge against the entire nation of Midian; so the Torah tells us. I just want revenge on the people who murdered my kin. Not an entire nation," he added with a smile, "The two men who pulled the trigger and encouraged that crowd to slash the bodies until they were unrecognizable."

For some reason, I thought of Mariyah, and I couldn't blame him. I wanted revenge too. We all want revenge for something. Then I got my head together. "You served in the Berkut, Mr. Dragan. You want revenge, go out and get it."

He grimaced. "Don't think I wouldn't have, once. But this," he tapped his stiff leg, "This wound means I am not the man I used to be."

I looked at Joe, and he was no help, his face was like stone. I couldn't read him at all. Nevertheless, I'd already put it together, or most of it.

"You're planning an assassination. You want someone to go back there and kill those men."

He stared back at me for a long, long time. Then he nodded, slowly. "Something like that. It needs two men, at least. Joe has already agreed to go. "

"That's nice of him. Especially as I'm not going anywhere, nor do I plan to kill anyone. Mr. Dragan, I have a young daughter, as you know, and I've enough on my plate just fighting to keep visitation rights so I can see her. The answer is no."

"Think about it," he said quietly.

"I already have." I turned to leave his office, and then looked back at him, "I assume that's the end of the freelance assignments?"

He glared at me. "I don't know what you take me for, Mr. Raider, but that isn't my style. I hired you for your professionalism as a photographer, and nothing has changed. I only wish you would allow me to hire you for your other talents."

I nodded, glanced at Joe, and stormed out. As I left, wading through the plush, expensive carpet, elbowing my way past elegant, reproduction furniture and priceless artworks on the walls, I had a single thought. After all this time I'd worked for him, I never knew where his money came from.

It's an interesting thought. One thing's for sure; it isn't anything legitimate.

Chapter 2

The Kremlin, Moscow – February 2014

The Alexander Hall was one of the jewels of the Kremlin. Viktor Yanukovych, late President of Ukraine, and currently the guest of the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, glanced around the room. The rich, ornate carvings and the art collection would have severely dented and stretched his considerable fortune to breaking point. Even the richly inlaid floor was a work of art, as were the chandeliers, row upon row of gold and crystal lights sparkling with a brilliance that lit up the entire chamber.

He was sitting on a gilt chair, upholstered in velvet, which had once been used by Tsar Nicholas II.

Perhaps the current tsar still uses it, he thought to himself. What else can you call the current leader of Russia?

He looked up as the two Kremlin guards stamped to attention, and their master entered the hall. Putin looked lean and fit, an image he was careful to cultivate. Yanukovych looked down at his own paunch and winced. It was time to cut down on the sweet pastries he enjoyed so much. Maybe he should have copied Putin's strongman image. Things may have worked out differently.

"Mr. President," the Russian leader greeted him.

A slight exaggeration, but no matter.

"Mr. President," Yanukovych replied, truthfully.

"You're looking well. The climate here in Moscow suits you."

"Thank you. And thank you for your hospitality."

"So how can I help my ally across the border? I assume you have come here to seek my help?"

"I have. Many of my people, ethnic Russians, are under threat from the armed bandits who have taken over my country. They need protection from the mobsters who have taken control of Kiev."

"What about Crimea? Is that not the priority?"

The Ukrainian shook his head. "I'm concerned with all of Ukraine. Although Crimea is under the greatest threat from these Kiev gangsters."

Putin nodded, his expression thoughtful. "And in the long term? What do you propose?"

"I must go back. However, it will not be easy. The illegal government has a large army and an air force at its disposal. In addition, many civilians have been supplied with arms by treacherous so-called Ukrainian nationalists."

The Russian President grimaced. "You know that any attempt by Russia to enter Ukrainian soil could result in war. The citizens will react violently to such an incursion."

Viktor adopted a sly smile. "Unless your troops enter the Crimea first, in order to safeguard the local population, who will welcome them with open arms. When they cross over into Ukraine proper, it will be at the request of the legal government of Ukraine government. My government."

The former head of the KGB was no fool. Especially when it came to dealing with rivals.

"You're saying that Russian troops occupy Crimea..."

"Defend Crimea, not occupy, President Putin. They would be there as part of a legitimate Ukrainian force, at my request. This would make it an internal matter, no more. Nothing for other nations to be concerned with."

The Russian smiled. "It sounds feasible. You know my feelings about Ukraine. We need a buffer against NATO. The Europeans want to inflict their brand of weak democracy on the East. It must not happen. But I do not wish to fight an endless guerilla war. We do not need another Afghanistan, or Chechnya. That would be disastrous."

Yanukovych nodded.

Disastrous for you, President Putin.

Putin continued, "I take it we would be able to count on your support, in return for committing our troops to the Crimea and into Ukraine itself."

"Of course. Whatever you need."

"I want bases inside your country."

"You what!"

"I want bases in Ukraine, to defend against a possible NATO strike."

"You mean the Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol, and the aviation infrastructure nearby."

"I mean Lviv, Odessa, and Kiev, a defensive line to hold off a possible future NATO attack."

Yanukovych gaped. "You cannot be serious!"

Putin shrugged. "You've seen what happens when the West peddles its propaganda on our citizens. These radical ideas go to their heads. I want to put a stop to it, and a ring of bases in Western Ukraine will send the right signals to everyone concerned."

Yanukovych was thinking furiously. This went far beyond anything he'd planned.

"You're talking about bringing down a new iron curtain. One that would separate Europe, East from West."

"Exactly."

"Our citizens would not be happy if it happened. Neither Russian nor Ukrainian."

The Russian chuckled. "Before, our nation was ruled by the communist party. We had a defensive frontier, an 'iron curtain' as you call it, and everyone was happy. We made sure they were happy. They had no choice."

"But..."

"No buts. That's the beauty of it. If anyone objects, we break a few heads or throw them in prison. Like you did with Yulia Tymoshenko."

"They never accepted that. I made a mistake," Yanukovych reflected bitterly.

"You made only one mistake, Viktor. You should have imprisoned many more of her supporters. That's how we run things here. When a man causes trouble, he disappears from the streets and ends up in jail. If he continues to cause trouble," he shrugged, "there are other remedies."

"Polonium?" the Ukrainian raised his eyebrows.

Putin stared back at him, his lips creased in a faint smile. "Of course not, it would be illegal, Viktor. Like faked prosecutions and imprisonment of political rivals. I couldn't possibly comment on taking such measures."

"Of course not," Yanukovych replied, wondering why he hadn't made more use of Polonium.

Putin stared at him; his reptilian eyes were still and intense. "Do we have a deal?"

Yanukovych hesitated for only a second, and then he nodded. "We have a deal. If anyone resists, I authorize you to use maximum force. When Crimea is secure, we can look at the Eastern part of Ukraine. We will light a fire that will signal the end of the rebel scum in Kiev."

"Good. We'll need support when the troops go in. I'm thinking of an armed militia, to keep order."

"We need more weapons, plenty of ammunition. There's liable to be some shooting."

The Russian gave him a thin smile.

"Of course. But if the world sees Russia supplying arms to Ukrainian civilians, it could cause problems. I do know of a man who specializes in these matters. He can make a private arrangement with your people in Crimea."

"He knows how to keep secrets?" Yanukovych asked, aware of the fallout in his own country if it became public knowledge he'd recruited a Russian arms dealer."

"He is a former KGB officer."

The Ukrainian smiled. "That's good enough for me."

Vladimir Putin extended his hand, and former President and President-in-waiting Viktor Yanukovych took it. He was aware he'd just sold his country to the Devil. Even so, it was better to be President of a vassal state of Russia, than a deposed President. Wasn't it?

New York City – February 2014

I took the express elevator from Dragan's office to the first floor, stormed through the palatial lobby, and out into the street. I don't like being set up, and there was no doubt in my mind that's what had just happened. As I waited for a cab, Joe Nguyen ran out of the building and rushed up to me.

"John, it's not what you think. Hang on, I told you I need to talk to you."

I waited for a monster semi-trailer to pass in a roar of turbo charged diesel engine and squealing brakes as it hit the intersection. Behind him came two buses and a delivery truck. The stink of diesel was enough to make me gag. I glared at Joe.

"No? I think you tried to fit me up, Joe. Jesus Christ, a mercenary! Is that what he hired you for?"

He at least had the grace to look shamefaced. "Not at first, no, but Christ, when he saw those photos you sent back and recognized his folks, he went ape. Look, buddy, why don't we grab some lunch and talk about this?"

I checked my watch, 1200. I was hungry, and we'd been friends for too long to fall out over some asshole billionaire.

It's only money, right?

"Yeah, okay. Then I need to get home to my apartment. I need a shower, a shave, and catch up on some sleep."

"Jet lag is hell, I know," he said with some sympathy, "Where're you staying?"

I eyed Joe. "Are you trying to tell me you don't know?"

Nguyen chuckled. "Okay, okay. We'll do lunch, and I'll take you home to your apartment in Brooklyn. How's the girlfriend, you two still an item?"

So he knew about her as well. Angelina Blass was twenty-two years old, a girl with all the carefree confidence of a fashion model, her chosen career. She possessed a pair of serene blue eyes, porcelain skin and rounded cheekbones, displaying perfect, soft pouty lips. Her hair was pale blonde, styled in a neat, shoulder length cut. She had a toned figure, with long legs that made her taller than average, like many of her colleagues.

She was also clever, with a degree in psychology that she planned to use when she grew too old for modeling. Everything about her was the total opposite to Mariyah. Where my first wife was brittle and defensive, as I found out to my cost, and too late to change anything, Angelina was easygoing. Her beauty was something she took for granted and then ignored. She was able to go through life with the total confidence of a girl who knew who she was and where she was going.

I was lucky to have hit it off with her, as I kept reminding myself. Apart from her looks, which were way out of my league, we were well suited. Both of us had jobs that meant long periods away, and on rare occasions when we were home together, the sex was joyful and energetic. Right now, she was away on a modeling job, somewhere in Europe.

"She's fine, and yeah, we're still together, at least for now. Have you met her?"

"No, I've only seen the photos."

"Glossy magazines or surveillance?"

He grimaced but made no reply. I wolfed down the huge plate of steak, fries, and salad, washed down with enough coffee to wake up an elephant. We chatted about old times, and then came to the one subject close to my heart. Joe brought it up.

"What are you going to do?"

"The writ? Fight it, what else can I do?"

"If your lawyer is as useless as you say, you'll lose."

"I'll replace him," I replied, knowing that any cut-price attorney was unlikely to be any better. Especially when faced with the likes of Vann, Ruben, and Turner.

He shook his head. "You need money to fight that kind of deal; money to buy a high priced lawyer, someone able to deal with your wife's firm. Look, John, forget what happened this morning. If you need help, I can always raise a few bucks. I'm good for five thousand dollars if you need it. Maybe even six."

I shook my head. "Thanks, but no thanks. It's a battle I have to fight on my own."

"Whatever you say, my friend."

We ate in silence for several minutes, and then he looked up at me. "Mr. Dragan's offer, it still stands if you change your mind."

"I don't think so. What about you, where do you stand? You're not really going out there?"

He grinned. "Why not? He wants someone to look around, put names to those faces in the pictures you sent back."

"And after that? You know he wants them dead."

"Why not? Those folks you watched being murdered, they deserve justice, no matter who they are. If the cops aren't interested, what do you suggest?"

"Staying out of it," I replied, "It's never a good idea to let loose vigilantes."

He shrugged. "Whatever."

I could see something else, in his eyes, in his expression and body language.

Fear? No way, not Joe Nguyen. So what is it?

"Is there something you're not telling me, Joe?"

He started to shake his head. Then he sighed. "Kind of. John, I need this job. You know my wife, Linh. She has some trouble, and I need a pile of dough to sort it out. Dragan has offered a big bonus if the killers of the Shevchenkos are brought to justice. How it happens doesn't matter. If I can persuade the local cops to deal with it, so much the better, if not, well, you know the alternative."

"It's not the way to handle it, Joe."

"We used to do it, in the old days," he retorted.

Yes, we did punish the guilty with a bullet through the head, but it was different, government sanctioned. It was our job, as SEAL operatives. The business in Ukraine is different. Private citizens don't go around murdering other private citizens, no matter what they've done, although the killers of the Shevchenkos did just that.

"You know it was different, then."

"Yeah, right."

"What the problem with Linh?"

I was worried. We'd spent a lot of time together, me and Mariyah, Joe and Linh. She was a sweet, half-Viet, half-American bombshell. Tiny, very pretty, and with a laugh that always reminded me of temple bells ringing. She loved to entertain, and we'd spent many a summer evening sitting on their terrace, wolfing down the Vietnamese delicacies she loved to prepare, drinking beer, and swapping stories. As hard and nasty as my ex Mariyah was, Linh was the opposite. I envied Joe, having such a perfect wife.

"She needs treatment. A brain tumor, the doctors don't give her more than a few months."

"Don't you have insurance?"

He grimaced. "Sure. But the treatment she needs is new, still in the development stage, so not covered. But it'd save her life, I'm sure of it."

He stopped, and I pondered what he'd said.

Is it worth fighting for, killing for? I hope I never have to ask myself that question.

"I'm sorry, Joe. So if you do this thing in Ukraine..."

"Dragan's fee will cover it, yeah. But there's a lot more at stake than bumping off the people who murdered his folks."

"What are you talking about?"

We were in a booth, which he'd made a point of choosing. He looked around carefully to check there was no one in earshot and then glanced back at me.

"This job in Crimea, knocking off the guys who killed those two old people, it's not the only reason for going out there. There's another one. I'm talking huge, as big as it gets."

"Go on."

He paused to collect his thoughts. "This is Class A Secret, right? I shouldn't be telling you this, but in case you change your mind, you need to know what's at stake. It's a hit planned to take place in Crimea, an assassination; the Agency picked up some noise that suggests it'll take place soon. They want me to nose around, see what I can find out."

"Who's the target? Tymoshenko?"

He smiled. "She's past history. A busted flush."

"Yanukovich?"

"You joust, my friend. No chance, he's not worth the bullet. No, this guy is the one who can make or break Ukraine. All he needs is to say the word."

"But, there's only one man who could possibly have that kind of power. And that's..."

And then it came to me, like a thunderbolt. "No!"

He nodded. "Yes. Putin will visit Crimea in the near future, no question. When he does, there'll be a long gun waiting for him. You see how important this is."

I do see. Jesus Christ, Putin!

But I had a daughter, and she was a million times more important than anything, even the killing of a world leader. I had to tell him no. Anything else, I'd do it for him. Any way to raise money for his wife; I was in.

"You'll have to find someone else," I told him, "I'm sorry, Joe. The timing couldn't be worse. I have to deal with the court hearing. That's the only thing in my life. I know how big this is, Putin, shit! But I can't, I just can't. Why doesn't the Agency contact the Russians, the FSB?"

He smiled. "They have. And the reply is they deal with hundred of threats to their President, and they can manage without our help. Problem is, this one is different."

In the end he accepted my refusal, like the good friend he was. Our conversation tailed off, and we finished our meal, called for the check, and he took me out to Brooklyn. We made sure we'd stay in touch with each other, and I went inside. It was a fourth floor walk up, and I was lucky to have it. The entire floor of the old building had been made into a single, open plan apartment, and as soon as I went through my door, I could smell the familiar odors of home. Spices from the kitchen, the pleasant tang of old leather, wood from the stripped floorboards and

oak desk; it was my sanctuary. I was still thinking about that conversation with Joe.

Putin!

I dumped my brown canvas Billingham bag on the couch and went to switch on my desktop computer. The first priority, as always, was to check my email. A freelance photojournalist is only as good as his current assignment, and the job for Dragan had ended, so I needed the next job. There was nothing, nothing, except for a long, hostile email from Mariyah. Even when she took a breath, she made the air hostile.

She didn't pull any punches, and the text left no room for any doubt. Abigail needed a stable father figure, not some gung-ho former SEAL who hadn't learned how to settle down in a regular job and make a life. It was worse than I could have imagined. She was capable of hitting more than low blows, but this was much worse.

My daughter, she wrote. My daughter?

'My daughter needs someone in her life who isn't a hardened killer. Someone who can give her the warmth and love she needs, not twist her mind with his distorted philosophy of brutal violence. I've prepared a new writ which was served on you today, making it clear a sadist like you is unfit to have any further contact with Abigail. In the meantime, I expect you to stay away from my daughter, until the court has heard the new evidence I have prepared. This email was copied to your lawyer. Please acknowledge receipt.'

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

She was tying me in knots, and there was little I could do to stop it. Not without money, bundles of money. I picked up a photo of her and Abigail, the one I kept on my desk. Mariyah smiled back at me, thin and severe, pale skinned, her auburn hair tied in a braid, Tymoshenko style, although the previous president of Ukraine was a blonde. My wife had decided to style her hair that way as a kind of gesture of solidarity. Her wide mouth was half-open in a wide smile that lit up her gray-blue eyes, and for a second, I felt a twinge of regret, only for a moment. Looks can be deceiving. Inside she had the ferocity and determination of a piranha.

By contrast, Abigail was cute and pretty. Brown, round eyes and dark hair, like her father. Even at such a young age, she had the kind of lithe grace of a ballet dancer, and I'd always expected to see her on stage at the Met when she grew older. If Mariyah had her way, it wouldn't happen. She wanted our daughter to be a lawyer, like her. I tried hard to persuade her otherwise, and Abigail wanted only one thing, to dance. But her mother was determined, and I knew there was no dancing in her young life.

I thought about Joe again, and the planned hit on Putin. The violence I'd witnessed in Crimea would be like a tea party compared to what would erupt if he were hit. But it still wasn't my business. There was only one person in my life, Abigail, and I could do nothing to jeopardize our faltering relationship.

I clicked on the Crimea folder and started to load the images to the screen. I still needed to catalogue the last of them before they went across to the Dragan Foundation. But I still kept returning my gaze to the photo of Abigail, and something welled up inside me. I picked up the phone to call my lawyer.

"This is Mathew Brace, how can I help you?"

His operation didn't run to a secretary to answer the phone, which I guess was one of the reasons he was cheap.

"John Raider. You saw the email from my ex-wife?"

The voice that replied was artificially cheerful, as if I had nothing to worry about. I listened to the bullshit for as long as I could bear it.

"John! I was going to call and ask you. What do you want me to do about it?"

"You're the lawyer, Mathew. You tell me."

A pause. "Well, er, there's not a lot we can do."

"You can't argue it in court?"

"Yeah, of course we can, but I mean, John, you'd be wasting your time. She has every angle sewn up, and I gather the new evidence she's presenting is pretty damning."

Today was the first I'd heard about new evidence.

"What kind of evidence?"

"Psychologist's reports, that kind of thing. Saying Abigail's been emotionally damaged by your violent career. That you've told her horror stories of the people you killed, that kind of thing."

I felt my anger reach boiling point. "That's a damned lie. When we were together, she was too young to understand anything, even if I had said those things, which I didn't."

"I'm sure that's true. But the way she makes the case, it's pretty damning."

"How can I fight it?"

I could almost feel him shiver down the phone line. "John, this is Vann, Ruben, and Turner we're talking. They're one of the finest legal firms on the Eastern Seaboard. They have expert witnesses, professional investigators; you name it. You can't fight it. We can't fight it. Not without a lot of money."

"So what do I do?"

"I'm sorry, but your best option is to wait until she's old enough to make up her own mind. When she's sixteen or eighteen, it depends."

Fuck you!

I slammed down the phone. It was a waste of time talking to the guy. There had to be something else. I glanced around my apartment, seeing the photos that lined the walls, happier times when I worked as a SEAL; Joe and me sitting in a bar, waving foaming glasses of beer. That one was taken at Ramstein in Germany. Al Miller and Waite Sullivan studying a stripped down Russian machine gun; a new model captured during a raid in Iraq. It was a modified PKP Pecheneg, a bullpup version, and this one was chambered to fire a hardened nickel round, giving it the ability to penetrate light armor.

I was standing in the background, watching, so I guess Joe would have taken the picture. Poor Joe, poor Linh. They'd always been the perfect couple, good looking, invariably polite and helpful, warm and, welcoming. Now she was dying, and he was about to risk his neck in Ukraine, in the Crimea. There was no point in mincing words. Dragan wanted blood, and I didn't blame him, but it was the kind of affair that could likely backfire badly. Then there was the other business that CIA had asked him to look into.

Putin! Fuck. What is he up against? A professional assassin, and he's on his own, without back up and any kind of support, a sure-fire recipe for disaster.

I reached for the phone and called his cell. The best way to help him would be to give him a few words of advice. Don't go, Putin or no Putin. He picked up straight away.

"Nguyen."

"It's me."

"Changed your mind?" he said, sounding slightly relieved.

"That's why I called. You can't do it, Joe."

"I can't? We've done it before."

"No, not like that. Listen to me. You say Linh is sick and needs money for treatment. That's fine, but if she loses her husband, how's she gonna feel?"

"She won't lose her husband," he rasped.

"Joe, you can't say that. Even before, when everything was planned down to the last detail, air support, a full team of Navy SEALs, weapons, UAVs, we still lost men. You ask me, you're walking into an early grave. Revenge is one thing, but this Putin thing is, well, it's crazy. Come on, Joe, there has to be another way."

"Like what? How'd you feel if it was your wife in trouble?"

"Don't ask me that one, my friend. You know how things are."

"Sure, sorry about that. If it was Abigail, then, how far would you go?"

To hell and back, and he knows it.

"Copy that, but I still think there must be another way. How much are we talking for this treatment?"

He was silent for a moment. When he came back, his voice was bitter, "It's long term. Ballpark, around a million bucks. That's for several surgical procedures, drugs, rehab, and a long stay in the hospital. It could even be more."

"Understood."

Short of robbing a bank, I couldn't think of any way to raise that kind of dough.

"You see where I'm at."

"Yeah, I do. Joe, you need to take someone with you, why not look up the old team? Al Miller and Waite Sullivan, you never know, they may be prepared to help out."

"I already emailed them. I'm waiting to hear."

Al and Waite, they were an ill-assorted pair, and yet they'd become closer than brothers. When Al Miller got involved with a scheme his stepbrother insisted was a sure-fire winner, Waite went into it with them as an equal partner. The scheme was a scam, and they lost their money when the stepbrother took off. They went after him, and it ended badly, with the stepbrother threatening to sue them for his hospital bills. After five months in a hospital bed, the debt mounted up some.

They never did get the money back, but they remained close and did everything together. After they lost their money, they decided to live for the day, and the future could go hang. Their big thing was fishing, so they'd take on a contract, usually in a war zone, shepherding executives and diplomats around the country. Then they'd hire a boat and take off. When the money ran out, they'd look for the next contract. And they were the best; there was always another contract waiting for them.

What made their relationship even more surprising was that Waite Sullivan used to be an all-out redneck, a hair's breadth away from joining the KKK. That's until he met Al Miller, and Al saved his life after he was pinned down under heavy

Taliban fire. When his local chapter came calling to sign him up, he took them apart with his bare hands. They never bothered him again.

"Good luck with that, amigo. Maybe if they're between contracts, they may be interested. I'm sorry I can't go, but my daughter, you know how it is."

"Sure, I know."

"When do you leave, Joe?"

"Couple of days, there are a few things I need to attend to before I leave."

Like putting his affairs in order and writing his last will and testament. SOP for a dangerous operation.

"Good luck."

I hung up and reached for the bottle. What else was there, I felt such a heel letting him go off like that? I didn't know that I could do anything different. I had to prepare for the upcoming court appearance, and try to pin down a strategy to stop Mariyah stealing away my daughter.

How come we were both so badly screwed in our lives? We'd given everything during our service with the Navy SEALs, and it looked like life had turned around and bitten us both in the balls. Maybe it was fate, karma, or whatever. Or sheer bad luck.

But Putin! Jesus Christ.

New York City – March 2014

Five days later, I answered a knock on the door. I was bleary with sleep after spending a late night working on my library of images I'd brought back from Ukraine. The pictures of the Shevchenkos falling victim to the crowd of baying, ethnic Russians still haunted me. Yet it was more than that. I'd zoomed in on a particular face, one I hadn't noticed before. It looked familiar, a man standing in the rear, as if he was stage-managing the whole affair. Somewhere I'd run into him, but where, I just couldn't remember.

Still, that face haunted me. It was tucked somewhere deep inside my mind, a memory from the past, and I was certain it was nothing good. However, it was the murder of those innocent people that proved too much to take. Despite deciding to cut back on my consumption of liquor, I'd reached for the bourbon and finished most of the bottle. Call it what you will, guilt, disgust, anger, it was too much to allow me to get a night's sleep, hence the liquid alternative.

I was hung over, tossing and turning as I came out of a deep, drunken sleep when the intercom sounded.

"Hi, is this Mr. Raider? I have a package for you, Sir."

She sounded nice. Sexy, too, so I buzzed her up. I opened the door with high hopes, and they were dashed in a fraction of a second. Mid-twenties, with nice legs, blonde hair, and a ten thousand dollar smile, the process server for Vann, Ruben, and Turner. She handed me a large envelope.

"I guess I don't need to ask what it is."

The smile widened. Why did she have to be so happy about destroying people's lives? "I guess not. You've been served."

She left, and I stood by the open door and ripped open the envelope. It was like being hit by a truck. Mariyah had obtained a court injunction, preventing me from speaking to Abigail or going within two hundred yards of the house. Shaking with anger, I picked up the phone and called her. She answered on the first ring.

"John? I thought you'd call."

"Damn right. Are you trying to wreck our daughter's life?"

"Not at all, in fact, quite the opposite." The answer was smooth, practiced, and confident. Purpose built to impress a jury.

"You're hurting her, Mariyah. She needs a father. She needs me."

"She has a good father, and he lives in this house with me."

"You mean that rotten, no good shyster you picked off the manure heap? Listen, he's..."

"No, you listen." Her voice had changed. Cold as ice, hard-edged, and compelling, "You're finished, John. She doesn't need you, so stay away from her, and get used to it. If you come near, I'll have you arrested and put in jail."

"You can't..."

"This conversation is over. Call me again, and I'll report you for harassment."

The receiver went dead as she hung up. Mentally, I rehearsed all the bad things I would do when I got my hands around her throat. She was orchestrating a campaign of legalized child abuse. Abigail needed her father, no question. Without me in the picture, she would fall victim to Mariyah's brand of nastiness.

Yet as those words went through my mind, 'orchestrating a campaign,' I stopped. It rang a series of bells, louder than the nineteen bells inside St Pat's Cathedral on Madison Avenue. I remembered that face in the photo I'd taken in Sevastopol. I raced to my computer and went through the image library until I came to it. There! I needed to put a name to the face, and I wracked my brains until it came to me. Grigory Orlov. He was the man Dragan wanted killed, a vengeance hit for the murder of the Shevchenkos. The coincidence hit me like a truck. Orlov's sponsor in Moscow, his name was Vladimir Putin, the target of an assassin! No, it was more than coincidence. It was enemy action.

I reached for the phone. Joe Nguyen was walking into more trouble than he could handle. All I got was his voicemail service. I put down the phone, and my thoughts went back several years, To Orlov.

Helmand, Afghanistan – April 2010

We were operating inside Afghanistan, targeting the movers and shakers in the Al Qaeda and Taliban organizations. Intel began to hear rumors of a new kid on the block, a major player who was delivering sophisticated arms and explosives to the insurgents. Nothing new, but this particular creature offered them an added bonus. He advised the ragheads on NATO doctrine, our strategy and tactics; information that only a highly placed figure in the command structure could know. They codenamed the unknown spy 'Redneck.'

We followed up several leads, but they went nowhere. Every time we reached a dusty, remote village after receiving a tip off, we came back empty handed. He was always one step ahead of us. The United States Army Criminal Investigation

Command, known as CID, put everyone under the microscope but came up with nothing. Until by chance, we uncovered the truth. There was no traitor. The information came from outside Afghanistan, from outside NATO. It came from a Russian, a man sent to destabilize the region in order to leave it wide open to Russian trade and influence. They lost the last time they tried to invade Afghanistan. This time, they were coming through the back door. And our men were dying.

They called our fireteam to the Special Forces briefing room inside a secure compound at Bagram Air Base, Kabul. Our boss was Commander Robert Lee. His parents had given him the middle name of Ethan, but he rarely, if ever, put the E into his name. He was young for his rank, a capable, tough officer. Unlike his famous namesake, he was black.

"You're going back out. We have a definite lead on Redneck, the Russian bastard who's been handing the enemy our operating procedures and order of battle. This time, with any luck, you can locate him and take him out for good. It's time we caught a break. What's your status, Chief?"

I grimaced. "We were looking forward to some down time, but in this place, who isn't? We can head out anytime."

I could feel the looks from the other men. Truth was, we were all beat. We'd been on operations almost continuously for the past four months, and they take their toll. They wanted me to say no, but they also knew that was impossible.

"Ain't that a fact? Very well, the village is called Madun, about eighty klicks from here. You'll fly an MH6 to go in, and this time it'll be a daylight assault."

"Daylight!" Joe Nguyen exclaimed, "Is that wise?"

"We believe so. It's vital we catch this guy out in the open, and I want you able to identify him on the ground. It shouldn't be hard. He's a white Russian. We're routing the Little Bird behind a range of hills, and when you come into the open for the final approach, you'll be less than two klicks away. You'll have the element of surprise."

I heard Al Miller murmur, "In your dreams." But if Commander Lee heard him, he ignored it.

"That's all. Wheels up in two hours. Journey time is twenty minutes, so you won't have to freeze your butts off sitting outside the helo for too long."

"Amen to that," Waite Sullivan said. He was the oldest operator in our team, a tad past his thirtieth birthday. He never admitted to his real age, although rumor had it he'd faked his documents, somehow. He was as tough and fast as the younger men were, but he had one Achilles heel. He felt the cold, more than most.

"I knew you wore your wife's underwear to keep warm when we were out fishing," Al quipped, "But I didn't know you brought it out here."

"Fuck you," he snapped.

We all relaxed. It was all part of the pre-mission routine, and if Al and Waite hadn't hazed each other, it would have been different. Soldiers the world over are notoriously superstitious, and SEALs were no different. They didn't like 'different.' Routine, SOP, it was what kept us alive.

A couple of hours later, we boarded the MH6 Little Bird. It was not unlike a fairground joyride, sitting two each side on tiny seats, about to be suspended over a two thousand meter drop to the ground. Except this was no joyride. The co-pilot

did a quick commo check, made sure we were secure, and the next moment the engine roared. The pilot moved the collective, and we rocketed into the sky.

It wasn't the first time we'd flown in the daytime, but it was still a novelty. The ground below us was exposed in a vast panorama that hid little of the damage inflicted on the miserable scrap of territory known as Afghanistan. Everywhere, there were ruins. Ruined buildings, ruined roads, ruined walls, as if Afghanistan was an enormous repository of broken stone for future construction projects; the stone coming from past projects, people's houses, farms, and schools. There was another ruin beneath us, yet we saw little of it from that height. Ruined people. God only knew, there were enough of them in this Islamic paradise.

My earpiece crackled, "This is the co-pilot. We're four minutes out."

"Roger that," I acknowledged automatically.

We were flying close to a range of hills, so close it would only need a twitch of the controls to smash the rotor blades into the barren, hostile rocks. Our pilot didn't twitch. He adjusted the collective, increased power, and we went up like an express elevator, higher and higher. It happened fast; one second we were in the shadow of the hill, the next we were over a long flat, open plain. Two clicks away, and closing, was the village. And with any luck, our target would be there. Redneck.

"Ten seconds."

I tensed and checked my assault rifle. I carried an HK 417 Battle Rifle, a beefed up HK 416. The big difference was the size of the round. The 417 fired a 7.62 bullet, instead of the lighter 5.56mm commonly used in modern assault rifles. I preferred the heavier round, especially during the kind of dirty war SEALs conducted inside hostile territory. The longer range, and fierce stopping power of the bigger bullet, had given me the edge on more than one occasion.

We were descending fast, and when the skids were less than a meter from the ground, we jumped. The Little Bird zoomed back up, as the first of the enemy fire tore up the sky right where it had been only a second before. The pilot was an old hand, we all were, and he was already bringing the MH6 around to reply with a strafing run.

We were running toward the outskirts of the village when the chain gun opened fire, and the enemy fire stopped abruptly. It tends to happen like that when the enemy is hit by the devastating fire of an M230, firing the huge 30mm rounds at a rate of six hundred a minute. It was a Degtyarev, a Soviet era machine gun positioned inside a stone hut, and we ran past the destroyed machine gun nest. The bodies of the gunners, three of them, were torn to bloody shreds, and the gun was left fit for scrap.

A heavy burst of gunfire made us duck behind a larger stone house. I ran inside and crossed to the window at the back. They were only fifty meters away, five men, firing their AKs in our direction. I keyed my mic.

"Hostiles, fifty meters in front. Waite, hit them with a couple of grenades."

"You got it."

He carried an M4A1 carbine length rifle fitted with an M203 grenade launcher. He took pride in his skill with the grenades, which were not the easiest weapons to target, and inside of a couple of seconds, I saw the first projectile sail overhead. The blast sent a hail of debris up into the sky, and the screams indicated Waite

had scored a bull with the first round. He fired several more, and I touched my mic, about to tell them to move in closer. A long-range confrontation was something we had to avoid.

Instead, I heard Joe's shouted warning in my earpiece.

"They're moving onto both flanks. We're in danger of being surrounded."

"Hold your positions," I called back. I called the helo.

"Little Bird, this is Foxtrot One. We've landed in a hot zone. We need fire support, urgent."

"Copy that, Foxtrot One. We're heading back in, ETA one minute. Do you have target coordinates?"

I read off the numbers from my GPS. "We'll keep a group inside of a five-meter radius from those coordinates. The hostiles are in front of us, to the south, on both flanks."

"Sounds like you've got yourselves into a jam down there. Hang tight, we're on the way."

I called the other three men and told them to close on me. They dived into the stone hut, followed by streams of enemy bullets. Joe dropped next to me and pointed his rifle out of the window.

"Either this is an ambush, or someone out there knows their business. They were mighty quick hitting us."

But not quick enough for an ambush. He was right; whoever was in command of this outfit was a planner, a quick thinker. Unusual in this place, and I thought about what it meant.

They kept firing, and we shot back, enough to stop them rushing us. And then the Little Bird came boring in, chain gun blazing. The noise on the ground was astonishing, and we kept our heads pressed into the dirt, out of the way of the ricochets hurtling around us. The heavy cannon stopped momentarily, and we all heard a strange noise, an engine starting. It was a heavy diesel engine.

"What the fuck is that?" Al shouted, "Surely it's not a..."

I suspected what the noise was. I'd heard it before, once. I called the helo.

"This is Foxtrot One. Hostiles are believed to have mobile anti-aircraft capability. Get out of here, now!"

I watched the MH6 bank and zoom away, and heard the pilot's acknowledgment; just as a stone building crumpled, destroyed by an armored behemoth that emerged through the hole in the stonework. It rolled over the rubble and came to a stop, and the quadruple barrels elevated to the firing position and tracked the fleeing helo.

The four 23mm autocannons burst into life, and a hail of heavy lead pursued the Little Bird. The pilot was no rookie. He dived for the ground, hugging the contours as he zoomed back over the range of hills. We were on our own until he could call for air support, something to deal with the Shilka.

Fifty tons of Soviet-era armored mobile anti-aircraft artillery. It was as expected in this dusty village as a Macdonald's franchise.

"We're in the shit," Joe shouted to me over the roar of the diesel engine. The vehicle had started moving toward our position, and the quad barrels were dropping to aim at a ground level target. Us.

"Waite, use the launcher. Try and make them drop a track or something," I shouted, "Four grenades, then we pull back."

"Copy that."

He pulled the trigger, reloaded, fired three more times, and stopped. More by luck than judgment, his last grenade wedged into the turret, and the gun barrels jammed in a fixed position.

"Nice shooting, Waite," I shouted to him, "Let's wait and see what they do next."

We waited. Slowly the dust settled, and the cries of wounded and dying men subsided as they lapsed into unconsciousness or died. A group of fighters began darting through the narrow buildings, too fast to pick them off, when I noticed something strange. The hatch of the Shilka was opening. A hand holding a white cloth waved, and I shouted at them to hold their fire.

That was the first time I encountered Grigory Orlov. I walked forward, feeling my skin crawl, waiting for the bullet from one of the hostiles who were massed all around us. A man emerged from the hatch, a white man.

Redneck, it has to be.

He climbed to the ground, walked forward, and we met out in the open.

"Good afternoon, American. It seems we have a stalemate. Do you play chess?"

He was a large, muscular man, round-faced, tall, and slightly obese.

"You're Russian?"

He beamed a smile from his blunt Slav face and nodded. "I am. Colonel Grigory Orlov."

"KGB?" I asked him.

"That was a long time ago. Whom am I speaking to?"

I hesitated but told him, "Chief Petty Officer John Raider. What do you want? You going to surrender?"

His smiled, but there was no warmth in his eyes, a Russian smile. "Navy SEALs. You're a long way from the sea, my friend. It is you who should surrender. You know you're beaten. Why shed more blood? Your cause is lost. Give up now, and I promise you will come to no harm."

Yeah, right. The Afghans would like nothing more than to get their hands on a bunch of SEALs.

I managed to look calm and confident, throwback to my poker days. "My friend, our helo called in a squadron of Navy F/A 18s as soon as they saw that tin can of yours. Inside of," I made a show of checking my watch, "eight minutes, they'll be lining up to shoot the ass off you and that heap of Russian junk you're riding in. You're fucked."

He looked thoughtful. "There are only four of you, and I have almost fifty men."

"Four of us and a squadron of fighter bombers. You've lost your advantage, Colonel Orlov. If I were you, I'd start running."

His faced reddened with anger, but he brought it under control. "It is a stalemate. We will both pull back. Until the next time, American."

"I'll look forward to it. Tell me, Colonel, how'd you get that monster into Afghanistan without our people seeing it?"

He beamed again. "The same way I imported the rest of the heavy equipment for my Al Qaeda and Taliban friends." He winked, "Trade secret."

It explained a lot, and it was obvious a combination of Spetsnaz and KGB expertise, combined with Taliban and Al Qaeda savagery, would be deadly.

"How come they're prepared to deal with a Russian? The last I heard, they had a price on the head of every Russian who set foot inside the country."

"I heard the same," he nodded, "but they're no fools. I have a product to sell, and they want to buy. Heavy weapons and equipment," he nodded at the Shilka, which waited a few meters behind him. Wounded, but still capable of inflicting damage, like a prehistoric monster, lurking in the primeval swamps.

"As well as a detailed knowledge of NATO military tactics and weaponry."

He chuckled but didn't reply.

"Why is it you Russians always pick the losing side?"

The angry expression returned. "I assure you, American, we haven't lost. Not by a long way. These people, the Taliban and Al Qaeda, they will not forget who supplied them with the means to fight the West. When your people have left Afghanistan, whom will they look to for aid? Who will be their friends? They will fall into the open arms of Mother Russia. And there's nothing you can do to stop us. Nothing."

"You're full of crap, Russian. This is one war you lost a long time ago, and there's no turning back."

I decided to call in an urgent airstrike the moment the conversation ended. Enough to flatten the area with everything we could put in the air. This man had to be stopped, and fast, except he read my mind. Maybe it was time I learned to play chess.

"History will decide who wins and who loses, Chief Petty Officer Raider. Let me warn you, if your aircraft come back before I clear the area, they're in for a surprise."

"Like what?"

He held up a hand and clicked his fingers. A man emerged from a nearby doorway. He was clutching a weapon I'd seen in training, a Strela, another product of the now defunct Soviet Union. Similar to the FIM-92 Stinger, they had enjoyed only limited success, due in part to a more primitive seeker head. But the missile was more than enough to bring down an aircraft.

"You're joking. You're threatening us with that piece of crap!" I sneered, smiling at the dark green launcher. He didn't smile back. Neither did the black-turbaned fighter who held the launcher. It was pointed in my direction.

"I have fifteen of these launchers and several cases of rockets."

Okay, he wasn't joking. That amount of anti-aircraft ordnance could decimate our jets. Even if only one missile in five reached the target, it would mean the loss of three of our aircraft.

"What are you looking for, Orlov? You trying to make a few extra sales?"

"Very funny. We need to make an agreement. I plan to leave Afghanistan soon, and I see no need to take any risks now that my work here is almost done. When we pull out, do not make a move for one hour, or we will smash you into pieces with cannon fire from my BTRs. And you can forget any ideas of an airstrike. My missiles will tear your gunships and fighter-bombers from the sky. Would you like me to demonstrate the heavy weapons I have at my disposal, or do we have a deal?"

We shook hands, he boarded the damaged Shilka, and it rumbled away. I saw a pair of modern BTR-90s armed with heavy caliber autocannons close in, one on either flank. His fighters were crowded on the hulls, some of them clutching Strelas.

The Russian watched the American soldiers recede into the distance. He was relieved they hadn't called his bluff, and it confirmed what all Russians knew. When it came to a battle of wits, strategy and counter strategy, a global game of chess, they were unbeatable. He'd told the truth about his missiles, except for one tiny fact. Russian made missiles were not as reliable as American and European equivalents. The stuff they exported to Afghanistan was even worse. It was entirely possible they'd misfire if they targeted an ISAF ground attack aircraft.

He'd enjoyed a good run of luck since he'd been inside Afghanistan. Just like another successful Russian, Vladimir Putin. The Russian President, then a lowly KGB officer, had been posted to Dresden in communist East Germany. He'd wangled a temporary posting to Kabul and worked to counter the American backed Mujahidin insurgency.

Putin managed to get out before the Russian withdrawal, to return to his posting in Dresden. He was untainted by the Soviet failure, although he'd always regretted the lost opportunities. After becoming President, he was keen to undermine NATO efforts in the region. He sent a steady flow of funds from Moscow to supply weapons to Russia's former foes, now known as the Taliban and Al Qaeda.

It was a simple equation. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. The more damage the Muslim terrorists did to the Western infrastructure; the more it undermined US and European foreign policy. As the West grew weaker, so Russia's influence on the world stage grew stronger. It was a useful proxy war that drained away the strength of Russia's enemies.

The fact that it resulted in the deaths of untold thousands of Afghans was immaterial. Putin didn't give a damn, and the majority of the Russian people blamed the Afghans for the deaths of so many of their sons during the 1980s. As for Orlov, it was of no consequence. Life and death was a commodity, like food and guns. To be given and taken away at will.

The soldiers were out of sight as they climbed a steep track and followed a narrow path through a deep ravine. The roadway was almost invisible from the air, and there was no sign of American aircraft. He relaxed. They were safe. His bluff had paid off, and he could continue to wind up his operation inside the country before he returned to Russia. Back to his sponsor, Vladimir Putin, the new Russian *tsar* who held the power of life or death over tens of millions of people, both inside and outside Russia.

It was Yeltsin himself who'd appointed Putin head of the FSB, the successor to the KGB. He used the powerful position to lever himself into government, and a year later, he was Prime Minister of the Russian Federation. A mere stepping-stone to the Presidency, the job he'd always coveted.

Orlov had his eyes on promotion, on getting as near to the top as possible. There was no question that Putin was the only man able to restore Russia's

greatness in the world. But even Putin was beset by problems. The country had grown soft, riddled by crime and corruption.

It was time for the return of the iron discipline of the communist era. What Russia needed, more than anything else was discipline; the rule of law, with no exceptions. It was time to bring down the oligarchs and drug dealers, and put their vast wealth in the hands of people who would know how to spend the money wisely. As long as he maintained a firm grip on power, Orlov would support the President, no matter what. It would need hard, brutal measures to succeed, but Putin was the man who was capable of just such iron tyranny. If his grip weakened, Orlov would throw his considerable skills behind another contender for the Kremlin. A man like himself, perhaps. But he would need wealth to make everything possible, and he was working on it.

As soon as he returned to Russia, he'd put into operation the next phase. It was necessary to find eager customers for his wares, people who would both pay handsomely and swear loyalty in return for vast quantities of military hardware he could provide. They would become an unstoppable force whose power and influence could be thrown behind Putin. Or whichever candidate he decided to back. Even himself. Weapons were the new world currency, and it was a currency he possessed in vast quantities.

President Orlov, it sounds right. Why not?

New York City – April 2014

I looked at that grainy image in the photo from the Crimea. Orlov. Next to him was another man, slightly younger, slimmer, with blonde hair and a hard, angular face. He looked like one of Hitler's blue-eyed SS troopers. Plenty of them cold psychopaths, men who spent their war murdering innocent civilians because they didn't fit in with the new Thousand Year Reich. I could imagine that face wearing SS uniform, strutting around some conquered city, a Lord of Death, until the Allies kicked their asses all the way back to Berlin.

Both of those men had pulled the trigger, but it was the Russian who worried me. Wherever he went, death followed in his footsteps, as sure as night followed day. I wondered if he was connected to the plot to murder Putin. It seemed unlikely. They were allies, as far as I knew. Orlov hung on Putin's coattails.

I grabbed the phone and called Joe again. This was worse than before. Apart from the business with Putin, he'd be facing a lot more than a few angry locals armed with surplus AKs and shotguns. Instead, a well-equipped, well-trained force, led by a superb tactician with a track record in Spetsnaz and KGB could be in place.

However it went down, Joe was heading into a total nightmare.

I tried several times, but Joe's cellphone only rang and rang, and each time it went to voicemail. I left a message and begged him to call me back. Then I had an idea. I looked up their numbers and called Al Miller, and then Waite Sullivan; again, voicemail. Waite's message made me smile. It was always the same.

'Hi there! Gone fishing. Call back another time.'

Al's message was terser. 'This is Al Miller, sorry, I'm away.'

I left messages for both men and finally went to bed. It was almost 0400, and I was exhausted, but the booze had no effect. I half dozed, seeing glaring images of my buddies cut down in bursts of withering fire from heavy caliber Soviet weaponry, unless I could stop them.

First the Shevchenkos, I'd watched their murder and just taken pictures. Now Joe was going out there and trying to recruit Al and Waite to go with him. I took a cold shower and dressed, tried the numbers again. Nothing. Then the phone rang, and I grabbed it.

"Joe?"

"No. This is the office of Vann, Ruben, and Turner. We wish to deliver a..."

"Go fuck yourself!" I slammed down the receiver. I'd lost everything, my only daughter, and now my best friend was walking into a trap. I'd been through hell with Joe and still made it back to laugh about beating the odds.

I felt worse about the Ukraine business than I'd ever felt in my life. I was fucked if I went, fucked if I didn't. At back of it all, there was the dark shadow that hung over Ukraine. Grigory Orlov, and an unnamed sniper with a long gun taking aim at his target. Putin.

Chapter 3

Simferopol, Ukraine – April 2014

"Who are you?"

The big Russian stopped and slowly put up his hands. A gang of armed men surrounded him. This was the heart of Crimea, and the evidence of the Russian takeover was everywhere.

Armed troops drinking in bars and swaggering along the sidewalks, no unit flashes in evidence, their only distinguishing mark the tiny Russian Federation flag on the arms of their combat jackets; armored vehicles rumbling through the streets, and occasionally, the sound of cheering people. The ethnic Russians had little time for the new pro-Western government in Kiev.

Besides, Putin had sent these troops to protect the Russian-speaking minority. Not many knew it was the same pretext the communists used in 1968. That was the year they sent the tanks into Czechoslovakia, to put an end to the so-called 'Prague Spring'.

However, the men in front of him were not Russians, their identity cards would have stated they were Ukrainians. They wore a motley collection of clothing, old camos hoarded from their military service. Wellington boots, woolen caps, some were ski masks, pulled down so that only the eyes showed. Others wore Ushankas made of fur, hats designed to protect the wearer from the Russian winter.

They had one thing in common, their language, Russian. Moreover, they all carried weapons, rifles, AK-47s, AK-74s, and hunting rifles. Orlov recognized one man carrying a weapon that had the distinctive shape of the Dragunov, fitted with a sniper scope. Two of them carried shotguns, lethal at close range. The man who'd asked his name carried no weapon. Orlov addressed him.

"My name is Orlov, Grigory Orlov. I am a Russian. I'm on your side."

"Is that right?" the leader sneered, "How would we know you're a Russian? We already caught a man sent to spy on us. Maybe he's a friend of yours."

"I doubt it. A good friend in Moscow sent me here. A very good friend."

"Who would they be?"

Orlov evaded the question. "You need heavy weapons and equipment, perhaps even knowledge and help with military tactics, intelligence gathering methods. Even though you have succeeded in Crimea, the war is not over. Who knows when the regime in Kiev may send troops to take back the territory they consider belongs to them?"

"You can supply us with weapons?"

Orlov gave him a firm nod. "I can. It is my business."

"And who will pay for these wonderful weapons?"

"There is no need for payment, not right now."

Orlov kept the relaxed smile on his face.

Later, you will pay, my friends. And the price will be higher than you can imagine.

For the first time, the man smiled, although it was Russian style, and the eyes remained cold. "In that case, I will take you to our commander. His name is Dimitry Minin."

"Minin? In that case, there is no problem. Dimitry Minin and I are good friends."

New York City – April 2014

It had been ten days since I'd tried and failed to contact Joe and warn him. Days in which I'd lost all track of time, and by now, I knew it was too late. I made one last try, and there was still nothing. He'd have been out there for several days already, and his failure to answer his calls and voicemails could only have one explanation. It meant he'd run into more than he could handle. Once more, I felt the pain of guilt, survivor's guilt.

I looked long and hard at the bottle, but Christ, it was only 0905. It hadn't come to that, not yet. I sat down and tried to take a long, hard look at the shitstorm that was whirling around me. Abigail was number one. There had to be a way to fight my ex-wife over visitation rights. Number two was Joe. Men like Joe didn't lose contact, especially in the middle of an operation. He was dead, no question.

Unless I could pull off a miracle, I'd lost my daughter. And Joe Nguyen, well, the best I could do was to try and recover the body. I'd talk to Dragan. See if he could uncover Joe's last known location. I couldn't get involved in his plans for vengeance on Orlov and his pal, not while I was trying to prevent the loss of my daughter. But this was something different. Joe's widow deserved to give her husband a decent burial.

I tried to put things in perspective and look on the positive side. I had a profession I enjoyed, and at which I was moderately successful. Shooting people, but this time with a camera instead of a gun. The Dragan Foundation was keeping me on retainer, and I'd little doubt the next assignment would arrive very soon. The only question was where. I'd done work for them in the US, in Ukraine, of

course, and in Canada. There was a short trip to Israel, and another to Germany, all countries with substantial numbers of expat Ukrainians.

My photos focused on Ukrainians, which was understandable. Alexander Dragan had a big heart and wanted to help his people, especially when he thought they lived with oppression, like in Crimea. So when I was at the Dragan Foundation delivering some files, I asked what the Dragan Foundation actually did. They sent one of Dragan's PAs to explain.

He was a buttoned down executive type, pale as a corpse, with about as much personality. The guy was lean, with cold, dark eyes and lank hair. His expression was more than a tad south of complete honesty. Another, younger man was standing behind him.

"Mr. Raider, My name is Andy Lorak. This is my assistant David Brackman. How can I help you?"

The younger man at least looked normal. As if unlike his boss, he didn't stay out of the sun in case the rays were dangerous to him. I gave them both a polite nod.

"Tell me about the Dragan Foundation. What kind of work do you do?"

He'd nodded and smiled. "Certainly. We look after the interests of Ukrainians wherever they are in the world. Most of our people are Christian, many are Jewish, and a few are Muslims. Their religion makes no difference."

He'd showed his perfect teeth then, in a smile that was almost risible in its insincerity, handed me a glossy brochure, and made to walk away. I stopped him.

"I get that. What do you actually do?"

He looked back at me, faintly irritated. "I just told you, Raider. We help out our own, Ukrainians. Is that clear?" He looked at his expensive wristwatch, "I'm sorry. I have to be going."

He made to leave again.

"So, when someone is in trouble, say when a bunch of Russians are beating up on them, like in Crimea, what do you do?"

"It's not just Crimea," he said with a trace of venom, "It happens in Israel, Canada, the US. Those people think they own us."

"The Russians?"

He grimaced. "Who else? Excuse me, I have things to attend to."

"You still haven't told me what you do?"

He sighed. "We help them. I already told you."

I noticed David Brackman hovering nearby. He gave me a look as Lorak left. I waited for a few moments, and he came over to me.

"You're a friend of Joe Nguyen?"

"That's right."

"We need to talk."

"What about?"

He turned as Lorak shouted, "Brackman, what're you waiting for? I need you, now!"

He shrugged. "Another time, maybe." Then he was gone.

Weird.

I returned home to my apartment and started checking out my photographic gear. There was still no sign of an assignment, but I was confident I'd be taking off before long. I wondered what Brackman wanted, and why he mentioned Joe.

New York City – April 2014

I had another sleepless night gnawing on my various problems. Abigail, there was nothing I could do until the court hearing. Then there was Joe. Maybe I could do something there, find out what had happened to him. Where the body lay, if he was dead, which he almost certainly was.

There was only one way to handle it; I would have to go straight to the top. I called Alexander Dragan. The number took a long time to answer, and instead of a secretary on the other end of the line, it was a man. A strong New York accent, so not a Ukrainian, unless he'd been in the States a long time.

"I need to speak to Alexander Dragan."

A pause. "Who are you?"

He sounded like a cop. I gave my name and said it was a personal matter. He was quiet for a moment, and I thought he'd ended the call. Finally, he spoke.

"You know the address of the Foundation?"

"Sure, I work for them, freelance."

"Doing what, may I ask?"

The alarm bells were going off in my head. "Who are you? Why the questions? If you're with the Dragan Foundation, look me up in the computers. It's all there."

"My name is Lieutenant Michael Dolan, and if you'd care to come down here, I'll give you all the answers. Shall we say a half hour? Ask for me in the lobby."

He put down the phone, and I heard the dial tone. Something had happened, and it wasn't good. I turned on the TV as I finished my coffee, and while I was pulling on my coat, I felt an icy feeling in my guts. The Dragan Foundation building was in the background, and the newscaster was relaying the few facts he had about a shooting during the night.

'Earlier today, someone reported a shooting at the Dragan Foundation. According to our witness, four masked gunmen entered the building, murdered two security guards, and went straight to the top floor where Mr. Dragan keeps an apartment. There was an exchange of shots, and one of the gunmen was killed. The other three escaped, and police are searching for them. We'll bring you an update as soon as the police give us an update. This is Dan Boyd...'

There was no mention of Dragan, if he was alive or dead. I was already moving down to the street where I hailed a cab. Ten minutes later I was outside the building. The area was fenced in with news vans, police cruisers, yellow tape, and legions of cops. They let me through the cordon, and I stepped into the lobby. A cop with a clipboard looked at me and frowned.

"Yes?"

"John Raider, I'm here to see Lieutenant Dolan."

He didn't answer; just spoke into his radio. A few seconds later he nodded. "

"Twenty-second floor, you know the way?"

"I know the way."

I rode the lift up to the top floor, all the while wondering about Dragan.

Is he dead?

If so, it could be the end of the foundation he bankrolled, and the end of my lucrative assignments. I shook my head; irritated I'd had such an uncharitable thought. He wasn't a bad guy, and to many he was almost a saint, who did a lot of good for a lot of people. Although I still wasn't sure what he did, exactly.

Besides, it appeared his problems were far worse than mine. The doors opened, and a man was standing there, facing me. He wore an expression of disbelief on his face, as if the world he inhabited was always something of a disappointment. His dark hair was short, buzz cut, and the suit draped over his hard, muscled body looked expensive, Armani maybe.

I stepped out, and he blocked my way.

"John Raider?"

His black eyes were watchful. Suspicious. He was a cop. It was his job to be suspicious.

"Yes."

He didn't respond for a few moments. Then he held out a hand. "I'm Mike Dolan, and I'm still trying to make sense of this shooting."

We were walking along the carpeted hallway toward Dragan's office.

"How is Mr. Dragan? Is he dead?"

"Dead?" He was tense, "Why would you think that? Do you know something I don't?"

"Me and the population of New York City, yes," I replied, "It's on the network news that he was shot. People sometimes die when that happens."

He relaxed, a little. "Fucking newsies. I'd like to drown the bastards in a barrel of piss." He sighed, "No, he's not dead. He stopped a bullet, but he insisted on his own physician on treating him here. What was it you did for Dragan, you said you were a freelance something?"

"Photographer."

"Photos? What the fuck does he want photos for?"

"His organization gives aid to Ukrainians, both inside and outside the country. I make a visual record of the lives they lead, the kinds of things that happen to them."

"What things?"

I thought of my last assignment. "Beatings, murders, bullying. Some of them get a rough deal. There's a lot of bad feeling, mainly from the Russians. Some of the Ukrainians are Jews, and there's still plenty of anti-Semitism in Europe. Alexander Dragan is Jewish, I believe."

"Is that right?" He wrote in his notebook, "So you take pictures."

"Yes."

"Pity you weren't here last night to snap the men who attacked him. Or were you here?"

He watched me keenly, as he waited for the answer.

"No."

"Okay."

He lost interest then and stopped to talk to a detective. I walked on through and found the entrance to Dragan's office suite guarded by a security man. He had a

Glock 17 in a holster on his belt, and his hand hovered over it the whole time. Fortunately, he recognized me.

"Mr. Raider, you can go through. First, I need to check you over, that okay?"

"Go ahead."

He ran a metal detector over my body, patted me down for good measure, and waved me through. There was no secretary in the outer office, and I went straight in to the inner sanctum. The oak paneling of the armored door was pockmarked with bullet strikes, but none had penetrated. I waded through the carpet and found Alexander Dragan. He was lying on a couch.

His chest was covered in bandages, but he didn't seem badly hurt. He waved me toward him.

"Mr. Raider, good of you to come." His voice was hoarse. I knew from experience a gunshot wound did that to you. Bullets sting.

I made the polite noises, "How do you feel?"

His eyes flickered, just for a fraction of a second. "I'll live. That's what matters."

"Where were you hit?"

"One in the side of the chest. It missed the vital organs and exited from my back. My physician says it'll take time for me to recover, but it could be worse. What brought you here?"

I explained my concern about Joe Nguyen, and the eyes blinked again.

"You haven't heard from him? That's strange. There's no reason I'm aware of for him not to answer his cellphone. I don't understand."

I stared at him. *You understand all too well, pal.*

"Have you stopped to consider he ran into the people you sent him there to kill? That they fired first?"

This time I saw him wince, but the movement caused his eyes to cloud with pain. He paused for a few moments. Then, "I've thought about it."

"So this shooting could be connected to the business in Sevastopol?"

"Probably. Yes, almost certainly."

I felt a presence behind me. Dolan. He walked over to the couch.

"Which business in Sevastopol? Is there something I should know?"

Dragan didn't answer, and I decided to lie. For some reason, I didn't think the NYPD would be able to help either Dragan or Joe. Besides, I used to be a Seal, and 'need to know' is virtually stamped on our foreheads from day one. Until I knew different, Dolan didn't need to know.

"It's the assignment I undertook for Mr. Dragan. We were discussing the images I sent back."

He grunted, looked around the office for several minutes, and left. I turned back to Dragan. He looked terrible. His skin was white like fresh fallen snow, and I assumed it was partly from blood loss, partly from shock. Maybe he was also suffering a healthy dose of fear.

"The Sevastopol affair, it's really not your business, Mr. Raider."

I felt angry then. The stupid bastard was in over his head, and now he was playing stupid games.

"Listen, Dragan, Joe Nguyen is one of my best friends. I'd say that makes it my business."

He beckoned me nearer; his voice was just a quiet murmur, "You turned the job down. You could have gone with him."

"I refused because I have my own problems to attend to here in New York. Besides, he may not have gone alone. I tried to contact two other friends, Al Miller and Waite Sullivan. They're away, so it's possible they went with him."

"No. He went alone."

If they didn't go with him, where are they? Or is Dragan lying?

I decided not to press that one.

"How were they connected? Joe's assignment in Sevastopol and the people who shot you last night?"

He thought for a moment and nodded. "Come closer. It's hard to talk."

I sat on the floor close to his head and listened.

"The attacker I shot last night, he was a Russian." I didn't reply. Russian hit men were no novelty, not in New York City, not anywhere, "They sent them to kill me."

"Who sent them?"

"The pro-Russians, of course! Orlov." His voice had risen to a painful croak.

"Orlov! The guy in that photo, so he hit you before you could hit him."

"It seems so, yes."

He coughed again, and I handed him the water. When he'd calmed down, he went on.

"It wasn't too much of a surprise. He's been trying to shut down my Ukrainian operations for some time. It is pure coincidence your picture identified him as the murderer of the Shevchenkos. You sound as if you've heard of him."

I nodded. "Yeah, we met. Once."

"And you lived to tell the tale."

"So did he." Something didn't add up, "Dragan, why would he want you dead? Are you planning on standing for election in Crimea or something? "

He managed a pained smile. "No, of course not. You know what we do, the Dragan Foundation?"

"Sure, you help out your fellow countrymen when they're in trouble. That's my take on it."

"It's rather more than that."

I was surprised. It was the impression he'd given me, a philanthropic organization that helped Ukrainians re-establish their national identity and rebuild their country after years of communist oppression; hence the photo assignments. He wanted a photographic record of the good, the bad, and the ugly. It paid well, too.

"So tell me."

He did. I spent the next half hour listening to him spit out the real reason for his foundation. In effect, he was supplying Ukraine with arms, but not the military. With the army unable to compete with the pro-Russians after they'd left a heavily armed rump in the country, he helped those opposed to Russia get arms and form defensive militias.

"You saw them in the Maidan Independence Square in Kiev, Mr. Raider," he whispered, "Our people defending their country. If they weren't armed,

Yanukovych's thugs would have pounded them into the dust. Many of those weapons were courtesy of the Dragan Foundation."

I felt as if I'd been used, and that I'd been working for a warlord. "And my pictures?"

"Oh, they were important, of course. We needed to show the world what the Russians were doing to my people, and not just in Ukraine. Everywhere there are Russians and Ukrainians in close proximity, the brutality surfaces. They want to push our faces into the shit, and keep them pushed there. Your photos provide striking evidence of some of their excesses."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "But why? Why are they doing it?"

"Why?" His voice had died to a faint whisper, "Because they want Ukraine as a defensive wall between them and the West. They want us as a defensive bastion, should the West ever decide to invade yet again. And to achieve that, they need to beat us into submission."

"That's crazy," I almost shouted, "It's insane. No one's going to invade."

"The Germans tried before in 1914, and in 1941. One thing I know, Mr. Raider, and the Russians learned the lesson, too, is that history has a habit of repeating itself."

"So they'd do that to an entire country, tear it to pieces, just to use them as a pawn in their defensive strategy?"

"Yes. There is no doubt."

"So they want you dead for interfering with their plans to take over the country."

"Exactly. It really is quite simple."

About as simple as breaking sophisticated algorithmic codes. Does he know about the plot to murder Putin? Is he behind it? I wondered. *You never know with these volatile Eastern Europeans.*

"And Joe Nguyen got caught up in it."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah. I bet Joe felt that way, just before they killed him."

He grimaced. "You think he's dead?"

"He's been out of contact for several days, and he went out there to kill two men in a war zone. Yes, he's probably dead. Grigory Orlov plays for keeps. As I said, I've met him before."

"You met Orlov. Tell me about him."

"The guy's a kind of Russian state-sponsored version of the Dragan Foundation. He supplies high-tech weaponry to Russia's allies, all paid for by Moscow. They always were ready to hand out cash for their expansionist efforts."

He closed his eyes, and for a few seconds he looked like a defeated man. When he opened them, he whispered to me, "We will beat these monsters. Their tanks will have to roll over the bodies of our dead soldiers."

"They've probably already rolled over the body of Joe Nguyen."

He shook his head. "Somehow, we will win."

I wasn't sure whether to bring up the business of Putin, but again I decided to keep quiet. Need to know. Unless he was behind the whole thing, in which case he already knew. I got up and left, sickened by the deception. I didn't blame him for trying to defend his own people. But I blamed him for using my best friend to settle his score and maybe getting him killed.

I walked back out to the elevators. Dolan was standing there, talking to a Crime Scene officer clad in a white jump suit. He stepped in front of me.

"What did he say, Mr. Raider?"

"Say?" I adopted an expression of surprise, "He didn't say anything, not really."

"And it took you more than a half hour to listen to him saying nothing?"

"I was trying to be sympathetic."

He nodded his head several times. "Right. I don't know what he said, but it sure wasn't nothing. How about I take you downtown, and we talk about it?"

I shrugged. "Whatever, but I still can't tell you anymore."

He looked weary. He'd probably been up most of the night. He waved me out.

"Leave your details with the officer downstairs in the lobby."

I handed him my card. Thick, expensive vellum finished pasteboard, with engraved printing and a designer logo. The cards were impressive, as they should be. I had to go on the wagon for a week after I paid the bill. He fingered the card, and then put it in his pocket.

"I'll give you a call when I want you to make a statement. Don't leave town."

"I was planning a vacation."

His eyes screwed up with interest. "Really? Where?"

"Cuba. No extradition treaty, beautiful women, sunshine, mojitos on the beach, what more could a man want?"

"Fuck off, Raider, before I take you downtown."

I made a sharp exit, but I didn't reach the street door. Brackman intercepted me.

"Mr. Raider, I wanted to talk about Joe. Can I buy you a coffee?"

He seemed friendly, so I nodded. We found a nearby coffee shop and sat at the back in the corner. I smiled. We were like a pair of spooks.

"You know who I am?"

"Andy Lorak's gofer?"

"The Agency detailed me to keep an eye on the Dragan Foundation. I'm also Joe Nguyen's handler. He reports to me on certain things that may interest us."

So it isn't that we look like spooks. In his case, he's the real thing.

"Go on."

"You're not surprised?"

I shook my head wearily. "After today, nothing will surprise me, not ever again."

"Right. You know we've lost touch with Joe."

"I know you sent him to his death."

He winced. "We didn't send him anywhere. That was Dragan."

"So you didn't know he was going into a hot zone, up against Putin's main hatchet man, who'd be anxious to do anything to prevent the assassination of his boss?"

"You know about that?"

"Joe told me."

"Uh, okay. You can imagine we wanted to know if it was true, and when it was going down, so we could warn the Kremlin. Now he's missing, we're fucked. Look, strictly between us, it's important we find out what's going on over there. We need a freelancer to snoop around, someone with a legitimate reason for traveling to Crimea. Someone who can't be attributed to us."

"Like a photographer, you mean."

He nodded, his face eager. "Exactly."

"Or like Joe."

His face fell. "Well..."

I got up. "Thanks for the coffee. You want my advice?"

"Sure."

"Go yourself."

He was only doing his job, I knew that, and he wasn't a bad guy. Maybe I'd been a little hard on him, but I had good reason to be pissed. As I walked across town, trying to clear my head and get it all in perspective, I mentally listed what I needed to do next. First and foremost, Abigail; somehow I had to rescue her from the clutches of her bitch lawyer mother, and show her she still had a loving father.

Next, I'd need to contact the US Embassy in Ukraine, and find out if there was any report of the discovery of the body of Joe Nguyen. Al and Waite were a mystery. I didn't know where they were, and I determined to run that one down. I hoped they weren't lying in some Crimean ditch. Then there was the question of finding a job.

I was finished with Dragan; the guy was trouble, big trouble. He'd deceived people, myself included, and got them involved in what was just a gun running operation. If that was what you wanted, no problem, except when you didn't know what you were getting involved in.

I got home, walked through the door, and my phone rang.

"Raider."

"John, old buddy. It's me, what's the big deal?"

Al Miller, I could hardly believe it.

"Al, where the hell have you been?"

"Me and Waite decided to do some fishing, so we rented a boat and tooled around the Gulf of Mexico for a few days. Just the two of us and a few crates of beer; it was heaven. What about you, what's up? The message sounded urgent."

I told him about Joe. He listened in silence as I explained Dragan's scheme to extract vengeance for his family. I also touched on his scheme to arm the Ukrainians against the threat of a Russian invasion. I didn't mention Putin.

"No shit! He went over there all on his lonesome, no back up?"

"I had no choice, Al. I'm fighting my own battle here, trying to keep my daughter."

"Got it. So what's the next move?"

"How do you mean?" I asked in surprise. I was a photographer, not a mercenary.

"You know what I mean. We always bring them back. No one gets left behind. Remember the old days?"

"This isn't the old days. Things are different."

"How are they different?" he asked quietly. I didn't answer, "He needs to come home, John. You know that."

He was right, and I was wrong. After a few seconds, I answered him, "I know."

"I'll talk to Waite. You contact this Dragan guy, and see if he can make the arrangements. Waite and me will go over there, if you're too busy, I mean. Either way, he comes home."

He made me feel like the worst kind of low life. "I'll contact him later today and call you back."

"You do that, John. Talk to you later."

He ended the call, and I had plenty to occupy my thoughts.

Is it worth giving my two-bit lawyer, the hapless Mathew Brace, another call? Probably not, it won't be worth the dime.

I needed a good lawyer; that was the priority, but I couldn't afford to pay anyone better than Brace. In order to employ someone tough and clever enough to take on Vann, Ruben, and Turner, I'd need money. A lot of money, far more than I could lay my hands on.

It made me think of Joe Nguyen. It was a similar motive that took him to Ukraine. For him, a sick wife forced him to go to desperate lengths to earn the cash. Now his wife had most likely lost everything. I spent the rest of the day looking through my finances, tallying my portfolio, working out how much I could raise on an insurance policy. A few things I could sell. At the end, I realized my life had even less value than I'd thought. It was hopeless.

Toward the end of the afternoon my cellphone rang again, and I assumed it was Al calling me back. I was wrong. It was Dragan.

"Raider, I need to see you. Can you come here, to the Foundation building? There's something I need to discuss with you, an assignment."

"I think not, Mr. Dragan. Find yourself a new photographer."

"Photographer? No, it's nothing like that. I need to see you, Mr. Raider. It's urgent. Something has come up. It could be to your considerable advantage."

I was curious, so I fell into his trap and asked him what it was.

"Grigory Orlov. You were right. He's bad news."

"Yeah, I already told you that. I suggest you inform the State Department."

"It's not that. It's the other thing," he said with some impatience.

"What other thing?"

"Joe Nguyen. He's alive. Orlov's people have him."

"I'll be right over."

Chapter 4

Sevastopol, Ukraine – April 2014

He'd no idea where he was, only that he was hanging from the bare brick wall of a filthy basement like a side of beef, dangling from his manacled and chained wrists. His naked body was covered with blood from the wounds they'd inflicted on him. Even now, blood dripped from where they'd cut him; shallow wounds, designed to hurt, to bleed, but not to kill. They wanted something from him. A name.

They could go fuck themselves. A career in the Navy SEALs drilled a certain code into you. You never betrayed the organization for which you worked. Not ever. But it hurt.

Jesus Christ, these people know how to cause pain.

The man in front of him, his chief tormentor, picked up a small package from a table and came nearer. He was about fifty years old, built like a bull, muscular, although he was going to seed. He spoke English with an accent. A Russian accent, but he could have been Ukrainian. It was hard to tell.

"We know who you are, Mr. Joseph Nguyen. What is that name, Vietnamese? So you thought you could buy the American dream." He chuckled, "Here there are no dreams, only nightmares. My friends want to know who sent you. For whom do you work? It is a simple request, and you can save yourself a lot of pain."

"Screw you, asshole."

The man ignored the insult and came closer. He shook out some white grains from the package and moved his hand so it was touching Joe's body. Then he rubbed the salt over the cuts. The pain was astonishing. If it had been bad before, now it was a sea of fire that possessed him, body and soul. He bit down hard to control the pain and felt more blood flowing from his chewed lips.

"Who sent you here to spy on us, Mr. Nguyen, Alexander Dragan, perhaps? Or another starry eyed Ukrainian idealist with more money than sense?"

He'd forced himself to stay poker faced when his tormentor mentioned Dragan. He'd been trained to keep secrets, not to cry like a baby after a bit of pain.

"Was it Dragan?" the man persisted.

Joe was convinced he was a Russian, something about his accent, or maybe it was the stink of cheap tobacco and cabbage on his clothes.

"If that's the case, your employer, he is probably dead. We have a way of dealing with interfering foreigners, and my associates have a long arm. Why protect a dead man, Joe? Was it him, or was it someone else? Give me the name, my friend, and you can save yourself more pain."

He summoned up the last of his strength.

No way will I give in to this mother, no way!

He managed to grin through gritted teeth.

"Is that what you call pain? You Russians are a bunch of pussies. I thought you were just playing around. Besides, you're wasting your time. I don't work for anyone. I already told you that."

The man sighed and looked at another man who stood inside the squalid basement.

"I'm sorry, Dimitry. I need more time to break this man, and right now I am needed elsewhere. I need to organize a shipment of armor due to arrive in the next two days. I don't want anything to go wrong, not at this stage."

"Of course, Grigory, we need those weapons. Would you like my men to work on him?"

He considered for a few moments, and then shook his head. "Leave him where he is, hanging in the chains. The pressure will increase the longer he stays there, and the salt will slowly work through his wounds until he feels he is inside a furnace. That should be enough. You can call me when he decides to talk. I want him alive, so give him a break from the chains every few hours. Otherwise he'll suffocate."

"It shall be as you say."

Before he left, the torturer turned to stare at him for a few moments. He regarded Nguyen as if he was a dumb animal, awaiting the slaughterer.

"You Americans, how can you be so stupid?"

Joe had to do it. He summoned the last vestiges of strength, reinforced with stubborn pride.

"You're right. We're all stupid. It must take a genius to create a shithole like Russia."

Grigory almost lost his temper, but he shook his head and left. The other man, Dimitry, watched him for several seconds; then followed the Russian out the door. The portal slammed shut, and there was only silence. Joe realized they hadn't locked it.

What's the point? I'm not going anywhere, not ever. Alexander's the only man who may have tried to reach me, and now he's most likely dead. I wonder how long I have left.

New York City – April 2014

When I reached the Dragan Foundation the cops had disappeared, along with the crime scene tape. Traffic moved smoothly, and passersby barely gave the building a second glance. It was as if nothing had ever happened. The security guard in the lobby nodded me through to the elevator, and the door opened as I reached it. Someone was monitoring me on CCTV because as I went in, the door closed and it rocketed skyward. The door opened at the twenty-second floor, and Alexander Dragan stood in front of me. He was dressed in casual clothes, a navy blue Lauren golf sweater and sand color chinos.

I struggled to hide my astonishment. The last time I'd seen him, he'd been a candidate for the high dependency ward.

"I thought you were badly hurt?"

"I can handle it."

"Even so, you should be careful. They may try again. It could have been anyone in the elevator."

"I watched you on the security monitor."

"You should still be more careful."

"Looks can be deceiving, Mr. Raider." He held up the sweater, and underneath I could see he wore a ballistic vest, "The bullet hit me hard enough to cause a minor bleed, nothing more. I preferred to let the cops know it was worse. If my enemies believe I'm badly hurt, they'll be sloppy when they make the next attempt. And I'll be ready for them."

I shook my head, finding it hard to believe what I was seeing and hearing. Dragan led me through the outer office and into his inner sanctum. A man was sitting there, a stranger.

"This is Myron Doroshenko," he introduced him, "He manages my operations in Ukraine. Myron, this is the man I told you about, the photographer, John Raider."

We shook hands, and he invited me to take a seat. Dragan sat behind his desk and watched me for a few moments in silence. I waited him out.

"Myron came in from Ukraine just a couple of hours ago. I thought you'd want to hear his news, so I called you right away." He smiled at the other man, "Go ahead, my friend, tell him what you know."

He looked about ten years younger than Dragan, altogether a different kind of person. Slicked back hair, carefully styled, reminiscent of the kind of punk gangsters who lurk around Brighton Beach. A shiny, thigh-length leather coat helped the image. He also wore crumpled denim pants tucked into brown leather ankle boots. I knew at once there was no way I'd ever trust this guy. Maybe it was more to do with the etched lines on his thin, sharp face, which suggested he'd served time in prison. If not a Mafiosi, he could have been a failed, small time auto dealer. One I'd run a mile from before buying one of his heaps of tin.

"The local militia has him," Doroshenko grated, "His interrogator is Grigory Orlov." I kept a straight face, but I pitied Joe. "I have an informant inside their organization, who told me they are trying to discover whether he works for Alexander. So far he has told them nothing."

"They're torturing him?"

He nodded. "Of course. They are Russians. Russian, pro-Russian Ukrainians, they're all the same."

"And you're sure they have him?"

"Yes. Don't you believe me?" he asked, beginning to sound angry.

I didn't reply. I wasn't sure what these two men wanted. Dragan sensed my distrust and took over.

"Myron and me are from the same village, and we go back a long way, so you can believe what he says. He is a good man and has done extraordinary things for the Dragan Foundation, and often put his life in danger."

I nodded. "Okay, so how are you planning to free him?"

The two Ukrainians looked at each other, and Dragan smiled at me. "The offer is still on the table. I'd like you to go out there and get him out."

"I made it clear, Dragan. The answer is no. Why don't you go yourself?"

I'd had enough of this rich bastard spending his money so that others could take all the risks. His answer surprised me.

"I am going myself, but I cannot do it alone. I need someone to lead the operation, someone who knows how to fight. I believe that person is you."

"I'm a photographer. I shoot pictures, not people."

"That's not entirely true. People tell me you were one of the best small unit commanders in the Navy SEALs, which means you had to be pretty damn good."

"Who told you that? My ex-wife?"

"I have sources, Mr. Raider. What do you say?"

I smiled. "The two of us to bust a man out of a high security prison. You're dreaming."

He chuckled and pressed a key on his desk phone. "Send them in, Andy."

"Yes, Mr. Dragan."

Five seconds later the office door opened, and two men entered. Two men I knew better than most, Al Miller and Waite Sullivan.

"You!"

"It's been a long time," Al grinned.

"How're you doing, buddy?" Waite added.

I didn't reply at first. I was too lost for words, and then I put it together, all of it.

"You're not serious, Dragan? You really mean to bust him out, do you have a death wish or something?"

"Look, don't you see how this can go down?" he said, sounding excited, "This is a real chance to..."

"To get yourself killed," I slammed back at him, "as well as Joe Nguyen. He could be dead already. As for Al and Waite, I bet you haven't told them everything."

"Most of it," he objected.

"Most of it? What about Grigory Orlov?" I almost shouted back at him.

Al looked at me quickly, and then Waite caught on. "Orlov?" He glanced at Al, "Am I guessing this is the same Orlov we ran into that time in Afghanistan? Wasn't it a Shilka?"

I nodded. "That's right. It's reasonable to assume he's up to the same old tricks in the Crimea. Bringing in heavy and sophisticated weaponry, courtesy of Vladimir Putin and Mother Russia; enough ordnance for the local militia to outgun the entire Ukrainian Army. If you go in there, you'd best make sure it's in an M1 Abrams."

The office was silent for a full minute. Then Al stared at Dragan.

"Is this true? This is what you were getting us into? You ever faced down a Shilka, with only an assault rifle to your name?"

He shook his head. "Not exactly, no. I mean, yes, I knew of Orlov. But not all of it."

"It's suicide," I snapped. I was weary of the bullshit.

"That's not true. I'm no fool, Mr. Raider. If I thought it was impossible, I wouldn't have suggested it. You should remember. I shall be there with you."

Al grimaced. "How old are you, fifty, maybe fifty-five? And how long since you had any military experience? Thirty years? More?" He shook his head, "You'd be a liability at best. How were you planning to cope with Orlov's weaponry? You know anything about the VSS Vintorez? It's a sniper rifle, quieter than a breath of wind, and accurate enough to shoot the hairs from your nose at a range you wouldn't believe. What about a DShK 12.7mm heavy machine gun, or an RG-6 grenade launcher? Even worse, the Strela and Igla shoulder launched missile systems. How did you plan to go up against that kind of ordnance?"

Al was angry and getting angrier by the moment. "Dragan, you told us this was strictly a limited action against a few lightly armed militia; some of 'em no better than street thugs, nothing about Orlov. You lied to us, Dragan, so fuck you, and fuck your job."

He started to turn away until Dragan stopped him with a question.

"What about Joe Nguyen?"

Al calmed himself with an effort. He glanced at the weapons, and for a moment, I thought he was about to seize a huge, Scottish two-handed sword and behead its owner. Instead, he sighed, dropped into a nearby armchair and nodded resignedly for the Ukrainian to continue.

"Okay, spit it out. What've you got?"

"We can get your friend out," Dragan said, "I can guarantee the resources to put together an operation, everything we need to succeed. It's all in place. All we need to do is fly out there and do the job."

"The job?" Waite said, voicing his suspicions, "The job is getting Joe out."

"More or less," he went on excitedly, "The job I told you about, the mission Joe went there to complete. Orlov and Minin. We take care of them, and when it's over, we bring Joe out."

"Take care of them. You mean kill them."

"Yes. It's all in place, in and out. Simple."

"That would be a first," Waite muttered. He looked at me, "What about it, John?"

I hesitated. "There's Abigail," I replied, knowing how feeble it sounded.

"Exactly!" Dragan's reply was like a whip crack, the voice of a bigshot businessman who had just beaten down the opposition to conclude a multi-million dollar deal.

"What does that mean?"

His glance was triumphant. "Mr. Raider, after I talked to you, I took the liberty of having my lawyers look into your problem. They said they'd be delighted to take on Vann, Ruben, and Turner. The last time they went up against that firm, they told me they ripped their still beating, bleeding hearts out of their chests, their exact words. They'd relish a chance to do it again."

Lawyers, aren't they truly civilized people? Maybe next time they'll splatter their opponent's brains over the sidewalk.

I didn't reply, but I didn't say no. So he went on.

"This means you get your daughter back, Mr. Raider."

"And tell her I had to kill several men in the process?"

He shrugged. "Murderers, men who deserve to die."

He knew I was hooked. They all did.

I nodded. "When do we leave?"

He checked his wristwatch. I noticed it was a Patek Philippe, solid gold, without a doubt.

"It's almost 1700, and I have arrangements to make. Shall we depart tomorrow, at 1400?"

"We'll need weapons, equipment, communications, vehicles, you name it. How soon can you get it all organized?"

He looked at Doroshenko. "Myron?"

"I can have it waiting for us when we reach Ukraine. I'd suggest two SUVs and a satphone for each of you. As for weapons, I have no idea. You tell me what you want, and I'll do my best to get it."

I looked at Al and Waite. "This is a former Soviet Bloc country, something sourced locally may be best. We don't want to raise any eyebrows."

We discussed it between ourselves and with Dragan, who had his Special Forces experience to draw on. In the end, we settled for a Makarov Silenced Pistol apiece, the PB model, and folding stock OTs-02 Kiparis. Dragan, a former sniper, demanded a VSS Vintorez, an almost silent sniper rifle.

"Some of those Russian-made sniper weapons are poorly made. I will need two. When I have test fired them, I will use the most accurate."

"That is no problem. I will see to it," Doroshenko stated when we gave him the shopping list, "As for the vehicles, I suggest the Mercedes G Class. They are tough and powerful, and the ones I have in mind are fitted with V8 turbocharged engines."

"It sounds good to me. Before we wrap this up, let's make certain we're clear on the mission priorities. First, we get Joe Nguyen out. That's number one. No question."

I didn't add that Dragan should never have sent him out there single-handed, but to his credit, the billionaire inclined his head in agreement. In the past minutes, he'd changed, undergone a metamorphosis. Sloughing off the years of physical inactivity to go back into the field again, to fight. He crackled with energy as he paced around his office, fingering his collection of antique weapons, the pain of his wound forgotten. It was fine, provided he didn't run into serious trouble. No matter what he thought, the years would catch up with him. I went on quickly before anyone interrupted.

"Second objective, Orlov. He goes down."

Dragan looked up suddenly. "No. I want Minin first. He was the man who fired the fatal shot. Besides, he is a Ukrainian, a traitor."

"Forget it. We take out Orlov first. Both of them may have pulled the trigger, but Orlov supplied the guns. And he'll keep on supplying them, until he's dead."

In the end, he saw sense. "But they must both be dead before we leave Ukraine."

I stared at him. "Provided I consider we can do it without getting ourselves killed. We're going to bring Joe back. Everything else is secondary."

"I'm paying the bills. I believe that gives me the last word."

"No way. You're an amateur. Al, Waite, and me used to do this for a living; I call the shots."

Eventually, he saw the sense of having one man in command, one that would make the decisions. We shook hands on it, and he appeared satisfied.

"Until 1400 tomorrow. We depart from Teterboro airfield, New Jersey. You know it?"

"I know it. What is the exact time the flight leaves?"

"It leaves when I say. It is my aircraft."

Yeah, the rich are different, no question.

The meeting ended, and Dragan spoke to his lawyers who agreed to make a start within the hour. There was a chance Mariyah had something sneaky going down behind my back, and they wanted to preempt any of her nasty little tricks.

Al and Waite agreed to come to my apartment, and we'd travel together by cab to the airport. Before I left, I passed on what Joe had told me about him moonlighting for CIA, and the threat to Putin if he showed his face inside Ukraine.

"You're shitting me," Waite exclaimed, "Putin, I mean, any one time, there must a hundred guys looking to knock that bastard."

"Maybe, but this time, it's a credible threat, enough to worry them. They've told the FSB, but they laughed it off. CIA isn't laughing. There's someone out there with a long gun."

Al was more thoughtful. "It'll mean increased security wherever we go. Other than that, it doesn't have to concern us. I never did like the guy."

"True, but we need to be watchful. If we do see anything, we need to feed the info back to Langley. Killing Putin could start a new European war. There's a guy works here. He was Joe's handler, and he'll know what to do with any intel we send back."

They both nodded. It was an added complication but no more than that.

I was wrong. At the time I didn't know how wrong I was. I said goodbye, left Dragan's building, and went home.

I had misgivings, plenty of them. I hadn't intended to continue fighting. I gave it up to look after my daughter. It was an additional worry. If I didn't make it back, she'd be entirely at the mercy of the Dragon Lady.

On the plus side, without Dragan's big guns getting into the act, I was likely to lose her anyway, and she'd still be at the mercy of the Dragon Lady. There was something else. It wasn't just Dragan. I felt a buzz. The idea of crossing swords again with a clever enemy like Orlov had a certain appeal. And there was Joe. We'd bring him home, no matter what, alive or dead.

I went to put the key in the door of my apartment. Instead, the door opened, and the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen in my life opened it. She looked wonderful. She was home.

"Hi, Angelina."

"John!"

Her smile was as radiant as the sun. She jumped into my arms, and her lips clamped around mine. Immediately, I was aroused beyond belief by this lithe, young beauty who'd chosen me over so many other men. God only knew why. It was like a whirlwind. We made our chaotic way into the bedroom, ripping off clothing as we progressed, leaving it strewn through the apartment.

The bed rocked violently as we landed, and within seconds, we were screwing the brains out of each other. It was more than enough to drive away any anxieties about the forthcoming operation, and I surrendered to the erotic glory of her body. We punished the bed for a full twenty minutes, as long as we could hold out against the rising tide of desire that threatened to overwhelm us. We came together, and it was like an earthquake. She screamed with pleasure and delight.

I had the kind of neighbors who would complain about excessive noise just because a toilet flushed in the night. What they thought about Angelina's squeals, I couldn't imagine. Then again, maybe they enjoyed them. Perhaps it gave them a few ideas.

We lay on top of the bed, trying to calm our breathing, and I traced patterns on her damp skin with my forefinger, enjoying the feel, the touch, and the smell of her. She stiffened, responding to my touch. I nuzzled up to her ear.

"You need to calm down, Angie. This old man needs time to reload."

"Really? I thought you were still under forty, what's the problem?"

I pretended to take a bite out of her neck, which only served to arouse her even more.

"I'm only just past thirty, and you damn well know it."

She giggled. "Prove it."

"How come you're back? I thought the assignment was due to last another week."

"It went well, really well, until my fashion photographer found some pretty celebrity to spend some time with, so he sent us home early."

"She wasn't prettier than you?"

"I hope not. It was a he. Alan isn't into girls, except when he takes the photos."

"That explains why he never made a pass at you."

"Thank God. He's a wizard with a camera, but other than that, he's a slimeball. All photographers are."

"I'm a photographer," I reminded her.

"That's what I meant," she chuckled, "By the way, where is your next assignment?"

It wasn't a lie. It was an assignment, although not one I'd need a camera for. "I'm going back to Ukraine tomorrow."

"Back to Ukraine? How interesting, you know where my next modeling job is?"

I felt a lurch, thinking she was about to enter a war zone. "Go on."

"A cruise, on the Black Sea. That's near Ukraine, isn't it?"

I felt relief. The Black Sea was on one of Ukraine's borders, but it was also on the bordered Russia, Turkey, Georgia, Bulgaria, and Romania. Unless there was the cruelest of coincidences, she'd be hundreds of miles away. Besides, her employers wouldn't be fools; the last place they'd want to sail would be to a country that was close to civil war. Her next words made me feel even better.

"We won't see each other because the ship won't even dock. It's an onboard fashion show organized by some oligarch, a viewing for the wives and girlfriends. We sail through the Turkish Straits and cruise around the Black Sea for a few days, then we fly home." She gave me a bright smile, "Still, I'll be thinking of you, so close."

"Me too. If the boat sails past Ukraine, blow me a kiss."

"I can do better than that. Here's one on account."

We played around for a bit, and then she put on one of my shirts and went to make some coffee. She was heating the water when the doorbell sounded.

"I'll get it," she called.

"Okay, I'm just getting some clothes on. Whoever it is, I'll be there in a couple of minutes."

In the end, I settled for jogging pants, bare feet, and the T-shirt I'd been wearing when I came home. I reeked of two things, Angelina Blass and sex.

No problem, I can take a shower when I've dealt with this visitor.

I assumed it had to be Al or Waite, come to talk over the details for tomorrow. I could hear voices, so I walked straight through into the living room, and came face to face with Mariyah.

If there is one person my ex would like to trash more than me, it's Angelina. They were as different as two people could be. Mariyah supremely ambitious, a highly driven, type 'A' personality, and Angelina calm and serenely confident. My girlfriend wore only a man's shirt over her perfect body, exposing her smooth, long, and shapely legs. Like me, she reeked of sex. As far as my ex-wife was concerned, she was the archfiend, the anti-Christ.

"I might have guessed you'd be fucking your whore while your daughter is at home crying her eyes out," she snarled.

I nodded to Angelina. "Why don't you wait in the bedroom while I deal with this?"

She smiled gratefully and left. Mariyah watched her leave, probably envying her perfect ass.

"You've come to tell me I'm welcome to visit my daughter who's crying her eyes out?" I asked her, keeping my voice calm.

"No! You stay away from her, and rein in those fucking lawyer creeps, Spiegel and Davis, as well. That's what I came to tell you."

So they'd fired the opening salvo. And it had scored a hit, hence the visit. Inwardly, I smiled.

Isn't it wonderful having a billionaire footing your legal bills?

"They contacted you?" I asked innocently.

"You're fucking right they did. Threatened to destroy me if I didn't agree to your demands. They even said they'd sue me for everything I owned. And they'd bankrupt Edgar, which is ridiculous. He's not even a part of this."

Edgar Kingsley, her current boyfriend, the man with whom she shared an upmarket brownstone. Another lawyer, and another total shit. I'd heard that even other lawyers didn't like him; he was that repulsive. I knew he'd tried to turn Abigail against me. To him, it would be a simple matter of male locker room pride, a pissing contest. The idea that Abigail's happiness and security had anything to do with it would astonish him.

Bankrupt him, now that would be nice.

"We need to resolve this for Abigail's sake," I said in as calm a voice as I could muster.

"Come to my office tomorrow," she snarled, "We'll deal with it then. And don't bring your whore with you."

I went to the bedroom door. "Angelina, would you come out here."

"I'm not dressed," she objected.

"Even better."

She came into the living room, and Mariyah's eyebrows rose several inches. She wore tiny, black satin panties, and nothing else. Her breasts were firm, the kind of perfection most women would die for. And she was completely unabashed by her semi-nakedness. No, she was proud of it. With Angelina, there was nothing hidden. Literally.

"Well!" Mariyah spluttered, unable to form a coherent sentence.

"You were saying, about my girlfriend?"

"I, I, er, come to the office, my office, tomorrow, and we'll talk."

"Not possible, I'm going away. An assignment."

"You'll have to cancel!"

"I'll call my lawyers and ask them to deal with it. Just make sure when I get back, I can see my daughter."

"Where are you going?"

I almost let it slip. "U... You don't want to know. I'll call when I get back."

She stared at me for a second or two, and I knew she was hatching evil thoughts inside her twisted mind. Then she stormed out; slamming the door so hard I knew my neighbors would be along soon to complain.

Angelina glanced at me. "What do we do now?"

"We finish what we started."

She grinned, and we returned to the bedroom.

The following day I woke up late and left her sleeping while I showered and dressed. I grabbed some toast and juice and waited until the doorbell rang. Al and Waite were standing there, each of them carrying a canvas holdall, their war bags.

They were dressed casually, Al in cream chinos, Waite in denim jeans. They both wore leather jackets, almost matching A2 flight jackets.

I knew they'd have their working gear in the bags. Camos, lightweight boots with soft, rubber soles for making a silent approach to an enemy, as well as ballistic vests and ski masks. The rest of it, the weapons, we'd collect when we arrived in country.

"You ready?" Al greeted me with a grin, "We asked the cab to wait."

"Give me three minutes."

My gear was already packed, so I threw on my battered Carhartt coat, grabbed my gear, and joined them. I'd packed a camera and some gear as well as my camos and boots. You never know when an opportunity may come up for a great shot, a shot of the photographic kind. Less than an hour later, we were standing on the tarmac at Teterboro.

I'd expected Dragan to possess an aircraft worthy of his bank balance, and he didn't disappoint. We were staring at a Gulfstream G650 in the gleaming blue and yellow livery of the Dragan Foundation. They were also the sovereign colors of the flag of Ukraine. A young woman wearing a cabin attendant's uniform, in the same yellow and blue, beckoned to us from the top of the air stair. We boarded to join her, and the hard concrete of Teterboro Airfield gave way to the rich, luxurious trappings of a successful businessman.

Cosseted by the oak paneling, the brass fittings, the thick carpeting, and the deferential greetings of the crew, I began to have doubts. Al glanced at me, and he was thinking the same.

"It stinks of expensive perfume," he murmured, "It's like going to war in a flying whorehouse. It doesn't feel right."

I nodded my agreement. But who were the whores, and who were the johns?

Chapter 5

The Kremlin, Moscow, Russian Federation – April 2014

"There is a risk, Mr. President."

Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation, glared at Yuri Malenkov. He was the current head of the Federal Protective Service, FSO, and the man responsible for Putin's safety. With only a short time before he began his unannounced and unofficial visit to Crimea, Yuri was starting to worry.

Putin, the former head of the Russian Security Service, had made his own risk assessment and had no concerns. The Crimean people were Russians, almost to a man. He was their savior. Or so he'd painted himself.

"I don't agree. What do I have to fear? Without me, these people would be second-class citizens in their own country, subservient to the Ukrainians."

"There are also enemies in Crimea, Mr. President."

Putin briefly wondered about Malenkov.

Maybe he's been in his job too long. How old is he, fifty-five maybe? The man sees a threat lurking in every shadow. He should remember he's talking to the former head of the FSB, not some green rookie.

Finally, he replied.

"Tell me, who is it this time? The Americans, the Chinese, maybe even the Georgians again. Who? Not the oligarchs, surely. We had an agreement. They wouldn't dare double cross me."

Between 2000 and 2004, Vladimir Putin had fought a brief power-struggle with the oligarchs. It ended when he reached a so-called 'grand-bargain' with them. He allowed them to maintain most of their powers, their criminal networks that wrapped around every aspect of Russian life like tentacles. In exchange, he demanded and got support for his government. It was a good deal, for him and for them, even if it did legitimize the mob inside the Russian Federation.

"We're not sure, Sir. It could be one or more of the oligarchs, although more likely the Ukrainians, but it's hard to be certain."

"It had better not be the oligarchs. They know where their best interests lie. They'd do well to remember that fucker Khodorkovsky. He almost died in prison. The sneaky bastard was lucky I freed him. They should remember that if they betray me, the only thing they have to look forward to is a lifetime of counting trees."

His security chief winced; 'counting trees' was the Russian slang for being exiled to Siberia. Often for life, and a life that tended to be extremely short in that barren, arctic waste. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the former owner of the Yukos Oil, was a man who was fortunate to survive. Putin gave orders for his arrest, and he was charged with fraud. Much of Khodorkovsky's wealth disappeared, literally overnight. He was sentenced to nine years in prison in 2005, remaining there until President Vladimir Putin pardoned him on December 20 2013.

"The oligarchs know the penalty for betrayal, Sir. They've learned their lesson. My money would be on the Ukrainians, the treacherous bastards! Your visit to Crimea will make you an easy target. The entire region is awash with weaponry..."

"I know that, dammit. Most of it came from us."

He smiled, recalling the arms shipments Orlov had sent to pro-Russian Ukrainians who were loyal to Russia. That meant loyal to Vladimir Putin.

"By the way, how is my old friend Grigory Orlov making out? He's been out in the cold for far too long. It's time I gave him a job closer to home, inside the Kremlin. That's the way I reward my friends, Yuri. And the rest of the scum had better remember it. I take it he's still in Crimea?"

"He's making progress, Mr. President. If we are to succeed there, the armed militias need superiority in weapons and equipment over the Ukrainian armed forces."

He stopped as Putin chuckled, "Ukrainian armed forces? The fucking place is bankrupt. You know that. Their economy is down the toilet. Give it a few months, and the only thing they'll have left to fight with is bayonets and wooden sticks. Their armor is a shambles, and their air force is no better. I doubt their planes have enough fuel to leave the ground. As for their precious government, they're a bunch of Nazis, fascist scum. It wouldn't be the first time we've taught those bastards a lesson."

"I read the history books, Mr. President. They're despicable."

During World War 2, many Ukrainians, sickened by Stalin's brutality had indeed showered flowers and gifts on the Nazis when they invaded. The desperate citizens saw it a chance to escape from the evils of communism. Many joined the Nazi SS, and toward the end, the Germans even created the so-called 'Ukrainian National Army'. However, Nazi brutality soon disabused them of their hopes, and they quickly understood they'd only swapped one tyrant for another. After the Russian victory, Stalin made certain they were rounded up, and most were executed.

Putin shook his head. "They're not all despicable. That's not fair." Then he belly laughed, "But most of them, eh, Yuri?"

"Yes, Sir."

"The bastards will soon remember who looks after their interests. Who supplies them with gas and oil to heat their homes, even loans for their bankrupt regime."

"Yes, Mr. President. Of course, you are correct. But this threat to your person..."

"Find out who's behind it. And when you find them, I want them alive. I'd like to have a chat with them in the basement cells underneath the Lubyanka. By the way, if you think there is a problem in Crimea, talk to Orlov. He is a man I can trust."

"If you're sure, Mr. President."

"Of course I'm sure. See to it."

"Yes, Sir."

Teterboro Airport, New Jersey – April 2014

The interior of the aircraft was like something from another world, a rich man's world. Spaced at intervals along the plush carpet were seats, more like armchairs, upholstered in white leather. They were arranged to face each other, one seat on either side of the aircraft, with a solid walnut table between them. Perfect for the tired executive to place their cocktail glass. Soft, designer lighting, and padded walls in matching leather completed the atmosphere of unrestrained opulence.

Dragan was sitting in the center. His head of Ukrainian operations, Myron Doroshenko was in the seat opposite, and looking out of place. Like a Hollywood depiction of an Eastern European gangster, who'd suddenly found himself transported from the slums to a fantasy world of luxury and wealth. The aircraft even smelled wealthy, a mix of leather, polished wood, and expensive perfume.

The billionaire was indifferent to us as he worked through a pile of documents. One by one, he scanned them, made a small notation, and then moved on to the next. Eventually, he looked up, saw us, and picked up the phone.

"We're ready to depart."

He put down the phone without waiting for an acknowledgment. Then he deigned to notice his hired gunslingers.

"Mr. Raider, Mr. Sullivan, Mr. Miller, it's good to have you aboard. Please, make yourselves comfortable. It's a long trip."

He turned away again and started tapping keys on his laptop computer. Myron Doroshenko stared straight ahead, frowning. Perhaps he was a nervous flyer.

There was another possibility. Maybe he wasn't too happy about Dragan traveling to Ukraine to see how well or otherwise his operation was progressing. Perhaps Doroshenko had dipped his hand in the cash draw. He wouldn't be the first.

The cabin attendant closed the door, and almost immediately the twin Rolls-Royce BR725 turbofans started up with a powerful roar. The flight crew must have already completed their pre-flight checks and got clearance, for a couple of seconds later the sixty-five million dollar aircraft started to taxi. We reached the end of the runway, turned into wind, and accelerated along the strip.

It was fast and smooth. We lifted into the air, climbed steeply, and banked to turn west for the long, overwater flight to Europe. Seconds later, the aircraft cleared the cloud base and broke into bright sunlight. The cabin speaker clicked on.

"This is the Captain speaking. We'll be climbing to a cruising altitude of forty thousand feet for the journey over the Atlantic Ocean. We make landfall over the United Kingdom, cross the North Sea to Europe, and then the final part of our journey to our destination in Ukraine. Journey time will be approximately nine hours, and we'll be flying at an average speed of five hundred and sixty miles an hour. Anything you folks need to make your trip more comfortable, pick up the phone and call the cockpit. If you'd like a better view, come up front, and we'll make you all welcome."

It wasn't like flying coach on American Airlines. The cabin attendant came around with porcelain cups of coffee that was out of this world. I resolved to buy myself a Gulfstream as soon as funds allowed. I wondered if the security at Fort Knox was still as tough. We sat in silence for the first hour. I tried to doze. Al was reading a book on his Ipad, and Waite watched an in-flight movie. We each had our own ways of relaxing before a mission. It lasted a couple of hours.

Abruptly, Dragan snapped the lid of his laptop closed. Relaxation over.

"We may as well use the time to plan how we're going to play this when we get there. We're landing at Odessa. That's about two hundred and fifty miles from Sevastopol. Myron has arranged for our vehicles and weapons to be waiting for us, so we can drive straight on down to Crimea."

"What about the roads?" Waite interrupted, "Is this place some kind of backwater where the main routes are mud tracks, or can we expect something more civilized?"

"The roads are good, Mr. Sullivan." Doroshenko had answered, and his mood seemed to have improved. Maybe he'd been snorting coke. He'd spent some time in the bathroom at the rear of the cabin, and I could swear there was a hint of white powder on his upper lip when he emerged.

"That's good to know."

"You will find Ukraine is quite a civilized country," Dragan said icily, "It is no backwater."

Waite nodded. "I guess there's another reason why you people are shooting and killing each other."

I heard Al choke as he smothered a chuckle. Dragan frowned, and Doroshenko looked murderous. I leaned forward to stop the discussion becoming a barroom brawl.

"What about Joe Nguyen?"

"What about him?" Dragan murmured, still annoyed at the slur on his precious country.

"You'll recall locating him and getting him out is our first objective."

"I haven't forgotten." He glanced at his associate, "Myron, do we have any news?"

"Nothing. My people are still working to find out exactly where they took him."

He shrugged. "In which case, we must proceed to the secondary objective, Grigory Orlov. If he's as dangerous as you say he is, it is vital we take him out of the equation. Then, we deal with the men who killed my relations. But first, Orlov."

Al answered him. "We agreed to get Joe out first before they kill him."

"But we don't know where he is," Dragan protested, "Not yet."

"In that case, you'll have to find him."

He stared at Al for a few minutes, and then looked at me. If he wanted support, he'd come to the wrong person.

"You have advanced communication facilities onboard this aircraft. I suggest you use them to see how the search is progressing. We have a few hours before we land. If you get busy now, threaten to fire a few of your people, chances are they'll come up with a couple of leads for us to work on."

He regarded me for a few moments. "Mr. Raider, whatever you think, this is my..."

"Forget it, Dragan," I snapped, cutting him off. I wanted him in no doubt who was in charge, "If you want to see this through, I suggest you contact your people and push them to find Joe. Otherwise, you can tell your pilot to make a hundred and eighty degree turn and head home. You're wasting our time."

His expression was feral, as if he wanted to rip me apart. I made a note to remember this side of Dragan. He liked to convey the impression of a suave and sophisticated businessman. It was obvious if someone crossed him, they'd see another side of him, a savage inside a designer suit. I reminded myself he'd also been a sniper in the Berkut, the Ukrainian Special Forces, and so a trained savage.

He looked at Doroshenko. "I suggest you make a start. Contact all of our people, those with links to the police and the military. We pay them enough. It's time they earned their salaries."

Myron shook his head. "Mr. Dragan, I've gone that route, and so far, no one knows anything. It's a waste of time."

I was getting pissed off with their antics. "Dragan, tell him to offer a reward. A hundred thousand US dollars for information leading to Joe's location."

Doroshenko looked shocked, "That is a lot of money!"

"Do it now," Dragan told him, "And make sure they know how much is at stake."

He left his seat and went forward to use the radio. An hour later, he returned.

"I have located him."

His face was gloomier than ever.

"Good, good," his boss said with relief, "Excellent news. Where are they holding him?"

"Inkerman Castle."

"Shit," he spat out the single word curse.

"This castle, is it a problem?" I asked him.

He almost smiled. Almost. "A problem, Inkerman Castle? It used to be called the Fortress of Inkerman. The walls alone are three feet thick, and the doors are made of hardened steel. Parts of the castle, the keep and the dungeons, are used as a jail for political prisoners. It has the reputation of being impregnable. We can't get into that place, period. We'll have to go to the second objective, Orlov."

"No. I need to see the place. Bring up some images on your laptop."

I knew we were connected by satellite to the internet during the flight, so it would be no problem for him. Even so, he didn't look happy. He pressed keys, and soon the forbidding exterior of the castle was on his screen. I saw why he wasn't happy. It sure looked impregnable. Positioned on top of a rock jutting several hundred feet into the sky, the walls were as thick as reported, and built of massive blocks of stone. They looked strong enough to withstand a hit from a Hellfire missile.

In the center of the castle stood the main building, the castle keep. It was built of granite, with only narrow slits for windows. As far as I could see, there was a single door that gave access to the prison from the outer courtyard.

The courtyard featured a tower on each of its four corners, and a machine gun was mounted on each of the towers. They overlooked the main building and the courtyard, giving a clear field of fire to the guns should anyone be stupid enough to try to escape. To make a forced entry even more difficult, a medieval style drawbridge protected the main gate.

Doroshenko pointed out the only way in would be by climbing the sheer cliffs, and then scaling the twenty-foot high walls. And even if an attack got that far, guards patrolled the walkway along the top of the walls. At least two armed men on each of the four sides.

"You see; it is impossible. It is as Mr. Dragan said. We have no choice but to leave your friend and go for the other targets."

I could see Al and Waite both looking at me with grins on their faces. They knew they way it went. Evidently, these two guys weren't on message.

"Here's how we'll do it. Myron, those SUVs you promised, you say they'll be waiting for us when we land at Odessa?"

He looked puzzled. "Yes, of course. They are in the company hangar, in the General Aviation area."

"And the rest of it, the weapons?"

"In the same building, in a secure storage locker."

"That's fine. In that case, we'll go in and bring him out tomorrow night."

For long minutes, there was only the quiet, soundproofed whine of the Rolls Royce turbfans. They stared at me in astonishment; no doubt they both thought I'd gone crazy. The hiatus was interrupted when the pretty cabin attendant materialized in a cloud of French perfume.

"Coffee, anyone?"

Her smile was as flawless as her makeup and uniform. Her timing was even better, giving them time to recover from the shock. She took our orders and returned to the galley. Minutes later, the cabin was filled with a strong, fresh coffee smell that mingled with the perfume, a heady aroma.

"Tomorrow?" Myron spluttered, "I've already made it clear we can't get in there. It's too heavily defended."

"You're right," I smiled patiently, "Everyone knows it can't be done, so they won't be looking for us when we go in. We can't leave it any longer. They could kill Joe at any time. Don't worry about it. We don't need you along."

I heard him mutter 'Thank God' under his breath.

His expression relaxed a little. "I see. If there's anything you need from me, of course, I'll do it."

"Just make sure the vehicles and equipment are waiting for us when we get there."

"Yes, yes, of course. I'll call ahead now and double check."

He went forward to the cockpit again. Dragan had been silent up until now, but he looked at me.

"John, I don't know how you're planning to do this, but I trust you'll need me. There's no way I'm staying behind."

It was like he'd been back in New York. The prospect of a return to action had galvanized him. That was fine, provided it didn't kill him.

"Sure. We'll need a sniper for this plan, no question. And you'd better be damn good, I mean, international class. If you can't take down those guards on the parapet, we're lost."

"I can do that. Anything else?"

"Yes. I don't trust Doroshenko."

He shook his head, and it was emphatic. "We've known each other all our lives. He's solid."

"Maybe. But as from now, we keep our plans to ourselves."

"But he already knows we're going into Inkerman Prison tomorrow night."

Al and Waite were both smiling.

"That's not quite true. We're going in tonight. If he's passing information to the other side, they won't be expecting us. Only make sure Doroshenko doesn't get wind of it."

"I see. No, of course I will not tell him." He looked thoughtful, "Do you think we can do it? I mean, get in there and bring him out?"

"Sure. We've done it before, a long time ago."

Tehran, Iran – May 2009

It was a hot, rank, and steamy hellhole in Iran. The Revolutionary Guard is a virtual government in itself, and apart from their many business enterprises, they run a network of prisons, particularly grim prisons, places of unspeakable cruelty and brutality.

On this occasion they were holding an American national, a priest who they accused of disseminating Christian propaganda. Which was true, Father Damion Hunt had openly addressed the dwindling Christian population in Iran, those few who had managed to survive the murderous Muslim onslaught. He was aware of the risk of arrest, but he went ahead in spite of it. He was a believer, most of the time.

What the Iranians didn't know was he worked for CIA, helping establish a network of Christian informers. Men who would work to keep the West up-to-date with what went on inside that dark and spiteful country. It was low-level stuff, but the Christians were prepared to do anything to undermine the Ayatollahs, and the Agency was glad of the product, which padded out their weekly intelligence assessments.

Eventually, the Guard got onto him and dragged him out of a Mass he was celebrating outside Tehran. In the process, they beat him up badly, but there was worse to come. The Iranian Christians who'd been helping him serve the Mass were taken out to the main square in the center of town and hung from cranes. They forced Father Damion to stand and watch. Then they tossed him into Evin Prison in a northwestern suburb of the capital, Tehran.

The jail was heavily guarded, and like Inkerman, reputed to be impregnable. Also like Inkerman, it was surrounded by a high wall; in this case concrete, not stone, with the main prison building positioned in the center of the inner courtyard. The Agency wanted their man out, and they arranged for a small team of Navy SEALs to enter Iran under cover and do the job. We went in with a team of twelve operatives, equipped with current intelligence briefings, and an operational plan that was micromanaged to the last detail.

On that occasion we also had a sniper, and this man was truly world class, Master Chief Ray Alvaro. He'd honed his skills in the killing fields of Afghanistan, where he'd taken out targets at ranges in excess of a mile. A genius with the legendary Barrett .50 caliber, on this occasion he'd brought along his Stoner SR-25. Not only was it lighter, but he was using a new sound suppressor that would enable him to knock down his targets without waking the neighborhood.

I stared at the target ahead of us, a white building cheaply constructed of rough concrete. Three further cranes were positioned outside the front gate. From each one hung a body, each corpse another Christian from the church from where they'd taken Father Damion.

"Fucking bastards!" Ray murmured. Like many Latinos, he was a devout Christian, a Catholic. "These people aren't jailers, they're sadists. Torturers."

"You got that right. All set?"

"Say the word, and I'll send a few of these mothers to Paradise."

The guards were patrolling the walls, and so far we'd identified a half dozen men. In addition, there were two machine gun nests, each manned by a crew of two. Ray would take the soldiers on the walls, and I had four men ready to move in and handle the gun crews.

"Give us ten. I'll call you when we're in position."

"Roger that."

We crawled forward through the shadows until we were less than a hundred meters from our targets. We weren't exactly snipers, but that didn't mean we couldn't shoot straight. We were equipped with HK-416s, fitted with Pulsar Digisight N550 Digital Night Vision Scopes. At a hundred meters, we could have fired a full clip and put every round into a ten-centimeter circle. The targets in front of us were no sweat.

It was what happened afterward that worried me. If a guard tumbled out of a tower and crashed to the concrete below, it would attract attention, a lot of

attention. I made a last check of the surrounding area to make sure no surprises lurked out there in the darkness, and pressed the transmit button.

"Shooters, go."

A sound suppressor does not make a weapon completely silent. But it's pretty effective when the surrounding ambience is as noisy as nighttime Tehran; radios playing, televisions, babies crying, women shrieking, and men, too. I could hear the cries and moans of the inmates from inside the prison. It was intended to deter, to terrify those who would defy the Islamic regime, and it was successful.

Any passersby who heard that wail of despair would be inclined to behave themselves. As much as Muslims can behave themselves when someone presents them with a chance to indulge their taste for bloodshed.

The soft, muted 'thunk' of round after round was lost against the night sounds, and the guards toppled like pins in a bowling alley. I touched the transmit button.

"Climbers, go."

Almost before the last body had slammed into the concrete, two of my men, Stu Bright and Waite Sullivan, hurled grapples over the gate and swarmed up like monkeys. They dropped down to the ground, killed two sleepy sentries, and the gates began to open.

"Breachers, go."

Two more men raced forward, demolition experts. One was Al Miller. There would be no time to hunt for keys or combinations, but fortunately, they were experts in near-silent methods of opening doors. It took them less than sixty seconds to plant tiny charges against the hinges of the huge, oak and iron portal that gave access to the main prison building.

A voice came into my earpiece, "This is Alvaro. People coming in on foot, looks like an escort party. Ten men, and they're guarding a single prisoner."

It had to be someone important.

"Take them. Keep the prisoner quiet, and don't let him run."

"Copy that."

A quiet 'thud' was all the noise the charges made as they destroyed the hinges. I watched the two men race forward and gently lower the door to the ground.

The confirmation sounded in my earpiece, "Door is open."

"Copy that. Infil team, move in. Security team, follow me."

Four of the shooters ran forward to join the breachers and began working their way into the depths of the prison. The four men I'd picked to cover the breaching party came up with me, and we followed at a distance. I had a diagram of the prison layout, and the first party reached Father Damion's cell in minutes. The inner prison doors were bolted from the outside, not locked, and progress was slick. Two Revolutionary Guards were watching the corridor where the cell was situated, and the infiltrators killed them without pause, moving on to the open the steel door to identify and bring out the priest. Seconds later, they were on their way back.

After a few meters, Father Damion collapsed, and Al knelt next to him to see what was the problem. I heard him mutter "Jesus Christ," before he hoisted him onto his shoulder.

"Bastards tortured him bad. It looks like they broke a few bones, cracked some ribs, and bruised his lungs. He's struggling to breathe. Probably they body punched him too hard. There's blood dribbling out of his mouth."

"Let's hope those who did it are amongst the men we killed. Can you carry him?"

"He's just skin and bone. I can handle it."

"Roger that. Keep moving." I keyed the transmit button, "This is Charlie One. We're on the way out."

"Copy that," Waite replied, "We got a problem, Chief. Ray Alvaro bought it."

"You're not serious? How did it happen, are they onto us?"

"Negative. He took out the guard party and went to free the prisoner. One of the soldiers he shot was wearing a vest, and the bullet only wounded him. When Ray went past, he knifed him. Straight into the heart, he was dead before he hit the ground."

"Shit. What happened to the hostile?"

"I popped him and checked out the others. They're all dead."

"Roger that. We'll take Ray's body out with us."

"I'd assumed we would. But it's the other outfit we need to deal with."

"You mean there's more?"

"Yeah. It looks like that bunch we took out was only half of them. The rest were a long way back, ten of them. They stopped outside a cafe, knocked up the owner, and ordered him to open up. The officers went inside. The rest are out on the street. We have to go past them. There's no other way. They're bound to see us."

"Roger that." I thought quickly, "We'll have to draw them into an ambush, and take them out before they know what's hit them. I'll take a look."

I raced forward and joined Waite. He pointed to a cafe several hundred meters away. We'd walked past it on the way in. Only then it had been closed and shuttered, all in darkness. A crowd of men were outside now, sprawled on the sidewalk. Another man stepped out the door of the cafe and spoke to them for a moment. Then he went back inside.

"Sloppy bastards, they've stopped for coffee on the way to their prison detail. We'll bring everyone up and wait until they start moving before we make a move. When they come this way, we'll hit them. It's a job for a single sniper. We have to take them out before they get near us and suspect anything. It's a helluva range. I'd sooner not chance the assault rifles. It'd be too noisy, and there's no guarantee we can get them all. Someone's bound to run."

"Except Alvaro got hit. He could have done it."

"Yeah, I know."

"I can do it."

I turned at the voice. Father Damion Hunt had recovered enough to stand on his feet, and he'd come forward to join us. He was thin, very thin, almost emaciated, although he'd obviously been well muscled before his arrest. His skin was pale, and yet imprisonment and torture had failed to dim the bright, almost black eyes that burned fiercely. They were hawk-like eyes, the eyes of a predator. Not what I'd expect from a priest. He was also holding himself rigidly, more like a soldier.

It was a crazy suggestion, and I shook my head.

"You're a priest, Father, not a soldier. Leave this to us."

"I was trained as a sniper. I can do it," he repeated, "I understand your man was killed."

"Yeah, he was. But I'm not about to allow a priest to take his place."

"I wasn't always a priest," he argued quietly. He spoke with an English accent, tempered with a tinge of Irish brogue.

"Maybe not, but the answer is still no."

"I served in the British Army, the Special Air Service. My specialty was sniping."

"The SAS? That's an odd background for a priest. What made you leave?"

"I saw too many killings," he said in a tired voice, "So I decided to make amends and join the church. As a Catholic in Northern Ireland, I felt it was worth trying to put right so much of the damage caused by the troubles. And my people were suffering."

A Catholic SAS trooper, he had to be a brave man. If the locals found out his history, they'd have formed a lynch mob.

"How can a priest shoot people? That isn't in the bible, as I recall."

He grimaced. "I've left the priesthood. I made the decision while I was inside that prison. When those poor people were slaughtered by the Iranians because of me serving mass in their local church, I'd had enough." He nodded at the bodies, still dangling overhead from the cranes, "I want to hit back."

"Vengeance says the Lord?"

He stared at me. "Isn't that a good enough reason?"

"No. The only reason to let you loose with a sniper rifle is if you're good enough to get us out of here. But I still can't see you killing those men."

"They're not men, they're beasts. Torturers, rapists, if there is a God, those soldiers belong in hell. And I want to help send them there. I was a Bisley champion in my day, believe me, I can shoot."

Bisley was the Brit shooting center used by both military and civilians. The annual championships were the preserve of the best in the world.

"Okay, that's good enough for me. You've handled a Stoner?"

"Many times."

"You've got it. Waite, do we have Ray's rifle and spare ammo?"

"It's all here," he replied.

Father Damion took the rifle, and by the way he expertly checked it over, it was obvious he knew what he was doing. He found himself a good shooting stand propped behind a low, concrete wall, checked his rifle for the last time, tested the wind, and waited for the moment. We all waited. I guess I was holding my breath.

Four minutes later they emerged, the two officers who'd been drinking coffee inside the cafe, and they began to form up their men. They started walking toward us, and the light in the coffee shop went out as the owner locked the door.

"When you're ready," I murmured.

He didn't acknowledge, just lay there in frozen immobility as they came nearer. I could see he was waiting for the perfect killing ground, the correct convergence of angles, and the absence of any cover the soldiers could drop into. Then he fired.

The weapon had a long twenty-four inch barrel and fired 7.62mm NATO standard rounds from a twenty-round box magazine. The bullets thumped out the bulbous end of the barrel in a long, even stream. There was no pause to take aim, no searching for a new target. It was as if he'd locked the location of each

Revolutionary Guardsman in his brain like a computer-programmed robot, and he shot them down one by one with machine-like precision.

Afterward, two of my men ran forward to check the bodies. The rest of us waited, and Father Damion held his shooting position in case a new target appeared. The men called in they were all dead, and I helped him to his feet. I gave him a nod of appreciation.

"Nice shooting, Padre. They'll all be in Paradise by now."

It was more than nice shooting. It was the finest example of rapid, precision sniping I'd ever seen.

"They're in hell, every one of them. I hope they stay there for a long, long time," he replied. His voice was an anguished monotone, and I knew he hadn't enjoyed what he'd had to do. It wouldn't have been a catharsis; no ending of the mental agony he would have suffered for the Christians dangling from the cranes. Afterward, I heard he'd entered a secluded monastery somewhere in Europe. He'd decided to devote his time to healing the mentally ill. After the torture he'd endured in the Iranian jail, I hoped he managed to heal himself, both his body and his mind.

Over the Atlantic – April 2014

Dragan realized we were staring at him. "What? What is it? Did it go wrong last time?"

"You tell us you're a sniper. I'm telling you you'd better be damn good," Waite said, his voice low and ominous. Ray Alvaro had been his best friend, "The last time we did this we got the guy out."

"Were there any casualties?"

"The sniper."

"He was hurt?"

"Enough to bring him home in a body bag. Yeah, he was hurt."

"I'll be careful."

"Just make sure you lock those sights onto the bad guys. You miss a single target, and we may as well pack up and go home. If they let us."

"I won't miss," he said, sounding irritated that Waite had called his skill into question.

Snipers. They're as bad as fighter jocks, all arrogance and ego. Nevertheless, you'd forgive them anything, provided they turn up and do the job when you need them.

"You'd better not," I growled. Something about him made me feel uneasy.

Can a billionaire make a good sniper? Time will tell.

"Just make sure you're there when the shit hits the fan."

Doroshenko returned to the cabin, so we stopped talking and waited for him to deliver his report.

"It's no problem. The vehicles and weapons are ready and waiting for when we land at Odessa. You can stay in the city overnight and travel to Sevastopol in the morning. There will be more than enough time to prepare the attack for tomorrow night. Do you know what time you'll be going in?"

I shrugged and decided to pull his chain.

"It depends on what we find when we get there. We're shorthanded on this operation, so we'll need all the help we can get to penetrate that castle. That includes you, Myron." His face fell, and his skin visible paled, "First, I want you to get hold of a map of the place to help us find our way around the interior of the castle, once we've got past the walls."

He regained some of his color. "I can do that."

"Next, Dragan will be on the outside, so we'll need a Ukrainian Russian speaker with us on the inside. You can come with us."

The blood drained away from his face again. It was like watching a chameleon. "Me! That's impossible. I have many things to attend to; I wasn't even planning on coming with you to Sevastopol."

"Which things do you have to attend to, Myron?" his boss asked, in an acid tone.

"Two of our weapons shipments are late. We're worried the Russians may have got their hands on them, but either way, I have to look into it. Our suppliers will want payment, and more importantly, our people need those guns. I can't postpone it."

"Very well," Dragan nodded his understanding, "These things can't be helped."

Doroshenko nodded, looking relieved. I said nothing, but I didn't believe a word of it. Was it old-fashioned cowardice? Or was it something else?

Dragan glanced across at me. "We will be in communication with the satphones, so anything you don't understand, I can translate."

I stared at Myron, and my gaze was pretty transparent. Doroshenko at least had the grace to adopt an expression of shame.

Dragan sighed, "Perhaps we'll need your help later, when we come to the second and third phases of the operation."

"Anything, Alexander. You know you only have to ask."

"Of course." He looked back at me. "Myron will be a great asset to this operation, you'll see."

No shit.

Odessa International Airport, Ukraine – April 2014

We landed five hours later at Odessa International. Built during the Soviet era, it was a classic example of their soulless style of architecture. Drab concrete, built by disinterested communist serfs who could only think of getting home after a day's low paid labor to start draining the next bottle of cheap vodka. The fiery Russian spirit that kept the uncomplaining comrades in their place.

We were the fortunate few. We'd dined on gourmet cuisine, courtesy of Dragan's well-stocked galley on board the Gulfstream. When we departed the leather-lined, thick-carpeted interior of the jet, we were outside his private hangar in the General Aviation area. There was no red carpet waiting for us to walk inside, but the personal touch was in evidence, superior in every way to the welcome Joe Public enjoyed across the tarmac in the unwelcoming arrivals terminal, which looked like a bomb shelter.

"Mr. Dragan, I trust your journey was comfortable?"

The woman who greeted us was the wrong side of forty, although only just. She reminded me of the former Ukraine President. A striking woman, still slim in spite of her age, she had her blonde hair plaited on top in imitation of Yulia Tymoshenko's trademark style. Unlike her boss, Myron Doroshenko, her face was open and honest.

"It was fine." He introduced us. "Gentlemen, this is Katya Polozov. She handles logistics for the Dragan Foundation inside Ukraine. She is second only to Myron, so if you need anything and we are not available, you only need to ask for her. Katya, these men are here to help us. John Raider, Al Miller, and Waite Sullivan."

We shook hands and went inside, to be greeted by our transport. Two brand new Mercedes G Class SUVs. Two men were busy polishing the already gleaming paintwork.

She smiled. "We wanted them to look their best for your journey. If you'd like to come through, we have a lounge at the rear. You can relax with some coffee and snacks while they finish preparing your vehicles."

I ignored her and stared at Dragan. "Did you organize this fuckup?"

He raised his hands in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"These vehicles, polished like they just came out of the showroom. Didn't you think to sign write them with Dragan Foundation?"

Katya Polozov replied, "As it happens, someone did suggest it, but we thought it may draw unwelcome attention."

"Is that right? You don't think two hundred and fifty thousand-dollar vehicles driving across a country that's falling apart, with armed groups roaming everywhere, might attract the odd glance? Why not fly a flag from the radio aerial? Apart from any hostiles we run into, anyone sees those two jeeps will see dollar signs, and we don't have the time to play around with armed gangs of auto thieves."

He looked angry at first, and then he sighed. "I see what you mean. Katya thought we'd want something first class that wouldn't let us down. There's nothing better than a new Mercedes."

"That's fine, but get your men to make them look old and battered. Drive them through a muddy field, plenty of scratches and dents. I want them looking like total crap, only fit for the scrapheap. They'll still be the same under the hood, but at least we'll look a little less conspicuous."

Myron and Katya both looked appalled at the prospect of virtually destroying their prized vehicles. But Dragan said a few words to him in Ukrainian, and Myron spoke to the two men. They stared at him as if he'd gone mad, but he shouted the order. They jumped into the driving seats and drove away.

"Is there anything else? I was looking forward to speaking with my staff."

"As soon as they get back with those SUVs, we're leaving. We need to take a look at the rest of the stuff."

He grimaced and spoke to Doroshenko. He led Dragan to a locked storage room, and we followed. Myron punched in a key code to open the door, and we went inside. There were anonymous boxes and wooden crates lying around the floor, and in one corner, several more distinctive wooden crates with Cyrillic markings.

Russian markings. Doroshenko waved his hand to point them out to us, and then rubbed his hands. He looked like an Arab stallholder.

"They're all here, just as you wanted, Mr. Dragan."

"Thank you, Myron."

We started to open the cases. A box of Makarov PBs, the silenced handguns, solid chunks of heavy, machined steel, and a legendary assassin's weapon. Another case contained five OTs-02 Kiparis submachine guns, together with a couple of boxes of 9mm Makarov rounds.

"Where is the other rifle?"

Doroshenko, his face starting to redden, hurried to join his boss who was examining an attaché case. The kind of briefcase used to carry documents, or a collapsible sniper rifle.

"The other rifle?"

"Where is it, Myron? There is on only one case."

"We, er, had a problem. I specifically told our supplier we wanted two, and he told me he packed two weapons in the consignment. But when it arrived, there was only one sniper rifle. I'm sorry."

Dragan lifted the weapon from the black case and quickly assembled it. Hard, black, angular, and functional, it looked as if designed by someone with a robotic mind. There was nothing aesthetic about it. Some weapons have a certain terrible beauty, despite their awful purpose. This had none. It was a machine, a killing machine. Nothing more. He put the butt to his shoulder and looked along the barrel.

"A VSS Vintorez, my friends, one of the better products of the Russian Federation, a suppressed sniper rifle. It fires a heavy subsonic 9mm cartridge. They issue these weapons to Spetsnaz units for undercover or clandestine operations. Stripped down for transport in a specially fitted briefcase, it is the perfect tool for silent assassination."

He stripped the weapon to its component parts and packed it back into the black briefcase. A bell chimed in my head. Sniper rifle. Putin. Assassin.

A coincidence? Maybe, but I need to keep an eye on our friend Dragan. You never know. And he hates Russians, almost as much as we Americans hate the IRS, except we don't take potshots at them.

"I will test fire the rifle later, Myron, and I hope it's not defective. I would be extremely unhappy, if you catch my meaning."

"Sure, Mr. Dragan. I'm sure it'll be fine. I don't know how it got screwed up. If I could..."

"Enough! Did you manage everything else? The satphones?"

He did his Turkish bazaar merchant act, rubbing his hands together. "Iridium 9575 models, Sir, compact and reliable. They're activated for you to switch on and make calls right now. Each unit comes with an earpiece for clandestine communications. The vehicles are both equipped with in-dash satnav systems. I believe you have everything you need."

"What about the map, the interior of the castle?"

"I have it ready for you. It is in my office."

"And the location of Joe Nguyen's cell?"

A silence. Then he shook his head. "I tried, I really tried, but it was impossible. Perhaps one of my informants will come up with something in time for your operation tomorrow night."

Dragan almost blurted out the truth, but checked himself. "Yes, I hope so."

The noise of engines deafened us as the SUVs roared back into the hangar. His men had done their work well. The 4x4s looked as if they'd driven to Afghanistan and back in the past half hour, and under fire for much of the journey. Dented, deep gashes in the wings, mud splattered paintwork; they'd even cracked several of the windows. I nodded my approval.

"That'll do it. I suggest we load up and drive nearer to the target. We can find somewhere to stay and scope it out tomorrow."

"You will not stay here in Odessa?" Doroshenko asked. He sounded alarmed. Maybe like a man whose well-laid ambush was about to fall flat on its face. Perhaps I just didn't like him. Dragan touched him on the arm, a friendly gesture.

"Myron, it is better we leave now, to prevent suspicion falling on the Dragan Foundation."

"That would only happen if they catch you, Mr. Dragan."

He paused, looking thoughtful. "Then we must hope they do not catch me. Otherwise you will be looking for alternative employment."

Dragan burst out laughing and clapped the man on the shoulders. Then he turned to us, his face alive with enthusiasm and excitement.

"It is time to go. Our destiny awaits us."

Really.

Less than two hours later, we were stalled, held at gunpoint by the Crimean pro-Russian militia.

Our plan had been to drive direct to the Sevastopol safe house provided by Dragan's organization, and set out to reconnoiter Inkerman Castle using the last part of the daylight. Like many plans, it went wrong almost from the start. We left the hangar with Waite driving; Dragan's vehicle was in the lead. For some reason, he wanted to be alone, and so the three of us followed in the second Mercedes. At first, the going was fine, and we followed the main highway to Crimea, the A58, without difficulty. The tarmac was in bad repair, but the Mercedes SUV was designed to soak up the gaping potholes.

We passed Yuzhne, veered north to Mykolaiv, and skirted the Gulf of Dniprovsko. A further fifty klicks took us south to Kherson, and we were close to Crimea. The landscape was changing. The first difference was soldiers huddled in groups at road junctions. They weren't making any effort to stop traffic, but all the same, they were there. In case they were needed, I assumed. Whether they were Russian or Ukrainian, regulars or militia, was anyone's guess. They carried no unit insignia on vehicles or uniforms.

We reached Armyansk, the gateway to Crimea, where the highway threaded through a number of inland lakes and waterways. It was the ideal place to position troops to control entry to Crimea, a natural bottleneck. We rounded a bend and saw Dragan's brake lights come on. In front of him, a soldier stood in the center of the road, an AK-74 slung on his back, waving for him to stop. The barrier was a single pole mounted on a trestle either side of the highway. It would be easy enough to crash through on a bicycle, let alone a tough German SUV.

Except for the bullets from the heavy caliber machine gun, positioned a few meters back from the barrier that would have followed you as you drove away.

"I don't want to mess with that mother," Waite murmured, "It would ruin our day, that's for sure."

"Looks like an RPK-74," I said.

"Yep, we came up against those in Afghanistan. Piece of crap compared to our M249s, but they can spew out the rounds. Any suggestions? I reckon we could hit 'em, but if we miss, that bastard would chew us to pieces."

"We'll wait and see how Dragan handles it."

I watched Dragan for a couple of seconds, and then looked more carefully at the machine gun in case we needed to deal with it. The weapon was another Kalashnikov derivative. Chambered for 7.72mm bullets, the forty-five round box magazine could hurl out a great deal of damage, and at a range that didn't bear thinking about. Five hundred meters was a conservative estimate, and they were good up to a thousand.

Waite stopped a few meters behind Dragan's Mercedes, and I continued to survey the checkpoint. Behind me, I knew Al would be doing the same. Two soldiers manning the machine gun, another man in the center of the road stopping traffic, and a fourth soldier stood on the hood of a jeep, watching everything with a suspicious gaze. It was a dented and crappy looking UAZ 469 parked at the side of the road.

He had binoculars hanging from a strap on his chest, and he gripped a compact submachine gun, not unlike an Israeli Uzi. I recognized it from the NATO recognition charts as a PP-91 KEDR, a modern weapon that fired the ubiquitous 9mm Makarov round. Not very accurate at ranges above fifty meters, but as we were thirty meters away, the accuracy wouldn't be a problem if he decided to start shooting.

We waited while Dragan talked endlessly to the soldier in the road. The man called for his officer, who jumped from the hood of the UAZ in an attempted display of athletic prowess. He went sprawling in the dirt, and the soldier rushed to help him up. The officer, a lieutenant, brushed him away and went to the open window of Dragan's SUV. They talked at length, and I could swear he handed the soldier something, a bribe, no question.

"Holy shit!" Al exclaimed, "They're letting him through. Does that mean we're clear?"

"He paid the price," Waite muttered.

"Keep the weapons out of sight," I warned them, "It's our turn, but be ready."

We each had a silenced Makarov PB tucked under the edge of our seats. At close range, they'd kill without making too much noise. The problem was they weren't accurate. And if we missed the machine gunner, we were dead.

"Change of plan. If anything goes wrong, you guys target the machine gunner, and make sure you don't miss. I'll go for the other three men."

"Copy that."

It made sense. If that RPK-74 opened up on us, we'd be reduced to scrap metal and bloody flesh, so we needed to make doubly sure of the gun crew. I worked out the sequence of my targets. The officer was first; he could aim and shoot that PP-91 KEDR in less than a second. Next, the soldier in the road; his rifle was slung on

his back. He could deploy it quickly, but I doubted he'd make it in time. The loader was last, in case Al and Waite didn't get him while they were killing the gunner. I couldn't see his weapon, but I assumed his assault rifle was somewhere close. I also guessed in the heat of the action, with bullets swatting aside his buddies like so many ducks in a shooting gallery, he'd freeze with fear. It would give me time to shift my aim and take him last.

Waite drove forward slowly and stopped. The officer came to the window and barked a few words at Waite, who held up his hands in incomprehension.

"Sorry, buddy, we only speak da English."

He stared around the interior for a few seconds. "Are you with the other vehicle that just went through?"

That meant Dragan hadn't cleared us through with the bribe. Automatically, I answered, "No."

I wondered if it was the right thing to say. His next words suggested I might've made a mistake.

"No? That's strange. Two vehicles, the same make, same color, traveling a few meters apart, and you say you are not together. I think you are lying. What are you hiding?"

I tried a friendly smile. "Hide? Hey, buddy, I'm just a photographer, a photojournalist. These men are my driver and assistant. Why would we have anything to hide?"

It was like pouring petrol onto a fire.

"A photographer! I think you are a spy. Who do you work for, CIA?"

I sighed, making it theatrical. "Listen, pal, I'm a freelance, I work for the Washington Post, Associated Press, you name it. I'll even snap your kid's graduation photos if the price is right."

"Get out of the vehicle," he snarled. He turned to the soldier standing in the road. "Ivan, I want this vehicle searched. These people look suspicious."

It was time to put plan B into effect. "Friend, I'm real sorry. This is just a misunderstanding. How about we settle this and pay the fee for allowing us into Crimea. How much would it take for you to let us through?"

I'd said the magic words. 'How much?'

"How much can you pay?" he snapped back, his eyes looking greedy.

Bingo!

"How about..."

I didn't get any further. His head erupted in a welter of blood, bone, and torn flesh. I heard Waite shout, "What the fuck!" as pieces of brain matter mixed with blood spattered over his shirt. Reflex took over, and I glanced at the soldier who was the closest. He was unslinging his rifle, his face a mask of shock as he muttered curses in what I assumed was Russian. Another shot, almost inaudible, ripped a chunk out of his ear. As he turned to find the shooter, a further shot hit him in the chest. He went down, and a third shot followed. This time it was a heart shot, and he stopped writhing.

The machine gun started to fire, a loud chatter as a long stream of bullets tore up the air in the direction of the shooter, although I doubted he could see the man. Whoever it was, he was good, too good to be out in the open. The sniper fired again, and the bullet whacked into the gunner, tossing him backward and away

from the weapon. He'd only been hit in the shoulder, and he lunged forward, his teeth gritted with pain and fury, to reach the gun and continue firing. Only to reel back yet again as another round punched into him. This time it tore into his mouth, and I saw it exit from the back of his head in a shower of bloody flesh and bone.

The loader was already up and running from that terrible, silent death. For some reason, probably panic, he made it easy for the killer by running along the road. We watched the inevitable unfold. This time the shooter took his time. I'd estimated his position as about two hundred meters away, and the soldier made a hundred and fifty before he opened fire.

It was almost as if he'd been playing with him, letting him get his hopes up before he pulled the trigger. Most sniper rifles are good for at least five hundred meters. Some of the best can shoot up to one and a half thousand meters. Three hundred and fifty meters was child's play, no matter who was doing the shooting. He fired twice, and both shots took the running man high in the back. They punched him forward, and he tumbled to the ground, dead.

We sat in silence for a few seconds, recovering from the shock. It's not easy when the bullets fly, to do nothing.

"What do you think?" Al asked, eventually.

"We wait and see. If they wanted us dead we'd be dead, no question. Whoever it is has something against Russians, or Crimean Russians, maybe both. I think we're safe."

An engine started in the distance, and an SUV pulled onto the road from a culvert where it had sheltered. Dragan's Mercedes G Wagon. He drove up to us, stopped, and climbed out. He was smiling.

"I haven't lost my touch. What about that officer, the first shot, bang!" His smile widened, "I hadn't even zeroed in the scope. I reckon that was as good as it gets. If I had..."

It wasn't so great. I'd seen much better snipers than Dragan. I thought back to that priest we'd freed in Iran, Father Damion. He'd been real world class. Dragan was just good. Okay, pretty damn good. It was an unfamiliar weapon, and he'd taken them all down. But still he had plenty to learn. I felt sickened. There'd been no need for it.

"You're a fucking idiot!" I cut in his bragging, "A one hundred percent cast iron idiot. You know what you've done? They were about to let us through for a bribe, just like they did you. Instead, you've sent a signal to every soldier and pro-Russian militiaman in the area. You've told them the enemy has arrived and to put their forces on maximum alert."

He looked nonplussed. "I... I thought I..."

This time Al chewed him out, "They'll be hunting for us now. You just made our job ten times harder. You stupid bastard! You'd better clear up your mess. Find somewhere to hide the bodies, and we'll do our best to cover up what happened here." Dragan hesitated, "What are you waiting for? Move!"

I fought to hold down a smile as he meekly obeyed Al Miller and started dragging the bodies off the road.

"Not there! Put them in the UAZ. We'll find somewhere to hide it. With any luck, they won't locate it until tomorrow."

Red-faced, sweating with the effort, and with his anger simmering at what he thought was unfair criticism; he loaded the bodies in the jeep. They looked like lengths of cordwood stacked across the rear seat. Several times, he looked at me for help, but I ignored him. When they were loaded, he asked someone to drive the vehicle and follow us to somewhere we could hide it.

I shook my head. "You drive it. They're your bodies. I'll bring along your Mercedes. Waite, you lead, and keep driving until you find a suitable spot. Al, ride shotgun with him. We're not out of trouble yet."

"Copy that," they both acknowledged. I could see them keeping poker faces, fighting the urge to laugh at his discomfiture.

"Let's go. And Dragan, next time we run into enemy troops..."

"Yes?"

"If you want to shoot something, start by blowing your damn fool head off."

Crimea Ukraine Border – April 2014

We found a hiding place for the UAZ, an abandoned vehicle breaker's yard, and the vehicle slotted into the center of the rusting wrecks. It should withstand a cursory glance, no more. In the meantime, we had a chance to put some distance between us and Dragan's idiocy. He took back the wheel of his G Wagon, muttered something about going on alone to Sevastopol, and drove away in a blaze of white-hot, righteous anger.

"That guy has a problem," Al noted, "What worries me is his hate for everything Russian. It's almost pathological."

"Almost?" Waite muttered, "He's almost a psycho. See a Russian. Kill a Russian. The guy's a loose cannon. The sooner we finish up here and go home, the better. He wants to declare war on Russia singlehanded."

It wasn't far from the truth. I couldn't give a shit about Dragan, let alone his billions of dollars, except his cash was all that stood between me and losing Abigail for good.

"We'll get the wheels rolling. The sooner we get to Sevastopol, the sooner we can get this done."

We got moving fast and drove through Simferopol, the administrative capital of Ukraine. As cities go, it wasn't too bad, not the typical former Soviet shithole I'd expected. A mix of old buildings with communist inspired concrete apartment office blocks, I'd seen a lot worse. But we weren't sightseeing. We drove through the city and out the other side. The next stop was Sevastopol, or more accurately, Inkerman Castle on the outskirts.

We drove the last few kilometers in silence, watching and waiting for the moment when we sighted the target. We rounded a corner, and it loomed in front of us, vast, cold, cruel, and forbidding; a monument to warfare that had stood for almost a thousand years, now a formidable shrine to man's inhumanity.

"Jesus Christ," Waite breathed, "There's no way we'll get in there, no way. Look at that place!"

We'd seen the images on Dragan's laptop but weren't prepared for what confronted us. A fortress built of massive blocks of stone on a rocky hilltop. The

walls fell away sheer each side, and even from a distance, we could see it was virtually impossible to climb the rock face below them. Not without professional climbing gear and a great deal of luck.

I recalled the briefing. "Dragan said the entrance is on the other side. It's a steep track just wide enough for vehicles to pass. At least it's out of sight of the main highway."

Waite grimaced. "Yeah, we wouldn't want people to see the guards shooting at us while we break in there."

Al and I smiled at each other. When Waite Sullivan's humor was at its blackest, it was when he functioned at his best. He slowed the vehicle and we surveyed the grim structure, the massive walls, watchtowers, and the absence of any windows large enough to make an entry. We'd have to go in through the only gate, or perhaps travel part way up the narrow track and then use a rope and grapple to scale the walls. Just like before. Except back then, it hadn't been an impregnable castle, and we had more men, backup, equipment, you name it.

"Dragan will have to be at his best for this one," Al murmured, "Then again, I guess he'll enjoy it, shooting Russians."

Right now, I preferred not to think about our billionaire sniper. The problem of entering the castle needed my undivided attention. We could see guards patrolling the walls, and men manning the machine guns in the watchtowers.

Can Dragan hack it?

We'd seen his shooting at the checkpoint. It was only average, no better. Our lives could depend on his skill. I wondered where he'd gotten to, only hoping he wasn't hunting more Russians to kill.

Luxe Hotel Presidential Suite, Sevastopol, Ukraine – April 2014

The bodyguards, big men with shoulders like library shelves beckoned him forward. One man indicated the door. "It's all clear, Sir, we've swept the entire floor."

Even so, Yuri Malenkov went in first, his hand inside his coat and resting on the butt of his pistol. They entered the suite. He turned to make certain the guards were stationed outside the door, then closed and locked it.

"Sir, coming to Crimea is not a good idea, and this visit to Sevastopol is madness. We should have stayed in our embassy in Simferopol, where we could have protected you much better. These fucking Ukrainians are madmen."

Putin smiled, or at least, his cold, rattrap lips assembled themselves in a semblance of a smile.

"Not safe? Look out of the window, Yuri. What do you see?"

Malenkov knew what he'd see, a guided missile cruiser, the Moskva Slava. The Kerch Kara, an anti-submarine warfare vessel. There was a guided missile destroyer, and two guided missile frigates, as well as an assortment of corvettes and minesweepers; the main body of the Black Sea Fleet swinging at anchor in Sevastopol Harbor.

The Black Sea Naval Infantry and Coastal Defense Force protected it, with scores of gun emplacements dug in around the harbor. He looked up as a flight of

three helicopters from the Black Sea Fleet Naval Air Force chattered overhead, probably on a routine sweep. They'd be nervous with the President of the Russian Federation in town. A President who didn't suffer fools gladly.

"I know what we have in the harbor. But it only takes one crazed lunatic with a rifle, and we'll be holding new elections for the post of President. Remember Dallas, 1963, the murder of President Kennedy."

His boss grinned again. "Yuri, how could I remember? I was only eleven years old, at school in Leningrad. Besides, we are among friends. The people of Crimea welcome me as a hero. No one is going to shoot at me, not here. In Moscow, maybe," he laughed aloud, "I have more than a few enemies there, but not here in Crimea. By the way, where is Grigory Orlov? I thought he'd be here to greet me on my arrival."

"He sent a message, Sir. He said he was delayed."

"A problem?"

He hesitated for a little too long. "We're not sure, Sir."

A scowl. "Keep me informed. You can bring my limo around. I'm dining on our flagship tonight, the Moskva Slava. I trust there'll be no crazed sailors on board trying to kill me?"

Malenkov allowed himself a thin smile. "No, Sir. The crew is loyal to you. We've checked them all out."

"Good. And make sure you contact Orlov. Tell him to report to me here tomorrow morning, and we'll take breakfast together. He can bring me up-to-date with what's going on here."

"Yes, Sir."

Aeroflot Building, Sevastopol, Ukraine – April 2014

Five hundred meters from where they were chatting, a man watched through the scope of his VSS Vintorez sniper rifle. It was early evening. After dark he would use the NSPUM-3 3.46x night vision scope, provided there was not too much light pollution for a clear shot. Time was no problem. His sources had told him Putin would be in town for several days, reviewing the Black Sea Fleet and discussing the takeover of Crimea with local politicians. There was no requirement to act in haste. One missed shot would alert the Presidential Guard, and they would throw a wall around their man that would be impossible to penetrate. He could wait.

His position was perfect. He'd found a stand at the top of an elevator shaft on the roof of a nearby office building. It was owned by Aeroflot, which seemed wholly appropriate. He'd determined that security was minimal. As usual, it was a wheezing geriatric who skipped most of his patrols and sat drinking vodka. It couldn't be better, and he'd even managed to steal a key from behind the reception desk in the lobby.

He smiled to himself as he recalled the simple ploy he'd used to gain entrance.

"Naval Base?" The old guy's silver mustache wagged as he said the words in indignation, "What are you carrying, important documents?"

He was looking at the black briefcase.

"Yes, important dispatches for the Admiral."

"I hope he knows you're almost blind. Look, it's over there."

The old man walked slowly to the glass door and pointed out across the water. He'd helped himself to the spare key and joined the man, expressing surprise.

"That's the Naval Base? I must have drunk too much vodka. I missed it completely."

"You should knock off the bottle, my friend. You stink of booze."

So do you.

In his case it was intentional, drunkenness excused most behavior and lowered people's defenses.

"Thanks, Granddad. You've been more than helpful."

The man gave him a playful punch. "At least I haven't lost the use of my eyes."

He'd left the building, waited until the man disappeared from the lobby, and then unlocked the front door. A few minutes later he was on the roof.

He watched the shapes five hundred meters from his position move away from the window, and then a man closed the heavy drapes. He smiled. When the time came, he'd have a perfect shot, and there wasn't a thing they could do to stop him. Carefully, he stripped down the rifle and packed it away in the briefcase. Then he left, walking quietly down the staircase, through the empty lobby, and out into the street.

Chapter 6

Sevastopol, Ukraine – April 2014

"Where the hell is he?"

I glanced at Waite, pacing up and down. We were in the safe house, ready to go; vehicle, weapons, ammo, ropes, grapples, satphones, everything, except for the most important part of the operation, Dragan. Unless he took down the guards, quickly and silently, we'd have little chance of getting in there. It'd be like the ill-fated Charge of the Light Brigade. As I recalled, the guns they charged on that occasion were also Russian.

"We have to wait," I replied, "Stay cool. We're not out of time. Not yet."

He nodded. "I'd still like to punch the bastard."

"He's paying the bills," I reminded him.

"He got Joe into this in the first place," Al objected, "Why shouldn't he pay to get him back out?"

It was a fair point. We owed the man nothing. The balance sheet was weighted the other way. He owed big time for what he'd allowed to happen to Joe. And then there was the unnecessary killing at the checkpoint.

Neither did I didn't trust him, not one little bit, nor his sidekick, Myron Doroshenko. Both of them had their own agendas, which they hadn't yet revealed to us. In Doroshenko's case, it was probably theft. The man was relieving his boss of large bundles of cash meant to help Ukraine. As for Dragan, killing those soldiers at the checkpoint was stupid. There was only one explanation, a passionate hatred of all things Russian.

If I can't rein him in, he'll cause a lot more trouble before we're out of here, no question.

"I'll turn the TV on, see if we can get CNN in this godforsaken place," Waite murmured.

I heard the newscaster's voice announcing he'd be back after 'this short break'. There was a sudden knock on the door. Al drew his Makarov PB and stood to one side, and I went to answer it. Dragan. He came into the room carrying his black briefcase.

"You're late," I greeted him.

He shrugged. "I had business to attend to. My Foundation..."

"Jesus H. fucking Christ!"

I turned to look at Waite. He was staring at the screen.

"What is it?"

"Not what. Who!"

We all turned to look. A hard, sour face stared back at us. The face of a man who imposed his iron will on hundreds of millions of people, a man with a secret police force at his personal command, every bit as ruthless as its KGB predecessor. The face of President Vladimir Putin, and as usual he looked as if he'd been sucking on a lemon. Tsar of all the Russias, in practice if not in name, not yet, anyway. Give it time. Behind him I could see a naval base. At first I didn't recognize it, and then it clicked.

"He's here! The bastard's here in Sevastopol. Why didn't you tell us, Dragan?"

He looked bored. "I don't see it's relevant."

"Not relevant?" If Waite was first in the queue to deliver the first punch, I was right behind him, "Don't you realize they'll have half the Russian FSB in town, hunting down anyone they perceive as a threat to Putin?"

He shrugged. "I still say it doesn't concern us."

How can I get through to this guy? It's like he has a whole rulebook of his own, rules that don't apply to ordinary people.

There was a further problem, the assassination threat. It meant there'd be even more security than normal. I briefly thought about mentioning it, but Al and Waite both gave me a warning glance, and I decided to let it ride. Need to know.

"Okay, let's focus on tonight. Waite, Al, you have everything ready? We'll be relying on those ropes to get us in."

"Roger that."

"Dragan, you all set?"

He patted the briefcase. "It's all here. And I don't need to check the scope. I reckon it performed well back on the road."

Not if you were one of the guys you shot. Another minute and they'd have taken the money, and we'd be here with no problem. As it is, they'll come looking for their killers as soon as they find those bodies. Together with Putin's security detail, mighty soon there'll be more cops and secret police than civilians in this town.

It was time to get Joe. "Let's go visit Inkerman Prison."

We followed the road that ran north out of the city, and it began to climb toward a low range of hills. Behind us, I could see the bright city lights, and beyond them, the security floodlights of the naval dockyard, Headquarters of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. I wondered briefly if Putin was on one of those ships, maybe being

wined and dined on board the Russian flagship. It seemed likely. They'd want to give him a big welcome. The Russian President, a former warrior, a Cold War warrior.

I looked look to the front. High above us, Inkerman Castle was a black shape outlined by the bright cluster of stars in the night sky. As if the medieval fortification held dark secrets. Secrets its owners were loath to reveal to the outside world.

Dragan was behind us driving the other SUV, and he fell further and further behind. His plan was to establish his position on the roof of an isolated apartment block close to the castle. He'd told us it was an immigrant block, and no one took much notice of what went on inside. From the roof, he'd have a clear shot at the guards on the walls.

We continued on the track until we reached a barrier across the roadway. It was as far as we could go in the SUV, and we parked the G Wagon behind a mound of grit. Doubtless put there for when the track became icy. We unloaded our gear in silence and continued on foot. The track was carved out of the solid rock, and we made good time, until we rounded a bend in the roadway, and then we were face to face with our objective.

"It's tougher than it looked in the photos," Al murmured.

The walls were at least three meters higher than we'd anticipated, which would make it even more of a bastard to scale. There was another problem.

"You guys see the barbed wire?" Waite asked us.

We couldn't miss it. Rolls of barbed wire suspended from the outer wall, making it harder for anyone to ascend a rope and enter the way we'd planned. Getting through it would take time, too much time.

"I brought along cutters, but if that wire's thick, they may not be enough. I only brought them for an emergency," Waite said.

I didn't reply at first. I was listening. A vehicle had turned off the main road and was coming up the track.

"Cover!"

We dived into the dark shadows at the side of the track and waited. As we lay there, I was thinking fast and furiously. Presumably, the vehicle would enter the castle, which meant they'd have to lower the drawbridge to allow it inside. I decided on a change of plan.

"Listen up. As soon as it's gone past, we go after it. It'll be going slow. The track is too steep and narrow for any speed. We'll stay close behind, and when they drop the drawbridge and open the gates, we follow it in."

They both looked shocked. "John, there're a few guards in there, remember."

"I know. It's time to contact Dragan. We need him to go to work."

I had my earpiece inserted, and I called his satphone. He answered immediately.

"Is there a problem?"

"No. A change of plan." I explained about the approaching vehicle, and how they would lower the drawbridge when it arrived, "We'll go in with it. I'll keep the line open. When I give the word, take out those guards."

"With pleasure," he growled.

I ignored the comment. "Are you in position yet?"

"Not yet, there's a delay, some kind of accident on the road. They'll have it clear in minutes. There's no other way for me to get through."

"There wasn't an accident when we came past."

"It only just happened. Don't worry, I'll be there."

"Make sure you are. I'll leave the phone connected so we have communications."

"I will do the same."

I stuffed the handset back in my pocket. The vehicle came into view, an old, black minivan, smoke billowing from its exhaust as it struggled up the steep slope. There were no windows in the rear or the sides, and I speculated what use they'd have for such a vehicle. It reminded me of something, and then it hit me like a train. It was the kind of vehicle used by undertakers for transporting bodies to the morgue. Al worked it out at the same time.

"They're collecting a body from the castle. Some poor bastard has just died up there."

Waite's voice was cold, "Or they're about to die."

We stared at each other. Could it be Joe, was he dead? Or were they about to execute him? Then the black van was alongside, drove past, and we were up and running. Al stumbled, probably on a chunk of stone. Waite and me grabbed an arm apiece and kept him on his feet. The vehicle was doing little more than five miles an hour, as much as they could manage on the dangerous, slippery slope. Even so, it was a lung bursting run, racing up a steep slope, fully laden with gear.

The drawbridge dropped down with a loud rattle of chains. The minivan stopped just in front of the gate, and we dropped to the ground out of sight. We were all gasping for breath and choking on the exhaust fumes that emanated from the rusty tailpipe close to our heads. Someone up front shouted, and we heard the whir of an electric motor as the gate slowly opened. It was time to begin. I dragged out the satphone and spoke into the mic.

"Dragan."

"I'm here."

"Do it!"

I didn't wait for a reply. "Waite, Al, we'll follow the van through the gates. Anything moves, shoot. We can't leave anyone alive, except for one man. We have to find out where they're holding Joe."

"Copy that."

The van started to move forward, and we followed. The first guard looked astonished as Al shot him with only a dull 'thud' from the Makarov PB. I looked at Waite.

"The driver, take him before he enters the courtyard."

"I'm on it."

As he raced forward, I dived into a small booth I'd noticed. A man was standing inside watching a series of CCTV screens. He looked up as I entered, and his hand flew toward an alarm button, a box with a big red button in the center. He didn't make it. I hit him with a single punch to the throat, and he dropped to the floor, choking.

There were four screens in front of me, all black and white. I watched the images change, as the system cycled through the cameras set inside and outside

the prison. The images were grainy and wouldn't be of any help. It was up to the man puking up his guts on the floor to tell me the whereabouts of Joe.

Al ran into the booth. "We're all secure, and Waite is keeping an eye on things out there."

"What about the guards on the wall?"

I heard Dragan reply in my earpiece, "Those Russian bastards are all dead." His voice was soft, filled with satisfaction. I'd clean forgotten the line was still open, "What do you want me to do now?"

"Stay in position. We may need you to cover our withdrawal."

"Very well."

I looked around as Al dragged the man to his feet. He held the Makarov under the guy's nose, and I could imagine the barrel looked huge from his perspective. He was trembling with terror.

"The American, where is he?" I snapped out. His eyes showed puzzlement.

"Joe Nguyen. Amerikanskiy!"

Comprehension dawned, and he pointed at the castle keep and then at the minivan.

Dear God, no! Are we too late?

I remembered the word for dead.

"Mertvyy?"

He shook his head, pointed at the van again, and spouted a flow of Russian.

"Never mind, lead us to him."

I pushed him forward out of the guard post. Al pointed the Makarov. He got the point, and we jogged across the courtyard to the heavy oak door. It was the main portal that gave access to the keep and the depths of the castle dungeons.

"Get it open," Al growled.

He spoke in English, but the barrel of a pistol is an effective translating medium. He reached up for a bell push and pressed, while we stood back out of sight. A second later, a spy hole opened, and a man's face appeared.

"Da?"

"Otkryt dver!" *Open the door!*

The face disappeared. The spy hole closed, and we heard the rattle of bolts and keys as the man unlocked the door. As soon as it started to swing open, we pushed through, holding onto our captive. The man inside toppled as Al hit him with two slugs from the silenced Makarov, then rushed forward to lower the body gently to the floor. We all noticed the smell, a stench of rotting humanity and sewage that almost knocked you over. Al looked at me and pulled a face. I nodded.

"Yeah, I know. It's disgusting, and they keep men in here. Cover my back. I'll go on inside. This guy will know where to find Joe, and when I come back, I don't want to find a dozen ugly Russians with guns waiting to fill us full of holes."

"You got it."

He withdrew into the shadows. Anyone who happened along would fail to notice a stranger lurking in the castle dungeon. Their first and last warning would come when Al's 9mm Makarov rounds drilled into them. I pushed the guard forward, holding my pistol out of sight but pressed into his kidneys.

"Amerikanskiy, seychas!" *The American, now!*

"Da, da."

I followed him along flagstone corridors, a testament to the medieval origins of the castle. They'd fitted heavy steel doors into the walls at intervals. Cell doors, with a tiny barred opening for the turnkeys to look in on their charges. We passed a guard point. A man in uniform pants, and wearing just a stained, ragged vest over his upper body, was snoring in a battered wooden chair. I didn't even slow, just popped him as we raced past. The man in front of me flinched at the meaty sound of the bullets striking the victim's flesh. Maybe he thought that sound would be the last thing he heard before I shot him. He was lucky. I didn't intend to kill him. The only guards I wanted dead were those who had to go down. We couldn't allow hostiles to remain in our rear when we pulled out. Not if we wanted to live.

He finally stopped at a door in a deeper part of the dungeon that was extraordinarily dark. The stench was even worse, a thick, cloying invisible fog that threatened to block the lungs and prevent breathing. He used his bunch of keys and opened the door. In the far corner, a small figure lay curled in a fetal position on a heap of stinking, rat infested straw. I pushed the guard ahead of me, and keeping him covered, knelt down to take a look.

Joe Nguyen, or what was left of him. He'd been beaten so badly his entire body, head to toe, was damaged. Every part of him was cut, bruised, and in some areas, blood was still oozing out of the deep gashes. I knelt closer.

"Joe, can you hear me? It's John. We've come for you."

He didn't reply, and although he wasn't unconscious, I reasoned his mind was somewhere else. Wherever it was, it was a long way away from the sea of pain they'd inflicted on him. I gripped the guard by his lapels fueled by rage, and with a huge effort, managed not to shoot him on the spot.

"Pick him up!"

Again, the Makarov PB magic translator worked like a charm. He knew what I wanted and picked Joe up, cradling him in his arms like a baby. I nodded toward the door, and we left the cell. As I went to walk away, a voice called softly, "Mister."

It was the cell opposite Joe's. A man was looking out of the small Judas window that was open. I cursed. The last thing we needed was another prisoner creating a racket and waking up the entire castle. I walked over, pushing the guard before me. He still carried Joe in his arms, and I noted he was very careful with my friend.

Good, he's grasped the way he needs to behave if he wants to live.

"What is it?"

"Please, open the door. Let me out of here, so I can free my comrades."

I shook my head. "Friend, this isn't a prison break. We're here for this one guy. He doesn't belong in here."

He was tall, broad shouldered, a man who had once been big and well muscled. Now his dark, brooding face had lines etched into it from the long period of privation he'd endured.

"You think any of us belong in this place? We're political prisoners. Ukrainians who dared to oppose the pro-Russians who took over the region."

"What was your sentence?"

A dry chuckle, "There is no exit from this prison. Only death. You know they were going to shoot your friend in the morning?"

"I guessed it was something like that."

"Please. Open the door, and let me free my people. Give us a chance to live."

I only hesitated for another second. Then I used the key to open the door. He looked pretty beaten up, not as shocking as Joe, but not a great deal better. He nodded his thanks and started opening the cell next to his.

"Did they torture you, too?" I called to him.

He didn't turn around. "They torture every prisoner in Inkerman. It is, how you Americans say, SOP." *Standard Operational Procedure*

"Understood. Listen, we have to get out of here and get some medical attention for our friend." I thought of the men we'd shot, as well as Dragan's butcher's bill, "If you want to save yourselves, you'll find plenty of dead guards lying around. You might find their weapons will come in handy."

He turned. "We will put them to good use. My thanks, American, my name is Stepan Sikorski."

"John Raider. Good luck."

"And you."

He continued unlocking the cell doors. I forced the guard to speed up, carrying Joe back through the stone-flagged corridors to reach the main door. We were almost there when I heard Dragan's voice in the earpiece. The signal was terrible.

"John, we have a problem. A military truck just started to drive up the track toward the prison."

"Any idea what they're up to? Has there been any kind of an alert?"

"Nothing yet."

My eyes rested on the guard, and I had an idea. "Dragan, talk to this guy. He's one of the guards. See if you can make sense of it."

I ripped out the earpiece plug and held the satphone up to his head so he could talk. He was still holding Joe, which made it hard for him to try anything; as well as my Makarov that I pressed against his balls as an added incentive to tell the truth. I couldn't help smiling to myself; maybe he'd like a 9mm circumcision.

They talked for a few minutes, and the guard nodded at me to take over the phone.

"He says it's the firing squad, six men. They're due to shoot a condemned prisoner at dawn."

"I assume it was Joe."

A pause. "Yes, he said they were there for the American."

I thought for a few moments. "Can you get up here in the next two or three minutes?"

"I'll try."

"You'll need to do more than that. Get here and deal with that firing party. As soon as you're in position, shoot the bastards, all of them. We can't risk any leakers. If one of them escapes, we're all in the shit."

"I will come at once."

"Right. Start shooting as soon as you're ready. And you can end this call. I need to talk to my men."

A click, and he'd gone. I called Waite, who was guarding the outer gate, and told him what was on the way. I also said Dragan was going to do."

"Six of 'em? Yeah, we can't guarantee he'll get them all. What do you want me to do?"

"Close the gates. That'll stall them, and when Dragan gets here, he can kill them from the rear."

"Understood. If they start shooting, you know this place will come alive."

"There's not a lot we can do. If it happens, we deal with it. Let's hope Dragan is as good as he thinks he is."

"Right. I'll get the gates."

We reached Al and started across the courtyard. The guard was unfit and staggering under the weight of his burden. Several times he stumbled with his load, but the fear of a bullet if he dropped Joe helped him recover. It was as if it was the only thing in his life that mattered. In that, he was correct. We reached the gatehouse, and I sent Waite and Al to target the newcomers.

"Go to the top of the wall. See if you can get a shot. Just in case Dragan doesn't get here in time. I'll stay here with Joe and this guy."

They rushed away, and I waited to see how things worked out. A minute later, it had all gone haywire. Why do problems always come in threes? The first of them came when the satphone rang.

"This is Dragan. I have a problem."

"What is it?"

"A breakdown truck has stalled on the road. I believe it was heading for the scene of that accident I saw earlier. I can't get past. They're trying to clear it, but there are soldiers everywhere directing the traffic back into the city."

"Understood, do your best. Get back here ASAP."

"I will try."

Whammy number two hit us only seconds after he ended the call. The satphone rang again.

"It's Al. Those soldiers are banging on the gate for it to be opened. They're already suspicious. They won't wait much longer before they start shouting for help.

"Hang in there. Dragan's held up. He may make it."

"The fuck he won't!" He sounded exasperated, "What do you expect us to do? Sing to them?"

"Why can't you shoot them?"

"Some of them are behind the truck. We don't have line of sight. We need Dragan."

"Just do your best."

I knelt down to check on Joe. The last thing we wanted was for him to die on us when we'd got him this far. Right at that moment, whammy number three hit like a crack of thunder.

The eerie wail of the Inkerman Castle alarm siren sounded, an ear-splitting cacophony. They'd rumbled us. If we didn't get out soon, we were dead.

Chapter 7

Luxe Hotel Presidential Suite, Sevastopol, Ukraine – April 2014

"My friend, it is good to see you."

Orlov nodded at the head of security, Malenkov, and then walked forward to shake hands with his boss. "Mr. President, thank you for inviting me here. How can I help you?"

Putin's sour expression softened, and he looked thoughtful. "Things are going according to plan. Crimea is in uproar, and the people are calling on Mother Russia to come to their aid. More troops are crossing the border even now, to restore order, of course, nothing more. Your patriots have been invaluable, taking over military installations. All that is necessary is for my troops to follow them in to keep order. It's a perfect plan, brilliantly executed. We make a good team, Grigory."

"Thank you. I'm always pleased to help, Mr. President."

"And you have helped, immensely. However, things are moving fast, and I have a new task for you. I want the rest of Ukraine."

Orlov counted himself a clever man, one who was able to read his President's mind. It was what made him so valuable, taking action often before the order was given. However, this time he was astonished.

"Ukraine? An invasion?"

Putin shrugged. "Why not? For five hundred years, Ukraine has changed hands more times than people can count. For much of the time the country belonged to Russia, which gives us a good claim on it. I'm not talking about declaring war, like the Nazis in 1941. Far from it, I'm suggesting only entering Ukraine when unrest and violence has got out of control. And only then, when the government requests our help."

"They'll never request help from Russia," Orlov objected, "They're a bunch of fascists, Nazis, all of them."

"An illegal crowd of fascists," Putin reminded him, "The President of Ukraine is Viktor Yanukovich, who is currently my guest in Moscow. If events are properly managed, he will return to Kiev to retake the reins of power, and we will give him the assistance he requests to put an end to the chaos and bloodshed. My understanding is when he returns; he will request us to provide a permanent Russian military presence in the country, specifically on the Western borders. Lviv, Odessa, Kiev, those are the kinds of locations I have in mind. A wall to keep out NATO, should they ever think to invade."

"You want to make it a buffer state."

"Of course. If NATO decides to mount an attack, while they are fighting their way through Ukraine, turning it into a smoking ruin, we will have time to organize our military response before they put a single foot on Russian soil."

"The Ukrainians won't like it, Mr. President. They'll go crazy. You know how keen they are to become part of Western Europe."

"Some of them, not all. Moreover, once their country is a battle zone, they'll have their own civil war. Brother fighting brother, whole towns reduced to rubble. It'll be as bad as the war in Syria. Worse. Once they've suffered a few thousand casualties, they'll reconsider. Believe me, there'll be no objection to us coming in and building a few bases."

"There is a problem, Sir. The chaos is here, in Crimea. Ukraine is relatively stable."

"That's your job, Grigory. There are plenty of Russian sympathizers in Kiev and other parts of Ukraine, tens of thousands of people loyal to Mother Russia. I want them armed. Get them on the streets and start shooting at anyone who dares to oppose them."

"You want me to foment civil war?" Orlov looked incredulous. Crimea was one thing, with a solid majority of Russians, but Ukraine was something else. "You know what it'll mean? Thousands of casualties, the infrastructure destroyed. Is that what you want?"

The sour expression returned. "What I want is a strong defense against a Western attack. I want them to request Russian bases in Western Ukraine. "

"I'm not certain NATO would ever attack us, Mr. President."

"Is that right? Have you forgotten the lessons of the Great Patriotic War? Stalin thought the Nazis would never attack, and look what happened. Thirty million Russian lives lost. I want you to make certain Ukraine is turned into a cesspit of trouble. They'll be begging Moscow to rush to their aid."

"How soon shall I begin, Sir?"

"Immediately. Go to Kiev, and start arming the pro-Russian citizens. Give them every inducement to fight the illegal usurpers who have ousted their President from power. Weapons, positions of power in the new government, you know how it works."

"I will leave at dawn, Mr. President. There are already a number of pro-Russians inside Ukraine; I can order them to begin immediately. We can reinforce them as fast as we can provide them with weapons. Once the armed gangs begin making trouble, we'll be able to build on it almost overnight. Pour petrol on the flames."

"Good. There is another matter. I intend to make a tour of the cities and towns, show them the face of their new allies. It should help give them the right impression, that we Russians are supporting our fellow Slavs in Ukraine. Do not fail me, my friend. I have great plans for you. Don't force me to make you an enemy. Is that clear?"

His stare was cold. The meaning was clear. This wasn't friendship. It was business. In Russia, business was tantamount to war.

"Of course, Mr. President."

Inwardly, he seethed. No matter how hard he worked, it would only need one failure to finish everything. His arrest and imprisonment would be a certainty if he made a single misstep, unless the President was no longer in power. He chuckled to himself.

Yes, all things are possible. Perhaps even probable.

He smiled warmly at Putin and left the room.

Until then, Yuri Malenkov had remained silent. Now, he intervened.

"Sir, this is impossible. This place is a war zone; you cannot show yourself in public. Someone is sure to make an attempt on your life."

Putin waved away his protest. "Yuri, it is your job to make certain they do not. It is vital I show myself to the people, so like it or not, this tour is going ahead. My good friend Dimitry Minin is in line to become the President of the Crimea, under the new administration, and he will accompany me. The people need to see their

leaders. They cannot think we are so afraid we hide ourselves behind steel barricades."

"Even so, Sir, if..."

"Enough!" he snapped out, "The arrangements are made, and there will be a public announcement at 0900 tomorrow. The tour will go ahead. If anyone is likely to be a threat, you know what to do."

He nodded. "Of course. I will make arrests of anyone..."

"Arrests? If this scum threatens to shoot their leaders, they do not deserve to live. Get rid of them, but quietly. Make sure they are not able to threaten us again."

"Yes, Mr. President."

Inkerman Castle, Crimea, Ukraine – April 2014

Soldiers were racing down the stairs from the upper rooms of the castle keep where they evidently had their barracks. The men outside, the firing squad, were shouting for us to open the gate, and someone was banging repeatedly on the woodwork for us to open it. Al and Waite raced back to join me.

"We can't target them from up there. They're too close to the walls. We'll have to take them from down here."

"Roger that. We'll wait for them to come to us."

"You sure you don't want me to raise the drawbridge?" Al shouted, as we reached his position next to the gate.

"Negative. The only way out of here is across that bridge. And we have to consider the men coming from the upper levels of the keep. We'll be caught in a crossfire."

I ducked as the first shots from the keep buzzed and whined around us. Three soldiers had reached the cobbled courtyard, recognized us as hostiles, and opened fire. We dived back into the tiny gatehouse and prepared to defend ourselves against the inevitable attack. I was tempted to make a break for it across the drawbridge, but they'd shoot us down before we even tangled with the soldiers outside. We had a long way to run to reach our transport, parked out of sight at the bottom of the track.

Waite and Al took turns firing burst after burst at the hostiles to stop them rushing us, but their reply was to increase the rate of fire so that we were under constant heavy fire.

"They can do what they want, and there's not a damn thing we can do," Al pointed out, "If they decide to attack this gatehouse, we won't even see them coming."

I nodded a reply. I was thinking furiously. It came down to one chance, and one chance only.

"We'll have to open the gates and make a break for it, try and hit those men outside on the run."

They both looked at me as if I was crazy.

"John, there's about twenty hostiles in front of us, and a half dozen behind. There are three of us, and we'll be carrying a casualty. You're talking about suicide."

"What else do you suggest? Surrender? Let them do to us what they did to Joe? I'd sooner go down fighting."

"Me too," Waite growled, "There's no way these mothers are going to take me alive."

I decided to look out the doorway and see what they were doing before I made a final decision. As I poked my head out, a storm of gunfire tore chips from the stonework around me. I pulled back, but they kept on firing. The torrent of fire was astonishing, forcing us to keep our heads undercover. If they were planning to rush us, it would have been easy. They'd brought up at least one light machine gun, and there was no way we could return fire in the teeth of the sheets of bullets that slashed all around us.

"It doesn't look so good. Maybe making a run for it isn't the best plan."

"No shit," Al said, keeping his face poker straight, "So what's plan B?"

Before I could explain there was no plan B, the firing stopped. We could hear shouts and screams coming from across the courtyard. There was sporadic shooting, but the machine guns had stopped. Al glanced out to look. I saw his body stiffen, and his astonished gasp.

"Holy shit! Take a look at this."

Waite and I peered out. We stared at the castle keep, and no one shot at us. They weren't able to shoot at anyone. Stepan Sikorski was leading a bunch of released prisoners, and they were attacking the garrison. It was more a bloodbath than an attack. The word 'massacre' came to mind. As I watched, another score of prisoners armed with pistols, rifles, and even staves of wood, surged out of the dungeons to make a despairing attack on a line of eight soldiers. The garrison troops returned fire, and four prisoners went down, but the rest of them charged home; sixteen men, lightly armed, taking on trained troops. Yet the soldiers stood no chance against their desperate ferocity.

The prisoners screamed, ululated, and drove forward. Two more went down, but the last of them reached the line and attacked. They fought like maniacs, which they probably were, driven mad by the cruel brutality of the guards. A bunch broke off from Sikorski's group and joined their fellow prisoners, and the real killing started.

They hacked into the garrison troops, using pistols, knives, clubs, even their teeth. The soldiers fell back slowly, attempting to fight off the feral savages who were mauling them to death. I watched a prisoner shot twice, once in the leg, the second time in the side of his body, and still he crawled forward, his arms reaching out to seize his tormentor and tear him apart. The soldier tried to drag out his pistol; an assault rifle was useless when fighting at close quarters, man-to-man, but the surging crowd around him trapped his arm, and he screamed shrilly as the prisoner stabbed forward with a crude blade.

Probably a shiv, a sharpened piece of steel modified by prison inmates to use as a weapon. He dragged it repeatedly across the man's face. His nose hung in bloody shreds of skin, and one of his eyes hung down as the roughened metal gouged out the eyeball. When he tried to hold off the fearsome weapon with his hand, the

prisoner dragged the rough blade across the wrist so that blood spurted and began to pool on the floor.

Inside the struggling crowd, prisoners fought to savage their hated opponents. Weapons were ignored as they resorted to primitive methods to defend, attack, wound, and maim. It was an opportunity. There was only one option open to us. We took it.

"Waite, open the gate, and then stand back. Let those guys outside come on in and join in the fun."

He looked at the bloodbath in front of us and smiled. "You got it."

He pressed the button, the motor started up, and the gate began to slide across. When it was only a couple of meters wide, the leader of the firing party led his men through the gap. He was still unaware of what had happened inside the castle; only that something had gone wrong.

"About fucking time you got that gate open!" he snarled. Then he spotted a couple of prisoners scrapping with two soldiers, "What is this, you want us to break the heads of some of these animals?"

He hadn't noticed we weren't soldiers, but we understood his meaning. In the dim light, he only saw the pitched battle being fought in one corner of the courtyard, a battle that could only have one outcome, for they were soldiers. Professionals. What chance could these prisoners have? I waved an invite to him, and he led them past us in a rush. The men made it halfway across the cobbled stones and stopped, making a rough assessment of what was happening right in front of their eyes. Their horror struck expressions were almost laughable. In front of them, they could see their deaths.

He screamed, "Back, back!"

They rushed back toward the gate, looking around wildly, their rifles raised ready to fire. I was tempted to race out and engage them, but there was no need. The prisoners had seen them. Stepan Sikorski took in the situation at a glance and shouted to his men, still fighting to the death with the garrison. Some of them detached and rushed at the firing party, who made the fatal mistake of hesitating. The prisoners charged.

"What do we do?" Al asked, "Should we lend a hand?"

"They don't need a hand. The only help anyone needs is that firing party, and they're not getting it from us. You could maybe say a prayer for them, but with what they came here to do, I wouldn't bother."

Al shook his head. "Me neither. This is a time to take a back seat."

The firing party came to a fast decision. Their sergeant barked an order, and they tossed down their rifles and put up their hands, screaming they'd surrendered. The prisoners didn't even break stride. They leapt forward like charging leopards; ready to mete out the same treatment to the men they had themselves given to the prisoners.

The two groups of men met, and another bloodbath ensued. Sikorski was leading them, wielding a homemade axe, a heavy chunk of sharpened steel fastened to a wooden shaft. Like the weapon used by the Red Indian tribes of the United States. Even earlier, the Vikings, who marauded across Europe and held whole populations in terror, would have used a similar weapon. The axe fell, and

the sergeant put up a hand to ward off the blow. The blade sliced through his hand, and two of his fingers rolled into the dust.

He screamed and brought up his other hand to protect him, but Stepan changed direction, swerving the weapon in midair to bring it in from a different angle. It sliced into the man's chest. He screamed again and beat furiously at Sikorski to push him away, but he may as well have tried to fight off a tornado. Weeks and months of brutal treatment and torture had taken their toll, and the man was in a furious, yet controlled rage. The axe swung again, and he buried it in the sergeant's skull. Chips of bone mixed with brain matter and blood spewed onto the ground. The man fell into the ghastly pool that had come from inside his own head.

The other prisoners made short work of the rest of the firing party, and the battle at the castle keep had all but ended. Prisoners were mopping up the last of the fallen, finishing them off with slashing knife strokes or single bullets to the head. Stepan Sikorski glanced around, and when he'd satisfied himself they were all dead, glanced at me.

"My thanks, American. We couldn't have done this without your help."

"You did it all. It's your fight. However, a word of warning, they'll be here with reinforcements, sooner rather than later. I'd get out of here if I were you."

"Yes, we will. Although where we'll go in this godforsaken country now the Russians have arrived in force, I have no idea. What's the situation in the rest of Ukraine? Is Yanukovych still using his secret police to smash down our protests?"

"You don't know?"

He shook his head, so I explained that Yanukovych had fled, but the Russians had arrived in force to occupy the major strategic installations. "It looks to me as if Crimea is about to become a colony of Russia. Eastern Ukraine is in uproar, and that could fall at any time. You need to get across to Western Ukraine if you want to be safe."

"Safe! This is my country. If the bastard Russians have invaded, we have to stay and fight."

"My friend, you should know it's time to run, so you can live and fight another day," Al told him, "Since we came to Crimea, we've seen Russian troops and local militia, and they're all spoiling for a fight. They're also well armed, and in the case of the Russians, well trained. Almost certainly some of them will be Spetsnaz."

He thought for a few moments. "Maybe you're right. We need to get out of Crimea, at least until we can regroup."

As he turned away, I felt sorry for him. Getting out of Inkerman Castle was one thing, fighting his way out of Crimea, armed with only what weapons and ammunition they could scavenge was another. His men, like him, were starved, emaciated, and a few of them were struggling even just to draw breath.

"Hold it!"

He stopped and looked back.

I turned to Waite Sullivan. "You'll have to manage without your satphone. I need a spare for these guys."

"Whatever."

He handed me the phone, and I gave it to Stepan. "You'll be able to keep in contact with this. Anything you need, call us. You know of Alexander Dragan. We're working for him."

He looked puzzled. "Dragan? Isn't he the rich man who abandoned Ukraine and went to America?"

"He didn't abandon Ukraine, not entirely. He's trying to help the people here, and he may be able to assist you."

He looked me in the eyes. "I know little of this Dragan, but you have enabled us to live again. I'm not certain why you are here. Only that it is not just for breaking one man out of his cell, unless he is related to the President of the United States."

"He's a friend, that's all. Anything you need, call us on the satphone."

He held out a hand, and I took it. We wished each other a safe journey.

I assumed he'd assemble his men into a fighting unit and get out fast; probably head north, out of Crimea and into Western Ukraine. We had other business that required our attention. I went back to the gate.

"The SUV is down the hill. The quicker we find it and load up and get out of here, the better. Let's move out."

"What about me?"

I looked at the guard. He was kneeling next to Joe, who was stretched out on the ground.

"Wait until we've gone, then you're free to leave."

"No, please! Take me with you. I beg you."

He was watching the escaped prisoners. Some were still in the courtyard, looting the bodies. Others were inside the keep itself, making a check for anyone they'd missed. The screams and occasional shots suggested they were having some success. I understood his terror. If we left him, they'd fall on him like a pack of wolves. No more than he deserved, but still, I'd promised to spare his life. I nodded.

"You can stay with us until we reach our vehicle. Then you're on your own."

"Thank you, thank you."

I interrupted his tears of gratitude. "Pick up our friend and carry him down the track. Don't drop him, unless you want us to leave you here."

"I will be careful."

I'll bet.

We walked out the castle, across the drawbridge, and started down the track. Only to discover we'd missed one man, one of the firing squad, the man who'd been left to guard the vehicle. As we walked past, he popped up from behind cover and snapped off a shot. We were carrying our weapons, loaded and ready, and we fired virtually at the same time. The fool, if he'd kept quiet he may have lived, but he panicked. Our combined fire shredded him, but even as he fell, I heard the meaty 'smack' as a bullet found human flesh.

"Who's hit?"

Waite nodded at the body on the ground. The guard carrying Joe had taken the bullet straight through the back of the head. By an extraordinary fluke, he'd turned away when the shooter appeared. His head blocked the bullet that would have hit Joe plumb in the center of his chest. Al was with Joe. He'd seen the guard start to topple and dived over to grab him before he fell to the rocky ground.

I helped them lift him back up, and to my relief, he was conscious. He tried a grin, but it was weak, very weak.

"I think I can manage on my own now."

"Forget it. Waite, lend me a hand with him. Al, go ahead and make sure we don't run into any more nasty surprises."

"Copy that."

We went slowly down the track, and every step took us further from the bloody castle and closer to the G Wagon; our ticket away from the devastation and death behind us. Al reached the vehicle first and waved to indicate we were clear. We helped Joe onto the back seat, and minutes later we were driving toward the city of Sevastopol. One huge question nagged at my mind.

Where the hell is Dragan?

Aeroflot Building, Sevastopol, Ukraine – April 2014

He watched the hotel opposite and cursed. This night should have seen the end of the operation, with the target obliterated. Instead, he was still on the roof of this cursed building, watching a closed drape.

He considered whether to wait a further hour but decided against it. He needed to leave this place and look for an alternative kill zone. He'd been back several times, and there was always a risk someone would see him. It was time to move on. He started to take apart the rifle, when abruptly the drape masking the window opposite jerked aside.

He'd removed the sniper scope, and now he put it to his eye, using it as a telescope. It was the target. President Vladimir Putin, the man who'd orchestrated the invasion of Crimea, standing in plain view. Another man stood next to him, and they appeared to be arguing. The stern faced Russian President turned to gaze out the window, to admire the nighttime view over Sevastopol. Especially when that view included the mighty Black Sea Fleet at anchor.

The other man was probably arguing for the President to step back from the window, which invited a bullet from any man with a gun who happened to be in the vicinity.

He smiled to himself; *Putin will never know how good that advice was.*

He slotted the scope back on the rifle, leaned the barrel against a low wall to steady the weapon, and took aim. The Russian's face filled the lenses, and he fixed the center of the crosshairs on his nose. At this range, he couldn't miss. He gently squeezed the trigger.

Even as he fired, he knew he'd missed. The security man appeared to have lost patience with his President and angrily jerked him away from the window. The shot went clean through the glass and buried itself in the wall opposite. Abruptly, the drapes closed with a jerk.

Luxe Hotel Presidential Suite, Sevastopol, Ukraine – April 2014

"Get down! Mother of God, there's a sniper out there!"

Yuri Malenkov threw Putin to the floor and dived on top of him. In the same moment he dragged out his radio.

"Sniper, sniper! Somewhere nearby, a rooftop, get outside and check the buildings across the street. He missed, thank God, but next time we may not be so lucky. Find that shooter, and kill him!"

He checked there was no way anyone could see into the room, but still he made Putin crawl across the carpet until he was away from the window. Both men stood up.

"It seems I owe you an apology, Yuri."

Malenkov shook his head, angry that an assassin could have come so close.

"I do what you pay me for, Sir. Nevertheless, after this, we must be more careful of your personal security. About that tour tomorrow, you must consider cancelling it."

Putin was already shaking his head. "I told you, these people will see that we are not the aggressors, and I am not afraid to show my face on the streets of Crimea."

"But..."

"No buts. Yuri, I want you to round up everyone in the region who may be a threat to my person. I mean everyone, no matter how small the evidence. Lock them up, somewhere deep and dark. Make sure they don't see the light of day until I've left the area."

"It will be done, Sir. However, I will need to call in more troops from Russia. We're talking about a major police action, involving thousands of arrests."

"Do it. It's time we put the screws on this place. Those extra troops, I'll sign an order that will station them here permanently. It's time these bastards learned who's in control."

Malenkov nodded. "I'll lock Crimea down so tightly, these people won't even breathe without asking us permission. Mr. President, about your accommodation. It's not safe for you to stay here. May I suggest you move to a more secure location?"

Putin nodded. "What did you have in mind?"

"There is a cruiser, part of the Black Sea Fleet. You could..."

"No way! I want something more comfortable than a fucking warship. Eating military rations has never impressed me. There has to be another way."

"There is another possibility. Your friend, the oligarch Vasily Stolypin, has recently arrived here. His boat dropped anchor earlier today. She's lying offshore, close to where the Black Sea Fleet is at anchor. He has a seventy-meter yacht; people say it is one of the most luxurious in the world. It is also equipped with state-of-the-art communications, and it even has a helicopter pad on the top deck. I could call him, and you could transfer to his yacht for the duration of your stay here."

He nodded. "Do it. Tell Vasily I want his chopper here inside thirty minutes. Find a boat, and send some of my guards to go aboard his yacht and make it secure."

"Of course, Mr. President. And the tour of Crimea, may I inform the media it is cancelled?"

"You may not. The tour goes as planned. You'd better make sure there are no more mistakes with security. Not if you value your job."

"Yes, Sir."

Inwardly, Malenkov raged. He'd told Putin repeatedly about staying away from exposed windows, and now the President blamed him, even though he'd saved his life. It was the cross all security chiefs had to bear. Too much security and the principal would blame you for smothering them. Not enough security and they would blame you when someone started taking potshots at them.

Fortunately, the pay was good. Not to mention the substantial sums he earned in kickbacks from grateful businessmen. His job made it possible to arrange introductions to Putin, and they paid dearly for a brief conversation with the President of Russia. Soon, he would retire to his dacha outside Moscow. All he had to do was live long enough for it to happen.

Aeroflot Building, Sevastopol, Ukraine – April 2014

He kept calm and carefully disassembled the VSS Vintorez rifle, putting each of the component parts into its place in the soft foam interior of the briefcase. Finally, he snapped the lid closed, and made a last check. He wasn't worried about fingerprints; he'd always worn thin surgical gloves.

He made certain he'd left nothing to give away his identity, put his coat on and left. He was just a business executive strolling home from a late-night meeting. He walked through the almost empty, dark streets of Sevastopol and reached the house where he was staying. It was a long walk, almost two miles, but he'd avoided the temptation to use a vehicle. Vehicles could be traced. And cab drivers could be questioned.

Inside the house, he poured himself a glass of wine and settled down to relax. The adrenaline was still surging around his body, and he knew there'd be little chance of any sleep for many hours. It had been close, very close. It was unfortunate the security man had pushed the target out of the way just as he fired. However, he was philosophical. These things happened. What was more important was to stay cool and wait patiently for the next opportunity.

He spent the time going over his plans for the kill. He needed an alternative approach, but until he had an idea of Putin's movements, it would be difficult. The only two places he knew the Russian President could be found were the hotel, which was now a hot zone, and the naval base that was impregnable.

Still wrestling with the problem, he turned on the television. The news was alive with pictures of Putin. There was no mention of the attempted assassination, but there was one story that made him sit up and watch closely.

'President Putin plans to tour Crimea with Dimitry Minin, who is hotly tipped to be the future Crimean President. The itinerary starts in Sevastopol, and then moves on to Simferopol, the administrative capital. The President is keen to meet the people and listen to any concerns they may have about continuing aggression from Western Ukraine.'

The screen showed a photo of Putin, a characteristic bare-chested pose; the iconic action man hunting bear in Siberia. Then it changed to an image of a

building, the Sevastopol Art Museum in Prymorsky Boulevard. Nearby was the Cathedral of Saint Vladimir. Appropriately named, and a perfect place from which to make a sniper stand. The building was thirty-two meters high, so he would have a good vantage point from which would make it simple to set up a long distance kill.

Can he be so stupid as to show himself in public so soon after the narrow escape? Yes, it's possible. The man's protected behind layers of troops and police, and they may well assume it's enough to prevent a second attempt.

He switched off the television and poured himself another glass of wine. Now he had a plan, he felt able to relax. Within a day, maybe two, the target would be dead, and his mission would be over.

Sevastopol, Ukraine – April 2014

As we neared the city, a number of military and police vehicles raced in the opposite direction, heading toward the devastation we'd left at Inkerman Castle. I hoped Stepan Sikorski managed to get his people clear before the area was saturated with angry troops. They'd be under orders to shoot anything that looked remotely suspicious, including anyone who looked like an escaped prisoner.

They stopped us one klick outside the city. As Waite slowed, I brought out my gear bag and festooned the interior of the vehicle with the tools of the trade of a photojournalist, tripod partly assembled, camera, and a range of lenses. I'd assumed they'd put up checkpoints, and we were ready for them. Two vehicles, a jeep, and a truck blocked the road. A platoon of wary infantry aimed their rifles at us, and an NCO waved us to a stop.

It was a cursory inspection. They were hunting the emaciated, ragged men who'd escaped from their dungeon. I told them we'd only just arrived in the area on assignment, and we were heading to Sevastopol to find somewhere to stay. They accepted our reason for being on the road late at night, and the sergeant spoke in broken English to give us the name of a decent four-star hotel. Presumably, he had a relative who was the manager. I thanked him, and Al drove on.

"Where to? The safe house?"

"Yeah, we need to locate Dragan, and find out why he abandoned us back there."

I was convinced the Ukrainian billionaire had an alternative agenda. Exactly what it was, I'd no idea. But if he was running around like a loose cannon, it could get us all killed.

We were driving through the suburbs when my satphone rang. I assumed it would be our missing sniper, and I answered.

"Dragan? Where the hell are you?"

"This is Brackman. From headquarters."

It took me a few moments to connect the dots. Brackman? Then it clicked. David Brackman, Andy Lorak's assistant, the undercover Agency man who was also Joe's CIA liaison.

"Yeah, what is it, Brackman? How did you get this number?"

"I talked to Myron Doroshenko and told him I needed to get in touch with you, so he gave it to me. I have a message for you. "

"Where are you? Still in New York City?"

"Yes, a couple of questions. That business he was looking into, the assassination threat, did you come up with anything?"

"Nothing."

"Uh, okay. Maybe there was nothing to it. Any news of Joe?"

"We got him out. He's with us now."

"Is he okay?"

"No, they tortured him. He had a rough time."

"Shit. I'd get one of our doctors to take a look at him, but it could be difficult at short notice. I'll look into it, make a few calls, but I can't promise anything. We're pretty busy, what with the situation over there. Our analysts are working night and day, monitoring the situation. I'll see what we can do."

"Knock yourself out."

Great, send a guy to do a job, and when he gets hurt, who cares? I was revising my opinion of Brackman.

"We'll take care of him, Brackman."

"Right. About the other thing."

"What other thing?"

"Angelina Blass. Isn't she your girlfriend?"

I felt myself go cold. If something had happened to Angelina, I didn't know what I do. My entire world would fall apart.

"That's right. What's happened?"

"She called the Dragan Foundation about twenty minutes ago, trying to contact you."

"Is she in trouble?"

"I'm not sure. She's on a yacht. It belongs to some Russian oligarch called Vasily Stolypin."

"I know, she told me about that. It's a modeling assignment."

"Right. They dropped anchor off Sevastopol, and she told them she wanted to go ashore to see if she could meet up with you. They wouldn't let her leave, said there was some kind of a security clampdown."

I could well imagine. The entire area was filling with troops itching to round up and shoot the prisoners who'd escaped from Inkerman Castle and would be roaming around the countryside. But why would they tighten security in the city, or on a luxury yacht lying offshore? Did they think the prisoners were about to swarm into Sevastopol, or swim out and take over the yacht to make their escape?

"What's she worried about?"

"Things are chaotic there. I doubt there's anything she needs worry about."

As long as she stays on that boat. Why did it have to dock here, in Sevastopol? Stupid bastards.

"She thinks the guy on the yacht may be keeping her on the boat against her will. That's what she said. Like he's a kind of white slaver."

I tried to make sense of it, but one thing I did know. The idea of a billionaire oligarch getting involved in white slavery was absurd, as absurd as a bunch of

half-starved and emaciated prisoners attacking the city and base of the Black Sea Fleet.

There has to be another reason for her concern, but what?

"What are you doing about it, Brackman? You're CIA, you must be able to monitor this thing. She's an American citizen, and she called out to you for help."

"We don't know for sure she's in trouble, Raider."

"And if she is? Jesus Christ, Brackman, she could be in real trouble. You have to help her."

"There's nothing I can do. I'd suggest you report it to the local police."

I reflected bitterly that what we paid our taxes for was a bunch of lazy, self-interested bureaucrats.

Maybe one day he'll be in trouble, and his own agency will hang him out to dry. That'd be a real shame.

There was Angelina's fiery temperament to be considered. As well as being incredibly beautiful, she also had a temper that was liable to erupt like a volcano when she was thwarted. I put it to the back of my mind. There had to be a simple reason for it all. I took her cell number from David Brackman, but he pleaded lack of resources when I pushed him again to try to get her some help. Meaning a total lack of interest.

I resolved one day I'd get even with the smug bastard. As for Angelina, I'd call her and find out what was the deal.

If anyone lays a hand on her, he'll be better off with Orlov after him than me.

"We're there," Al said.

I climbed out of the Mercedes and looked around. The street was empty, devoid of all life. There were one or two lights burning outside the houses, but no noise, no sign of any threat. The safe house was showing a light from the living room, so I assumed Dragan was back. The bastard had plenty to explain.

We eased Joe out of the vehicle, and Waite helped me carry him to the house. We went in, and Al started working on Joe's injuries. Dragan was dozing in an armchair. He woke suddenly, grabbing for his briefcase as he saw us. His eyes widened with what looked like relief.

"You made it! I was worried you wouldn't be able to get out of Inkerman Castle."

"We nearly didn't, thanks to you. What happened?"

"I told you! I was held up behind a truck that was broken down on that narrow highway. A bunch of troops was redirecting traffic, and I had no choice but to head back to Sevastopol. I've been here ever since."

"You could have called."

He shrugged. "I thought you might be busy."

Waite Sullivan's expression darkened, and I stepped in to prevent him from physically attacking him. Right then, I didn't care whether he lived or died. I didn't believe a word of his story, although with the amount of troops running around the area, I had to admit it was possible. What I did care for was my daughter, Abigail. Without his money, she was lost.

"Give it a rest, Waite. Maybe there was a problem on that road."

He snorted. "A problem! You saw it when we left. The road was empty."

"Maybe they had time to clear it. Give him the benefit of the doubt."

He glared at Dragan, and I heard him mutter, "Sonofabitch," under his breath. But he turned away, and the confrontation ended.

Dragan beckoned me to follow him, and I left the other two men tending to Joe. We walked through into the back room.

"What's so secret you can't discuss it in front of the other men, Dragan?"

He looked embarrassed. "I know they're angry over my no-show at the castle, so I thought I'd discuss this with you first. Tomorrow, we need to move on to the second objective, Orlov."

I shrugged. "We all know that. There's no secret."

"Yes, that's true, but since I've been back, there've been developments."

"What kind of developments?"

"I contacted Myron Doroshenko to establish the exact whereabouts of Grigory Orlov. The problem is, he's disappeared. Gone."

"Surely with all the resources you have at your disposal, it won't take long to locate him."

"Myron says he's vanished completely. He's not in Crimea. That's for certain. We don't know where he went, or why."

"It's your problem, Dragan. What do you plan to do about it?"

We have to go to the third objective, the people who killed Lev Shevchenko and his wife. Dimitry Minin."

"Whatever." I was still thinking about Angelina.

Is she in trouble, aboard an oligarch's yacht? It doesn't seem too likely, but still...

"He's likely to be the next president of Crimea. Dimitry Minin. It won't be simple."

"You don't say."

He was shaking his head. "You don't understand. There's an added complication. Vladimir Putin is in town, and he's spending time with Minin."

"So he'll be covered by Putin's Presidential guard."

"Yes. It will make the job much harder."

No shit.

I closed my eyes. This gig was going down the tubes, getting worse by the hour. We'd barely succeeded in extricating Joe Nguyen, and it was only by luck our bodies weren't laid out in the courtyard of Inkerman Castle, riddled with bullets. He was telling me the secondary target had disappeared, and the third target would be covered by security that was virtually impenetrable.

I was tempted to call the whole thing off, right there and then. We had plucked Joe from the castle dungeon, so we'd scored one small victory. We could leave Crimea and get him home safe. But...

It wasn't just the money for Abigail, although that was more important than anything. I also wanted Orlov, the Lord of War. The man behind so much death and misery, often resulting in the deaths of American troops. And then there was the other man, Dimitry Minin. Those images from the rooftop, when I'd seen him urging his people on to slaughter those poor storeowners were still etched in my nightmares. I knew I'd never forget them. I also knew that until someone stopped him, the man would continue with his bloody campaign of genocide. The President of Crimea, it would make him unstoppable.

He was staring at me with anxious expression. "What do you think, can we do it? Kill Minin?"

I felt tired, unbelievably weary. Joe was lying in the front room, badly wounded after his treatment inside Inkerman Castle. There were many more like him, those tortured human skeletons who'd broken out, and even now would be trying to escape the vengeance of the Crimean Russians who were hunting them down. Orlov, the man who would have provided the weapons for those people to carry out mass murder. And Dimitry Minin, who'd happily pull the trigger again; a man who would control an army and an air force if he took power. A man surrounded by a ring of steel.

"I'll sleep on it. We'll talk in the morning."

I checked on Joe and established a rota for one man to stay on watch at all times. Safe house or no, the entire region was a hot zone, crammed with armed men looking for the men behind the attack on the Castle. Then I lay down on the couch and tried to catch some sleep.

They were not dreams; they were nightmares, populated with garish images and tortured faces. Joe's face, covered in blood. The bodies of the men killed in the castle, some of whom deserved to die for the atrocities they inflicted on the inmates. Also, others had not deserved to die, but there was no way to separate them. The inmates themselves, imprisoned because of their political beliefs. I thought of Abigail and her ferocious, vengeful mother, Mariyah. The face of Putin invaded my nightmares and superimposed on top, Grigory Orlov, the architect of mass murder. Suddenly, I was wrenched out of a deep sleep. It was no longer dark. I looked out the window, and dawn had broken.

Angelina! I doubt there's a problem, but this is Crimea, so there's always a possibility.

I checked the time, 0740. Jesus Christ, I'd slept far more than I planned. There was much to do today; first arrange to get Joe to somewhere for medical treatment. That meant out of Crimea, where he was a wanted fugitive. We'd take him to Kiev, probably. Then there was the business of the target list to discuss. I suspected Waite and Al would insist we went ahead. We weren't in the business of failing to fulfill a mission. It wasn't our style. Dragan was awake and watched me as I keyed the number into the satphone. She answered so quickly I thought she must have been waiting for me to call.

"John?" Her voice was strained, not only with the anger that I knew so well when she flew into a rage, but also with fear. That was new. It made me worried.

"Yeah, it's me. What's up, kid?"

I often called her 'kid' even though at twenty-two, she was not that much younger than me. When she was in a joking mood, she'd reply by calling me 'dad'. This time she wasn't in a joking mood.

"John, they're holding me prisoner on the yacht. We're anchored off Sevastopol, and this Russian billionaire, Vasily Stolypin, he won't let me leave."

I smiled to myself, feeling relieved. It sounded like the guy had some sense, not letting a beautiful young woman go ashore into the violence and bloodshed that was Crimea.

"I wouldn't worry about it. The situation in Sevastopol is crazy, people running around killing each other."

Not entirely true, not yet. But I didn't want her in harm's way.

"The chances are if you came ashore you'd be attacked and raped by some drunken soldier."

"No, no! You don't understand."

I could almost hear her stamping her foot in frustration, and I had to hide my amusement.

"What don't I understand?"

"There's this man. He made a pass at me."

"So? You're a beautiful girl. I should think plenty of men make passes at you. I seem to remember I did when I first met you."

"It's not like that," she hissed, "That man, the President, the bastard threatened to send me to a gulag if I didn't do what his friend wanted."

Now I'm confused. What does a gulag have to do with anything?

"Which President?"

"Putin."

I struggled to stay calm.

"The President of Russia is on board the yacht?" I could hardly believe what she'd said.

"He came on board last night, in the early hours. Vasily sent the helicopter to collect him, and a boat brought along his bodyguards. There are about twenty of them, and they're all armed with automatic weapons."

I felt a surge of anger that some jumped up pal of Vladimir Putin was threatening to rape my girlfriend. And the Russian was lending a hand.

"Okay, okay, who is this guy?"

"His name is Dimitry Minin. I doubt you've heard of him."

"Minin, the guy who is standing for President of Crimea."

"Yes, that's him. You know him?"

I covered the mouthpiece. "Dragan, I found Minin. He's on board a yacht, the same one that Angelina's on. Go and tell the others."

I uncovered the mouthpiece. "I know him only by reputation." I thought of Minin standing over the bloody bodies of the Shevchenkos all those months ago.

"Is it a good reputation?"

There was no way to soften the truth. "No, it isn't. Stay near the phone. I'll call you back."

Chapter 8

Sevastopol, Ukraine – April 2014

His cellphone rang, and he answered it. There was no greeting, just a terse, "What went wrong?"

The man murmured, "A last minute problem, his security chief intervened."

"You should have allowed for that. I thought you were the best."

The assassin felt a surge of irritation. "I am the best. But perhaps you should have kept me better informed."

A pause. "You could be right." Orlov decided it was time to be conciliatory. Who knew, one day he may find himself in the sights of this man's rifle? "Things have changed. I doubt you'll get another shot at the target."

"Why not? The fool is touring Crimea to show himself to the people. It is a perfect opportunity."

"It's a trap. His security chief, Malenkov, will flood the region with thousands of security police and troops. He will also travel in a heavily armored limousine. Even if you get a shot, you will not be able to escape. They are certain to capture you."

"And I guess you wouldn't want Putin's men to torture the truth out of me."

Orlov didn't reply. There was no need to state the obvious.

"Does that mean the contract is finished? I will require payment, you know that."

"The contract is not finished. I require you to travel to Kiev."

"Kiev! Why Kiev?"

"Is it a problem?"

"Surely Putin will not show his face in the capital of Ukraine? Not unless he wants to provoke a riot. They hate him there."

"Be patient, my friend. Like the hunter, lay out the bait for your target, and let him come to you. And this target will come, believe me."

"I still don't believe it. It's out of character. He'd spit on Ukraine before he visited the capital."

"Not if it suited him. He has plans in place to achieve his strategic goals, and he needs the Ukrainians to help him get there. He will go on what is called a 'charm offensive'."

Orlov explained in detail. The assassin listened carefully, but he still wasn't satisfied.

"You're certain he'll go to Kiev?"

"No question. You must travel there and finish the job. Your contract will be fulfilled. This time we'll use a different plan. One that will not allow for any mistakes."

"It wasn't my fault, the last time. If that damned security man, Malenkov, hadn't intervened..."

"I'm not interested in the past, only the future. And that future, my friend, belongs to me, and to you, of course."

He only needed a couple of seconds to think about it. "Very well. I will call you for the details when I arrive."

"Do that."

Sevastopol, Ukraine – April 2014

We watched the yacht from a derelict building close to the shore. The structure was some kind of old wartime fortification, a gun emplacement, part of a one-time shore defense battery. It was built of concrete, covered in green mold, weeds, and the inside coated with rust and slime. I could smell rotting seaweed, mixed with a number of unidentifiable odors that suggested it had become little more than a

garbage disposal site. It was cold, wet, and it stank. But it was the ideal forward observation point.

Al had stayed at the safe house with Joe, who was still floating in and out of consciousness. The vessel was enormous, a floating palace, the creation of a fantastic imagination, a shrine to the worship of kitsch. Only new money could wish to own such a freaky craft.

The bows were designed to flare dramatically from each side, almost like the white beak of a large bird of prey. Behind the futuristic curves, a long wood-planked deck occupied more than half the length of the vessel, with a large swimming pool in the center. At the rear, the dark blue, almost black superstructure looked like a scene from a sci-fi movie, all sweeping curves and bubble shapes. It would house the upper living accommodation, main lounge, and navigation bridge. There would be much more below decks, out of sight.

Undoubtedly, a private cinema, more leisure rooms, a gym and sauna, and Christ know what else, a brothel maybe? It wouldn't surprise me.

Soldiers patrolled the decks at regular intervals, and a pair of Black Sea Fleet frigates kept station a few hundred meters away. From time to time, helicopter gunships roared overhead, and I could see observers looking down through binoculars, surveying the area carefully. There was no sign of Putin, or of Angelina. Dragan was lying next to me, watching through his sniper scope.

"That's Minin," he murmured.

I checked out the man who'd just appeared on deck. Even from a distance, I could recognize him. There was no doubt, blonde-haired, the image of a Nazi SS officer, strutting around the yacht and shouting orders at the guards. Slim, erect, blonde hair, blue eyes, the hard-faced killer with Orlov on that fateful day when the Shevchenkos were murdered.

"Yep."

As I watched, a guard pulled a struggling young woman on deck and dragged her across to Minin. I felt my adrenaline surge. It was Angelina. He made a comment to the guard, and she reacted violently, raising a hand to slap his face. He intercepted the blow and punched her hard in the stomach. I felt white-hot rage take over mind, as the guard picked her up and dragged her away. At least she wasn't badly hurt.

Angelina was tough and feisty, in control no matter what situation she was in. As for Minin, if I'd had any regrets before about killing him, I forgot about them. Not only was he a cowardly murderer, he was also an abuser of women. People like him deserved rough justice. The kind I planned to deal out when we got hold of him.

We continued to watch the yacht. Putin suddenly appeared on deck, but only for a few seconds. He climbed into the tiny helicopter. It left the deck and took off toward the city. A score of armed security men, the protection detail, climbed down into a launch, and the vessel roared toward the dock. They'd be going to accompany the Russian President during his tour. I was surprised he'd left Minin almost alone on the yacht, but maybe he'd catch up later after he'd finished with Angelina. I turned to Dragan.

"We need scuba gear to get out there. And I mean now!"

"It may not be possible," he replied, sounding annoyed.

"Then make it possible. If we can get out there while the security detail is onshore, we can eliminate one target, Minin, and get Angelina out of there."

"There'll be other security men on that boat."

"Good! Any more abusers and molesters, bring 'em on. You're wasting time, Dragan. Either you get us that gear, or I'll have to steal a boat to get out there. I hardly think they won't notice a strange craft approaching their yacht. These people aren't fools."

He gave me a sullen nod. "I'll contact Myron and tell him to organize it."

"How soon can you get it here? We need two sets, for me and Waite."

"Two? What about me?"

He was fired up for revenge and could see one of his targets on that yacht out on the Black Sea.

"You'll stay here." I held up a hand to stop the protest, "We'll need sniper cover. It could make or break the mission. How soon can you get the scuba gear here?"

He laughed. "How soon? The question is how much money I throw at it? The more money, the quicker it will come. Those Russian sailors across the water would sell me the gear if I paid them."

"Forget the Russian navy. Just get that gear here fast. We'll need waterproof bags and demolition charges. Nothing too fancy, something we can pack into the bilges."

"Demolition charges? Why do you want to sink the yacht? The owner's done nothing wrong! He would have paid a fortune for that boat."

I hid a smile. A typical billionaire, he wasn't happy about a fellow billionaire taking a big hit.

"We need to hide the evidence of what we do on that boat. It'll take them a couple of days to send divers down and then bring the wreck up for a thorough forensic investigation. Time for us to get a long way away."

He nodded his understanding. "I will instruct Myron to include explosives and detonators."

Dragan made a call to Doroshenko, and they chatted for a couple of minutes in Ukrainian. He ended the conversation and nodded to me.

"It will be here inside of an hour."

It took fifty-five minutes, and a truck drew up outside, emblazoned with images of pipes, taps, and radiators.

A plumber's vehicle, clever!

The driver carried a half-dozen large bags into the building and nodded to Dragan. He was about to leave when I stopped him.

"Tell him to wait. He can take us to the water. It'll be a giveaway walking along the street in this gear."

He reddened and gave me a smile of apology. "I didn't think of that. Sorry."

We unpacked the gear, wetsuits, bottles, regulators, fins, masks, and snorkels. We changed into the wetsuits and shrugged on the tanks and gear. The last task was to stow our folding stock Kiparis assault rifles, the silenced Makarovs, and eight small packages of C4 with pencil detonators in waterproof bags. We were almost ready. Dragan was talking quietly to the driver.

"Does he understand English?"

He shook his head. "He barely understands Ukrainian."

"Fine. Here's how it goes down. Stay here and watch the yacht. I want you ready with that sniper rifle. Tell the driver to take us somewhere close to the shoreline where we can slip into the water unnoticed. Somewhere near a dock where there's deep water. We'll swim out to the yacht, take care of our business, and hopefully bring Angelina out unharmed."

"You must take care of Minin! He cannot be allowed to live."

"We'll find your friend, Minin. He's probably in the same cabin as Angelina."

"And kill him?"

"Oh, yeah."

He looked wistful. "I only wish I was coming with you. I would like to see that bastard's face when I pull the trigger."

"Who knows, you may get the chance. There's something else. If Putin returns while we're on board the yacht, do nothing. You start shooting when he's around, and they'll be all over us. We'll never get off that boat alive."

He stared back at me, and I could see the longing in his eyes."

"I'd like to see him dead."

No shit.

"Just keep your head down if he shows."

He inclined his head. "As you wish."

"And tell the truck driver to return here when he's dropped us off. We may need transport when we've finished."

"I can do that. I will offer to double the fee."

"Make it quadruple."

Sevastopol Harbor, Ukraine – April 2014

It was like swimming through soup. The plumber's truck had dumped us next to an old wooden jetty, and we were able to slide into the water without attracting attention. The big problem came when we started to swim. We had no GPS and no navigation computer, just the bare scuba gear paid for by Dragan. It meant coming to the surface every few minutes to check our course.

Even then, we almost swam past the yacht. The Black Sea was so polluted; visibility was down to little more than a couple of meters. Then I heard a gentle hum through the water and identified it as the yacht's generator, its exhaust venting into the sea. We surfaced and found we'd swum fifteen meters past our objective.

The yacht looked even bigger from the surface, as big as a naval frigate. There were two guards on deck, close enough to see us if they turned their heads, but they were looking for threats coming from the land. I used hand signals to indicate to Waite we'd infil over the stern of the vessel. It was the lowest point, easiest to board, and with luck, there'd be a diving platform to make our job easier.

We ducked below the surface and came up at the rear of the boat. The diving platform was exactly where I'd thought it would be; as if they'd left the back door open. A speedboat hung from davits above the platform, all polished varnish and leather upholstery. I pointed it out to Waite.

"That could be our transport back to shore."

He grinned. "It beats swimming. As long as I can drive."

I led the way, clambered onto the flat deck, and opened the hatch that gave access to the interior of the yacht. We were aboard and in a small cabin lined with diving gear, wetsuits, tanks, and even harpoon guns. Waite and I stripped off our tanks and the rest of the gear, and checked our Kiparis assault rifles, as well as the Makarov PBs. We switched on the satphones and plugged in the earpieces. The phones were our only means of communication. I opened the door and peeked out. There was a long, carpeted passage that was empty. I murmured, "Let's go." I was still nursing my anger over the treatment meted out to Angelina, "And give 'em hell."

We tiptoed along the narrow passage. The rich, thick carpet covering the floor deadened any sound we made. Halfway along we reached a companionway, a staircase leading up to the deck. A man was descending, heavy footsteps, a guard, and we waited. I gave Waite a hand signal, and when the man came into view, he fired. I ran forward and gently lowered the body to the carpet.

Waite had gone for a heart shot. Even if he'd missed the center of the chest, the man would have gone down. He didn't miss. Blood poured out of the wound, and the victim's eyes opened for a second. I debated giving him a shot to finish him, but then he shuddered. More blood spewed out of his mouth, and he died in my arms. Waite helped me drag the body into a cabin next to the companionway. We almost missed the second man.

We opened the door, pulled the body inside, and I was about to tell Waite to lead the way to the front of the boat where I assumed the main cabins would be situated, when he held up a hand. I froze.

"Ivan? Gde ty?" *'Where are you?'*

We waited.

"Ivan, chto eto takoye?" *'What is it?'*

Curiosity can be the death of some people. So it was with this guy. He came down the last few steps and stepped into the passage. He saw Waite, opened his mouth to cry out, and I shot him. It was a brain shot. I was aiming for the bridge of the nose, and at two meters, I couldn't miss. Waite lowered him to the floor, and we dragged him to join his comrade in death. We exited the cabin, Waite closed the door, and I led the way forward.

At the end of the passage we found two doors, one on each side, and another staircase that would take us further into the bowels of the boat. I took the left door and Waite the right, gently eased them open, and dived into the cabins. They were empty. I nodded to the staircase and started down. We reached another passageway, this one even more richly carpeted, so I guessed we were at the heart of the boat, the owner's suite and principal guest cabins.

There was another clue to the importance of this particular area. Two guards standing twenty meters away in front of a cabin door. They were armed with Czech made Skorpion vx 61 submachine guns. Short, stubby weapons, they fired a variant of the 9mm Makarov round. Something like the Israeli Uzi, devastating at short-range, and we were close enough for it to be short-range.

It had to be one of two people in that cabin, the oligarch who owned the yacht or Dimitry Minin, future President of Crimea. Either way, they had to go down. There

was no other way to go forward. Besides, if we left them alive, they'd shoot us down like dogs when we left the boat. I looked at Waite.

"I'll take the man on the left, you take the right. But we need to bring them closer to be sure."

"I'll handle it," he replied.

He raised his pistol and tapped on the brass handrail. Three taps, and the response was immediate.

"Kto tam?" *'Who is there?'*

They were no fools. Instead of falling for the ruse, they stood their ground.

"Kto tam?" one of them shouted again.

Waite grimaced, then ran lightly up the staircase and let out a long series of groans. He sounded like he was dying, and no matter how well trained the men were, they had to respond. He came back down to join me, and we heard them coming closer. They were whispering to each other, and from the sound of their voices, they were puzzled. We waited until they were close. Then we stepped out.

Two big men dressed like nightclub bouncers in black suits, white shirts, and black bow ties. They had their guns pointed straight ahead at us, but we had a fraction of a second's advantage. It's called the benefit of surprise. We fired two suppressed shots each. Both men went down. They had their weapons on safe, preventing a reflex trigger action firing off a loud shot to alert the entire vessel. Waite checked them while I covered us.

"Both dead. You want to hide the bodies?"

"There's no time. We've been lucky so far. We have to finish this before whoever is in that cabin comes out to check what's going on."

We went to the end of the passage, and I put my ear to the door. Someone was talking, a man, speaking accented English. A female voice replied, and I felt a wash of relief.

Angelina! We've found her.

I put my head close to Waite and whispered, "She's in there with a guy."

He nodded, and we listened at the door, waiting for the moment to go in. My girlfriend was in full torrent, snarling like a wounded leopard, and probably more dangerous.

"Fuck you, asshole! You want someone to screw, go screw yourself."

"Take off your clothes, or I will make it very painful for you."

"Just looking at your face is painful enough, shithead. You fucking pervert, go suck your dick!"

I heard a meaty 'thump', a fist striking flesh.

"Let's go! Be careful who you shoot. Don't forget she's in there."

He nodded, but I was already flinging open the cabin door. The sight that greeted us was extraordinary. Dressed only in panties and a bra, Angelina was standing in the center of the luxurious cabin. Minin was sitting on the bed, a hand nursing his eye where she'd obviously hit him. His blonde hair was mussed up badly, and his thin, hard face was bright red. He'd encountered Angelina's bad side.

She whirled as she became aware of us.

"What the fuck is it now, shit for brains?"

She always did have a way with language, and she also took regular self-defense lessons. Minin had been totally outclassed.

"It's me, kid."

She stared for a moment, not recognizing me at first, with my head encased in the rubber hood of the wetsuit. Then she made the connection.

"John?"

"Yep, it's me. I've come to take you home."

She ran toward my outstretched arms. And stopped. Minin recovered fast, sized up the situation, and jumped to his feet, grabbing her as she tried to run past him. He gripped her around the neck with one hand. In the other hand he held a tiny pistol, tiny but lethal, a Russian PSM automatic. It fired a small 5.45 bullet, big enough for the job. The clip carried eight rounds. Pressed to her head, he only had to squeeze the trigger, and he'd splatter her brains over the cabin walls.

"Put down the guns, both of you."

"Don't!" Angelina shouted, "The motherfucker will kill you."

I tried to reason with him, frightened for her.

"We can work this out, Minin. Let her go, and we'll leave the yacht. No one needs to die."

"Fuck your mother," he spat at me, the traditional Russian insult, "I told you, put down the guns. Otherwise, I pull the trigger."

I forced an icy calm to sweep through my body. It was the only way to save her. Besides, he was going down, real soon.

"You pull the trigger, pal," Waite growled at him, "and you don't have anything left to bargain with. We'll shoot you down like a dog."

He looked away from me for a second, and I had an idea. An outside chance, but it was our only chance. The earpiece for the satphone was still in my ear, and I twisted slightly to hide what I was doing and pressed the speed dial. Button number one, Dragan's speed dial.

Minin was hesitating, and Waite pressed home his argument.

"Why don't we call this a draw? Let the girl go, how about it? Tell you what. Swap her for me. Take me as your prisoner."

"No. Put down the guns."

But he was less decisive, starting to work out his odds of survival, and he knew they weren't good. I heard Dragan's voice in my earpiece.

"This is Alexander Dragan, who is it? Raider, is that you?"

"Listen, Minin, what my friend says makes sense. It's the only way out for all of us."

He hesitated, and I could see him thinking furiously for a way to get the drop on us.

"Raider, John Raider, what is it? What's going on?"

"Minin, look out the porthole. Half the fucking Russian army is camped out there, making themselves a cozy little base on the Crimean Peninsula. We have to make a deal. If the shooting starts, they'll be all over the yacht. You've got the winning hand, my friend. All you need do is keep calm and be sensible. Look out there."

He fell for it. And to his credit, Dragan was on the ball. He wasn't the finest sniper I'd ever come across, but he evidently managed to control his smoldering

hate. Minin dragged Angelina in front of him and twisted to glance out the porthole. Less than a second later, the Ukrainian billionaire fired from three hundred meters away.

The VSS Vintorez fired a 9mm round, which ordinarily would have been enough. On the other hand, the Perspex of the porthole could have deflected the bullet. But this was no ordinary bullet. Almost 40mm in length, it was constructed of steel with a tungsten tip, and had the ability to penetrate quarter inch steel plate. The subsonic round drilled through the thick Perspex, penetrated his head, exited the other side, and buried itself in the thick oak paneling of the cabin.

I spoke into the satphone. "You got him. Nice shot."

"You're sure he's dead?"

"As certain as the coffin lid closing."

"Good."

I looked at Angelina. She was white with shock, and her body was splattered with part of Minin's blood and brains.

"Are you okay?"

She seemed to ignore the gore and tilted her head to look back at me. "I think so, John. What happened to him? Who shot him?"

"We had a sniper posted on shore."

I told her about Dragan, and her eyes widened. "A billionaire with a sniper's rifle? What's he doing mixed up in this?"

"One word. Vengeance. Minin was one of the men who killed his relatives."

She nodded. "Yeah, I can believe that. Guys like Minin; they're a bunch of psycho perverts. I know I wanted to kill him. You know what he was going to do with me?"

"I can guess."

"I doubt that. One of the stewards on the yacht warned me. That's why I was so frightened. His favorite trick is to kill a girl just as he climaxes. Apparently, he likes to see the expression in their eyes, makes it more of a thrill for him. The guy who owns the yacht knew all about what he was doing, and he did nothing to protect the girls before they were killed.

The steward told me he filmed it all, so he'd have leverage over Minin. I'll bet that bastard got a thrill out of that sniper bullet. It's just a pity it was so quick and clean." She stopped speaking for a moment as a stray thought entered her mind, "What exactly are you doing here? I mean, the guns, the wetsuits, you look like fucking James Bond, both of you."

"Doing? I came for you, to get you out of this."

"I appreciate it. But I mean, how come you're all dressed up like that? Where did you get the Action Man suits and the guns? What's it all about? You're supposed to be a photojournalist. You came here on assignment."

I hesitated for a second but decided not to lie. "Not exactly, no."

"What do you mean, not exactly? You didn't come here on an assignment?"

I should have recognized the warning signs, the hard edge to her voice, and the red spots of anger that appeared on her cheeks. But I didn't.

"Kind of. It's just; it's not a photographic assignment. It's a kind of military thing."

"Not photos?"

"No."

"You lied to me, John."

"Well..."

She hammered a hard punch into my chin that rocked me backward. "You bastard! Why didn't you tell me the truth, don't you trust me?"

"It's a need to know. If..."

"I need to fucking know! I thought I was your girlfriend. Next time, you tell me. Got it, Mister?"

I nodded. "Sure. I'm sorry."

"You should be," Abruptly, her stern expression changed to the familiar warm smile I knew and loved. She hugged me close, "But I'm so glad you came." She pulled away and looked down at the blood and brain splatters. "Ugh! I need a shower!"

"You have one minute, then we're leaving. I'll stay here and guard the cabin. Waite, you know what to do with the charges."

"Happy to oblige," he grinned, "Unless you want me to guard the cabin."

"Out!"

He left the cabin, and Angelina stepped into the shower. She was out in less than a minute. Her firm, naked skin was smooth, and it glowed. The long, lustrous hair was slicked back, and already she looked as if she was about to dress for the catwalk.

Models, how do they do it?

She dressed slowly, and I knew she was enjoying the effect she had on my libido. She pulled on tight-fitting Lycra pants, tall, high-heeled boots, and a short, fitted leather jacket. As far as I could tell, she wore no makeup, and she sure didn't need any. She was the same, gorgeous Angelina Blass I'd fallen for, and was constantly astonished she felt the same way about me.

"What are you looking at, cowboy? Haven't you seen a girl getting dressed before?"

"Not standing next to a dead body, no."

She looked down at the corpse of Minin. "He looks better dead than alive. Can't you toss him over the side to feed the fishes, or something?"

"Not unless you want to alert the entire Black Sea Fleet, no."

"I guess not. What are we waiting for?"

"For Waite to come back. He's setting the explosives to sink the ship."

She smiled. "Good. That means Vasily will go down with it. The skunk, he stood by and did nothing while Minin tried to rape me. He partied hard last night. Vodka, heroin, you name it. The last I heard, he's out cold in his one of the crew cabins. He wanted to rape one of them, but he was so out of his head, he passed out. The guy legged it ashore and locked him in the cabin. What about the rest of the crew?"

"We'll warn them before we leave."

"Okay, they weren't so bad. Not all of them, anyway."

Minutes later, Waite was back. "We're ready to go. I set the timers for fifteen minutes, so I suggest we get out of here fast."

I led the way back up the companionway to the deck. So far, the only shooting had come from our suppressed weapons, and the crew was still unaware of the

presence of intruders on the boat. A man in a neat, navy blue uniform with gold piping on the sleeves was standing inside the navigation bridge. His mouth opened as we stepped inside.

"You... you..."

"You speak English?"

He nodded.

"You're the captain of this boat?"

"Yes, Captain Gerasimov. Who are you?"

"We're the men who placed explosive charges in the bilges of your vessel. You have a little over ten minutes to abandon ship. Get all of your men here, crew, guards, whores, everyone. Do it now! And don't try to warn anyone, unless you want to go down with your ship."

"I have to warn Mr. Stolypin. He's the owner."

"That's not necessary," Angelina told him, "I was with Vasily earlier. He's been taken care of."

Gerasimov gave her a glance, then nodded. He picked up a phone and spoke quickly. Several minutes later, the deck was crowded with people. Waite relieved three guards of their weapons; the crew was unarmed. I got the Captain's attention.

"Tell them to toss their cellphones over the side if they want to live. Now!"

A shower of phones splashed into the water, and I got the Captain to prepare his people to abandon ship.

"Waite, we need that boat next to the diving platform. Get her in the water, and start the engine. As soon as we're ready to pull out, I'll tell the crew to start leaving."

He ran to the rear of the vessel, and I heard a splash as he released the clamps and dropped the speedboat in the water. Seconds later, the engine came to life with a gentle throb, and he called out she was ready. I nodded to the Captain.

"Get moving. Over the side and swim for it."

"But, we have boats. We don't need to swim."

"You won't be using the boats. You'll have to swim. I don't want you getting ashore too quickly. I'd jump if I were you. If you're too near this boat when she goes up, the concussion will damage your internal organs."

He rapped out orders. The crew rushed to the side and started leaping into the water.

"What if they can't swim?" Angelina asked me.

"It'll be a good incentive for them to learn. Besides, there're plenty of them, and they can help each other. Let's go."

We ran to the diving platform where Waite held the speedboat steady, and climbed in. He opened up the throttle, and the boat surged away from the stricken vessel. We roared past the crew, swimming like crazy for the shore. A couple of minutes later, he beached the boat close to where Dragan was hiding, and we went ashore.

The plumbing truck was parked outside the building, and Dragan came out to greet us.

"That was magnificent. Thank you for fixing it for me."

He made me feel like a tacky game show host who'd awarded him a prize. I brushed off his effusive thanks. "Forget it. We only have a few minutes, and this place will come alive with soldiers. And they won't be happy. We need to return to the safe house now and start searching for Orlov. The quicker we take him out, the quicker we can go home. I'm hoping your lawyers will have some success with my custody case for Abigail."

"They have never failed me, not once. They will get her back for you; never fear. However, I have located Orlov. Katya Polozov called me. He is in Kiev."

"Orlov is in Kiev? You're certain. I thought he was making mischief around these parts. Why Kiev?"

He hesitated for a fraction of a second, and I knew he was about to lie. About what, I'd no idea.

"I don't know."

What aren't you telling me, Dragan?

I stared at him for a few moments, and then it came to me. "It's spreading, isn't it, and he's supplying arms to pro-Russians in Kiev?"

"Perhaps."

"And you're in the same business. The two of you are as bad as each other. You're pushing this country into civil war."

"No! We are just defending ourselves from the Russians."

No shit. "I'll bet that's what they all say."

He was silent. I still felt cheated, used. But we were stuck in the middle of this, with only one exit strategy. I gave him a hard look.

"Let's go to Kiev and finish this."

As we drove away from the shore, an explosion punched across the water, and the sky filled with smoke and debris. Waite and me exchanged glances, and we both smiled. It was always good when something went to plan. A pity it didn't happen more often.

We arrived at the safe house and went in to check on Joe's progress. He was sitting on the couch, watching a news program on the television. His face was still bruised and battered, but the bed rest and painkillers had done wonders.

"How did it go?" Al asked as we walked through the door.

"Pretty much according to plan."

I looked at Joe. "How do you feel?"

He managed a half grin. "Al is wasted in his work. He'd have made a fine nurse. I feel much better."

"Fuck you," Al growled, "Those painkillers I gave you; they were designed to knock you out, not start telling stories. I hate looking after sick people. Miserable, ungrateful bastards all of them."

I smiled at his bad mood. "You should see the more difficult ones."

"Are we making progress? It sounds good."

"We are. Minin is down."

"You got him?"

"Dragan, a long shot from the shore. Saved Angelina's life, too."

He protested. "You set it up for me, John. I just pulled the trigger. And now we're going to Kiev."

Joe stared at me. "Kiev? I thought the action was here."

I shrugged. "Dragan says the target is there, so that's where we go. However, the problem we face is getting out of Crimea. Since you've been out of action, the place has filled up with Russian troops. We were lucky to get across the border when we came in." I gave Dragan a searching glance, to remind him of those unnecessary deaths, "But next time, it won't be so easy. Dragan, do you have any ideas? We need a route that's clear of enemy troops."

He shook his head. "Not right now, no. I'll call Myron, and see if he can help us."

He went into the back room to make the call. I was still uneasy about using Myron Doroshenko. It was certain he had an alternative agenda, one that would fill out his bank account, no doubt at the expense of our operation. Selling us out to the Russians would be profitable. They'd be mighty pissed after we'd destroyed the vessel Putin was using as a floating hotel. Pissed enough to send everything they had against us.

I said nothing because I planned to use my suspicions to our advantage. It was a simple plan. Whatever Doroshenko came up with, we'd do the opposite.

"You're up to something," Angelina interrupted my thoughts. I hadn't realized she'd been watching me.

"Just thinking about the next phase of the operation."

"Bullshit."

I thought for a moment. She was too perceptive to leave her out of the loop, but what I had to say was very, very private. "We'll talk later."

Cruiser VOLGA, Black Sea Fleet – April 2014

Malenkov was rarely afraid, but when he saw his President's face, he felt the beginnings of fear. Real fear. He'd insisted the Presidential security detail bring Putin back to Sevastopol. The President was brought aboard the cruiser 'Volga', swinging at anchor off the coast of Crimea, and surrounded by frigates and destroyers of the Black Sea Fleet. It was the only sane, sensible course of action, given the explosion on the yacht where the President had stayed only hours before. Sadly, his boss didn't see it that way.

"You fucking idiot, Yuri. You made me look like a fool. Now everyone is this shithole will believe the President of the Russian Federation is some kind of coward."

"You're alive, Sir. That was my priority, keeping you safe until we find out who is behind this attack."

"What do we know so far?"

"The crew escaped and swam to shore. They say two men came aboard, divers, carrying explosives. They killed Dimitry Minin's bodyguards, then killed him as well."

"So this was a hit on Minin, not aimed at me personally?"

"We don't know, not yet, Sir."

"Keep questioning the crew. They must know something. Arrest them all, and send them back to Moscow for further questioning. I'm sure the Lubyanka has rooms available for them."

"I've already arranged it, Sir. They're at the airfield under guard, waiting to board a military flight."

"Good, good. Why did the terrorists let them go? Are they connected?"

"I don't know."

"Find out. I don't care what it takes. Take their stories apart piece by piece, until you've wrenched the truth out of them."

"I will, Mr. President."

Putin shook his head, his expression even more sour than normal. "What about increasing security here inside Crimea?"

"The Crimean government has requested ten divisions of Russian troops to help them put down a possible insurrection. They are already crossing the border and will start taking up defensive positions within the hour."

"What about the hunt for the terrorists?"

"We've thrown everything into it, Sir. We'll find them, and when we do, we'll squeeze the truth out of them."

"Make sure they don't cross the border, Yuri. They're sure to be Ukrainian nationalists, so they'll be heading back to Kiev."

"I have instructed five of the new divisions to protect the western border, Sir. As well as four platoons of Spetsnaz. One platoon has been assigned to the east. It's not likely they'll go that way, but if they do, they'll find a warm welcome waiting for them."

"Spetsnaz! Excellent, Yuri, it's time we let loose our trained killers. If anyone can find those criminals, it's our Special Operations units."

"Sir, about your tour. Now we have this emergency, and Dimitry Minin is dead, can I assume you will cancel?"

Putin thought for several minutes while the chief of his security detail waited in silence. Finally, he looked up.

"Very well, you may cancel."

Malenkov breathed a sigh of relief, until he heard his master's next words.

"I have an idea, Yuri. Get me Orlov."

"Grigory Orlov?"

"Who else? Tell him to go directly to our embassy in Kiev and speak to the Ambassador. I wish to go to Kiev and meet with the new head of government in Ukraine. The purpose will be to discuss the settlement of our differences over Crimea."

"You plan to visit them, to discuss an agreement with those fascist pigs?"

The sour expression relaxed, just a little. "I plan to make them think that. I'll show them the face of their friendly neighbor, Russia. Make them think we're considering a joint agreement over the future of Crimea. When their guard is down, and Grigory's people are staging armed riots all over Ukraine, then we'll make our move. With Ukraine's back to the wall, Mother Russia will step in to save them."

Malenkov was doubtful. "I'm not sure the media will swallow it, Sir."

"I don't give a fuck what they believe," he snarled, "We'll make them believe it. Those journalists will fall for anything. Feed them enough vodka and caviar, show them the benevolence of the pro-Russian government, and they'll believe everything we tell them."

"Yes, Sir, benevolent. About our troops, they're not exactly benevolent. I mean, we're already having to hide the mass round-ups and killings of those people who oppose us here in Crimea."

He shrugged. "As long as they don't see that side of things, what does it matter? Put some of our soldiers to distributing free food supplies to the hungry, help with the rebuilding program, you know the kind of thing."

Malenkov smiled. His President was enthusiastic, and all he could do was agree. Inside, he wasn't so sure.

Would anyone trust Vladimir Putin? Are they that stupid?

Chapter 9

Orthodox Monastery, Kiev, Ukraine – April 2014

The bell interrupted his thoughts. The fucking thing, the monks seemed to ring it day and night. How could a man think, let alone sleep? Since he'd been here, he'd wearied of the constant ringing of bells, the chants, the prayers, the hymns; even the smell of incense turned his stomach. At least he was in safe hands.

There were two distinct branches of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church with ties to the new regime in Kiev. The Kiev Patriarchate and the Moscow Patriarchate. For obvious reasons, the Kiev Patriarchate attracted the majority of religious adherents. However, this particular monastery, on the outskirts of Kiev, owed allegiance to the Moscow Patriarchate.

The Abbot, Aleksey Arakcheyev, had been a prisoner under the Soviets before the fall of communism gave Ukraine full independence. Just before the end of Moscow's iron tyranny, a young KGB officer had seen the way the wind was blowing. He freed the Abbot from his long prison sentence and arranged for his return to the monastery in Kiev. He also made certain his family was well looked after in the post-communist chaos.

As a result, Abbot Arakcheyev was always willing to assist his Russian friends. Including the man who'd helped him, a certain Captain Vladimir Putin. When Moscow asked him to give shelter to Grigory Orlov, as well as a secure store for certain crates of ordnance he'd brought into the country, he was more than willing to oblige. It was a good arrangement, except for one problem.

Those damn bells, why won't he put a stop to them?

He was prepared to put up with the other discomforts. The monastery had been built eight hundred and seventy years ago, when people cared little for warmth and comfort. They had electricity but little else. The rough, stonewalls ran constantly with damp, and there was hardly a comfortable chair in the drafty building. In addition, the furniture had been carved from solid, locally grown oak, and it felt as hard as cast iron. In fact, it really was as hard as cast iron.

The monastery was on the edge of the city, with only a couple of semi-derelict cottages nearby. It was situated at the end of a long valley, which seemed to funnel the winds day and night to keep the building as cold as a meat locker. The only relief was when he went to bed fully dressed. He covered himself with a half

dozen coarse blankets and swigged a bottle or two of the Russian vodka he'd brought with him. Even then, the stench of incense filled his nostrils, and he was constantly sneezing as if he was allergic to it.

The call from his boss, Vladimir Putin, had been a surprise. He'd expected to be summoned to Moscow for a debriefing and a possible promotion, and now the man was coming here, to the heart of Nationalist Ukraine! The same people who'd summarily tossed Yanukovich from power and established a government that was opposed to anything tainted by Moscow.

A bunch of fucking Nazis!

When Putin explained the reason for his visit, Orlov grudgingly admitted it was a good plan. He agreed to accelerate his program to arm his people to go out and create havoc across Western Ukraine, until the citizens were crying out for law and order. Mother Russia would be waiting to offer assistance. No strings, no conditions. Not until the troops were firmly inside the country. Then the demands for bases would come.

When an assassin killed the President, Orlov would be in position to make his play for power. His plan was brilliant, and all that was required to light the fuse was a single, well-aimed bullet, or a bomb. And Russia would have a new man at the top.

His satphone rang. It was the only way to get service in this remote corner of Kiev. The telephone company had decided a few farmers and monks didn't warrant the expense of laying in a cable, let alone establishing a cell tower.

"Orlov."

"What are your plans for Kiev?"

It was the assassin he'd employed to deal with Putin.

"You have left Crimea?"

"Soon."

"You may find it difficult to cross the border. Thousands of our troops have closed off all the crossings."

"I will manage."

"Some of them are Spetsnaz."

"So? They die the same as any man."

"True. Call me when you arrive. I have a new plan to kill him that cannot fail, provided you do not make any mistakes this time."

"I won't miss, if that's what you're worried about."

"I'm not worried. I have an alternative approach. A bomb."

A silence. "Don't you trust me?"

"Of course. It is just that a bomb will be better. The place I have in mind will send shockwaves all across Russia and Ukraine. More effective than a bullet."

"Very well, I will do it."

"Good. You should remember that afterward you will enjoy more rewards than most men can dream of."

"I can dream of a great many rewards. I was thinking of some real estate. I feel it is time to retire when this job is finished."

"What did you have in mind? I know you are not so keen on my country, but I'm sure you would find a dacha outside Moscow very comfortable."

"I would prefer somewhere other than Russia. Somewhere warmer, like Georgia, on the Black Sea."

"An interesting choice. Which part of Georgia?"

"All of it."

A pause. "You're talking about starting another war, my friend."

There was only silence from the other end.

Orlov thought the assassin was crazy. He was already a rich man, yet now he was reaching for the stars, a whole country? Presumably, his plan was to become yet another of the burgeoning twenty-first century despots. What had made him the way he was? He knew some of the man's history, and once he'd been a more compassionate man.

Has he been tortured sometime, and if so, by whom?

Yet why not let him have Georgia, provided he remained loyal to Moscow. To Grigory Orlov. Alternatively, he could have the man murdered. That was a possibility, although he would be a hard man to kill. He'd have to make up his mind, and soon. He decided to agree, for now. Later, things may be different.

"Georgia, then. Call me when you arrive in Kiev."

He hung up and sat for a few minutes on the hard, wooden bench, thinking about the next few days.

Have I thought of everything? Yes, it's foolproof. President Putin will die. Long live the President.

He smiled as he got to his feet and strolled through the snow.

Crimean Mountains, Ukraine – April 2014

It wasn't too hard to exit the city. We made Joe comfortable on the rear seat of Dragan's G Wagon and entrusted Angelina with his care. The three of us were in the second Mercedes, me driving, Al next to me, and Waite on the back seat. It was a simple plan; we carried the weapons, all of the firepower, except Dragan's sniper rifle in the innocent looking briefcase.

Dragan would wend his journey cross-country out to Donetsk, in Ukraine. The idea was sound, as we'd be heading east, away from Kiev, the last direction any pursuer would expect us to travel. If he were stopped, he'd claim to be transporting an injured tourist and his pretty wife to the hospital in Donetsk for specialist treatment. If all else failed, we'd close the distance fast and blast anything that stood in the way. If the military took down the details, we could abandon our vehicle if necessary and hitch a lift with Dragan. Even walk, if necessary. It was a good plan, and like most good plans, it was destined to go awry. We hadn't counted on one factor. Spetsnaz.

We'd been traveling for an hour when we began to climb. It was part of the plan. We'd follow a route through the Crimean Mountains and join the Donetsk Highway, the E105. Once we were clear of Crimea, we'd head north and then turn west, toward Kiev.

We climbed higher and appreciated the sturdy Mercedes four-wheel drive on the snow-covered track. The views were spectacular, and when we reached the crest, we had a clear view of the Sea of Azov. On the opposite shore lay Russia, and the huge industrial city of Rostov. Wisps of cloud over the nearby peaks competed for space in the sky with darker, dirtier smudges. Industrial pollution. One of the

Russian failings was to resolve their chronic pollution problem. Like the Chinese, another legacy of a dark communist past.

"Stoy!"

The checkpoint consisted of a single vehicle slewed across the track. It was a Gaz Wolf, a modern military 4x4, with a three-meter radio aerial protruding from the rear fender. It was similar to our own Humvee, with one huge difference. The Humvee had a certain brutal aesthetic appeal, whereas the Gaz Wolf was all ugliness.

Tactically, the soldiers had chosen a good position, close to what looked like an abandoned fort. It probably dated from the Crimean War when the Russians fought against the combined armies of England and France, as well as a few other minor players.

Russian territorial expansion, and ownership of warm water ports of the Black Sea, was the stated 'casus belli'. The war resulted in a chain of fortifications built inside Crimea, and the fort in front of us would have been one of them. It was built into the side of the mountain, a clever design, which meant they only needed to defend the front against enemy attack. The structure would have housed a company of troops, as well as food and horses. Now it was almost derelict. The weather had been unkind, and part of the outer wall had collapsed. The main gates were missing, probably chopped up for firewood.

There were four soldiers, all big, well muscled, broad shouldered, tough, and fit. They wore camos, Russian camos, as well as black ski masks. Their weapons looked like AKSU-74s, a handy folding stock assault carbine, chambered to fire a 5.45mm round. Fifty meters away, we saw they'd already stopped Dragan's G Wagon, and it was parked at the side of the track. Two of the soldiers were lounging nearby while a third leaned in through the driver's window, talking to Dragan.

"What do you think?" Al asked, "Special Forces? Those guys look like they know their business."

"Spetsnaz, it has to be. The question is, how we get through this? And why are they up this high on this mountain, stopping the traffic?"

"Maybe it's something to do with us blowing up the yacht that Putin was staying on."

"Very likely."

The three men clustered around the other Mercedes, and the soldier who'd stopped us stood in front of the hood of our vehicle. We could probably take them, but I was loath to take the chance. They were no patsies. Besides, thus far, they hadn't threatened us. It was just a check, and they were doing their jobs. Although I could never forget the Inkerman Castle and the kind of treatment the locals dished out to prisoners. If they tried to take us prisoner, we'd fight.

The soldier came around to the driver's window. I pressed the button to lower it, and he unleashed a stream of Russian.

"Sorry, pal, I don't speak Russian."

He tried again. "Wait!" The word was tortured English, but we got the message.

We waited. He called across to the other three soldiers, and one of them shouted something back. His AKSU had been slung on his shoulder, but now he unslung it, held it in the firing position, and stood back from our vehicle to keep us

covered. Clearly, we weren't going anywhere until the guy in charge had looked us over. After that, it was probable we weren't going anywhere at all.

I felt something hard push into my side. A gun.

"The Makarov," Waite murmured, "It's loaded, safety off. Al, you ready?"

"Give the word."

The soldier couldn't see what we were doing, and I managed to nudge the weapon closer so it was in reach of my right hand.

"I'll ease out the assault rifles," Waite continued, "It's going to be difficult without him seeing. John, you need to distract the bastard."

"Okay."

I left the gun where it was, opened the door, and climbed out. The soldier gestured and shouted, and the meaning was obvious. Get back inside the vehicle. I held my hands in view, palms up to show him I wasn't armed, and went closer to him. I pointed to my groin and mimed taking a piss. He sneered and nodded for me to go ahead. I unbuttoned my pants and managed to pee. He watched me the whole time, and I dragged it out as long as possible. Finally, I buttoned my pants and returned to the G Wagon.

"We're set," Waite said as I climbed into the driver's seat, "Your carbine is on the floor in front of your seat. Christ, what are those guys up to?"

He was pointing toward the other SUV. The soldiers were dragging them out, and none too gently. Dragan went sprawling on the snow and mud covered ground, and Angelina followed, spitting insults. I saw one of the men clutch his hand, which I assumed she'd bitten. Joe Nguyen was the last out, and when he couldn't get out himself, they reached in and tossed him to the ground like a sack of grain. One of the soldiers covered them all with his rifle, while the other two began ransacking the contents of the jeep. They ripped open boxes and cases, checking for anything of value.

I still didn't know why they'd stopped us. It could have been just a shakedown, nothing unusual for low paid Russian troops. Or they may have had an idea of who we were, and were looting our stuff prior to an arrest, or something worse. One thing was for sure; we had to put a stop to this. Angelina, still protesting, got a sharp kick to her side that silenced her, but only for a few seconds. As for Joe, the rough treatment had restarted the bleeding from his wounds.

I tucked the Makarov under my coat and pushed it into my pants waistband. Again I opened the door of the Mercedes, climbed back to the icy ground, and after taking a few seconds to button their coats, Al and Waite joined me. The soldier raised his rifle and shouted; his voice filled with rage that we'd defied him. I went through the routine again, palms up.

'We're unarmed. We're not looking for any trouble.'

Like hell we weren't. I'd decided we were in deep trouble. If they planned to let us go, they wouldn't be hitting on Dragan's party so hard. Which meant we'd have to waste them. The problem was, they weren't conscript soldiers. Spetsnaz were similar to our SEALs and Deltas. Highly trained and highly motivated, except not to the same degree as our Special Forces. The Russian military system also encouraged brutality and theft, bullying, bribery, all ugly traits to teach an elite soldier. It meant they'd have a weakness. They were always looking for a payoff.

I approached the soldier slowly, and his expression darkened. He waved his rifle in a 'back off' gesture. Very slowly, I eased out my billfold. His eyes widened as it came into view, and his alert stance relaxed a fraction. I measured the distances between us and the other soldiers. Fifty meters, not an easy shot for a silenced handgun. Even without the suppressor, fifty meters was maximum range for the Russian pistol. With the suppressor fitted, it could be halved; too far, except we had no other options.

He held out his hand for the payoff, and I edged closer, talking to him in soothing tones. Al and Waite were slightly behind me, one either side.

"Listen, friend, we're just trying to drive across this mountain. You want money. It's yours. What are we looking at, American dollars? How about five hundred?"

As I eased out the bills, I continued in the same friendly tones. He didn't understand my English, but it wasn't intended for him.

"When he reaches across to take the money, I'll put a bullet in his heart. I'll hold onto him so he doesn't go down. We don't want to warn his pals. You'll have to move nearer to the other three, and put them down before they realize what's happening. Trouble is, it's a long shot for a PB."

"That's why we slung the Kiparis assault rifles under our coats," Al replied.

Why didn't I think of that?

I grinned. "You think you can hit all three without our people getting caught in the crossfire."

"No." It was Waite who replied, "Best we can hope for is to get two of 'em. These guys are no rookies. What we're counting on is the third guy making a run for it. We'll take him last, after we secure our people."

"What if he uses them for human shields?"

He shrugged. "We'll deal with it when it happens. They'll have to take their chances. If they have any sense, they'll dive for cover when the shooting starts. You got any better ideas?"

I'd gone over the possibilities a dozen times, without result. "No."

"Okay. Make sure you don't drop that soldier after you shoot him. We have to get in close, and I mean real close."

"Understood. Good luck."

"Yeah, you, too."

We were all still smiling, all good pals. I concentrated on the man in front of me. Two meters, one meter, and then we were almost toe-to-toe. I handed him the bundle of dollar bills. I'd no idea of how much I'd taken out, and his eyes looked down as he grabbed the cash. I moved like greased lightning. My right hand dived under my coat and pulled out the Makarov. The left hand pulled him close to me, and I pressed the barrel to his heart.

I was still talking in calm tones. We're buddies, good friends, and a little financial transaction to oil the wheels. The soldier looked surprised when I embraced him, and I saw his face flush red with embarrassment. Maybe he thought I was making a pass at him. Al and Waite were walking forward, chatting, smiling, nothing to worry the other soldiers. I pulled the trigger.

There was a split second between success and failure. Even as I saw him jerk, and the light in his eyes start to fade, I pulled his body closer, tighter. I kept up the pretend conversation, laughing joking, chatting. They afterward said they

almost choked with laughter. My voice went up half an octave as I struggled to prolong the masquerade.

Over my victim's shoulder, I saw one of the Russians stop looting Dragan's gear and stare at me, his expression puzzled. But I managed to keep the dead man upright, gripping the front of his camo jacket with one hand and stop him toppling with the other. After a moment, the man lost interest and reached for Dragan's briefcase. The moment he opened it, their suspicions would be confirmed. The time for pretense was over. Al and Waite started to run, swinging out their Kiparis assault rifles. I dropped the body to the ground and took off after them.

One of the Russians had been busy ripping the expensive stereo from the dashboard. He looked up, sized up the situation, and brought his AKSU to bear on Al and Waite. I'd left my Kiparis in our G Wagon, so I did the only thing possible, aimed and fired the Makarov at his body. I missed. He twisted away, ran toward their vehicle, and ducked behind cover as Al fired several more shots that also missed.

Waite hit one of the soldiers still in sight with a burst from his carbine. The other ran after his pal, and they both started to shoot back at us, sheltering behind their armored 4x4. I needed an assault rifle, and there wasn't time to return to the Mercedes and rummage for ammo. I started running toward the action and tripped over a weapon. The soldier had dropped it as I shot him. I snatched up the AKSU, stripped off the dead man's ammo pouches, and raced forward.

Al and Waite reached Dragan's G Wagon, and the Ukrainian helped them pull Joe to safety behind the rear wheels. Angelina climbed to her feet and glared at the Russians, about to launch a torrent of abuse. Al tackled her and pulled her out of harm's way, just as a stream of 5.45mm rounds parted the air where a second before she'd been standing.

I reached them, fired a burst at the Russians to keep their heads down, and took stock. We were in a bad situation. It could hardly have been worse. The Spetsnaz would call for backup, and when they arrived in force, they'd tear us to shreds with heavy firepower.

As they sheltered behind the Gaz, there was no way we could reach them across that open ground. If we tried to drive away, they'd rake us with gunfire before we got more than a few meters. In military parlance, we were fucked.

"What do we do now?" Angelina asked me, her tone truculent, "You're not going to let those bastards get away with this, are you? They're no better than bandits."

I grimaced, "That armored 4x4 means they hold all the cards. We can't attack them, can't leave, and they'll call in their pals before long."

"So what is this, you're just going to sit here and do nothing?"

"Listen, lady," Waite snapped, "We're doing everything we can. Give John a break."

Her face was furious. "A break! Fuck him!"

Angelina cast her eyes around the snow and spotted the AKSU dropped by the dead soldier. In a single motion, she scooped it up, leapt to her feet, and pulled the trigger. The gun roared as she emptied the entire clip at the Gaz, and we watched the bullets bounce harmlessly off the armor, except for two or three rounds that

tore through the base of the radio aerial. They were out of communication. If they hadn't called for help yet, maybe we had a chance. Score one for Angelina.

Two bursts of bullets replied nearly cutting her in half, but I reached up and dragged out of the line of fire. She was still muttering and cursing, the Spetsnaz, me, Crimea, mud, snow, everything. And then Al shouted a warning.

"They got a machine gun. Hit the dirt!"

If we weren't in serious trouble before, we were now. They'd deployed a light machine gun from their vehicle, a PK, the Kalashnikov derivative. With a firing rate of 600 plus 7.62mm rounds per minute, the weapon could deliver long, deadly bursts. The first raking fire turned the G Wagon into scrap inside of a few seconds. We were crouched behind the axles in a narrow fold of ground that gave us some cover, but when they made up their minds, they could come in with the armored Gaz to finish us any time they wanted.

"We have to go for it," Al said quietly, "It's the only way."

"I know."

"What do you mean?" Angelina asked. She looked suspicious, "You're not going to do something stupid?"

I ignored her. We were about to do something stupid, a headlong charge right at the Russian 4x4. We'd wait until they changed belts and hoped to seize a couple of seconds advantage, enough to reach and kill them before they killed us; except they were Spetsnaz. We'd already killed two of their men. They'd be thirsting for revenge and watching our every movement. Even so, it was our only move. There was nothing else between us, and the dungeons of Inkerman Castle.

Waite slapped in a new clip and tensed himself up like a sprinter on his starting blocks.

"Say the word."

"I'm ready," Al said.

I looked ahead of us. The gap looked vast, far more than we could reach in the time it would take them to reload and then cut us down like wheat before a combine.

"Dragan, when we go, cover us. You're all we have. Okay, let 'em have it."

We fired, all three of us. Dragan joined in. He'd assembled his sniper rifle and fired the heavy sub-sonic rounds at the Gaz. None penetrated the armor. He may as well have thrown rocks at them, but it had stung them into action. The machine gun roared, and we pushed our faces into the mud and slush, as the hail of lead whistled overhead. And then it stopped. I looked up.

"Now!"

We catapulted to our feet and started running like it was the Olympic final of the one hundred meter sprint. As I recalled, the world record stood at around ten seconds. We had fifty meters to cover. If we were trained athletes, wearing shorts and vests, we might have made it in five. But we were soldiers, in heavy camos, carrying assault rifles. Ten seconds to reach them, at least. It seemed like an eternity, but there was no other way. We ran. Nine seconds.

A Russian popped his head up and ducked down as Dragan's bullet scorched past his head. I was counting the seconds in my head. Seven seconds. I saw the black, deadly barrel of the PK machine gun appear over the hood of the Gaz. Five seconds.

One of the Russians shouted, and the barrel moved slightly as he aimed at us. Four seconds.

Jesus Christ, so near, and yet so far!

Three seconds. And the firing started. My lungs were bursting, and my throat was raw. I rasped out what I knew would be my last breath. I heard the gun hammering its message of death, a mechanized announcement of our departure from this life. Was it possible they could miss? No, it was not. They were Spetsnaz, and the range was so near they could have used pistols and still they couldn't miss. But they had the PK.

Two seconds. Yet I was still alive, as were Al and Waite, alive and still running. I looked beyond the Spetsnaz. Something was strange, out of place.

"Wait! Hold your fire!"

They both stopped running. Figures were pouring out of the old fort. They looked like a nightmare from a horror movie, a dozen ragged men, scarecrow-like. They were the army of the damned, summoned from hell to bring fresh bodies to suffer the never-ending torments of Hades. But these were no ghastly specters. They were armed men, pouring fire on the Russians, who never stood a chance from the unexpected onslaught. We started forward again; walking slowly, and I saw the last of the bodies lying in the slush, riddled with bullets.

"We meet again."

The scarecrow nearest to me spoke the words. I cast around for the name, and then it came to me. Stepan Sikorski, the man I'd released from Inkerman. I held out my hand.

"You saved us, Stepan. We were finished there. They had us cold. What are you doing up here?"

He shrugged. "Hiding from these bastards. Someone started a ruckus down in Sevastopol, and our hiding place got too hot. We were waiting for a truck to take us to Ukraine, but when it failed to arrive, we had to walk out on foot. This was the only way to avoid the checkpoints, or so we thought. We took shelter in the old fort, and when these people turned up, we were trapped. And then you arrived."

"Thank the good Lord you were here. So you're still trying to get out of Crimea."

"Of course, it is that or die. We must reach Ukraine. Western Ukraine."

"How many of you?"

He indicated the group who'd attacked the Russians. "This is all of us. Twelve of us."

"You may fit in the Gaz at a squeeze. We still have a useable G Wagon, enough for our party."

He gave me a thin smile and answered at once, "Agreed. Our plan is to head northeast to Zaporizhia to throw off the scent, and then turn west toward Kiev."

"That's more or less the way we were headed. We need to hide the bodies before we leave. Their friends will be upset if they find we've killed four of their Spetsnaz troopers."

Stepan called over several of his men and issued rapid orders in Ukrainian. They started dragging the bodies away into the old fort. Two more men were brushing away the marks they'd left. When a fresh fall of snow covered the area, they'd disappear.

"Can you hide the bodies in there without anyone finding them too easily?" I asked him.

The thin smile left his face, and he looked bleak. "There is a long shaft, a fissure in the rock. The previous occupants used it as a shithouse. We'll toss them down there."

I didn't reply. It was a cruel way to dispose of fighting men, but it was Stepan's country they'd invaded, not ours. I left them to it.

Russian Embassy, Kiev, Ukraine – April 2014

The Embassy was crowded in honor of the special visit by the President. The Ambassador switched off his cellphone and made his way across the ornate reception room. He waited to speak to Putin. Finally, the sour face turned to him.

"What is it?"

"Mr. President. Your guest is waiting for you in my office upstairs."

He nodded. "Give me a few minutes. I'll rejoin your little party later."

The Ambassador inclined his head. "As you wish, Sir."

The Russian President left the room, with two security men leading the way and two more behind. They reached the Ambassador's office, and one of his men opened the door. Putin stepped inside and gave a rare smile.

"Grigory, my friend. How are things with you?"

They shook hands and embraced.

"Excellent, thank you, Sir."

"And our arrangements?"

"The weapons distribution goes according to plan. We already have more than three thousand armed sympathizers, and more are coming forward every day."

"Good. Grigory, there is no need for excessive bloodshed, not here. The presence of armed men, and the disruption and property damage, should be enough to raise the temperature here inside Ukraine. We had to act harshly in Crimea because of the nature of the problem. Besides, we had to teach the Ukrainians a hard lesson, to fear us. Here, a softer approach will achieve our ends. You can keep the arms shipments going, but instruct your people to try and avoid too much loss of life."

Orlov nodded his agreement. "It shall be as you say, Sir."

"Good. When this country is firmly under our control, and the agreements for the military bases are signed, it will be time for you to return to Moscow. There are options I have kept open for you. I think you will be impressed. One is an ambassadorship. We have an opening coming up shortly in Nigeria. I will make sure your name is at the top of the shortlist."

"Thank you, Mr. President."

Orlov smiled broadly as they shook hands, and Putin left the room to rejoin the reception. Inside he was shaking with anger.

Nigeria for fuck's sake! Why the hell would I want to become ambassador to an African country? They were a nightmare, constant armed insurrections, and a total lack of culture that would be a nightmare to a man such as myself.

There was no way he'd go to Nigeria, Not when he had a shot at the main prize; the very pinnacle of power, the Kremlin itself. The plan was already in place, the bomb waiting to be planted by his trained killer.

Nigeria! Fuck! President Grigory Orlov. Yes, it sounds much better.

Chapter 10

Eastern Ukraine – April 2014

We drove down the icy track, wending its way from the peaks of the Crimean Mountains, and crossed the border into Eastern Ukraine without meeting further opposition. It was as if they hadn't expected anyone to make the difficult crossing and had left it lightly defended. In other parts of Ukraine, it was a different story.

The sky was constantly filled with aircraft. Fighter interceptors, helicopter gunships, and plenty of transports. It was clear Russia was sending in huge numbers of troops to reinforce their operation in Crimea, and if we'd left it a few more days, there was no way we'd have got out. Not without more of a fight, and one we would have lost.

The first obstacle we faced was when we reached the border. It was a border post in name only, a ramshackle affair, which had been constructed by local pro-Russians. It was more a gesture than a serious attempt to prevent the passage of people in and out of their breakaway nation. At the side of the rough track that constituted the highway, we could see the low buildings of a nearby village, less than a hundred meters distant.

There was an air of squalid neglect hanging over the area, like a dark, wet fog. It didn't need much imagination to see the locals lived and died lives of poverty, desolation, and despair. The buildings were little more than shacks. What paint there was had long faded and was in the last stages of peeling off completely. People sat in doorways with vacant eyes, waiting for God only knew what. Perhaps they were watching the road, waiting for their Russian saviors to arrive. Maybe they were waiting for rapture. Even the sky seemed darker than elsewhere, duller, more of a muddy gray than the bright blue we'd driven beneath as we came over the mountain range.

"Something in the road up ahead," Waite murmured.

"Let's hope it's a service area. I could do with something to eat and a visit to the bathroom," Angelina grumbled.

"You'll have to wait a while longer before we reach civilization," I informed her.

"But there's something on the other side of the road."

"It's just a shack, not what you're looking for. Not unless you're looking to buy a dirty glass filled with home-made vodka."

"They may have a bathroom."

"Sure, a clump of bushes around back."

I heard her curse but ignored it. I was concentrating on the two men standing in the roadway, both of them armed with what looked like hunting rifles. The

roadblock was a farm cart hauled across the highway, and I guessed these two men were the farmers who owned it.

They looked as old and derelict as the village, tired, lined faces and clothes that were threadbare and shabby. Pants tucked into Wellington boots, and hunting rifles that were little more than antiques cradled in their arms. They looked like peasants about to hunt down a wayward fox who had been eating their chickens.

There was a narrow gap on the highway just wide enough for pedestrians to pass. Nearby we could see a tiny, semi-derelict bar set at the roadside, which had once been a kiosk for travelers. To my astonishment I saw it was still functioning. Two other men, both elderly, were standing at the counter nursing glasses of vodka. They were armed, so it was reasonable to assume they were with the men blocking the road, although their weapons were shotguns.

"We'll have to shoot our way through," Dragan exclaimed from the back.

"No way," Waite spat back at him, "Those guys are just yokels."

The Ukrainian was jammed on the back seat with Al and our gear. Angelina and Joe were in the rear luggage space, where there was more room for her to tend to his wounds. As I was slowing, I heard a click, the start of a sniper rifle being assembled.

"Dragan, cut it out!" I called over my shoulder, "Put that damned gun away. These people won't prevent us getting through. They're here to stop people getting into Crimea, not getting out."

"They're Russian sympathizers, you realize that."

"They're old men. That's all I realize."

He sounded sullen, but if he kept the rifle tucked away, the men would live. I remembered the debacle when we entered Crimea, when he'd shot a bunch of soldiers who would have been more than happy with a bribe. He had an intense, inner hatred of all things Russian. That was his business. My concern was to make sure he didn't go around shooting every Russian he came across.

As we drew nearer, it was apparent the men were not quite as old as we'd first thought. No doubt the life they lived gave them the appearance of old men. Lined faces, sunk in resignation and despair. If Dragan left them alone, they'd have a chance to live to become old men.

I wound down the window, and the man unleashed a torrent of Russian. He had a huge, bushy beard, an ancient trilby on his head, and he held his hunting rifle aimed a little too close to my head for comfort. I pointed at it and gestured for him to move the barrel aside. He replied with a further stream of Russian, probably abuse.

I smiled, trying to keep things calm. "Dragan, tell the guy to stop pointing his gun at me, and to let us through."

He started talking to the guy, and it sounded as if some kind of an argument was developing. I began to feel irritated. We had a long way to go and a badly injured man in the back. I snapped at the billionaire.

"For Christ's sake, finish up so we can push on. If he wants money, offer him anything he wants. You can afford it."

"He says he wants to clear our passage with his commander."

"Tell him to hurry up and do it."

"It's not that simple. His commander is in Dzhankoi, and that's about thirty clicks away. He will have to make a phone call, and it will take time to get through."

The old guy started walking away.

"Dragan, we don't have time for this. Deal with it, any way you can."

I heard the rear door of the G Wagon open and turned to see him stepping down. He clutched his VSS Vintorez, ugly and lethal, out of place against the backdrop of these peasants with their primitive weapons. I felt uneasy about him toting the gun, but I could hardly ask him to go unarmed when these men carried rifles.

He shouted to the man who was walking toward the bar, where I assumed they had a telephone. The man turned, shouted something back, and kept walking.

It all happened in slow motion. Dragan pointed the Vintorez and called again. The old man shouted something back that sounded like a curse. Dragan pointed the ugly, bulbous black barrel at the man, and before I could stop him, he fired. The subsonic, tungsten-tipped bullet smashed into the man's back and flung him to the dirt. There was almost no report from the shot, but his comrades heard the commotion and looked around at the killer with the black rifle.

There was silence for a moment as they digested the incredible sight of the man lying on the ground, with a big entry hole in his back where the toughened round had hit him. His blood slowly pooled on the ground while his heart kept pumping, and then the trickle stopped. He was dead when the heavy bullet entered his body. It would have torn his insides to pieces.

The two men at the kiosk raised their shotguns, aimed, and one of them managed to fire. Lead shot peppered the bodywork of our vehicle, but none penetrated. Dragan fired and killed him. The man with the hunting rifle started running, and the fourth man with the shotgun joined him.

"Don't kill them!" I shouted, "Dragan, no! Let them go."

He calmly aimed his semiautomatic sniper rifle and fired twice. Both men slammed to the ground, as good as dead the moment he pulled the trigger. I jumped out of the Mercedes, ran up to him, and snatched the weapon out of his hands.

"Leave it alone. You've no right!" he shouted, "These people are our enemies. One of them tried to kill us. They were Russian scum!"

I lost it then and slammed my fist into his face. He sprawled to the ground with blood pouring from his nose. "You just killed four old men. We could have driven on, and they'd have done nothing to stop us."

He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the blood.

"You should remember who are your friends and who are your enemies. And who you work for."

"If that means helping a common murderer, you can go fuck yourself."

He walked up close now, and his eyes were blazing with fury.

"And your daughter? What will you do, curse your ex-wife's lawyers? What will Abigail do when you have no money to press your case? Lose her father, that's what. The next time you lay a hand on me, Raider, you're fired. And you can give me back my rifle."

I had an image of Abigail, a virtual prisoner of her rattlesnake mother, and I handed it back to him.

"Put it in the case. If I see it out in the open again, I'll shoot you down like a dog, money or no money. Clear?"

He ignored me, detached the scope, and disassembled the rest of the gun. I climbed back into the driver's seat, started the engine, and heard Dragan swing aboard the vehicle behind me. I didn't need to check he had his rifle out of sight. Waite and Al were both watching him, and he knew if he made the wrong move, he wouldn't need me to shoot him down like a dog. They were more than ready to beat me to it.

As we drove away, I couldn't keep my eyes from the bodies lying where they'd fallen. Several people, men and women, all lined and elderly, shuffled toward them and began dragging their loved ones to the side of the road. They'd be fathers, mothers, wives, maybe even sons. I watched one ancient crone stare at our vehicle. The distance was widening, but I was certain her eyes were conveying a curse upon us for what we just done. I felt it, a slight shiver.

Fuck Dragan!

We drove on to Zaporizhia and then turned north to Dnetpropetrovsk, a long journey of almost four hundred kilometers. The road varied. Parts of it were asphalt, and parts little more than a muddy track that had been repaired with loose gravel. Fortunately, we were in the G Wagon, and it ate up the distance. A lesser vehicle would have been shaken to pieces by the appalling state of the roadway.

Dragan sat in sullen silence, wedged on the back seat, nursing his bloodied nose. I only asked him one question when we reached Dnetpropetrovsk.

"Is this the turnoff for Kiev?"

His answer was curt, "Yes."

The highway had improved. It was fully asphalted, and we passed other vehicles traveling in both directions. Some were military, some civilian, but the real worry was the paramilitaries. Open trucks, the beds packed with armed men wearing a variety of military and civilian clothing. They were loose cannons, apt to start shooting for any or no reason.

One paramilitary truck roared past us and disappeared in the distance. We heard firing, faint, and a long way away. We caught up with the truck several minutes later. It was stopped next to the shot up, burned out wreck of a car. The passenger door was open, and a body hung half in and half out of the vehicle. The driver was slumped over the steering wheel, and as we drew near, we could see the line of bloody bullet holes in his back.

I put my foot on the gas and smoothly accelerated past the wreck. Several of the paramilitaries gave us curious glances.

"Waite, Al, keep your guns handy, just in case they start shooting. You, too, Dragan, until we're clear of these guys."

We left them behind, and there was no shooting. The constant stream of armed men was a concern, and I wanted some answers from Dragan, whether he liked it or not.

"What the hell is going on with those bands of armed men?"

"They are my people, fighting for their freedom," he replied tersely.

"I don't get it. This is Ukraine, not Crimea. You got rid of Yanukovych, and now you have a new democratically elected president, Marko Kulik."

He sighed, as if any fool should understand the complicated politics of Eastern Europe, as they applied to Ukraine.

"It's the fucking Russians. They are preparing to invade. You saw that truck back there, they shot up a civilian vehicle?"

"Yeah, I think we got that."

"They were Ukrainians in the truck, loyal Ukrainians. The men in the car were Russian infiltrators, come here to stir up trouble."

"How do you know?"

He shrugged. "They looked suspicious. They had to be Russians."

"You don't know that. As far as you're concerned, that shooting match could have been an argument over a girl."

"I know my people. You do not."

I gave up, and we continued on toward the capital. The highway was more crowded, and then we ran into a small-scale battle just outside a small town. The first indication was the line of machine gun fire that stitched the air a hundred meters ahead of us.

"Incoming! Go left," Waite shouted.

I'd already seen it. I jammed the wheel over, and the tires bucked and fought as we left the road, plunged into a narrow drainage ditch, and then emerged the other side. I drove into a sparse thicket, but it was enough to camouflage the G Wagon from the hostile fire.

I threw open the door and rolled out onto the ground, clutching my assault rifle. Al and Waite found cover a few meters either side of me, and we started to look for targets. Dragan was reassembling his rifle, kneeling down behind cover at the side of the G Wagon.

"Stay with the vehicle!" I shouted, "We may need covering fire, but don't leave it unguarded. And keep Angelina with you."

"I will be here, do not fear."

Before I could reply, Al shouted, "I can see movement, about two hundred meters ahead of us. I'll take a look."

"Copy that."

I crawled over and joined Waite. We started creeping forward in support of Al.

"We need to circle around them," I said to him, "As soon as they spot Al, they're liable to start shooting, and we need to hit them from the flanks."

"Yeah, I get that. But why are they shooting at us?"

"Because everyone in this mad country is as crazy as a coot. I reckon they shoot for the sake of it."

He grinned. "Just like old times, back in Afghanistan."

"Except we knew who our enemy was back then."

"You mean everyone with a towel on his head?"

"Sounds right."

We ducked as another hail of bullets ripped over our heads. I called forward to Al.

"You okay?"

His voice came back from ahead of us, "Sure, the bastards couldn't hit a barn if they were inside it. They're not shooting at us. There's some kind of a firefight going on inside the town. Some of them tried to make a break for it along the road heading east, and the machine gun tried to pick them off. They lost them, and then we came along."

He stopped as we all heard the familiar 'whoosh' of a missile launch. Anti-aircraft or anti-tank, who cared? At least it was not aimed at us. It roared out of a concealed position several hundred meters away and impacted somewhere in the town.

"Jesus Christ!" Waited exclaimed, "This isn't a few fucking peasants with shotguns."

"Roger that. Al, crawl back, we'll have to find a way to go around this place."

We snaked back to the Mercedes, climbed aboard, and I drove across the uneven ground to the other side of the thicket. There was no obvious road to follow, and I bumped across fields and even through the center of a cemetery. Several hundred meters further there was a dried up river. I put the Mercedes into the rock-strewn bed, which kept us out of sight. We managed to skirt the town without further trouble.

On the way we passed within fifty meters of a half dozen men with assault rifles. Dragan said they were ethnic Russians, and whomever they were shooting at, presumably Ukrainians, were returning fire with a heavy machine gun. Sheets of gunfire tore over our heads, and we were thankful to be in the deep gully. There was another bonus, the firing kicked up enough racket to drown out the noise of our diesel engine. When the riverbed finally detoured in the wrong direction, I was able to drive out and find we were far enough from the action to be safe.

"Raider," Dragan said quietly as we drove away, "Do you still think it's an argument over a girl?"

I kept my eyes on the road as I answered, "I think there are too many guns in this country for comfort. It seems to me that a lot of them came from you."

"Some of them, but by no means all. There are far more weapons on the ground than could have come from the Dragan Foundation. We only supplied small arms for self-defense, never machine guns or heavy weapons. Even so, would you have my people defenseless when the Russians attack?"

So where are the pro-Russians getting their weapons from? It's hardly Dragan, so who's the source? It can only be the Russians, which means they intend to destabilize the entire country of Ukraine. Someone, a Russian, is responsible for bringing large quantities of ordnance into the country, and there's only one name that comes to mind.

"Orlov."

I said it all to myself than speaking to Dragan, but he nodded.

"Yes, he is the last of our targets."

"That's not what I meant. He could be behind the arms shipments inside Ukraine. Arms shipments to both sides."

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it? You said yourself, there are far more weapons than you've supplied. Where do you think they came from?"

He was thoughtful for a few moments, and then he shook his head. "No, that would be insane, supplying arms to both sides."

"If you didn't supply the heavy machine gun we just passed, who did?"

"It could have been stolen from the military, perhaps even sold to Ukrainian loyalists."

I laughed. "You need to get real. This country is on the verge of civil war, and every man is carrying an assault weapon, even women and kids. What about those missiles, where do you think they came from? The last I heard, they don't supply them mail order."

"I do not know where they came from."

"No shit."

When we reached the outskirts of Kiev, it got worse. The first indication was when we halted at an intersection to allow a line of military vehicles to cross. A gang of feral youths slunk out from a shabby apartment block and walked in our direction. At first we took no notice, until the first rock hit the roof of the SUV.

"What the fuck!" Waite shouted.

"They believe we're pro-Russians," Dragan informed us.

"The stupid bastards, it's not like we carrying a Russian flag. Is there something I've missed?"

Another rock crashed into the hood of our vehicle, and I decided enough was enough. The Ukrainian military convoy was still passing, blocking our route. I saw a gap between a tank transporter loaded with a T-80, a Soviet era behemoth, and behind it a BM-30 Smerch, a mobile multiple rocket launcher. I didn't stop to calculate how many tons of armor would sandwich us if I got it wrong. It was time to get out of Dodge.

I stamped down on the gas pedal and went for the gap. The driver of the Smerch opened his mouth with astonishment as we zipped through, and the tank commander in the turret of the T-80 shouted something at us. I ignored them all, including Angelina's scream of fear as she saw the towering cliffs of armor looming over us.

I didn't get through clean. The Smerch nudged our rear wheel and fender and spun the Mercedes in a full circle. I eased off the gas, but we'd made it to the other side, and I was able to drive out of trouble. Except the G Wagon was mortally wounded. It drove like it was on square wheels.

"When we hit the rocket launcher, it must have bent the rear axle," Dragan shouted.

"How far to go?" I asked him.

"We'll make it."

I heard Joe cry out in agony as the vibration caused by the damaged axle bumped the rear of the Mercedes up and down, like it was driving over a tank trap. But I didn't stop, not when the whole of Ukraine was mobilizing on a war footing. Our best hope was to reach Dragan's headquarters and find help.

We got away and limped toward the Dragan Foundation's operational base. We were on his territory now, and he was able to direct us along the back lanes, past the worst of the trouble. It was obvious the country was about to implode. Like civil wars everywhere, brother would kill brother; sons would murder their fathers, and fathers their sons. And in between, the countryside would echo to the wails of

anguish, women and children unable to influence the course of events, their fate only to endure; in some cases, to die.

We reached Dragan's compound. It was a substantial warehouse building, surrounded by a high wall. Two men armed with assault rifles guarded the double gates, but when they saw their boss, they opened up immediately. We drove into a scene of utter chaos. Men were dragging wooden crates from the warehouse, loading them onto the beds of a convoy of 4x4 vehicles. At the side of the compound, another Mercedes G Wagon was parked. Unlike our battered wreck, this one looked relatively undamaged.

Everywhere, people ran around in panic. The city was alive with the sound of warfare. It sounded more like Beirut in the bad old days than the capital of a European nation, even if it was Ukraine. We climbed out of the Mercedes, and Myron Doroshenko ran across to greet his boss. The look of astonishment that we'd make it to Kiev quickly turned to calculation. I wondered what he was trying to hide.

"Mr. Dragan, we were worried. We weren't sure if you'd make it out of Crimea."

"We're here now," he replied, sounding irritated, "What the hell is going on here?"

The manager threw up his hands in despair. "We're sending stuff out as fast as possible. Everyone wants weapons. I decided to abandon the warehouse and move the remainder of our supplies to somewhere safer, west of Kiev."

Dragan now showed the face of the angry billionaire. His expression was tight with fury.

"You had no right to move our stocks."

"But, Sir, I had no choice. You weren't here, and I had to make a decision."

"You could have called me. You know I have the satphone."

He thought fast. "I forgot."

Dragan nodded slowly. "Tell me, Myron, to whom are you supplying our weapons? It seems everyone in Ukraine is carrying an assault rifle."

"I promise you, only those people who..."

He held up his hand to stop him. "I want to see it, in writing. Bring me the inventory, and a list of those people we have helped."

"But, there's been no time. I didn't keep a list. It's been crazy..."

"No list?"

He shook his head.

"What about food supplies? I've seen looting throughout the country. People are desperate for food. How much have you distributed?"

"There's been no time! It's been guns, guns, guns; that's all they want. They're frightened of the Russians, Mr. Dragan; you know that. They could be here at any time."

He grimaced, "There are enough guns on the streets as it is. Our plan was to enable our people to protect themselves, not to start a war. Put all of our resources to getting food out to those people in need."

"But..."

"Do it. And then come back here. I have another matter I wish to discuss."

Myron nodded abruptly and rushed away to notify his staff of the change of plans. The huge roller shutter door giving access to the warehouse was open, and

we could see cardboard cartons of foodstuffs stacked high, waiting to be distributed. On the other side, wooden crates, they would contain the weapons. And the heap was much smaller. I turned to Dragan.

"It looks like your guy has been busy turning the country into an armed camp. And while they're shooting, the food is lying in there rotting."

"Not any more. Dammit, I've been a fool, Raider. I'll deal with Myron when this is over. But first, we need to locate Orlov. He needs to pay. When he is dead, your business here is over, and you can return to the United States."

"You'll keep working on my legal case, my daughter?"

"Of course. I will ask Myron if there is news from the lawyers."

"That's much appreciated. However, the first task is to get a medic for Joe."

"Of course, I will go inside and make some calls."

"Hey, Dragan!"

He stopped at Waite's shout. "What is it?"

"We could use that G Wagon."

He nodded. "Take it. And anything else you need."

Waite nodded his thanks, and Al helped him transfer our gear to the new vehicle. Dragan strode away, and Angelina and I did our best to make Joe comfortable. Sporadic gunfire still sounded throughout the city, and occasionally the unmistakable noise of something heavier. A tank or artillery round, and on one occasion an RPG rocket whooshed overhead and detonated a few hundred meters away.

"How is he?" I asked Angelina, as we tucked bags and blankets around him.

She shook her head. "The journey hit him hard. There are signs of infection, so he needs antibiotics. He may also have internal injuries from the beating they gave him. At the very least he'll need his ribs strapped up and a good dose of painkillers. Strong stuff, IV most likely."

I told her a medic was on the way to take charge of him. Her expression relaxed but only a little.

"That's good news, but what he needs is a hospital. Tell me, John, what's going on here? I mean, the shooting, the armed gangs. Is it civil war?"

I had to think about that question. Like everyone else with access to satellite news, we'd seen the scenes of chaos in the iconic Maidan Square. There was the dramatic flight of Yanukovych to Moscow, and the subsequent discovery of his opulent lifestyle. With the election of Marko Kulik, people seemed to think it was an end to the trouble. Then came the Russian invasion of Crimea. But it hadn't ended there. Once again, Ukraine was boiling with protest and awash with guns, a lethal combination.

"I don't think it's a civil war, not yet, but it's close."

"Is there any way they can stop it?"

"If they cut off the arms supplies, it would help. Dragan has called a halt from this end, but people have far more weapons than is good for them. The Ukrainians are terrified of the same thing happening to them as happened in Crimea. I suspect the man behind it is a guy named Grigory Orlov, a Russian."

"You sound as if you know him."

She was fast. "We met, a long time ago."

"It wasn't a friendly meeting?"

"No."

"So, you're planning to kill this guy?"

"Part of the deal I struck with Dragan is to take him out."

She seemed calm, and I guess after her initial fury on the yacht when I'd been forced to admit my deception, she'd worked out that life wasn't simple. She'd seen too much death and destruction to have any illusions.

I saw her expression of distaste, and I hastened to explain about the Shevchenkos, Dragan's relatives. How Orlov and Minin, the man who'd tried to rape her, were behind the killing. How Orlov was the unofficial front for Russian arms supplies. And I told her about Afghanistan.

"Orlov is supplying these people with weapons, and you can see the end result. Armed chaos. War."

"Isn't Dragan doing exactly the same thing?"

I shook my head. "At first he supplied weapons to ordinary Ukrainians, like the people who protested in Maidan Square, and they got rid of a bloodthirsty tyrant, Yanukovich. He realizes it's got out of hand, and he's put a stop to it. These people need food, not weapons."

I thought of a phrase from Isaiah. *'They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.'*

No shit!

We watched people carrying the cardboard cartons of food to load on the trucks. More men were shifting the heavier wooden crates with weapons back into the warehouse. More workers had arrived, obviously Doroshenko had brought in reinforcement, and it was like watching lines of ants going back and forth.

"Surely the other guy, this Orlov, he won't stop," she murmured.

She was speaking as Dragan emerged. "We have found him."

Orlov!

"Where is he?"

He handed me a piece of paper with an address and GPS coordinates. "It is a Russian Orthodox monastery on the outskirts of Kiev. We believe he has weapons stored there as well."

"In a monastery?"

"A Russian monastery."

It still seemed strange, but I told him we'd check it out.

"You coming with us?" I asked him.

I'd assumed he'd want to be in at the kill, but I was wrong.

"No, I have much to do here. It seems Myron has mismanaged things in my absence."

Really?

He went away, and I explained to Angelina I needed her to stay with Joe. When the medics arrived to take care of him, they'd take him to a strange hospital, and I wanted him to see a familiar face nearby. She threw a minor tantrum, but I insisted. As crazy as things were in Kiev, there'd be much more chance of getting help if the person asking was a pretty face like hers, and she saw the sense of it. Besides, after everything she'd been through, she'd had more than her fair share of the slaughter.

I walked inside to chase up the medic. Myron was in an office, so I stepped in to ask him about the whereabouts of his boss. He was listening to the radio, and he waved his hand irritably for me to wait.

"Be quiet!"

"Horseshit. Where's Dragan?"

"Not now, not now. Can't you hear, the news on the radio?"

"Last time I listened, I didn't understand a word of Ukrainian."

"Of course. It's from Sevastopol, and they're saying someone tried to assassinate Vladimir Putin."

Damn, the yacht we'd destroyed. Putin's comfy home from home, riding the waves away from the noise and bustle of Sevastopol.

"Where did it happen, on a boat?" I asked innocently.

"A boat?" He looked puzzled, "No, it was his hotel room. A sniper fired a shot at him from the roof of a building opposite."

"When did this happen?"

"Two days ago, during the night. He was standing at the open window, but apparently his security man saved him. Normally, it wouldn't make the news, but the Russians sent a forensic team to search the area, and it became public knowledge."

I thought back to what we were doing then.

Yeah, we were rescuing Joe from Inkerman Castle. At least it put us in the clear. Although... Dragan wasn't with us. There was his weird excuse about the accident that blocked the road, forcing him to turn back. So where was he all the time we were fighting our way out of Inkerman? It's time to square with Dragan.

I knew his hatred of all things Russian was close to an illness, a kind of 'the only good Russian is a dead Russian' mantra. I wondered would he be crazy enough to try and take out the Russian President. If that was his game, the only place to be was a million miles away from here, legal expenses or no legal expenses.

"You still haven't told me. Where's your boss?"

"He's in his office, through there."

He pointed to a door at the rear of the office. I nodded my thanks and walked through to Dragan's office. He was sitting behind a utility gray steel desk, working through a bunch of documents. He looked up and gave me a nod of recognition.

"I'm checking through Myron's logs for the past weeks. Much of our stock has gone missing."

"And I'll bet it isn't foodstuffs."

He looked up and met my eyes. "No. Weapons mainly, assault rifles and thousands of rounds of ammunition."

"Now you know why the countryside we passed through was almost a war zone."

"Possibly," he murmured.

"Dragan, President Putin. Did you hear about the assassination attempt in Sevastopol?"

He looked away, refusing to meet my eyes. "I heard."

"As I recall, we were hacking our way out of Inkerman Castle when it happened. You fed us some line about an accident that prevented you from reaching us. I'm starting to think you may have been elsewhere."

His jaw fell in astonishment, and I had to admit he looked genuine. "You think I attempted to shoot the Russian President? That's ridiculous."

"Is it? Do you deny you'd like to kill him if you had the chance?"

He thought for a few moments. "No, I don't deny it. Putin stands for everything I despise. He'd do anything to gain control of Ukraine and establish permanent bases for his troops. For us, it would mean almost a return to the bad old days of communism, when we lived our lives in the shadow of Moscow. Yes, I'd like to see him dead. But it wasn't me."

I wasn't entirely convinced. It would have been a stupid move, and I could have taken the time to explain that the quickest way for Ukraine to be overrun by Russian troops would be for someone to bump off Putin during his visit to Kiev. He should have understood that. He was a clever man, a brilliant man, but that fanatic belief often distorts reality. Whatever I said wouldn't make any difference.

I made a decision to keep him close.

"I want you to come with us when we go to the monastery."

His gaze was cold. "In case I'm the assassin. You think that will save Putin, to watch over me?"

"I don't know. But you're coming with us."

He looked angry. "I don't take orders from you, Raider."

"You're coming with us."

He grimaced. "Do you plan to hit me again if I refuse? I haven't forgotten the last time. You almost broke my nose. Don't try it again. It would not be...healthy."

His bleak expression left me in no doubt he'd come gunning for me if I pushed him too far. He was a man who wouldn't hesitate to gun down an enemy, or pay others to do it, like us. This guy never forgot a slight, never forgave an enemy. And it seemed I'd become his enemy.

Too bad, he shouldn't have shot those men. I've always had something against shooting people for no reason.

"I couldn't give a shit what you advise." I switched to trying to persuade him with reason, "You want to be there at the end, surely?"

He gave a faint nod. "Yes."

"Then stay close, where we can see you. As soon as it's done, we're out of this crazy country of yours."

He sighed. "Very well, I will accompany you."

I nodded. "There's something else you need to handle. Getting out of here when it's over?"

He looked puzzled. "I don't understand."

"As I recall, your jet is still on the ground at Odessa. It might be an idea to have it standing by at Kiev International Airport. Fueled and ready to go at a moment's notice."

He looked pained. "Of course, I should have arranged it. I will make the call now. Is there anything else I've forgotten?"

"The medic for Joe? Where is he?"

"I called again just before you entered my office. The city is ablaze, and medics are difficult to come by. They said the ambulance would be with us inside the next ten minutes."

As if to underline he was telling the truth, a siren blared outside, and I ran out into the yard. Angelina was waving at a battered Soviet-era ambulance approaching. He steered toward her and parked next to our G Wagon. The driver climbed out, together with a female paramedic, and they knelt next to Joe to give him the once over. Less than a minute later, they were hauling a gurney from the back of the vehicle. They strapped him on and carefully eased the casualty into the back of the ambulance.

I jogged across to them. "Where are you taking him?"

The driver looked at me blankly, not understanding English, but the paramedic replied in broken English.

"City Clinical Hospital Number Nine is in Ryzka Street. Do not worry, we look after your friend."

I nodded. "Angelina, go with him, and make sure he has everything he needs. Any problems, tell them Dragan will pay."

"I'll be there, and believe me, there won't be any problems," she replied.

Having her go with him made me feel more confident while we went to deal with Orlov. She stepped into the rear of the ambulance. The driver slammed the doors closed and climbed into the cab. He started the engine, switched on the siren, and lurched back out through the gates, narrowly missing one of Dragan's trucks about to enter.

It was time to get on the road. I found Waite and Al loading the new SUV. Al wedged a last case of ammo into the trunk and glanced at me.

"You know where we're headed?"

"I have the address. We can use the satnav to find it."

I handed him the piece of paper with the details and glanced at Waite. "How did you make out with the weapons? Remember, this is Orlov we're going up against."

"I helped myself to some of Dragan's ordnance. There are four AKMs in the trunk and a few boxes of ammo. There're no spare rounds for the Kiparis submachine guns, so I figured we'd best use the AKs."

"As long as bullets spray out the barrel when you pull the trigger, that's fine by me. I want this finished, and I don't care what we use. Dragan is coming with us."

I told him my suspicions about the assassination attempt in Sevastopol. Now there was Putin's visit to Kiev to consider. If Dragan were involved, I'd shoot the bastard rather than let him go ahead.

Al shook his head, horrified by the implications of a hit on the Russian leader.

"I'll handcuff the bastard to the vehicle, if necessary. Jesus Christ, it could start a World War. I recall reading that after the assassination of Kennedy plenty of people thought it'd come to war. Thank Christ it was only that crazy Lee Harvey Oswald who pulled the trigger."

A single rifle fired from the Book Repository. No other involvement, no plots, no conspiracies. No grassy knoll. Yeah, right.

"Let's make sure it doesn't happen this time."

"Where is he? Dragan?"

"Making some calls, finishing some paperwork. Business."

Al grimaced. "Always time for making money. There's something you may not have considered. If it wasn't Dragan, the assassin could be here, about to try again. If he succeeds this time..."

"War. In which case, we need to be a long way away when the shit hits the fan. As soon as Dragan is ready, we'll go there and get it done."

Kiev, Ukraine – April 2014

The assassin decided it was time to call Orlov. He needed to finalize the arrangements to complete the job. And afterward he'd be even wealthier, more powerful than he was now. He dialed, but the line buzzed with the busy tone.

Damn! I'll have to try and find the time to call him later.

He was about to switch off the satphone when he heard the tone that meant there was a message waiting for him. He pressed the key and listened for a long time.

He saved the message for later. He didn't want any mistakes. The information gave him a time, an address, and a location. The time was for when Putin would make an appearance at the address given, surrounded by an army of useless guards, useless because they couldn't stop him. The location was where he would pick up the explosives, fifty kilos of C4, enough to take out a city block.

It made sense after the failure in Sevastopol. A remote killing would be certain, a huge bomb that would give him time to get clear. The venue for the assassination couldn't be better either. A hospital! What else would arouse so much rage and emotion as killing a man who'd taken time out from his busy schedule to visit the wounded and sick? There'd be total chaos in Russia and Ukraine. Which would allow his sponsor, Orlov, to take control.

The savior of Russia, the protector of Ukraine, a hero!

He switched off his phone and tucked it away. All that remained was to pick up the equipment, plant it in the basement of the hospital, and arm the remote detonator. He would observe the Presidential visit from a rooftop half a kilometer away, an innocent bystander watching through binoculars. When the moment came, the blast would reduce City Clinical Hospital Number Nine to rubble. Afterward, he would be able to claim his just reward. From President Grigory Orlov.

Chapter 11

Russian Embassy, Kiev, Ukraine – April 2014

"I'm not happy about this arrangement. I still say you should cancel."

Putin gave Malenkov the benefit of his stern expression. "You're never are happy, Yuri. If I left my appearance schedule to you, I'd spend my life inside a concrete bunker. And then you wouldn't be satisfied."

Malenkov smiled; the President may be right. Even so, Kiev was an unstable city, akin to a powder keg about to explode. City Clinical Hospital Number Nine was a sprawling complex, and his security troops had only had time to make a

cursory inspection. There could be an army of assassins hidden inside, and he wouldn't know about it until the attack began. When it would be too late.

Even so, he'd done his best. They'd all done their best. He'd sent men to check out every building that overlooked the hospital, and they'd found no sign of an assassin. It still didn't mean the threat didn't exist, and he worried about what could be waiting for them inside the hospital. There wasn't time. All he'd been able to do was select the tallest of his men to surround the President. If an assassin made an attempt on his life, it was likely one of the bodyguards would stop the bullet. It was what they were paid for.

Snipers weren't the only danger. He'd have liked to search further for threats such as explosives. That would take two days to complete. All he had left was two hours.

"If you will delay for just one day, postpone until tomorrow, I could make further checks."

"Forget it. We go today, and start the tour at 1400 as planned. It will do wonders for relations between our two countries. I need those bases, Yuri, and this is the best way to forge an agreement. We will help Ukraine avoid a civil war. In return, they will be more than happy to agree to anything we ask of them. First, it is essential they see the friendly face of Mother Russia."

If things go wrong, all they'll see is the failure of Russian security and a dead President.

"As you say, Sir. I will have your limousine ready to leave at 1345."

Kiev, Ukraine – April 2014

We packed into the new G Wagon, and Waite drove to the monastery following the directions on the satnav. This time, we made no attempt to hide the weapons. All of Kiev was an armed camp. We slammed new clips into our AKMs and made certain the Makarovs were fully loaded. I made one change before we left Dragan's compound. As he walked toward us, I noticed he carried the briefcase in his hand, the black case that contained the VSS Vintorez sniper rifle.

"The rifle stays behind."

He darkened with anger. "This is my personal weapon! If we get into a fight, we'll need an expert sniper."

I had a few reservations about his degree of expertise, but I didn't voice them right then.

"Dragan, you've heard the news. An assassin made an attempt on the life of President Putin in Sevastopol. We know it was a long distance shot, so if they stopped us and found that rifle, they'd be a tad more than suspicious. Anyone found in possession of a sniper rifle is likely to be put under immediate arrest."

"They will not arrest me! I am Alexander Dragan. Everyone in Kiev knows of my reputation. Without me..."

"The rifle stays. Hand it over."

He looked either side of him. Al and Waite waited to force the issue. He shrugged, gave in, and handed over the briefcase. I found a filing cabinet in the warehouse with a key in the lock and secured it inside. When I returned to the

vehicle, Dragan was in back with Al. He looked sullen, but appeared to have accepted the loss of his sniper rifle and was checking a spare AKM. I suppressed a smile, climbed into the passenger seat, and nodded at Waite. He started the engine and drove away.

The journey through the streets of Kiev was a nightmare. The satnav route took us past Maidan Square, the traditional venue for demonstrations. It was packed with people, and as we skirted the square, it was obvious it was more than a demonstration. On one side, a huge crowd of protestors waving Ukrainian flags had gathered. Most of them were armed. Some were taking potshots at a smaller crowd on the opposite side of the square, who fired back. It didn't take a genius to work out what was going on. The bigger crowd was Ukrainian patriots, and on the other side pro-Russians. Like gunpowder and a lighted match.

Waite swerved to avoid a petrol bomb thrown by a guy who suddenly stepped out of a doorway, lobbed the missile, and stepped back before we could get a shot at him. The explosion rocked the Mercedes, and the windshield blew inward, showering us with fragments of toughened glass. Black, stinking smoke filled the interior of the vehicle, and flames licked at the bodywork.

Waite jammed his foot down on the gas to get us out of trouble, and we shot forward. In the process, he took down a lamppost, and it crashed to the ground behind us as we raced away.

"Aced the fucker," he growled.

I looked in the rear view mirror. The petrol bomber had come out from cover and run forward, clutching another petrol bomb, ready to throw. Waite had knocked over the lamppost as the guy came alongside. The heavy steel post slammed him to the ground. The scream may have been from the impact or from his bomb exploding, showering him with burning petrol. The effect was the same. His petrol bombing days were over.

When we were clear, Waite screeched to a halt, and we leapt out to deal with the fire. Three of us covered the area with the AKMs, while Waite used the fire extinguisher clipped inside the vehicle to put out the fire.

We were lucky. The only casualty was the blackened, scorched paintwork and the smashed windshield. He knocked out the remnants of glass. We climbed back into the vehicle, and he drove on.

"What's the deal with these idiots?" I asked Dragan, "They don't even know which side we're on."

"I think they assumed we were pro-Russians. Not many in Ukraine could afford a new Mercedes. Not patriots. Only the Russians have that kind of money."

"The fuckers need to work on their target selection," Waite grumbled, "Assuming they live long enough. If they shoot at anything that moves, people are going to shoot back."

Madness had gripped the city. Every man had taken up arms to defend himself against what they perceived as threats to their liberty. Pro-Ukrainians, pro-Russians, I doubted many of them would know what the other side stood for. Only that after Crimea, they saw themselves as next on the Russian shopping list of countries to invade. If they stopped to think, they'd know Crimea was different. The majority of Crimeans welcomed the Russian invasion. Kiev hated the Russians.

I looked and squinted ahead through the open windshield as Waite shouted, "What the fuck!"

We'd exited Maidan Square and were driving along a narrow, one-way street. At first, it was empty of other vehicles. The next moment, a truck was heading toward us at high speed. It was no ordinary truck. The white converted Toyota Land Cruiser sported a heavy machine gun fastened to the bed, with two grim looking men operating it. As the other vehicle neared, I could see the twin barrels of the gun angling toward us. They were taking aim.

"Now would be a good time to get off the street," I said to Waite.

"Where? I can't see a turn off anywhere. I can try to reverse back up, but if he's made up his mind to shoot, it won't stop him."

I turned to Dragan. "Any ideas, do you know who it is?"

"None. All I can say is he has us outgunned. He may decide to hit us for the hell of it." He was trying to stay calm, but his skin was white with fear. There was nothing his billions could do to protect him from the onrushing machine gun.

I was scanning the residential street, desperate to find somewhere to turn off. Anywhere we could evade the oncoming Toyota. At the last moment I saw a garage with an up and over door. The door was closed. It was better than nothing.

I pointed. "Waite, the garage. Go for it!"

He sized it up for a split second. "And if there's a vehicle inside?"

"Then we're no deader than if we don't try it."

"That's good enough for me."

We were almost adjacent to the door, and at the last second he swerved the wheel. The rear wheels skidded, and we smashed through the thin aluminum-skinned door. We made it to the inside of the garage; the remains of the door perched on the roof. I barely had room to squeeze out the door, but I slipped through the tiny gap and rushed to cover the street with my AKM. Al came up beside me, cradling his own assault rifle.

The Toyota rumbled past us, and we relaxed; the gun crew appeared to ignore us. They'd found another target, an ancient Soviet relic rattling along the narrow street. It was recognizable because of its odd shape, a UAZ 452 truck, nicknamed the Bukhanka. It translated as the 'Bread Loaf' because of the round, loaf-shaped front. The back of the dilapidated vehicle was crowded with eager youths, some of them armed, all of them shouting slogans. The gun crew opened up immediately. Once again, we knew there was no way they could have identified the target as friend or foe.

The heavy machine gun, a tandem mounted DsHK 12.7mm, fired a cartridge that was 108mm in length. The machine gun had been built in vast quantities, at the last count over a million, and the Russians were still making them. It was no surprise; at two thousand dollars a pop, they were an absolute bargain for anyone who wanted to start a war on a budget. The dual machine guns on the Toyota 'Technical' would have been intended for anti-aircraft use, but at a cost of less than five thousand dollars the pair, they would have been employed in a variety of theatres.

The 'Technical' was an invention of the constant wars on the African continent. It was named because the budget for the machine gun equipped trucks was marked down for 'technical' purposes with the various aid agencies that supplied

relief funds. They were cheap and easily built in a short time, the perfect weapon to inflict maximum damage for the least cost. What we called the 'biggest bang for your buck.'

The result was inevitable. The oncoming UAZ had no machine gun mounted on its bed with which to defend itself, and no armor. The twin barrels of the DShK flamed as the massive rounds spewed out in a continuous hail. In a matter of seconds, the lighter vehicle was turned into a mass of chewed up metal, tissue, and blood. The Toyota slowed, the fenders touched, and they started to push the wreckage backward, all the way out of the street. When they reached the end, they left the pile of mangled bodies and twisted wreckage and continued on the journey.

No one said a word. We'd just witnessed a casual act of mass murder, and there was no doubt similar scenes were being enacted all over Kiev, perhaps across Ukraine. It wasn't civil war, not yet, but it soon would be. Waite reversed the Mercedes out of the garage, and we drove on.

Soon, we reached the suburbs of the city. Waite braked to a halt at the head of a long, narrow valley when we saw our destination ahead. Eighty meters away stood the monastery. It looked innocent, surrounded by a white stonewall about one meter high, and inside it a collection of buildings.

The monastery chapel was the most prominent feature, with a distinctive onion shaped dome in the classical Russian Orthodox style. Surrounding the chapel were four long, single story buildings, obviously the sleeping accommodation, kitchen and dining area, and a large storeroom. In the center of the open ground, close to the chapel, they'd constructed a small shrine, a stone plinth of about one meter high, with a two-meter stone statue of the Virgin Mary on top. It was all very convincing, as if to show the world their spiritual dedication, except they were hiding Grigory Orlov somewhere inside.

Waite waited. Finally, I gave him the nod.

"Drive on down, but make it slow. Orlov is a careful man, and it's hard to believe he won't have a couple of guards posted. We're just innocent sightseers."

We moved forward. As we neared the monastery, two monks appeared from one of the buildings, each wearing a thick brown woolen robe, the waist pulled in with a length of knotted rope. The prayer rope, part of the habit of Eastern Orthodox monks, was used to count the number of times they'd prayed. It looked pious enough, but I was dubious.

Since when did monks have the build of Russian weightlifters, or Mafiya triggermen?

They stood in the entrance, blocking it, and we were forced to stop.

"I'll handle it," Dragan said. He climbed out of the vehicle and approached the monks.

"Cover him," I murmured to the other two.

"You think they'll say a prayer and call down a bolt of lightning on his head?" Waite grinned.

"You mean a 9mm prayer? They're carrying something under those robes, and it doesn't look like hair shirts."

Whatever they were, they were giving him a hard time. I could see them shaking their heads as he talked to them. It was obvious they weren't about to allow us inside. I decided it was time to up the ante. I explained what I was planning to

Waite and Al, climbed out, and approached the monks. My AKM was slung on my back, not an immediate threat, but enough to make a point that we weren't tourists.

"Hey guys, any problems here? We're looking to visit the Abbot."

In return I got a torrent of Russian. They stared pointedly at my AKM, and I could see their hands itching to move toward whatever ordnance they had hidden beneath their habits. Maybe they planned to toss bibles at us, but I didn't think so.

"What do they say?"

Dragan's lips twisted into a grimace, "They said fuck off."

"Do monks talk like that?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so. I haven't heard it before."

"So they're not monks."

"No."

"So we can shoot them."

"Yes."

I gave a hand signal to the men in the G Wagon and murmured to Dragan, "Hit the dirt."

He'd been a soldier and hadn't forgotten the way it worked. A short pause, and then he was rolling on the frozen ground, only a fraction of a second behind me. At the same time, Waite and Al fired. I'd told them to fire over their heads at first. If I was wrong, and they were genuine monks, I didn't want their blood on my hands. In the event, they reacted as expected.

Two hands dived under voluminous robes and came out clutching weapons. They weren't conventional semi-automatic shooters. Each man produced a PP-2000, a close quarter combat weapon, intended for riot police and special operations forces. The gun was one of the latest products of the Russian arms industry, and one of the most dangerous. Compact and lethal, easy to conceal, the gun could fire on full auto at a rate of six hundred 9mm Parabellum rounds per minute. The conventional magazine carried twenty rounds, but an unusual feature of these weapons was the ability to store a spare forty-four round magazine in the rear of the gun, which also functioned as a stock.

They were fast, lightning fast. Whatever training they'd received, it wasn't in a religious seminary. They were good enough to squeeze off a half-dozen rounds before they went down, but Al and Waite had the drop on them, and they stitched both men with heavy 7.62mm rounds before the supposed monks managed to hit anything.

As the brown robed bodies fell to the ground, I turned and shouted at Waite, "Drive inside and get the Mercedes behind cover. Spin her around ready for a fast exit. We'll start sweeping through the buildings to locate Orlov. Dragan, with me."

Dragan followed me as I sped over to the chapel. I considered whoever was hiding here would most likely be inside. We reached the door, and it was locked. I stepped back a half dozen paces and shoulder charged. The lock snapped, and the doors burst open. I nearly tripped on a meter-high statue of the crucified Jesus positioned in the center of the lobby, but I kept my balance and went on into the chapel. The interior was gloomy; the only illumination was rows of lighted candles arrayed in niches around the walls.

The chapel was richly decorated, festooned with icons, and the small altar at the front emblazoned with gold filigree. There were no wooden pews, and nowhere to sit. Apparently, monks were expected to stand during worship, or kneel. I heard a click at the other end of the chapel, and as my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, I saw a man walking forward. He was old, gray haired, and he wore religious robes. His garments were richer, more expensive, and from his neck hung a heavy gold cross.

"Who are you?" he spat, his voice charged with anger, "What are you doing inside my chapel?"

It was an interesting opening. He spoke in English. I wondered how he'd guessed, or who'd told him we weren't Ukrainians or Russians.

"Where is he?"

He was a fraction of a second slow to answer. "Who?"

"Orlov."

"I don't know who you are talking about. Who is this Orlov?"

"Raider! Something's going on out there," Dragan shouted the warning.

I'd already heard the ruckus, and we ran back toward the doors. Directly in front of us in the center of the lobby, three monks were kneeling behind the shrine to the Virgin, shooting at Al and Waite. Chips of stone flew off the statue as they returned fire with short, professional bursts. Further away, dozens of stray bullets had peppered our G Wagon, another write-off for Dragan's accountants.

The hostiles had made a mistake. Maybe they'd forgotten about us or hadn't seen us go inside the chapel. We were right behind them. Both of us squeezed the triggers of our AKMs and unleashed a storm of fire at the three shooters. Two went down, and the third tried to zigzag out of the chapel and across to a stone building thirty meters away. He stopped as I stitched a line of shots into the dirt in front of his running feet, dropped his gun, and waited with his hands held high. He was a big man, overweight, but heavily muscled. The blunt, Slav face could only be one man. Orlov.

I felt a sense of exultation. I'd come a long way, and it had been a long time. The first time had been in Afghanistan when he got away to continue peddling his weapons to the Taliban, for them to use against American soldiers. There'd been the rooftop in Sevastopol when I'd seen him shoot the elderly Jew, and encouraged the enraged mob to hack the body to pieces. Crimea, where he'd almost single-handedly armed the populace to stage an armed coup and open the door for Russian troops to take over the country. And now in Ukraine, where the suffering he'd caused was a tragedy.

He adopted an expression of resigned surrender, but I wasn't fooled. This was a man who'd survived scores of battlefield encounters, and so far he'd always come out on top.

"Lie on the ground, face down, Orlov."

He obeyed. I took out my combat knife, slashed the prayer rope, and used it to tie his hands behind him.

"There's no need for this. I can help you," he said calmly in his Russian accented English.

"Get up, and move toward the Mercedes."

He inclined his head and started plodding toward the shot up SUV.

I heard Al shout, "Dragan!"

I spun around in time to see the billionaire aiming his rifle at Orlov. He was close to me, and I dived to hit him full in the body, enough to pitch him over, and the bullet he'd intended for the Russian whistled harmlessly overhead. He sprawled on the ground, cursed, and gave me a venomous look. When I failed to take any interest, he climbed to his feet and bent down to pick up his assault rifle.

"You've no right to stop me, Raider. The contract we made is to kill this man. If you're not happy about me doing it, you pull the trigger."

"Not yet. We have business with Comrade Orlov."

"Then I will kill him."

His bloodlust was almost a physical thing, yet there are rules, norms of behavior. You don't shoot an enemy in cold blood, in spite of Dragan's psychotic hatred of this particular Russian. I didn't blame him, not entirely. If he'd murdered my family I'd have wanted to pull the trigger, but in battle, not in cold blood. Yet now there was a further complication. We needed information, information that may save thousands of lives. I stared at Dragan.

"Let's see what he has to tell us. Orlov, I have some questions for you. First, where are the guns? This country is awash with assault rifles, missiles, machine guns, you name it, where do you keep the stuff?"

His look was cunning. "Why should I tell you? What do I get in return?"

"What do you want?"

He shrugged and smiled. "My life, what else? You've beaten me. All I can do now is live long enough to go home."

"No!" Dragan shouted, "He's mine. That's the agreement."

"When we took on this contract, you put me in charge of the operation. The final decision is mine, not yours."

I saw the grip on his assault rifle whiten with tension.

"Watch him," I murmured to Waite and Al. They nodded.

"Orlov, if I give you your life, what do we get in return?"

"The weapons, isn't that what you came for?"

"Tell me about the assassination."

He tried to hide it, but the flicker in his eyes was the giveaway.

"Which assassination?"

I shrugged. "Have it your way. Alexander Dragan can have you."

It only took him a couple of seconds to get a reality check.

"No, keep him away from me. I will tell you what you want to know."

It all came out, in the space of several minutes. The weapons first, they were hidden in the storeroom of the monastery. I pushed him in front of us to show us the way, and we were astonished when he opened the door. A building almost forty meters long, twenty meters wide, and four meters high, piled with enough ordnance to refight World War Two. But it was the second part that was the real shock.

"If I tell you of the plan to destroy the hospital President Putin is due to visit today, will you guarantee my life?"

"You hired the assassin?"

"Yes. With the President out of the way, I could have restored Russia to her former greatness."

"Another Ivan the Terrible? How much blood do you want, Orlov? Will it ever be enough?"

He glared back at me, and his hatred chilled my guts. Our stares locked for seconds. Then he seemed to accept the inevitable, and he relaxed.

"I've have worked on this for many years, and I almost made it. I doubt you can stop the assassination. My man is ready, and the bomb is in place. Why don't you join me? The rewards will be unimaginable."

I saw Al and Waite exchange glances. Dragan was incandescent at Orlov's casual offer for us to join his crusade of blood. He would have shot him like a dog if I'd let him have the chance. I watched him carefully. We needed Orlov alive for his information if we were to stop the murder going ahead.

"You said Putin is visiting a hospital. Which one?"

It all came out. City Clinical Hospital Number Nine, in Ryzka Street. I stared at the others. That was the hospital they'd taken Joe Nguyen to, with Angelina. I felt numb for couple of seconds, and then I recovered myself.

"Orlov, how long do we have? I need to know exactly."

He made a mental assessment. "Two hours, no more, but you can't stop it."

I ignored him. "Where will this guy place the bomb?"

He shrugged. "It is already in the basement. He is waiting for the right moment to detonate. If you try to warn Putin, you'll be wasting your time. They won't believe the word of a bunch of American mercenaries." He looked at Dragan, "Especially when they're paid by a Ukrainian gangster."

I suddenly realized the shooter wasn't Dragan. "Who is this assassin? Tell me his name."

"I don't know his name. I just call him *The Englishman*. He's the last person anyone would suspect. The man is a priest, or at least he used to be."

Something clicked in my head.

A trained sniper and a priest?

"What does he look like?"

He took a moment to collect his thoughts. "Thin, but very strong. I believe he was a member of the English Special Forces."

"The SAS?"

"Yes. Afterward, he became a priest, but something happened. He left the priesthood and made a new career as a hired gun."

"Describe him."

"Let me think, pale skin, thin face. But his eyes, that's how you'd recognize him. He had intense, black eyes. The eyes of a hunter."

"Or a predator."

He looked at me curiously. "Yes, that would describe him. A predator."

Father Damion Hunt, the man we'd pulled out of an Iranian jail. I remembered the shot he'd taken, an impossible shot even for a fit man, and at the time he was anything but fit. An international class shooter, several leagues ahead of Dragan, and a perfectionist; a man who would carry out a kill with the precision and dedication of the world class professional he was.

Damn, damn, damn!

"Let's go."

We ran to the Mercedes. The Russian almost made it, swerving away at the last moment.

"Orlov!"

He reached the chapel and was diving through the open doors. The Abbot stood in front of him; his arms open as if in welcome. Dragan's AKM chattered a long, full burst that emptied the clip. The Russian pitched forward into the arms of the monk. They both fell; locked together in death, sprawled in the doorway. Splashes of blood had sprayed over the crucified Jesus, almost as if the sculptor had applied a final touch of realism.

I looked away from the bodies, sickened by the unnecessary bloodshed. Orlov could have walked away with his life. Instead, he'd caused the death of the Abbot, as well as his own. Life can be a bastard. Death can be a bastard. I looked at Dragan. His expression conveyed no sense of closure. Instead, it was as if the act of sacrilege inside the monastery had shown God mocking his quest for vengeance.

I suddenly recalled where we were headed. And why.

"We need to go now! We're running out of time."

The four of us raced toward the Mercedes. We had a political assassination to prevent, and the lives of Joe and Angelina, to save. Angelina! She had a cellphone that never left her side. It meant I could warn her. It was just possible she could pass on the warning to the Russians. People will often listen to a message from a beautiful young woman when otherwise they'd ignore it completely. Weird that.

I recalled the number from memory and switched on the satphone. After a couple of seconds, the signal connected with the satellite, and I heard the dial tone. I punched in her number and waited, nothing; not even a recorded message. There was just silence, the hiss of static. It occurred to me the trouble in Kiev had almost certainly taken out some of the cell towers. We had to reach the hospital, and fast.

Waite hit the gas, and we fishtailed out of the monastery grounds.

The drive to Ryzka Street, to City Clinical Hospital Number Nine, was a nightmare of crazy driving. Other drivers shaking their fists and waving weapons at Waite as he threaded his way through the increasingly crowded streets like a man possessed.

I programmed the satnav, and he watched the screen, twisting and turning through the turbulence of a city turned to violence. Once, someone fired several rounds at us, and the window next to my head disintegrated in a shower of splinters. The slipstream from the shattered windshield funneled through, so it was like sitting in a blast freezer. It made driving even more difficult for Waite, but the satnav kept us on course, and we narrowed the distance to our destination.

We rounded a corner. The hospital complex was only three hundred meters away. Three SUVs had parked across the street to close off access. In front of them, a huge man held a machine pistol, a Russian Kiparis like those we'd used. He wore an ill-fitting black suit, and an expression like a man who'd swallowed a pint of vinegar. He held up his hand in a gesture that was universal.

"Stoy!"

Dragan climbed out of the vehicle to talk to him. After twenty seconds, I could see it was no use. The G Wagon looked anything but innocent, bearing the scars of battle, bullet holes, and shattered Perspex. The guard stood unmoving, ignoring

the arguments and blocking the highway like a stonewall. We were running out of time. I shouted from the shattered window.

"Dragan, you're wasting your time. We'll have to find another way in! Get back in the car."

He waved a hand of acknowledgement and came back to the G Wagon. Not before time, five other armed Russians were starting to take an interest.

"Waite, drive around back. We'll try that way."

"You got it."

The tires smoked as he rammed the gear lever into reverse and stamped on the gas pedal. We screamed back the way we'd come, and when we reached the end of the street, he turned in the direction of the rear of the hospital. We followed the street for two hundred meters, and he threw a left turn, only to come up against three more SUVs parked across the street, and six more hard looking armed Russians, who were plainly not about to let us through.

"Any suggestions?" Waite asked.

We have to do something. Anything.

"Head back, and find somewhere to ditch the vehicle. We'll go in on foot."

"Roger that."

He backed up, turned around, and drove until we were out of sight of the Russian guards. He parked, and we did our best to hide the assault rifles under our coats. If anyone with military training saw us, they'd have no doubt about what we were hiding. The trick was to make sure they didn't see us. I led the way back, but instead of turning into the street where the guards had blocked the road, I opened a wooden gate and turned into the garden of a private house.

We ran along a paved pathway, past a house where a family sat eating lunch at a table, a man, a woman, and two children. They stared at us, frozen in astonishment. Then the man climbed to his feet and opened the window. As he opened his mouth to shout, his eyes dropped to the unmistakable shape of the AKMs hidden beneath our coats. He said a few words to his wife, retook his seat at the table, and they continued eating his food.

Waite grinned. "Jesus Christ, he's not even worried about us."

Dragan shook his head. "He's worried. That's why they did the only thing possible. Closed their eyes to what's happening on their doorstep. It's the only way they can survive the madness in this country."

"Crazy fucking world," Waite shook his head.

"Yes, it is," he replied quietly.

"You should have stuck to handing out food, Dragan," I told him, "You can see what you've achieved, and it's not something I'd be proud of."

"You'd prefer a Russian invasion?"

He was watching me carefully, waiting for an answer while we hurried past the house.

"I'd prefer to live."

He snorted, and I smiled. His hatred of the Russians blinded him to any kind of rational thought. I wondered for the hundredth time how he'd become so rich. Where had his money come from? As far as I knew, he wasn't a conventional oligarch. He hadn't raped Ukraine after the fall of communism. Had he made that

money in the States? If so, how? As far as I knew, he left Ukraine with a few possessions and little money.

People who make that kind of money in a short time, billions of dollars, have a limited number of ways to acquire it. Drugs, one of the big ones, but he didn't seem like a drug dealer. Arms dealing, that was another possibility, except he was genuinely trying to arm patriot Ukrainians against a Russian invasion. Not much money in that. There was another way he could have amassed such a fortune. He'd trained as a sniper, a Captain in the Ukrainian Special Forces, the Berkut. Had he put his skills to good use, as a contract assassin?

It would answer a number of questions. If he took on high-level targets, heads of state, captains of industry, even the leaders of drug gangs, who were often targets for their rivals, it could have given him the seed money to build his empire. Once he had a few millions, he'd have been able to leverage it into the huge fortune he now possessed.

Which posed a huge question. If it was true, we were working for an assassin. We now knew he wasn't the man contracted to murder Putin, but he could still have plenty of innocent blood on his hands. If it wasn't true, how did he make his billions?

We climbed over a wooden fence, followed a narrow path between two houses, and ran through an overgrown garden. We'd reached a brick wall, three meters high.

"This could be the way in," Al murmured, "Give me a lift up. I'll take a look over."

I cupped my hands to make a stirrup. Al stepped forward, and I heaved him up. After a few seconds, he climbed back down.

"It looks good. We're at the rear of the hospital kitchens. There're garbage bins, and I can see steam coming from the outside vents."

Maybe they were cooking Putin's lunch. I turned to Waite.

"You go first, then you can pull us up."

He stepped forward. I hoisted him up, and in turn we reached the top of the wall. We were looking down on a cobbled courtyard, enclosed on three sides by the high wall. The other side was the hospital building itself. Waite was right. It was the hospital kitchens, with the stink of rancid, overcooked food. At one corner of the building, there were steps leading down. I pointed.

"That has to be the way in to basement. It could lead us to where Hunt is setting the charges."

"Raider, they're already in place," Al warned, "He could well be a safe distance away, just waiting to detonate them by remote."

"Yeah, I know. We don't have much time. I'm going in. This only needs one man to disarm the detonator. If he triggers the bomb early, there's no need for all of us to die."

"Better than dying of shame," Waite retorted. Al nodded, and to my surprise, Dragan had a determined expression on his face.

"This country needs heroes not cowards."

As we jumped down to the cobbled yard, I reflected we were neither heroes nor cowards.

Just in the wrong place, wrong time. And running out of options.

No one called a warning as we raced across the courtyard and down the steps. The basement door opened easily, and we crowded into a dimly lit passage. We had one thing on our minds. The bomb was down here somewhere and could detonate anytime. It tends to focus the mind.

"Keep it quiet," I murmured, as much to calm my nerves as to warn them.

We passed walls that were unfinished concrete, grimy with age and dirt. Pipes and cables ran along the roof, and the resemblance to a submarine crossed my mind. What we needed was a plan of the hospital, so we could pinpoint the likely location. Otherwise, it was like putting our money on a single number on a roulette wheel. Except it was our lives, not our money, we were gambling with. And the chances of laying hands on a plan in this dank basement was about nil.

"There's a plan, some kind of schematic here. It gives the layout of the building," Dragan whispered.

I smiled to myself. It wasn't the jackpot, but we were closer. The obvious location for a bomb stared back at me from the plan; the main reception area, adjacent to the ER room, as well as the office of the Chief Executive. They'd line up there to greet their famous visitor. It had to be ground zero.

We were less than one hundred meters away from the target area, and I started jogging along the route I'd memorized. We needed the first right turning, then the next left, then the second right. We took the first turning, followed the long passage, making good time, and turned left. That's when someone switched off the lights.

"He's here!" Dragan hissed.

Great!

I estimated we were perhaps fifty meters from the bomb.

Has he turned out the lights because he heard our approach, or some other reason?

I made sure they were behind me and murmured, "Follow me. Stay sharp, he could still be ahead of us."

I edged forward, and in the distance I saw a pinprick of red light. Very faint, almost nothing, like the illumination given off by a tiny LED. Then I stopped. Footsteps sounded a few meters ahead, and a flashlight clicked on. Dragan had found an emergency lamp clipped to the wall. The beam lit up the passage, more pipes, more bare concrete walls, and more layers of brown-gray dust, and a man.

It had been a long time since we'd pulled him from that prison, yet I couldn't forget his incredible shooting. He hadn't changed much. Pale, lean, yet he carried himself with a strength and power that hinted at the sprung steel in the body beneath the stolen white hospital coat. The flashlight reflected in his eyes, and they glistened with strength and clarity, a hunter's eyes, a predator's eyes.

"Father Damion. It's been a long time."

A slight smile, "Chief Petty Officer Raider, the wrong man in the wrong place. Get out now if you want to live. I would prefer not to kill you. I owe you a favor."

"My friends are up there in the hospital."

"Friends?" His expression showed contempt. As if 'friends' always let him down. "They're as good as dead. Forget about them, and get out."

"Shoot the fucker!" Waite growled. Like the rest of us, he had his finger on the trigger of his assault rifle. Yet he hesitated.

"Waite Sullivan?"

I nodded. "He was on the team that got you out."

"A shame, he was a good man." He held up a device, like a cellphone. His finger was on one of the keys, "But if any of you take the shot, we all die. If I press this button, the C4 in the room behind us detonates. Boom!"

"I thought you were a priest."

A grimace. "A long time ago. It didn't do me a lot of good. Nor anyone else, so I decided to go back to my old trade."

"It's never too late to change, Father."

I thought by reminding himself of his former vocation, it may make him think again. Long enough for one of us to get the drop on him, you never know.

"It's not Father, not any longer."

"And I'm not a Naval Chief Petty Officer. Just a guy trying to save his friends, is all. Give us a break, Damion. We helped you out before. Let this one go."

I may as well have been talking to the wall.

"You have twenty minutes, Raider. That's how long it'll take me to reach a safe place. Then it's thank you and goodnight."

Twenty minutes. Is it enough time? Probably not.

"The sniper in Sevastopol, Damion. It was you?"

He smiled. "It was me."

"You missed."

"No. The security man pushed him out of the way. The bullet went where I intended it to go. These things happen. Now I will finish what I started."

"Was it a VSS Vintorez, the rifle you used?"

He looked puzzled. "What difference does it make?"

"It makes a difference. Was it Myron Doroshenko who supplied the gun?"

A nod. "He'll do anything for money, Myron. He must be worth a fortune. I have to leave. Nineteen minutes, and then I detonate."

"Look, if we..."

We didn't hear footsteps, any kind of noise to indicate which direction he'd taken. He just vanished, like the SAS operator he'd once been. I ran forward, seeking the bomb. In the distance the red light glowed, so tiny, yet so threatening. I shouted to them. There was no need to whisper, not now.

"We have to disarm the detonator. Find the red LED. That's where we'll find the bomb."

It was only a few meters further along the passage in an alcove. The tiny bulb was fitted to an aluminum briefcase bolted to an inspection hatch mounted on the top of a metal flight container, the size of a large suitcase. It didn't take any imagination to know the case contained the explosives, and my knowledge of C4 told me it would be enough to destroy the hospital, as well as any number of nearby buildings.

I gently raised the lid less than a centimeter and used Dragan's flashlight to peer inside. I motioned for Al to take a look. He'd forgotten more about explosive ordnance than most people learn in a lifetime. He grunted.

"It's a trembler. It's going to take time."

The trembler switch would detonate the package the moment anyone tried to open the case to disarm the detonator.

"Which we don't have. How long?"

"I'll have to dismantle the case from the side. Thirty minutes, it'll be a long, slow job."

"We don't have thirty minutes, Al. He has the remote detonator. As soon as he gets clear, he'll watch for Putin to arrive, and then he'll hit the button. Maybe fifteen minutes, tops."

"I'll give it a try," he murmured. We'd both been speaking in funereal tones. The presence of enough explosive to kill hundreds, perhaps thousands of people, has that effect on a man.

"Do it. Waite, stay with him. Give him any help he needs. He'll have to retreat to a high vantage point where he can watch for Putin, so we have a little time. If it looks impossible, you'll both have to pull out. Dragan, give Al the flashlight and come with me."

"What for?"

"You're a sniper. It's time to see how good you really are. We'll have two chances. Al can work on the detonator down here, and we'll try and get him from up on the roof."

They were concentrating on getting inside the bomb case, so we left. We sprinted away, pounding along the dim passageways, yet our eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness. We only cannoned off the occasional obstacle. I felt my lungs searing with the effort of that race, knowing every second was a second nearer to when Damion pressed the key and sent us all to oblivion. Dragan was panting; his throat rasping as his oxygen starved muscles forced him to suck in more air.

"The elevator, where would it be?" I shouted.

"Close to where we entered," he croaked, wheezing with the effort of speaking, "It would make sense to build it close to the kitchens."

I didn't answer but retraced the route we'd taken when we entered. We arrived in front of an antique, wire framed elevator shaft. The elevator was already there. All I needed to do was wrench the rusty iron door open and step inside. Dragan followed. I dragged the door shut and pressed the button for the top floor. After a pause, the mechanism started, and the car jerked upward. The building had four floors, and we emerged on the fourth.

"Through there," Dragan shouted, pointing toward a door with a sign written in Ukrainian. He went to open it, but it was locked.

"My turn," he said, his voice still croaky.

He stepped back, shoulder charged, and bounced off. I'd anticipated something like that and shouted, "Get out of the way!"

I sprinted forward. The door was tough and nearly broke my shoulder, but I hit it enough to damage the lock. Dragan kicked the door open, and in front of us we could see the roof. It was flat, with a number of ventilator shafts poking out the top and a guard armed with a rifle. I cursed myself for not anticipating they'd place a man up here. After all, Putin was the President of Russia, not the owner of the used car mart.

"Stoy!"

Oh, fuck!

He was swiveling the rifle to point at us.

"Dragan, talk to him. Tell him!"

He tried, said something in Russian, the words sounded urgent. But it was too late, way too late. The guy was about to fire. It was all there, in the eyes, in the body language, the way he focused his stare on Dragan, and then on me. I had no choice, so I did the only thing I could do. I shot him with the Makarov PB.

The weapon jolted in my hand as I squeezed the trigger, just as he dived to the side to avoid the bullet. I'd aimed at his shoulder, in an attempt to wound and spin him around so we could disarm him. His dive took him into the path of the 9mm round, and it struck over his heart. I watched, appalled as his eyes registered disbelief, and he dropped to the concrete rooftop. The rifle landed next to him with a clatter.

"Fuck! I didn't mean to do that."

Dragan was uninterested. "He was a Russian."

"He was a man. Start looking for our target."

He nodded and panned his gaze across the rooftops of nearby buildings. I picked up the rifle. At first I thought we'd landed a VSS Vintorez, but it was something radically different.

"What the hell is this?"

Dragan glanced around and regarded the weapon. "It's a VSK-94, piece of crap."

"You've used one of these?"

"A long time ago. It's accurate enough, but they're unreliable. Give me the Vintorez any day."

"Except we don't have a Vintorez. If we see him, can you take him with this?"

A pause. "It depends. The effective range is poor, much less than the Vintorez. Maybe three or four hundred meters, tops. The AKM has a range twice that of the VSK."

"But the AKM doesn't have a scope, and it's noisy. There's an army of Russian security men downstairs, who'd like nothing more than to use us for target practice."

He kept scanning the surrounding buildings, but he was thinking.

"I'm not sure. Let's see what the range is first. Assuming we locate him."

I used the scope of the VSK like a monocular, squinting through the lens, examining each building for a sign of our target. The minutes were passing too quickly. Then I heard Dragan's intake of breath.

"Anything?"

"I'm not sure; that building ahead of us, ten o'clock. There's an elevator housing. There may be someone on top of the housing, but if he is, he's well camouflaged. I can't be sure."

"He's an SAS trained sniper, so he'd know about camouflage. I'll take a look."

I focused the lens on the distant building. When the elevator housing came into view, I examined the narrow roof. There was a curved housing for the winch mechanism and nothing else. Empty.

"Dragan, there's nothing there."

"I could swear I saw movement. Let me take a look."

He took the rifle from me and looked through the lens of the scope. After a few seconds, he shook his head.

"No, you're right, there's nothing." He put his eye to the lens again, and I saw his lips crease up in a smile, "Yes, I see him now. He's there, but it's an impossible shot. He's made a stand inside the machinery housing, and there's a tiny hole he can look through to keep watch on the hospital."

I took the rifle back. Sure enough, I could see a dark hole in the structure, and while I watched, something moved inside the aperture. He was in there! There was no question a rifle shot would penetrate the thin metal, but Dragan would be shooting blind. Anything less than a kill shot would allow him to detonate. Although the metal housing would almost certainly inhibit the signal, so he'd need to come out into the open to use it. I explained it to Dragan, and he nodded.

"Yes, that makes sense, to wait for him to emerge. But it's a massive gamble, and if I miss, we all go up."

"So don't miss. What's the range?"

He looked carefully, with a sniper's eye. "I'd guess at least five hundred and fifty meters. Too long for the VSK."

"You can do it."

I was worried about the AKM. At best, it was a crude weapon, and Dragan had little experience of using this particular model. Whereas the VSK was a precision weapon, designed for the job, albeit it would be operating at the extreme upper limit of its effective range. It was also quiet.

"No. It will have to be the AKM. We can both shoot, and with luck, one of us will kill him."

He was suffering an attack of nerves. The stakes were so high. So many lives, including our own.

"Dragan, you'll use the VSK, and when he shows, you'll kill him."

He shook his head. "I could miss. Perhaps the other men will disarm the bomb. We could go and..."

I stopped him. "You'll wait here, and when he comes out of his hiding place, you'll kill him. That's the way it's going down, Dragan, so you'd better get used to it."

"I can't do it."

Before I could argue, a noise sounded from the stairwell. It was Waite.

"Al sent me up with a message."

"Good news?"

"Negative. He says he can do it, but it'll take at least an hour. He'll stay there and keep trying until... well, until the end."

"Roger that. Dragan, you hear that? Take the shot. It's on you."

He started to tremble, the ultimate enemy of the sniper, who needed to be calm and relaxed to target his kills. Waite looked at me, and his gaze was eloquent.

We're fucked. There's no way it can get any worse than this.

Chapter 12

City Clinical Hospital Number Nine, Kiev, Ukraine – April 2014

I was wrong. It could get worse. It all happened as if in slow motion. First, a movement on the rooftop almost six hundred meters away. A man emerged from a small access hatch set into the side of the machinery housing. It was impossible to identify him, but we knew who it was, Father Damion. He looked across and saw us, and he even gave us a friendly wave. In his hand he held a black object, the remote detonator. The bastard was taunting us. He knew there wasn't a damn thing we could do about it.

"Heads up, there's someone coming up the staircase," Waite murmured.

We whirled to look at the door that gave access to the roof. The footsteps belonged to a bunch of men who came out of the stairwell. They blinked as they came out into the early afternoon light. The first man on the roof was the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. To his credit, he didn't flinch when he saw armed men in front of him, even when Dragan recognized the archenemy of Ukraine and turned to face him, clutching his rifle.

The man who followed him reacted fast. He snatched a pistol from under his coat, but the rest of the party jostled him as they stepped onto the roof, preventing him from taking aim. They milled around, confused by our unexpected presence on the roof of their hospital. Maybe they thought we were more Presidential security. Doctors in white coats, managers in suits, and a couple of nurses in pristine white uniforms, the hospital greeting party escorting the President around their building. After a few seconds, they began to realize something was wrong. They froze.

The Russian shrugged out of the crowd and snarled, "Put down the weapons!" He held a big pistol in his hand and looked ready to use it.

I purposely looked at each of our assault rifles and the sniper rifle Dragan still held. He'd moved the barrel to point it at the President. His nemesis.

I dealt with the bodyguard first. "It looks to me like we call the shots here, buddy."

His gun was moving from one to the other, as if he could take us all. His face showed an expression of both confusion and grim determination.

"Where is the man I posted here?"

"He pointed a gun at us, like he wanted to kill us. He's dead. I shot him."

"He's dead?"

"He was going to kill us."

His mouth was opening and closing, like he couldn't get a grip on the situation. "This is the President of the Russian Federation. You cannot threaten him with guns! You must lower your weapons."

It was a fair point, except the situation was more complicated than he realized. Moreover, there was no time to spell it out to the guy. All the time, Putin stood watching. Calm, cold, sour as ever. Like we were beneath his consideration. I'd give it to him. He knew how to do arrogance.

"You're the President's bodyguard?"

"Yes. My name is Malenkov. And you?"

"Raider. Your President is standing on a building that's about to explode."

He did the goldfish impression again. "Explode?"

I explained about the bomb in the basement and nodded in the direction of the roof almost six hundred meters away where Damion waited. I had little doubt he found the confrontation vastly amusing.

"He's going to detonate very soon, and we'll all die."

I made it clear we were trying to save his precious President, not kill him. He still didn't believe me, and gave Dragan a savage glance. "That man has a gun pointed at my President."

"You're right." I looked at the Ukrainian, "Dragan, lower the gun. Your enemy isn't Putin. It's the guy over there about to detonate the bomb. You need to kill him. Even better, put a bullet in the detonator."

He looked at me for long seconds while he decided. Then he turned and locked eyes with Putin. Something passed between the two men. I'd like to think it was common humanity, but I'd been wrong before. Dragan lowered the gun.

"Now shoot the bastard," I snarled at him, "Do some good with that fucking rifle."

"It's impossible."

"You won't know until you try. Do it!"

We watched as he measured the distance again, still looking doubtful. Putin said something. The bodyguard talked to him for several seconds, and Putin shook his head. Malenkov turned to me.

"I tried to persuade him to leave, but he said he will allow this man to do his job. President Putin has always prided himself on his ability to know when a man can be trusted. He trusts this man to do it."

Dragan straightened, and he gave Putin another look. Part accusing, and part something else. Understanding.

"We're running out of time. He could detonate at any moment," I told Dragan, "It's now or never."

"Yes."

He'd changed. Something had flowed between him and the Russian leader. The catalyst was the shared moment of maximum danger on that roof. He lay prone on the concrete and had a last attack of nerves.

"You know this is impossible, Raider. It would need a genius to make this shot. I was good, but..."

I knew he was not as good as the guy he was aiming at. Although fear of dying has a way of focusing a man's skill set on the job in hand.

"This is your moment, Dragan. You can do it. We know you can. Putin put his trust in you."

He didn't reply, just adopted the sniper stance, rifle held firmly, body relaxed, his breathing normal. Putin watched the sniper as if his life depended on it, which it did. He saw my glance and nodded to me. I nodded back.

A minute elapsed, as Dragan went through whatever snipers do. Psyching themselves up. Slow the breathing even more; focus every cell of his being on that distant, tiny target.

We waited. I stared across the divide as Damion raised his hand higher, and we knew it was a farewell. He was about to detonate. For some reason I couldn't work out, he hesitated. I never knew why, maybe it was something to do with an old debt he owed us. Maybe he was just over confident and taunting us. Whatever. I

willed Dragan to pull that trigger. We all did. We waited and waited, for the shot or for the explosion that would end everything. Which?

When it came, it was surprisingly muted. It could have been a distant backfire from a vehicle. Unless you'd been around suppressed weapons, in which case, you'd recognize it for what it was. He fired a single round. I was sure I could see the subsonic bullet as it traveled nearly six hundred meters across to the distant rooftop.

I felt a lurch in my guts. He'd missed. Damion was still standing there. Then he jerked as the bullet hit. He flinched, moved his hand, and used the other hand to support it. I wasn't certain, but I could swear I'd seen a shower of tiny plastic fragments spray into the air around him. He seemed to stare back at us for several seconds, his face unreadable. Then he disappeared. One second he was there. The next, he wasn't.

"Did I see what I thought I saw?" Waite asked me.

"I think so."

"Fucking A!" he exclaimed.

"Yob Tvoyu Mat!" Putin murmured. *Fuck your mother!*

Nothing personal, it was a common curse in Russia, not meant literally. Even so, he'd just escaped being buried in an exploding building, so he was entitled to say what he wanted.

Dragan climbed slowly to his feet. I rushed over to him.

"You did it!"

He nodded wearily. "Yes, I did it. I don't know how, but I did it."

"Mr. Raider?"

I looked around. Malenkov.

"What is it?"

"We're leaving. This never happened. No one would dare to threaten the life of our President and come close to succeeding. It is not possible. I will arrange for our security people to remove the explosives. As for the assassin, he never existed. Clear?"

Putin was watching closely.

"Yeah, I got it."

"Not so fast!" Dragan shouted, "Ukraine has enough weapons. It has to stop. My people are dying."

"You are Alexander Dragan?" Malenkov asked.

"Yes."

"In that case, ask him yourself. My President speaks some English."

Dragan looked at Putin. "It is time to call a halt to the arms shipments to this country." His voice was quiet, but firm, billionaire-to-billionaire. They're different to the rest of us.

"Many of them were your weapons, Mr. Dragan."

"Do you deny you furnished your people with assault rifles and heavy weapons?"

He shrugged. "It is possible that one of my people, a renegade Russian, brought weapons into the country, but not me."

"You mean Orlov?" I interrupted.

Putin stared at me. "You know Grigory Orlov?"

"I did, and I shot him. After he tried to kill us."

"He was a friend. One of my best friends."

"When your security people look into this, you'll find your 'friend' was the man behind it."

The President's look was sub-zero. "Mr. Raider, why am I not surprised that so many people want to kill you?"

His expression didn't change as he walked away. The crowd of hospital staff closed ranks around him, and as he started to leave, I wondered if we had unfinished business between us.

Malenkov led the way to the staircase. I'd no idea where they were going; only that it would be a long, long way from this place. Moments later, Al arrived white-faced on the roof.

"I've run out of time down there. We're screwed. We have to get out of here."

"It's okay, Al. Dragan got him."

He stared at the Ukrainian.

"Thank the good Lord. Then it's time to find Joe and get him home to a real hospital."

"Don't forget Angelina," I reminded him.

"Yeah. How did you fix up with a girl like that? She's like a movie star."

I grinned. "It's my magnetic charm."

"More like your line of bullshit," Waite snarled, "You spread it like peanut butter."

"True. But it works."

City Clinical Hospital Number Nine, Kiev, Ukraine – April 2014

We found the ward where Joe Nguyen lay unconscious in a hospital bed. He was hooked up to a spaghetti of cables and drips, watched over by Angelina Blass. The Ukrainians were in awe of her, assuming she was some kind of a celebrity. She was more than that, so much more. I embraced and kissed her, and she held on to me so tightly she almost squeezed the breath out of me.

"I thought you were never coming back."

I realized she didn't know about the bomb. I kept quiet. There was no need to worry her with minor details. Al, Waite, and Dragan nodded their understanding.

"You won't get rid of me so easily. How is Joe?"

Her smiling face became serious. "They've done wonders with him. He'll take some time to recover, but he's more comfortable."

At that moment, Joe started to move, and his eyes flicked open. He looked at me, then at Al and Waite. Finally, he scowled at Dragan.

"I guess I'm still in Ukraine? I can smell boiled cabbage."

"Not for long," I told him, "The moment Dragan's jet arrives in Kiev International, we're flying you back Stateside."

"Thank God for that."

Angelina gripped my hand. "We're going home? Really?"

"Really."

Kiev International Airport, Ukraine – April 2014

He was as good as his word. We traveled to Kiev International in convoy, two limos, the one in front carried Dragan and Doroshenko, with the private ambulance in the center. Once again, we boarded the luxurious confines of the Gulfstream G650, resplendent in the gleaming blue and yellow livery of the Dragan Foundation. And again, a pretty young woman wearing a blue and yellow uniform was waiting to usher us aboard. The paramedics carried Joe's gurney up the air stair, and we followed. We settled into the leather upholstered and walnut-clad cabin, and less than ten minutes later we were airborne.

Angelina continued tending to Joe, and there was no doubt her beauty was a painkiller as effective as any pharmaceutical drug they could have given him. I fell asleep.

I resurfaced a couple of hours later and saw the pretty cabin attendant leaning over me. Her heady perfume almost overpowered me. Almost. She was no competition for Angelina. "Is there anything you'd like, Sir? Coffee?"

"Make it black and strong," I smiled.

She glanced at Al and Waite, who were nearby and talking quietly. I guessed they were planning another fishing expedition. Al gave her the nod.

"We'll take the same, and thanks."

She drifted away to the galley, and I joined them.

"Where's Dragan?"

Waite indicated the front of the aircraft. "In the cockpit with Doroshenko. I guess he's catching up on some of his multi-million dollar deals."

As he spoke, the cockpit door opened. Dragan spoke to the attendant and came aft to join us. He raised his eyebrows.

"Do you have everything you want?"

"We're good."

Right then, I decided I'd had enough of not knowing about this enigmatic man, the billionaire who was prepared to risk everything, his life, his fortune, for vengeance. Who was the real Dragan, where had the billionaire come from? After all we'd been through, I couldn't give a shit if he thought it was over the top to inquire. I wanted to know whom we were working for, and where the money came from. So I asked him.

"My money?" He raised his eyebrows in surprise at the personal question. He thought for a moment and went on, "It's no secret. I trade stocks and commodities all over the world, everywhere except Russia." He stopped, thoughtful. "Although perhaps that will change."

I recalled that moment on the roof, between him and Putin. Something had changed; some kind of a spark had ignited. As if they'd silently reached an understanding.

"All that money from buying and selling shares?"

He smiled. "You're not convinced? In the early days it was more commodities, but I find there is more money in stocks. You're wondering how I got rich so quickly, yes?"

I nodded.

The cabin attendant brought his coffee, and he sipped it appreciatively. The aroma of good coffee competed with her perfume, and it was a powerful mix. Dragan began recounting the story of his long journey from his humble origins in Ukraine.

"As a child I was a chess prodigy, and I soon became a champion. Apart from chess, my overriding passion was for mathematics.

"Arithmetic?" Waite asked, "How can anyone be passionate about numbers?"

"You'd be surprised," he grinned, "I experimented with trading algorithms, and had some limited success. But I wanted more than sitting behind a desk or a chessboard, so I joined the army. I eventually became a Captain in the Berkut, our Special Forces. Sadly, they're discredited now, after the Yanukovych days. Back then we were professional soldiers not thugs. We were all specialists, and as you know, I trained as a sniper.

However, you asked about how I make my money. I arrived in New York City almost penniless. I doubt I had more than a quarter of a million dollars in my trading account."

Yes, the rich are different, no question.

"I'd intended joining the UN to work on programs to help refugees, famine relief, that kind of thing. But I needed to make some money in order to live, and so I spent time revising my trading algorithms. I found them to be more than successful, and the rest is history."

"Automated trades," Al said, "You buy and sell in microseconds, and make a fortune."

"Or lose a fortune," he objected, "It's not quite so easy. You need to know how to play the markets. However, I was successful, very successful. That's all there is to it. I established the Dragan Foundation and began helping out my fellow Ukrainians. It's a very simple tale, really."

Simple if you were a chess prodigy and a math genius.

"Are you considering investing in the markets?" he asked us.

Our three heads shook in unison.

"No, I imagine you would find it tame after the kind of work you do." He could have been right, except Al and Waite would sooner spend their time fishing. He looked at me. "Mr. Raider, I contacted my headquarters while I was in the cockpit. There's a message from my lawyers."

I felt as if he'd punched me in the guts. I'd lost her. "Go on."

He smiled. "You won, all of it. You have full custody of your daughter. Apparently, my lawyers hired a psychologist, a world-renowned expert, and he found your ex-wife had been poisoning Abigail against you. The judge took a very dim view, and when their private investigator came up with evidence of her new husband's coke habit, it was a done deal."

I could hardly believe it. "That's it? She can stay with me?"

"She's all yours. She goes where you decide, and nowhere else."

I shot out a hand. "Fantastic, Dragan. I can hardly believe it."

"You'll have a great time bringing her up, I'm sure."

Bringing her up? A young girl and me, a battered warrior, what the hell did I know about it? I decided I had a lot to learn. I wondered how Angelina would take it. She'd be a virtual stepmother. Yet she was more than a pretty face, tough,

resourceful, energetic, and most important, a girl. She'd know what Abigail needed. It was unlikely my range of skills and knowledge about kids would keep her interested.

I decided to give him something in return. He deserved to know the truth about his trusted manager, so I told him about Doroshenko; how he'd supplied Damion with the sniper rifle. He looked at the cockpit door, his expression thoughtful. He didn't seem too surprised at the news.

"I used to believe he was incorruptible. He was once the best friend I had in the world, but lately there've been too many coincidences that suggest the opposite. You're saying Myron Doroshenko supplied an assassin with the rifle, a weapon intended to be used for the murder the President of the Russian Federation?"

"There's no question."

"That was my rifle. He knew he was making me a target for Putin's protection detail. They'd have all come after me, Spetsnaz, SVR, FSB, all of them."

"Yes."

"The bastard!" he murmured, "If Putin had died, the Russians would have invaded, and we'd have become a slave state again. All because of Doroshenko's greed."

"Yes."

"Leave him to me. I will deal with him."

Kiev International Airport, Ukraine – April 2014

He saw the executive jet leap off the tarmac and rapidly ascend into the skies over Kiev. He'd watched from the departure lounge as the small party went aboard, and he remembered the time in Iran when John Raider and his men had pulled him out of that jail.

It was too bad they had to be enemies. He had a trade, a profession like most people. His was just a little different. He hadn't recognized the voice when he checked his voicemail, but it was a familiar request. A man had a problem with another man, and he wanted him killed. An end to his problems, but in this case, the target was John Raider, a man to whom he owed his life. The man had left a number, and he'd called back.

"I need to know who I'm dealing with. A name."

"I am Malenkov."

"You are not the principal."

A pause. "No."

"Who will pay my bill?"

"I think you know. And you should consider yourself lucky he has not put a company of Spetsnaz on your tail."

"Are you threatening me? My friend, I eat Spetsnaz for breakfast."

There was a silence on the line. Then Malenkov said, "You would not be the first man who made that boast to die."

"Perhaps. But it is no boast. I speak from experience. Your man would do well to remember he came very close in Kiev. Next time he may not be so lucky."

"We both threaten each other. At least we know where we stand."

"Yes."

"Will you take the job?"

"I will think about it and call back in one week."

He didn't yet know if he'd accept the contract. In one week, he'd make a decision.

Mid- Atlantic Ocean – April 2014

Over the storm-tossed seas of the Atlantic, away from the busy sea and air lanes, a Gulfstream G650 jet descended until it was less than five hundred meters from the angry waves. An emergency hatch opened, and a man fell headfirst through the doorway, still fighting and screaming for forgiveness.

The man who pushed him, a silver-haired Ukrainian in his mid-fifties, was deaf to his cries. The figure plummeted to the waves below, and the hatch closed. Neither the crew nor the passengers observed what happened. In fact, it didn't happen.

Billionaires are different.

Teterboro Airport, New Jersey – April 2014

They were waiting at Teterboro, forewarned by Dragan. First, the ambulance, to whisk Joe away for the best care money could buy, and Angelina went with along. She took the care of her patient very seriously. She'd probably make a damn good nurse. Just looking at her made people feel better.

A limo arrived to take Al and Waite onward to their destination. Dragan had agreed a generous payment for their services, and the crazy bastards had decided to travel up to Alaska, to try ice fishing, or something similar. Polar bears, penguins, cold to freeze the ass off a penguin. It wasn't for me. The weather was chilly enough in New Jersey. Right now, the weather threatened a rainstorm. Their close friendship was something for me to envy, for I was about to go home alone.

We entered the VIP arrivals lounge, and then I wasn't alone any longer. Abigail rushed into my arms. Apparently, Dragan had fixed that up, too. I gave her a cuddle, listened to her breathless news for several moments, and put her down on the floor. A woman was standing nearby, watching Abigail.

"Hello, Mariyah."

She gave me a sickly smile but didn't reply at first.

"How are you?"

"I'm sorry, John. I've been a bitch. I know that now."

No shit.

It was my turn to keep quiet. I waited.

"I guess you heard about the court order."

"I heard."

"Did you know I split with Edgar? Dad threw him out of the company when he heard about the coke habit. He went ballistic."

"I can imagine." Her father was Paul Vann, and like Dragan, a Ukrainian. Just as set on gaining vengeance for slights to his family, real or imagined.

"When I heard about it, I told him to get out of the house. He risked everything, my daughter, well our daughter. Everything. And now she's yours."

It was a new Mariyah. She could be faking it, although I knew her better. She'd been well and truly beaten. She knew it and accepted it.

"Daddy, can I get something to eat? I'm hungry."

I looked down at Abigail. "Sure we can. I just need to fix things with your mother. It won't take long."

"What things?" She looked suspicious.

"Things that'll make you happy."

She smiled. "Okay."

It was Mariyah's turn to look suspicious. "What things? You have everything, what more could you want?"

"Our daughter's happiness. First, I suggest we go back to the way it should have been at the start. She stays with you through the week, to keep up with school. And she comes to me weekends, except when I'm out of the country. And that's not going to be too often. I've decided to make some changes in my life."

Like avoiding Ukrainian billionaires, Russian Presidents, and priests who shoot people.

She looked as if she was going to faint. "You're serious?"

"I'm serious. She comes with me now. We'll grab some food, and I'll settle her in. She'll be back with you on Sunday afternoon to get ready for the school week. How does that sound?"

"Thank you, John. I don't know what to say."

"Say goodbye to Abigail. You'll see her on Sunday. Let's go home, pumpkin."

We left in a cab. On the way back, on an isolated stretch of the road, I saw a vehicle pulled into the side with the hood up. It was bitterly cold, and the driver was trying to cadge a lift. A storm had come down, and rain fell in torrents, driven by a hard, bitter-cold wind. Out in the open, the temperature would have been arctic. I told the cab driver to stop. I pressed the button to lower the window, and the guy looked grateful we'd stopped. It was David Brackman.

"Gee, thanks, I think there's a short in the electrical system. I tried to use my cell, but there's no signal in this area." Then he recognized me, "Raider!"

"Brackman. You need help, I guess?"

"That's mighty generous of you. I just need a ride into town. I can fix up a tow truck to collect the car."

"I wasn't offering you a ride."

"You weren't?"

"No. I'm short on resources, Brackman. You know how it is. Let me give you some advice. Call the cops. They're sure to help you out."

I pulled the door closed. "Let's go."

There's an old proverb, Chinese or Japanese, who cares? 'If you sit by a river long enough, you'll see the body of your enemy float by.'

Sayonara, Brackman.

New York City – April 2014

He'd spent a week relaxing in a lodge in the Colorado Mountains, and now it was time to go back to work. He checked into a hotel in New York City to stake out the target. The man was picnicking with his daughter in Central Park. They laughed and smiled, relaxing in the early spring sunshine. For the first time since he'd abandoned his religious vocation, he felt a little of the old warmth for humanity. It was a trace memory, but it was there nonetheless.

Besides, the man did me a favor a long time ago. Why not give him something in return?

He switched on his untraceable satphone and pressed a key. The voice answered on the first ring.

"Malenkov."

"The answer is no. I do not accept the contract."

A pause. "Very well. There are others who will be happy to take it on."

"I wouldn't advise it."

"Why is that?" Malenkov's voice was stiff with hostility.

"He's a friend. Remember, I missed your man last time. He won't be so lucky next time."

"Are you saying there will be a next time?"

"It's up to you. Leave the target alone. Believe me, Malenkov, it's good advice."

"You're offering me advice?"

"For your President's health, yes."

He hung up the call and put the phone away. As he walked away, he had a sudden thought.

Am I losing it, losing the inner core of memories that drive me on to kill for money?

He summoned up the nightmare once more, and it was still close to the surface. The part-fear and part-hatred that returned to him every night, every time he closed his eyes to sleep. The Iranian Republican Guard colonel who'd tortured him. The man was a general now, and he was still alive, still roaming the jails to select new victims for his sadism. He'd kill the man as soon as he had the opportunity.

He'd lost nothing, none of bitter hatred that drove him to kill for his clients.

In the case of John Raider, it's different. The man helped me. It was enough to spare his life and allow him to bring up his pretty daughter.

Then again, business was business. He had to live. He took out the satphone again and pressed a key for another number he'd put on speed dial.

"Ni hao."

The voice that answered sounded sleepy. He checked his wristwatch. It was no wonder. It was the middle of the night in Beijing.

"It's me. When do you want it done?"

