

The Will of the People


Conspiracy Trilogy, #1

by Christopher Read, 1946–

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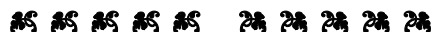
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Prologue

February to May

Moscow

With its vaulted ceilings and stained glass, countless mosaics, and bronze statues seemingly at every turn, the underground palace that is the Moscow Metro sucks in almost ten million passengers every day, newcomers invariably marvelling at such extravagance, wide eyes drawn upwards by majestic chandeliers and tall marble pillars. Started in 1931, Stalin had ensured the metro

had enjoyed the services of the Soviet Union's very best architects, and no expense had been spared to create a grandiose and enduring symbol of Soviet supremacy.

Just a short distance from the 25-storey Holiday Inn, even the ticket hall of the Sokolniki station impressed with its arched roof and white marble, while the twin platform proffered a double rank of blue-grey marble pillars, resting on a chequered black and grey granite floor. Yet, as if to counter its outward glory, the Moscow Metro had also become a favoured target for terrorists, the Sokolniki line's Lubyanka and Park Kultury stations attacked in 2010; a total of forty dead, scores badly injured.

In the decade and more since that devastating attack, the continuing threat from suicide bombings had done little to counter complacency, Moscow's commuters adopting a pragmatic approach to the obvious dangers, concerned but certainly not cowed. The authorities had embraced a similar philosophy, the Metro gradually returning to a more relaxed regime, with CCTV regularly providing a lone and somewhat dubious form of protection.

The morning rush hour was at its height, the warmth of the station's interior a welcome deliverance from the bitter cold of a late-February morning. Aldis Eglitis stood stiff-backed on the crowded platform, eyes half-closed, trying to push all negative thoughts from his mind. Every day for over a week now, he had braced himself against the rush-hour crowds, riding the commuter train as it headed south-west towards the city centre. To his fellow passengers, Eglitis was just another anonymous face, the smart suit and silk tie those of an elderly businessman, or perhaps a lawyer, the exclusive gold watch and expensive briefcase indicating—whatever his chosen profession—an envious degree of success.

While some might have attributed Eglitis' presumed wealth to the advantages offered by a more liberal Russia, he personally had only contempt for everything Russian, and he could never forgive the betrayal of his youth. Communist, Conservative or Democrat – the politicians had merely changed their allegiance, not their souls. The post-Putin Government had promised a better, freer Russia, and a clean break from his dictatorial regime; but the new man in the Kremlin still bullied and blackmailed, Russia's neighbours always conscious of the hungry bear peering over the fence, worrying as to how best to keep it fed. Some might assume that the crumbs of Crimea and Transnistria had long-since assuaged Russia's greed, but Eglitis knew it was but a temporary respite, history proving that Poland and the Baltics had every right to be fearful of an expansionist Russia.

Latvian by birth, Eglitis' early years had been spent at a school especially reserved for children of the communist elite, his father taking full advantage of the benefits bestowed upon a respected Party member. A large home south of Riga, a foreign car, easy access to the gourmet food shops—the family had lived a life of relative luxury, content to sit back and watch as Latvia's distinctive identity, and even its language, was swamped by an influx of Russian immigrants. They had even managed to emerge untouched from the Khrushchev purge of '59 which saw many of Latvia's communists stripped of their posts, their leader deported to Russia.

At sixteen, a self-righteous Aldis had his sights set on a career in medicine, his fluency in Russian guaranteeing an open route through higher education and

beyond; life was easy and predictable, with weekends spent by the beach or canoeing along one of Latvia's many rivers. Then, in an unguarded moment of stupidity, his father forgot the lessons of the past, using a private meeting with a so-called friend to voice his frustration over the Russification of Latvia. In less than a week Aldis' life of privilege and opportunity was no more, his father unemployable, the family turned out of their home and into a squalid two-room apartment. Aldis' education came to an abrupt end and for the first time in his young life he came to know the true meaning of poverty. His father's mood varied daily from angry to morose, alcohol destroying what little was left of his self-esteem—and his common sense. He began to attend nationalist gatherings, openly speaking out at one meeting to urge civil disobedience. Past influence had long since counted for nothing and the next morning the KGB battered down the apartment door.

Eglitis never saw his father again. Guilt by association—or perhaps birth—was automatically assumed, and at the age of nineteen an innocent Aldis was sentenced to two years in a labour camp.

Even after his release he remained a partial outcast, working from one temporary job to another. The labour shortage of the early '80s found him newly-married and working at Riga's State Electrotechnical Factory making telecommunications equipment for the Soviet military.

Then, just when it seemed his life had finally reached a happier and more stable phase, Eglitis' young wife was killed in a traffic accident, protecting their baby daughter with her body as a drunk Russian immigrant lost control of his car. It was another year before Eglitis finally accepted his true fate, his self-confidence growing as he split his time between looking after his daughter and helping run guns and explosives to various anti-Soviet groups based in the Baltics and Ukraine.

The adrenalin rush soon became addictive, and with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Eglitis merely transferred his expertise to the nationalist factions in Dagestan and Chechnya, his role slowly changing first to bomb-maker, then field sub-commander. That all ended in 2009, when Russian Special Forces generously left Eglitis with a bullet-sized memento buried deep in his belly. It took three operations and almost eighteen months for the wound to recover fully, and by then Eglitis had settled into the less-stressful role of doting grandfather.

Yet, despite everything, Eglitis couldn't forget—or ignore—his need for vengeance, both for his parents and himself. When a Ukrainian contact had offered Eglitis the chance to return to his earlier bomb-making ways, Eglitis had at first been dismissive—that was until the sudden crushing pain in his chest. Even as the heart consultant mechanically worked through Eglitis' options and potential survival rates, the latter had been focusing on something even more personal, but equally deadly.

Away to Eglitis' right the constant low rumble from the tunnel suddenly increased in intensity, and in a blaze of light a train swept out towards him. Eglitis pressed forward, right hand clamped around his briefcase, following the throng of commuters as they surged towards the opening doors. His chosen carriage was already crowded and Eglitis squeezed his way to stand in the aisle, his back resting against a metal partition.

Within seconds the doors hissed shut and the train accelerated away, the rush-hour crush pressing in on Eglitis. He let his gaze wander, settling for a brief moment on two young men away to his left. Outwardly, both of his associates looked calm enough, and if anyone could be said to be the weak link then it was undoubtedly Eglitis himself, the nitro-glycerine spray in his pocket perhaps the only thing between him and disaster.

Was it foolishness or pride that had made him choose to be part of this initial attack? Eglitis' future role was a key one and he had been forced to overrule the many objections as to his decision, wanting to show—perhaps even to himself—the depth of his commitment to the struggle ahead.

Eglitis' gaze resumed its random traverse, stopping suddenly as his eyes met those of a young woman standing opposite. Eglitis smiled in response, unsure as to what had attracted her attention, and also annoyed he now had a permanent reminder of the personal loss he was about to inflict. The girl gave a brief smile, then looked away, seemingly unconcerned.

It was just ten minutes to their destination. Others had argued it was too dangerous to target not just the same line, but the same station as in the 2010 attack, but for Eglitis there was more than one message to be sent. Lubyanka was the station opposite to the Lubyanka Building, former home of the KGB and site of the infamous prison. In practice, the Lubyanka name actually encompassed several buildings, the grey façade to the north-east fronting the headquarters of the Federal Security Service (FSB), Russia's main counter-terrorist agency. The KGB's successor had shown itself to be different only in name, with the FSB equally determined to stifle dissent and so protect the ruling clique. The Lubyanka was thus the heart of Soviet, now Russian repression, and to many a hated symbol of Moscow's out-dated dominance.

The excitement of old was making a welcome return, and Eglitis kept his breathing slow and deep, forcing his body to relax as he tried counting down the seconds, while keeping his gaze away from the young woman—instinct told him there was no danger here. His trip to Moscow from London last November had been Eglitis' first visit to the city in almost a quarter of a century, but to him the people were still the same: sullen, untrustworthy and arrogant, invariably remembering with false pride the brutal regimes of Stalin and Brezhnev.

As the train raced into the glare of Lubyanka station, Eglitis glanced again at his two colleagues: it would be at least another four minutes before the train carrying the fourth bomber arrived at Lubyanka, giving the other three more than enough time to reach their respective exits; their own bombs could then be timed so as to intensify the carnage. Unlike previous stops the carriage disgorged a good third of its passengers, with relatively few waiting to board. Eglitis forced his way through the slower commuters, pressing quickly on towards the Lubyanka Square exit, uncaring as to whether the security cameras picked him out or not.

The crowd thinned once he reached the western vestibule and Eglitis slowed. Phone in hand, he moved to stand beside the north wall, studying the phone display as though reading a text. The train bomber would have the briefest time to escape or seek protection but Eglitis had little doubt she would fulfil her role, patriotic fervour leaving no room for second thoughts.

Some thirty-five metres below Eglitis, a teenage boy stood and watched in surprise as a smartly-dressed woman literally fought her way out of the metro car and onto the platform, her briefcase seemingly forgotten in her haste to get off at the correct stop. To the teenager, there was now the offer of an intriguing prize: even if its contents should prove worthless, the case itself looked expensive, and in Moscow's markets you could sell just about anything—even people, if the rumours were to be believed. The carriage doors began to close, providing just the distraction the teenager needed.

His hand was still in mid-air when an electronic relay clicked shut, detonating the briefcase's kilogram of plastic explosive. In an instant the blast swept outwards through the carriage. Flesh and blood offered little more than token resistance, and even metal buckled and split before the onslaught. The metro car leapt into the air, the two adjacent carriages shuddering in sympathy as the explosion ripped through the adjoining doors. Along the platform bodies were carelessly cast aside, a storm of glass and metal sweeping everything from its path.

The floor under Eglitis trembled momentarily before an accelerating roar engulfed him; a brief hesitation then with finger and thumb he rotated the arming mechanism hidden in the briefcase's handle, sliding the case with his right foot flat against the wall. *Thirty seconds and counting...*

Around Eglitis there was surge of movement, people shouting, screaming, a few standing transfixed in shock as a rolling cloud of smoke and dust billowed out from the platform below, scores of panic-stricken passengers following in its wake.

Eglitis' silent countdown had barely reached twenty when his legs ignored the dangerous pounding of his heart, responding instead to his brain's urgent order to flee. Six steps and in one bound he leapt over the ticket barrier, ageing knees threatening to buckle as he desperately tried to increase the distance between himself and certain death. His countdown was still three shy of zero when an explosion tore through the vestibule, the two massive glass arches that framed the Lubyanka exit disintegrating into a million lethal pieces.

* * * * *

Within minutes the tragedy at the Lubyanka Metro was headline news around the world. The following day became a National Day of Mourning, with a two-minute silence observed across Russia, the public mood both sombre and angry when the latest casualty figures gave some measure of the human cost: at least 90 killed, almost 400 hospitalised.

Of the terrorist groups that had quickly claimed responsibility, only one, signing itself simply as *August 14*, offered definitive proof. In an aggressively-worded media statement written first in Russian, and then repeated in English, it condemned the Government's failure to renounce Russia's imperialist past. Moscow still controlled its own vast empire, a hundred diverse nationalities subjugated in the cause of Russian colonialism. To the terrorists, Lubyanka was just the start, their ultimate—if unlikely—aim the complete and irrevocable fragmentation of the Russian Federation.

Exactly a week after Lubyanka, a parcel bomb killed its innocent courier and six bystanders at the entrance to the Kazansky Rail Terminal, a day later the National

Security Advisor was murdered, together with his driver and two bodyguards. The next week two car bombs exploded close to the Bolshoi Theatre—sixteen dead. Then on successive days more car bombs killed another twenty-three. The spring thaw saw the terrorists' target shift to city-centre stores, nightclubs and restaurants, a deadly mix of bombs and incendiaries resulting in another ninety-three deaths and insurance claims close to three billion U.S. dollars.

The authorities' response was rapid and determined. Within 48 hours of the Lubyanka attack, they had identified, but not named, all four bombers: the only female, a 21-year-old student from Poland had died at the scene, but despite a massive police hunt the other three terrorists remained at large. With few other leads to work with, the police soon concentrated on thwarting further attacks; hundreds of known activists and dissidents were detained and interrogated, the movements of others closely monitored, their phones tapped, homes searched. An intensive media campaign urged the public to stay vigilant, and a security cordon was thrown around central Moscow with all vehicles subject to random checks. Security on the Metro became oppressive, armed guards patrolling every station and platform; yet passenger numbers still plummeted by almost a third.

In spite of such extreme measures, support for the Government's response was generally positive. The images from Lubyanka had left an indelible public memory and many in Moscow could still recall the bloody scenes from the apartment bombings of '99, when almost 300 were murdered during a two-week killing spree. If lives could be saved and the terrorists stopped by abandoning the rights of a few dissidents or by adding a few minutes to the daily commute—then so be it.

And by the beginning of May the terrorist attacks had seemingly stuttered to a halt, the high-profile police action provoking a renewed sense of optimism. For Eglitis and his paymasters, however, it was merely a lull before the crescendo of the next phase.

Chapter 1

Friday, May 7th

Marshwick, England

A chill wind swept in off the North Sea, driving across the flat Lincolnshire landscape to buffer against the sombre group gathered around the grave and Anderson hunched his shoulders over even more, trying to bury his face into the collar of his coat. He had deliberately detached himself from the other mourners and he could barely hear the vicar's words, but it seemed impolite to intrude yet further upon the grief of family and friends. It wasn't as if he even knew the dead man and he was only there because Devereau had needed a favour, one Anderson would have been hard-pushed to refuse.

Eighteen months they had worked together, Adam Devereau doing his best to ensure Anderson's transition to enterprise journalism wasn't a disaster, Anderson grateful enough to try and make it work. Persistence seemed to be the key, that and Devereau's many contacts, Anderson now with a decent, if unpredictable income. Commercial pilot to freelance journalist—the adjustment had proved easier than Anderson had anticipated, the career change one enforced upon him by the return of blurred vision and the suspension of his pilot's licence for the second time. Central Serous Retinopathy was the medical term, the consultant blaming it on stress with the threat of permanent eye damage only one of many unpalatable outcomes.

As the friend of a friend, Devereau had helped far more than Anderson had any right to expect and being asked to attend the funeral of a complete stranger seemed little enough in return, even if it did entail a five-hour round-trip. With Devereau still in New York, Anderson was the preferred substitute, a private word to the widow felt to be more respectful than the standard of flowers and a card. Not that Devereau had been particularly forthcoming about the late George Saunders, Anderson's curiosity only growing once he'd read some of the online obituaries, the funeral service adding a more intimate perspective to the multitude of facts.

Known affectionately as 'the Commander' to friends and acquaintances, the church had been full to bursting, and it was the first time Anderson had experienced a retired Admiral deliver a eulogy. Lincolnshire born and bred, Saunders had joined the Royal Navy straight from university, eventually finding his niche in Naval Intelligence before retiring back to village life and the challenge of being a parish councillor. A frequent visitor to Spain, he had been reported as missing by his wife whilst walking alone in the hills east of Malaga, it two more days before his body had been found at the base of a deep ravine; with no suspicious circumstances, it had all the elements of a tragic accident. Despite the combination of Naval Intelligence and an unusual death, Saunders had been retired far too long for the national press to see it as a story worth pursuing. The journalist in Anderson was tempted but reluctant, curious now as to whether Devereau actually wanted him to become involved—in which case why hadn't he just said as much?

Anderson musings were cut short as a distant roll of thunder sounded out its warning and already there was a cold wet trickle nuzzling its way down the back of his neck. He shifted uncomfortably, trying to ease the ache in his back, and by chance his gaze settled on a tall, burly figure away to his left. Like Anderson, the man stood apart from the rest of the mourners: late-thirties; six-foot four; black hair tied in a ponytail; alert, restless eyes—Anderson had walked past a score of such men every flight, most in uniform, some not. Using the Commander's history with Naval Intelligence as his cue, Anderson's imagination worked overtime to wonder whether Ponytail was MI5, or should it be MI6? There was almost the look of a Hells Angel... CIA, he decided finally, the man doubtless enjoying a brief respite from a heady life of espionage and intrigue. More likely though, he was the gravedigger silently urging the vicar to hurry up before the storm got worse.

If so the man would be disappointed, both wind and rain choosing to redouble their efforts; with the funeral finally over, the vicar immediately encouraged

everyone to join the family at the Saunders' home, Anderson happy to tag along and express his condolences in a rather drier environment. The village itself was a loose connection of a few hundred homes, a farming community midway between Boston and the coast. Anderson had no need for his car, the short walk from the church taking him past Marshwick's single shop and lone pub, then along a narrow country lane to a detached picture-postcard cottage, with leaded windows and ivy-covered walls.

By the time Anderson arrived the two main rooms were already crowded, mourners spilling out into the kitchen and even up the stairs, raincoats and umbrellas drying out where they could. Anderson picked up a drink and a plate of food, before looking around for someone who might be willing to give him some more background on the Commander. The atmosphere was restrained but not especially sombre and no-one seemed concerned that Anderson was a complete stranger. To his disappointment, there was no sign of the man with the ponytail—no doubt he was already hard at work with wheelbarrow and shovel.

It was a good fifteen minutes before Anderson chose to work his way round to the Commander's widow. Jessica Saunders stood beside the living-room fireplace, deep in conversation with the Admiral. Anderson politely hovered in the background, uncomfortably rehearsing his opening line, while waiting for a convenient moment to interrupt. His attention quickly began to wander elsewhere and he found himself looking at a young woman conversing at the far end of the room: tall, thirtyish, shoulder-length brunette hair, attractive and with a ready smile—Anderson couldn't stop himself from staring, even going so far as to search out the potential annoyance of a wedding or engagement ring.

An elderly couple generously took pity on his lonely vigil, it several minutes before they moved on. Anderson's gaze immediately resumed its previous traverse but the young woman in question was already moving purposefully towards him. Their eyes met and Anderson instantly glanced away, feeling as if he'd been caught peeping through someone's window.

"I'm sorry; I don't think we've met. I'm Charlotte Saunders." Her voice was cool, polite, the deep-brown eyes almost accusing.

"Michael Anderson." They shook hands, Anderson's brain working overtime to find something relevant to say.

"I seem to have been the focus of much of your interest, Mr Anderson. I'm not quite sure why I deserve such attention, but it can be rather unnerving."

Anderson struggled to change the subject, "You're Commander Saunders' daughter?"

"That's very perceptive of you, Mr Anderson. Did you know my father well?"

The hint of sarcasm wasn't an encouraging start and Anderson's role as stand-in for Devereau was proving more awkward than he'd anticipated. "I never actually met the Commander," he replied, trusting in honesty to dig him out of a very deep hole. "I was asked to express my condolences on behalf of a friend, Adam Devereau."

Charlotte frowned, "I'm afraid I don't recognise the name. In which case, did Mr Devereau know my father well? If they were in the Navy together, I'm sure there are others here who would be interested to talk to you."

"I'm pretty sure Adam was never in the Navy; I got the impression that he knew your parents from when they lived in London. Unfortunately he's in New York at the moment—hence me." Anderson realised he was close to babbling and having assumed Devereau's name would instantly strike a chord, he wasn't sure that anything he was saying was actually correct.

Charlotte persisted, "Well, it's kind of you to give up your time to come here. What is it you do, Mr Anderson?"

Her tone was a warning to be careful and Anderson tried to hedge, "A writer of sorts; articles and such like."

"You mean a journalist?"

"On a good day... a hack for the most part."

Anderson's attempt to make it light-hearted failed miserably, the admission merely opening the floodgates of the woman's anger: not only was Anderson rude and a chauvinist, he was quite likely an interloper as well.

"My father was a generous man, Mr Anderson," said Charlotte, her tone ice-cold. "He would always go out of his way to make everyone welcome, even insensitive journalists who choose to invade a family's private grief. Stay if you must, but please leave my mother alone. And to save you the need to bother anyone else, I'm thirty-three, unmarried, live in Boston and work at an estate agent's." Charlotte paused, brown eyes smouldering. "Was there anything else you wanted to know?"

Anderson slowly shook his head, then with nothing to lose, he pushed his luck as far as he dared. "Is that Charlie for short, or Lottie?"

Charlotte glared at him in confusion, struggling for the right response. When the reply came, it was both abrupt and dismissive, "Goodbye, *Mr Anderson.*"

* * * * *

As well as being the village's sole pub, The Farriers Arms also doubled up as Marshwick's only hotel. Dating from the early-1800's, with beamed ceilings and a wood-burning fire, it offered just three en-suite rooms for the occasional guest like Anderson; yet while his room might be small and spartan, the food more than made up for such minor grievances. The lounge and public bars had long since merged into one, with chairs and tables for some two dozen patrons, plus up to ten more on stools alongside the U-shaped counter. The atmosphere was friendly and relaxed, and without the distraction of irritating music or even a TV; two-thirds full, the bar area was still cosy rather than crowded, the two staff coping with professional ease without ever looking rushed.

A well-fed Anderson sat on an end stool with drink in hand, reflecting on a very confused set of messages from the Commander's wife and daughter. Having been roundly put in his place by Charlotte, he had struggled to know how best to satisfy his obligations to Devereau, the problem solved within minutes by Jessica herself. Whether she had noticed Charlotte's reaction to Anderson wasn't clear but she at least well knew Adam Devereau, or more specifically his wife, Christmas cards shared but no real contact for a good twenty years. Jessica certainly hadn't been put out by Anderson's admission that he was a journalist, keen in fact to promote the Commander's story beyond just one five-minute conversation.

It had been an intriguing proposition, the worsening weather another good reason for Anderson to delay his return home. So far, the *Farriers* had proved a welcoming refuge, Anderson's continuing failure with members of the fairer sex not something to brood over. Despite being close to the wrong side of forty and of unsteady income, he could still be considered a reasonable catch, the hindrance of a failed marriage a relatively minor inconvenience. Their friends had always regarded it as the ideal match, then after five years of marriage, Anderson had suddenly packed his bags and walked out; four years on and he still couldn't explain—even to himself—exactly why he had left.

Anderson gulped down the last of his drink, thought about having an early night, then took the easy option and asked for a refill.

"You here for the Commander's funeral?" The barman was in his forties, solidly built, always happy for a chat in his broad Lincolnshire accent, his main talent that of making people feel at ease. The *Farriers* seemed to be run primarily by a husband and wife team—the husband organising the bar, the wife organising the husband.

Anderson nodded, "Didn't know him though; just doing a favour for a friend. Now wondering whether there might be a story in it somewhere."

"Story? You work for the papers, then?"

"Freelance," Anderson said, hoping to encourage the barman to open up and confident that he would know something of interest. Devereau preferred the term enterprise journalism over investigative, arguing that every journalist was part investigator, but whatever the name Anderson was still at the bottom of the pile, learning his trade while supplementing his income with articles of purely local interest. Of late, Anderson had been keen to prove he could cope without the need for a guiding hand and as long as Devereau was kept in the loop, he didn't seem that bothered, the subsequent expense claims signed off with only an occasional caustic comment.

"Commander was a straight Scotch man, like yourself," continued the barman. "Everyone round here liked him and he always had time for a chat..."

An unsolicited summary of the Commander's naval exploits then followed, the barman's tone softening as he detailed rumours concerning Saunders' role in Naval Intelligence. Anderson looked suitably impressed but there seemed little of real substance, just village gossip and hearsay, nothing that would be of real use.

The barman—now known to Anderson as Rob—broke off to attend to one of his regulars, returning briefly a few minutes later with newspaper in hand.

"*Boston Standard*," he explained, as he laid the paper down in front of Anderson, "They did a nice write-up about the Commander; sorry it's bit of a mess, but it's a couple of weeks old. Plenty of info, so it might be a help..."

Anderson didn't have the heart to refuse and with nothing better to do, he read through the lengthy obituary, even though most of it was familiar. Idly, he continued to turn the pages, scanning the weekly paper for something else of interest. It was only when he reached the newspaper's original front page that both headline and picture grabbed his attention.

"*Death Crash Horror. Village stunned by teenager's death.*" The photograph showed the crumpled wreck of a saloon car resting against a large tree, the car

front squashed and distorted, the harsh glare of arc lamps picking out every horrific detail.

The report itself was the standard mix of fact, conjecture and tributes. Nineteen year-old Darren Westrope had only passed his driving test eight months earlier and the ageing Ford Fiesta had been bought soon after, Darren using it to commute from Marshwick to his college course in Boston. Yet it was doubtful whether age or experience could have helped save Darren's young life, the Fiesta sideswiped by a box van skidding out of control on a patch of wet mud. With no chance to do anything, the Fiesta had smashed head-on against a mature sycamore, the massive trunk an unforgiving and immovable barrier. It had taken firemen over an hour to cut Darren's body free.

Seeing Anderson's renewed interest in local matters, Rob chose to return. "Bad luck, I call it: there's not that many trees round here and the road's never busy. Nice lad, not one to cause trouble; parents are devastated."

Anderson's attention had been dragged away mid-sentence, "The van driver—was he hurt?"

"Badly shaken, some cuts and bruises, that's all. Lucky not to have been killed. Van was travelling too fast, I reckon. Narrow road, normally empty, driver in a hurry—since Erdenheim came there's been plenty of near-misses; their drivers treat the roads round here like a race-track."

Anderson's bewildered look brought an immediate response, "Erdenheim," repeated Rob, as though it explained everything. "They have a place just outside Graythorp, a couple of miles east of here; it's a Management Development Centre."

"Which still means nothing," said Anderson, getting frustrated.

Rob grinned at Anderson's confusion, enjoying his superiority. "Team-building exercises," he explained. "Not the fun stuff like a zip wire and quad bikes, Erdenheim prefers to do it all on computer."

Anderson finally nodded in understanding, "Been there, done that; apparently, I don't listen enough to be effective in a team situation."

"I could have told you that," said Rob with a grin. "Boss there's a yank, name of Pat McDowell; ties his hair in a ponytail but don't let that put you off—he'd be a tough bastard in a fight."

"Big guy, 'bout six-four?" Anderson asked curiously. "Late-thirties?"

"Yeah, that's him." Rob's tone became defensive, "You know McDowell then?"

"Not personally; he was at the Commander's funeral."

Rob frowned, "Odd that; I didn't think he knew the Commander that well. Maybe he was just curious as to who else might turn up." He leaned closer to Anderson and gave a knowing wink, "Could be he was hoping to meet an old friend from the CIA..."

Chapter 2

Saturday, May 8th

Moscow

Major-General Dmitry Grebeshkov stood in front of the wide windows and looked out across rain spattered Lubyanka Square, watching as police stopped and searched two men a few metres from the newly-restored metro entrance. Such aspects had now become a normal part of Moscow's daily routine with the authorities struggling to make headway against August 14. Responsibility for defeating the terrorists rested primarily with the Federal Security Service—unfortunate then, that according to some, the crisis was yet another FSB-led conspiracy.

History did little to convince the doubters otherwise, the evidence of the FSB's involvement in the apartment bombings of '99 persuasive, it seen as part of a wider plot to justify the war in Chechnya. With every new atrocity or terrorist act since, many had automatically assumed the FSB was culpable, some three hundred innocent lives unjustly laid at its door in the last decade alone. To counter such fears, the Prime Minister had insisted on a degree of additional monitoring, a pledge made more difficult when the FSB had vetoed the PM's first two nominees due to security concerns; Grebeshkov had become the compromise choice, his reputation within the FSB's Investigation Directorate—specifically for tackling corruption—ensuring he was acceptable to both parties, his competence and integrity never in doubt, his lack of independence considered an acceptable risk.

With his new title of Special Adviser to the Prime Minister had come a place on Russia's Counter-Terrorist Security Committee and an enforced move across Moscow to a suite of offices on the Lubyanka's fourth floor. Officially, Grebeshkov's unit was part of the FSB's anti-corruption section but in practice it was totally independent, answerable only to the Prime Minister, able to inspect, search and question as it saw fit. It was awkward at best, Grebeshkov and his small team having to cope with the dangers implicit in split loyalties, while also trying to ensure the FSB was indeed innocent of all slurs and innuendo. And in a country where trust was at a premium, Grebeshkov felt it safe to assume that someone was similarly scrutinising his every move, their link to the Russian President doubtless rather more direct than Grebeshkov's to the Prime Minister.

Grebeshkov felt he coped well with the inevitable stress: at fifty-four he had achieved as much as he could have hoped for, and ambition had never been one of his faults. Three children, five grand-children—he loved them all but he still sometimes felt a stranger to them, his thoughts more wrapped up in work than in family. Grebeshkov's long-suffering wife had long since learnt to live a semi-independent life, supporting her husband when she felt he needed it, and not getting under his skin when he brought home the FSB's problems to spend long hours at his desk, surviving on a regular intake of strong tea and vodka.

For eight weeks now his hand-picked unit had questioned and probed, rechecking the hundreds of lines of inquiry as they spread outwards from Moscow and towards Eastern Europe, searching for the clue ignored or the false lead blindly followed. Yet despite their expert scrutiny, there was nothing of concern, no evidence of manipulation or collusion, not even a rogue *agent provocateur*

working on a hidden agenda. Grebeshkov was surprised but not complacent, his investigation now stretching out to include the Moscow Police and National Guard.

Grebeshkov turned away from the window, settling down at his desk to re-read the latest update from two floors below. The search was still ongoing for the three remaining metro bombers, although now they had names as well as faces. From subsequent attacks, an additional three suspects had been identified, but again they were nowhere to be found. Unexpectedly, none of the terrorists were from Chechnya or Dagestan, or indeed any other Russian Republic; four were Polish, including the woman killed in the metro, two more were Ukrainian.

Then there was the Latvian, Aldis Eglitis. He was well known to the FSB due to past exploits and it seemed likely he was August 14's bomb maker, perhaps even their leader. The explosive used was invariably C4, its probable origin Iraq, Eglitis with more than two decades of experience in its use. He had made no attempt to hide from the security cameras or disguise his appearance, and so far Eglitis' arrogance had been well justified, the FSB unable to track his movements either in the days leading up to the metro attack, or during the succeeding weeks. The terrorists seemed able to come and go as they pleased, invisible to police, CCTV, and the public alike, just six nondescript faces hidden amongst some twelve million others.

Overall, it made for uncomfortable reading. Previous terrorist campaigns had lacked cohesion but *August 14* seemed well organised and totally determined, with few qualms as to the numbers killed. So far they had avoided the extreme of suicide attacks and even the woman killed at the Lubyanka had been trying to escape, the terrorists making the most of their resources: two cells, three at most, presumably operating independently of each other.

August 14—the name had caused confusion and the terrorists' media rant had offered no obvious clues, no-one yet prepared to believe it was a fourteen-week countdown to some momentous event. If it symbolised a date in the past, then the link was far from obvious. The infamous Marxist-Leninist terrorist Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, known popularly as Carlos the Jackal, had been captured on that day in '94, and in 2007 four suicide bombs had killed almost 800 in Iraq; up to a thousand more had died when Egyptian security forces had attacked supporters of ousted President Morsi in 2013.

The Poland—Ukraine—Latvia connection offered various alternatives, the most likely being from 2008. At a mass rally in Tbilisi, the leaders of Poland, Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia had stood with Georgia's President to publicly declare their support for Georgia in its conflict with Russia over South Ossetia. The actual date of the rally was August 12th, with Georgia's President signing a French-brokered peace plan three days later—the 14th might thus represent some as yet unidentified event of importance, perhaps even a very specific personal loss.

Whatever the significance of the date, Grebeshkov knew the FSB had to smash *August 14* sooner rather than later, before the citizens of Moscow finally lost patience. In less than twenty-four hours the crowds would gather to celebrate Victory Day, army units now both in the parade and as part of the increased security, everyone concerned that *August 14* would find its own unique way to mark the end of the Great Patriotic War.

The terrorists needed money, shelter, transport and basic necessities—with their faces splashed across the media and a generous reward offered, the breakthrough would eventually happen, and the FSB’s own specialist counter-terrorism unit, the elite Alpha Group, was more than ready to exact a suitable revenge.

Yet Grebeshkov still worried that he was missing something crucial and disbelief was proving to be an irritating bedfellow, leading to many a sleepless night. The terrorists were just a little too clever, able to disappear far too easily for them not to be receiving high-level inside help. And if not the FSB, that left either someone close to the Security Committee or indeed a member of Grebeshkov’s own specialist team.

Grebeshkov opened up one of the personnel files from the Alpha Group Index, pausing briefly to study the image adjacent to the personal data. The daughter of a Russian diplomat, Captain Natalia Markova had inherited an Asiatic attractiveness, her features hiding a subtle mix of self-confidence and resourcefulness: degree in political science, fluent in three languages, no obvious vices, and no subconscious desire to prove herself better than her male counterparts.

The campaign against *August 14* had stalled, and the FSB was struggling to prove it was capable of defeating the terrorists. Markova had never yet let Grebeshkov down, and he needed someone whose integrity matched his own, someone with the initiative to help tease out the traitor in their midst.

Chapter 3

Sunday, May 9th

Marshwick, England

“I’m sorry the house is in such a mess. George was always a hoarder, but I just can’t seem to work out what to keep and what to... well, throw away, I suppose, or perhaps take to a car boot.”

Jessica Saunders gave Anderson a thin smile, then continued to reminisce about her husband while Anderson sat on the sofa and made brief notes. Once the *Farrier’s* barman had piqued Anderson’s interest, he couldn’t let it lie, and a sleepless night had followed with his mind flipping from one fanciful scenario to another. George Saunders’ accident, Darren Westrope’s crash, the American McDowell—three elements which taken together could mean absolutely nothing, or so much more. Whilst a double murder might be stretching it a little far, fate seemed to be whispering in Anderson’s ear; there could well be a story here and all he needed to do was fit the pieces snugly together.

The buzz of chasing down a story was sometimes worth the effort just by itself and Anderson had quickly managed to get his head around who was where and when; not that it offered any answers, but it helped him work out what questions

needed to be asked. George and Jessica Saunders had flown to Spain on Sunday April 11th, the Commander going missing on the Wednesday, his body discovered two days later: multiple broken bones, fractured skull—all injuries consistent with a fall from the track at the top of the ravine. Darren Westrope had died early Monday evening, April 19th. Two accidents resulting in two deaths, five days and fifteen-hundred miles apart, yet Saunders and Westrope had lived a mere hundred yards from each other.

Anderson's staple opening line of researching an article on a young life unfairly taken had worked as well as he could have hoped and Darren himself seemed a normal enough nineteen year-old: college course at Boston in Computing, free time spent out and about enjoying himself, no obvious link to Erdenheim or Pat McDowell, and no apparent motive for anyone to want him dead. The car crash had occurred roughly a mile and a half from Marshwick, Darren's Fiesta heading east towards Graythorp, the Management Centre of Erdenheim standing on its northern edge. North, west and south, there was nothing else other than miles of farmland, the sea to the east. Graythorp itself was a hamlet of no more than a dozen houses, yet no-one seemed able to shed light on where exactly Darren was headed the evening he'd died or even precisely what time he'd left home; he might even have just fancied a random drive.

Everything pointed to it being a tragic accident, the police happy that the other driver wasn't drunk, on drugs or speeding, the inquest set for June. Pat McDowell, on behalf of the Management Centre, had contacted Darren's family to offer his condolences but unlike with Saunders, he hadn't attended the funeral. McDowell himself seemed to be a favourite target for the gossips, his reputation based on nothing more than his physical size and a surfeit of self-confidence. Yet the American still seemed out of place: 82nd Airborne, then off the radar for almost five years until he arrived at Graythorp.

Erdenheim's Management Centre had only opened its doors the previous November, offering single day and residential courses on leadership and team-building. Purpose built, with state-of-the-art computer facilities, its client list included two multinationals, the Centre's out-of-the-way location made easier by the presence of a helicopter pad. McDowell and a Jonathan Carter were listed as its directors, the American parent company with three other facilities spread across North America.

By the time he had arrived at Jessica Saunders' house, Anderson's enthusiasm for his chosen task had started to wane, well aware that he'd let rumour and wishful thinking affect his judgement, and embarrassed to be asking impertinent questions while people were still coming to terms with their loss. To his relief, Anderson had immediately been welcomed into Jessica's house for Sunday afternoon tea and cake, there no mention of his contretemps with Charlotte. Jessica was more curious than anything, his friendship with Devereau apparently enough to convince her Anderson could be trusted, and she had skilfully avoided any mention of how exactly the Commander and Devereau had become friends, Anderson never yet getting to the bottom of Devereau's slightly murky past.

It was inevitable that the conversation would eventually move on from the Commander's naval career and work as a parish councillor to the trickier subject

of their regular holidays in Spain, Anderson doing his best not to be too insensitive.

"I'm just sorry to be asking lots of difficult questions," continued Anderson. "Please ignore any that go too far."

"Ask all you want, Mr Anderson. Don't worry; you'll soon know if any of your questions could be classed as impertinent."

Anderson jumped in regardless, not sure how else to word it, "Could you tell me a little more about the Commander's accident?"

"We both love Andalusia," Jessica explained, pouring out a second cup of tea. "The beaches are beautiful but away from the coast there's a whole different world, almost unspoilt..." Her hand trembled slightly as she lowered the china teapot, then she looked up and gave Anderson a sad smile. "The hills around Nerja have some wonderful walks; the *Junta de los Rios* is a bit further away but with spectacular views. George knew the area well, so I wasn't worried that he went alone." She paused, and her tone softened, "The Spanish authorities were very good and they even brought in a specialist team. Some of the paths are very steep and can be quite treacherous, especially after rain. And it had rained that night..." She broke off briefly before continuing, "I take it you believe George's death might not have been an accident?"

Jessica was proving as perceptive as her daughter, or perhaps Anderson was just far too easy to read. "No, not really," he said, his tone somehow managing to sound both embarrassed and defensive. "I'm just trying to cover every possibility... Darren Westrope: I understand from his parents that he used to work for you?"

Jessica looked at Anderson in surprise, "Darren?" Her brow furrowed, "He did, yes; for several weeks last summer holidays. He needed money for a car and sorted out the garden, together with a bit of decorating." She studied Anderson closely, "Darren's crash was terrible but no one here blames the other driver. If you're suggesting a connection between Darren's death and my husband's then I think it very unlikely."

"I'm sure you're right," Anderson said quickly, still pushing his luck. "Darren wasn't working on something recently for the Commander?"

"I don't think so." Jessica's eyes misted over, "Darren's funeral was only last Monday, such a sad affair."

"And there's been nothing out of the ordinary?" asked Anderson gently. "Say, in the last couple of weeks before you went to Spain?"

Jessica pursed her lips and thought for a moment, "Not that I can recall. George was pretty busy for a month or so before our holiday, but that wasn't unusual."

"Busy doing what exactly?"

"Council business and suchlike," Jessica responded, not put out by Anderson's continued probing. "George always tried to spend some time each day out and about, and not under my feet. That last week was a little chaotic; I probably would have asked more but I was busy getting everything organised for our holiday. I'll check his diary in a minute if it helps."

"No unexpected visitors? Someone different on the phone?"

"Sorry, no-one. In any case, strangers on the phone would be nothing new."

"And there's no possibility of your husband being involved in something related to his work in Naval Intelligence?"

Jessica did well to keep her surprise in check, “Now you are definitely creating something out of nothing.” She paused, choosing her words carefully, “When George first retired, his opinion was sometimes sought after, but not for years now.”

“And Spain was pretty much as usual? Your husband didn’t seem worried or have something on his mind?”

“We were both looking forward to it,” Jessica said with a shake of her head. “George was perfectly happy, I’m convinced of that. The Spanish police asked about money problems and such like, but we’ve never had worries on that score. I sense you’re grasping at straws, Mr Anderson.”

Anderson was indeed becoming desperate, “Nothing relevant filed away on his phone or his computer?”

Jessica gave an amused smile, “I doubt it; George wasn’t that keen on technology. We’ve an ageing laptop but I tend to use it more, shopping and holidays mainly.”

Anderson didn’t push it and opted to again change tack, “The driver involved in Darren’s accident was from the Management Development Centre at Graythorp—do you know much about one of its directors, an American named Pat McDowell?”

“The man from Erdenheim,” confirmed Jessica. “I know of Mr McDowell but I can’t say I’ve ever met him.”

“He was at the funeral, taller than me, burly, hair tied in a ponytail.”

“Was he,” Jessica said in surprise, “I’m sorry, I didn’t notice him; but then I didn’t notice you either until I saw you with Charlotte.”

Anderson ignored the jibe, relieved Jessica was being so helpful. “Would the Commander know him? Or the other director, Jonathan Carter?”

“Jon Carter’s often in the *Farriers* and he only lives round the corner; mid-thirties but looks about twenty. George definitely knows Jon and he went to Erdenheim’s opening last year so he would have met your Mr McDowell then. The Centre’s only a few buildings close to the sea wall and it’s a nice walk from Graythorp to the RSPB Reserve at Freiston Shore.”

“Is that a walk your husband would ever do?”

“One of several, yes; George would pick somewhere local at least once a week and he was quite happy off by himself. I think he saw it as a way of patrolling his territory.” Jessica pulled a face, “That sounds bad, doesn’t it? But it was meant in a good way... George would generally write something in his diary, just in case there was ever a problem.” She stood up, “Help yourself to cake and I’ll go check; just give me a minute.”

Anderson waited patiently, letting his gaze wander at will around the room. A framed photograph of a very young girl—presumably Charlotte—occupied pride of place on the marble mantle-piece; on either side were pictures of Jessica and George—one obviously their wedding, the other with the Commander standing proudly in full dress uniform. The old-fashioned three-piece suite and floral curtains gave the sitting room a nice homely atmosphere, a quality totally at odds with Anderson’s far-fetched fantasy of a double murder.

Jessica returned with a chunky hard-backed book in her hand, front cover garishly showing bright-red blood dripping from a yellow hammer and sickle.

“I can’t see anything to suggest George took the walk along the sea bank recently,” she said as she sat back down. “But he did in fact visit Erdenheim; the morning of March 29th to be precise. I just can’t recall that he said anything about it at the time, so I’ve no idea why he went there.”

Jessica placed the book on the coffee table in front of Anderson and gave him another one of her sad smiles. “You’ve now got me thinking about everything that happened over those last few weeks. George was an avid reader and this was one of three books he ordered off the internet, all by the same author; I think they even came by next-day delivery. They turned up a few days before we went to Spain but when I asked George if he wanted any of them to read on holiday, he said not to bother.”

“*Red Terror, Truth and Fiction*,” quoted Anderson, picking out the key facts from the information on the dust jacket, “A detailed study of Soviet-sponsored terrorism from 1945 to 1991; author Charles Zhilin.”

“All three share the terrorism theme and they’re not at all what George would normally read,” Jessica said, sounding confused. “This one was sitting on top. By all means borrow it, Mr Anderson; perhaps it’s relevant in some way.”

Anderson smiled his thanks while trying not to show his disappointment, one diary entry and a hardback book little enough for two days of effort.

Chapter 4

Monday, May 10th

Domodedovo, Russia

Some forty kilometres south of Moscow sits Domodedovo International Airport, Moscow’s main outlet to the Western World, the three terminals struggling to cope with some 30 million passengers per year. Around the airport, the town of Domodedovo similarly continued its own expansion, Russia’s planners doing all they could to ease the plight of its home-hungry millions. Three kilometres west of the airport, the last in a set of eight massive apartment blocks, each sixteen storeys high, waited empty and forlorn. Despite already being a month late, and at least one more from completion, the second-shift had finished some fifty minutes earlier, able finally to enjoy what little remained of the Victory Day national holiday. The building was now left safely in the hands of its two security guards and their dogs.

Baranovskiy and Nazarenko made no distinction between guards and dogs, using silenced automatics to deal with all four. Elevator and final clamber up onto the roof took some ten minutes, Baranovskiy coping with the sixteen kilograms of missile and launcher, while Nazarenko struggled with the remainder of their gear. Eglitis’ sources had said it would be at least another hour before the guards’ absence was noted, and even then the response would be fairly lax. However, just

in case someone should turn up unexpectedly, Katya—the third and final member of the terrorist cell—waited impatiently on the ground floor.

Baranovskiy got on particularly well with Nazarenko, liking the other man's confident and somewhat relaxed approach, western Ukraine home to them both. Katya might be the youngest at twenty-one but she was the serious one of the three, it the first time she had travelled outside of her native Lithuania; months earlier Baranovskiy had made a passing comment as to her diminutive stature, his arm almost broken as Katya proved she was no makeweight. For all of them, their hatred of Russia was a genuine bond, it an unfortunate truth that the only common language between them was Russian.

History clearly proved the dangers of a resurgent and assertive Russia, Baranovskiy prepared to do whatever was necessary to save his country's future. Eglitis had promised six months of fearful anticipation mixed in with an occasional moment of gut-wrenching terror, confident now that they would be back home before the end of the month. Baranovskiy had no idea what he would do with himself when that time came, and *August 14* wasn't perhaps the ideal apprenticeship for a stable and successful career path.

The Aeroflot Airbus was late. Baranovskiy sat with his back against the metre-high parapet, concentrating on the background hiss from the VHF radio receiver resting at his feet. Restlessly, he picked up the missile launcher, running his hand lovingly along its length, before once again going through a trial run, making sure the complex set of operations was clear in his mind—grip and stance secure, battery coolant unit in place, sight assembly locked, right thumb on actuator switch... There would be no second chances, and even though the heat signature from the Airbus' twin engines would make it a deliciously attractive target, Baranovskiy felt the need to practise each and every action over and over again. The American-made Stinger was a weapon he could admire—this wouldn't be the second-hand thrill of a car bomb, this would be far more personal.

A sudden sound froze him into immobility. There was a second crackle of static from the radio, followed immediately by half-caught instructions in English to the Airbus' pilot. Baranovskiy searched the murky early evening sky to the north-west, but it was several seconds before he found the aircraft as it angled down towards the runway. He pressed then released the actuator, the hum of the gyro confirming all was well. Baranovskiy braced his left thigh against the parapet, ignoring the distraction of yet more messages from the radio.

A sudden gust of wind twisted the launcher to one side; Baranovskiy wrenched it back, but precious seconds were wasted before he managed to relocate the target through the gloom, now some four kilometres distant. Body rigid, he tracked the plane as it flew south-east, the audio tone changing to confirm acquisition lock. His body tensed and almost without thinking his left thumb held the first switch closed; immediately the tone grew louder and Baranovskiy instinctively squeezed the launch trigger with his right hand.

Even as the missile leapt forward, Baranovskiy sensed something amiss. The exhaust plume momentarily blocked his view, then as he focussed again on the aircraft, he saw that the target's profile didn't quite match the computer simulations and despite the grey evening light the aircraft livery looked all wrong.

The Stinger missile had no such doubts, cruising safely away from the tower block before accelerating once more towards its target.

The pilot seemed suddenly to sense the threat and the aircraft banked sharply, wrenching itself around in a futile attempt to outmanoeuvre the chasing missile. The Stinger appeared to twist in mid-air, reaching out once more towards the aircraft's starboard wing. A brief moment later the proximity fuse exploded, shredding the starboard engine and ripping a jagged hole in the fuselage. The aircraft flipped almost horizontal, the motion abruptly reversing as a piece of the starboard wing crumpled and broke off. Now totally out of control, the aircraft's remaining engine gave a high squeal of protest before the plane spiralled downward, arcing south-west and towards the town's suburbs.

Nazarenko dragged Baranovskiy away from the parapet, the launcher dropping from his hands, his whole body starting to shake. Even as the rolling boom of an explosion sounded from far-off, the two men were heading back down, desperate now to make their escape. Neither man spoke, Baranovskiy unable to look at his friend, his mind still struggling to accept his mistake. Almost in a daze, he followed Nazarenko out of the building, clattering down the front steps before slowing to a walk, his body still reacting to the adrenalin. Their Nissan SUV was parked some twenty metres ahead, Katya already beside the driver's door.

Distracted by the distant wail of several sirens, Baranovskiy barely registered the sound of voices away to his left, reacting only when he heard a shouted command to halt. He broke into a run, hand reaching down into his waistband to pull out his pistol. There was another shout, followed immediately by the crack of a handgun.

Baranovskiy twisted around, trying to steady his hand before firing at a pair of shadowy figures some fifty yards away—police or security guards it was too dark to tell. The nearest staggered forward then fell to his knees, hands clawing at his chest, but it was Nazarenko who had drawn first blood. The second figure fired twice before flinging himself to the ground.

Baranovskiy sensed a bullet tug as his side then he doubled over as a second tore into his belly, a shriek of agony drawn from his lips. Fighting against the pain, he wrenched himself upright, firing wildly and emptying the clip in the vague direction of the second man.

Moments later, the Nissan shuddered to a halt beside him. From the back seat Nazarenko reached across to help drag Baranovskiy inside, bullets punching through the side window as Katya accelerated away.

* * * * *

Positioned on the western outskirts of Domodedovo, the factory building was a decaying remnant of its former self, a victim of Russia's blind leap into economic *perestroika*. For once, Grebeshkov had struck lucky, Markova's Alpha section operating by chance in Podolsk, less than twenty kilometres to the west.

Within fifteen minutes of the missile attack, they were heading east, their journey guided by police reports detailing the likely route of the target vehicle. A final update, then the searchlight from a police helicopter directed them to where a blue Nissan rested on its side. The car looked to have crashed rounding a bend at

speed, and a young woman's body lay slumped across the driver's seat, a blood trail leading the pursuers towards a pair of battered gates and the factory beyond.

Markova personally led the first group into the building, the six of them fanning out and moving cautiously towards the far wall some fifty metres away. Moonlight filtering down through gaps in the high roof revealed the pitted concrete and rusted metal of the building's interior, the odour of decay hanging heavily in the air. The rubble of a decade littered the floor, a fine dust coating the discarded chunks of machinery like an early-morning frost.

Markova's transfer to the FSB's Alpha Group had been a well-deserved highlight of her military career; her promotion to the rank of Captain had been another—and this in a country where in many men's eyes women were only fit to be secretaries, cleaners or whores. A loving husband, children, a real home—she had totally failed to live up to childhood ambitions and family expectations, yet she had already accomplished far more than a lifetime of innocent dreams. Some two hundred strong, Alpha considered itself the elite of Russia's Special Forces, it primarily a specialist counter-terrorist and hostage-rescue section, Markova's unit with hours spent evaluating scores of real-life incidents.

Abruptly a shouted warning from somewhere to Markova's right was followed immediately after by a double report from a handgun. There was the harsh crack of a stun-grenade, more shots, then an ominous silence.

Markova moved right, a quiet voice sounding in her earpiece. "Target-one is down and tagged; target-two boxed in, single weapon only."

Markova halted beside a large concrete pillar; further right, lying with his back against another pillar, was a young man with one of Markova's section kneeling protectively beside him, left hand pressing hard down against the terrorist's blood-soaked shirt. Markova searched her memory but the man's face meant nothing, certainly not one she recognised as being on the FSB's terror list. Directly ahead was the scarred carcass of what looked like a giant press, the hint of a shadow indicating where the second terrorist hid.

Markova gave new orders, her instructions succinct and precise, well aware that the terrorist would likely prefer suicide over the FSB's hospitality. Almost immediately, the man stepped out into the open, firing twice, his body tensing for the expected deadly response.

From Markova's left, two duller shots sounded, the first of the plastic rounds knocking the man's gun arm backwards, his weapon flying out of his hand; a brief instant later the second round thudded into his thigh, forcing him to his knees.

Markova walked cautiously towards him, gun held two-handed out in front of her, two more *spetsnaz* moving in from either side. The terrorist lifted his head to stare contemptuously up at Markova, no words spoken, the bitterness showing in his eyes.

Markova couldn't help but smile, it part relief, part satisfaction. Grebeshkov had insisted on a live terrorist; well now he had two.

Lincolnshire, England

The estate agent's was close to the river, down a narrow alley and only a few yards from the town's all-seeing landmark, the Boston Stump – or more properly, Saint Botolph's Church. After a decade in South London, Charlotte's move back to Lincolnshire had arisen from the desire for something more; London had become claustrophobic and the friendships she had made there seemed looser than the ties of family. Boston and Marshwick offered familiarity, together with ready-made close friends left over from the happiest of times at the High School. It was perhaps a retrograde step, almost an admission of failure, but Charlotte had few regrets, confident about the future and content with her lot.

The agency was a joint undertaking between herself and an old family friend, Charlotte the junior partner and general dogsbody. Junior partner she might be, but the 'Welch & Saunders' sign was a constant reminder that the move to Boston had been the correct one. By luck or good judgement, the opening of the agency had coincided with a buoyant rental market and steady house sales, and both partners considered the venture a significant success. Charlotte enjoyed the various roles, although it was sometimes hard to ignore the fact that in terms of public trust estate agents were generally fighting for bottom place along with journalists, bankers and politicians.

Her father's death had hit her hard, bringing home the fact of her parents' mortality. As an only child, Charlotte felt it her duty to stay strong for her mother's sake. George Saunders had always been the rock of the family, patient and loving, rarely judgemental; now, if Jessica would allow it, that family role would need to move down a generation.

"Excuse me; do you have a map of Boston I could have?"

Charlotte looked up from her desk, the polite smile frozen on her lips as she recognised her visitor. "Mr Anderson, I was wondering when you would turn up and it seemed wishful thinking to expect you to return from whence you came."

"I couldn't keep away," Anderson replied smiling. "Everyone made me feel so welcome."

"It must be your boyish charm." Even though Anderson's smile seemed genuine, Charlotte felt her annoyance with him instantly resurface. "A map, you said, printed on paper? I would have thought some all-singing app would have been standard issue in your line of work." She took out some of her irritation on the filing cabinet, wrenching open the top drawer and extracting a street map. "With the agency's compliments. Or was this just an excuse to annoy me further?"

Anderson took the proffered map, gaze holding hers. "I didn't create a very good impression the other day and I owe you an apology for my rudeness. Perhaps we could start again?"

"Apology accepted," Charlotte replied without enthusiasm. "Now, if there's nothing else?"

The smile returned, "Lunch?"

Charlotte knew she should have expected as much, but the audacity of the offer still took her by surprise. A curt and unladylike response formed on her lips, then something stopped her: Anderson had tried to make up for his initial blunder and her own rudeness had now far exceeded his.

“Thank you, Mr Anderson, but no; another millennium perhaps. I too must apologise for doubting that Adam Devereau even existed; my mother appreciated your visit and said you were very... considerate, I think was the word.”

“She’s a lovely lady,” Anderson said, “and anyone else would probably have told me to get lost, so I tried to be on my best behaviour.”

“That must have been very stressful, for you. I just hope you’re as considerate when it comes to putting some sensational spin on my father’s death.” Charlotte’s brain kept sending the message ‘be polite’ but her mouth seemed unable to heed the advice.

“I’d be happy for your mother to vet any article before it gets to print, if that would help.”

“That would be appreciated, Mr Anderson; thank you... Mum told me of your interest in Darren Westrope; sometimes people do just have unfortunate accidents.”

“Of course they do. Professional curiosity can have its annoying side and I accept I’m probably being over-dramatic.”

“Professional curiosity to some, nosy interference to others. I’m sorry, Mr Anderson, but I must get on. Try not to litter Boston’s streets with our map; it doesn’t go down well.”

“Of course,” Anderson said. He made to leave, pausing just short of the door before turning back to face Charlotte. “It’s Michael, by the way, or Mike. And thanks for the map, Miss Saunders; in some respects I’m rather old-fashioned and I really do have places to visit.”

Charlotte couldn’t help but return his broad smile. “In answer to a previous question; it’s Charlie to a select few and most definitely not—under any circumstances—Lottie.”

* * * * *

To Anderson’s eyes and ears, Boston was something of an enigma. His confusion had started once he had reached the outskirts and read some of the shop signs, only to increase when he heard the languages being spoken in the town centre: mostly Polish, but also Portuguese, even perhaps Russian and Romanian. In terms of a cosmopolitan mix, this was more like a major city than what he had imagined was a sleepy Lincolnshire town.

It was a thought he put on hold as a text came through from Devereau, confirming that he wouldn’t be back from New York until the Wednesday and detailing a job in Bristol. Anderson kept his reply deliberately vague, merely stating that he was pursuing a new lead and he needed two more days.

Two more days—time enough to satisfy his own conscience and feel he’d done his best. He was tentatively assuming Saunders and Westrope were somehow working together, but he had no supporting evidence and no idea what they might actually be working on. It was simple intuition, backed up by a mix of conjecture and optimism. Saunders wasn’t stupid, if there had been something fishy going on at Erdenheim or with McDowell, he would have called the police. And what better way to draw attention than by murdering two people. Despite every objection common-sense threw at Anderson, he couldn’t just drop it, and his two-day deadline seemed a fair compromise.

The Commander's book had proved typically unhelpful, Anderson's hope that the American author was somehow important immediately dashed, it three years since Zhilin had died from cancer. A scan through of its four hundred plus pages had revealed nothing worthwhile, no notes in the margin or sentences underlined, not even a corner turned over; Anderson even had to tease a good few of the pages apart.

Despite a sudden spattering of rain, Anderson paused at the centre of the Town Bridge to check the map and get his bearings. He might be struggling to come up with anything convincing but he wasn't yet out of ideas, a Geoff Shaw the next on his rapidly diminishing list of contacts.

* * * * *

The pub wasn't quite as friendly as the *Farriers* but it served well enough, Shaw refusing Anderson's offer of a free lunch but still willing to have a beer and a chat. The fact it was Darren's parents who had passed on Shaw's details was perhaps the only reason he had agreed to meet, Anderson again struggling not to seem insensitive, his virtual story on Darren growing more real by the day.

"You did what you could," continued Anderson, as he toyed with his second soft drink of the day. "No-one could have helped save Darren."

"So everyone says. You stand there and just pray for the ambulance to turn up; for someone—anyone—to arrive who knows what to do. Those ten minutes seemed like an hour."

"And the other driver, Bob Kendal; he must have been in shock as well."

"He was in a terrible state; just cuts and bruises but he kept trying to wrench open the driver's door, anything so he could get to Darren and help him. When we arrived Kendal was pretty much incoherent and he didn't even realise the engine to his van was still running."

"He was lucky you got there when you did."

"I guess." Shaw said, while absently lifting his head to look at the TV screen high up on the wall above Anderson's left shoulder. "We saw a spurt of dust in the distance but didn't think much about it; didn't hear anything at all."

"And that was what, a minute before you got there?"

"Thirty seconds maybe." Shaw's gaze drifted back towards the TV, "Turn the sound up, mate," he said loudly.

Someone duly obliged, Anderson left with little option but to turn round to see what Shaw had found so interesting.

The scene on the TV was one of flames bursting from a shattered apartment block. At least three of the lower floors were ablaze, the thick black smoke billowing aside to reveal part of an aircraft's wing, edge neatly severed, lying forgotten on the ground like some giant toddler's broken toy. A score of hoses played water on the inferno, while several helicopters hovered nearby, one trying to winch survivors from the roof. The camera panned closer to show the massive fiery gash gouged out of the tower block, tracing it up towards the roof, before refocussing on the dramatic helicopter rescue.

The commentator's sombre voice cut across the pictures. "...*British Airways Boeing-787 Dreamliner carrying over 250 passengers and crew. Whilst hundreds of people have been successfully evacuated from the apartment block, it is feared that*

the total number of casualties could be as high as one thousand. Although no terrorist organisation has yet accepted responsibility, this latest attack comes—

“Sorry, was there anything else?” Shaw asked loudly.

Anderson just left it at that, thankful Shaw had been so co-operative, convinced now that Darren Westrope hadn’t been murdered. That didn’t mean McDowell and Erdenheim were off the hook but it wasn’t looking promising, Anderson’s instincts well wide of the mark.

* * * * *

Anderson’s stomach was seriously starting to protest, arguing that two courses at the Farriers, followed not long afterwards by a large helping of homemade apple-pie at the Saunders’ house, was just too much. Anderson himself chose to ignore such protests, his taste-buds confirming Jessica’s culinary skills—at least with apple-pie—more than matched those of the Farriers’ chef.

Jessica’s invite had seemed more of an instruction than a request, but Anderson had no cause for complaint, Jessica working hard to make him feel at home. Anderson sat on the sofa with Jessica on the chair opposite, a pot of freshly-brewed coffee between them. Their conversation mainly consisted of reminiscences related to the Commander, or occasionally Charlotte, with Anderson happy to sit and listen. Jessica kept apologising for boring her guest, but whenever she tried to move the topic of conversation round to Anderson, he merely deflected it back again to ask something new about the Commander or Jessica. Eventually, after almost an hour, it was Jessica who brought up a more contentious subject.

“I was a little taken aback yesterday and I wondered later whether I should have been outraged by what you were implying; but then you were really only voicing my own fears... Have you got any further with your theory that George’s death might not have been an accident?”

“I didn’t quite go that far,” Anderson said hastily. “There were just certain aspects I needed to check out.”

“Aspects? Such as Darren Westrope? And the man from Erdenheim?”

“Darren’s crash was definitely an accident. As for the rest, it seems likely that I’ve just got a very vivid imagination. There’s certainly nothing to suggest otherwise.”

“And you’d tell me if there were?”

“Of course,” Anderson replied, instantly regretting his promise.

Jessica still wouldn’t let it lie, “What about George’s book? Has that been of any help?”

“To be honest I’ve not read much of it; but again, it looks like a dead-end.”

“A poor choice of words, Michael,” Jessica said solemnly, but with a twinkle in her eye. “I, however, do have a lot to report; although it’s more negative than positive, I’m afraid. It’s surprising what you can achieve once you put your mind to something, and I’d far rather try and be useful than sit on my hands and do nothing. I’m not saying I agree with your concerns but I am curious as to why George bought those damn books.”

She paused momentarily, getting her thoughts in order. “First, the laptop: nothing exciting in the search history and, despite it feeling like I was prying, there

were no relevant files or emails. George's close friends were next; I tried my best to be subtle and none of them can recall a recent mention of Erdenheim or Pat McDowell. Also nothing related to terrorism or why George would want to buy Zhilin's books."

Jessica stopped and took a deep breath, "It's quite exciting all of this detective work; sorry I'm dragging it out. George's mobile was another casualty of Spain, I'm afraid, and it seems even a widow isn't allowed access to her late husband's call records. I was able to check the landline calls; we both mainly use our mobiles, so it wasn't too hard and I looked at everything in the last two months – no calls to Darren or Erdenheim."

Again Jessica paused for a moment, as though building up to something more exciting than a long list of negatives. "There were just two landline calls that stood out, both USA country code; George phoned them four days after he visited Erdenheim; one call finished the other started ten minutes later, each a good forty minutes."

Jessica smile was getting wider, a measure of how pleased she was for winning the battle against modern technology. "Feeling brave, I phoned them both: the first went to straight to the Office of Naval Intelligence; the second was diverted and I ended up speaking to someone at the Pentagon. I'm afraid I just stuttered 'wrong number' and put the phone down."

"Pat McDowell was 82nd Airborne," confirmed Anderson. "The Commander must have been checking up on him; hence the Pentagon."

"I thought as much. I imagine George would still know a few people in the ONI and they obviously put him on the right track."

It was intriguing without being particularly helpful, Anderson pleased that he seemed to have an ally, worried in case he was selfishly leading Jessica on.

Jessica had no such concerns, keen to drag out every relevant fact, "What do we know about McDowell's fellow director, Jon Carter?"

"Not much: degree in Computer Science, founded his own games company before selling it on to work as a game-play programmer; Erdenheim seems to be seems to be his first venture with McDowell."

"So not quite in the same category as Mr McDowell," said Jessica thinking aloud. "George and I both use the same Amazon account and I checked the order for Zhilin's books; he bought them on the Tuesday and it was next-day delivery. That would be four days after he spoke to someone at the Pentagon, so either the Americans weren't that helpful or he was trying something different. Visit, phone calls, books—George was clearly following-up on something."

Jessica leaned forward, eyes holding Anderson. "I'm not very good with all these secrets and I'm not sure what I really want to believe. Is it better to live with the thought that your husband has been murdered, or that he simply slipped and fell to his death? George was always a careful man but deep down I know his death has to be accidental..."

She paused, shaking her head as if afraid to voice what she wanted to say, "But then, sometimes what you believe to be true turns out to be just a naïve hope. If I can help, Michael, in any way, please just ask."

Chapter 5

Tuesday, May 11th

Lincolnshire, England

The flat landscape of open fields and few hedges made it easy for Anderson to see far into the distance, encouraging him to drive at speed along the narrow country lane. It was fast becoming a glorious spring morning and two cars plus one van had been the sum total of Anderson's fellow travellers. Eventually a combination of sharp bends and bumpy ride forced him to slow down, his eyes drawn to a beautiful tall tree standing like a lone sentry beside the road, the base of the sycamore hidden by a covering of floral tributes. For some reason the scene brought home the immediacy of Darren Westrope's death, more so than reading about it or even talking to his parents.

A pensive Anderson kept his speed below forty, the lane now paralleling a high grassy bank some fifty yards to his right and so blocking his view to the east. If there was a sign announcing Graythorp, then Anderson was distracted enough to miss it, and he had driven well past before the car's map display revealed his mistake. Ahead was finally a sign, not Graythorp but Erdenheim, indicating the right turn into the Management Development Centre.

Anderson slowed to a halt a few yards past the Erdenheim turn-off, before reversing into the access road, his gaze following the road back as it sliced through the bank. The latter was well above his head and proved a very effective barrier: all he could see was a pair of metal gates and a brick building beyond, maybe a hundred yards distant.

Keen not to seem too inquisitive, Anderson paused only briefly before driving slowly back the six hundred yards into Graythorp proper. The hamlet was even smaller than Anderson had expected, and he counted just seven houses, plus a stone farmhouse standing by itself at the southern edge. To the west it was all farmland, while the high bank blocked his view to the east—a view which, according to Anderson's reading of the map, should be of a muddy wilderness leading to the foam-speckled waves of a blue-grey sea.

He parked the Renault on the grass verge opposite the farmhouse, then with trusty camera in hand, followed on foot a narrow track as it climbed gently up onto the grassy bank. It was only when he reached the top that Anderson realised he was actually standing on what must have once been the sea wall, the seaward side angling its way leisurely down until it met the ground some twelve feet below Anderson. Four yards wide at its apex, clothed in coarse grass and stumpy bushes, it snaked north-south as far as the eye could see, the occasional grey shape of a concrete pillbox lining its lonely route. At right-angles to the old sea-wall was a narrower embankment; this one ran straight and true, heading east for some four hundred yards before merging with a second north-south sea wall.

To the south, sandwiched between the two sea walls, the reclaimed land was bursting with crops; to the north lay more farmland, broken only by the brown brick and black tarmac that was Erdenheim.

Despite the polite notice formally warning of the dangers of proceeding further while advising that due reference be made to the tide tables, Anderson chose to follow the narrow embankment east and out towards the sea. It took him barely five minutes to reach the end of the linking embankment to where it joined the outer sea wall. Beyond were small ditches and wider gullies, meandering out to become an endless expanse of dark-grey with a rare splash of muddy-green. The air still lacked the characteristic salty taste, but the sea had to be out there somewhere, and in the far distance was the unmistakable outline of a ship moving ever so slowly south.

Anderson slid down the opposite side of the bank and tested out the ground. Firm to begin with, after some fifty yards water began to appear in his footprints. An ominous squelch now sounded at each new step, black evil-smelling mud sticking to his shoes like blackcurrant chewing gum. He stopped beside one of the gullies: some three yards wide, the sides oozed sharply down for several feet to meet a surface of glossy-black liquid mud.

Curiosity satisfied, Anderson retraced his steps before following the seaward base of the outer wall as it headed north. Unable to get a reliable signal for his mobile, he had to abandon the convenience of a map, instead using guesswork to gauge the correct distance to bring him level with Erdenheim. Feeling confident, he clambered his way back up to the top of the sea wall. Erdenheim's buildings sat away to his right, roughly a hundred yards distant. Just below Anderson was a wide ditch which virtually acted as a moat, various offshoots helping protect Erdenheim on three sides; a second line of security was provided by a six-foot high chain-link fence.

The centre's three buildings were roughly midway between the two sea walls, forming a line some seventy to eighty yards long running north-south. They weren't in fact separate buildings at all, more a single structure but with three distinct components, the two outer ones single-storey twins of each other whilst the central structure was shorter and two storeys high. With their brown brick and darker-brown tiled roofs, the buildings seemed unlikely to win any prizes for inspirational design, but they did appear to blend in well with their surroundings.

Anderson sat down on the edge of the sea wall, trying to get a feel for the overall layout. South of the entrance road lay the tarmac car park, half-full with some twenty vehicles including two small vans; to the north was the large white H of the helipad. At the rear, between the buildings and the fence, was a wide belt of grass, interspersed with newly-planted trees and bushes.

For some reason Anderson felt a little cheated: no guards, no frenzied activity, nothing to make him overly suspicious. And the fence was one an enthusiastic ten year-old could easily scale. There was some attempt to deter intruders, primarily an alarm system, plus several security lights and cameras; but then such precautions were hardly out of the ordinary.

By the time he returned to the *Farriers*, Anderson was almost too late for lunch, having followed the sea bank south to the RSPB Reserve at Freiston Shore. He had stayed there for a good hour, finally able to make better use of Pentax camera and

zoom. He might not have had a clue what type of bird he was photographing but Anderson could definitely see a future for himself as a photo-twitcher, or whatever the phrase might be, and it was infinitely more rewarding than a one-man witch-hunt against Erdenheim.

Stomach satisfied, Anderson sat in the lounge bar, coffee at hand, reading through the *Daily Telegraph's* report on Monday's outrage at Domodedovo. *August 14* had quickly accepted responsibility, their hypocrisy all-too clearly revealed as they expressed regret for the British and American lives lost in the fight against Russian imperialism. The total number of victims was still rising, with 262 killed aboard the Boeing Dreamliner, almost half of them British, some forty American. For Russia the total loss was far greater, the list of missing and dead now well over two hundred. The Russian authorities had also confirmed reports that a policeman had been critically injured in a shoot-out west of the airport, one terrorist killed, two more arrested.

Russian terrorism seemed to be a common theme of late and Anderson returned to the enigma of Charles Zhilin's book, needing to understand why the Commander had thought Red Terror a worthwhile next step. *Terrorism—Russia—August 14—Erdenheim*: Anderson thrust the thought aside, his Walter Mitty daydreams were just getting a bit too outrageous.

Zhilin himself had been Head of the FBI's Counter-Terrorism Section and a member of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force, just the three books to his name. *The Tactics of Terror* and *The Failures of Counter-Terrorism* had been followed in 2016 by *Red Terror, Truth and Fiction*, it supposedly the first of two books on Soviet-sponsored terrorism, the second one contrarily due to cover the period 1918 to 1945.

Sadly, *Red Terror's* contents weren't quite as exciting as the garish cover had suggested, each chapter focussing on a particular incident or country, from sabotaging power supplies in the United States to the kidnapping and murder of Russia's own citizens. Too dry and factual for Anderson's taste, he forced himself to keep reading—and more importantly, keep learning.

After an hour, and just fifty-two pages, he finally gave up. Hope and the odd prayer seemed to be getting Anderson absolutely nowhere.

Moscow

The small conference room always seemed particularly bland to Grebeshkov, especially when compared with the rest of Government House, there not even a single picture to break up the monotony of its steel-blue painted walls. The furniture was minimal, with just one long table and eight high-backed chairs on either side. No wall-mounted displays with sophisticated computer graphics, no complex map overlays, no touch screen data updates—such technological aids were just not the Prime Minister's way. Hence, a sombre setting for a sombre meeting of Russia's Counter-Terrorist Security Committee.

Including Grebeshkov there were seven generals seated around the table, none of them presently in uniform. The other two committee members were both politicians, namely the Prime Minister and the National Security Advisor. Chaired

by the Prime Minister, it was a group with much influence but no real power, as any major decisions had first to be ratified by the President. That said, it still meant responsibility for all subsequent actions—or more accurately, those actions that either failed or were deemed to have been a mistake—would lie entirely at the door of the Prime Minister and his eight colleagues. And, to ensure there would be no dispute as to who said exactly what and when, their every word was recorded both digitally and by hand via an aide.

The Prime Minister sat directly opposite Grebeshkov: not yet fifty, he was another of the relatively young breed of Russian politicians, it taking him just ten years to progress from his first political appointment as Presidential adviser to then become PM. To his left sat the only woman on the Committee, Irina Golubeva, Russia's newly-promoted National Security Advisor. Tall and thin, with short grey hair, Golubeva's appearance belied a sharp and intelligent mind, someone whom it would be wise to take very seriously, her long fingers seemingly reaching out into every dark corner of government. Entirely the President's appointment, she reputedly was no friend of the Prime Minister, her presence on the Committee seen by many as the President's way of appraising the chairman rather than supporting him. The President and Prime Minister had once been close, perhaps even good friends, but political necessity had loosened that relationship, and now the Prime Minister's future was irrevocably tied to that of the Committee and its ability to defeat the terrorists.

Grebeshkov had spoken little, silently urging the Prime Minister to speed the meeting forward. The PM was fastidious to a fault and every new scheme or suggestion had to be thought through and discussed in boring detail. A thick file rested on the table in front of each committee member, its contents a compilation of reports prepared by individual members in consultation with other relevant section chiefs, and as usual the PM seemed determined to check every single page. The only agenda was the one chosen by the Prime Minister as he went along, and already over half an hour had been spent reviewing the effectiveness of police road blocks; twenty-five minutes wasted to Grebeshkov's way of thinking.

Finally, the Prime Minister moved on, turning his attention back to the terrorists. "The date August 14—does it in fact relate to 2008 and Georgia or is it something more obscure?"

There was a brief silence before Grebeshkov took the initiative, the notes in front of him already open at the relevant page. "Section 9-121 contains a summary of what has been learnt from the two terrorists arrested after Domodedovo; overall, they are both proving to be helpful."

The emphasis on the last word was subtle but hinted at how such information had been extracted; no-one needed to ask more. Grebeshkov, as the PM's Special Adviser, had received a personal update on each interrogation from a stony-faced colonel, and it was thus Grebeshkov's initials which appeared at the end of the relevant report—a fact he wasn't entirely comfortable with.

"Baranovskiy," Grebeshkov continued, "is still wavering in and out of consciousness but Nazarenko is relatively unhurt, just a minor concussion from when their vehicle crashed. He claims that the name *August 14* is merely a convenience, rather than being of any great significance. In fact it relates to the workers' seizure of the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk on August 14th 1980 and the

subsequent birth of *Solidarity*, which—according to Nazarenko—ultimately led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. August 14 hopes to achieve the same with the Russian Federation—just a little quicker...”

There was a murmur of derision from around the table and Grebeshkov gave an exaggerated shrug, “It’s unclear quite why either man is so anti-Russian. No doubt we will discover their exact motivation in due course, but it would be unwise to doubt their commitment or their belief in the terrorist cause. Baranovskiy’s error in targeting the British Airways flight has given *August 14* worldwide publicity but with the Americans now actively involved, it could well prove counter-productive.”

Some around the table might not appreciate American help but Grebeshkov knew it could only be to Russia’s advantage, the West’s intelligence agencies offering a different route to searching out the terrorists’ many secrets. A gesture from the Prime Minister and Grebeshkov pressed on; able to keep a wealth of detail at his fingertips, only rarely did he need to refer to the paper file or his own notes.

“Nazarenko was recruited in August last year—he hasn’t yet explained exactly how, or what happened to him before he entered Russia in late December. The terrorists work in three-man cells, each apparently independent of the other. Nazarenko has yet to reveal the total number of cells and the location of his particular group, but it’s likely all of the cells are based in and around Moscow. He claims not to know who finances *August 14* or who its leaders are; Eglitis is more like a chief of staff.”

“So Eglitis,” interrupted the Prime Minister, “is the key. Find him and we will have them all.”

“I’m not so sure,” Grebeshkov replied slowly. “For August 14 to rely heavily on just one man would be foolish, especially someone who has a serious heart condition; I think it would be too easy to assume Eglitis knows the location of each and every cell.”

The discussion widened, Grebeshkov fielding a range of questions from around the table. Conjecture as to the total number of cells was one of the questions left unresolved, although Grebeshkov was confident as to his own figure of at most four.

Next on the Prime’s Minister’s mental agenda was finance. “Mikhail, I believe that’s in your brief?”

The FSB’s Anti-Terrorism Chief noticeably straightened his back; he was already under pressure for his section’s lack of prior intelligence concerning *August 14*, and he was unsure as to how this latest report would be received. With relatively few leads, tracing the origin of *August 14*’s money had proved difficult, but not impossible.

“Section 3-42, Prime Minister. Several financial transactions have now been traced back to their source, which are inevitably cash-deposits made into Ukrainian or Polish accounts. Last November, Eglitis purchased a plane ticket from London to Moscow using a British account, the money routed through Turkey and Latvia, but originating in Poland.” He paused, as though for effect, “The Polish account was in the name of Lech Kaczyński.”

There was a stunned silence, broken eventually by Golubeva, “They’re mocking us,” she said incredulous.

“No,” Grebeshkov said quietly, “They’re showing us they don’t care.”

There now was little doubt as to where the terrorists’ loyalties lay. Five years as President of Poland, Lech Kaczyński’s death in April 2010 had seen over 100,000 people attend his commemoration ceremony, and a day of national mourning had been declared across Europe. The cause of the Polish Air Force Tupolev crash near Smolensk was still controversial, several investigations failing to satisfy those looking for Russian complicity. Also killed were the President’s wife, former president Ryszard Kaczorowski, government members, senior military officers, and relatives of victims of the Katyn massacre. As the crash had occurred on Russian soil, the initial investigation was carried out by the Russian authorities. Their report had placed the majority of the blame onto the Polish pilots, as had the follow-up Polish report. Yet conspiracy theories abounded, ranging from a deliberate assassination of the Polish President to suggestions that Russia was merely trying to prevent him from attending the Katyn ceremony. It was a wound that was taking a long time to heal, and any terrorist link to Poland would bring its own set of unique problems, not least because it was part of NATO.

It was another twenty minutes before the Director of the SVR, Arkady Valentin, gave his report. Valentin had been one of the President’s few surprise appointments and at just forty-five had become the youngest ever head of Russia’s primary foreign intelligence agency, his first success that of replacing the old guard, the few dissenting voices swiftly silenced.

“Section 8-106,” said Valentin, pausing whilst the others turned to the relevant page. “The terrorists are invariably disciplined, well trained, and familiar with the use of guns and explosives, even a Stinger missile. We’ve managed to track some of the terrorists’ movements prior to their arrival in Russia, specifically Baranovskiy, which combined with satellite data and other intelligence, gives an indicator of where they might have been trained. The most likely site is in the Dzūkija region of Lithuania, near to the border with Belarus. An initial assessment of this site has confirmed the presence of at least a dozen personnel, together with visual evidence of weapons’ training. That by itself is not definitive but if they are *August 14* it suggests several more terrorist cells may soon join those already here in Moscow.”

“Not at all what I wanted to hear,” the Prime Minister said with a sigh of frustration. “And Eastern Europe again – this has become a dangerous theme. But let’s be clear, Arkady, you’re not absolutely certain where Baranovskiy was trained, and might it be somewhere other than Lithuania?”

“It’s possible, Prime Minister. It will take time to gather sufficient evidence, and it may never be conclusive – men and women firing weapons doesn’t have to mean terrorists... Perhaps we should consider bringing in the Americans?”

That was now two of the Committee’s members who seemed keen to involve the United States. A terrorist base in Eastern Europe would make everything far more complex and action against Lithuania—in whatever form—without American agreement would be at best unwise.

The Prime Minister chose to keep his thoughts to himself, “Thank you, Arkady. Lithuania lies well outside the remit of this Committee, but should your fears be confirmed, Russia’s response will need to be judged most carefully—”

Golubeva was quick to interrupt, "With any response we must also consider the fact that *August 14* appears to be particularly well informed. Their agents seem able to bypass police raids and road blocks at will, and the increase in security obviously hasn't halted the attacks."

Moscow's Commissioner of Police was the first to protest, struggling to hold back his anger, "We lost a man at Domodedovo and three more at Lubyanka. Every one of my officers wants to get these bastards. If there's an informer, I suggest you look elsewhere..."

"Perhaps not the police," Golubeva continued, unabashed. "The conspiracy theorists always seem keen to blame the FSB."

"As they blamed the U.S. Government for 9/11," Grebeshkov retorted calmly, before his two colleagues could respond. "The FSB is always an easy target. My responsibility, indeed my specific charge from the Prime Minister, is to ensure the FSB is blame-free." He looked directly across the table at Golubeva, speaking slowly so as to emphasise each word, "My responsibility, my reputation."

Golubeva gave a thin smile, but remained silent.

"Well said, General," the Prime Minister said smoothly. "I think you have your answer, Irina."

Lincolnshire, England

Anderson returned from a visit to Marshwick's general store to be met by a grinning Rob. "There was a call for you," said Rob with a wink, "Commander Saunders' daughter..."

Anderson nodded his thanks as he took the proffered post-it note and tried to look nonchalant; after a terrible start with Charlotte, things had definitely improved, and now he finally had her mobile number. He stepped back outside, preferring a little more privacy for the return call.

For once Charlotte actually sounded pleased to hear from him even if the pleasantries were effectively ignored. "To cut a long story short, I phoned Erdenheim. I trust you're not busy tomorrow morning because you've got an appointment to go and visit them; eleven o'clock sharp."

"An appointment?" repeated Anderson in confusion. If he had any sort of a plan then it was to stay inconspicuous, not rush full pelt into the lion's den.

"Well someone needed to take the initiative," said Charlotte forcefully. "Otherwise you'll keep badgering my mother. So I put on my best telephone voice, claimed I was your assistant and spoke to a very snooty receptionist. Don't worry; I used my mobile not the agency landline."

"What sort of an appointment?" asked Anderson, struggling to get a word in.

"You're supposed to be some sort of journalist, so I said you'd like to go and journalise, or whatever it is you do. I suggested Erdenheim might appreciate the publicity, what with your many newspaper and magazine connections—I take it you do have connections? It seemed a long shot but half an hour later Pat McDowell phoned back and said fine. Also, we're going on a drive after I finish work to meet someone—don't bother asking whom or why. I trust that's all okay?"

Anderson struggled to take it all in, Charlotte's tone sounding rather friendlier than the rapid-fire words themselves might suggest. "That's great," he said, managing to sound enthusiastic.

"I'll pick you up from the *Farriers* at six-thirty; forget the camera, it just won't be appropriate. You can reward me with dinner later; the *Farriers* is fine."

"The *Farriers*, for dinner; you and me? Did the next millennium arrive and I missed it?"

"I believe I said that about lunch, not dinner. Do please keep up."

"My apologies for being so slow. You said no camera but presumably I'm actually allowed to talk to this contact; even ask the occasional question?"

"Probably not," Charlotte said. "Just follow my lead..."

A bemused Anderson returned to the bar, opting for a celebratory drink. Strictly speaking, the appointment at Erdenheim would be outside his self-imposed deadline but he could hardly pull out now. And it was about time he actually met Pat McDowell.

When Rob returned with his drink, Anderson tenaciously resumed his quest, choosing to ease his way slowly into finding more on events prior to the Commander's death. "Was Darren Westrope a regular?"

"His Dad is," Rob replied, happy to talk, "but not Darren; Boston's got a bit more to it than 'round here."

"What about the people from Erdenheim, do they ever come in for a drink?"

"Now and again; they have their own bar but a few come over once they're desperate for a proper pint. Jon Carter just lives round the corner but he's not been in for a while—too busy playing computer games, I guess."

"And Pat McDowell?"

"Not that much," said Rob with a shrug. "Just an occasional drink with a few of his Erdenheim buddies. Since Darren's accident, they've avoided evenings."

"I guess it's fairly quiet 'round here most of the time," said Anderson, well knowing that he was talking to the village's chief gossip. "No scandal to report? Or something else that might be of interest to an underused journalist; preferably with a few facts thrown in."

Rob eyed Anderson curiously and he took his time replying. "There's always something," he said thoughtfully. "But if it's McDowell you're after, it's mostly hearsay."

Anderson tried to look nonchalant, hoping for a mutual exchange of information. "He's an interesting guy. Did he tell you he was ex-military; 82nd Airborne in fact?"

"Guessed as much," Rob said, sounding impressed. "You been checking up on him then?"

"Comes with the job; I'm assuming he's never visited the *Farriers* with some of his old American buddies?"

Rob frowned, searching his memory, "He brought some Yanks in for a meal a while back; good tippers."

"How far back exactly?"

"A month at least; I can check if you want."

“Not unless there was something memorable about it, other than the tips?” Anderson knew Rob would put his own slant on everything but it was a risk he needed to take.

Rob shook his head, “Not that I recall. Picked up a bit when Pat came with two of his other mates; be a couple of weeks ago now.”

Anderson’s quizzical look was all the encouragement Rob needed. “Man of about forty and an elderly woman; the three of them sat in a corner, occasionally gabbling away in Polish or maybe it was Russian—not McDowell, of course, he can barely speak the King’s English... The woman spoke American like McDowell and it was only the man whose English wasn’t so good. He was drinking steadily and the woman was stupid enough to try and keep up; in the end Pat almost had to carry her out. She wasn’t too happy, I can tell you.”

“A Polish-Russian man of about forty, and an older bilingual American woman,” Anderson repeated slowly. “Is that right?”

“More or less. I don’t think she was American; probably Polish or Russian like the guy; she’d be mid-fifties, blonde hair.”

“Does that happen often—McDowell drinking with people he can’t converse with?”

“Alcohol can beat any language barrier,” Rob replied philosophically. “You wanted facts and memorable, and where McDowell’s concerned that’s all I’ve got.”

“And they were from around here or something to do with Erdenheim?”

Rob was trying his best. “Erdenheim, I think; so maybe they were some of the outside experts he gets in.”

“I guess you’ve no idea what they were talking about?”

“I just said they were talking foreign. And I do serve drinks to paying customers when not being given the third-degree.”

Anderson gave a slow and deliberate glance around the empty bar, “Well, it’s fortunate I’m the only paying customer you need worry about at the moment. Might any of your regulars have overheard anything?”

Rob frowned, “Now you’re asking... I doubt it; bar wasn’t busy.”

“And this was before or after the Commander went to Spain?”

Rob gave Anderson an annoyed look, then moved across to study the wall calendar, turning it back to April. “Definitely after; it’d probably be the week of the 26th, the Monday or maybe that Tuesday.”

Anderson persevered, “CCTV?”

“Not unless you’re the police,” Rob said, with a hint of exasperation.

Anderson bought him a well-deserved drink, mulling over how this latest titbit fitted in with everything else. It was well after the Commander’s death and Darren’s accident, and any link to *Red Terror* or terrorism was speculative at best. Much like the rest of Anderson’s leads, it was all a bit confused, a mess of ideas with no clear answers.

Perhaps Charlotte’s mysterious trip out would provide some clarity as to his next move—if not, then at least there was dinner to look forward to.

* * * * *

Anderson sat in the passenger seat still none the wiser as to their eventual destination, Charlotte sidestepping his questions to quickly turn the conversation round to McDowell.

“Before you clam up, I’ve been fully briefed,” she announced, keeping her eyes on the road ahead as it wound its way towards Graythorp. “I might be a sceptic but Mum seems determined, so let’s just see where it all leads. Is there anything more on Pat McDowell?”

Anderson was already regretting his haste in involving mother and daughter but it was a little late to turn back the clock. “There might be more to the Russian connection than just one of Zhilin’s books.”

“Are we talking about McDowell or Erdenheim?”

“I’m guessing it’s the same thing. McDowell was at the Farriers with a man and an older woman, common language Russian. When I say Russian, I might actually mean Polish; Yuri and Lara, I’ve decided to call them.”

“Very poignant... Are you suggesting Dad had seen them at the *Farriers*?” The car slowed, Charlotte glancing to her left, drawn—like Anderson a few hours earlier—to the tributes at the base of the sycamore.

“The dates don’t work,” Anderson said, hoping he didn’t need to explain further. “It’s just another intriguing fact to add to the rest.”

“Intriguing isn’t perhaps the word I would have used; random seems nearer the mark.”

Anderson’s retort was stilled as they passed through Graythorp. Two hundred yards beyond Erdenheim, Charlotte turned west onto a narrow back lane, pulling into a driveway partly-hidden behind a line of stumpy trees to park beside a mud-spattered Range Rover.

It was in fact part of a farm complex, Charlotte taking a moment to work out where to go before leading the way to the farmhouse’s side door. Even as she went to press the bell, the door opened wide to reveal a woman in her fifties, her smile of welcome tinged also with a hint of sadness.

“Miss Saunders and Mr Anderson is it?”

“That’s right; Charlotte and Michael, please.”

They shook hands, Anne Teacher ushering them through into the large kitchen, readying mugs as she continued to talk.

“I was so sorry to hear about the Commander; as you know I spoke to Jessica and things just won’t be the same without him. Always helpful, always polite; the commander was a true gentleman. What with young Darren as well; it was all so sad... Now, can I get you some tea?”

Charlotte smoothly took control, Anderson’s article on Darren now transformed into a feature on Erdenheim. He nodded and agreed where it seemed appropriate, happy to wait and see what Charlotte had in mind. It quickly became clear that the meeting had been arranged through Jessica, the Commander’s diary pored over to try and work out why he had visited the Management Centre.

“As I said to the Commander at the time,” continued Anne, quickly becoming more animated. “I have nothing against Erdenheim itself or it being where it is, and everything was fine until early March. It’s not as if we have many animals, so an occasional helicopter isn’t a problem. But then all of a sudden lots of brash Americans turned up with their loud voices and louder cars, none with the

patience to have to crawl for a mile behind a tractor. Every night it was a noisy barbeque and I'm pretty sure it wasn't cigarettes they were smoking. I was just hoping the Commander could persuade them to tone everything down a bit."

Anderson finally found his voice, "Is it still as bad as when you spoke to Commander Saunders?"

Anne pursed her lips, "It improved as soon as he had a word with them and I did thank the Commander. At the moment, it's much better and there's just the one sports car; even so, I can't help but think about poor Darren and worry as to whether my John might be next."

Charlotte nodded in understanding, the arrival soon after of Anne's husband taken as their cue to leave. The sequence of events involving the Commander might be somewhat clearer now but not the precise reason for his subsequent actions. Charlotte's doubts were pushing Anderson into a potentially risky strategy, both hoping that his visit to Erdenheim would help supply some answers.

"We have lots but we have nothing," said Charlotte, as they headed back to Marshwick. "And no motive. Perhaps Pat McDowell isn't quite the ogre you seem keen to portray."

"That's always been likely," admitted Anderson. "I guess I'll find out tomorrow."

Charlotte glanced quickly across at Anderson, "There is one more thing. Did you know my father had a heart condition?"

Chapter 6

Wednesday, May 12th

Lincolnshire, England

Anderson sat in his small room at the Farriers, flicking through the TV news channels for the very latest on events in Russia. Domodedovo was still making the headlines, the total of confirmed dead fast approaching six hundred. The missile attack had re-ignited the Russian public's concern that far too little was being done to stop the terrorists, and Wednesday morning had seen Moscow's police having to contend with several large demonstrations, the biggest targeting the Government building known as the Russian White House—due purely to its colour and not because it had anything to do with Russia's President, so the BBC somewhat patronisingly explained.

With still an hour to waste before his 11 a.m. appointment at Erdenheim, Anderson chose to give *Red Terror* one last go—he could then return it to Jessica with a clear conscience. Dinner with Charlotte had been less than he had hoped for, although the gentle smile and single chaste kiss as they had said goodbye had offered the promise of something more. Sadly, the assignment in Bristol would soon be the priority, Anderson just not sure whether to delay his pursuit of McDowell or simply abandon it altogether. Although he wasn't convinced the

Commander's heart problems were entirely relevant, it was one more complication to what was already a convoluted tale and it was simply Anderson's contrary nature that made him persevere with the frustration of Charles Zhilin's long-winded book.

He ignored the main body, scouring through the two pages of acknowledgements, then the notes and index, hoping that something might stir some deep-seated memory. Twenty minutes of searching was enough to prove he was still wasting his time, *Red Terror's* secret as elusive as ever. Name, photo, event, date—the key element could have easily been staring up at Anderson and he wouldn't even know.

* * * * *

Erdenheim's car park was relatively full, Anderson finding a space between two smart BMWs and disappointed not to see any sign of a sports car. A large sign politely reminded visitors and guests that all public areas were protected by CCTV, with entry to the site and buildings between 8 p.m. and 8 a.m. by card only. Anderson duly made a mental note, although unsure quite why he needed to.

The main door slid open to reveal a large reception area, two curved wooden staircases to left and right, office directly ahead. Good lighting made the area bright and cheerful, despite the rather bland colour scheme of white and beige. Even as Anderson announced himself to the young lady receptionist, a smiling McDowell clattered down the left-hand stairs, Anderson feeling rather more apprehensive than common-sense dictated.

"Mr Anderson; welcome to Erdenheim's Management Development Centre. I'm Pat McDowell, one of the directors here." They shook hands, Anderson passing across his business card—it would have seemed odd not to. McDowell's American accent was barely noticeable, cultured rather than broad, his tone friendly; yet there was just something about his demeanour that made Anderson wary, and it wasn't simply down to his preconceptions.

"Is it okay to take photos?" Anderson asked. "I'll send copies of the best ones and you're free to use them in any future publicity."

"Yes, of course, take whatever you want; I checked earlier and none of our guests are camera-shy... Your assistant said you're looking to do a feature on Erdenheim?"

"Probably not just Erdenheim; I'm hoping to put something together emphasising the success of several new out-of-town ventures, such as the Golf Centre at Fishtoft. In part it's also a follow-up to the article the *Standard* did when you first opened." Anderson had his story well-prepared and he had even gone so far as to make contact with the golf course, anything to give his story added credibility.

"Well, we're always glad of good publicity, Mr Anderson. Forgive me, but have we met before?"

"Commander Saunders' funeral," Anderson explained, half-expecting the question. "That's why I came up from London, and this feature sort of developed from there."

"Yes, of course, the Commander's funeral," said McDowell with a sad smile. "I felt it best Erdenheim be represented; part of our ethos is strong links with the

community and Councillor Saunders was very supportive with the initial planning application.”

Very magnanimous, thought Anderson, and possibly even true. In any case this was all part of a game; one where neither trusted the other but both had to play just in case one of them was actually telling the truth. Anderson wasn't even sure now why he was there, his suspicions more to do with McDowell himself than Erdenheim.

“Some in the community,” said Anderson glibly, “might argue that the links aren't quite as strong as they used to be.”

There was a brief pause before McDowell responded. “I assume you're referring to young Darren Westrope. A very unfortunate accident which has clearly harmed our standing in the community; I have spoken to the Westrope family and Erdenheim is keen to do what it can but I believe all the evidence shows our driver to be completely blameless. He's still off sick and I imagine won't be back for some time.”

There was an uncomfortable silence, broken eventually by McDowell. “If it's okay, I'll give you the usual tour. The brochure can be a bit vague but that's because a lot of what we do is customised to our clients' needs.” He gestured at the entrance area, “This central space, for example, can be partitioned off for use as a small conference room, or we can add tables and chairs for a planning exercise.”

Anderson took a couple of photographs, preferring pad and pen for brief notes rather than using his phone as an audio recorder. McDowell moved on to the northern single-storey block, its sole purpose that of providing single en-suite accommodation for up to twenty people, the rooms small but well-furnished. McDowell opened up an unoccupied room for Anderson to take the required photos, letting his guest dictate the pace of the tour. After the slightly awkward beginning, McDowell had settled into a more relaxed mode, happy to answer Anderson's many questions, proud to emphasise that a good proportion of new business came from client-referrals.

“So business is pretty good?” asked Anderson between photos.

“Steady growth; at the moment we're running at about two-thirds capacity, and just about heading for a profit.”

“And how many staff?”

“Seven full plus five part-time; we also bring in various experts and guest speakers when necessary.”

“Erdenheim's American, is that right?”

“Yes, and no,” McDowell replied. “The original Erdenheim is in Philadelphia; the rest of us are totally separate companies operating under a franchise, paying a yearly fee to use the Erdenheim name and borrow some of their ideas. The Graythorp Centre is actually owned by a company called Erdenheim UK with Jonathan Carter and myself as directors.”

McDowell had a sensible and full answer for all of Anderson's questions, certainly nothing to suggest he was lying. Even though Anderson was getting impatient, he didn't want to act out of character by asking anything too unexpected, holding fire on any mention of Anne Teacher's complaints or George Saunders' visit.

Next on the guided tour came the southern block, the double doors opening onto a large seminar area. Some team activity was in full swing, four to a team, touch-screens replacing anything as basic as pen and paper. Everyone was casually dressed, all under forty and judging by the heated discussions fully involved in trying to win.

“It’s a form of Monopoly,” McDowell explained, gently guiding Anderson to the opposite door. “There’s also a bit of stock-market trading thrown in; limited budget with various high risk options—team building through problem solving. We use Psychometric Profiling to work out how each person will react in different situations, and a good team leader can then apply that data to get the very best out of his team.”

McDowell seemed in no hurry to move on, waiting until Anderson was ready before leading him through into a small dining room and bar area, the kitchen beyond; then it was back to reception and on up the wide stairs.

The landing opened out onto a computer Utopia with a bank of screens curving along the front wall and a massive wall-mounted monitor along the back; some twelve feet wide, the monitor was divided up into multiple segments, four presently rotating through the various CCTV images. In the centre of the room was a large circular table, its silver sheen matching the rest of the ultra-modern decor; convex in shape, the table’s outer edge was about two feet lower than its centre, the domed surface one continuous touch-screen.

“Impressive,” Anderson said, unsure how the nature of the training exercise downstairs fitted in with what he was now seeing.

“A resource second to none,” McDowell said, the pride obvious in his voice. “And it gives us an edge over most of our competitors. We can offer a unique set of management simulations and problems, either for individuals or for a specialist team, and the computer can often prove a more skilful adversary than that found in the real world. Our emergency response simulation based around a train crashing into a tanker is worth a week’s fees by itself.”

McDowell continued to enthuse while Anderson took plenty of pictures. It had been obvious for the last hour that this wasn’t some sort of outrageous charade but that didn’t mean there were no secrets here. He might have been mistaken about Darren Westrope but it would take something more to convince him that he was also wrong about Pat McDowell.

“82nd Airborne to Graythorp?” Anderson asked curiously, “The attraction of opposites?”

For a brief instant the mask of amiability slipped before McDowell regained his composure. “We all have to embrace new challenges, Mr Anderson... I look forward to reading your feature; by all means give me a call if you have any more questions.”

Anderson drove slowly back to the Farriers, mind busy with what he had seen and heard. *‘We all have to embrace new challenges’*—was that a hint McDowell knew of Anderson’s own career change? And if he had indeed checked up on Anderson, was that necessarily a good sign?

Moscow

The Mercedes' driver gave a loud sigh of frustration as the traffic slowed to a stop-start crawl, something all-too-common of late. It wasn't just a consequence of the security checks—every day saw some new street protest against the Government's impotence and its inability to deal with the terrorist threat. Moscow's citizens had been patient long enough and it was time to force the Government into adopting more effective measures. Even the revelation that the security forces had arrested the terrorists responsible for Domodedovo had barely stilled the demand for heads to roll, Russia's Prime Minister the main recipient of the protestors' anger.

Rinat Nabiyeu sat in the back seat of the Mercedes, listening to the radio news as it detailed the latest of *August 14's* attacks, a bomb blast near the Kashirskaya metro station seriously injuring three commuters. According to the news report, two bombs had been placed in litter bins and timed to explode during the early-evening rush hour; luckily only one had actually exploded, the other being successfully defused by the police.

It bewildered Nabiyeu how anyone could believe August 14 responsible for such an amateurish prank. He had seen at first-hand Eglitis' work, discussed with him potential targets, and worked through the specific role of each terrorist cell, and in everything Eglitis was always the consummate professional. The police should have quickly recognised that such an attack bore none of Eglitis' hallmarks, and even *August 14's* younger conscripts had learnt enough in their months of training to ensure something significantly more impressive.

To Nabiyeu's knowledge, this was the third time *August 14* had been falsely blamed for attacks by dissidents and copycats, all of them wishing to exploit the crisis to their own advantage. Nabiyeu cared little as long as the pressure on the authorities was maintained, and without the support of Russia's ethnic minorities and the various separatist groups, *August 14* had no chance of achieving its stated aims, the crisis in Russia's fragile government not yet irreversible.

The capture of Baranovskiy and Nazarenko had been *August 14's* first serious setback but it would have been foolish not to anticipate that someone would eventually be encouraged to talk. Hence, a high degree of paranoia and none of *August 14's* agents knew the location of any other cell or their likely targets. Cell phones remained the only means of communication, a coded text all that was generally needed, a phone used just twice before being discarded.

Of the original four cells Eglitis had helped secrete in Russia, three were still active; morale was excellent, belief undiminished, the terrorists' desire for vengeance unfulfilled. The fragmentation of the Russian Federation might be an impossible dream but *August 14* would do its very best to precipitate such a momentous event, it the one chance in Nabiyeu's lifetime for his home nation of Tatarstan to become a truly independent country. Few could have forecast the dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union, and was it so difficult to believe the same could happen to a brittle and diverse Russian Federation of some two hundred ethnic groups.

Eglitis was a man who understood such dreams and despite his concerns as to whether Nabiyeu could be trusted, he had no reason to regret their alliance, the terrorists the stronger because of it. And *August 14* was so much more than just a

lethal group of bombers and assassins. A more subtle form of attack was ever present, ranging from a dramatic rise in power outages across Moscow to media articles either criticising the Government or carrying compromising photographs of its representatives. Backed up by rumour and downright lies, the steady drip of distrust was relentless. The number of strikes—mostly independent of the unions and so unofficial—was also increasing week on week, with major truck and car factories in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Tatarstan amongst the latest to be targeted.

Elsewhere, Poland led the way in cleverly managing to condemn *August 14* while also censuring Russia for its policy on Eastern Europe. New restrictions had come into force specifically targeting workers from Poland, Ukraine and the Baltic States, the changes matching a surge in assaults against foreigners in Moscow. Russian ambassadors had in turn been summoned and argued with, and in a dozen European cities security around Russian embassies and consulates had been tightened; Latvia had even seen two Russian businesses fire-bombed, a tour bus stoned.

The United States was slightly less ambivalent than its East European allies, denouncing *August 14* and stating that there could be no justification for the lives lost at Domodedovo. The U.S. Secretary of State had offered America's full support in the hunt for the terrorists, in the same breath encouraging the Russian President not to act without due consideration of the consequences—a possible hint of the dangers implicit in extending the conflict beyond Russia's borders. Not that Nabiyeu would be too concerned by such an event, the risks to Russia far greater than for *August 14* and its allies.

Nabiyeu's musings were abruptly cut short as the line of traffic split apart, a policeman directing the vehicles towards two adjacent check-points. The Mercedes pulled to the left before stopping in front of a metal barrier, Nabiyeu's driver opening the car window to hold out the relevant photo-IDs.

A policeman, gun resting at his hip, moved across to the car, taking the two documents, before giving them and their respective owners a studied glance.

"One moment." The policeman handed the IDs to a colleague, who casually swiped each one across a mobile reader, the response from the FSB's data centre flashing almost instantly onto the screen.

Without comment the second policeman passed the two documents back across to his colleague. The latter in turn returned them to the driver, a polite smile masking his real thoughts as to how Nabiyeu at only forty-four was already a full colonel in the FSB, with a plum job in Grebeshkov's new anti-corruption unit.

A moment later and the car was waved through, turning right towards the Lubyanka.

* * * * *

The Prime Minister's office offered a refreshing alternative to the conference room: ornate wood, leather chairs, modern paintings, technology aplenty. Grebeshkov's own office would have comfortably fitted in one corner but his mood wasn't one of jealousy, more curiosity as to why he and Arkady Valentin were the only ones so honoured. The Prime Minister looked drawn and pensive, his fingers

tapping out an irregular beat on the desktop, the expectations of a nation weighing heavily on his shoulders.

Yet there had been some good news, primarily the identification of the apartment where Nazarenko and Baranovskiy had been staying. The contents of its three rooms would keep the forensic teams busy for some time, some in the media already building up the discovery as the beginning of the end for *August 14*. Pressure on the security forces remained intense, their targeting of East European visitors and foreign workers becoming ever more oppressive, people stopped and searched simply because of their accent.

Baranovskiy's interrogators had similarly been encouraged to produce more, whatever the risks, something his injuries and ultimately his heart had failed to appreciate. Now Nazarenko was the FSB's sole asset, a resource whose value was fast diminishing. For the Prime Minister, however, Nazarenko's knowledge was a crucial guide as to their next move.

"It is time for more direct action," the PM said, as though trying to convince himself. "However, where Eastern Europe is concerned we must tread carefully and Russia cannot be seen to act without just cause. I need to be absolutely sure of complicity before I make any recommendations to the President." The Prime Minister looked sharply at Grebeshkov, "Dmitry, I understand you have something more from Nazarenko?"

"Yes, Sir. It's taken a little time but Nazarenko has confirmed he received weapons training at a site in Lithuania. He was one of twelve recruits, eight men, four women, who stayed there from September until early December, and we should have names and descriptions of Nazarenko's remaining associates in a day or so. There were five instructors, including Eglitis, all American or East European, presumably ex-military. With luck, based on Nazarenko's detailed descriptions, we should be able to identify most of them."

"Excellent, Dmitry, we seem to be getting somewhere at last. "And you believe his disclosures are generally reliable?"

"Yes, Sir; the drugs can make him confused and so progress is relatively slow; if we push him too hard then he will start to say whatever he thinks we want to hear."

"I understand he's confirmed the location of the training camp as the one in Dzūkija?"

"He's not sure of the exact location, Sir, and I doubt he ever knew exactly where in Lithuania he was; however, his description of the site is an exact match to the satellite images."

"Lithuania—it's hardly ideal. And I doubt NATO will react well to any incursion." The Prime Minister paused, thinking through their options. "Arkady," he asked finally, "I assume you have enough assets in the area?"

"We will have shortly, Sir," Valentin replied. "The site is south-west of Vilnius, a small dacha settlement of four cottages on the edge of the Dainava Forest. We have now identified a total of sixteen residents, lightly armed, minimal security. However, it's impossible at the moment to guarantee they're part of *August 14*."

"Absolute confirmation is not that easy to find," Grebeshkov added. "There might well be some documentary proof at the site but retrieving it has its own dangers. Unfortunately, Sir, Director Valentin and I are concerned that the

number of terrorist cells introduced into Russia could well be greater than Nazarenko's suggested total of just four."

"Concerned? Or is it something more definite?"

Valentin was quick to explain, "Simple maths, Sir. Nazarenko spent three months in Lithuania, arriving here in December; that easily gives August 14 time to train at least one more group, even if they took a couple of months off for a winter break. Of course, it's also possible these sixteen presently in Lithuania have been there since December, rather than being brand-new recruits, or even that they have nothing at all to do with *August 14*."

The Prime Minister gave a deep sigh of frustration, fingers tapping absently, trying to work out the best way forward. "We have to assume the worst-case scenario. If you're right, we could easily be looking at eight or more terrorist cells already inside Russia, with several more preparing to join them."

"Lithuania," Valentin said, "could supply all of the answers we so desperately need: who finances them, how many of their people are actually here, names, faces... perhaps even the identity of their leaders. Evidence we could then use to justify such an attack. Conversely, there are significant risks, and the diplomatic repercussions of any action must be carefully weighed against the potential rewards."

There was a long silence while the Prime Minister made up his mind. "Let's be very clear," he said, emphasising each word. "Are you both agreed that this site in Lithuania has been, or indeed still is, a training camp for terrorists; specifically for those of *August 14*."

Valentin's response was immediate, "Yes, Sir."

Grebeshkov knew it was too late to have second thoughts and what happened next wasn't down to him. "I agree, Sir. However, I must formally advise that the consequences of military action on Lithuanian soil could be disastrous."

"We must tread carefully, Sir," Valentin reaffirmed.

The Prime Minister slammed his hand down onto the table, irritated by their lukewarm support, "How many more terrorists can we allow Lithuania to train before we react—ten, twenty, a hundred... They abuse our friendship and you expect us to do nothing?" Abruptly, he waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal, "Your opinions are duly noted, gentlemen; however, we must act decisively, the Russian people expect nothing less."

* * * * *

Kolomenskoe Park is one of Moscow's more popular attractions, serving up a different architectural wonder around every turn, from magic stones for health and happiness to the beautiful Church of the Ascension of the Lord on the bank of the Moskva. Despite the many tourists, there are still vast areas of relative peace and tranquillity well away from the security cameras where privacy is assured.

Eglitis sat on a wooden bench, listening to the church bells and soaking up the beauty of the scores of apple trees just coming into blossom. Couples and family groups were spread out across the orchard, sitting haphazardly amongst the trees, enjoying each other's company. It was a truly harmonious scene but Eglitis still found it difficult to relax, there always that small doubt some observant policeman would see through his disguise or decide his ID was worthy of a more detailed

check. Today's meeting was important but hardly essential; nevertheless, they both believed such risks were justified, it perhaps being their final opportunity to exchange essential information and review progress.

Nabiyev was late, a fact which hardly helped Eglitis' mood. To sit too long would draw unwanted attention: to many in these suspicious times, an old man sitting alone watching children at play was obviously a kidnapper or a paedophile, not a grandfather missing the love and laughter of his own family.

Eglitis rose stiffly, hunching over his walking stick, trying not to over-play his part. On cue, Nabiyev immediately appeared in the distance, striding purposefully along the path. Eglitis quickly sat back down, annoyed with himself for his own impatience, and annoyed with Nabiyev for lacking the good sense to be on time. He trusted Nabiyev—as much as he trusted anyone—yet he always felt the younger man was far too relaxed over the potential dangers. Eglitis had no illusions as to his own fate, merely unsure whether it would be a consequence of the demands of *August 14* or the fragility of his failing heart.

Nabiyev gave a smile of welcome, his hug and triple kiss suggesting to the casual observer that Eglitis was at the very least an old friend, or more likely the two of them were father and son. Nabiyev sat himself beside Eglitis, a box of sushi offered as part-apology for his being late.

With a wave of his hand Eglitis declined, keen to keep their meeting short and to the point. "I need information not food. Baranovskiy and Nazarenko?"

"Baranovskiy's dead," Nabiyev said dismissively, "but Nazarenko's still talking. We need to assume the FSB will extract everything he knows within the next forty-eight hours." He gave Eglitis a hard look, "The attack on British Boeing was unfortunate; we cannot afford to antagonise potential allies."

Nabiyev's casual indifference as to the sacrifice of his fellow conspirators instantly annoyed Eglitis but he knew it would be pointless to speak his mind. "A regrettable mistake," he said quietly. "One we must learn to deal with. Has Nazarenko told the FSB where he was trained?"

Nabiyev waved his hand uncertainly, "I get to learn some of what the drugs and beatings have revealed, but not all. As I said, it would be best to assume they will eventually discover everything."

Eglitis gave a brief nod of agreement, "What else?"

"There's to be saturation security coverage of a random district, changing each day. Tomorrow it's Presnya in the centre, then Konkovo in the south-west; I'll try to update you when I know more..."

The briefing continued, Eglitis getting a feel for how the search for *August 14* was progressing. Their survival depended on staying one step ahead of the police and the FSB, and it was ironic that Nabiyev had been pulled from his role in counterintelligence to help monitor the FSB's own investigation into *August 14*. Paradoxically, that had severely limited his usefulness, information often trickling down to him far too late to be of any real benefit.

After some twenty minutes, they parted as they had met, Eglitis waiting a further five minutes before shuffling his way along the path, heading south towards the Kashirskaya Metro. It was time to prove that the FSB's recent success would do little to stop the terrorist attacks, *August 14*'s reach extending far beyond the confines of just Moscow.

Marshwick, England

“Michael, I’m so pleased you’ve called; come in and sit down, and I’ll put the coffee on.”

Jessica’s welcome was one not to be denied and Anderson took his usual seat on the sofa, placing the Commander’s book on the coffee table in front of him. He knew he wouldn’t be allowed to depart Marshwick with nothing more than a thank you and a simple goodbye, just hoping that he could persuade Jessica to leave McDowell and Erdenheim well alone.

“Coffee will be ready in a minute,” Jessica said, returning from the kitchen. “Now, how are you? What about a bite to eat? You can’t go back to London without something inside you. Or did you eat at the *Farriers*? Is it London, or did Charlotte tell me you were heading off somewhere else?”

Anderson randomly picked which questions to answer, “I’m fine, Mrs Saunders; I’ll have something to eat later, and it’s Bristol.”

“Jessica, please... Bristol, of course; now I remember.” She gestured towards the book, “Did it help after all?”

“I’m afraid not; certainly nothing leapt out at me.”

“It could have been an impulse buy, I suppose, unlikely as that seems. It took my husband three years to propose and another two to actually walk down the aisle. George being impulsive meant having to plan less than a month ahead.”

Anderson tried to match Jessica’s smile, but he needed first to apologise. “I got carried away with the idea that your husband’s death might not be an accident. I’m sorry; it was just a foolish notion.”

Jessica’s reaction was to give Anderson an even wider smile and he feared she was actually going to hug him.

“Thank you, Michael,” Jessica said warmly, “for such a gracious apology. I assure you, such concerns are totally unnecessary. I actively encouraged you and we must both share any fault. I still believe there’s some mystery here and these books are not something George would normally buy: he’s much more Bernard Cornwell than Tom Clancy. With non-fiction, it’s virtually all antiques and naval history. I can’t imagine there’s even a single book on terrorists or terrorism.”

She paused, as though making up her mind about something. “I always find a strong coffee and a good lunch helps focus one’s thoughts; let’s see if we can solve this conundrum together.”

He’d been through the front door barely a minute and Jessica was already taking charge, Anderson not yet off the hook. There seemed little harm in giving it one more go, past assumptions put aside at least for the moment.

Anderson still wanted to check the ground-rules. “If there’s no ulterior motive for the Commander to order Zhilin’s books, then we’re simply wasting our time with a lot of pointless conjecture. Are you sure you want to do that?”

Jessica’s response was immediate, “Most definitely, Michael; we’ve gone this far, and I’m looking forward to a bit more outrageous speculation. Don’t worry, I promise not to be shocked or upset by any of your more outlandish ideas.”

“Sadly,” Anderson said, “ideas are a bit lacking at the moment, outlandish or otherwise.”

“In which case, do we need to bite the bullet and read all three books? It’s only one each if I volunteer Charlotte.”

Anderson’s pained look was enough to veto such an idea. The events described in *Red Terror* were decades old, the youngest of those involved well into their seventies; the other two books covered more recent times but that merely opened up scores of lines of inquiry. Somehow there had to be a simpler way.

It became a working lunch, Anderson wasting five minutes in a search for other editions of Zhilin’s books but there was only ever the one, not even a paperback or eBook alternative—an indication as to Zhilin’s rather limited appeal. The ridiculous was discussed along with the feasible, the Russian links argued over, nothing ignored, but it was again proving a fruitless exercise in conjecture, there too many unknowns to come close to something that made reasonable sense.

Eventually the tone from Anderson’s phone provided an essential distraction, Devereau the caller. “Mike, where are you exactly?” he asked, sounding impatient.

Anderson lied, “About halfway to Bristol; just stopped for something to eat. Shouldn’t you be getting on a plane or something?”

Devereau ignored the question, “Did you finish pursuing whatever it was you were after?”

“Yes and no; could be something but it’s proving difficult to get anywhere.”

“And it has to do with George Saunders? How he died?”

Anderson might not have mentioned his inquiry was related to Saunders but Devereau had no problem reading between the lines. “There are certain aspects that needed following up.” He didn’t want to get into specifics, not without something concrete.

“Forget Bristol,” said Devereau. “I’ll deal with it. Get yourself back to Marshwick. You seem to have upset someone with influence and they’re rather keen to find out more about you. Fortunately, I too have friends in high places, but no-one’s telling me who’s asking questions or why. Upsetting important people is always a good sign, so you must be doing something right. Phone me tonight with an update...”

Things were looking up thought Anderson wryly; his leads might be so thin as to be virtually invisible but the number of his allies was growing almost daily.

* * * * *

“Anyone home?” Charlotte asked loudly, shutting the front door behind her.

“We’re in the study...”

We—Charlotte was first confused then intrigued, half suspecting—or was it half-hoping—it might be Anderson. The study was awash with boxes and books; books in boxes, books in waist-high piles, books strewn across her father’s desk. Anderson and her mother were on their knees searching through a box each, discarded books seemingly being added to any random pile.

“I assume you’re looking for something?” Charlotte said flippantly.

“I never realised your father had so many books,” responded Jessica, struggling to her feet. “We’ve emptied the garage and the loft; there are just hundreds of them, certainly enough for our own library.”

"I'll ask again," Charlotte said. "What exactly are you looking for? And, Mike, why aren't you photographing the Avon Gorge or something a little further west than Dad's study?"

It was Jessica who answered first, "We're looking to see if your father's liking for four-hundred page narratives on terrorism was purely a one-off and so far there's nothing even close. They really needed sorting out anyway and it's nice to have a helper. Now you're here, Charlotte, make yourself useful; my knees are getting too old for such work."

Charlotte kicked off her shoes and knelt down beside Anderson, "I'm guessing this is Mike's idea?"

Again Jessica answered for Anderson, "I'm encouraging Michael to continue his interest in Mr McDowell, so please don't give him a hard time. And I must admit I'm quite intrigued by the mysterious Yuri and Lara."

"As are we all", said Charlotte. "Or at least until we discover McDowell's trying to widen Erdenheim's appeal by offering language courses."

"There's always a cynic," Jessica said unabashed. "Apparently, Michael's been upsetting important people, and not just you."

Charlotte ignored the jibe, "Are we talking about Erdenheim? How did it go? Or is Mike not actually allowed to speak for himself?"

"Pat McDowell was the perfect host," said Anderson, pleased to finally get a word in. "And there was nothing suspicious that I could see. It's not clear who I've upset but it's another incentive to stick around."

"And how long might that be for?"

"A few more days," said Anderson, trying not to smile. "A week maybe."

Jessica again jumped in. "Charlotte, don't forget I'm off to Dublin on Saturday, then a few days with your Uncle John; back on the 26th. I told Michael he could stay here—as a sort of house-sitter—rather than some cramped room at the *Farriers*, but he politely declined. Perhaps you could sort something better out for him, dear; not tonight, of course, but maybe tomorrow or at least before the weekend?"

Charlotte ignored Anderson's hint of a smirk and gave her mother a daughterly-glare, "Of course, Mum; just leave it with me."

* * * * *

Jessica set great store by her instincts, and her instinct was telling her Anderson was one of the good guys. Despite Charlotte's outward reserve, she clearly like him and Jessica wanted to help things along if she could. If it all came to nothing, then at least she'd tried; not that Anderson seemed the ideal suitor, his unclear job description and vivid imagination perhaps indicating an uncertain future. Jessica still couldn't believe that her husband had been murdered but that she was content to follow Anderson's lead and see how it all played out.

The search through George's many books had produced nothing related to terrorism but it had resulted in an unexpected bonus when Jessica came across a thin black notebook. She had recognised it immediately even though she hadn't seen it for years; it wasn't exactly hidden away, merely squashed between two bigger books on a shelf in the study and George had used it for various work-related contact details. No home addresses, just names, phone numbers and

perhaps an email address, together with a single letter above each surname. It wasn't even a particularly subtle code, just a silly idea suggested by Jessica but taken up with enthusiasm by George; the letter L used for Langley or CIA, T for Thames House or MI5, and so on. In total, there were some hundred names in the book, listed in a loose variation of alphabetical order, the results of some twenty years working on the fringes of Britain's intelligence agencies.

Once Charlotte and Anderson had left, Jessica retrieved the notebook, and more out of curiosity than expectation, she thumbed through the second half, gaze moving quickly down the list of names. No Patrick McDowell and no Charles Zhilin. Having started along that particular train of thought, Jessica turned somewhat hesitantly to the front pages; a cautious search and she was relieved to see that there was also no listing of anyone named Anderson. She delved deeper, not totally surprised when she quickly found the final name she was looking for: Adam Devereau, with work phone number and the letter V alongside. V for Vauxhall Cross on the South Bank of the Thames, home to the UK's Secret Intelligence Service, more popularly known as MI6.

Jessica shut the book with a sigh, curious as to whether Anderson was aware of Devereau's past link with the security services. And, if not, would it really be wise to tell him?

Chapter 7

Thursday, May 13th

Russia

The MS MIKHAIL BULGAKOV was the very latest addition to the ships cruising back and forth between Moscow and St. Petersburg. A budget version of the five-star vessels favoured by the foreign visitors, the steady increase in domestic tourism ensured the Bulgakov had a full complement of 442 passengers and crew. With four decks of relative luxury, the ship had been designed to provide an entertaining but relaxing experience for its passengers, the overwhelming majority of whom were Russian.

The BULGAKOV's tour along Russia's scenic waterways took in the ancient cities of the Golden Ring before moving slowly on to St. Petersburg. Ahead was Uglich, home to the beautiful Church of Saint Dimitry on the Blood, and so far the trip had fairly routine; one crew member had failed to board before the BULGAKOV had departed Moscow the previous evening but the ship's entertainment officer had quickly rearranged the quotas to cope.

Four hundred kilometres to the north the BULGAKOV's sister-ship, the MS KONSTANTIN BALMONT, cruised slowly along the River Svir. Again there was a single crew-member missing; this time one of the kitchen staff.

The first bomb exploded aboard the MS MIKHAIL BULGAKOV shortly after 7 a.m. local time, then eighteen minutes later the second on the MS KONSTANTIN

BALMONT. Those sleeping aboard the BALMONT were by far the luckier, the bomb blast sweeping through part of the main restaurant but causing no structural damage, and the subsequent fire was quickly extinguished. On the BULGAKOV, the bomb shattered one of the lower-deck cabins, splitting the hull just below the waterline. Within fifteen minutes the vessel began to list, adding to the problems of the inexperienced crew struggling to launch the lifeboats. Despite there being no real danger, several panic-stricken passengers began to leap overboard, desperately striking out to the shore some four hundred metres distant. The hysteria and fear started to spread, people fighting each other to board the lifeboats. Overcrowded and unstable, two lifeboats crashed into each other, spilling terrified passengers into the chilly waters of the Volga.

Even as the first news reports flashed onto the TV screens, a third explosion tore through the entrance chamber of the Mariinsky Palace, the home of St. Petersburg's City Council. *August 14* had chosen to spread its wings, its actions once again emphasising to the world the impotence of Russia's security forces.

* * * * *

As the bomb attacks became public knowledge, a wave of protests spread rapidly through Moscow's streets. In particular, a gathering at Arbat Square began to suck in more and more people, the crowd's numbers swelled into the tens of thousands as even the most placid of Muscovites was taken up with the passion of the moment. Activists pushed themselves to the front and a group several thousand strong broke away from the main body, streaming west along the New Arbat and towards the Russian White House. Their placards revealed that the crowd's anger was primarily directed against the Prime Minister, regarded by many as indecisive and weak, and thus the main cause of Russia's inability to stop the terrorists.

Two hundred metres from the White House, a double line of riot police stood shoulder-to-shoulder, shields and batons held ready, the extremists in the crowd marked out for later attention by well-armed snatch-squads. The shouts of the protestors were soon reinforced by anything from chunks of concrete to petrol bombs, the two sides becoming embroiled in a series of vicious confrontations.

With a helicopter hovering overhead, hundreds more police began to advance along the wide avenue, two water cannon punching a hole through the front rank of demonstrators. People began to stumble and fall as they tried to escape, but the police advance never slowed, batons, shields and boots being used to club the protestors back. So far, it was relatively routine; no need for tear-gas, rubber bullets or stun-grenades, and no reason to deploy the armoured vehicles presently held in reserve.

Two thousand more riot police waited directly outside the White House, most of them impatient to get to grips with the mob. Not that they felt any personal animosity towards the protestors—in fact many agreed wholeheartedly with their views—but Moscow's Police Commissioner had decreed that the White House be protected.

And protected it was: six thousand security personnel policing Moscow's streets, one demonstrator killed, well over a hundred injured.

Marshwick, England

Anderson was feeling guilty, well aware that he should have found a healthier lunchtime option than a ham sandwich at the Farriers. Still, the quiet corner of the bar was somewhere relaxing to review progress and plan out his next move.

Devereau might be busy in Bristol but he hadn't entirely left Anderson to his own devices and his initial inquiry into Erdenheim had found nothing untoward, a trusted source with personal experience of the Management Centre giving it a glowing review. The Erdenheim staff had been friendly and knowledgeable, particularly Jon Carter; McDowell had delivered the standard welcome speech but that was about the limit of his contribution.

Amongst a swathe of other information from Devereau was a chronological list of Erdenheim's courses and clients. Anderson had wondered if the Centre might have run a workshop on counter-terrorism and invited some expert as a guest speaker, but there was nothing even close. Often the company names meant nothing, no specific links able to be made, it impossible to verify whether the bookings were genuine or not. Anderson had tried to confirm who had been at Erdenheim during the visit of Anne Teacher's brash Americans but got nowhere, it the same for the date of Yuri and Lara's likely visit; his quick analysis of the photographs from his visit to Erdenheim had proved equally unhelpful, there nothing that stood out as being odd or unusual.

Throughout the morning the radio news had kept him up-to-date with the continuing turmoil in Russia. Domodedovo was now relegated to the briefest of mentions as details of the latest attacks were revealed—seventeen killed or missing on the MS MIKHAIL BULGAKOV, four more deaths aboard the MS KONSTANTIN BALMONT, and one killed in the St. Petersburg bombing.

Yet, the Russian authorities were continuing to strike back, their massive media campaign at long last producing results when a Moscow shop assistant had recognised a man buying cigarettes. The man was quickly traced to the third-floor of a nearby apartment block, and in the chaos of the ensuing shoot-out, three had died, all presumed to be members of *August 14*. There was no mention of any arrests, although a cache of arms and explosives had reportedly been seized.

It was clearly a world away from the tranquillity of Marshwick and the relaxed surroundings of the Farriers. Coffee duly finished, Anderson set himself the task of finding more about Erdenheim's foreign guests—preferably without upsetting anyone too important.

Moscow

Nabiyev carefully slipped on gloves and shoe covers, always conscious of the need to set the correct example. A nod that he was ready, and one of the FSB guards thrust open the shattered remains of the front door, simultaneously holding aside the police tape for Nabiyev to duck through into the apartment's main living area. Nabiyev let the door swing half shut behind him before standing to survey a dishevelled and crowded interior, his eyes drawn to the blood-

spattered sofa-bed. Just hours previously the apartment's three occupants had been living a meaningful if slightly chaotic existence; now, thanks to one of them needing his half-hourly fix of nicotine, all three were dead.

Less than forty minutes after receiving the emergency call from the shop assistant, a six-man unit from the FSB's Alpha Group had blasted their way through the apartment's front door. Only one of the terrorists had been immediately visible, the man confused and barely conscious from the effects of two stun-grenades. A second terrorist had suddenly appeared from the rear room, gun blazing, joined a moment later by the third man. In the ensuing firefight, all three terrorists had been killed. It wasn't the Alpha Group's finest hour: despite their body armour, two of them had been seriously injured, and questions were already being asked as to why they had chosen to rush in rather than making a proper assessment. Live terrorists were considered a useful commodity, dead ones significantly less so.

The apartment's main room had the usual trappings of table, chairs, and TV, but along two walls stood a line of large cardboard boxes, sometimes up to three boxes high. Nabiyevev began the onerous task of looking through them, trying to disturb the contents as little as possible. All weapons, explosives and phones had supposedly been removed by the FSB's investigators once Alpha had secured the apartment, and it would be at least a half-hour before the main forensic team arrived, leaving him time enough; in any case, as one of Grebeshkov's hated team of inspectors, he had every reason to be there. And if nothing else, it made a welcome change from the claustrophobia of the Lubyanka.

The boxes contained enough processed food to last the terrorists several weeks; there were also work clothes and various uniforms—nothing of any interest to Nabiyevev. He padded back across to the large table, and one-handed casually sorted through the topping of domestic clutter, mostly magazines. Nabiyevev moved on, past the sofa-bed and into the bedroom. To his surprise, there was space enough for a large wardrobe, plus two single beds separated by a chest of drawers. He was more thorough now, although still unsure what he was looking for—his visit more one of idle curiosity than fear there would be something to implicate him. In fact, it had taken an internal FSB report for him to even know the three men's names. In this sad world of terror and deceit, ignorance was a form of security, and the terrorists had given their lives without ever learning the identity of *August 14's* leader or its backers, probably not even aware of allies within Russia such as Nabiyevev.

Nabiyevev himself was somewhat more knowledgeable, his understanding gained at the expense of his life becoming significantly more complex. Once there had been a happy marriage, two young children, a comfortable house in Moscow's western suburbs. Everything had been just a little too cosy, and Nabiyevev had followed a selfish path, allowing career and personal ambition to dominate his every waking hour.

Eventually, his wife had walked out, taking the children with her to live close to her family in Tatarstan. Nabiyevev had been first bewildered and then distraught, falsely assuming his wife was having an affair. Too late he had finally come to understand that by satisfying the demands of the FSB he had completely ignored the needs of his own family.

The torment and despondency of those early weeks had eventually dulled, Nabiyev slowly coming to terms with his own mistakes, realising that his wife had had little choice. He started to look afresh at his life, concerned as to how easily he had been seduced by Russian arrogance, seeing himself almost as a collaborator. Evidence of the authoritarian and repressive nature of Russian federalism was all around him, the FSB an efficient custodian of Moscow's will. Now, for the first time since his teenage years, Nabiyev actively sought to satisfy the needs of his conscience rather than his pocket.

Nabiyev's profession gave him a unique—if dangerous—insight into finding fellow activists. In turn that had led to contacts from Eastern Europe. Lacking unity, their proposed strategy had initially been one of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience—that was until they had come to the attention of *August 14*. Nabiyev had met its leader just the once, a rushed ninety minutes at a Saint Petersburg hotel last September, and had immediately been impressed by the elder man's passion and vision.

By the start of February, all the required elements had been put in place, Nabiyev having to tread a delicate path to keep *August 14* informed as to where the various dangers lay, the FSB's recent successes more down to basic mistakes by the terrorists themselves. *August 14*'s more subtle offensive, focusing now on media manipulation and cyber-attacks, was already proving to be particularly effective, the personal risks to those involved significantly less. Russia's Government had worked hard over the previous decade to improve computer security, anticipating an attack from amateur hackers or perhaps China; consequently, it was the more vulnerable alternatives such as energy supplies, transport centres, and communications that were presently being targeted. Life in Moscow was becoming intolerable with the roads often gridlocked, other transport links cut, and phones—even landlines—subject to frequent outages.

Nabiyev turned his thoughts back to more immediate problems: the apartment's secrets would shortly be added to those dragged from Nazarenko, and he was growing nervous that soon there were be no secrets left. Quickly he checked the rest of the bedroom, before moving on to the kitchen and bathroom. To keep up the pretence, he made written notes of anything of interest, and would later prepare a detailed report on his visit, a paper copy duly filed away.

It was another ten minutes before Nabiyev left having found nothing to worry him. As he signalled for his car, an FSB guard spoke briefly into his radio; moments later, a record of Nabiyev's visit was automatically assigned for processing, Nabiyev's rank ensuring it was one of the few to land in General Grebeshkov's personal inbox.

USS JOHN FINN

The briefing-room was small but functional, a video camera passing on the Captain's words to a far wider audience than the fourteen officers presently seated in front of him. Commander Jack Young stood at the podium, both elbows resting on its sloping surface. Even after almost two years as captain of the JOHN FINN, Young still felt the pressure of command; he knew that others regarded him as

fastidious, even a perfectionist, but he could only relax when every problem and difficulty had found a solution.

A guided missile destroyer of the Arleigh Burke class, the USS JOHN FINN was a well-armed multi-role workhorse, capable of dealing with simultaneous air, surface and anti-submarine targets. Reasonable cost plus versatility—the designers had achieved the first of their two main objectives, while struggling with the second. In part because of this design conflict the JOHN FINN was hardly the most stylish of vessels, the line of her hull spoilt by a misshapen topping of grey-metal boxes and a spike-encrusted central mast. The advanced design tried to ensure the superstructure was relatively free of vertical and horizontal surfaces which, in combination with its covering of radar absorbent tiles, helped to keep the destroyer's radar signature to a minimum. With her Tomahawk cruise missiles and Ballistic Missile Defence System, the open expanse of the North Atlantic or the Pacific was the JOHN FINN's natural environment, most certainly not the busy waterway that was the Baltic Sea.

The JOHN FINN's deployment to the Baltic had originally been planned for the start of the BALTOPS training exercise in June, a U.S. sponsored event involving well over a dozen nations, even Russia up until 2014. Now the crisis in Russia and the murder of American citizens at Domodedovo had accelerated the destroyer's placement, the JOHN FINN a gentle reminder of American power, and a symbol to steady the nerves of Russia's Baltic neighbours.

With a casual nod and a brief, "Thank you, gentlemen," Young brought the meeting to order. A chart of the Baltic Sea flashed into focus on the large touch screen behind him, specifically the region known as the Gotland basin: Poland and Kaliningrad to the south, Sweden to the west, the three Baltic States to the east. The overhead lights dimmed in response, and a moment later a cluster of coloured lights appeared across both land and sea.

Young continued, "We will be passing the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, headquarters to their Baltic Fleet, early tomorrow morning. Their main base is at Baltiysk, with a second at Kronstadt on the approach to Saint Petersburg. As a courtesy, the Russians have been informed of our deployment, so expect a chaperone once we pass the Danish island of Bornholm." With each name, the relevant location flashed briefly, the JOHN FINN's predicted course showing as a blue line, a cluster of Russian red to the south and east.

Young paused, gaze sweeping along the three rows of his audience. "Every country has a right to defend itself and remember the terrorists of *August 14* have taken American lives as well as Russian. Unfortunately, intelligence indicates that *August 14* has strong links with Poland and the Baltic States, and they of course are part of NATO. There are other countries in the mix as well, notably the Ukraine and possibly Georgia. Retaliation by Russia against any of these countries would be regarded as an over-reaction, and whilst such an event is extremely unlikely, the U.S. feels it prudent to take sensible precautions. The USS JOHN FINN is one such precaution. Diplomacy needs time to work its magic, so that everyone at home can sleep easy in their beds."

Again Young paused, making sure he had everyone's full attention. "We're here to fly the flag, not to upset or bully anyone, and not to create an international

incident. Everyone needs to stay sharp... no mistakes... no miscalculations... no close shaves.”

Young straightened his back and took two paces forward, bringing him up to the edge of the front row, “Questions?”

Boston, England

Charlotte was in two minds as to how to react to Anderson’s chosen quest. Whilst she remained unconvinced by his implausible ideas, there was enough to suggest her father had indeed found something unexpected. That didn’t mean he had been murdered to keep it secret but nor could Charlotte blame Anderson for taking up the challenge. In any case, she enjoyed their repartee and was content to see how the relationship would progress. The one difficulty was that Anderson’s actions were denying her mother closure as to the events surrounding her father’s death, and that was at best unhelpful.

So unhelpful in fact that Charlotte felt the need to find her own answers, and the sooner the better. If she had to dismantle Anderson’s ideas one slow step at a time, then that was fine with her. And if he thought Lara and Yuri were important, then step one was to find a little more about McDowell’s two associates.

The pursuit of the Russian/Polish duo provided an intriguing diversion during work’s quieter periods, although progress proved significantly more elusive. Her plan was first to try and pin down where Erdenheim’s guest speakers might stay: presumably some would need overnight accommodation and the Centre itself hardly offered five-star comfort.

It was awkward at best, her prying phone calls proving that hotel receptionists were universally immune to Charlotte’s charms. And there were so many unknowns: Lara and Yuri could have been at Erdenheim for a day, or a week; and with only one of them speaking good English, they might not even be guest speakers, just potential clients or acquaintances of McDowell.

More in hope than expectation, Charlotte moved on to holiday lets and rental properties, her expertise allowing a more direct strategy. It wasn’t until late afternoon that some lateral thinking combined with inside knowledge resulted in something productive, if not exactly ground-breaking. And for once, being an estate agent had proved to be a distinct advantage.

* * * * *

Set back like most of its neighbours some forty yards from the road, the Fletcher’s home was one of a long line of country houses which formed a lonely but exclusive outpost on Boston’s north-eastern edge. Charlotte parked at the front, walking up the block-paved drive to the elegant entrance door, brain automatically reassessing the house’s relative pros and cons while adjusting her instinctive valuation.

The door was opened on Charlotte’s second ring, Sarah Fletcher looking tired and a little flustered, the small toddler in tow shyly half-hiding behind his mother’s skirt.

“Charlie, how lovely to see you,” said Sarah with a weary but welcoming smile. “It’s been too long and I need someone adult to talk to—and that includes Ray. As I said on the phone, he won’t be back from golf until after seven, so we’ve got ages before he starts chatting you up.”

Charlotte was ushered in to the front room, Sarah sweeping toys and books aside to create a space on the settee for Charlotte. The next half-hour was spent jumping from one random topic to another, covering everything from the complex welfare of babies and toddlers, to updates on mutual friends. Sarah couldn’t be classed as a close friend of Charlotte’s, but they had known each other for some twenty years, their senior-school acquaintance renewed once Charlotte had returned to Boston. A conversation centred around children was one Charlotte was happy to accept, as virtually all of her friends had at least one child, and sometimes at least one husband.

It was almost seven before Charlotte chose to move the conversation on to something a little different. Taking advantage of Sarah being distracted by her young son, she drifted towards the bay window, staring out across the front lawn to the house opposite. “How long have you been in this house now, Sarah, is it a year yet?” Charlotte tried to make her tone one of idle curiosity.

“Just over; it’s been wonderful here, I’m so pleased we bought it. The old house was always too small and we moved just before the prices went up—well, you’ll know that better than most. How is business, Charlie; there always seems plenty of *For Sale* signs?”

“Business is pretty good... The house opposite, am I right in thinking it was sold a few months ago?” Charlotte hoped she wasn’t being too obvious, and for a second she wondered whether it would be easier just to tell Sarah the reason for her sudden interest.

“That’s right, went for well over half a million. It’s a beautiful house, and the plot must be at least an acre; five bedrooms, swimming pool at the back, south-west facing of course...”

“I wondered if it might be rented, not that’s it on any list, but I believe the Management Centre at Graythorp bought it.” Charlotte knew very well who had bought it, precisely when, and for exactly how much; what she didn’t know was who lived in it. Not Carter, and not McDowell, unless he wanted a second home to add to his three-bedroom house in Marshwick.

“I don’t think it’s rented,” Sarah replied. “It wasn’t on the market for long. Chap moved in middle of February but he seems to be away a lot of the time; not that I’m deliberately nosy, I just don’t like it when a house is empty.” Sarah had finally found a suitable TV channel to keep her son occupied and her full attention moved back towards Charlotte. “Management Centre... is that Erdenheim? Weren’t they in trouble for something?”

“There was a car crash and a young man was killed; an Erdenheim van was involved but it was just an unfortunate accident... It’s a big house for just one person.” Charlotte said, working hard to get the conversation back on track.

“Not fair, is it; I’ve certainly not seen a wife. Ray’s met him but I’ve just gazed wantonly—he’s very handsome...” Sarah’s eyes started to glaze over then she gave a broad smile, “Too rich and too old for me; must be in his fifties. American, I

think Ray said. I drool over him, and Ray drools over his car, what a sad couple we are.”

“Fast and sporty? I mean the car not the man,” Charlotte asked, matching Sarah’s smile.

“Very sporty and very fast; white Ferrari... well something Italian anyway.”

“And he’s there now?”

Charlotte had finally gone too far. “I think someone is hiding something,” Sarah said sharply. “What do you know that I don’t, Charlie?”

“Oh, nothing really; I’d heard that a well-known writer was working at Erdenheim and I just wondered who it was.” It was the best Charlotte could come up with on the spur of the moment, and it was worrying that Sarah’s description was edging far more towards the late Charles Zhilin than the mysterious Yuri.

“Are you telling me this visit has an ulterior motive?” Sarah asked curiously. “Should I be upset that we’re only a means to an end?”

Sarah didn’t sound upset, but Charlotte was already regretting her high-handed use of a friend. “I’m sorry, Sarah; I guess I’m the one who’s being nosy.”

“Don’t worry about it; I’m all for killing two birds with one stone as the saying goes. I sense you’re not telling me everything but I’m far too polite to pry.” Sarah’s brow furrowed, “I think I saw his car earlier, or maybe it was yesterday; in any case, I’m fairly sure he’s about somewhere.”

“I don’t suppose you know his name?” Charlotte asked, pushing her luck as far as she dared.

“Sorry, no,” Sarah said immediately. “Ray might have an idea though. Now, Charlie, what other intrigue have you got for me—whatever it is, it’s got to be better than a diet of Mickey Mouse and Curious George...”

It was another fifteen minutes before Ray breezed in through the lounge door, eyes widening appreciatively as he recognised Charlotte.

“Down tiger,” Sarah said mockingly, “Charlie’s got herself a boyfriend, so hands off.”

“He’s just a friend,” Charlotte said quickly. “I didn’t say boyfriend.”

“That’s how it all starts,” Sarah said, “There’s no such thing as a male friend for someone as attractive as you; trust me, I know.” She turned back to her husband, “Ray, what’s the man opposite called?”

“You mean DeLorean?” Ray replied, fending off his son as they began a ritual pre-bedtime play fight.

“DeLorean? Are you talking about his car? I thought it was a Ferrari?”

“No, it’s a Lamborghini,” Ray said, distracted.

“DeLorean, Lamborghini, Ferrari... You talk to him, Charlie; just remember what I said about not having an adult conversation.”

“It’s how I remember his name,” Ray said defensively. “DeLorean as in *Back to the Future*.”

“That makes sense,” Charlotte said equally confused.

“His Lamborghini is a supercar, like the DeLorean in *Back to the Future*. DeLorean equals *Back to the Future* equals Marty McFly; so it’s Marty from across the road. Makes perfect sense to me. Didn’t get the guy’s surname.”

Marty McFly, *Martin* McFly... Charlotte was just thankful it wasn’t Charles.

She left after another fifteen minutes, pleased but also a little confused. It had obviously been naïve to assume the Erdenheim house was for the convenience of guest speakers, and it made far more sense for it to be occupied on a more permanent basis. Yet this was an expensive and extravagant resource, a half a million plus house bought not for one of Erdenheim's directors but for an American with a love of fast cars.

It was just a little odd, and for a brief moment Charlotte worried that Anderson's intuition might actually be proving superior to her scepticism—then reason prevailed. Quite who Marty might actually be wasn't important at the moment, Charlotte content to savour her success as a part-time private eye.

Moscow

Markova's perch beside the tree was at best uncomfortable and—at three hundred metres—further away than she would have liked but at least it gave her an unrestricted view of the rear of Golubeva's house, down past the walled garden and along to the wide veranda. The modern three-storey house in Moscow's western suburbs was something for Markova to aspire to, although she had no idea why anyone needed so many rooms, especially when you were just an ageing woman with no husband, nor any children to nurture or support.

The National Security Advisor was Markova's second high-profile target in five days, Moscow's Police Commissioner having proved somewhat easier to study. It would take a month or more to check every member of the Security Committee, Grebeshkov pushing his authority to the limit in the vain hope that the *spetsnaz* would discover something of interest. With no-one seemingly immune from Grebeshkov's suspicions, a second surveillance unit matched Markova some ten kilometres to the north, their latest target the general's own deputy, a Colonel Nabyev.

Golubeva's house was one of a dozen which formed its own gated community, the swathe of trees on the higher ground to the rear of the properties helping ensure Markova's presence remained undetected. Apart from two guards permanently stationed beside the wide metal gates, community security was mainly electronic, CCTV watching every possible access route. Golubeva was also honoured with two live-in bodyguards, and soon after she had arrived home an irregular police patrol had started to keep a protective eye on developments.

Markova's orders from Grebeshkov had been simple enough: tail each Committee member in turn and make a note of anything unusual—not easy with just a team of six when twenty-four was the norm. The unofficial nature of Markova's task meant she was effectively working with one hand tied behind her back, conscious that Golubeva likely had enough authority to finish her career for good.

There was sudden movement from behind a window on the second floor. Markova adjusted her headphones, realigning the laser microphone for the best possible sound quality, the device close to its maximum range. The voices were still too distorted to pick out anything meaningful and it would be an hour or more before she could check the computer-enhanced version. Like many assignments, it

was an exasperating experience, just a few minutes activity every hour but with the constant fear you would be the one to miss something vital.

Irina Golubeva was a very popular lady, visitors—mostly middle-aged males—arriving each evening and staying for between one and three hours; never the same person, a total of eight in just three nights. The informal nature of Markova's task meant she was having to analyse the various photographs and sound recordings herself; even so, the FSB's facial-recognition software made identifying Golubeva's callers a relatively simple task. Most were minor government officials, covering a range of departments, but there was also a high-powered executive from Channel One Russia. So far, the sound recordings had proved unhelpful, with half completely unintelligible, the rest revealing nothing out of the ordinary.

And what exactly should Markova regard as unusual? Earlier that evening two male visitors had joined Golubeva at a friendly dinner for three, followed by drinks on the veranda, then several phone calls all made from behind closed doors—was any of that supposed to be unusual? Markova hadn't recognised either of the men, and having arrived within ten minutes of each other, they had left after some two hours, one having his own bodyguard and driver. Markova had no real idea what the President's National Security Advisor's role actually involved, so it was quite possible such meetings were nothing more than routine.

However, the latest caller was rather different to the rest: arriving some twenty minutes earlier, Markova's team at the front of the house had noted that although not in uniform he looked to be military; mid-thirties, he hadn't treated Golubeva with any obvious deference, his Volkswagen hire car offering no clue as to the identity of its driver.

To Markova that seemed more than sufficient to be classed as unusual. Fifty minutes later she was seated rather more comfortably than before in a black Lada, following the VW as it turned west towards Vnukovo International Airport. Markova stayed well back, the risk of being spotted a worse alternative to losing contact.

The trip was becoming more of a long-distance trek than she had anticipated but Markova persevered, the Lada's headlights struggling to pick out the VW through the late-evening rain. The two cars sped past the turn-off to Vnukovo, eventually joining the M3 Ukraine Highway as it headed south-west.

Some seventy kilometres from Moscow, the Volkswagen turned towards the town of Naro-Fominsk, swinging right to pull up at the barrier guarding its destination. Markova kept going, gaze straight ahead, no need to read the large signs. The trend of Golubeva's contacts was starting to become disturbing: first government officials, then TV executives, now the Russian military, or more specifically the 6th Independent Tank Brigade, 20th Army.

Markova turned back towards Moscow, working out whether to spoil Grebeshkov's evening by phone or in person.

Chapter 8

Friday, May 14th

Lithuania

Jester adjusted his night-goggles and checked his watch, then motioned Eduard to take the lead. After thirty seconds, he followed on, the remaining six *spetsnaz* strung out behind him at ten metre intervals. Jester was enjoying this new style of anti-terrorism: gone was the risky low-level parachute jump or abseil from a bucking helicopter, now it seemed business-class flights and rides in a Land Rover were the order of the day. The only awkward part had been the collection of some additional baggage from a boathouse beside Lake Vištytis, the guns and other equipment having been smuggled across a few hours earlier from Kaliningrad.

The eight *spetsnaz* walked slowly through the pine forest, heading towards the southern edge of the dacha complex, their initial objective being two of the settlement's four cottages; a second eight-man team would attack from the north, while the four-man headquarters section also acted as a reserve. Two hundred metres above Jester a drone silently circled, its infra-red camera forwarding real-time data via satellite direct to Moscow; a simplified version was then streamed to the visual display attached to Jester's left forearm, red icons glowing dimly to reveal the position of the two guards. Intelligence suggested an opposing force of no more than sixteen, lightly armed, and of more concern to Jester was their eventual extraction, the ten kilometre trek and helicopter flight to the relative safety of Belarus a hazardous venture into the unknown.

Jester slowed as he caught up with Eduard, a hand-signal warning the others to exercise caution. Thirty metres ahead the forest abruptly ended, and some fifteen metres further on stood the first dacha. Two storeys high, wooden steps led up to a large wrap-around deck where a single guard leant against the rail, hands busying themselves with lighting a cigarette. Apart from the gleam from the guard's lighter, there was little more than the soft glow of the moon to brighten the darkness. The only sounds were the gentle rustle of the breeze through the pine trees and the muted spatter of an early-morning drizzle.

Jester whispered a sitrep, words and image passed on to the HQ section and the watchers in Moscow. Once the attack began, the low-tech alternative of eyes and ears would often be a better guide than the visual display, the drone's sensors struggling with an overabundance of information and multiple heat sources too close together.

The guard was Eduard's responsibility, and other than a Kalashnikov he carried a weapon with rather more ancient origins, the crossbow's dual visual and thermal sniper-sights making the shot all too easy. The bolt was also a special design and as it plunged through the guard's chest, the sudden deceleration initiated the release of jagged metal fins which literally ripped the man's internal organs apart, the guard crumpling down onto the wooden deck.

Moments later, two *spetsnaz* raced across the open ground, moving to either side of the first dacha. The others quickly followed, four targeting the second dacha, the visual display revealing the northern patrol circling round to take out the other two buildings.

Eduard gently tried the only ground floor door, nodding to Jester to confirm it wasn't locked. Jester signalled to the remaining two spetsnaz, before following Eduard as he gently crept his way up the wooden steps and onto the wrap-around deck. The glass-fronted double doors were closed but again unlocked. Orders confirmed, Jester counted slowly to three. An instant later, Eduard half-opened one of the doors, Jester lobbing two stun-grenades into the room beyond, his actions mirrored by the spetsnaz on the floor below.

There was a delay of a few short seconds before a series of deafening explosions tore through the dacha's interior. Almost before silence had returned, Eduard led the way inside, Kalashnikov held ready for instant use. He entered a large room—table, chairs, TV, closed doors ahead and to the left and right, but no terrorists.

Terrorists first, companion devices such as cell phones and laptops second, paper documents third—such was Moscow's order of priority. Jester moved inside, nodding to Eduard to check the door to the left; from somewhere far off came the crackle of gunfire, ceasing almost immediately.

The room to the left was a large bedroom, three single beds, little else of immediate interest. The room to the right was a twin to the one they had just left. The remaining door opened out on to the dining area, stairs leading to the rooms on the ground floor; still no terrorists. Jester duly reported the top floor clear. Seconds later, one of the ground-floor team moved warily up the stairs and into view, shaking his head. Again there was a spatter of gunfire away to the north.

Jester was growing concerned, and he checked the visual display on his arm, the coloured icons jumping around as spurious heat sources and the residue from the stun-grenades confused the drone's sensors. Jester widened the target area; away to the north-west two red dots suddenly flickered into existence as if from nowhere, Jester instantly recognising their significance.

Even as a warning sounded in Jester's earpiece, he grabbed Eduard, almost flinging him back towards the outer stairs.

"Get out!" Jester shouted. "It's wired!" They took the stairs three at a time, Jester aiming to be anywhere but the dacha. They had barely crossed halfway to the forest fringe before several muffled explosions ripped through the dacha complex, three of the four buildings belching forth a torrent of smoke and heat from shattered windows and doors.

Jester flung himself head-first into the undergrowth, the night-goggles torn from his face. Flashes of gunfire lit up the pine trees opposite, the familiar rapid-fire burst of Kalashnikovs now an unwelcome indication of the terrorists' firepower. Slowly to begin with but increasing in intensity, the *spetsnaz* fired back. Jester's earpiece was silent, the visual display attempting to reboot.

Bullets flicked through the branches to Jester's left, a red-hot needle of pain ripping into his side and out through his back, his cry of anguish bitten short to become stifled groan. Beside him, Eduard got off a three-shot burst, before grabbing Jester by the arm and dragging him deeper into the forest.

Jester twisted painfully around so his back was against a tree, left hand clamped across the wound, watching with something akin to indignation as the blood seeped through his fingers. The opposition were supposed to be nervous ill-trained amateurs, the need for body armour dismissed as unnecessary and restrictive—but when had *August 14* ever acted like amateurs? It was an idiotic

mistake, born of over-confidence, the dacha complex well-prepared for its Russian visitors.

Lincolnshire, England

Marshwick's general store was a treasure trove of hidden supplies, with the shelves along each narrow aisle crammed with everything the villagers could possibly need, ensuring they would think twice before making the frustrating trip to a supermarket in Boston. Anderson took his time whilst trying to work out what he might need to cover the next few days, still unsure whether it was a good thing that Charlotte had already managed to organise some alternative accommodation. He had grown to quite like his small room, and the privacy offered by a holiday let might well be a poor exchange for the convenience of pub food and his regular psychoanalysis from Rob.

It was almost as an aside that Charlotte had revealed the results of her own research into Erdenheim. Anderson had tried hard not to sound petulant and even though the discovery of some man named Marty was hardly dramatic, it was still far better than anything he had come up with. A celebratory bottle of wine was thus high on Anderson's list of potential purchases, it preferably one to be shared while settling into his new abode.

"Isn't it time you stopped interfering in matters that aren't your concern!" The woman's tone was angry, and Anderson instinctively turned, keen to see who was the recipient of the woman's wrath. Unfortunately, she was staring straight at him.

"I'm sorry?" Anderson didn't need to act confused.

"Thanks to you, I'm losing money, and I don't appreciate someone spreading lies and gossip." The woman was in her late forties, dressed in a casual top and jeans, her body language a mix of determination and disapproval.

The general store suddenly seemed to have more customers than Anderson had noticed, the woman's angry words immediately gaining an interested audience.

Anderson worked hard to defuse the situation, brain feverishly trying to work out what the woman might be referring to. "I'm afraid I don't understand. Perhaps we could talk outside? I'd be happy to sort out any misunderstanding..."

"You wouldn't be wanting to talk outside if my Steve was here, and I don't call it a misunderstanding when my wages get cut in half."

"You mean Erdenheim?" Anderson asked uncertainly. That was all he could think of, unless Rob had taken umbrage at him leaving the *Farriers*.

"Of course I mean bloody Erdenheim..." The woman now noticed how much attention she was attracting, and with an angry glare at Anderson she stormed past, thrusting her half-full basket onto the counter, hand reaching for her purse.

Anderson waited until the woman had paid for her shopping before following her out onto the street. "If there's some way I can make amends and sort all of this out. What about lunch? It's the least I can do under the circumstances." Admitting responsibility seemed the most sensible course, although Anderson still didn't understand how exactly he was at fault. Even as he spoke, he realised that the

woman might just think he was trying to pick her up—in which case the aforementioned Steve could soon be making his presence felt.

The woman paused, brow furrowing as she worked out whether to spurn or accept Anderson's offer.

"The *Farriers*?" encouraged Anderson. If in doubt, his response lately to every problem seemed to involve eating, and the *Farriers* menu was already forever etched on his brain.

Mention of the *Farriers* seemed to do the trick, lunch rejected for the less-compromising alternative of a soft drink, and not the bar but one of the outside tables. Pippa Mason had worked as a housekeeper at Erdenheim since it had opened, weekday mornings until twelve with an occasional full day at the weekend. She had been working the morning of Anderson's visit to the Management Centre, having been pre-warned by McDowell to make sure everything was immaculate in case of publicity photographs. So when she had been called in to the office and told by McDowell that the Centre was having to cut her hours until at least June, she had discounted his excuse of disappointing course numbers, and assumed it was all down to some poor review from Anderson. Less than forty minutes later, Anderson himself had been standing in front of her, glibly unaware of the ensuing onslaught. His subsequent offer had seemed to be Pippa's one chance to change his mind, yet she was still finding it hard to believe he was entirely blameless.

And for a brief moment, Anderson wondered whether she might actually be right. Perhaps McDowell's decision was somehow related to Anderson's meddling, although he couldn't quite grasp how his investigation could so instantly affect course numbers.

Anderson coaxed yet more from Pippa, resisting the urge to question her about an American named Marty or indeed anything controversial. Erdenheim employed two housekeepers and Pippa's colleague was similarly affected, but as neither of them was being laid off, that seemed to imply some rooms and certain facilities were still in everyday use.

With Pippa departing the *Farriers* apparently unconvinced of Anderson's innocence, Graythorp was next on his agenda, along with the pursuit of a white Lamborghini.

* * * * *

The concrete surface of the pillbox was a convenient vantage point, allowing an unrestricted if distant view of Erdenheim, a wide ledge providing a good resting place for Anderson's forearms. The Centre's car park was more than half-full but no sign of a white sports car, the highlight of the past hour the sight of a small van from Boston delivering farm produce.

For some reason he wasn't that bothered, confident that Charlotte would have Marty's surname figured out soon enough. Erdenheim might be short on clients but Marty's house proved its enigmatic backers had plenty of money, Devereau doubtful as to whether McDowell and Carter had found the million-plus to find the Management Centre themselves. Carter had sold his computer company for several million but had invested badly, the money mostly frittered away; yet he

obviously hadn't lost any of his computer skills, writing most of the software for Erdenheim's computer simulations.

Boredom was starting to catch up with Anderson and he moved across to the western side of the pillbox, gaze idly following the road as it meandered its way into Graythorp proper. He had spent exactly a week chasing his way around the Lincolnshire countryside but had never really taken the time to get to know the area. The only high point was the sight of the Boston Stump several miles away, and the totally flat landscape with its scarcity of trees still seemed alien to him.

Abruptly Anderson froze, listening intently. From far-off came the unmistakable whirring of a helicopter, the squat shape easy to pick up against a bright blue sky. It flew in from the south-west, heading straight for Erdenheim before angling steeply down to land on the helipad. The main rotor blade slowed, idling impatiently while the helicopter's four passengers—each struggling with a large suitcase—stepped down on to the tarmac. McDowell and another man emerged from inside the main building to greet them; after brief handshakes, the new arrivals were escorted into the Management Centre. Anderson took a good selection of photos but wasn't optimistic as to whether they would be of any use—even with the zoom the distance was too great for a quality shot.

The helicopter left without waiting, heading back the way it had come. Anderson watched for another twenty minutes before calling it a day, curious as to what the helicopter's visit might mean.

Just because Erdenheim might be struggling for numbers, there was no reason to assume clients and guest speakers wouldn't still be putting in an appearance. Even so, it was an intriguing development, and Anderson sensed it was time he actually did some proper work for a change. He had promised McDowell a feature on Erdenheim and if nothing else, it would give him a good excuse for a follow-up visit.

Moscow

The Senate building within the Moscow Kremlin appeared to be in turmoil, aides scurrying back and forth, Grebeshkov's two armed escorts saying little as they guided him through the corridors of the President's power base. The evening summons to the Kremlin had left no room for discussion, and it had been with a deep sense of foreboding that Grebeshkov had walked out of the FSB's headquarters and into the waiting Mercedes. The Prime Minister had been unavailable all day, leading to rumours of a heart attack, or even that he was under arrest. The latter possibility certainly didn't augur well for Grebeshkov, especially with his recent promotion as the PM's Special Adviser.

The leading escort stopped by a double set of doors and Grebeshkov was ushered into the Security Council Meeting Hall. A respectful salute, then Grebeshkov was left alone with his thoughts, the room's sombre feel totally in tune with Grebeshkov's present mood.

Grebeshkov chose to seat himself near to one end of the long conference table. After the excessive number of meetings he had been forced to endure over the last week, it seemed fitting that he should be sacked—or would it be court-martialled—

in such formal surroundings. He assumed he was about to become another casualty of the fallout from Lithuania, and the raid had turned out to be a serious error of judgement. The events of Thursday, culminating in the Moscow riot, had finally forced the Prime Minister's hand, and even the destruction of a second terrorist cell could not prevent the inevitable. Of the twenty spetsnaz smuggled into Lithuania, four had been killed, another six wounded. Although the possibility of the dachas being booby-trapped had been considered, the reluctance of *August 14* to consider suicide attacks had led the Special Forces to downplay such a possibility. And no-one had foreseen that the terrorists would create escape tunnels. Ten or more had managed to slip away before doubling back to turn the attack on its head.

Even the extraction of the *spetsnaz*—including the dead—had been beset with problems, coming close to disaster. NATO forces in northern Lithuania had already been on standby, air and ground units consequently reacting far more quickly than had been anticipated. It was only because the two helicopter pilots had wilfully disobeyed orders, extricating the spetsnaz earlier than planned, that they had managed to cross into Belarus just minutes before being intercepted.

To complete the debacle, the intelligence gathered from the dacha complex was apparently negligible, the only significant success the capture of a lone terrorist. At least seven others had been killed, but altogether it was a poor reward for the loss of four good men, and the repercussions were only just beginning.

Despite such setbacks, Grebeshkov truly believed Moscow's war against *August 14* was being won, albeit slowly. Of the original thirteen terrorists, just six were left, including of course, the FSB's prime target of Eglitis. With Nazarenko's help, they now had names and faces for all six, their age profile a curious split of young and old: nine were under twenty-five, the remaining four all over fifty.

Not that *August 14* was Moscow's only problem. While Markova's fears that Golubeva could be part of a coup were probably an exaggeration, there was enough evidence to sow the seeds of doubt, especially in the present atmosphere of mistrust. Grebeshkov had considered denouncing Golubeva in the vain hope of saving himself before immediately rejecting the idea. She could simply be acting on the President's behalf, garnering support for difficult times ahead. Even if guilty, would ruining Golubeva really help Grebeshkov's cause? Whatever her motives, for the moment at least, the wisest course seemed simply to say nothing.

Forty minutes he had been alone with his thoughts when the conference door was thrust open and the President strode into the room, the door pulled closed behind him. Grebeshkov stood respectfully, the President immediately waving him to sit back down.

"I'll be brief, General," the President said brusquely, seating himself directly opposite Grebeshkov. "Your record as an investigator in the FSB is impressive. Success which, according to Irina Golubeva, is based on old-fashioned thoroughness combined with the confidence to act as much on instinct as reason. Is that a fair assessment, General?"

"I would like to think so, Sir." Golubeva was rapidly going up in Grebeshkov's estimation, her unexpected praise an immediate reward for his decision not to expose her.

The President continued, “Recent events have precipitated a change in policy, General Grebeshkov; as of now, you will take total charge of the FSB counter-terrorist operation, with direct control over the Police and National Guard. All other of your responsibilities will be delegated elsewhere. I expect the remaining six members of *August 14* to be caught or killed by the end of the month. Is that clear, General?”

“Perfectly clear, Sir.” What else could he say?

“The National Advisory Committee meets tomorrow at ten to discuss Lithuania. The mess there needs to be cleared up or preferably turned to our advantage. I expect you to attend.”

Grebeshkov stood as the President left, a mixture of emotions churning inside of him. It wasn’t a court-martial but it might well soon be; there were just over two weeks until the end of May—two weeks to perform a miracle.

Marshwick, England

On the market for some eight months but left furnished so it could continue as a holiday let, a short gravelled drive led up to the cottage’s front door. Detached, cottage-style bungalow, two bedrooms, recently modernised, large plot to include small arable field, no onward chain—the agency brochure had done its best but interest had been minimal. Another of the cottage’s key features was its isolation, with the nearest neighbour being some two hundred yards back along the country road towards Marshwick.

The move from the *Farriers* definitely offered Anderson far more space, and it would have been foolish to spurn the convenience of a washing machine and kitchen. Both were becoming essential as he was fast running out of clean clothes and thanks to the *Farriers* also eating far too much. Now it would be back to a less-fattening and rather more basic menu, more down to laziness than lack of culinary skill.

It had been after six by the time Charlotte had arrived at the *Farriers* with the house keys. A hurried meal, then with each taking their own car to the cottage, there had been limited opportunity to chat and compare notes. Anderson thus took his time about settling himself in to his new surroundings, working hard to encourage the semi-serious banter with Charlotte which seemed to have become part of their normal routine. But there was also something else, a mutual attraction which neither now tried to disguise.

Anderson’s offering of red wine might have been rejected but their parting kiss was as tender and affectionate as Anderson could have hoped for. And with Charlotte’s work rota giving her a free Saturday, the promise of a mystery tour around Lincolnshire was something different to look forward to, a free day away from the self-imposed stress of Pat McDowell and Erdenheim.

Chapter 9

Saturday, May 15th

Moscow

Including Grebeshkov there were now seven members of the President's inner circle, going by such titles as First Deputy Prime Minister and Presidential Assistant, the National Advisory Committee merely a convenient name for the group of non-elected officials who really held the power in today's Russia. In truth, Grebeshkov doubted whether any Russian over the age of sixteen actually believed they were ruled by a democratically elected parliament sworn to follow a set of honourable ideals. Democracy might work for the West—although that was debatable—but for Russia a subtle form of autocracy served the needs of the Federation far better. It was a strange and somewhat unsettling experience for Grebeshkov, and he was still coming to terms with being moved from a committee which had no power to one that doubtless had too much.

Grebeshkov had been the first to arrive by some ten minutes, and a casual nod had been the only sign of greeting as the other members of the Committee had taken their places around the long table. The single woman and only non-*silovik* was Irina Golubeva: *Silovik*, a person of force, it meaning a politician whose origins were based in the FSB or some other military-type service. Golubeva's support had kept Grebeshkov from following the Prime Minister into obscurity and he had felt obliged to bury all records relating to her various liaisons, Grebeshkov's continuing frustration with his political masters testing even his loyalty.

As the President brought the meeting to order, a simplified map of the Baltic replaced the Presidential Standard on the various digital displays, Kaliningrad outlined in red. Grebeshkov was impatient to begin, frustrated with every minute wasted. A terrorist every two days—that had become his new, if unlikely, target.

"The repercussions from Lithuania have been significant," the President said gruffly, "with protests turning violent in several European capitals, our embassy in Warsaw attacked. We have a moral right to protect our nation from the threat of terrorism and I'm not prepared to offer anything approaching an apology; fortunately, NATO seems keen to downplay the incident and Russia is not alone in demanding answers from Lithuania. Their government denies any complicity with *August 14*—apparently the dacha settlement had more to do with drug traffickers than terrorists. Sanctions may persuade Vilnius to be more receptive but it will take time; similarly, it would be foolish to expect the U.N. to offer anything constructive."

The President spoke quietly to the aide seated beside him, before tapping a command onto the small table-top console to his right; immediately a red icon flashed on the map display close to Poland's northern coastline.

"Lithuania may well prove to be the least of our problems," said the President with a sigh of frustration. "The terrorist captured there is a Marek Tamm, Estonian, age twenty-three; the dacha complex had apparently been shut down over the winter and we are fortunate that Tamm's group of twelve was the first to arrive once Nazarenko's group had left. However, the SVR have now identified a second terrorist base, west of Gdansk, which has possibly been active since at

least October; there is also circumstantial evidence to link it with figures within the Warsaw Establishment. An incursion on Polish soil, even a drone strike, would doubtless be worse than Lithuania and we are consequently facing the prospect of a terrorist war for months to come.”

Grebeshev well understood the President’s dilemma, it the same as that faced by the Prime Minister just two days earlier. Russia’s allies in Eastern Europe were few and far between, many countries unable or unwilling to forget past Soviet atrocities, Belarus the only one to maintain strong ties with Moscow. Ethnic Russians made up a quarter of Estonia and Latvia’s population, and—together with Poland—the three Baltic States were clearly determined to ensure they would not be the next Ukraine, their own private war leaving Russia with various unpalatable options.

The President took their continued silence as his cue to resume his analysis, “The number of cyber-attacks on soft targets has continued to grow, with much of Moscow’s transport and energy infrastructure particularly susceptible. Tracing their precise origin has proved difficult with the attacks being redirected via multiple proxy connections; however, I’m told the prime source is again likely to be Eastern Europe, with both Poland and Estonia apparently being centres of suitable expertise.

“Intelligence indicates the facility in Poland has some twenty residents. In a week, they could be in Russia. In a month, *August 14* could have a new base in the Ukraine or Georgia. Time is most certainly not on our side. Our soldiers’ sacrifice might have given us a few days grace, or it could have accelerated *August 14*’s plans. The FSB has focused much of its efforts on these Lithuanian cells; now there is also the unwelcome likelihood that one or more groups arrived from Poland, perhaps as early as January. Unless the Polish Government generously decides to be more helpful, we presently have no clue as to the number or identity of *August 14*’s agents already resident here.”

The President paused briefly, looking across the table at Grebeshev. “For the moment, we can only focus on the dangers as we know them. In terms of the terrorists trained in Lithuania and presently still at large, General Grebeshev has assured me that we will have Eglitis and his five remaining associates in custody before the end of the month.”

And so the pressure mounts. Grebeshev acknowledged the President’s words with a nod, sensing that it wouldn’t matter anyway. The President seemed to be working his way towards an alternative that would either solve the problem of *August 14* for good, or risk driving the President from power.

“It’s imperative,” continued the President forcefully, “to show the world our determination to rid Russia of these terrorists. To do that we must dramatically increase the pressure on Poland, and so ensure they in turn react quickly and effectively against *August 14*; it cannot be allowed to reorganise and so threaten us in the future.” The President’s tone hardened, “Only if we make an example of Poland will the rest of Eastern Europe finally realise the stupidity of allying themselves with those wanting to bully and intimidate Russia.”

He paused a moment as though for emphasis, “I propose that this can be achieved through the following: firstly, the immediate suspension of certain strategic exports to Poland, including oil supplies via the Druzhba pipeline;

secondly, the closing of the Strait of Baltiysk, thus shutting the port of Elblag.” The President tapped the console beside him, and the map of the Baltic zoomed in to show Gdansk Bay, Poland to the west, the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad a hundred and thirty kilometres to the east. “Thirdly, a naval blockade of Poland’s two major ports of Gdansk and Gdynia.”

The uproar which greeted his words was less than the President had expected but more than he had hoped for. With a resigned shake of his head, he leant back in his chair and waited patiently for the hubbub to cease. Eventually there was silence.

“Gdansk and Gdynia,” the President explained, “are some twenty kilometres apart, and I’m advised that such a blockade should be relatively easy to implement. Unlike sanctions, a naval blockade would be a visible and dramatic signal as to our intent, sending a message to any other country thinking of harbouring terrorists. Taken together, these three actions would have a significant and immediate effect on Poland’s economy. Russia could, of course, give Poland an ultimatum, a final opportunity to act against *August 14*—however, such gestures are pointless unless we could absolutely guarantee that all terrorists would immediately be arrested, and then deported to Russia. In the present climate, whilst Russia threatens but does not act, I do not believe Poland would ever fully comply with such demands. Consequently, these three measures would need to be implemented without prior warning.

“Poland has neglected its navy: it has no large warships and five outdated submarines. Yet there are of course obvious dangers. Their main naval base is at Gdynia-Oksywie, with a second flotilla at Świnoujście on the border with Germany. However, a show of force, with vessels stationed near the entrance to Gdansk Bay and thus some thirty kilometres from Poland’s naval base, would be unlikely to provoke an immediate military response. Personally, that is a risk I am prepared to take, and naval units from our Baltic Fleet can be in position within hours.

“The blockade would also bring into sharp focus the terrorists’ training camp, itself barely forty kilometres from Gdansk. Perhaps *August 14*’s choice of name, and its reference to the strike at the Gdansk shipyards in 1980, is rather more significant than has been suggested. Although they have recruited from across Eastern Europe, the Polish link becomes stronger every day. We might even be looking at their main centre of operations and not some second-tier training camp.”

The President paused, and the map display opened out slightly, a red icon appearing in the Baltic Sea midway between Poland and the Swedish island of Gotland. “The USS JOHN FINN is an unfortunate complication and we can only guess as to how the United States and NATO would react to such a blockade; active diplomacy would ensure Sweden and Finland remain neutral.

“Once started, it would be fatal to withdraw our ships without achieving at least some of our aims. It’s imperative to avoid further escalation, but if necessary, we must be prepared to order the military to respond appropriately to any additional deployment of NATO naval forces. We have photographic evidence that at least two Americans, both ex-Marine Corps, are working with *August 14* in Gdansk and there can be little doubt the West is indirectly supporting the terrorists. Despite

the risks, there is no viable alternative if we truly wish to defeat *August 14* quickly and effectively.”

The President waited patiently for comments. The discussion began slowly at first, but gradually became more heated as the inner cabinet argued the relative merits of what the President proposed. Grebeshkov said little, understanding the need to bully Poland into acting against *August 14*, but appalled as to the means suggested. Having been brave enough to voice his opposition to the Prime Minister’s plans, he wondered whether he would be brave enough to argue against the President.

When the vote came well over an hour later, agreement was unanimous. To ensure Russia’s Baltic Fleet had sufficient resources and time to refine its strategy, implementation was delayed by 48 hours, the President confident that his demonstration of Russian might would quickly force Poland to act in turn against the terrorists.

Even as Grebeshkov arrived at his Lubyanka office after a hurried and very late lunch, a new problem added to the dangers of what the President proposed. Having only appeared on the internet some three hours earlier, a video clip had quickly gone viral. The title implied the footage had been taken by the Lithuanian authorities, it supposedly showing the inside of one of the terrorist dacha’s in Lithuania, and Grebeshkov watched fascinated as the scene unfolded. He assumed the video was a fake, and he paused it repeatedly, looking for obvious mistakes and inconsistencies.

The opening shot was of a smoke-blackened room, with three unmade beds, a pile of clothes scattered across the floor. The camera moved to an adjoining room, set out like an office, focusing on open desk drawers crammed with document wallets in various colours. Seemingly at random, the unknown cameraman pulled out a selection, spreading their contents across the desktop. The image sharpened to reveal U.S. Field Manuals for the Stinger missile, the M203 grenade launcher and the Claymore antipersonnel mine. Another drawer: this time instructions in English on sabotage techniques together with detailed photos; then more photographs, one clearly showing Eglitis and Baranovskiy talking to a third man, a caption identifying him as a serving officer in the U.S. Marines. And so it went on: yet more photographs, diagrams and maps, including a detailed plan of Moscow’s second international airport at Sheremetyevo, Russian rail and coach timetables...

Taken together, there was a clear—if overworked—message: these were definitely the terrorists from *August 14* and they had help from the West, specifically the United States.

Grebeshkov was confused by the amateurish nature of the film, but somehow that almost made it more believable. Logic told him no-one would be convinced by such convenient evidence but in the present heady atmosphere logic was all-too often absent, and the film could only stir up more animosity on Moscow’s streets.

It certainly wasn’t clear to Grebeshkov who had most to gain from such a parody: Russia perhaps, or possibly *August 14*. And such a film could only embarrass the Lithuanian authorities, giving the lie to their drug-trafficking tale. It might even be as simple as a teenage Steven Spielberg turning his home into a

Lithuanian dacha but whoever it was, and whatever their reasons, the U.S. embassy had just been made into a prime target for Moscow's anger.

USS JOHN FINN

The destroyer's dimly-lit Combat Information Centre (CIC) was filled to over-capacity, the air-conditioning working overtime to maintain the optimum temperature. Young sat in his elevated chair next to the Tactical Action Officer, keeping a wary eye on the dozens of consoles and their operators—some twenty men and women working together to protect the JOHN FINN from every conceivable threat. Most of Young's interest centred on one of the two large tactical displays, its brightly-coloured symbols providing a real-time projection of all potential targets, with every sensor aboard the JOHN FINN straining itself to capture what electronic intelligence it could.

Two miles to the south, the Russian frigate ADMIRAL GOLOVKO shadowed the JOHN FINN's every move, maintaining a respectful distance while seemingly unconcerned by the Finn's superiority. Both vessels were of a similar age, the Russian warship having been commissioned slightly earlier than the JOHN FINN in 2013, but there the similarity ended. In terms of displacement the JOHN FINN was twice the GOLOVKO's size, carried two helicopters against the GOLOVKO's one, and packed a far bigger punch.

The GOLOVKO wasn't the only chaperone, her duties shared with at least two other Russian vessels, varying from one of the new Gremyashchy-class corvettes to an elderly destroyer. The JOHN FINN ignored them all, Young trying not to be intimidated by their presence, and keen to show the calibre of the U.S. Navy.

The ADMIRAL GOLOVKO had recently transferred from Russia's Northern Fleet, a strategic redeployment which had more to do with the ageing nature of many of Russia's ships, than any terrorist threat. However, since the early hours of the morning three more Russian surface vessels had abandoned a training exercise in the Norwegian Sea to head at speed towards the Baltic. With their estimated time of arrival late Monday, NATO had yet to respond, the USS JOHN FINN, backed by naval resources from Northern Europe, presumably felt to be sufficient to curb any further Russian aggression against Lithuania. In any case, the West's leaders now seemed happy to treat the *spetsnaz* attack as a very minor incident, and were working hard to reduce tensions. There was even the promise of a full investigation into the exact nature of the dacha complex. To Young, it seemed a poor way to protect an ally, simply turn the other cheek while almost admitting it was your own fault.

The Russian public were similarly unimpressed but for very different reasons. The internet clip of the dacha complex had brought thousands more out on to Moscow's streets, irate protesters gathering in the city centre to condemn those seen as supporting the terrorists. Initially, the demonstrators' focus had been primarily anti-government, but it had quickly shifted to become anti-American, Moscow's police having to use tear-gas and water-cannon to quell yet another violent confrontation, this time outside the U.S. embassy west of the Kremlin. The fact that the video could easily be fake seemed of little concern to the thousands

trying to fight their way through to the embassy, America's guilt never doubted, the truth merely an irrelevant complication.

Such matters would normally pass the USS JOHN FINN quietly by, but *August 14* had poured salt into a dozen open wounds, pushing an angry Russia ever closer towards confrontation with Eastern Europe. On both sides, decades of suspicion and mistrust made compromise increasingly unlikely.

Moscow

Nabiyev's luxury apartment was a twenty minute drive from the Lubyanka, the exclusive suburbs to the north-west of the city offering a relaxed and protected environment for its wealthy residents. As always, Nabiyev ignored the convenience of the lift, taking the main stairs two at-a-time and refusing to give in to the protests from his aching muscles. It was his earliest return home for over a week, and he was looking forward to an early night, preferably with the TV replaced by the low-tech option of a good book. For once, both *August 14* and the FSB could take a back seat to the more basic needs of rest and recuperation.

The entrance hallway was in semi-darkness, the small lamp beside the front door casting its gentle glow past the open sitting-room door into the space beyond. Nabiyev gave a long sigh of contentment and strode into the living room, hand automatically reaching for the light switch; even as the light chased the shadows away, he belatedly noticed the two seated figures waiting silently. Confusion and lack of sleep slowed his reactions and Nabiyev simply froze, brain struggling to work out what to do next.

Almost as one the two figures stood up, the shorter taking a step forward. Nabiyev recognised first the uniform and then its owner: there was no mistaking Grebeshkov's favoured henchwoman, and he had seen her face on a dozen reports, almost invariably with a positive comment or recommendation. Curiously, he felt no fear, the constant threat of discovery draining him of even the most elementary of emotions.

"Captain Markova," Nabiyev said coldly. "This is an unexpected surprise; I wasn't aware you had an open invitation to make yourself at home." He heard footsteps behind him, and Nabiyev stood unresisting as strong hands patted him down for a weapon. "You'd better have good cause, Captain; this is a serious mistake." Nabiyev kept his body rigid, unblinking eyes watching a half-smile slowly spread across Markova's face.

"I'm sorry, Colonel, but I must ask that you accompany us back to the Lubyanka."

"Am I under arrest?"

"If that should be necessary, Sir." Markova gave a curt nod, and the man behind Nabiyev grasped his left arm, twisting him around and guiding him back towards the front door.

There was little doubt in Nabiyev's mind that it was likely to be a one-way journey. He wondered whether to bluff it out in the hope Grebeshkov was just guessing, but it was too much of a risk. He was marched along the corridor, the other two following close behind. Ahead and to the left were the double doors of

the two central lifts; to the right the wide stairs down to the building's front entrance. His thoughts raced ahead, Nabiyev following through in his mind the next few seconds, desperately searching for the right opportunity to make his escape.

A metre from the stairs, Nabiyev suddenly twisted his left heel to stamp viciously down on his escort's ankle. As the man stumbled, Nabiyev wrested his arm free, charging down the stairway, then with reckless abandon he vaulted over the stair-rail and down onto the flight below. It was a fall of several metres, and he felt bones in his right foot crack as he landed off-balance close to the second-floor landing.

A bullet shattering the wooden rail close to his hand hurried him down the final flight. Nabiyev's every action was now based purely on instinct, but the futility of his response was already taking its toll, his despair neutralising the effect of the adrenalin.

An elderly couple hovered nervously beside the building's front entrance, bewildered eyes following Nabiyev as he elbowed his way past. A second bullet drew a strangled cry from the woman's lips, a crimson line lancing down her arm from shoulder to elbow. Nabiyev wrenched open the entrance door, stumbling his way out into the open. Heel first, he staggered down the front steps, his broken foot twisting away from the pain. Abruptly Nabiyev lurched to the left, pressing his body tight against the grey blocks of the building's front wall. As the first of Markova's men raced down the steps, Nabiyev reached across, both hands grabbing the man's gun arm and yanking him round. A vicious downward jerk and the arm snapped at the elbow, the man falling forwards, his shriek of agony cut short as Nabiyev's knee caught him full in the face. The man's gun clattered to the ground; off-balance, Nabiyev flung himself towards it.

A single shot rang out and Nabiyev felt a crushing weight smash him to the ground. His next breath was a tortured wheeze, the blood bubbling at his lips. As darkness overwhelmed him, Nabiyev's final thought was one of relief, satisfied he had done what was right, done what he could for the future well-being of Tatarstan.

Chapter 10

Sunday, May 16th

Moscow

A ten-metre wide map of the Baltic shone out from the north wall of the Command Centre, lights and numbers flickering brightly in a variegated display, with each coloured icon representing a multi-million rouble investment in both men and materiel. Every aspect of the Baltic Fleet's deployment—surface fleet, submarines, ground and coastal forces, naval aviation—was instantly accessible, including data on less vital aspects such as repairs, resupply, and reserves, the

pattern most complex in the south near to the coast of Kaliningrad. Most of the remainder of the Command Centre was taken up with banks of consoles; they in turn were looked down upon by a circular gallery, itself leading to adjacent conference and briefing-rooms. Control of the Baltic Fleet was actually under the command of Kaliningrad, with the Command Centre in Moscow merely reproducing the data from Fleet Headquarters.

Grebeshkov stared down through the wide window of the main briefing-room and studiously watched the interplay as various senior officers conversed with their opposite numbers in Kaliningrad. A quiet word from an Admiral and every major difficulty could be predicted, analysed and countered, almost as though routine. If only Grebeshkov's problems could so easily be solved—yet his hoped-for miracle was starting to take shape.

First, the traitor Nabiyeu, his betrayal revealing Grebeshkov's arrogance in declaring the FSB totally blame-free; surprisingly, Irina Golubeva had been gracious enough not to gloat, keen to encourage the lie that Nabiyeu be lauded as a Russian hero, his death more conveniently laid at the door of *August 14*. Other than six iPhones, the search of Nabiyeu's apartment had found little of interest, the satellite data from his Mercedes roadster a guide as to certain of his movements. Second, a painstaking trawl of rented accommodation had finally had its reward. In a pre-dawn raid on a house in St. Petersburg, the cell responsible for the bombs at the Mariinsky Palace and aboard the MS KONSTANTIN BALMONT had been captured intact, the three terrorists presently being interrogated deep within the Lubyanka.

The remaining members of *August 14* were wise enough to maintain a low profile, the Polish-trained cells having had months to fit in and find a secure refuge. Unless they chose to reveal themselves somehow, it would take time to whittle away at such foundations. It was also galling that three of the terrorists responsible for the initial devastating attack on the Moscow Metro were still at large. Eglitis and his two associates had managed to evade the massive media campaign and police hunt for more than twelve weeks now, and that couldn't be entirely down to Nabiyeu.

Grebeshkov turned away from the window, and retook his seat at the conference table between Irina Golubeva and a grey-faced Admiral. Golubeva was deep in conversation with a Colonel from the Ministry of Defence, apparently making the most of the fifteen minute break to press home the President's point of view, and determined to show the tougher side of Russia's political system. The Prime Minister now clearly knew the penalty for failure, news reports confirming he had suffered a massive heart attack, his present condition said to be critical. Grebeshkov was confident that there was an element of truth in there somewhere, his sympathy more with the PM's family, than the man himself.

A long sigh of frustration, then he reached forward to gulp down his second vodka of the morning. Abruptly he pulled back, annoyed with himself for his lack of resolve. For some obscure reason the alcohol took on a more important role, representative of his future success or failure. Grebeshkov made a simple resolution, just between himself and his conscience: no more vodka—at least until *August 14* was no more.

From Moscow Command Centre to a four-hour stint at his Lubyanka office, then on to an afternoon meeting of the National Advisory Committee—Grebeshkov was still the first to arrive, waiting impatiently whilst the others took their seats. The President quickly moved on to the single item on the agenda.

“Despite the FSB’s valiant efforts and three more terrorists removed from Moscow’s streets, the threat from *August 14* remains significant. General, I understand you are ready with an update on the Polish link.”

Grebeshkov had pooled reports from various agencies, again hardly needing to refer to any notes, “Today’s arrests could be a crucial breakthrough and we are working hard to get reliable data without compromising such important assets.” Or, in plain language, the interrogators were discovering as much as they could, as quickly as they dared, without first killing the three terrorists.

“It would appear,” Grebeshkov continued, “that fears of a second batch of terrorists arriving in the spring from Lithuania were definitely misplaced. Consequently, *August 14* can only maintain its present momentum by utilising one of the hidden cells or bringing in assets direct from Poland. Eglitis might even feel the need to act in person, a form of retaliation for *August 14*’s recent losses. We can use deductive profiling to try and predict potential targets—government offices and officials are at high risk, and are being protected accordingly. Eglitis is under pressure and in poor health, and wherever he’s hiding in Moscow there’s a potential vigilante on every street corner. This could well be our best chance to finish the Lithuanian component of *August 14* for good.”

“But not the Polish one,” the President said with a thin smile. “Thank you, General. Unfortunately, the situation with regards to Poland has not altered. There are still some twenty terrorists in Gdansk simply biding their time, waiting while someone works out how and when to smuggle them into Russia. And we won’t be able to stop them all. We cannot allow August 14 to go into hibernation or simply transfer elsewhere. Pressure on the Polish authorities, and subsequently the terrorists, will only begin once we cause some serious pain. Accordingly, the naval blockade and other sanctions will be enforced early tomorrow...”

Marshwick, England

Anderson got up late and had a lazy brunch, his Saturday outing with Charlotte going as well as he could ever have hoped. The weather had done its worst, a near gale-force wind and driving rain restricting their options, Charlotte finally settling on Tattershall Castle and Woodhall Spa; both Charlotte and Anderson had deliberately steered the conversation well away from difficult topics, and as a result it had been a relaxing and pleasant day out, their mutual love of films quickly turning competitive. Finally, it had been back to Charlotte’s Boston home, and wine, dinner, and bed—although not exactly in that order.

Yet throughout that rain-drenched day, Lincolnshire’s roads always seemed to have a smart-looking silver Audi somewhere close at hand, Anderson just not sure whether it was entirely down to his imagination working overtime. Having accepted that the Commander’s death was an accident, he had become rather

more blasé as to any potential risks; yet late at night, on his own and miles from anywhere, it had been difficult not to feel apprehensive.

In the light of day such fears had seemed exaggerated, Anderson irritated by his own willingness to put an enigmatic spin on every situation, however innocent. Erdenheim's multiple American links weren't by themselves suspicious and the terrorism theme started by the Commander could easily be nothing more than coincidence. And what if Erdenheim had well-connected friends who didn't appreciate Anderson poking around—was that really good reason to assume something underhand?

Determined to make amends for his earlier ill-considered accusations, Anderson's Sunday schedule began with a visit to the tall sycamore on the Graythorp road. The article on Darren Westrope might have started out as a convenient pretext but Anderson's conscience wouldn't allow him to now ignore it, those who had known and loved Darren deserving something better than an outright lie.

Anderson parked a few yards beyond the circle of floral tributes, spending a self-conscious twenty minutes taking a series of photographs. Part of him was curious to see whether a silver Audi would make an appearance but the single vehicle that drove past was both the wrong colour and make, the elderly female driver even giving Anderson a sad wave of support.

By the time he returned to the cottage, Anderson's thoughts were back to the problem of Erdenheim. He sat at the kitchen table, freshly-made coffee in hand, gaze drawn inexorably towards Zhilin's book, refusing to be beaten by a simple union of paper and ink. Charlotte had had no luck pinning down the American Marty's surname and Anderson idly tried a new internet search on Charles Zhilin, adding in 'Martin' in the vain hope of finding something relevant.

The top results seemed to offer up a solution too simple and easy to be correct, the links encouraging Anderson to look again at the book's list of acknowledgements. Three days ago the very first sentence had meant no more to Anderson than any other; now, thanks to Charlotte's persistence and Ray Fletcher's devious memory, it jumped out at him, offering an unexpected twist to the Erdenheim puzzle.

'I am indebted to my good friend and colleague, Martin Rebane, for his continued counsel and advice, his insight as to the causative factors of terrorism proving invaluable, and in many ways this book is as much his as mine.'

Martin Rebane—Marty of Lamborghini fame?

Anderson quickly scanned through the rest of the names on the two acknowledgements pages, there no-one else called Martin. It wasn't much but it was enough for Anderson to search for something more on Rebane, the first eight results linking back to Charles Zhilin and his three books. Which begged the question as to whether the Commander's phone calls to America might have had more to do with Martin Rebane than Pat McDowell?

As with Zhilin, the internet was a little lacking in detail on Rebane: Master's degree in International Relations from Oxford; early career in journalism, including a short stint with *The New York Times*; then the CIA, seven years as a counter-terrorism analyst and three as a Russian specialist; now a consultant to

various government and private agencies. No definite age but Anderson could make a good guess; more annoyingly there was no photograph.

Anderson was back on conspiracy mode, curious as to whether being a consultant to various private agencies might include Erdenheim. And if so, why the Centre would need the services of a counter-terrorism analyst for significantly longer than a half-day? Did it really matter anyway?

Devereau seemed keen to encourage Anderson to follow his instincts and basically, future progress came down to how enterprising Anderson was feeling, confrontational tactics perhaps his one chance of getting to the truth. A bit of gall and bluster, that's all it would take...

Chapter 11

Monday, May 17th

Graythorp, England

Anderson was baulked at the very first hurdle, Erdenheim's security gates remaining closed as he approached. Frustrated, he pressed the intercom, worrying he might well have to settle for option two and try to catch Rebane—if it were him—at his Boston home later that day.

“Hello, can I help?” It was a male voice, English accent, so definitely not McDowell.

Anderson looked into the baleful eye of the security camera and gave what he hoped was a winning smile. “My name's Michael Anderson; I was hoping to speak to Pat McDowell about a feature I've written on the Management Centre. I visited Erdenheim last Wednesday and I'm sure Pat would want to see the results.”

“Do you have you an appointment?”

“I'm afraid not, but I'll only be a minute.”

“One moment, please.”

It was only just past nine o'clock and Anderson now worried that he would simply be told McDowell wasn't there and to email the feature. The wait turned into a full minute, then abruptly the two gates separated, the way ahead open and inviting. Anderson edged slowly forward, a twinge of doubt starting to creep in as the gates slid shut behind him.

The car park had its usual mix of vehicles, although fewer in number than previously; one notable addition was a sleek white Lamborghini, the car's beautiful lines bringing an admiring glance from Anderson. He parked alongside, gathering up the Erdenheim printout before striding confidently up to the main entrance and through the door.

“Mr Anderson, welcome again.” McDowell was his normal smiling self, directing Anderson into his small office. Anderson duly followed, noting the absence of a receptionist; in fact the whole building seemed somewhat quieter than his last visit.

“How’s business?” Anderson asked idly. “You seem a little lacking in guests.”

“Oh, most are on a visit; different group to when you were here last but we’re virtually full.”

Anderson didn’t question the lie. He sat down opposite McDowell and passed across the printout. “I just wanted to check you were happy with your part of the feature before I pass it along to the *Boston Standard*; as I said before, you’re welcome to use the photos in any future publicity and I’ll email you the best ones with a copy of the final version.”

McDowell took the printout without comment and began to scan quickly through it, following Anderson’s lead by keeping up the charade. Anderson waited a few seconds before asking a more pertinent question.

“Is Martin Rebane about; I was hoping to be able to talk to him?”

McDowell’s head jerked up, eyes confused, “Martin who?”

“Rebane; has a house in Boston. I saw his Lamborghini in the car park.” There, it was done—bridges burnt and all pretence finally at an end. If Anderson was wrong and Marty wasn’t Rebane, he could always adopt the usual journalistic strategy of blaming his mistake on information received.

McDowell studied Anderson closely, then abruptly he stood up. “Just give me a minute, Mr Anderson.”

Anderson was left alone, unsure whether to feel pleased or perturbed, his guess as to Marty’s identity all-too obviously correct. The seconds dragged by, Anderson’s nervousness growing with every tick of the office clock. Confronting the problem no longer seemed quite so prudent.

The office door opened and a tall, silver-haired man entered, right-arm extended to shake Anderson warmly by the hand.

“Martin Rebane, as requested,” Rebane said, seating himself in McDowell’s chair. The body language was relaxed, the smile unconcerned. “Now, how can I help?”

The accent surprised Anderson: there was the expected American twang but with just a hint of something else. “Pat McDowell seemed confused as to who you were. I’m pleased he remembered.”

“Pat was just being protective. Erdenheim is naturally keen to ensure its guests’ privacy and most of us have better things to do than speak to wayward journalists.” Rebane gave Anderson a studied look. “Was there something specific you wanted, Mr Anderson?”

“I was just wondering what an expert in counter-terrorism and former CIA officer is doing at Erdenheim, especially one specialising in Russia. With the present crisis in Moscow, others might also find it of interest.” Anderson kept his tone polite, more curious than accusing. He could have thrown Commander Saunders into the mix, even implied there was some link between the Commander’s death and Erdenheim, but that seemed somewhere between outrageous and downright foolish.

A flicker of concern crossed Rebane’s face, “And you believe there’s a good story here?”

“You, Pat McDowell, a dozen other Americans and a couple of Russian speakers with McDowell at the *Farriers*—it all adds up.”

“To what exactly?”

Anderson shrugged, "I'm not sure at the moment but give me twenty-four hours and I might just be able to turn it into something worth selling."

Rebane gave Anderson a long hard look, almost as though sizing him up. "I sense you're jumping to an unfortunate conclusion, Mr Anderson; however, I guess that's not something that matters too much in your profession, just as long as there's a money-making headline. At this moment in time, any form of publicity would be unhelpful, particularly if it's inaccurate and misleading."

"Then give me the accurate and un-misleading version," Anderson responded. "If it's all totally innocent then you have no reason for concern."

Rebane took his time replying, "You put me in a difficult position, Mr Anderson, and it seems I have little choice but to trust your integrity. Just to be clear, anything said from now on is totally off the record and I would be grateful if you would turn off your phone."

Anderson didn't argue, taking out his phone and sliding it across the table so Rebane could confirm it was switched off. Now things really were getting interesting.

Satisfied, Rebane continued, "It is a difficult world we live in, Mr Anderson; one where a single terrorist group can hold a city, even a whole country, to ransom. The British Government, like any other, does everything it can to protect key infrastructure from terrorist attack; not just the threat from a bullet or a bomb but the more insidious one that has effectively brought Moscow to its knees."

"Cyber-warfare?"

Rebane nodded, "If you check your facts, Mr Anderson, you will discover that Britain's Intelligence Services have been involved with the private sector for a decade or more, primarily in the field of cyber-security. Erdenheim is part of that partnership; similarly, your government makes use of my expertise in counter-terrorism on an informal basis. Presently, we are just one several groups studying the recent terrorist attacks in Russia; if we can help stop London grinding to a halt like Moscow then Erdenheim will have earned its keep."

"Hence McDowell's two Russian friends?"

Rebane gave a half smile, "Russian? Or were they Polish? Perhaps your sources aren't quite as reliable as you think... When Pat warned me a journalist was sniffing around I thought it best to seek advice; your interest in turn flagged up Adam Devereau and the fact he was involved seemed of concern to your security services." Rebane gave an amused smile, "Are you and Devereau a threat to national security, Mr Anderson?"

Anderson just stared at Rebane, totally confused.

"I assume," said Rebane, his tone verging on the patronising, "you're aware Adam Devereau left MI6 under something of a cloud?"

MI6—Britain's foreign intelligence service; there was too much new information here for Anderson to take in and make sense of, Rebane cleverly managing to turn the interview on its head.

"Pat said you quizzed him about the young man who died in a car crash," Rebane continued. "And I imagine you assume we might have had a hand in George Saunders' death. There's no evil conspiracy here; we're actually trying to do some good, preferably without the blaze of publicity. I hope you can understand that, Mr Anderson. Erdenheim is hardly GCHQ or the NSA but we do our best;

unfortunately, the rapid escalation of the crisis in Moscow has in turn increased the need for a suitable counter and Pat's already helped out by rescheduling some of his clients. Your Government will of course compensate Erdenheim but I would hate for him to feel the relationship has created yet another problem."

Rebane's co-operative attitude was starting to become unnerving and Anderson belatedly tried to get the conversation back on track. "Why Erdenheim?" he asked testily.

"Its facilities and Jon Carter's brilliance make for an impressive combination," Rebane replied, his tone still one of restrained superiority. "We are also working to refine Carter's computer simulations for use in anti-terrorist training."

"A busy life," Anderson said, with a trace of sarcasm.

"A life presently split between the extremes of New York and Graythorp." Rebane stood up, choosing to bring the discussion to an end. "Our secret is in your hands, Mr Anderson; I wish you luck with it. If you need any more from Erdenheim, I suggest you speak to Pat."

USS JOHN FINN

Young refocused the binoculars and in an instant the quarter-mile gap between the JOHN FINN and the ADMIRAL GOLOVKO become uncomfortably close. He panned across the Russian frigate from bow to stern, pausing to take in the weapons systems while confirming his personal view that the frigate lacked the necessary firepower to fulfil its multi-functional role. Neither ship had a helicopter airborne, both sides apparently choosing not to add a third dimension to what was already a complex dance. A hundred yards aft of the frigate was the Russian corvette SOOBRAZITELNYY, a smart little vessel determined to help her larger sister thwart the JOHN FINN's every move.

Young let the binoculars rest against his chest, thoughts struggling with the problem of how best to follow his orders. The Russian blockade had taken NATO totally by surprise and the diplomats were working overtime to ensure a suitable resolution; that would take time, and until then the dubious honour of testing Russian resolve was duly accorded to the USS JOHN FINN.

Young had been kept well-informed as to the timeline of the day's events, it starting at 8 a.m. Moscow Time when Russia had privately informed Poland, the U.S. and the U.N. of the immediate implementation of a naval blockade, together with the closing of the man-made Baltiysk Strait and the so-called Friendship Pipeline. Three hours later, in a live TV address, the Russian President had given a vigorous defence of Russia's actions against Lithuania, detailing the physical evidence linking *August 14* with the dacha complex, before then showing a brief pre-recorded statement from Marek Tamm confirming his involvement. Next had come a robust condemnation of Poland, the President claiming Russia had proof of complicity between the Polish authorities and the terrorists of *August 14*, the location of a second terrorist base revealed. The forty-minute diatribe had ended with the formal announcement as to the implementation of a thirty-kilometre naval and air exclusion zone centred on Gdansk, Russia's main demand the handing over of *August 14*'s operatives.

The three hour delay before the public announcement was seen as a gesture of compromise from Russia, a final opportunity for Poland to act against the alleged terrorists. Yet it was now an opportunity ignored. The news reports gave some indication of Poland's fury at Russia's imperious actions, but for the time being the Polish President appeared content to let NATO take the lead. The various commentators seemed confident it was to no-one's advantage to further escalate the crisis, and mutual restraint was the new buzz-word.

This wasn't the first time Moscow had chosen the easy option of blocking the Baltiysk Strait and thus effectively shutting the small Polish port of Elblag, and the Friendship Pipeline was anything but, with regular disputes as to transit fees. Unfortunately, the splitting of the pipeline into the northern route to Poland and Germany, and the southern to Slovakia, Hungary and beyond, occurred once it had left Russia and reached Belarus—so a large part of Eastern Europe was now being starved of oil, not just Poland and the Baltic States.

Young was far from convinced Russia was keen to follow the concept of mutual restraint, and the three Russian warships en route from the Norwegian Sea were now only a few hours away, having just passed through the bottleneck of Zealand. So far they had been left unhindered, but if Poland had its way that could easily change. Germany might also choose to be difficult, Russia's actions indirectly threatening a fifth of its oil imports; of course, they might decide to be contrary, and join with certain other European nations such as France and Belarus by applying pressure on Poland instead.

To Young, it was obvious some form of naval confrontation was almost inevitable, his own orders very specific as to the use of minimum force. Russia had stated that the blockade of the Polish ports of Gdynia, Gdansk and Polnocny was to be total, with no shipping of any kind—merchant or naval—allowed to leave or enter, whatever its flag of origin. Now Young had to challenge that assertion, somehow guiding the JOHN FINN into the naval base at Gdynia without creating an international incident.

Theoretically, it didn't appear to be that difficult a task. Although the long finger of the Hel Peninsula severely narrowed the entrance to Gdansk Bay, it was still some thirty kilometres from Hel to a second peninsula—the Vistula Spit, the latter running west-east from Poland to Kaliningrad. The latest intelligence suggested Russia had stationed over thirty vessels along the line of its blockade, ranging from corvettes to destroyers; then there were the Naval Air Defence units operating from Kaliningrad. But with just one ship to guard each kilometre, Russia was relying heavily on her warships' ability to threaten and bully, with additional resources responding quickly to counter any Captain who wished to be obstinate.

There could also be as many as four submarines, the unseen threat perhaps more worrying than the physical presence of a surface vessel. Torpedo, missile, 130mm shell, or machine gun round—all would be equally problematic for any merchant ship foolish enough to test the blockade.

For the JOHN FINN, the most immediate obstacles were the ADMIRAL GOLOVKO and the SOOBRAZITELNYY, and at least one of the Russian warships had doggedly stayed between the JOHN FINN and the Polish coast, or more specifically the main shipping channel to Gdynia. According to reports, at least two merchant ships had already received a warning shot across their bows, but so

far the Russians had been wary of trying such tactics with the JOHN FINN, choosing instead to stick with a more literal meaning of blockade.

Since receiving his orders, Young had tried guile, deception, bluster, and finally raw speed to get past—each time, the ADMIRAL GOLOVKO and the SOOBRAZITELNYY had worked together to give Young the stark choice of giving way or colliding with one of them.

Young thought through each tactic once again, visualising them afresh from the Russians' point of view. Despite the JOHN FINN's excellent manoeuvrability, one or other of the smaller Russian vessels was always a little too agile, a little too fast—brute force was about all that was left, and even then he might have to barge his way past both of them.

The crew had been at General Quarters for several hours already, watertight doors closed, ship in lockdown, prepared to go to that final step to Battle Stations should the need arise. The Russian ships were similarly in a state of high alert, both vessels fully prepared for whatever might come next.

“Mr Rodriguez,” said Young to the officer of the deck (OOD). “The GOLOVKO will probably continue on her present course and match our speed. Let's get really friendly—try and keep no more than fifty yards off her starboard beam.”

Young kept a close eye on the Russian frigate, the JOHN FINN creeping closer until the two ships paralleled each other once more. As expected the GOLOVKO refused to give way, effectively blocking the JOHN FINN from closing in on Gdynia. The SOOBRAZITELNYY too closed up, ready to block the JOHN FINN if she made a sudden turn.

“Mr Rodriguez, crowd her some more and we'll try to force her away.”

The OOD gave the necessary orders and the JOHN FINN closed in a yard at a time towards the GOLOVKO. The helmsman's task was made far easier by a calm sea, and the two vessels were now heading towards the same point some four hundred yards ahead. Young was assuming the frigate would turn aside before the two ships collided, but he wasn't entirely convinced; although six knots was only a slow jog, the U.S. destroyer was twice as heavy as her Russian opponent, and in any clash the GOLOVKO would undoubtedly come off worst.

The GOLOVKO continued to ignore the JOHN FINN. Young could clearly see the officers on the frigate's bridge, only one of whom appeared to show any interest in the destroyer. An exasperated Young thumbed the intercom, warning the ships' crew as to the imminent collision. Seconds later the OOD pressed down on the yellow knob of the collision alarm, the strident triple beep a last despairing warning of intent.

With neither side prepared to give way, the outcome was inevitable.

The JOHN FINN hit the frigate just aft of her 130mm gun and with an anguished shriek the destroyer's bow scraped along the side of the GOLOVKO, the sound overwhelming the repetitive tone of the collision alarm. Young was safely strapped in his commander's seat, the others on the bridge grabbing hold of anything substantial, but even so a petty officer was knocked off-balance, crashing against the starboard bulkhead. The destroyer's greater momentum enabled her to shrug off the encounter with the smaller warship, and her course barely altered, the destroyer plunging forward in an explosion of spray. The ADMIRAL GOLOVKO

was thrust aside and she rolled sharply to port, a fifteen-foot gap appearing in her starboard guard-rail.

The two ships bounced apart, but the GOLOVKO immediately wrenched herself to starboard, virtually maintaining her original course abreast of the USS JOHN FINN.

“Damage-Control, Captain. Damage report ASAP.” Young glanced across at the GOLOVKO and a malicious smile touched his lips as he took in the wide scar running along the frigate’s starboard side, defacing her pennant number. The two ships continued to match course and speed, now running some thirty yards apart.

“Captain, Damage-Control. A few sore heads, Skipper; otherwise, okay.”

Young calmed his nerves and gave his opponent a hard stare: although the ADMIRAL GOLOVKO had probably come off worst, she hadn’t yet admitted defeat. *Best of three?*

The second clash was virtually a repeat of the first, with the GOLOVKO veering just a few degrees but not giving way, and both ships now adding a second set of scars to their paintwork.

Young finally lost patience, not willing to risk serious damage to either ship—yet his next action might well do just that. “Mr Rodriguez, take us two hundred yards off their starboard beam.” He pressed the intercom, “Combat, Captain. Mr Serelli; prepare to fire a shot across the GOLOVKO’s bow; make it no closer than fifty yards.”

Seconds later an alarm sounded throughout the ship as the destroyer’s 5-inch gun swivelled around to face the Russian frigate. The gun was radar-aimed and computer-controlled, compensation made for the pitch and roll of the JOHN FINN and movement of the target, even variations in wind strength.

Young waited, hoping something would happen so as to force him to alter his decision. For a full five minutes he said nothing. Finally, “Combat, Captain. Confirm weapons free; fire when ready.”

A loud crack from the gun followed almost instantly. The resultant explosion was a good sixty yards from the GOLOVKO, but water still cascaded down upon her deck, momentarily shrouding the frigate in a fine mist. Seconds later, the SOOBRAZITELNYY followed serenely in her wake.

The tension on the John Finn’s bridge was palpable, Young having to force his hands to unclench. Again the minutes dragged by.

Young keyed the intercom, “Combat, Captain. Once again, Mr Serelli; a little closer if you please.”

The second round was nearer by some twenty yards, yet the GOLOVKO simply coasted through the spray, seemingly impervious to the JOHN FINN’s taunts. Young didn’t dare risk a third shot: any closer and the frigate could easily be hit. The Russians certainly weren’t afraid of playing chicken, and it took guts to sit back and do nothing on the assumption the JOHN FINN wouldn’t actually blow you out of the water.

“Mr Rodriguez, steer course zero-one-zero; we’ll give ourselves a bit of space and review our options.” Young was running out of ideas. If he didn’t come up with something soon, there were no guarantees the Polish navy would be quite so accommodating. And it didn’t feel right to be retreating from an enemy just half your size... Perhaps a short break would give him sudden inspiration.

The gap between the JOHN FINN and the two Russian ships slowly increased, Young watching in frustration as the Russians cruised sedately on, no doubt congratulating each other on a job well done.

“Bridge, Sonar. Passive contact: bearing two-five-five; range approximately 7000 yards; possible submarine, confidence level high; designate—Sierra-One. Too much interference to confirm class or identity.”

The atmosphere on the bridge changed instantly from subdued anticipation to one of confusion. A new voice interrupted, “Bridge, Combat. No friendly subs anticipated this grid-area; contact potentially hostile.”

Young felt new rivulets of sweat run their way down under his collar. If the contact was indeed a submarine then he wasn't so sure it was hostile, it potentially one of Poland's ageing diesel-electric boats. The GOLOVKO's reaction to being sandwiched between a U.S. destroyer and a Polish submarine would be unpredictable, it hardly likely to be one of passive acceptance.

Young's fears were quickly realised. “Bridge, Combat,” said an excited voice, “The Russians have gone to Battle Stations; both ships.”

Young made an instant decision, “I have the Conn. All engines ahead flank! Left full rudder; come to course two-seven-five!”

The orders were repeated and the engines throbbed as the JOHN FINN surged forward, pulling sharply to port, her new course aiming her directly at the GOLOVKO. By putting the U.S. ship into close contact with the two Russian vessels, Young was hoping the submarine's captain would think twice before doing anything stupid.

“Battle Stations, Sir?” the OOD enquired, more calmly than he looked.

Young shook his head, “We're trying to help the GOLOVKO, not sink her. If we go to Battle Stations, the Russians might well assume we're attacking. That's quite possibly a Polish sub out there and if we're not careful someone is going to start a shooting war.” Young sounded far more confident about the identity of the submarine than he felt, but if it was Russian, then the GOLOVKO's reaction made no sense.

“Bridge, Sonar. Sierra-One: bearing two-six-eight, range 6600 yards, speed six knots; course zero-two-two, target class and identity still unknown.”

The JOHN FINN accelerated directly towards the Russian frigate, now some four hundred yards away. The GOLOVKO had also speeded up, trying to distance herself from the perceived threat. The SOOBRAZITELNYY swept round in a sharp turn, accepting the challenge and angling west towards the submarine, trying to protect the GOLOVKO.

“Combat, Captain. Keep those sub reports coming.” Young should ideally be in the CIC but he felt happier on the Bridge, somehow better able to judge the GOLOVKO's intentions. And there was always the danger that she could still interpret the JOHN FINN's actions as an attack. Using the bow-mounted active sonar might give the sub something to think about and perhaps convince the Russians that the JOHN FINN was as confused as they were—or it might just make matters worse, forcing the sub to react.

“Bridge, Combat. Sierra-One: target lost; there's too much noise, Sir.”

Young couldn't blame anyone; with the increase in speed the sonar team would be hard pressed to hear anything other than the JOHN FINN's engines—that's why

he should have had a helo scouring the sea with sonobuoys and active sonar. To a casual observer, the JOHN FINN was an impressive sight, the destroyer now at full speed with her wake churning astern, turning slightly to starboard in order to keep her bow aimed at the GOLOVKO. The situation was changing rapidly, both Russian warships obviously fearful of the submarine's intent.

The JOHN FINN continued its dash directly at the GOLOVKO, the Russian frigate in turn slowly pulling herself round to starboard towards the American warship. Young gave a smile of satisfaction, thankful the Russian captain had followed his lead; a torpedo attack was just as likely to hit the JOHN FINN as the GOLOVKO and a precarious form of mutual protection was now in place.

But not for long. Young tried to work through what each of the other captains were thinking: the GOLOVKO was distracted from her prime task, out of position and at present unable to obstruct the JOHN FINN; the SOOBRAZITELNYY too had other concerns. Assuming the Russian ships weren't in the mood to fire on the JOHN FINN, then Young's single worry was the unidentified submarine. And knowingly or not, the sub had already played its part.

"Left standard rudder," Young ordered. "Come to course two-seven-zero; maintain full speed." If the submarine's sonar operators were doing their job, they would soon be reporting that the JOHN FINN was now past the two Russian ships and heading at speed towards Gdynia. If the submarine was Polish, surely that would be enough to encourage the boat to withdraw. If not—well, that particular scenario still didn't make any sense.

The macabre dance continued, the GOLOVKO belatedly sweeping around to try and head off the JOHN FINN. The SOOBRAZITELNYY seemed confused as to what to do, and then she too swung back towards the destroyer, abandoning her race to counter the submarine.

Young mentally crossed his fingers: if no-one pressed a button marked 'Fire' whether it be in Polish or Russian, then the John Finn was finally about to satisfy her orders. Five more minutes and he might even give a smug smile of self-satisfaction.

Lincolnshire, England

"What led Rebane to mention Adam Devereau?" Charlotte asked curiously. "And he didn't need to tell you Adam used to work for MI6." She hadn't anticipated Anderson turning up at the agency with a welcome mid-morning coffee in hand determined to distract her, and she was in two minds as to how to deal with him. "Maybe he was just testing you?"

Anderson hadn't seen it that way at the time, but he now wondered whether Charlotte might not be right. He tried to recall the exact words, realising that perhaps the conversation's sudden lurch onto Devereau was a bit forced.

"Testing me? On what?"

"As to whether you're aware of Adam's past connection with MI6." Now totally unable to concentrate on work, Charlotte decided the easiest option was to give Anderson and coffee her full attention; it was either that or tell him to bugger off.

“Well, it was nice someone told me,” Anderson responded, sounding slightly indignant.

“Mum wasn’t sure how relevant it was,” Charlotte said, becoming defensive. “And I was forbidden to mention it. In any case, you can hardly complain when you forgot to mention that Marty was Martin Rebane. I thought this was joint effort, not every man for himself.”

“I wasn’t certain,” Anderson said, sounding only a little contrite. “I was making a lot of it up as I went along and obviously should have asked much more, especially about Erdenheim. When Rebane threw in Devereau and MI6, it just confused me.”

“It doesn’t take much,” Charlotte said, avoiding his eye whilst sipping her drink.

“I’ll ignore that. Rebane was definitely telling the truth about private companies helping out with cyber security; so it’s all plausible. He just seems unnecessarily eager to keep everything secret—surely Erdenheim would get more kudos from publicising its government links.”

“You would have thought so,” agreed Charlotte. “Yuri and Lara—so not Russian after all?”

“Maybe, maybe not; we somehow need to tease out the facts from the story Rebane’s concocted. And at the moment, I haven’t a clue how to do that.”

“You said Rebane’s accent was unusual and his actual country of birth might be a useful start. Hang on a sec...” Charlotte put down her coffee to deal with the office phone, switching instantly back to estate agent mode.

While waiting, Anderson tried a surname search, wondering if Rebane might actually be Russian-born.

“Rebane’s Estonian,” he announced, once Charlotte had ended her call. “Not definite, but likely. His surname means fox apparently and it’s about as common there as Walker is in the UK. In which case, shouldn’t he be helping *August 14* rather than trying to stop them?”

Charlotte gave him an angry look, “You can’t condemn everyone from Eastern Europe just because of a few extremists.”

“Just a vague thought,” Anderson said undeterred. “Thanks for the advice, I’ll go and see who else I can annoy...”

* * * * *

Monday was always a quiet day, and without Anderson to bother her, Charlotte could easily cope with the usual influx of email and phone calls, plus the occasional personal caller. Charlotte and her business partner varied their hours to suit, more or less keeping to a five-day week, with two part-time staff filling-in when necessary. Contrary to her outward show of annoyance, Anderson’s visit had been a welcome diversion, although he had an arrogant streak she always felt the need to counter, something not helped when his wild assumptions—or perceptive deductions as Anderson liked to call them—turned out to be correct.

Jessica’s plan to share the burden of reading all three of Zhilin’s books might not have met favour with Anderson but Charlotte had been more receptive, borrowing *The Failures of Counter-Terrorism* and managing to get past the first hundred pages. Now with time dragging, she decided to work on her own perceptive deductions.

The veracity of Rebane's story would seem to depend in part on the nationality of Yuri and Lara, and Charlotte followed Anderson's success by focusing purely on the book's acknowledgements. One name at a time she began the challenging task of matching each of the thirty-four names to an actual person, her task made a little easier by assuming everyone on the list had some connection with terrorism, be it job-related, as a consultant, an academic, or even as an ex-terrorist. Name, age, sex, nationality, expertise and internet link were all duly recorded onto her phone.

By late afternoon Charlotte had found all but nine and she now racked her brain to recollect everything Anderson had said about Yuri and Lara, his comments in turn culled from Rob at the *Farriers*. Common language Polish or Russian; Lara, in her fifties, possibly blonde, good English but probably not American; Yuri, fortyish, English not as good as Lara's. It wasn't a great deal to go on but it would have to do.

None of the men came anywhere close, well over half of them American; however, one woman was an encouraging match to Lara's profile—Klaudia Woroniecki, age 55, Polish, a political consultant and foreign affairs analyst. Appointed in November to Poland's National Security Bureau, her official title of Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Counter-terrorism was particularly impressive, Charlotte downloading a couple of photos for future reference.

Charlotte sat back in her chair, pleased with her afternoon's work. The thirty-four names gave a snapshot of Martin Rebane's professional associates and whilst it would be foolish to put any faith into her deductions, perceptive or not, Charlotte's possible success in identifying Lara might—if only for a second—smooth away Anderson's slightly superior and always annoying frown.

* * * * *

Martin Rebane stood by the open window and took a long drag at his cigarette, his body welcoming the nicotine as a long-lost saviour. Of late it was threatening to become a regular transgression, the cigarette helping to ease the stress of another difficult day. And where *August 14* was concerned, new problems were never far from his thoughts.

Despite his advancing years, Rebane was still able to attract the admiring stares of younger women; his obvious success might partly influence the initial look, but the darkest of blue-eyes set off by silver-grey hair would always rate a second glance. Born near the city of Tartu in Soviet-era Estonia, from Rebane's early memories two images stood out: protective, hard-working parents, their love for each other and their son never doubted, and a frail, kindly grandmother who had spent most of her evenings instilling in her young grandson an appreciation of his Estonian heritage. Then, in the space of a few months, twelve year-old Martin's grandmother had lost her long battle with cancer and his father had been crushed to death in a freak accident at work. His mother had struggled on, but there had been too many shocks too close together, and eight months later she too was dead. Rebane had spent the rest of his youth in a State Orphanage, a harsh regime made bearable by the occasional act of kindness and the hope of a better future.

With his every waking moment bombarded by images of Communist and Soviet ideology, such ideals were the one stable but hated element of his teenage years, and Rebane's growing sense of national identity had quickly become a confusion of conflicting loyalties. Determined to break out of the cycle of poverty, Rebane had worked hard, and was duly rewarded with a scholarship to read Politics at Tartu State University. Estonian Independence had brought with it a more personal bonus and with his tutor's backing Rebane took up a place at Oxford. The experience was close to a revelation, the academic rigour of Oxford ensuring he had continued to thrive, and a long-standing interest in the differing motives of terrorist groups had led to the first of many such articles. From Oxford, it was on to an eight-year stint as a journalist, based in the United States, Rebane gaining U.S. citizenship in 2003. The CIA had then come calling.

Talent, hard work, and a regular stream of articles established Rebane as an acknowledged expert in his field, his expertise ensuring he maintained strong links with the world's security agencies even after he had left the CIA. Despite such success, he had never forgotten the lessons of his youth, ever conscious of Estonia's long and difficult struggle for independence.

Purely as a theoretical exercise, Rebane had sought to find a way of removing the last vestiges of Russian influence and so securing Estonia's treasured sovereignty. An off-hand comment to a Polish colleague had brought an unexpected response, followed soon after by a meeting in New York. People of influence seemed to share Rebane's concerns and more to the point were willing to fund his ambition. If Rebane really had the know-how and contacts to test Russian frailty, then it would be foolish to ignore such an opportunity, the solution one essentially brought about by the will of the people, *August 14's* role purely that of creating the right environment to ensure success.

In the years since the end of the Cold War, Russia and the West had seen a surge of terrorist attacks and ethnic rivalry, and the national unity provided by a common enemy had evaporated as people's perception of the threat had changed. Rebane simply wanted to channel people's everyday frustrations to a more effective end, his co-conspirators a relentless mix of manipulation, deceit, and terror.

McDowell and Carter had helped Erdenheim become a surprising success as a management centre, almost outshining its covert role as an intelligence base and centre of operations for *August 14*. To some, Boston might have seemed an odd location, but its small port and the town's vibrant ethnic mix ensured Rebane's European associates could come and go almost unnoticed. The town's large Polish community had also proved to be an excellent source of occasional intelligence, bypassing the more official routes. Overall, Erdenheim had proved invaluable, its cutting-edge facilities and bespoke computer simulations giving *August 14* a further advantage.

Now, a combination of bad luck and bad judgement was threatening to bring Erdenheim to the attention of Britain's security services. George Saunders' unannounced visit in response to Anne Teacher's concerns had caught Rebane off guard, something subsequently provoking the Commander's interest; within days he had used past contacts to probe and enquire, pushing the boundaries well beyond just idle curiosity. With unease growing amongst *August 14's* backers, the decision had been made to terminate him as soon as practicable, the fickle nature

of luck showing that the Commander's murder had been a prudent choice, then with Anderson's arrival a completely pointless one. Darren's Westrope's accident had thrust Erdenheim into the spotlight, attracting the unwanted interest of villagers and local journalists. If George Saunders had still been alive it would doubtless have spurred his pursuit of Erdenheim, but in place of Saunders, the coincidence of two sudden deaths had instead tempted Anderson to investigate further. A stubborn and perceptive old man traded for a persistent and slightly less perceptive younger one.

Anderson was clearly playing his own devious game, guesswork and conjecture helping him stumble towards a confused interpretation of the truth. McDowell hadn't helped, his failure to appreciate the dangerous combination of jet lag and alcohol resulting in more public embarrassment for Erdenheim, and something else for Anderson to get his teeth into. The three-way conversation at the *Farriers* had supposedly revolved around trivia, nothing controversial, McDowell almost blasé as to the long-term consequences of his actions.

Anderson's latest visit to Erdenheim had seemed a final chance to convince him there really was no story here, and Rebane had steered as close to the truth as he had dared, concerned that Anderson might already know enough to recognise any obvious inconsistency or falsehood. Sadly with Adam Devereau now seemingly involved, that could well prove a very dangerous strategy and could Rebane really afford to step back and continue to do nothing?

Anderson and Devereau were not the only ones whose interference was proving unwelcome, and the film footage of the camp in Lithuania was merely the latest example of unsolicited meddling. Whilst such revelations had helped accelerate Russia's internal crisis, the Kremlin's response had gone far beyond the anticipated diplomatic bluster and eventual sanctions, the Gdansk blockade inflaming tensions throughout Europe. The final outcome was impossible to predict, even for Carter and his proven computer simulations, and well beyond anyone to control.

In Moscow, *August 14* had lost far too many valuable assets to remain effective, the high mortality rate highlighting the FSB's unexpected and unwelcome fight-back. The chance of reinforcements from the facility at Gdansk was also disappearing by the hour, Poland reacting to the Russian blockade by placing a police cordon around *August 14's* training camp, its occupants effectively under house arrest.

Additional resources would now need to be actioned ahead of time, their utilisation a delicate balance between breaking the Russian Federation apart and driving it back towards Soviet-style totalitarianism. As a result, Erdenheim could no longer maintain its dual function, and the Management Centre was having to tighten its belt to cope with this final phase. Erdenheim's normal timetable had now been completely abandoned, all courses cancelled with immediate effect—apologising to a set of very unhappy clients somehow seemed the least of their problems.

Rebane took a final drag on the cigarette and considered whether it would be advantageous to change tactics, if only for a day, and turn *August 14's* focus onto individuals rather than its more usual inanimate targets. It was a precarious time

both for Rebane and *August 14*, not a time to make rash decisions, most certainly not a time to make another mistake.

* * * * *

The return trip back from Boston had still not revealed a suspicious Audi skulking in the rear-view mirror and if Rebane was to be believed, then any followers were doubtless from the Security Services. Devereau had typically given short shrift to Anderson's complaint about not mentioning his links with MI6, claiming it was a time best left in the past; similarly, Rebane's presence at Erdenheim and his explanation as to his role were met with the text equivalent of a non-committal shrug, Devereau letting Anderson decide whether or not to cut his losses and move on.

Rebane might have called his bluff, but Anderson wasn't ready to give up just yet, curious as to Erdenheim's most recent visitors. The photographs from Friday had given him the helicopter's registration number, the Civil Aviation Authority website supplying the owner's name and address; forty minutes later, Devereau was in his car heading south of Watford and on towards Denham Aerodrome near Uxbridge, a sixty-mile round trip on the off-chance of learning something worthwhile.

If Anderson expected Devereau's persuasive skills would ensure some sort of breakthrough then he was disappointed, and the information was basic at best. Erdenheim had regularly chartered a helicopter from Heathrow to Graythorp, the majority of passengers American, usually no more than six. While it didn't directly contradict anything Rebane had said, it just seemed odd that Britain would rely so heavily on American expertise, with Carter apparently the lone UK representative.

Charlotte's arrival was a welcome after-dinner distraction, Anderson trying to be generous at her success in identifying Lara, irritated that he hadn't thought of it first.

"And Rob confirmed it was her?" he asked while reading through Klaudia Woroniecki's internet profile.

"Ninety percent certain," Charlotte said, trying not to gloat too much.

"And you've brought Zhilin's other two books with you because? Personally I'd rather burn them than have to read another page."

"I thought we might combine resources," said Charlotte with a smile. "With your perceptive genius and my deductive reasoning, then surely anything is possible. The acknowledgements gave us Rebane and Woroniecki—maybe your friend Yuri is in there as well? I'm still struggling to find nine people from the book that gave me Klaudia."

Anderson knew it was well worth a try. "I guess we're sticking with people whose expertise is related to terrorism in some form or another?"

Charlotte nodded, "Using Amazon as a filter helped with some of the more common names; there's also a Global Expert Database. There might only be fifty or so left to check, less if several double or triple up."

In fact it was simpler than Charlotte had imagined, there just thirty-five more names to be pursued, one from *The Tactics of Terror* immediately striking a chord.

"Aldis Eglitis," Charlotte said, staring down at the page. "He's the man the Russians are desperate to get their hands on."

“While true,” said Anderson with a shrug, “it still proves nothing. Just because Zhilin consulted with Eglitis, that doesn’t mean Rebane knows him. Even if they worked together on the book, that was years ago; Devereau would just laugh at me if I used one dodgy reference to somehow link *August 14* to what’s happening at Erdenheim.”

“But you have to admit, it’s intriguing.”

“As with everything we’ve found,” said Anderson exasperated.

The news reports had been working hard to keep them apprised as to events in the Baltic, the Government in Warsaw vehemently denying any prior knowledge of August 14’s Polish base. Erdenheim’s complicity remained unproven but the amount of circumstantial evidence was slowly gathering pace and for what it was worth, Anderson’s own verdict on Poland was rapidly edging towards guilty.

Chapter 12

Tuesday, May 18th

Moscow

Grebeskov ignored the driving rain and strode purposefully along Nikolskaya Street, forgoing his official car for the short journey from the Lubyanka to the Kremlin. For his four bodyguards it was far from ideal, but Grebeskov had curtly dismissed their concerns. With one leading the way, the others kept close to Grebeskov while giving him a certain amount of personal space; fortunately, the bodyguards’ very presence often created its own protective bubble, and in the main the other pedestrians quickly stepped aside.

The narrow street was one of the oldest in Moscow, its fine buildings once making it a centre for scholars and poets; now it catered for the fashionable and the thirsty, the bright lights of the boutiques and bars blighting the ornate stone facades. Since the uprising of ‘93, Moscow’s streets and squares had undergone a popular transformation, and in an attempt to eradicate the memory of 70 years of communist-inspired ineptitude, the city had gradually reverted to its pre-revolutionary state. So Twenty-Fifth of October Street had once again become Nikolskaya Street, with the even more preposterous Fiftieth Anniversary of the October Revolution Square restored to its more traditional title of Manezhnaya.

The walk was slowly helping to clear Grebeskov’s mind, his thoughts preoccupied with the latest reports from Kaliningrad. May 18th: the Baltic Fleet should have been celebrating its birthday; instead, it was forming an ever tighter noose around Gdansk and Gdynia, while readying itself for the arrival of yet more NATO ships. Other than the USS JOHN FINN, only a handful of vessels had been foolish enough to test the blockade and in such cases the warships had been quick to enforce their mandate; four merchant ships had been fired upon, one suffering minor damage, no casualties reported.

In reply, NATO had denounced and threatened, with additional warships now being deployed to the Baltic, both from the U.S. Sixth Fleet and their European allies. Diplomacy was still struggling to find a solution, with talks at the United Nations deadlocked. For the moment it had become a test of wills, and eventually NATO's raw power would force Russia to give way. But Poland too had been censured, and Polish public opinion was split as to whether the Government was implicitly helping *August 14*. The terrorists themselves had apparently been spirited away from their base near Gdansk, their present whereabouts unknown.

In Russia, protests continued to grow, with Arbat Square the main focus for dissent. Violent clashes between demonstrators and police were also being reported from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok. The U.S. and Polish embassies were virtually under siege and the theory that *August 14* was an American-Polish invention was rapidly gaining acceptance. Russia's aggressive response had generally been well received, many of influence warning the Government against accepting any US-led compromise, some going so far as to demand even tougher action against Poland.

Otherwise, the streets of Moscow were relatively peaceful, *August 14* noteworthy for its inactivity. Despite the lack of progress as to whether the terrorists trained in Poland had even reached Moscow, Grebeshkov was growing more confident that *August 14*'s strength had finally been blunted. Link and pattern analysis, using CCTV evidence of Nabiyeu's movements combined with the data from his car, was also helping highlight where others from *August 14*—even perhaps Eglitis—might be found, just one of several strategies vying to complete their destruction.

By the time Grebeshkov reached the Pokrovsky Opera the pavement had become more crowded. Distracted, Grebeshkov almost walked into an elderly couple, the woman having to quickly step aside. The General turned to apologise, his words suddenly stilled as the woman gave a shuddering cry and collapsed to the ground, a bright red welt newly revealed on her jacket.

One of Grebeshkov's bodyguards reacted far quicker than the General and a hard shove sent him up the three steps towards the Opera entrance. Grebeshkov had time to realise someone was shooting at him and time to wonder why he couldn't hear the shots above the screams, when both legs abruptly buckled beneath him, a dark cloud sweeping him down into unconsciousness.

* * * * *

From the opposite pavement Eglitis backed away, moving south-west towards the Kremlin. As two of Grebeshkov's bodyguards crouched over the General's still body, a third opened fire, the shop window beside Eglitis shattering with a deafening crash. Around Eglitis the pavement emptied as pedestrians sought sanctuary wherever they could. At least one person was already wounded, his cries merging with the frightened screams of those caught up in the mayhem. A few yards away, a car had smashed into the rear of another, virtually blocking the street, a bemused driver standing beside his car and staring open-mouthed at the chaos unfolding on either side of the street.

Further back down Nikolskaya Street, a blue Lada mounted the pavement, terrified pedestrians flinging themselves aside as the car fought its way along the one-way street and past the now stationary traffic. Eglitis pressed himself into the

cover of a doorway, firing twice in the vague direction of Grebeshkov's bodyguards; then, as the Lada shuddered to a halt beside him, he wrenched open the rear door and threw himself in.

An instant later bullets peppered the side of the car, the young driver grunting in pain as blood darkened the back of his shirt. He jammed his foot back down on the accelerator and the Lada leapt forward. Another hundred metres and the man wrenched the wheel to the left, down a narrow lane and past the Epiphany Monastery. Abruptly the Lada screeched to a halt behind stationary traffic, Eglitis thrown painfully against the driver's head-rest.

"Keep going!" Eglitis shouted. "Just get us anywhere but here!"

The driver used the pavement again, the Lada moving only a few yards before a line of parked and empty cars blocked the way ahead. A savage pull on the wheel, and the Lada smashed its way back onto the road, cars battered aside in its frenzied attempt to break free.

The driver turned as though to speak to Eglitis, then with a blood-choked sigh he slumped forward. Eglitis took a glance behind, choosing to continue on foot, half-running half-walking, gun hand held tight inside his jacket. He gave another hurried glance back, brain filtering out the innocent to focus on four men in the black uniform of the FSB's counter-terrorist unit, plus at least half-a-dozen police. The closest was some seventy metres away, gun drawn, looking but not yet seeing his quarry. Eglitis couldn't understand how the security forces had reacted so quickly, sensing now that he had been drawn into some sort of trap.

He raced left, heading towards the nearest metro entrance. Heart pounding, his breathing was becoming laboured and he felt his chest begin to tighten, the spasm pressing in with an intensity that drew a sudden gasp.

Eglitis staggered to a stop, sinking to his knees, fighting against the pain.

From around the corner a single policeman appeared gun in hand. He looked straight at Eglitis, then shouted something incoherent. Eglitis was barely conscious but he managed to loose off a shot, hand shaking with the strain.

The reply was instantaneous, a bullet tugging at Eglitis' right arm, a second thumping into his side. The shock turned the angina into a full-blown heart attack and a grey-faced Eglitis collapsed to the ground, left hand clutching helplessly at his chest.

Bushey, England

Devereau was running late, the plans for his grand-daughter's birthday apparently requiring his involvement in a long list of instructions, thus ensuring he would not suddenly cry off with a forgotten appointment or some other familiar excuse. List duly considered and confirmed, Devereau was given leave by his wife to begin his usual early morning constitutional for the newspaper. The commuter and school traffic had just about ended, a daily waste of time of which Devereau was delighted not to be a part. It was eight years since he and MI6 had parted company, Devereau being pig-headed and resigning on a matter of principle when falsely accused of fiddling his expenses and then trying to cover it up. The injustice of it all played only a small part in his reasons for leaving. What rankled

most was his superiors' lack of belief in his ability. If he had wanted to fiddle his expenses, it would have taken far more than a junior clerk to ferret it out.

That was all well in the past, and Devereau was quite proud of the freedom his new occupation gave him—no fixed base except his home, no secretary except his live-in daughter, no hour-long city commute. Thank heaven for his HTC phone: it had most of the resources of his previous office, all nicely wrapped up in one very smart pocket-sized package.

He walked at a steady pace, finding the breeze with its persistent rain more refreshing than unpleasant. In any case, Devereau was feeling rather pleased with himself, and it would have taken a torrential downpour to dampen his mood. Asking Anderson to go to Marshwick had been one of Devereau's better ideas and it was clear there was something very unusual happening at Graythorp. Despite his cavalier treatment of Anderson, he was now as much a friend as employee, and Devereau was content to let Anderson take the lead, helping out if needed. Friends in the Security Services were nowadays few and far between and Devereau mentally worked his way through his diminishing list of Intelligence contacts, weighing up which one might know something of Erdenheim's true role.

Some fifty yards behind Devereau, on the opposite side of the road, a stolen BMW crawled slowly along. The driver kept the BMW in second gear, making regular checks on rear-view and wing mirrors for signs of other traffic. Despite the hour, the suburban road was relatively quiet, and *August 14's* second target of the day never once looked back, Devereau striding along at a surprisingly brisk pace.

The BMW's driver let the car glide to a halt while he carefully checked the mirrors once more. Still undecided as to his next move, he wavered between a simple hit-and-run or waiting for an opportunity with a more predictable outcome. It needed to be clear-cut, and concussion or even several broken bones would simply not suffice.

Devereau gave a quick glance behind, then started to angle his way across the road. The driver made an instant decision. Seizing his chance he pressed down hard on the accelerator and the BMW surged forward.

Devereau was only a yard past the central white line when he looked to his left. For a brief second he froze, then instinctively he threw himself backwards.

The driver snatched the steering wheel to the right and there was a dull thump as metal and plastic met flesh and bone, Devereau's body half twisting as his head smashed down onto the bonnet. An instant later his broken body was cast aside, a squeal of protest dragged from the tyres as they skidded across the tarmac. The driver immediately released the brake, before thrusting his foot back down on the accelerator.

The adrenalin was still doing its work as the driver swung the car through two right turns and out onto the main road. Now he began to wonder if he had been too clever, the shriek of the tyres must have attracted attention and already someone might be on the phone, giving details of the colour and make of the car. Yet an innocent driver would surely have slammed on the brakes, even if he later drove away in panic.

The driver forced his breathing to slow: no need to worry, it was a job well done.

Lincolnshire, England

Breakfast became a rushed affair and it was well after eight by the time Charlotte left, Anderson wasting another hour before choosing to get with grips with writing his second article on Erdenheim; this one not just for local consumption but a money-making exclusive unmasking all of Erdenheim's many secrets. Sadly, he wasn't quite certain as yet what exactly they were.

Anderson sat in the kitchen, paper notes resting on the table beside him, and stared at the laptop hoping for inspiration. Devereau was the expert on high-powered scandals and exposés, Anderson the apprentice with his first big case and depending upon how well their assumptions panned out, either Erdenheim was part of a covert scheme to counter *August 14* or it was *August 14*. Ideally, Anderson wanted an opening statement that was suitably dramatic and could cleverly cover all possibilities, but with facts presently a little thin on the ground, that was proving difficult.

Anderson's deliberations were interrupted by the crunch of a car on the gravel drive. He glanced through the window to see McDowell emerge from a black SUV; no sign of anyone else. Anderson mulled over his options then dismissed the cowardly ones—even so, he only half-opened the front door.

"Mr Anderson, I hope I haven't interrupted anything important. I've come with an invitation from Martin Rebane..."

McDowell's demeanour was relaxed, his smile seemingly genuine. Anderson breathed out in relief, his grip on the door loosening. It was the only invitation McDowell needed, and in one fluid motion the door was barged open, Anderson thumped in the pit of his stomach.

Doubled over, he took a step back, unable to do anything but watch as McDowell strode across the threshold, grabbing Anderson by the shoulders and dragging him into the kitchen and up onto a chair.

Anderson sat gasping for breath and trying not to throw up, eyes fixed on McDowell as he pulled up a chair to sit down opposite, gun held casually in his right hand. Two more men appeared from outside, one starting a search of the kitchen, the other checking Anderson's pockets, his phone and keys duly joining the laptop on the kitchen table. The rest of the cottage was next on the men's list, McDowell seemingly content to keep a wary eye on Anderson while idly reading through his handwritten notes.

"Make yourself at home," said Anderson, still struggling not to be sick.

"You just couldn't let it lie," McDowell said, with the trace of a smile, "and look where it's got you. As soon as you sent Devereau to Uxbridge, you left us with little choice." He glanced down at Anderson's notes, "Martin Rebane, Klaudia Woroniecki, Aldis Eglitis and someone called Yuri—you've been busy."

Anderson stayed silent, watching as McDowell's men returned, one placing a suitcase beside McDowell, the second adding the ubiquitous *Red Terror* to the select pile resting on the kitchen table.

With a wry smile McDowell opened the book to a random page before abruptly snapping it shut, his tone instantly becoming more hostile, "Who else knows about Erdenheim?"

Anderson ignored the question. “Am I going somewhere?” he asked, looking down at his suitcase.

McDowell took his time answering, his voice returning to its previous more casual inflection. “Just for a couple of days. As I said, you have an invitation from Marty—not one you can easily refuse, unfortunately. And if anyone gets curious, we’ve left enough clothes to suggest you’re coming back.”

Anderson had to ask, “Is that likely?”

“Anything’s possible,” McDowell replied, with a cold smile. “I’ll ask again, who else knows the truth about Erdenheim?”

“The truth?” repeated Anderson, desperately trying to think of something that would save him. “I don’t even know what the truth is.”

“Not sure I believe you, Mike. Lie again and I’ll break your fucking arm.” The words were spoken with barely a change in tone, yet McDowell left little doubt he would be more than happy to carry out his threat.

“Check my notes,” Anderson said nervously. “Devereau got nothing useful from Uxbridge. I might not have taken Rebane at his word but that doesn’t mean I know what’s really happening at Erdenheim; I had a couple of ideas but nothing definite.” It was near enough the truth and it might just be enough to protect Charlotte and Devereau.

“And what ideas might they be?”

Anderson knew McDowell wouldn’t believe him if he came up with something trivial and he just had to try and muddy the waters a little. “It was a toss-up between Erdenheim helping the FSB against *August 14* and somehow trying to take advantage of the terrorists’ success; either way it seemed to explain why you were so sensitive about unwanted publicity.”

“But now you believe something different?”

“People threatening you with a gun can do that,” said Anderson softly. “I’m guessing Erdenheim is closer to *August 14* than I imagined.”

McDowell stared at Anderson thoughtfully, “I’m almost convinced you’re telling the truth, Mike; for your girlfriend’s sake, you’d better hope that Rebane thinks so too...”

Five minutes later, a morose Anderson was in the back of his car on the way to Graythorp, McDowell seated beside him, the SUV following on close behind. The car stopped outside the Management Centre’s front entrance, McDowell and one of his men hustling Anderson through the door and into the small office.

There was a wait of several minutes before Rebane finally appeared, the questions of earlier repeated. Anderson stuck with his story, doing his best to emphasise that Devereau had little clue as to Erdenheim’s actual role, Charlotte knowing even less.

It was a good twenty minutes before Rebane seemed satisfied; a brief consultation with McDowell then he slid across an iPhone, the display already showing a picture.

“You recognise the image?” Rebane asked quietly.

Anderson looked, then nodded. The ‘Welch and Saunders’ sign left no room for doubt, while the timestamp showed the image had been taken earlier that morning.

“We have someone outside the estate agent’s and another watching Charlotte Saunders’ house. Co-operate, and no harm will come to her, or you. All we need is for you to convince Miss Saunders that you’ve disappeared off somewhere for a while. Now, surely that shouldn’t be too hard.”

“And you’ll kill us both if I don’t? Two more deaths will hardly protect Erdenheim.” Anderson had regained a little backbone.

Rebane looked thoughtfully across at Anderson, “Your cottage is nice and isolated; it would be tragic if it caught fire with you and your girlfriend asleep inside. I imagine it should be well alight before anyone else notices...” Rebane shrugged, “A credible scenario, at least for a while. In any event, it will give us the time we need and your lack of cooperation would have achieved nothing.”

“Charlotte might not believe me,” Anderson said desperately. “You can’t just kill her because I’m a bad actor. And if Charlotte contacts the police then what’s the point—you’ll just convince them she’s telling the truth.”

“The point is,” Rebane said forcefully, “that Erdenheim needs to be left alone, without anyone interfering in matters that are not their concern. If you think I’m bluffing, then that would be a very serious mistake. Do you not yet understand what you’re up against? We couldn’t operate as we do without the authorities turning a blind eye. *August 14* isn’t just a few terrorists; it’s a united international effort to break Russia apart. Any appeal to the police would simply be classified as a crank call, or filed and instantly forgotten. Your friend Devereau has already been successfully warned off and you’re entirely on your own, no-one of importance caring whether you live or die.”

Anderson’s brain couldn’t function and he had no clue as to whether Rebane was telling the truth or not; anything seemed possible, and he was too confused to work out even the most obvious flaws. Anderson seemed to have little chance to save himself, but somehow he might still be able to save Charlotte. However, the way he felt at the moment, she would easily hear the stress—even fear—in his voice.

“I can send a text...” Anderson muttered, shaking his head. “I’m not sure I’m presently up to speaking to Charlotte, she’ll know instantly something is wrong.”

“I think the two of you have gone past the stage where a text would suffice, especially under such circumstances. If you phone her at the estate agent’s, I assume she wouldn’t expect a video call, and we can work on what you need to say... What does she know of Adam Devereau?”

“He’s just a name,” replied Anderson, not sure what Rebane was after. “She knows he’s my boss but that’s it.”

“Devereau knew George Saunders from when exactly?”

“It was years ago; twenty or more. I got the impression they hadn’t been in a contact for a good few years.”

“Yet he still sent you to pay his respects. Why was that?”

“Guilt, I guess,” said Anderson getting exasperated. “He certainly couldn’t be bothered to go himself and I owed him a favour; it wasn’t anything complicated.”

Rebane seemed pleased for some reason, perhaps worried that the link between Saunders and Devereau might have been closer. “Relax, Mr Anderson; one brief call to Charlotte Saunders, and then it’s a nice sea voyage to Poland and accommodation better suited than Erdenheim to cope with unwelcome guests.”

“Somehow that doesn’t inspire me with confidence. Is to be an accidental drowning this time, or will you just wait until I get to Poland?”

“You are not the enemy here, Mr Anderson. All I need is a week, two at the most; then you will be released. If you’re lucky you might even get a few people to believe your story, just not anyone who really matters.”

Anderson remained silent, totally unconvinced, fearful of what the next few hours would bring.

* * * * *

Charlotte was feeling rather happy but at the same time ashamed—happy with how well everything was going with Anderson, yet ashamed because her father had died only a short time ago. Not that he would ever have begrudged her such feelings, but somehow it just didn’t feel quite right and it hadn’t helped that Jessica seemed to be doing all she could to encourage Anderson. Erdenheim too seemed to be doing its best to bring them closer together and only when that particular puzzle had been resolved would it be clear as to whether their relationship really did have a future...

As if on cue, the insistent cry of her mobile broke into Charlotte’s thoughts, the display identifying the caller as Anderson.

“Hi Mike, you can’t be missing me already?”

“Sometimes, when one person is missing, the whole world seems empty...”

“Very poetic; it doesn’t sound like Shakespeare but I bet you didn’t make it up.”

“Sadly, I didn’t and unfortunately, I’ve forgotten where it’s from. My apologies but I’ll have to take a rain check on tonight.”

“No problem,” Charlotte said, her voice successfully hiding her disappointment. “I trust you’re doing something or going somewhere very important?”

“Afraid so; I can’t go into details but external pressure is being applied with veiled threats related to National Security and suchlike. Basically I’ve been told to lay off Erdenheim and in exchange I’ve been promised an exclusive. I just need to pick up some fresh clothes from home and then I’m off to Warsaw. Sorry...”

Charlotte didn’t know quite what to say, more upset than she would have imagined, but at the same time annoyed with herself for being pathetic. “So, where are you now? Still at the cottage?”

“No, Peterborough; I’ve just pulled over for a quick break. I’m really sorry; it all happened in a bit of a rush.”

“You said Warsaw?” Charlotte asked, checking that she’d heard correctly. “I take it this has something to do with August 14?”

“It might do,” Anderson replied mysteriously, “but I couldn’t possibly comment.”

“Warsaw... Sounds nice,” Charlotte said wistfully, regaining some of her composure. “Lots of palaces, castles, and Chopin—someone with an ounce of romance might think of inviting a friend along...”

There was an overlong delay before Anderson responded, Charlotte sensing a subtle change in his voice. “I can do romance, Lottie; I should have thought of it earlier. A nice five-star hotel for two. Once I get home, I’ll organise everything.”

Charlotte froze, instantly annoyed at Anderson’s use of the hated diminutive, and she had to bite off a sharp response. “How long exactly would it be for?” she asked, trying to give herself time to think.

“A few days, Lottie, it’ll be fun...”

Again that name: Anderson knew how much she hated it, and even in jest he surely wouldn’t be so insensitive as to use it. And by doing so, he was convincing her that Warsaw was basically a bad idea. “Thanks, Mike, but I was only joking; there’s no way I could get time off anyway.”

“Oh, well, another time. I should be back probably at the weekend; I’ll give you a call when I get to Warsaw...”

Charlotte slowly put the phone down, her mind in turmoil. Anderson couldn’t even be bothered to pop in and see her before he rushed off south, and he would have come through Boston to get to the A16. Had she misjudged him so badly? And why did everything have to be done in such a hurry? She shook such thoughts aside, looking up as a young man entered the office. Charlotte gave him her best smile but when he seemed happy to browse, she turned back to busy herself at her desk.

Exasperated, she searched a random selection of files for something to do, anything to take her mind off Anderson; that was the problem with touch screens, there was nothing you could easily batter like a mouse or a keyboard.

* * * * *

“Not bad,” Rebane said. “But you should have pushed her more with Poland.”

“She just wasn’t keen; in any case that wasn’t what we agreed to.” Anderson had done his best to keep Charlotte safe, his only hope now was that Rebane would believe she represented no threat and leave her alone.

“What we agreed to?” Rebane repeated with a trace of annoyance. “I’m not sure you quite understand your situation. I tell you what to do and you do it. Poland was a good option and it’s a shame I didn’t consider the possibility she might want to tag along.”

“A good option? Not for Lottie.”

“I sense she knows more than you have implied; she’s a smart girl and I’m not sure I can protect her if she continues to be a nuisance. She might actually be safer kicking her heels in Poland, and—believe it or not—I regret her father’s death. To me it was unnecessary; unfortunately, some of my associates aren’t quite so moderate and felt that pre-emptive action was required.”

“Blowing up half of Moscow doesn’t seem particularly moderate. And how can I trust your promises when you’re obviously not the one in charge.”

“Russia is hardly an innocent party and the usual maxim of casualties of war still holds good. As to whether you can trust my promises...” Rebane gave a thin smile, “Concern has been expressed as to your welfare here at Erdenheim, with the fear that Pat might overstep his authority. Poland is the safe choice for you as well as Miss Saunders.” He lapsed into silence, iPhone restlessly twirled between his fingers. Abruptly it sounded and he stepped outside to take the call, returning within a minute.

“Charlotte Saunders,” Rebane reported, “seems pretty pissed off but not suspicious. I guess she believed you.”

“So now what?” Anderson asked softly.

Rebane took his time replying. “Maybe Miss Saunders will change her mind about Warsaw; we’ll give her a few hours, and then try something different.”

* * * * *

Jessica doubtless would have proved sympathetic and offered a virtual shoulder to cry on, but Charlotte was in no mood to share her woes. She'd only known Anderson just over a week, and was still confused as to why she felt so let down. Lottie was after all just a word but to Charlotte it meant far more, primarily an unpleasant reminder of childhood taunts. Under normal circumstances, a good book with a side order of chocolate was the best antidote to turn her mood around, but the distraction of work would have to make do. It wasn't just Lottie; it was almost as if Anderson had deliberately tried to put her off Warsaw. If so, she wanted to know why.

A chirrup from her mobile broke into her thoughts, her mood darkening as she saw it was a text from Anderson. Charlotte forced herself to wait for a full minute before reading it, brow furrowing as she scanned across the lines. Again there was the annoying Lottie, this time with the arrogant assumption she was some contrary female who would change her mind on a whim, someone who could be bought by the purchase of a plane ticket and the promise of a posh hotel.

Charlotte left it for another half hour then sent a curt rejection in reply, stopping short of telling Anderson to get lost. Perhaps, when she cooled down, everything might look a little different and she was wise enough not to completely burn her bridges. But, for the moment, Anderson was a selfish and insensitive bastard who deserved to rot in hell.

By the time she arrived home, Charlotte was calm enough to look afresh at phone call and text. For a week she had investigated and questioned, and had learnt to follow a lead or work through a problem. Now she put her detective hat on again and tried to leave emotions aside. What if 'Lottie' was deliberate? Anderson was well aware of how she would respond. Why bother asking her to go to Warsaw if he wanted her to refuse? Perhaps he felt obliged to ask, but for some reason believed going to Warsaw was unwise, even dangerous. *But still safe enough for Anderson?*

Charlotte quickly became fed up going round in circles; she wanted answers and had a good idea who might help supply some of them. In the end it took a trip to Marshwick, plus a slightly disconcerting search of her parents' house, before she finally managed to acquire Devereau's contact details.

Back home once more, she sat brooding over a cold cup of coffee, if not frightened then at the very least worried. Once Devereau's mobile had repeatedly gone to answer phone, Charlotte had moved on to the landline, ready with her opening line of thanking Devereau for his commiserations regarding her father's death. The call had only lasted a few seconds, the sad voice of Devereau's daughter a warning to tread carefully and all Charlotte had been able to extract was that Devereau was very poorly in hospital, having been hit by a car while out for his morning walk.

Charlotte made herself a fresh coffee, then chose to persist with the theme of Devereau. Even though it wasn't worthy enough for the national news, the internet carried the story of a hit-and-run in Bushey: local man, age fifty-six, in critical condition, police appeal for witnesses, occurred around 9.20 a.m.

There was no doubt in Charlotte's mind the victim was Adam Devereau. So what the hell was Anderson up to? He wouldn't have done anything without consulting with Devereau first and how could he have done that with him in intensive care? Struggling to understand, Charlotte finally managed to convince herself that Anderson had obviously spoken to Devereau before the accident, and had thus been unaware of what had happened. Consequently, she was probably worrying over nothing.

There seemed only one way to be certain. However, Charlotte was becoming fearful of every new disclosure, and she took her time working out exactly how to play it. Sticking with her preference for lists, she carefully prepared two versions of things to say: version one to be used if Anderson really was a chauvinist pig, the other if he was in trouble. If the latter, she also needed some way of getting him to tell her where he was and whether she needed to go to the police. And how on earth could she do all that without making Rebane or McDowell or whoever it was, suspicious? Was Anderson in immediate danger, and was she too at risk? And what about her mother?

It seemed impossible to get answers to everything, so she forced herself to prioritise. As long as Anderson's brain was switched on and he remembered a friendly argument from Saturday, it might just work—not that she really believed she would need the back-up option.

A sudden thought, and after a rapid search she added a newly-found app to her phone, one which claimed to be able to provide the geographic location for both incoming and outgoing calls. That seemed about as much help as technology could supply; the rest was down to her.

Charlotte calmed herself, then checked each of her two versions for a final time. Neither was perfect but they would have to do, and if she didn't phone Anderson soon, she'd certainly lose her nerve.

When Anderson's phone went unanswered and defaulted to a recorded message, Charlotte had her response ready. "Hi Mike, it's Lottie. Not sure if you're still in England or have reached wonderful Warsaw, but I was thinking about what you said. Give me a call when you've got a moment." When the location app quickly flashed up 'Unknown', Charlotte restrained her impulse to throw the phone against the wall.

It was another thirty minutes before Anderson called back, again opting for voice only. "Hi Lottie, I just got your message." Anderson's tone was positively cheerful, or was he just relieved?

"Hi Mike, thanks for calling back. How are things going?"

"Pretty good, thanks. Again I'm sorry I had to rush off; my flight leaves early in the morning and there were various things I needed to sort out first."

Still no mention of Devereau and Charlotte knew it really was time to worry, certain that Anderson would have contacted Devereau by now; even if he hadn't, Devereau's family would surely have let him know that Adam was fighting for his life. Or was Anderson so selfish that Warsaw was the priority?

Charlotte didn't believe it and she ran her finger along version two of her prepared script. "I was just thinking again about Warsaw. I can get away on Thursday for a few days, and I've never been to Poland."

“That’s great, Lottie,” Anderson said, managing to sound enthusiastic. “I’ll get it organised.”

“I looked it up, and there’s some lovely castles to visit. Where exactly are you staying, is it in the centre or on the outskirts—I just need to plan ahead?”

Anderson took his time answering, “I’m not sure, the centre I think; I’m sorry, I’m being met when I get to Warsaw.”

Charlotte sensed Anderson had missed what she was after, glossing over her use of the present tense. And for Charlotte to have emphasised the word centre—as in management training centre—would have been far too obvious. She continued to ramble on about nothing in particular, concerned now she was being far too subtle and Anderson would also miss the second hint. He was playing his part, his tone staying relaxed and animated.

Decision made, she moved on to the last item on her second list, making sure she said it exactly as she’d written it down, while trying to make it sound natural.

“Sorry to have messed you about over Warsaw. I’ll get back to my lonely sofa and watch a film... I thought now you’re one of the departed, then putting my trust in Leonardo DiCaprio would be a good choice, or is it a case of Matt Damon?”

Charlotte could almost hear Anderson’s brain ticking over, “Matt Damon definitely,” he said with emphasis. “I think most people would prefer Jason Bourne to watching *Titanic* for the hundredth time.”

“Any other suggestions for a relaxing evening in?”

Again there was a slight pause before Anderson responded, “*The Last of the Mohicans*: romance, betrayal and lots of fighting—what more do you need...”

Charlotte’s hand was shaking as she finished the call. She sensed Anderson had finally picked up on what she was asking, but she wasn’t sure. Saturday’s argument had revolved around a top ten movie list, with twenty or more suggestions thrown back and forth, including *The Departed*. In the film DiCaprio had played an honest cop, Damon a corrupt cop. *If* Anderson was on the same wavelength as Charlotte, the message seemed clear: Anderson believed that Charlotte couldn’t trust the police. And the comment about Damon and most people—did that mean she shouldn’t trust anyone? Matt Damon as Jason Bourne had spent most of his time being chased by the CIA—was that relevant?

Then Anderson had added in *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Charlotte struggled to work it all out. Maybe he was hinting that Erdenheim was some CIA operation, but the Mohicans’ reference was just too obscure. But then if it was that obvious, Rebane would understand it as well, so Anderson was presumably trying to be devious.

Or, of course, Anderson could just prefer Matt Damon to Leonardo DiCaprio, and particularly enjoy spy thrillers and historical epics...

* * * * *

Rebane glanced at McDowell as though wanting his opinion, unsure whether he was missing something.

“Play it back from the beginning,” McDowell said, eyes watching Anderson.

A nervous Anderson sat and listened to the recording, thankful now he hadn’t thrown in *The Aviator* or the more blatant *Citizen Kane* as a suggestion—between them, Rebane and McDowell were smart enough to work out he was telling

Charlotte to go to the papers. But were they smart enough to work out Charlotte's use of *The Departed*? Despite being pre-warned by Charlotte's text referring to herself as Lottie, even Anderson had momentarily been confused. *The Last of the Mohicans* would help to muddy the waters, and it was amazing how quickly his brain had seized up when trying to think of some clever film title that would guide Charlotte as to what to do next.

The recording ended and Rebane sat studying Anderson thoughtfully. "*The Last of the Mohicans*—why that film?" he asked quietly.

"It's a good film; Charlotte wanted a title and that's all I could think of on the spur of the moment."

Rebane gave a nod of understanding, "I appreciate your co-operation, Mr Anderson, long may it continue."

"It's still not necessary to involve Charlotte," Anderson said, "She knows nothing that could threaten *August 14*." Despite Rebane implying she would be safe in Poland, Anderson was unconvinced by anything Rebane said. He was assuming Charlotte wasn't being serious about Warsaw but he couldn't be certain, and he was terrified any plane journey would turn out to be a one-way trip.

"She's already involved up to her pretty neck." Rebane responded sharply. "And there's too much at stake to risk simply ignoring her." He gestured crossly at McDowell, "Take him back, Pat; Mr Anderson is beginning to test my patience."

McDowell escorted Anderson back to his room in the accommodation block. The rear-facing room was rather lacking in its dual role as a cell, despite the locked door and window; hence the addition of a camera high up in one corner and the handcuffing of Anderson to a metal fitment on the wall. The bed had been moved so Anderson could lie down with some degree of comfort, but his right wrist was already scraped and bruised. He had worked out several possible ways to wrench the handcuff free, but the vigilant eye of the camera was an appropriate deterrent—that and the warning from McDowell. It wasn't the words themselves that worried Anderson, or even the tone in which they were said; it was the way McDowell smiled—like a snake marking out its next victim.

Events were starting to have a horrible inevitability, and despite Rebane's promises Anderson assumed the latest plan was for him to suffer some accident, possibly in Poland. Until then, Anderson had a TV to watch and butler service for food, drinks and toilet break. The hours invariably dragged by, self-reproach as to his many misjudgements a constant companion; Rebane's confirmation that George Saunders had indeed been murdered was still a shock, Anderson's instincts proving to be far superior to his common sense.

He couldn't be sure how much Charlotte knew, or had been able to guess, but Rebane seemed very wary of leaving Charlotte to her own devices, and her film references showed she was obviously up to something. Anderson just hoped she didn't try anything too outrageous and she was sensible enough to pick Devereau as her first point of contact.

Rebane had done a good job of convincing Anderson as to *August 14*'s reach, but with Anderson now having had plenty of time to brood and mope, Rebane's comment about Devereau being warned off simply didn't ring true. Devereau wasn't the type to appreciate being ordered around and it was just one example of

where Rebane might simply be exaggerating for effect. If not, then things could hardly get any worse.

* * * * *

Charlotte prevaricated as to the wisdom of driving to Anderson's rented cottage then decided to chance it, using the fact that the agency had a spare key as some sort of omen. She drove the long way round, looking out for a tail, but trying not to make it obvious she was being careful. Thankfully, all seemed normal.

With the cottage empty, she again felt like she was snooping—which of course she was, but in a good way. She stayed less than ten minutes, any lingering doubts that Anderson was in control of his own destiny finally erased. Anderson might go to Warsaw without certain clothes, shoes, or aftershave, but he most certainly wouldn't forget his favourite camera.

Chapter 13

Wednesday, May 19th

Moscow

The nurse cast a despairing look at her erstwhile patient then strode haughtily from the room: if Grebeshkov wanted to run the risk of an infection and thus kill himself, then that was his problem, not hers. As a result the General's transfer from bed to wheelchair was made with the inexperienced assistance of two bodyguards. It was then only a short journey to the main elevators, before a final transit along the wide passageway to the hospital's side entrance. Outside, a three-car convoy waited impatiently with engines running.

There was a slight delay as Grebeshkov struggled to manoeuvre his way onto the back seat of the black limousine, then the convoy accelerated away, heading west. The lead car used its siren in an attempt to clear the road ahead, its task made more difficult by traffic-clogged roads and frustrated drivers, the convoy stop-starting its way towards Barvikha and the government dachas. Grebeshkov would have preferred to have returned home, but with the doctors predicting a recovery time of two to three weeks, the President had been insistent, and four days enforced recuperation at Barvikha was the very least he would accept—in the present climate, the Kremlin or even the Lubyanka was no place for an invalid.

Grebeshkov had been shot twice, the first bullet striking him in his side in line with his heart, the second passing through his right thigh. The body armour had stopped the first bullet, although its kinetic energy still had the potential to kill: known as behind-armour blunt trauma, a cone-shaped layer of compressed body armour and clothing was often driven into the soft tissue, creating a surface injury that at first glance looked similar to a gunshot wound. The resultant shock-wave could on occasion cause more serious injuries depending upon where the bullet struck; in extreme cases, such as when the pulmonary artery was lacerated, the

energy transfer itself was the cause of death. Fortunately for Grebeshkov, internal damage was restricted to a single fractured rib. The second bullet had missed both the femur and the femoral artery, and although there was some soft tissue damage plus bruising to the bone, the recommended treatment was nothing more than bed rest and a mix of anti-inflammatories and antibiotics.

Of dubious consolation was the fact that Eglitis and his associate had both been killed, representing belated justice for two more perpetrators of the Metro bombings. That left just one man, a sixty-year old Polish man named Bagiński, as the sole survivor from Eglitis' original four cells.

Just for an instant, Grebeshkov almost felt sorry for Bagiński: everyone involved was fighting for a cause they truly believed in, and under different circumstances Grebeshkov might be the one pushed to extremes while trying to achieve the impossible. The only real difference between them was their motivation, each of them doing what they thought was right.

In the hours since the assassination attempt, Grebeshkov had worked hard to stay in touch with events both in Moscow and the Baltic. Eglitis' personal effects had led in turn to his hideout, a large three-storey house east of the city centre, although the subsequent search had produced little of interest other than the usual clutch of cell phones.

With Eglitis' death it had been hoped the threat from *August 14* would decrease; however, since early that morning there had been an upsurge of terrorist attacks against government facilities—not bombs or bullets, but renewed cyber-espionage. The victims ranged from the old favourites of transportation, communications and the electric power grid, to the previously untouched targets of water supplies and hospital services, even the stock market. Life for the people of Moscow had moved on from the intolerable to the impossible, with disruption to every aspect of their daily existence.

August 14's tactics were working to good effect, with even the most placid of Muscovites becoming frustrated and angry as they watched the city crumble around them. Industrial action was spreading, a strike by immigrant workers protesting against the government's crackdown on its East European workforce exacerbated when Russian workers also took to the streets, demanding an even tougher stance against *August 14* and its Western masters. Combined with those employees who couldn't actually get to work, Moscow was effectively in the grip of a general strike.

With respect to the Baltic, a short-term compromise had finally been agreed in order to allow time for a more permanent solution to be found. NATO would halt reinforcements heading to the Baltic, while Poland would allow a joint American-Russian mission access to the training centre near Gdansk and to its twenty occupants, all of whom were now being held at a military facility in Gdynia. In return, Russia would permit vessels—other than those heading for Gdansk's three fuel terminals—to enter port. That process had already started—but with merchant ships having first to be inspected and then only allowed to follow a very specific route, entry to Gdansk and Gdynia was proving to be fairly tedious. In effect, Russia was imposing a shipping-based quota system. Finally, for mutual protection amid the fear of some tragic mistake, a new no-fly zone had been established, covering the Baltic for one hundred kilometres north and east of

Gdansk, with Gdansk Lech Walesa Airport and the military airport at Gdynia temporarily closed to all flights.

To Grebeshkov it looked to be more of a Russian concession than an equitable compromise, yet it was still far better than having warships throwing missiles at each other. Reaction on Moscow's streets was universally negative, Russia's right-wing media similarly unwilling to accept anything other than total victory—whatever that might mean. Grebeshkov's own fears centred on a military coup, and he wondered whether to re-assign Markova to her earlier task. He quickly realised it was too late for that, and in any case his temporary home would hardly be the best place to counter Golubeva's schemes.

Even with generous use of the siren, the thirty kilometre journey to the dacha took well over an hour, Grebeshkov's eventual transfer into bed made easier by the presence of both his wife and a nurse. Although not quite as sumptuous as some of the government's many country houses, Grebeshkov had been allocated a dacha of two stories and a range of modern amenities. Surrounded on all sides by a forest of pine, the dacha's faded wooden boards and antique furniture gave it a traditional feel, its many rooms and sombre decor offering an environment of tranquillity, a place to relax and forget the troubles of the world.

However, relaxation was not high on Grebeshkov's list of priorities. Within an hour, the first report arrived from the Lubyanka, Grebeshkov reading through the details with a frown of concentration. He had instructed an FSB team to review recent strikes and unrest to see if there was a pattern, and their initial findings left little room for doubt, duly confirming Grebeshkov's worst fears. The team concluded that while many strikes were obviously spontaneous, others revealed a more organised approach, fermented by activists working in concert. It was even suggested that this too was a deliberate act by *August 14*, the terrorists' bombs replaced by rhetoric.

Three such activists had been identified, their recent movements checked. It quickly became clear August 14's base in Poland provided a very different but equally effective form of training compared to Lithuania, one based on creating turmoil and disorder without the need for explosives, or even a single death. Such activists could well have been spreading their poisonous message for months, twisting the attacks on Moscow's streets to their own advantage, continually emphasising the weakness of the Government while pushing home the need for change.

A second difference with Lithuania was that none of the three agitators were from Eastern Europe: two were born in the Russian Republic of Komi, the third in the Republic of North Ossetia. The strategy seemed clear: first the bombs to create an environment of mistrust and fear, then the provocateurs to rip Russia apart. And the President's actions in the Baltic had obligingly pushed Russia to the very edge, NATO conveniently acting as *August 14*'s unknowing allies. Or perhaps some in NATO weren't quite so innocent, with Poland's exact role still open to question.

Grebeshkov thrust the report aside and turned on the TV for the latest on Moscow's pain. He was met with a scene of chaos, angry protestors battering at metal railings with stone and concrete, while others fought with a cordon of riot police. The camera panned back, and Grebeshkov recognised the flattened grey modernist slab that was the Polish Embassy. The police were vastly outnumbered

and as Grebeshkov watched, a set of railings split, opening up enough to let a group of protestors into the embassy grounds.

The TV picture reverted to the newsroom, the anchorwoman explaining the scenes were from an hour earlier, prompting renewed fears the military might be brought in to stabilise Moscow and prevent further disruption; although quite how the army would defend Moscow against cyber-attacks, or even wildcat strikes, was left unanswered. The TV picture flipped back to a live image of the embassy. Now the camera position was from higher up and further back: somehow the police had managed to re-establish their cordon around the embassy walls, but the street was still filled with an angry and vociferous crowd. In the background, bright against the early evening light, flames danced upwards from the embassy entrance, smoke billowing out to obscure most of the upper floor. Heard above the noise of the protestors was the occasional rattle of gunfire, although Grebeshkov could see no evidence that any of the crowd near the embassy were armed.

A voice-over detailed the protestors' tactics, their chosen target varying almost at a whim between the American and Polish embassies, with others attacking the Kremlin and White House. Despite the police and security forces putting thousands of officers onto the streets, they were struggling to cope, the news ticker at the bottom of the screen reporting a total of at least fourteen killed since the clashes began.

Abruptly the TV image changed to the Russian President, standing stiff-backed at a podium, face grim. Grebeshkov listened carefully, feeling sad and weary, fearing what was about to come.

"Compatriots, citizens of Russia, this is a critical hour for the Motherland and our peoples. As you are all aware, for several months terrorist elements have mounted a campaign of terror and intimidation, with many innocent lives lost, hundreds maimed, our children murdered without remorse or pity. To achieve their own totally selfish ends, these same terrorists have fostered worker unrest and civil protests, bringing Moscow close to a state of anarchy. Violent protests have now spread to yet more of our great and beautiful cities.

"The present situation is of deep concern to everyone, with the security of every citizen at risk. Our economy too is now in danger, the terrorist offensive forcing factories, offices, and even schools to close. Immediate and decisive measures are needed to bring the present situation under control; we must restore the pride and honour that is an integral part of being a citizen of the Russian Federation."

A pause for effect, then in sombre tones, the President continued. "As a result, as allowed by Articles 56 and 88 of the Constitution, I have formally declared a State of National Emergency, effective immediately. My sole purpose is to re-impose order and bring the Motherland out of this crisis. I call upon all citizens of the Russian Federation to put an end to this time of uncertainty, and render all possible assistance to the security forces..."

Grebeshkov only half-listened as the President finished with an appeal to people's patriotic duty; there were no specific details as to what laws were to be strengthened or ignored, and no mention of Article 102—the need for any such decree to be approved by the upper house of Russia's parliament. This was the President's last throw of the dice, if it failed then some form of martial law would be inevitable.

Moscow's Police Commissioner was next to take to the podium. He began by reinforcing the President's words, before detailing how Moscow would be affected: suspension of civil rights, a 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew imposed, public protests and strikes banned, access to and from Moscow restricted.

Grebeshkov wasn't convinced *August 14* would be cowed by such a declaration; with their record, they might even be encouraged.

Lincolnshire, England

For far too many hours Charlotte had worried and agonised as to what to do next. Just before lunch another text had arrived from Anderson: he was in Warsaw, everything was fine, the hotel was indeed in the centre, a car would pick her up tomorrow at nine to take her to East Midlands Airport... Charlotte had believed none of it, concerned as to why a text and not a personal call from Anderson. Should she be worrying even more? The location app had stuck with the unhelpful 'Unknown', and out of curiosity Charlotte had sent a routine text to her mother. The app's response to the outgoing message and the subsequent reply had been rather more impressive, Jessica duly confirmed as being safely ensconced in Dublin.

Where Anderson was concerned, Charlotte chose to remain optimistic, guessing that he might well be at Erdenheim. What if she just ignored tomorrow's invitation to Warsaw? Would that then inspire some sort of angry response? Against Anderson? Or her as well? And could she actually do anything about it?

Whatever she eventually decided, the consequences for Anderson seemed unclear. She could do nothing – and hope that she had totally misread the situation. She could still do nothing – and assume Anderson would somehow manage to get himself out of the mess he was obviously in. For some people, the sensible choice was most definitely *do nothing*, but Charlotte wasn't feeling particularly sensible at the moment. Rebane and his friends might well have murdered her father, and they'd probably tried to kill Adam Devereau; Anderson was quite likely to be next.

She could go to the authorities, but they could well be part of the problem; Anderson had even hinted that Rebane had contacts within the police. She could go to the newspapers—who would do what exactly? She could ask her mother for help or advice—but that would then put her life at risk as well. Even if she found someone with the power to act, what actual evidence did she have? Basically, it was all conjecture mixed in with some very dubious logic. One bad choice and Anderson would be dead, and Charlotte might well be next on Rebane's list.

Charlotte wasn't ecstatic about her final decision but her conscience would allow nothing less. Having had so little time off, even with her father's death, her business partner was understanding when she said she needed a break; if he was surprised that Charlotte wanted to take it immediately, then he graciously kept it to himself. Charlotte negotiated a week, playing safe just in case things became even more complicated. Her mother was one such complication, Charlotte unsure exactly how much to tell her, not wanting Jessica to worry nor wishing to put her in any danger. In the end, she kept it simple, and said nothing.

The light was beginning to fail by the time she reached the car park at Freiston Shore, and she walked quickly along to the outer sea wall, before stepping carefully down to its base on the seaward side. Her outfit was rather more sombre than usual for a trip out: black jacket, black top, black jeans and comfortable boots, plus a back-pack half-full with a variety of bits and pieces. Her intention was to try and get something concrete against Erdenheim or Rebane, and her camera was thus the most essential item. If Anderson *was* there and a suitable opportunity arose to help him, then fair enough, but to attempt any sort of rescue would be foolish. Charlotte stayed with that thought, even though deep down she knew priorities might all-too easily be changed. And she still hadn't quite worked out what sort of photographic evidence could possibly be considered concrete.

Despite such inconsistencies, Charlotte had convinced herself that preparation was the key, with every possibility considered and suitable back-up options prepared. As an additional precaution, she'd even removed the battery from her mobile phone—she wasn't convinced it was necessary but with Erdenheim's computer expertise it seemed wise to be extra careful.

The theory that Erdenheim might actually be helping *August 14* no longer seemed such a ridiculous idea, especially with Moscow suffering attacks from hackers and cyber-terrorists. The Management Centre was hardly Fort Knox but the closer she got, the more the reality of what she was attempting started to sink in—and the potential consequences. Whether it was arrogance, stubbornness, or just stupidity, she was still determined to follow it through.

Charlotte headed north, staying the seaward side of the sea wall. Despite the encroaching darkness, plus a persistent drizzle and the occasional narrow ditch, it was mostly easy going. A quick check to see where exactly she was in relation to Erdenheim, then she slid back down the sea wall for a short but uncomfortable stay. To add to her enjoyment, the rain began to bucket down.

Chapter 14

Thursday, May 20th

Lincolnshire, England

The downpour eased after a half-hour, but it remained overcast, a few stars flickering dimly in a futile attempt to brighten the night sky. Charlotte waited until well after midnight before moving cautiously along the seaward side of the embankment, following it north for another hundred yards. She then clawed her way to the top of the sea-wall, crouching down to peer out over the opposite edge. Almost directly ahead lay the Management Centre, a scattering of lights brightening its dirty-brown walls.

Most of the interior was in darkness, with just one room in the accommodation block showing a subdued glimmer from behind the half-open window-blind. More light spilled out from the computer centre on the top floor, security lights

stationed above the storeroom and each of the side doors barely managing to beat back the darkness for more than a few yards.

Charlotte slipped her binoculars from the back-pack and slowly scanned across the buildings from left to right, using the various light sources to search out some weakness, or indeed anything out of the ordinary. The doors were coded entry, the windows double-glazed with restricted openings. Charlotte wasn't expecting to break in, she was just hoping there would be something that would help her cause – even evidence that Anderson was actually there would be a start.

The Last of the Mohicans—could Anderson be implying his room was the last one in the block? Silly though it seemed, Charlotte warmed to the idea. From Erdenheim's original building plans and Anderson's many photos, she knew there were just five security cameras and a similar number of motion-sensor lights. Presumably any more might draw attention to Erdenheim's desire for security, or maybe five was enough considering the Management Centre had twenty-four hour occupancy. In any event, twenty minutes research on the internet had provided Charlotte with enough knowledge to work out a relatively safe approach; all it took were the low-tech aids of school protractor, ruler and pen. Assuming the cameras were high quality with dual day and night operation, at best they would have a hundred degree viewing angle and a night-time range of sixty metres. That would leave various blind spots, as long as she kept well away from the main entrance and both side doors.

Decision made, Charlotte crept across the sea-wall, slithering her way down the embankment and into a stinking mud-filled ditch. Whilst mud was supposedly good for her complexion and she couldn't get much wetter, it was still a disgusting experience. Some of the mud managed to find its way into her mouth, and greasy sewage seemed a fitting description for the taste. Other than that, it was all quite exciting, almost a childhood game of hide-and-seek combined with a mud fight; surprisingly the muddy mix of black silt and water wasn't that cold—chilly but hardly freezing.

There was still time to turn back, home to a hot bath and cosy bed. Charlotte savoured the thought then reluctantly put it to one side, focusing instead on what to do next. Her chosen blind-spot meant she would need to take a diagonal route to the north-eastern edge, well away from where the lone room-light shone.

The fence was easy enough, Charlotte more concerned by the amount of noise she seemed to be making, yet she was still far enough away for it not to be a problem. The final stretch became a painstaking shuffle, any faster and her mud-covered shoes insisted on slapping loudly down onto the grass. Pausing to catch her breath, she crouched midway between fence and eastern wall, and for the first time she realised she was shaking. Whether it was cold or fear wasn't obvious, but it didn't help her confidence. Yet, so far, everything was going as planned, with no suggestion Erdenheim was aware of her presence.

It was then she heard what sounded like a muffled explosion; Charlotte stood stock-still, seconds later she was battered by the ear-splitting screech of an alarm...

* * * * *

Anderson waved again at the camera, feeling a little foolish, but realising that the longer it took before someone responded the better—that should mean those sharing the night-time vigil were fairly busy, so they might not be following the image from his room too closely.

It was now too risky to assume Charlotte would be left alone and in the morning she would doubtless force Rebane's hand by ignoring the invitation to Warsaw. Or, knowing Charlotte, she might well do something impulsive and make Rebane act immediately. Somehow, Anderson had to make things more difficult for Rebane in the hope he would be encouraged to move his focus elsewhere and away from Charlotte. And he had to do it soon.

For the last few hours, Anderson had trodden a tricky line, trying to convince everyone he was no threat by acting out the frightened wreck of a man. Anderson feared it might not be that far from the truth, and there was also the danger his liability index might increase as a consequence, reducing the time before someone decided he was an unnecessary and unwelcome burden. However, Anderson had his plan, and he was determined to stick to it.

There was still no response to his wave, and Anderson tried yet again with both arms—surely one of the computer nerds could have come up with something better than Anderson having to wave himself silly in order to have a piss. Still it all helped to calm his nerves.

Anderson ran through in his mind the next few minutes: if McDowell turned up to temporarily release Anderson, then he would try again in a couple of hours; anyone of smaller stature and Anderson would opt for something rather more violent—he just hoped he was brave enough to follow it through. Most likely it would either be Laurel or Hardy—Anderson's chosen names for McDowell's two associates from the cottage: one tall and thin, one rather more rotund. Other than that, it was a poor comparison as both were English rather than just Laurel, and neither were particularly funny. Anderson had seen or heard at least six other residents, and he presumed they were mostly computer experts, with McDowell, Laurel and Hardy providing security.

Whenever any of the three turned up to deal with Anderson, it was always with gun in hand, although Anderson's pathetic demeanour was starting to make them rather less guarded. As a commercial pilot, Anderson had received some training in the use of handguns, and securing a semi-automatic from one of his chaperones was high on his list of priorities. McDowell's gun was not one Anderson recognised, but both Laurel and Hardy used what looked to be a Glock. That meant there was no need to fully cock the pistol before firing the first round, the process of simply chambering a round—or racking the slide—partially cocking the hammer; the safety was also integrated within the trigger, rather than being a separate lever. Even if it wasn't a Glock, Anderson assumed any other pistol would be pretty similar; if not, then he'd just have to have to wing it and hope for the best.

Anderson's one advantage over his jailers was the small size of his room: the en-suite of shower and toilet was adjacent to the door, leaving a short corridor, then a space roughly nine feet by eight for bed, wardrobe, chair and dressing-table. The door to the en-suite faced the opposite wall of the corridor, and was some four feet from the entrance door. Anderson's guard could thus never be more than a few

feet away. When he'd first used the bathroom, even though the door was left open, someone would always check it after—but now they didn't seem bothered. Nor did they appear concerned about the TV, which was as loud as Anderson dared, despite him opting for whatever programme made the most noise. Bruce Willis was presently eliminating most of a gang of cyber terrorists in *Die Hard 4.0*, something which Anderson could only empathise with.

He stood up to wave for a fifth time, but abruptly the room door opened and a familiar figure entered; despite his fears, Anderson almost smiled, thankful it was Laurel and not someone twice his size.

"Sorry, I was getting desperate," Anderson said meekly.

Laurel stood at the end of the narrow corridor, half-leaning against the wall, gun held nonchalantly in his right hand. Left-handed, he lobbed the key to Anderson's handcuffs onto the bed.

"Better make it last," Laurel said gruffly, "And don't take all fucking night."

Anderson undid the cuff on his right wrist. As he stood up, Laurel took a pace back to allow Anderson free access to the en-suite, gun pointing vaguely at Anderson's midriff.

"Thanks," Anderson said. "I guess I'm just a bit nervous..." He moved towards the door of the en-suite, nodding towards the TV, "Good film; lots of action."

Laurel glanced beyond Anderson and towards the TV; just for an instant, Anderson thought to adjust his plan, then the moment was past. Laurel moved to his left to lounge against the wall, and Anderson pushed open the door to the shower and toilet. He had tried closing it once but that apparently was against the rules, so Anderson had worked hard to develop a nervous whistle—something which proved useful when he had earlier unscrewed the showerhead. Lighter than he'd hoped, it was still the best weapon he could come up with.

Even before the first few tuneless notes of his musical accompaniment had ended, Anderson was back through the open en-suite door, showerhead arcing round for a classic uppercut to Laurel's chin. Plastic and chrome shattered, and Laurel staggered back, eyes shocked and confused, his only sound a dull groan. Anderson pressed home his advantage, knowing at any second McDowell could be on his way. His left hand grasped Laurel's gun arm, wrenching it up, desperately forcing the pistol to point away from his body; his right hand, still grasping the remains of the showerhead, swept down a second, then a third time, striking Laurel's forehead just above his nose. Laurel slumped to the floor, unconscious, gun clattering down beside him.

Anderson hadn't time to worry as to what he had done—this wasn't a game, something with rules or an agreed code of behaviour, this was his life that was on the line. He grabbed Laurel's gun and pulled open the bedroom door, taking a quick glance up and down the dimly-lit corridor. It was empty, although as he watched a light flickered on from the room opposite, a warning that Laurel's demise hadn't gone completely unheard.

Anderson's room was closest to the central building, and it was some thirty yards along the corridor to the fire exit, a red warning light winking ominously above the door. Anderson backed quickly towards the exit. Suddenly, light spilled out into the corridor as a room door opened, and Anderson instinctively loosed off a warning shot, no specific target in mind. Back-first, he crashed against the push

bar and the exit door sprang open, the shriek of the security alarm sounding out its warning.

Anderson turned immediately left, sprinting as fast as he could towards the fence; instantly a security light blazed out to show him the way forward. Flat open farmland would hardly help Anderson's cause and he was convinced the mudflats of the Wash were his only hope: if King John could lose his baggage train and crown jewels there, then one man should easily evade capture. If eventually he could get to a phone, then he would take the gamble and call the authorities—Anderson felt he now had little choice.

The glare from the security light quickly faded, and the fence was now just a few yards ahead. Abruptly, Anderson sensed a dark figure away to his right, and he pivoted around, almost slipping, gun hand wavering uncertainly.

"Mike! It's Charlie!"

Anderson struggled to comprehend, but then all at once it made perfect sense—the cavalry had arrived, just slightly lacking in numbers.

* * * * *

Gun in one hand, shirt in the other, McDowell raced along the corridor and out through the fire exit. A single security light blazed out into the night, its beam carving out an area of brightness some thirty yards deep, and it took McDowell precious seconds to reorient his sleep-dulled brain. Abruptly, away to his right, he heard a shout then the muffled crack of a pistol.

McDowell ran towards the sound. Up ahead a burly figure knelt on the grass halfway to the fence, gun raised, peering through the gloom towards the sea wall and the dark shadows dancing along its edge.

"Fisher!" McDowell shouted. "What the fuck's going on?"

"Anderson's bugged off," Fisher replied angrily. "Bastard's armed and there's someone else with him."

As a breathless Rebane joined McDowell, the alarm was suddenly silenced. "Morton's half-dead," Rebane said without emotion. "It could be the girl with Anderson; she's proving to be as big a problem as him."

"What do you want me to do?" McDowell asked, gaze moving along the top of the sea wall. "The phone signal out there is patchy but they'll get through eventually. If she uses her usual phone we'll get her position but it might be better for Carter to bar the phone's SIM."

"Agreed," said Rebane quickly. "I'll handle the police; we just need to tidy up a bit and get Morton to a hospital."

"And Anderson?" McDowell prompted.

"Take Fisher and go after them," Rebane ordered quietly. "Kill them only if you have to. I'll get us some backup."

* * * * *

Anderson stumbled unseeing into the ditch, his feet slipping their way down the greasy bank and into thick clinging mud. He slithered to a halt and lay on his back, taking in big whooping gasps as his lungs tried to replenish his body's desperate need for oxygen, every breath tearing at his chest. Charlotte tumbled down into the mud beside him, breathing deeply.

How best to reach safety? With McDowell and friends close behind, there wasn't time to concoct something complicated – yet an escape along the sea-wall seemed too obvious a choice. There had been the occasional sound of pursuit, the beam of a torch briefly lighting up the darkness before it was extinguished, but so far nothing too close for comfort.

“What's the plan?” Anderson asked in a whisper.

“There's no plan,” Charlotte said softly. “Aren't we just making this up as we go along, pretty much as usual? Heading east looks safest, but I've no idea what the tide's doing.”

“East it is.” He held Charlotte's gaze, “What about Jessica? And Adam Devereau?”

“Mum's okay in Dublin... I'm sorry, Mike, there was a hit-and-run; Adam's in intensive care.”

Anderson nodded in understanding, too angry to speak even though he had expected as much.

“We need to keep going,” said Charlotte gently.

Seconds later they were trudging towards what they hoped was the sea, using the gullies as tunnels to safety. The larger ones were deep enough for them to be able to squelch along in a sort of crouching stumble with the gully's rim above their heads. Each one seemed to contain at least a foot of brackish water, and at any moment Anderson expected to find the sea surging its way towards them. He tried to move as fast as the clinging mud would allow, but it sucked his feet downwards with the grip of a drowning man, the black goo slurping in protest as every leaden step was wrenched from its sticky grasp. The rain started again, a steady drizzle that helped rinse some of the cloying mud from their bodies.

Unlike Charlotte, Anderson had been restricted in his choice of attire, with T-shirt, jeans and casual shoes all proving a poor choice for such an environment. Twice already the mud had sucked a shoe from his foot; his jeans seemed happy to soak up ever more muck and it felt like he was actually wearing three pairs of trousers. His T-shirt was almost worse than useless, kindly leaving his arms free to be scraped and clawed at by a score of hidden dangers; already his bloodied scratches were now too many to count. Not that Charlotte was fairing much better, her face and hands grazed and bruised, jacket and jeans both torn.

Charlotte stuck doggedly behind Anderson, the occasional stifled expletive her only form of complaint. Yet Anderson was quickly becoming disorientated: the sea-wall, so long his only guide, was lost in the blackness, and he was relying almost entirely upon intuition and luck. The gullies were becoming shallower now and there were less of them, the landscape gradually changing to one of liquid mud.

A particularly tenacious pool abruptly resisted Anderson's attempt to free his feet and he lost his balance, slithering down into the syrupy grip of cold marsh water. Charlotte waddled her way alongside, and then she too collapsed into the mire, her body twisting sideways in a futile attempt to protect her face.

Exhausted, they lay side-by-side, the thick mud oozing its way around their bodies. Slowly at first, then with gathering intensity, Charlotte began to shake with silent laughter, the sight of them both covered head-to-toe in stinking black sludge pushing her towards hysteria.

With a sudden push of her arms, she struggled to a sitting position, wiping away the mud from her face to glare at Anderson with a look of part anger, part sympathy. “*The Last of the Mohicans*, what sort of bloody clue was that? Hours I spent trying to work it out.”

Anderson clambered to his knees, “Sorry, Rebane was too suspicious, so I just picked any old film.”

“At least calling me Lottie was one of your better ideas. Sadly, I almost got to like it.”

“To continue with the mutual appreciation theme—it really was very nice of you to come and rescue me. Or were you just passing through?”

Charlotte gave a wry smile, “I was out for a pleasant walk and got carried away. The alarm going off scared the shit out of me and then you appeared—that was the good news, but I wasn’t expecting a full-scale war with people shooting at me.”

“Unfortunately, it all seems to have got out of hand. Going to Warsaw wasn’t going to be much of a holiday, more of a catastrophe; so I thought it best to reject their kind offer. McDowell and I weren’t getting on too well anyway... What’s in the back-pack, anything to drink?”

Charlotte slipped the back-pack from her shoulders and struggled with the zip. “Water, food, and phone—assuming I can find the battery.”

“Hang fire on the phone,” said Anderson. “Once you get a signal it’s possible to use the GPS chip to track us. Does McDowell know your number?”

Charlotte thought for a moment, “I used my phone when I organised your visit last week; so it’s possible.”

Anderson weighed up the risks and was still none the wiser, neither option particularly attractive. “Your phone, your choice,” he said finally.

Charlotte didn’t have such doubts. “Who do I call?”

“Forget 999; we need the number for the anti-terrorist hotline.”

Charlotte cleaned her hands as best she could before fumbling around in her back-pack; water first, then battery and phone. Her hands were shaking again but this time it was definitely down to the cold.

“No signal.” she announced after a few seconds. With a sigh of regret she removed the battery, replacing it and the phone carefully into her back-pack.

Anderson struggled to his feet, peering through the darkness at the surrounding mudflats. “Where’s your car?” he asked eventually.

“South at Freiston Shore,” Charlotte replied. She looked pointedly at Anderson, “North?”

“North,” Anderson confirmed. “We can try the phone again in fifteen minutes.”

“And exactly which way is north?”

“The one opposite to south, Charlie; it’s obvious.”

Charlotte gave a despairing shake of her head and they began to trudge in a direction which their combined intuition assumed was north. Anderson again led the way, trying to keep the expanse of mud to his right, gullies to his left. It was now almost one-thirty, and he was conscious that they needed to be somewhere less open by the time it became light. There was also the concern that the tide might suddenly decide to assist McDowell and start chasing them as well.

Abruptly Anderson froze. A whispered warning to Charlotte, then he turned towards where he sensed the sea wall should be, listening intently, foolishly imagining for a moment that he had heard the sound of a car door slamming shut.

Moments later a searchlight blazed through the darkness away to his left. The source looked to be some sort of multi-beam spotlight, seemingly mounted on a vehicle sitting atop the outer sea wall to the south. For once Anderson's sense of direction had been pretty good, and they had in fact been travelling roughly parallel to the embankment, now perhaps some three hundred yards distant.

The searchlight beam slowly travelled eastwards, sweeping across the mudflats, before starting a parallel traverse a few yards further to the north but still several hundred yards south of Anderson and Charlotte.

They quickened their pace, then a second searchlight illuminated the night, this time ahead of them to the north, the beam playing back and forth, highlighting an area no more than eighty yards away.

With casual ease, the second beam waltzed ever closer; Anderson grabbed Charlotte and pulled her to the ground, right arm pressing her down into the mire. The searchlight beam swept towards them, slid past, stopped, moved on again, then suddenly reversed, gliding back towards them.

It crossed directly over Anderson's body, the light reflecting for an instant from his watch. The beam continued to creep slowly along the mudflat, until abruptly it pulled away, sweeping round to the south as something else attracted its attention.

Charlotte twisted around to lie on her back, hands furiously wiping the muck away from her face. She tried glaring at Anderson but could barely see, her second option of roundly questioning his parentage also difficult with a mouthful of sludge. In the end she merely spat out a glob of mud and a single well-chosen expletive, knowing that Anderson had had little choice.

Anderson was keen not to wait around for the searchlight's return. With Charlotte in tow, he headed north and roughly parallel to the sea wall, the two of them scrambling their way from one disgusting mud hole to the next. The two searchlights stayed to the south, gliding back and forth in a fruitless search for their quarry.

After another twenty minutes, Anderson called a halt. They sat side by side on one of the more solid clumps of mud, sharing the rest of the bottled water whilst planning out their next move. The phone option again proved futile, it choosing to display 'SIM Blocked' in protest at its treatment.

They left it until two-thirty before moving inland, the searchlights having abandoned their quest a good fifteen minutes earlier. Both Charlotte and Anderson were suffering badly from the cold, their best insulation a thick layer of sludge.

Yet it was far easier than the outward journey. Now the gullies could be waded across rather than being needed for protection. Eventually the sea-wall appeared through the darkness, and as an extra reward the rain stopped. Anderson was feeling relatively optimistic, rethinking who best to contact and how exactly to play it. The stinking mud was starting to dry, forming a crazy-paving like crust over most of Anderson's body.

Some forty yards short of the sea-wall, he felt a gentle tug at his arm, and he turned to see Charlotte gazing at something over his shoulder. Even as Anderson turned back, he heard the slap of boots on the sodden ground. Instinctively, he reached to his jeans pocket for the gun, then common-sense prevailed, and with exaggerated care he moved both hands away from his body.

Torchlight played across Anderson, a second beam illuminating Charlotte. Seconds later, McDowell emerged from the gloom, gun in hand, his smile a reflection both of triumph, and anticipation.

Some ten minutes after their enforced return to Erdenheim, Charlotte stood silent, arm held tightly by a surly-looking woman, watching through tear-filled eyes as McDowell taught Anderson a lesson in manners, or perhaps it was a reward for his own treatment of Laurel.

It was brief but very unpleasant. Letting Charlotte see for herself Anderson's punishment was McDowell's way of permanently ending false hope. And with Charlotte's capture, Anderson's value as a hostage seemed to have depreciated significantly.

It was then Charlotte's turn, but there no physical violence, just a barrage of questions. Charlotte wisely stuck to the truth, responding with a mix of hostile restraint and bitterness. However, the anger was still there, Charlotte having to vehemently deny her mother knew anything of her plans; then it was back to a sullen tone to explain why she wouldn't be missed at work.

Left alone at last, Charlotte helped a half-conscious and still-dressed Anderson into the shower, washing away mud, muck and blood. Nothing seemed broken, but just about everywhere was tender to her touch. McDowell had been keen to emphasise that Warsaw was still the plan: whether they were sticking with the promised sea trip or it was now to be by air, he hadn't said. Either way, it didn't seem a journey to look forward to.

* * * * *

Rebane sat at Erdenheim's bar toying with an early breakfast of eggs and bacon, eyes heavy with lack of sleep. McDowell pulled up a stool to sit beside him, a steaming mug of black coffee in hand, happier now the loose ends were finally being tidied away.

"Helene," McDowell reported, "has picked up Saunders' car from Freiston Shore; she should be back from East Midlands in a few hours. Carter's already working on the flight adjustments."

"And Anderson," Rebane asked, "I trust he's still alive?"

"I was careful. A few bruises is barely enough for what he did to Morton; the poor bastard's got a fractured jaw and broken nose – I should have done the same to Anderson."

When Rebane merely gave a tired nod of understanding, McDowell continued, "Why not just save all this effort and kill them both now? You can still dump them in the North Sea."

Giving Anderson free reign in the hope he would get bored had proved to be foolish and Rebane would have been happy enough to follow McDowell's advice if it hadn't been for the problem of Jessica Saunders; he certainly had no wish to wipe out the entire Saunders' clan unless it became absolutely necessary.

“We need Charlotte to keep up the pretence with her mother,” explained Rebane with a hint of annoyance.” If Jessica Saunders becomes suspicious—what then? Kill her as well? The police can hardly ignore two deaths and a missing daughter. We’ll simply be focusing everyone’s attention back on Marshwick and then Erdenheim. Is that what you want?”

“Just checking,” McDowell said, not bothered by Rebane’s sarcasm.

“Jessica Saunders is in Dublin for a while longer,” Rebane said wearily, hand rubbing his brow in an attempt to focus his thoughts, “then on to her brother’s in the south. Whether we like it or not, we need to leave her alone. Charlotte will cooperate, if only to protect her mother.”

“Whatever you say,” McDowell said unhelpfully. “If she’s anything like the other two, then I just hope you’ve got a back-up plan.”

“I always have a back-up plan,” Rebane replied, with a half-smile. “Sometimes even a second reserve...”

* * * * *

The van slowed to a halt and Charlotte heard the driver’s door open and close. McDowell sat opposite, finger moving to his lips in a warning not to make a sound. Although their trip from Erdenheim had been relatively short, it hadn’t been the most comfortable of journeys, with all three seated on the bare metal of the vehicle’s floor, backs pushed against the sides of the van. Charlotte and Anderson sat side-by-side, handcuffed together, warily watching as McDowell’s gun with its silencer had swapped aim from one to the other, fearful in case the van should hit an unusually deep pot-hole. Now the gun was rather less mobile, resting on McDowell’s thigh and pointed loosely at Anderson, almost as though tempting one of them to try something stupid.

After some five minutes the driver returned and the van cruised slowly to its destination, reversing the last few yards. Again the driver left them alone, and McDowell repeated his warning as to the need for silence. From outside, Charlotte could hear people talking, the words indistinct, also machinery and the clink of metal on metal.

Abruptly, the rear doors were pulled open. Only yards away towered the blue-painted hull of a cargo ship, sunlight glinting off the pillar box red of her hold and hatch covers. McDowell clambered out onto the concrete dock, impatiently gesturing at Charlotte and Anderson to do the same. Charlotte shuffled her way forward, having to work with Anderson so they could simultaneously slide off the rear edge of the van.

It had been years since Charlotte had last visited Boston’s small port, but it could be nowhere else. Not that she could see much, a grey warehouse to her left, the river away to her right. Even before their eyes could adjust to the early-morning sunshine, McDowell pushed them forward, hustling them up onto the gangway. The van driver followed close behind, a suitcase in each hand.

The PRINCESS ELOISE looked to be relatively modern, although there was still plenty of chipped paint and well-worn metal. Sturdy but somehow also elegant, her white superstructure reached up to the radio mast and a flag of blue, yellow and green. It was a combination Charlotte frustratingly failed to recognise: a

vertical band for each colour, with three green diamond shapes in the centre, arranged like a V.

From the top of the gangway, Charlotte caught a glimpse of two more ships berthed on the opposite side of the dock, cargo vessels similar to the PRINCESS ELOISE. Then the view was blocked as McDowell shoved them through a watertight hatch.

Once the van driver had followed them inside and pulled the hatch shut, McDowell grabbed Charlotte's wrist and undid the handcuffs, gesturing at her to go up the angled ladder to their right. Once she had reached the top, McDowell repeated the exercise with Anderson, reinforcing his orders with an unnecessary shove towards the ladder. Charlotte waited impotently, noting with concern Anderson's wince of pain at every other step, despite trying to keep his weight on his left side. Finally, it was through into a surprisingly large and pleasant-looking twin-bedded inside cabin.

Without comment, the van driver barged past and half flung the two suitcases onto one of the beds, obviously annoyed at being a porter without even the prospect of a juicy tip. McDowell waited at the threshold, looking relaxed now he had successfully transferred his two charges.

"All the comforts of home," he said with a grin. "And far better this than a bullet in the head."

Charlotte asked, "Where exactly are we headed? Or is that a state secret?"

"You should reach Gdansk sometime Sunday morning, Russian blockade permitting. The Captain's name is Koval—he's Ukrainian but his English is excellent. Have a nice trip..."

"We will," Anderson said. "I don't suppose you know the weather forecast?"

McDowell ignored the comment, and without a backward glance he thrust the cabin door shut, the handle trembling slightly as something was affixed to it.

Charlotte gave it a few seconds before trying first to turn the handle, then the lock; sadly, neither would budge. She turned back and gestured at their surroundings, "It could be far worse."

"True enough... two single cabins would have been a complete disaster."

"How are you feeling?" Charlotte enquired, still worried that Anderson was suffering rather more than he indicated.

"Pretty sore, but better than earlier. Give me twenty-four hours on the high seas and I'll be throwing up like any healthy person. There's just one problem..."

"Only one?"

"I'm sure I ordered a double not a twin room and the brochure definitely showed a balcony."

"Would you like me to scream loudly for McDowell and tell him you're not happy? I'm sure he can have a quiet word with Captain Koval and sort something out; perhaps a nice room in the hold or even the bilge."

"No need; three days, alone with you in small cabin, and nothing to do—I should really be writing him a thank-you note."

"And I thought you were poorly."

"Not that poorly. I'm just hoping it wasn't McDowell that packed your case."

Charlotte pulled a face at the thought and started to rummage through the first of the suitcases. "It's just clothes and all neatly folded, so I'm being positive as to

who packed it. You get some sleep, Mike; you look like you need it. I'll sort this lot out."

Anderson knew he was taking the chauvinistic option but he was too exhausted to argue, "Just yell if anything exciting happens..."

Anderson lay back on the free bed and closed his eyes. Within minutes he lapsed into a fitful sleep. Charlotte quickly sorted out the two cases, then sat on the other bed, knees pulled up to her chin while studying their new domain.

McDowell hadn't been exaggerating: the cabin was en-suite, with table, two chairs, desk, wardrobe and drawers, even a wall-mounted TV and a small fridge. The fridge was in fact part of a well-stocked mini-bar, with wine, soft drinks, snacks and chocolate. The hotel theme continued into the en-suite shower room with its range of luxury toiletries. Overall, there was ample room to swing several cats, while the quality furnishings and dark blue wall-to-wall carpet gave the cabin a luxurious feel. It was not at all what Charlotte expected of a small cargo ship. Sadly, being an internal cabin, there was no porthole, so the traditional message in a bottle option was a definite non-starter.

Charlotte's thoughts turned to her mother, concerned her earlier phone call might not have been convincing enough for Rebane. She was certain Jessica had no suspicions there was any sort of a problem, and her mother had seemed delighted Charlotte was off to Warsaw to meet up with Anderson. Jessica had even promised to restrain her curiosity and only interrogate Charlotte more fully once she'd returned.

Charlotte could only hope that events would allow Jessica to keep to her promise, preferably the sooner the better. Still, as McDowell had said, things could be far worse, and even though Anderson was a bit under the weather, his bruises would heal. He had tried apologising, blaming himself for the mess they were in, but Charlotte would have none of it—she had free will, which combined with her stubborn streak, meant that her active involvement in Anderson's quest was never really in doubt. Poland was days away and a lot could happen before then; she certainly had no intention of brooding on what might be their fate once they arrived—at least not until Saturday night.

Of more immediate concern was the fear Anderson might possibly have a fractured rib or two, and Charlotte made a mental note to try and find out if any of the ship's crew had medical training. Assuming, of course, the Captain didn't decide to cut his losses and throw them both overboard.

* * * * *

McDowell moved away along the dock to make sure Fisher would be unable to hear his cell phone conversation: it wouldn't do for his colleague to be confused as to where McDowell's loyalties lay. McDowell had long since given up trying to make sense of who worked for whom and why. In his present line of work, the deeper you dug the more shit you came across, and it never helped make anything any clearer. Rebane might believe his paymasters were a group of like-minded benefactors, with their roots based in Eastern Europe, but that was just a naïve hope or more simply blind faith, the reality far different.

Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, American, politician, poet, banker or gangster—McDowell didn't care whom he worked for as long as he was paid what he was

due. And through some odd moral principle based loosely on honour, once McDowell had given his word then his allegiance was guaranteed—well at least for as long as the money kept coming. The fact he was presently being paid rather handsomely was merely an appropriate reward for his commitment and effort; he had worked hard to help make Erdenheim a success, and those first few months had been far more challenging, indeed far more enjoyable, than he had ever anticipated. Now the last few weeks were in sight he felt an unusual sense of regret and despite their differing personalities, the team of Rebane, Carter and McDowell had worked particularly well together.

Having reached the far corner of the dock, McDowell finally halted. A last check, just to be sure there was nobody in earshot, then he made the call.

The number was answered at the sixth ring. “Yes, Pat.” The voice was that of an elderly woman, her accent slight but still noticeable, and to McDowell’s ear not that dissimilar to Rebane’s.

“Anderson and his girlfriend are aboard the ELOISE; due to set sail in just over an hour; destination Gdansk.”

“Arrival time?”

“Late Sunday morning. If the blockade is still operating, the Captain will divert to Szczecin. In either case, the plan is to then transfer them to a safe-house near Warsaw.”

There was a slight pause as the woman mulled over McDowell’s update. “I hope both are still in one piece? They’re no good to us dead.”

“You sound like Rebane; I had a bit of fun winding him up but once he can put a face to a victim he lacks the balls to do anything. Anderson’s gained a few bruises but nothing too serious. Koval’s reliable and unless they try something really stupid, they’ll both be fine.”

McDowell could almost sense the woman nodding her understanding. “On a related matter, I’ve been impressed with your choice of Jon Carter; he’s proved a crucial asset and I trust he’ll be involved in the second phase.”

“I’ve already been told to take good care of him,” confirmed McDowell softly. “You’ve no need to worry.”

“And how’s Rebane coping?”

“Not getting much sleep,” McDowell said. “But he’s keeping on top of things.”

“We need him to be fully focused in these final few days,” said the woman. “The pivotal moment could happen anytime soon, certainly less than a week, and I assume you have everything prepared.”

“Of course,” McDowell confirmed, thoughts briefly contemplating on how and where to spend his bonus. “One phone call is all it will take.”

Barvikha, Russia

Grebeshkov sat in an armchair, both feet raised, legs covered in a blanket, reflecting on how quickly he had gone from being a high-powered general in the FSB to an old man needing to be helped to the bathroom. Soon no doubt he would be feeble in mind as well as in body, remembering with clarity the events of his youth while forgetting his wife’s name, and even her face.

Still, old age had some advantages, and from the open-plan room he had a fine view of the forest, the glint of water just visible through the trees. And it was so peaceful, with the gentle tick-tock of the Swedish longcase clock often the only sound to break the silence. It was so perfect Grebeshkov had to restrain the urge to scream loudly or smash something in frustration, anything to stop himself from slowly going insane. His existence now seemed to consist of eating, drinking, sleeping and frequent visits to the bathroom; not that he felt in control over even those basic functions, his wife seemingly determined to treat him as a complete invalid. Grebeshkov could berate and bully anyone, male, female, colleague or civilian—anyone except for his wife.

Whilst technology was doing its very best to keep him informed of events elsewhere, he was forbidden from interfering. Grebeshkov had protested that he was fine, but the President's version of recuperation was the one that counted—and that meant Grebeshkov was no longer fully in the loop, his wife even going so far as to limit his contact with the Lubyanka. He had tried taking his frustrations out on his nurse, a middle-aged woman who was far too polite to ever argue, but it had merely made him feel guilty. It was difficult but he had forced himself to read a book, listen to music, and even lose to his wife at chess. And still he felt resentful, irritated that no-one else appeared to share his sense of isolation.

So it was a relief when his wife announced he had visitors, Grebeshkov just hopeful it was someone from the FSB and not another doctor to tell him to take it easy. In fact it was a pairing he could never have guessed at—Markova's smart uniform and good looks making Golubeva appear even more dowdy than usual.

Grebeshkov's wife knew the routine from old, quickly organising tea and then leaving them alone, Golubeva pulling up a chair to sit opposite Grebeshkov, Markova taking station by the window yet not quite out of earshot.

"You're looking tired, Dmitry," Golubeva said matter-of-factly. "But still better than I expected. I understand you'll be back with us in a few days."

"Three more days," Grebeshkov responded, rather more sharply than he'd intended. Whatever words Golubeva used and however she said it, there was always a hidden message, and Grebeshkov was already on his guard, unsure what she was after. And the reason for Markova's presence was still unclear.

"The President has asked me to pass on his best wishes for a speedy recovery, and also his congratulations."

"Congratulations?" Grebeshkov asked curiously. "For what?"

"Your promise to catch Eglitis and his associates. You did it in just four days. That's a very impressive record, General; you ought to be proud."

Grebeshkov frowned, "There's still the remaining metro bomber—the Pole Bagiński."

"Not so," Golubeva announced. "His body has been in the morgue for over a week. He was pulled out of the Moskva near Gorky Park and the police assumed it was drug-related. He had no papers and had been shot in the face, so identification was difficult; more so as he'd been in the river for at least two days. Perhaps he and Eglitis fell out but I guess we'll never know. Nine terrorists dead, four in custody: a job well done, General." Golubeva gave a thin smile, "Making yourself a target was a brave if somewhat foolish move."

“A calculated risk,” Grebeshkov said gruffly. Such praise always made him feel ill at ease, with mistakes by the terrorists themselves playing a significant part in the FSB’s success.

Golubeva said, “You’re definitely better off here than in Moscow. The State of Emergency has had little effect, and to add to the traffic jams and strikes, several government computer networks have been hacked. We’re in grave danger of losing complete control... For the record, Dmitry, no-one blames you for Lithuania; the Prime Minister ignored your advice and the *spetsnaz* attack was ill-judged with poor intelligence. It was always a very risky option.” Golubeva tried to give a winning smile, but it still came across as a scowl, “You have won the public’s respect, Dmitry; they recognise your achievements with *August 14*, and even the terrorists fear you enough to make you a target.”

An embarrassed Grebeshkov quickly chose to return the conversation to something less personal. “Are we getting anywhere with Poland?”

“The shipping quota is frustrating for everyone but there is little sign the President’s demands will be met. Our representatives have visited *August 14*’s base and apparently it is masquerading as some sort of religious sanctuary: there were no weapons, no explosives, nothing that could be described as a physical threat. We know now they are being trained to spread dissent and organise strikes, but to the world we look like idiots, seeing terrorists in every Polish village and home. *August 14*’s strategy of inciting worker unrest is proving particularly effective and from the hundreds arrested in Moscow we have identified five who were trained at Gdansk; we now estimate they have some sixty agents spread across Russia.”

“And all Russian?” Grebeshkov asked, shocked at the numbers.

“All Russian speaking, with perhaps one in ten from Eastern Europe. It seems they have been planning this for a year or more.” Golubeva leaned forward, her voice softening, “From your perspective, Dmitry, away from the stress of the Lubyanka, how do you assess the President’s handling of the crisis?”

The sudden change of emphasis and loaded question was typical of Golubeva, and Grebeshkov picked his words with care. “I am certainly not in the best position to judge: a diet of television news and the internet will always give a biased view. Sadly, I fear Moscow will have to undergo more pain before normality returns.”

“And the continuing blockade of Gdansk?”

Grebeshkov chose to give a more honest answer, “It will be difficult to extricate ourselves without loss of face. Even if Poland gives in to all of our demands, I doubt that will stop the terrorists already here. We should have taken up the offer of American help when *August 14* attacked the British Airways’ flight. Now world opinion is against us, and I’m unclear what we can do to retrieve the situation.”

Golubeva nodded thoughtfully before bringing Markova into the conversation. “I was shocked to discover you had so few guards, Dmitry. You are still a target, and I felt Captain Markova would be best suited to provide the protection you require. I trust that is acceptable?”

Polite *and* helpful—Grebeshkov was starting to feel very uncomfortable. “Very acceptable, Irina; I am indebted to you.” Now he too was being ingratiating. Much more and he would throw up.

It was another twenty minutes before Golubeva took her leave, escorted out by Markova. The latter returned to stand a respectful distance from Grebeshkov's chair, politely waiting for him to speak.

"Captain Markova," Grebeshkov said. "Welcome to the countryside. I am curious to know what Golubeva told you."

"Very little, Sir. I received new orders about three hours ago: gather a team of twelve and escort Golubeva's car here; then assume responsibility for your personal security." Markova gave a broad smile, "The orders were countersigned by the President himself. It seems he is very concerned as to your safety, Sir."

"That's what's worrying me, Captain. Perhaps I have more enemies that even I suspected..."

The PRINCESS ELOISE

Charlotte woke from an exhausted sleep to hear the steady throb of the ship's engine. Her watch told her it was less than three hours since they'd boarded, although lack of sleep made it feel like it was actually much later. The indoor cabin was slightly disorienting, but she sensed the PRINCESS ELOISE was moving at a good speed, so it was likely they were already well out into the North Sea.

Minutes later, there was the rattle of a key in the door. In the other bed, Anderson jerked awake, pushing himself upright.

A uniformed figure entered, the man looking to be at least as tall as Anderson, mid-forties, his black beard speckled with silver.

"Captain Koval?" Anderson asked, the exhaustion sounding in his voice.

"That's correct. No more names, please; it's better not to know."

"Fair enough," Anderson said without enthusiasm. "Anything to protect the guilty."

Charlotte would have kicked him if he'd been closer and fully fit. "We understand, Captain," she said, keen not to antagonise their jailor.

"Your anger is quite understandable," Koval said pleasantly. "And I genuinely regret that we have to meet under such circumstances. I would still hope that we can treat each other with civility."

"Of course, Captain," Charlotte said, forcing a smile. If being polite was the worst she had to put up with, then that was fine.

Koval continued, "Obviously, you are not exactly guests, but I will try to make your time here as comfortable as possible. You'll find plenty of choice on the television—all the usual satellite channels. We can also supply you with books, DVDs, and a wide range of music. If you are short of clothes or other essentials, then we can help out there as well. Please just ask."

"Thank you, Captain," said Charlotte. "That's very much appreciated."

"The PRINCESS ELOISE is a delightful vessel," Koval said, with a hint of pride, "and I trust you will have a pleasant voyage. I'm afraid I must lock you in your cabin at night and when we go through the Kiel Canal, but I will try to ensure you can spend some time each day either on the bridge or in our small gym. During such periods you will need to be escorted by a member of the crew. Please do not attempt to persuade them to help you in any way. Whilst your arrival in Gdansk is

to be preferred, it is apparently not essential, and I would rather not have to do anything unpleasant.”

“As would we,” Charlotte said quickly, before Anderson could speak. “Although, if you were to pretend we got lost somewhere, I’m sure we could make it financially worthwhile for all of you. Just one phone call would be all it would take.” She felt it was worth a try, although she hadn’t a clue as to whom she would call.

Koval smiled broadly, and under different circumstances Charlotte felt she could have got on well with him. “Even if I believed you,” he said, “there are certain things in life that override such concerns as money. It might be sad to say this, but seeing Russia suffer brings a warm glow. If I can ensure Russia’s pain continues by transporting the two of you to Gdansk, then that is no less than my duty.”

“We get the message, Captain,” Anderson said without emotion.

“But,” Koval continued, “let’s not concern ourselves with such matters. The weather is glorious, your cabin comfortable I think; if there is anything you need, please do let me know. And perhaps in an hour or so, I can give you a tour of the PRINCESS ELOISE.”

Charlotte again was quick to respond, “Thank you, Captain; there is one thing. Do you have someone who could look at my friend; I’m worried he might have fractured a rib?”

“No doctor, I’m afraid; there are only seven of us. But I will see what I can do...”

True to his word, Koval returned in just over an hour. First on his agenda was Anderson, the Captain checking his chest and back, nodding now and again as though to convince them he knew what he was doing. Eventually, he declared that Anderson was just badly bruised, prescribing ice, ibuprofen, and deep breaths.

Their tour of PRINCESS ELOISE was next, the Captain proving to be a charming host. Even if it was only for a short while, he seemed determined to distract them from thinking of what the following week might bring. Charlotte almost convinced herself Koval’s helpfulness could eventually be turned to their advantage, then she looked again at his cool blue eyes and appreciated how false her hope was. At heart Koval was just another McDowell, albeit one who smiled often and was far more charming.

The PRINCESS ELOISE was a Dutch-built multi-purpose freighter, registered in St Vincent and the Grenadines under a flag of convenience: ten years old; ninety metres long; gross tonnage just shy of three thousand tonnes. Her Boston cargo had been animal feed, and she generally voyaged between the UK and the Baltic carrying grain, animal feed, phosphates and wood products. Captain Koval was keen to recount the minutiae of the ship’s finer points, and even though Charlotte listened attentively there didn’t seem that one extra-special fact which would somehow help them to escape. To make use of a lifeboat or liferaft, they would have to disable their escort, plus whoever was on the Bridge, then launch their chosen option and hope no-one noticed.

With an awful lot of luck it might be possible, but Charlotte was far from convinced. Sadly, there didn’t seem to be a plan B.

Moscow

To the TV crew stationed by chance in Lubyanka Square it had all the elements of a flash mob, although more properly it was referred to as a smart mob—the intelligent coordination of people through instant messaging. From all directions an organised tide of protestors swept into the square; while many held placards condemning the State of Emergency, other banners were more personal, attacking the President and accusing him of corruption and incompetence. A good proportion of the activists were non-Russians, emerging onto the streets to show their anger and frustration at the Government's draconian policies. The security forces were slow to respond, and in any case were unsure as to where the crowd might head next—the Lubyanka itself seemed not to be the target.

Belatedly, the authorities followed August 14's lead and blocked the cell phone services. Even as the police moved to cordon off Lubyanka square, thousands of protestors headed from there west towards Theatre Square, where another vociferous crowd was gathering. The newcomers were similarly responding to messages on various social networks; however, their anger was targeted elsewhere, their support for the President shown by the wearing of something red, representing allegiance to the concept of 'One Russia'.

Both gatherings were in direct conflict with the new laws, and with just two hours remaining before the start of the curfew, even that was likely to be ignored, thousands still heading towards an inevitable confrontation at the very heart of Moscow.

The two opposing groups met near to the Bolshoi, bricks, fireworks and petrol bombs from both sides showing their intent. The police communications network was itself under attack and the officers in the area were far too few in number to do anything but watch. Yet more protestors swarmed in from the surrounding areas to boost both sides, arming themselves with anything that came to hand. Missiles bombarded the two front lines; at least a dozen vehicles were set alight, some used as flaming battering rams.

As police reinforcements finally started to move in from the south, water cannon and tear gas were used to separate the two sides. Slowly the protestors were driven apart, the fumes from the tear gas drifting lazily in the breeze to cover much of the square. Some protestors refused to go quietly, kicking or simply flinging the smoking canisters back towards the police lines, a scarf or forearm their only protection against the searing anguish of the tear-gas.

The situation was gradually being brought under control when shots from a building on the western edge of the square reignited the tumult, both police and protestors hit. The gunfire drew an instant response from the east, shots fired from several sources. A police helicopter was itself targeted, and as the number of injured increased, many of the protestors sought sanctuary wherever they could. The buildings surrounding the square, even the Bolshoi Theatre, were attacked, doors and windows smashed open so as to force a way inside—anything to escape the gunfire scything through the protestors from east and west. Those who tried to flee down the side streets were handicapped by the crowd's sheer numbers and new fighting erupted as people became desperate, driven on by the screams of those they had left behind.

The rattle of gunfire intensified, automatic weapons now sounding out from all corners of the square. Theatre Square became a shooting range, with several thousand terrified panic-stricken targets. Outside the Bolshoi, a live TV feed revealed the continuing turmoil as protestors cowered beside the theatre's stone columns, or crouched down behind fountains and abandoned vehicles. In the centre of the square a score of bloodied figures lay unmoving, a brave few trying to help them or drag them to safety.

In a totally separate but apparently coordinated attack, a swarm of protestors fought their way into the national television centre at Ostankino, the small police guard overwhelmed by the ferocity and number of their attackers. Some two dozen TV stations went off air. As if in response, the police's tactics immediately changed and they abandoned their futile attempt to bring order through restraint. A well-armed anti-terrorist squad retook the television centre after less than thirty minutes, while in Theatre Square the security force's own guns were now added to those of Government opponents and supporters. For another hour the square echoed to the sound of automatic fire, until increased numbers and armoured police vehicles finally managed to clear the streets.

Initial police estimates put the number of deaths at fifty-three—including twelve police—with some five hundred injured. The news reports were less optimistic, with most independent sources more than doubling the number of casualties.

By eleven in the evening, some two hours after the official start of the curfew, Moscow finally settled down for a worried night's sleep, the security forces determined to keep the streets clear, whatever it took.

Chapter 15

Friday, May 21st

K-335 GEPARD

The humpbacked silhouette slipped gently under the waves, foam boiling briefly around the submarine as the air swept up out of the ballast tanks. Despite the occasional gentle groan of protest from the hull, there was no sign of apprehension on the faces in the control room: familiarity had helped the crew overcome their initial fears and now they treated such sounds, if not with contempt, then with scant respect.

For Valeri Karenin, the GEPARD's captain, the condensed environment aboard the submarine was little different to his cramped apartment in St. Petersburg, and at least the GEPARD's well-ordered world was immune to the trivia and irrelevance of city life. Anna had never understood why her husband was willing to give up so much, and she hated the weeks apart, having to take sole responsibility for every decision while learning how to be both mother and father to Mikhail and little Daria. The GEPARD's isolation had begun to represent more than just a physical

barrier between them, and each separation merely widened the cracks in an already rocky marriage.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, much of Russia's navy had been left to rot. The GEPARD had been relatively lucky, not scrapped or sold, the boat's commissioning merely delayed, eventually joining the Northern Fleet in 2001. Known by NATO as an *Akula* (shark) fast-attack submarine, NATO's name had far more charisma than Russia's choice of *Schuka-B*, or pike, despite the latter's aggressive tendencies. The submarine was now rather past its prime but given a second life with the Baltic Fleet, the Baltic Sea a familiar haven from the GEPARD's original sea trials. Nuclear-powered, double hull, anechoic coating and advanced noise reduction—like its namesake the cheetah, the GEPARD was still well able to match speed and stealth with aggression when needed. Armed with multi-purpose torpedoes, missiles and mines, Karenin truly believed the GEPARD remained a potent hunter-killer, and only slightly inferior to the latest American *Virginia*-class and British *Astute*-class attack submarines.

The nature of the Baltic Sea meant that any confrontation would be a claustrophobic affair, more so with warships presently cruising just a few kilometres apart. Average width 200 kilometres, average depth just 55 metres, nine countries sharing its coastline—the Baltic was more the preserve of the smaller diesel-electric Kilo-class. The GEPARD needed space to hide, space to creep up on its prey, certainly not the restraints of territorial waters, numerous islands, complex currents and restricted depth. With the Baltic Fleet's ageing ships and relative lack of resources, the GEPARD's transfer was purely a consequence of political necessity, and Karenin viewed the redeployment more as a challenge than taking it as some sort of demotion.

While not specifically regretting the demise of communism, Karenin had little faith in Russia's latest attempt at democracy, and the Government was in grave danger of throwing away the hard-won successes from the Putin era. The prejudices of a lifetime were difficult to ignore and for Karenin the greatest danger to Russia was still the misplaced arrogance of the United States. Superior weapons, superior technology, superior ships—these were advantages Karenin was keen to dispute, and with the GEPARD, he might possibly have the means.

Their present patrol area was to the north-east of Poland, and for several hours the GEPARD cruised slowly from west to east, picking out a merchant vessel to track, before Karenin carried out yet another practise attack drill. The boat kept well clear of any NATO ships, if necessary Karenin taking the GEPARD deep to sit silent and immobile whilst the warship passed.

The regular midday meeting of the senior officers was an event Karenin often cancelled, preferring a more personal and relaxed approach to the everyday running of the boat. Today was different, Karenin knowing that a formal briefing was a better way to gauge his officers' enthusiasm as to their new orders.

The others were already seated in the senior wardroom, and Karenin paused only to collect a mug of strong sweet tea before sitting down at the head of the table. With just the five most senior officers present there was enough space for him to be able to stretch out his legs—the fact he didn't was almost a signal as to the gravity of the occasion.

The others waited expectantly for the Captain to speak, all eyes watching him as he sipped the steaming drink. Finally, Karenin rested the mug on the table-top and met their gaze.

“I have been ordered,” he reported, “to brief you fully on the present situation in Russia and the Baltic, so that we all understand how crucial the next few days will be. Moscow is close to complete chaos, communications disrupted, banking systems frozen, stock market closed, airports, train and metro stations shut down, fuel and food shortages, wildcat strikes... Overnight there were more clashes between rival groups and police; hundreds of protestors have been arrested, but thousands more are still out on the streets. The official number of those killed in the last twenty-four hours is put at ninety-eight, including twenty-one from the security forces.”

Karenin paused, giving the others a chance to absorb what he had said. “In terms of Poland, the United Nations Security Council is still trying to hammer out a suitable and permanent compromise; however, NATO seems to have finally lost patience. They have effectively given Russia an ultimatum—withdraw and end the blockade, or face attack. In practical terms, from 1200 Zulu on Saturday, NATO will abandon the agreed inspection system and offer to escort merchant ships into the ports of Gdansk and Gdynia. Any Russian ships hindering the ‘rightful’ progress of such vessels will be subject to attack, and if necessary sunk.

“Our new patrol area will be to the east of Gdansk, our new orders directing the GEPARD to assist the surface ships presently enforcing the blockade. Specifically, if any of our ships are attacked or unable to prevent a foreign vessel from breaching the exclusion zone, then the GEPARD is authorised to use all possible means to defend our comrades and halt any such incursion.”

Karenin sipped his tea in silence, noting with interest that only the GEPARD’s elderly Chief Engineer seemed unmoved by NATO’s threats. If it came to a fight, the GEPARD lacked the guile for gentle persuasion—a killing blow was all the submarine was designed to deliver.

Graythorp, England

The large wall monitor showed scenes from various news channels, while the touch-screen table was split between differing data streams and updated projections as to future outcomes. Nothing was certain, but Rebane and his team of experts had developed a feel as to how Russia would react. Carter’s simulations were always a useful starting point, but of more importance was the wealth of data that was constantly being fed to Erdenheim. Real-time satellite imagery; public and private CCTV networks; phone, email and internet protocol interceptions; social-networking sites; police and internal security reports; its own agents still spreading their poison on the streets of Moscow—*August 14* used whatever resources it could to keep abreast of events in Russia and elsewhere.

It was far too much data for one person, or even a team of a hundred to absorb, and Carter’s computer expertise was once again put to good use. Tested and refined over some six months, the bespoke software analysed, filtered and prioritised, producing a manageable set of data for Rebane and his present team of

nine to work with. Now, with wisdom born of experience, they could assess and react to Russia's actions almost as they happened.

With months to plan and prepare, Erdenheim had the time to search out which of Moscow's infrastructure systems and large businesses were susceptible to being hacked. Carter and his army of computer allies—some human, the overwhelming majority innocent computers infected by a zombie virus and hundreds or even thousands of miles away—were able to disable their chosen targets almost at will. Russia's security analysts were having to do catch-up, blocking one attack only to be met by another. The smart-mob incidents were almost entirely orchestrated by Erdenheim, Rebane managing to either divert police resources elsewhere or create false reports. Through denial-of-service attacks, certain banks and other financial institutions had had their systems temporarily frozen, and a good proportion of Moscow's citizens were now unable to access their money, or even be paid. Their only option was to return to a cash-only environment, but cash too was in short supply. A dramatic run on the Rouble was also threatening to add rampant inflation to the long list of Russia's woes.

Erdenheim still had a few more cards left to play, the pressure on Russia inexorable, ultimately revealing the many divisions that would split the Federation apart. The final wave of agents from Poland and Lithuania had been due to arrive in Russia in the next week, and while their future absence was a significant setback, *August 14's* earlier successes had been far more effective than anticipated, thus ensuring they were well ahead of schedule. The remaining resources were badly stretched, but secessionist elements were finally readying themselves to join with *August 14*.

Rebane stood beside the touch-screen table and stared down at the latest analysis, worrying that his timing as to the next attack would have to be based purely on intuition rather than logic. The others would offer their advice, but the decision would have to be his. Still, he was more focused now Anderson was out of the way and, with the notable exception of the naval blockade, Russia's leaders had reacted much as expected, the complication of NATO now becoming more of an advantage than a concern.

"Upload parameters modified," Carter announced. "Transmission now staggered over a thirty hour period... Just waiting for your go-ahead, Marty."

Rebane nodded his understanding, eyes still focused on the pattern of data. *Is Russia's Government fragile enough?* he wondered. The military would soon make their move, and Rebane could either accelerate that time, or simply wait for it to happen. His worry as always was the need to maintain the pressure, to ensure that the authorities never knew when or where the next assault would happen, or even from what source. The cyber-attacks had to be constantly re-routed to avoid their origin being traced, but the greater their daily exposure the greater the likelihood Erdenheim would be revealed. In addition encrypted instructions were now being sent direct to *August 14's* agents, Moscow's mobile phone and internet block ensuring the need to use the far riskier landline option.

An expectant hush settled over the computer room, the others readying themselves for the surge of data the next stage would bring. All of them had been involved with Rebane for at least six months, their reputation known by him for far longer. Well over twenty had helped in some way, often as not working from

home with just a few days spent at Erdenheim; the majority were American, the rest from Eastern Europe.

The eventual team of nine had been chosen in typical Erdenheim fashion by a dispassionate review of strengths and weaknesses, combined with an analysis of what they could contribute to the team as a whole. Other than Carter, only two had any expertise in programming; the rest had been picked for their understanding of terrorism or civil disobedience. Whilst most were not as anti-Russian as Rebane, each member of his team was committed to the challenge of breaking Russia apart, relishing the once in a lifetime opportunity to put their academic theories into practice. For all of them, monetary reward was of secondary importance, their prime motive entirely one of personal fulfilment, with a totally selfish disregard as to the human cost. In that respect, they were not that dissimilar to Rebane.

Rebane looked across at Carter and gave the briefest of nods. There was really only one way to find out if all this time, effort and money had actually been worthwhile.

* * * * *

The first reports were broadcast by the American news channels, and it was a good forty minutes before Russian TV started to show live pictures from Yakutsk, the capital of Russia's Sakha Republic. The camera image was of Government House, its windows smashed, smoke blackening the upper floors; scores of armed insurgents celebrated in the street outside, the Russian Tricolour in flames at their feet. The voice-over condemned the mob violence and unrest that had led to the storming of the building, blaming terrorist elements linked to *August 14*. Western TV news offered a different perspective, the protests seen more as a popular uprising against the Government in Moscow.

Hundreds of ethnic Yakuts had already joined the insurrection, although the fighting was now generally confined to west of the city centre and further north around the airport. Troops from the Eastern Military District were thought to be in transit, but for the time being the city was in the hands of the nationalists.

Rebane watched with a smile of satisfaction, gaze moving from one TV picture to another to see which news channel would be first with the next of *August 14's* targets. In fact it was a close call between CNN and Sky, both showing the same video clip, purporting to be of Ulan-Ude, a thousand miles south-west of Yakutsk and near to the Mongolian border. A dozen bodies lay in an unnamed square, the camera pulling back across bullet-ridden vehicles to show riot police firing live rounds at some unknown enemy hidden in the buildings opposite.

It was as much as Rebane could presently hope for: Ulan-Ude, the capital of the Republic of Buryatia, was probably a lost cause, the ethnic Buryats forming barely a third of the population. With Yakutsk the mix was more even, and despite the forced immigration of the Soviet era, less than half its people were ethnic Russians. And this was just the beginning; over the next twenty-four hours more of Russia's republics would follow the Asian lead. Bashkortostan, Chechnya, Chuvashia, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkar, North Ossetia and Tatarstan—in all of these, ethnic Russians were the minority. All had secessionist movements of differing influence, but with *August 14's* leadership there was now a

real opportunity for change, for true freedom from the Russian yoke. Only then, could Eastern Europe relax, the fear which had pervaded millions of lives for countless generations finally put to rest.

Even many native Russians were fed up with the authority of Moscow, and several regions including Kaliningrad, Karelia and Siberia actively sought some form of sovereignty. Not that the Government in Moscow took such wishes particularly seriously. Of more concern to Moscow was the fact that a large number of Russians considered themselves Siberian rather than Russian—something China and now *August 14* was keen to encourage.

By 8 p.m. Moscow Time, the capital's central squares were swarming with protestors, upwards of a hundred thousand according to some estimates. The placards again told of conflicting loyalties, the numbers evenly split between those supporting the Government and those demanding an end to the State of Emergency with its authoritarian suppression of human rights.

The security forces were vastly out-numbered. Their options seemed limited to the extremes of massacring the innocent with the guilty, or reverting once more to the feeble strategy of watch and wait. When two opposing groups of protestors clashed, the police intervened with tear gas and batons instead of firearms, and for the time being the two sides settled down to an uneasy and unspoken truce. By some process of diffusion, the majority of Government supporters made their base Red Square, while a confused mix of nationalists, immigrants and liberals set up camp a kilometre to the east in Arbat Square.

As the evening progressed, reports trickled in from across Russia, telling of the unrest spreading inexorably from one republic to another, it primarily affecting the larger cities. In some areas, the numbers were relatively small and the protests petered out or were quickly broken up by the police, but in the Caucasus, the security forces came under armed attack, with several government buildings fire-bombed or ransacked. The latter success spurred those in Arbat Square to burst forth and march towards the Kremlin. The police worked hard to stop them, but organised elements moved through the side streets, running battles drawing in more or more protestors from both sides.

By midnight, sporadic gun battles raged across the city centre—it was far from something as dramatic as civil war, but such an outcome appeared to be getting ever closer.

Chapter 16

Saturday, May 22nd

Barvikha, Russia

Just one more day and Grebeshkov's exile would finally be ended. His frustration seemed to grow by the hour and he was desperate to return to the mayhem that was Moscow. Armed conflict seemed to be the norm in several of

Russia's cities, with half-a-dozen regional capitals now under secessionist control. In Moscow the news channels were being starved of information, their reporters arrested or cameras confiscated, websites hacked. And with the phone networks blocked once more, even the social media option was proving an unproductive news resource.

Grebeshkov sat in his usual chair, laptop on his knee, reading through the latest FSB reports relating to *August 14*. They were the usual mix, with the speculative and the unhelpful forming an unfortunate majority. Of academic interest were the follow-up results from the many cell phones that had been recovered, their pre-coded contact names and associated phone numbers matching phones found either at Eglitis' house or Nabiyeu's apartment. Only one phone—number fourteen as labelled by Nabiyeu—could not be matched to a recovered smartphone. Whether the holder of the matching phone was important, or even still alive, was unclear.

Similarly, the satellite navigation records from Nabiyeu's Mercedes had belatedly offered some clue as to his links with Eglitis. In the month prior to his death, he had visited four different tourist attractions, all well away from the city-centre, a trawl of CCTV records showing that on each occasion he had stayed for some forty minutes. Subsequent image-matching had revealed an aged Eglitis invariably close at hand, arriving and leaving within a few minutes of Nabiyeu. It was all now completely irrelevant, and yet another report to hide away so as to protect the FSB's reputation.

The final report managed to be the longest and most complex, unusual in that it had been passed on directly to Grebeshkov from Valentin's SVR. Concentration wavering, Grebeshkov turned down the volume on the TV, leaving it set on Russia-24. Now he could give his full attention to a tangled web of guesswork and data analysis produced by one of the Foreign Intelligence Service's more promising investigators, a man named Reunkov.

On his own initiative and in his own time, Reunkov had in turn followed up a standard SVR report focusing on the family, friends and associates of known *August 14* terrorists. Reunkov had noted that in an unusual number of cases there was a link to the United Kingdom, specifically to the town of Boston. Such links weren't unusual, Warsaw for example producing several hundred similar hits—yet Boston was intriguing, the proportion of hits for its population putting it on a level with a city such as Poland's Katowice, and far more than London or Birmingham.

Curious as to whether the Boston link really was significant, Reunkov had looked deeper. Boston had a very high East-European immigrant population of around fifteen percent according to a recent report; it was also a port, its vessels voyaging to northern Europe and the Baltic. Reunkov had stubbornly persisted, and more in hope than expectation had followed the trail of merchant vessels leaving from Boston, as well as the ports of Lowestoft, King's Lynn, Grimsby and Immingham.

The route of every vessel had been examined, the dates compared. Of the many ships plying between England's east coast and the Baltic, only one came close to matching Reunkov's specific criteria, with virtually all of the vessel's ports of call on the FSB's terrorist checklist: Gdansk, Klaipėda in Lithuania, Riga, Tallinn, and

finally St. Petersburg. The PRINCESS ELOISE was a slow but convenient carrier of various types of cargo, and in Reunkov's judgement the likely means by which a good portion of *August 14's* supplies—and possibly even some terrorists—reached Eastern Europe or entered Russia.

Grebeshev read through the report a second time, now understanding more clearly Reunkov's arguments and conclusions. If only they had used the investigator's skills earlier, they might have prevented the debacle of Lithuania, certainly the disaster of Poland. Valentin's SVR was now looking deeper into the Boston connection, seeing where and to whom it might lead.

Grebeshev's musings were cut short as he heard his wife's voice, and he looked up to see her staring at the TV screen. He glanced towards it, surprised to see an outdated scene of parading troops. He turned the volume up to be met with martial music, the stirring sound sending a clear and worrying message to Grebeshev—the military had finally lost patience with their political masters.

After some forty minutes of archival footage, some dating back to the Soviet-era, the TV picture changed to show one of Russian television's more senior news announcers, the man reading from a hand-held script. Speaking with dignified restraint, the announcer explained that a five member National Committee for Democratic Unity had taken over the mantle of government; martial law was now in place, the Committee determined to use all necessary means to restore order to Russia's streets. New legislative elections were promised before the end of the year, but there was no mention as to the President's fate or present whereabouts.

Grebeshev's thoughts were already working through the coup leaders' likely identities, ticking off in his mind each person's role and status before their name was revealed. The leader could be any of them, even two or more pushing each other in the hope of mutual reward.

First, the figurehead, someone with authority, probably a politician to give the coup a semblance of legality.

On the TV screen, the first photograph appeared, together with a list of the man's achievements and previous positions of responsibility. "Alexander Cherenkov", revealed the announcer.

Grebeshev gave a smile of self-congratulation, pleased to have guessed correctly. Cherenkov fitted Grebeshev's profile perfectly: experienced and respected, he was the speaker of parliament's lower house, the State Duma, and would doubtless prove a popular choice.

Second, the military man, someone to ensure the support of the army.

"General Igor Morozov, Commander of the 20th Army Group." Again a satisfied smile from Grebeshev: capable and well-respected, Morozov was more moderate than many of his military colleagues and not someone who would be willing to risk lives without good cause.

Third, the power broker, the manipulator to persuade and cajole, while acting as the leader's spokesperson.

"Irina Golubeva, National Security Advisor." No surprise there, thought Grebeshev complacently.

Fourth, a person with real talent, someone able to get to grips with Russia's problems and come up with solutions.

“Arkady Valentin, Director of the SVR.” Grebeshkov’s surprise turned quickly to one of understanding, Valentin with enough drive and common-sense to at least stand a chance of bringing order out of chaos.

Fifth, the wild card, probably someone with influence, either with the media or the people.

“Colonel-General Dmitry Grebeshkov...” Grebeshkov stared open-mouthed as his own image on the TV. By his own expert analysis, he was obviously a man with influence; not only that, he’d unknowingly been promoted from a one-star general to three stars. Idly, he wondered if Eglitis had actually shot him with a third bullet and amnesia should be added to his increasing list of medical problems. Golubeva’s questions of Thursday now made better sense, Grebeshkov’s own responses seen as some sort of endorsement as to the wisdom for the coup d’état.

The TV picture changed to central Moscow, showing tanks and paratroops taking up positions in Red Square and the surrounding streets, although it was unclear whether the pictures were live. There was no sign of protestors or armed dissidents, just a few hundred curious bystanders, watching in silence as the military regained control of Moscow.

Grebeshkov flicked through the news channels for another fifteen minutes, before struggling to his feet. The sooner he got back to Moscow the better—only then would he know how close to reality the TV version actually was.

K-335 GEPARD

Temperature variations, changes in salinity, pressure differences, even the presence of micro-organisms—just some of the factors affecting the way sound propagates through sea-water. Regions are created where sonar signals never reach the surface; conversely some sounds will travel for hundreds of kilometres. Such peculiar effects are commonplace, and in the underwater equivalent of a mirage, the sound waves curve round in a series of loops or convergence zones. In ideal conditions, a sound can be detected several convergence zones from the source, even though it might be tens of kilometres distant; yet a vessel would only need to be a few kilometres from the edge of a zone to be relatively safe—although the ship might then be detected by the sound travelling directly or by bottom bounce. Then there was the thermocline at around a hundred metres depth, where the sea temperature drops most rapidly; this acts as an invisible blanket, generally blocking any sound waves. Thus a submarine below the thermocline will be unaware of any surface vessels, and in turn unheard by them, but still susceptible to a helicopter’s dipping sonar.

The science worked well for the Atlantic, but the unique characteristics of the Baltic ensured the rule-book could be thrown away. The small area involved meant that convergence zone propagation was frequently irrelevant, and sound signals often underwent multiple reflections from the shallow sea floor; even the

use of magnetic anomaly detectors was made ineffective by significant iron-ore deposits. The thermocline was also complex: in May it could be as little as thirty metres in some parts, up to a hundred metres elsewhere, but the Bay of Gdansk's maximum depth was only 113 metres. It all made for a confused game of hide and seek, where hunter and hunted could change roles at a moment's notice.

The GEPARD zigzagged slowly to the north-east, keeping close to the exclusion zone and its protective line of Russian warships while ignoring the large number of spurious echoes. However, one particular signal was persistent and relatively loud, the source edging its way steadily to the west.

Karenin plugged in a set of headphones, trying to ignore the background irregularities whilst concentrating instead on a subtle vibration, almost a double heartbeat. The sonar display showed a shifting pattern of thin vertical lines—like a complex bar code—with a thicker solid line moving slowly across the screen from left to right.

“Two, or is it three surface contacts?” he suggested tentatively. “In convoy?”

The sonar chief nodded his agreement, “Three contacts all very close together; bearing zero-one-two; range twelve kilometres. The convoy's speed is less than eight knots, heading almost due west. The ADMIRAL GOLOVKO is moving to intercept but is still about fifteen minutes away; bearing three-five-two.”

“Three NATO ships?”

“The signals are interfering with each other, so it's hard to be sure. Probably an American destroyer and a frigate; the third is most likely a large merchant ship. There's also an intermittent signal from an active sonar; similar bearing; range thirty-plus kilometres; frequency consistent with that of an AQS-22 dipping-sonar.”

“Very well; designate unknown surface targets as Gold-One, Two and Three. Let me know as soon as you can confirm their identity.”

Karenin stepped back into the attack centre and weighed up his options. The intermittent signal would be an American ASW helicopter and under normal circumstances that would be a serious concern, but the Baltic was truly a law unto itself. It took time for even an experienced sonar operator to become acclimatised to the Baltic's peculiarities, able to consistently pick out a real contact from the myriad of false echoes. Computers lacked the subtlety provided by pure gut-instinct, and the GEPARD had worked the Baltic for months, the Americans for only a few days.

Karenin's orders were to help maintain the blockade, and the ADMIRAL GOLOVKO looked to be alone and outgunned. The world was a very different place to that of just twenty-four hours ago, and Karenin worried as to whether he should be basing his decision on a purely personal criterion—namely, what action would best help stabilise the coup d'état. The average Russian had little respect for their Navy and the Government treated them almost as second-class citizens. Underpaid, the sailors frequently stole what they could from their own ships, sending the proceeds back home to help their desperate families. With hardliners in charge, all that would be bound to change for the better.

Decision made, the GEPARD edged cautiously forwards. The atmosphere in the control room was relaxed and confident: the submarine was the hunter, silently patrolling its territory, always ready to make the most of any opportunity.

“Conn, Sonar. Gold-One and Gold-Two confirmed as Arleigh Burke-class destroyer USS JOHN FINN and Type 23 frigate HMS PORTLAND; re-designating contacts by name. Now bearing zero-zero-eight; range 6800 metres; speed six knots on heading two-nine-five. Gold-Three now designated Gold-One, identity still unknown; same bearing, speed and range.”

“Steady on three-four-zero,” Karenin ordered. “Secure all fans; rig for silent running.” He was content to watch and wait. If the ADMIRAL GOLOVKO needed help, then a comrade was close at hand.

USS JOHN FINN

Young stood in the CIC and watched with concern the confusion of symbols on the tactical display. A hundred and fifty yards astern was the Gibraltar-registered tanker ALOPOCHEN, her destination the Liquid Fuel Terminal at Gdansk; in her wake trailed a second escort, HMS PORTLAND. The edge of the Russian exclusion zone was some three miles distant, almost due west, the tactical display showing it as a thin red line. Cruising just inside the red boundary was a familiar guardian, the ADMIRAL GOLOVKO waiting patiently for the convoy’s arrival, her presence a persistent reminder of Russian intransigence.

Young was thankful if a little surprised the ADMIRAL GOLOVKO was all alone, and just over the horizon on the northern sector of its patrol, one of the FINN’s two Seahawk helicopters scoured the Bay for any underwater threat, its dipping sonar in active mode to frighten off unwelcome visitors. Sonobuoys dropped by the Seahawk helped further extend the JOHN FINN’s sonar reach, and even though intelligence had concluded that Monday’s contact was most likely one of Poland’s diesel-electric attack submarines, there were still doubts—it might even have been a totally false alert. The Baltic was proving to be a nightmare of confused signals; the Seahawk had chased down five false alerts in the last ninety minutes, and the JOHN FINN’s Anti-Submarine Warfare Officer (ASWO) was forced to become rather more selective, taking his time with the last three potential contacts before responding with a resigned shake of his head.

Young didn’t share the ASWO’s disappointment: their task was difficult enough without a Russian submarine to contend with, and deep down he was nervous as to exactly how far the Russians were prepared to go. Theoretically, the Seahawk’s operation was already in breach of the extended no-fly zone. Young had been instructed to ignore such restrictions if the operational safety of the convoy so dictated—thus leaving him with a very unhappy choice. He had serious concerns that the helicopter itself could become a target, a low-value option to illustrate Russian intent. Consequently, he had ordered the Seahawk not to enter the exclusion zone until the GOLOVKO’s likely response was better understood.

Young’s own orders permitted the use of deadly force should any of the convoy be attacked. Attacked—not impeded or baulked, and Young could once again be trying to batter his way through the blockade. If so, then the ALOPOCHEN would create a serious problem for the Russians: she was far off being a supertanker, but at 200 metres and displacement 50,000 tonnes—over five times that of the JOHN

FINN—her manoeuvrability was limited, thus leaving the ADMIRAL GOLOVKO with some fairly unpalatable options.

In theory, NATO's ultimatum to Russia had seemed simple enough. Not surprisingly, the insurance companies and the merchant ships' crews were less enthusiastic about the potential risks, and it had taken various high-powered negotiations before a suitable compromise had been hammered out and volunteers found, appropriate bonus payments helping ease the way. The JOHN FINN's earlier success in breaking the blockade had apparently made the destroyer the ideal escort for the ALOPOCHEN and Young was keen to prove it had been no mere fluke. Yet, as before, he had no clear idea of how best to outfox the ADMIRAL GOLOVKO. Her companion of Monday was some three miles to the south and making no attempt to join the party—whether that was good news or not, Young couldn't quite decide.

Ten minutes later, he was back on the bridge, staring out at a sea like blue glass, mirroring the clear sky above. The atmosphere around him was relaxed, Young even managing to share a joke with the helmsman. The crew were again at General Quarters rather than Battle Stations, prepared for combat casualties and just one small step away from a combat alert. The GOLOVKO was now a mile to the south-west, slowly meandering her way towards the convoy.

Young's chosen strategy was based on simplicity: the ALOPOCHEN was instructed to maintain her course and present speed of six knots come what may. If the GOLOVKO got in the way that would be unfortunate; basically, it was another game of chicken, except the Russian tactics of Monday certainly wouldn't work with such an unwieldy ship as the Alopochen, and the GOLOVKO's captain would be well aware of the tanker's shortcomings.

“Bridge, Combat. We're now inside the Russian exclusion zone, Captain.”

Young turned and nodded at the OOD, and seconds later the JOHN FINN angled away, taking up a position some fifty yards off the ALOPOCHEN's port bow. The destroyer kept station just ahead of the tanker, paralleling her course. Astern, HMS PORTLAND closed to within seventy yards of the ALOPOCHEN, just off her starboard side.

Young paced the JOHN FINN's bridge while anxiously awaiting the GOLOVKO's response. In his mind, he had gone through every possible scenario, trying to anticipate each danger and counter it effectively. But then he had no control over the GOLOVKO, and even the ALOPOCHEN's actions were unpredictable.

The four ships crept closer, the Russian frigate travelling at no more than ten knots, eight hundred yards now between her and the convoy. A warning hooter sounded, then there was a puff of smoke from the GOLOVKO's 130mm gun. The shell landed a hundred yards from the tanker, far enough away for there to be a slight delay before the sound of the explosion reached the JOHN FINN.

A command from Young and the destroyer's forward gun responded, the shell sending a cascade of spray out towards the Russian frigate. To Young's eyes the explosion seemed rather less impressive than the GOLOVKO's offering, and it seemed a very strange way to engage the 'enemy', with both sides deliberately doing all they could to miss the other.

Undeterred, the tanker steadfastly maintained her course. Young half-expected a radio message from the ALOPOCHEN's captain, but there was nothing.

According to reports, in previous exchanges the Russians had first hailed the errant merchant ship to warn it to turn back, but with the escorts' presence the rules had plainly altered. There was a second shell from the GOLOVKO, closer by some fifty yards, and again the JOHN FINN returned fire.

Young found himself clenching his fists, fearful as to what the next few moments might bring. The ALOPOCHEN's captain was a brave man but he wasn't suicidal: any degree of damage and he would turn tail, leaving the three warships to slug it out amongst themselves.

The GOLOVKO swept towards them, aiming directly at the tanker. Abruptly, she wrenched herself round to port, driving across the ALOPOCHEN's bow; an instant later she swung sharply back to pass the tanker on the JOHN FINN's blind side. As the frigate slid between the ALOPOCHEN and the PORTLAND, there was a burst of gunfire from one of her two heavy machine guns.

The ALOPOCHEN never wavered, her great bulk thrashing her way on towards Gdansk. The GOLOVKO appeared from under the tanker's stern, the PORTLAND having been forced to veer to starboard to avoid a collision.

"Bridge, Combat. The ALOPOCHEN reports no damage; the Russians were just firing over their heads."

Young gave a long sigh of relief, immediately ordering the JOHN FINN to reduce speed, while requesting that the ALOPOCHEN do the opposite. The GOLOVKO was now behind the tanker, trying to turn and playing catch-up. If Young could interpose the JOHN FINN between the Russian frigate and the tanker, then he would feel far more in control; the GOLOVKO would then have two warships between her and her target.

Whatever the GOLOVKO tried, Young was determined to respond in kind—and at the moment the Russians were owed a warm welcome from the JOHN FINN's 25mm cannon

K-335 GEPARD

"Conn, Sonar. We have multiple explosions in the water; Gold-One now leading convoy; range 4800 metres."

Karenin concentrated on the tactical display, trying to make sense of what was happening on the surface. Despite—or perhaps because of—the use of force, the merchant ship had obviously pushed his way past the GOLOVKO, and the route to Gdansk was now open. With a destroyer and a frigate to protect Gold-One, the GOLOVKO stood little chance of surviving should it choose to adopt a more effective method of stopping the merchant vessel.

Karenin watched in frustration as the convoy moved ever deeper into the exclusion zone, the ADMIRAL GOLOVKO now lagging well behind. Abruptly he turned to his XO and gestured him to one side.

"Yuri," he said quietly, "Gold-One is now some eight kilometres inside the exclusion zone. Our orders are very clear: we must do all we can to prevent this merchant vessel reaching Gdansk. I intend to use deadly force—do you concur?"

Yuri Alenikov was a competent, if uninspiring XO, a man who always followed the rules and consequently would never have his own command. He stood open-

mouthed, staring at Karenin, before mumbling his answer. “Deadly force, Sir? You mean to sink the merchant vessel?”

“That is one option,” Karenin replied, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. It was important for the others in the control room not to sense there was some dispute—there could be no second-thoughts or doubts if it came to a fight. “I believe the merchant vessel is a tanker, and sinking him would likely create an environmental catastrophe, affecting Kaliningrad as well as Poland. We could fire a torpedo but not arm it, and hope the threat itself encourages them to see sense and retreat. In either case, we might subsequently find ourselves under attack from both warships.” He paused, allowing Alenikov time to digest what he was saying. “Instead, I intend to fire two torpedoes at the American destroyer: if he is hit, the tanker will certainly flee, and we will also have reduced the opposing force by half.”

Alenikov couldn’t hold Karenin’s gaze, “We should confirm our orders with Kaliningrad, Sir.”

It was the sort of tame answer Karenin had half-expected. “That would take time, Yuri, and put the boat at risk. Our orders are perfectly clear, as are the Rules of Engagement. If we do nothing, the tanker will reach Gdansk and others will follow; by our inaction, we will have allowed this to happen.”

Strictly speaking, peacetime use of the GEPARD’s weapons could only take place with the agreement of both Captain and Executive Officer, but both of them knew that such a restriction was unlikely to hold under the present circumstances. Karenin was merely asking Alenikov for his support, and his refusal would only be relevant once normality had returned. Alenikov had formally signed to show he had read the submarine’s orders and the detailed Rules of Engagement, and Karenin’s interpretation was totally justified. It was a career-breaking decision, Alenikov finally choosing to follow the advice of his brain rather than his heart.

“Permission to attack the USS JOHN FINN is confirmed, Sir,” he said, rather more loudly than necessary. “The Rules of Engagement have been satisfied.”

Karenin nodded his thanks, and moved back to the centre of the control room. “Sonar, where’s that ASW helicopter?”

“It was last detected fifteen kilometres north-east of us, Sir; that was about three minutes ago.”

“Very well; keep those reports coming.”

“Visual confirmation, Captain?” Alenikov asked hesitantly.

Karenin slowly shook his head, “It’s too risky, even with the distraction of the GOLOVKO.”

Alenikov chose not to press the point, despite the training manual suggesting Karenin’s decision was unwise. Alenikov was once more in control of his emotions, curiosity and an unexpected excitement subduing his concerns.

“Weapons, Conn,” Karenin said. “Load tubes three and four with Type-53s; set solution for the JOHN FINN; high-speed option.”

The orders were repeated back so as to ensure no mistakes were made, and with four vessels in close proximity there was always the danger of hitting the wrong target. The Type-53 was a reliable multi-purpose torpedo, with a wake-homing mode for use against surface ships; the modern UGST variant was as

capable as any of its Western counterparts, and even though the high-speed setting reduced its range, the JOHN FINN was well within its limit. Wire-guided for the first twelve hundred metres, data from the torpedo could be fed back to the submarine and course corrections made, allowing the operator to bypass any countermeasures. Once the wires were cut, the torpedo's own computer would guide it towards the predicted position of its target before it automatically switched to wake-homing mode.

Karenin had been tempted to test out the brand-new anti-ship variant of the *Shkval* (squall) torpedo but its reputation was as temperamental as its name. The *Shkval* was one of Russia's more brilliant designs: gases from its rocket engine were deflected by the shaped nose-cone to create a gas bubble through which the torpedo was essentially flying, allowing it to reach speeds of over four hundred kilometres per hour, five times the maximum velocity of the Type-53. Although the *Shkval's* range was shorter than conventional torpedoes, its speed ensured the target vessel would have no chance to manoeuvre out of the way. It also existed in a more basic form as the *Shkval-3* anti-torpedo, designed specifically for fast-reaction use. In this new and unclear confrontation between Russia and the West, standing orders from Kaliningrad ensured two *Shkval-3s* were permanently on stand-by, pre-loaded in torpedo tubes one and two.

"Conn, Sonar. ADMIRAL GOLOVKO has changed course; now 2900 metres astern of Gold-One, heading zero-seven-five."

Karenin was as close as he dared go and it looked as if the GOLOVKO was finally giving up the chase. "Confirm solution on the JOHN FINN."

"Solution confirmed, Sir; JOHN FINN: bearing three-five-three, relative zero-one-three; speed ten knots; range 4500 metres."

"Fire tubes three and four..."

USS JOHN FINN

Young was trying hard not to let his smile become too obvious, keen to maintain an air of imperturbability, as though he had always expected to win through. There had been some more gunfire from both sides, and some wayward shots had struck the ALOPOCHEN's superstructure, but no-one had been injured. The tanker's captain was maintaining his course towards Gdansk, HMS PORTLAND cruising along in her wake some hundred yards astern, the JOHN FINN another hundred yards further back. Fortunately, the GOLOVKO seemed to have realised it could do little to stop the ALOPOCHEN without risking innocent lives and had finally turned to head east towards the edge of the exclusion zone.

Time now to take stock and work out whether the Russians had finally given up, or if round two was about to start. The JOHN FINN's Seahawk was hovering to the south-west, Young now happy to allow it to operate inside the exclusion zone. The shallow seabed was still proving a difficult challenge, spurious echoes creating a host of false contacts.

Captain, Sonar. New contact... Torpedo in the water! Confirm two torpedoes, bearing one-seven-one, range 4600 yards and closing!"

“Man Battle Stations!” Young felt a chill hand grip his body, his mind wrestling with unclear options, trusting that the torpedoes were the standard wake-homing and not the ultra-fast *Shkval*. As he raced down to the CIC, the Aegis Combat System automatically analysed the threat with the command-and-decision element reacting accordingly and far faster than the Tactical Action Officer or any human could ever hope to do. There was an explosion of sound as two anti-submarine rockets (ASROC) were fired in quick succession, each missile racing away at the speed of sound to deliver its payload of a homing torpedo close to the target submarine’s predicted position. Even as Young reached the CIC the JOHN FINN was already zigzagging, one of the two towed torpedo decoys—known as Nixie—streaming out astern.

Although simulations indicated the Nixie stood a reasonable chance of distracting a torpedo, it also acquired information for the FINN’s newest and best defence against the Russian wake-homing torpedoes—the inelegantly named anti-torpedo torpedo or ATT. The ship reverberated as the first ATT was launched from the torpedo tubes stationed on the aft missile deck; a count of six and a second torpedo leapt after its companion.

The JOHN FINN was fighting back as best she could and Young stood and stared at the tactical display, watching two flickering red symbols as they headed towards the JOHN FINN, seemingly oblivious to all countermeasures. HMS PORTLAND was doing her part, it not yet certain whether both of the Russian torpedoes were targeted at the JOHN FINN or even if they might soon be joined by others.

Abruptly, one of the Russian torpedoes switched back and forth to search-mode, turning away to begin a chase of the Nixie, before being destroyed by the first of the ATTs. The second Russian torpedo was rather less naïve, yet still confused by the combination of the Nixie and the FINN’s multiple rapid turns, the destroyer’s overlapping wake misleading the targeting computer into reacting prematurely. Still short of its optimum position below the JOHN FINN’s hull, the torpedo exploded close to the stern on the port side.

In the CIC, it felt as though some giant had picked up the JOHN FINN’s stern and then dropped it like a hot potato. Young was thrown off his feet, crashing shoulder-first into a computer screen, his body knocking a seaman from his chair, both of them tumbling to the deck. The CIC seemed to rock from side to side, eventually settling down with a slight list to port, emergency lights casting a gentle glow over a chaotic scene. A dazed Young tried to push himself upright, but his right arm refused to obey any commands. Left-handed, he grabbed at a metal support and pulled himself to a sitting position, eyes still unable to focus, blood dripping down from cuts in his forehead and face. He sensed there was an alarm sounding but he couldn’t hear it, just a persistent low-pitched hiss like static or a dozen boiling kettles.

K-335 GEPARD

Karenin tried to ignore the steady pinging from the American ASROC torpedo, forcing himself to concentrate on the appropriate response. Immediately the Type-

53s had been fired, he'd reloaded with two more of the *Shkval*-3 rockets, but they were only one of several options.

"Helm, left five degrees rudder. Come to course two-four-zero. Ahead slow." For the moment, he'd try and slip quietly away.

"Conn, Sonar. Alpha-One confirmed as American Mark-54 torpedo: range 3400 metres; bearing three-three-eight; still in search mode."

"Program decoy for four knots," Karenin ordered, his voice carrying nothing of his own fears. "Set course for two-nine-zero; ready countermeasures." Launched like a torpedo, the decoy would emit sounds similar to the GEPARD but louder. If that failed to entice the torpedo away from its intended target, a mix of noisemakers and bubble generators would be next.

"*Second torpedo!* Bearing two-three-four; range estimate 3000 metres; designate—Alpha-Two."

Shit, he was turning into it! "Rudder, amidships," Karenin ordered. "Ahead dead slow." A rapid reverse turn would cause turbulence and alert the searching torpedoes. It was becoming essential that they kill at least one of them and the sooner the better. "Weapons, Conn. Set solution for tube one as Alpha-One, tube two as Alpha-Two."

This was when the hours of training paid off, all decisions based on experience and a detailed knowledge of NATO's weapons. Karenin still had to pick the right moment to use the *Shkval* rockets: merely opening the torpedo tubes' outer doors could well be enough to allow the American Mark-54s to acquire a target-lock, but nor could Karenin afford to leave it too late.

"Conn, Sonar. Alpha-One still searching; range 3100 metres; bearing three-five-six. Alpha-Two also in search mode; range 2500; bearing two-three-six."

"Decoy ready," Alenikov prompted.

Karenin shook his head, preferring the more aggressive option. The *Shkval*'s recent upgrade to wire guidance supposedly improved their accuracy—however, the torpedo's speed was such that anything other than a minor adjustment in direction invariably caused the wire to break. "Confirm solution for tube two as Alpha-Two; fire when ready."

Moments later the GEPARD gave a gentle shudder as the *Shkval* rocket was launched, its rocket engine quickly igniting to accelerate the torpedo towards its target.

"Right five-degrees rudder," Karenin ordered. "Come to course two-six-zero." The GEPARD edged away, creeping ever further from the two American torpedoes like a burglar trying not to disturb a pair of sleeping dogs.

"Reprogram decoy for course three-one-five." Karenin's voice was stilled by the sound of a dull explosion and the GEPARD gave a momentary judder. Even as the reverberation died, Karenin's over-sensitive ears still seemed able to pick out the discordant ping of an active sonar.

"Alpha-Two intercepted, target destroyed," Alenikov reported, with almost a smile. It was eerily quick, the first *Shkval* pouncing on its victim after what seemed like just a few seconds

"*Alpha-One has acquired!*" The sonar chief rapidly fed Karenin with data, "Bearing zero-two-one; range 2700; speed forty-plus; down-angle six degrees."

“Launch decoy.” Karenin rattled out his orders, knowing every second was crucial. “Confirm solution for tube one; fire when ready. Program second decoy, speed five knots, course three-five-zero... All ahead one-third.”

The second *Shkval* tried to emulate the success of its companion, while both decoys worked hard to seduce the chasing torpedo away from the GEPARD. Karenin changed course and slowed once more, knowing the submarine had no chance of outrunning their pursuer. If the American torpedo lost its fix, then it would simply begin searching again, snaking back and forth, while using both active and passive sonar. To Karenin’s right, the ECM Warrant Officer tried to match his skill against that of the torpedo, tempting it with false targets whilst trying to distort the GEPARD’s return echo.

With uncustomary electronic wisdom the torpedo pressed on with its pursuit, bypassing the second ultra-fast *Shkval* and ignoring both decoys.

When Karenin found himself mentally counting out the interval between each new sonar pulse, he knew it was time for their final desperate act.

“Launch noisemakers.” He paused, waiting until there was a nod of confirmation from Alenikov, “Maximum bubble; make your depth eight-five metres.”

The GEPARD angled steeply down to sea bed. Astern, a swarm of unsophisticated and outdated noisemakers battered the sea with a cacophony of sound, doing all they could to distract and confuse the American torpedo.

“Conn, Sonar. Alpha-One slowing; returning to search pattern.”

The GEPARD levelled off, heading slowly east to deeper water and relative safety. Karenin looked around at the young faces of his attack team, noting with pride the lack of fear in their eyes—anxiety and concern, yes, but not fear. Together they had won their first true battle, and there was a good chance it wouldn’t be their last.

USS JOHN FINN

The JOHN FINN was badly crippled, taking in water, her engine room flooded, fires threatening to complete the torpedo’s work. There was never any thought of abandoning ship: the watertight doors were holding and the three separate fires were being contained. Without propulsion the destroyer started to drift slowly to the south, the auxiliary thrusters eventually driving her forward at a painfully-slow four knots. HMS PORTLAND patrolled around the JOHN FINN like a protective nursemaid, a helicopter from each vessel providing an additional form of defence. The ALOPOCHEN had wisely chosen to turn back and abandon her blockade-busting attempt, even though she had been just eleven miles short of her objective.

Young sat on the bridge, trying to deal with each new crisis, anger and self-reproach unwelcome but constant companions. Various drugs were also not helping him to think particularly clearly, but at least the pain from his shoulder and arm had subsided. Despite bandages covering half his face and his right arm strapped across his chest, he was still better off than many—ten of his crew were dead, at least another twenty badly injured, several with severe burns. The

destroyer's second Seahawk had been kept busy ferrying the seriously injured to Gdansk, an essential infringement of the no-fly zone and rather more blatant than its partner's earlier ASW patrol.

Gdynia was the nearest port and that was where the JOHN FINN duly headed—fuck the Russians and their blockade. The attack on the JOHN FINN was without justification, despite some illegal pretence of an exclusion zone. As yet, NATO had made no comment on the atrocity, but Young was confident the United States would not ignore the JOHN FINN's pain. In a few hours, a day at most, America would surely respond in kind.

Barvikha, Russia

It was proving to be a frustrating afternoon, Grebeshkov growing angrier by the hour, his blood pressure reaching worrying levels as his transfer back to Moscow was thwarted by something as basic as the lack of transport, and for some unclear reason there were no vehicles at the dacha. The dacha's secure phone line was his preferred link to the outside world, but Grebeshkov's attempts to contact first the Lubyanka, then Irina Golubeva, proved futile with every one of his calls meeting a similar fate—a double ring, then the line went dead. Cell phones proved equally useless, calls to anywhere in central Moscow merely producing a repetitive 'service not available' message.

By early evening Grebeshkov was resigned to spending another night at Barvikha. Whatever the news reports might suggest, the authority that came with his new role was far from obvious, and while Markova could no doubt commandeer a vehicle or two, they could easily be turned back at one of the many roadblocks, or even become another target for some over-zealous soldier.

Grebeshkov could feel the paranoia starting to invade his every thought, his mind struggling to understand the real reason for such enforced isolation. A mixture of persistence and obstinacy ensured he finally managed to get through to Arkady Valentin, the latter having just returned home. Valentin's friendly greeting helped put Grebeshkov at his ease, the younger man promising to arrange transport together with an appropriate military escort for early the following morning. They talked together for another fifty minutes, Valentin emphasising that the coup was a coalition of like-minded patriots, all of them angered by the Government's failings and impatient to return the nation to something approaching stability. Grebeshkov's inclusion had been seen as essential for its success, Valentin readily apologising for their high-handed manner in assuming he would be supportive.

Grebeshkov well knew he had little choice but to endorse the coup's aims and the need for change, and he had been correct in his suspicion that Golubeva had acted as the main go-between, tentative discussions ongoing for well over a month. Valentin was keen to argue that to have done nothing would have led to a breakup of the Russian Federation and some form of political or military coup had become inevitable; he also claimed there was no actual leader, with each of the five having an equal say, their individual areas of expertise ensuring that together they offered

a coherent whole, one with the determination to push through change and create a more robust and unified Russia.

Grebeshkov was sceptical at best, unsure whether Valentin was being naïve or merely optimistic. While the news outlets similarly hedged their bets, social media sites were far more enthusiastic, an online survey suggesting that some eighty percent of Russians supported the aims of the coup, although slightly less than half agreed with the means. Moscow's streets remained quiet, the curfew just about holding, many people still coming to terms with the dramatic events of earlier that day.

August 14 was now concentrating its cyber-attacks and insidious rhetoric on other Russian cities, primarily Kaliningrad, St. Petersburg, and Novosibirsk in south-west Siberia. The secessionists had gained full control of Yakutsk, and were on the offensive in a dozen other cities. Elements within Dagestan and Tatarstan had formally—if with unclear authority—declared independence from Moscow, mirroring the declarations made by various ex-Soviet states in '89. Fearful that other republics would follow their lead, Valentin and Morozov were working together to mobilise support, hoping to ensure a loyal military presence in every major Russian city. Across Russia, the police and National Guard had made hundreds of arrests, temporary prison camps having to be set up to cope.

The situation in the Baltic was seen as a test the coup's leaders could not fail—to withdraw would reveal weakness when strength was the only virtue that could save Russia. The West needed to be seen to back off first; until then it would be folly to abandon the naval blockade, despite the fear of military escalation and further conflict with NATO.

Whilst the GEPARD's action against the USS JOHN FINN was considered an unfortunate over-reaction, in public the Committee was unrepentant. In a TV interview due to be shown late that evening, Cherenkov would argue that the GEPARD's attack was totally justified; conversely, Poland's obvious and continued support of *August 14* was a baseless outrage by a government determined to drive Russia into war. Such warlike posturing would be countered appropriately, Cherenkov threatening to use all necessary means to stop Polish aggression.

Grebeshkov ended the call with a sense of foreboding, knowing that somehow he had to reach Moscow. As yet, NATO's reaction to the attack on the USS JOHN FINN was restricted to mere words but that wouldn't last, a vicious cycle of mutual retribution the likely next step. Cherenkov's aggressive instincts needed to be countered and that required face-to-face discussions, not some erratic video-link. Grebeshkov was confident that he could persuade Valentin and Morozov to support him, maybe even Golubeva as well, and a four-to-one vote would help prove unity of purpose, something essential if the coup were to have any chance of success.

Once Markova was duly briefed, the secure phone line was successfully used a dozen more times, Grebeshkov calling in a variety of favours and using his perceived authority to persuade and cajole. It was time for Grebeshkov to take the initiative, rather than simply reacting to the demands of others. If Russia *was* to have a coup d'état, then it should at least be one he truly believed in.

Chapter 17

Sunday, May 23rd

The PRINCESS ELOISE

Anderson wandered his way blindly to the bathroom, turning on the bathroom light then squeezing through the half-open door so as to not waken Charlotte. It was a toss-up between ibuprofen for his ribs and aspirin for his eyes, or maybe even both. The bruises were still fairly spectacular but starting to fade, and he opted just for the aspirin. The vision problems had resurfaced the previous day, although a little different to before, his eyes seeming to have a life of their own and wanting to look anywhere but straight ahead. Anderson assumed it was stress-related, maybe even some weird migraine, and aspirin seemed to be the sensible choice, thinning the blood prior to the next stage of a stroke or heart attack.

Strangely Anderson didn't feel particularly stressed, and under different circumstances it would have been a fairly relaxing break. Captain Koval had been true to his word and their regular visits to the bridge helped split up the day; then there was the TV and a large library of DVDs. Charlotte had asked on the Friday for something to read and to her surprise an ageing Kindle had duly arrived—no network connection but with over five hundred books already stored on it. Twenty minutes later, half-a-dozen board games had been thrust into Anderson's arms. Charlotte's competitive streak had immediately surfaced, the Kindle thrown aside as she challenged Anderson first to Scrabble, then Monopoly. Anderson had been in his element, ignoring the quiet voice urging him to tread carefully, and despite the random influence of letters and dice, he had convincingly won both games. To her credit, Charlotte had taken defeat gracefully, only glaring at Anderson in angry silence for rather less than the anticipated half-hour.

Despite such distractions, every waking moment was invariably clouded by the fear of what lay ahead, and Anderson's relationship with Charlotte wasn't quite as it had been. Intimacy was more gentle than passionate, and there seemed to be a barrier between them, made up of unspoken feelings of guilt mixed in with a good helping of regret. Even though it was far too late for such thoughts, Anderson simply couldn't ignore his own arrogance in assuming the danger was imagined or exaggerated, and he was determined to do what he could to make amends. Unfortunately, there seemed little chance of that: Koval was deaf to inducements, and whenever they left their cabin, an armed and uncommunicative escort kept a vigilant eye on their every move. Their escort was always the same man, Charlotte nicknaming him Lurch, even though the comparison to the Munster's butler was minimal—five foot six and of broad build, his gloomy demeanour was always a depressing start to each new day.

Koval had refused to talk about what would happen to them once they reached Poland, but however Anderson viewed the various possibilities, none seemed particularly healthy. Charlotte and he knew too much, and their Baltic cruise was merely delaying the inevitable. Anderson was prepared to do whatever it took to

regain their freedom, he was just hoping for the right opportunity, something that would give them at least a fifty-fifty chance. Charlotte worked out some new escape plan every few hours, before then explaining to Anderson in great detail why they were all far too risky. If she had hoped he would dismiss her concerns, or suggest brilliant improvements, then she had been sadly mistaken, Anderson well aware that the PRINCESS ELOISE was proving to be a particularly effective prison.

Anderson stepped back into the main cabin, feeling his way in the dark to his bed, the green LED of the smoke detector his only guide. His watch showed it was just after four, and it would be another four hours or so before their standard wake-up call of a double rap on the cabin door, Lurch typically returning within the half-hour with two well-stocked breakfast trays.

Anderson lay on the bed, brain too busy with a torrent of thoughts to allow him to sleep. The opportunity to escape was always likely to be elusive, but the promise of a solid surface under their feet seemed to offer far more chance of success than the cold watery expanse of the Baltic. Despite the unknowns, Anderson was convinced it was better to wait until they had embarked from the ELOISE—wherever that might actually be.

The TV news was a depressing reminder of August 14, Gdansk now an unlikely destination. The attack on the USS JOHN FINN had attracted worldwide condemnation and Russia's new Government could have simply chosen to admit nothing, but instead they had mounted a robust defence of their actions, blaming the West for ignoring the well-defined exclusion zone and foolishly risking the lives of their own personnel. In response, NATO had argued and denounced, its Secretary General warning Russia for what seemed the hundredth time. No other vessels had attempted to run the blockade, with most merchant ships choosing to divert to ports in or near Germany. The theory that *August 14* was American by birth also appeared to be gathering public acceptance, the CIA perhaps once again overstepping the boundary between inspiration and misjudgement. The official line from the White House was to ridicule such rumours, but it wouldn't be the first time a U.S. President had lied to the World—and not even the American people trusted the CIA.

Anderson's musings were distracted by a sudden change in the background noise, something unusual adding to the constant deep throb from the engine—first a series of heavy thuds, followed soon after by the clatter of footsteps reverberating along the deck. He listened intently, and within seconds there were several dull pops. He tried to interpret them as something other than gunshots, but failed. Playing safe, Anderson turned and flicked on the bedside light, shaking Charlotte awake.

"Something's happening," he said urgently. "Best get dressed, just in case."

Charlotte looked as though she wanted to argue, then she gave a nod of confirmation, flinging the duvet aside. Anderson grabbed some clothes and forced himself into them. From outside the cabin there were raised voices, the actual words indistinct, then a loud crash as something heavy smashed down on the cabin lock. A brief moment later the door was thrown open.

A black-suited figure stepped warily across the threshold, night-vision goggles sat awkwardly atop his head, submachine gun moving quickly from Anderson across to Charlotte, then back again.

Anderson stood with arms half raised, unsure as to whether they were about to be rescued or murdered. The gunman spoke rapidly in Russian, then awaited a response, his gun still aimed at Anderson's midriff.

Eventually it was Anderson who offered the standard if rather feeble reply. "British, we're British..."

* * * * *

Charlotte sat huddled in a corner of the helicopter's cabin and stared out across the blue-black surface of the Baltic Sea, trying to relax and not show any of the others how frightened she felt. Anderson sat beside her, eyes closed, but certainly not asleep, the deafening roar from the rotor blades ensuring that was impossible. Captain Koval was the third passenger from the PRINCESS ELOISE, the remainder of the crew remaining aboard with their captors, their fate unknown.

Frightened she might be, but it was nothing when compared to the mind-numbing terror of being winched skywards from the heaving semi-dark and rain-spattered deck of the ELOISE. Exactly where the helicopter had come from and where it was now going, she had no idea; the position of the early-morning sun suggested they were heading east, hardly surprising considering they were in a Russian helicopter. Three of their black-suited rescuers sat opposite, along with one member of the flight crew, Charlotte feeling distinctly uncomfortable under their gaze.

Koval and Anderson had been handcuffed together, but Charlotte had been left with both hands free. Quite how the Russian authorities would regard the two of them, without even a passport to prove who they were, was unclear—terrorists or spies at worst, idiotic tourists at best. Charlotte had been taken aside and quizzed with a few standard questions, such as name and why she was aboard the PRINCESS ELOISE, but she sensed her inquisitor wasn't that interested in her actual answers, merely going through the motions while awaiting their next mode of transport.

It was now almost two hours since their enforced flight had begun, and Charlotte was regretting her earlier refusal of a chocolate bar, her fear that she might start throwing up proving unfounded. She had even managed a few sips of water without feeling queasy. It perhaps wasn't all that wise to keep looking out of the side window but it was far better than catching the eye of one of the Russians. If they responded with a smile, should she smile back or glare at them? Her education seemed to have missed out on how to deal with a nation's Special Forces, especially when you weren't sure whether they were friend or foe.

Far below and away to her right, was the first in a line of warships, each vessel a slim grey finger against the darker shadow of the sea. Russian, American or even British, there was no obvious clue, the ships too far away to see any flag. Charlotte assumed they were Russian, part of the naval force mustered for the blockade of Gdansk. She counted five vessels, each spaced out from the other by a mile or more, plying their way in an endless patrol of the gulf.

For some odd reason, Charlotte's thoughts moved on to her mother, wondering how her holiday was faring. Jessica should be back home on Wednesday and Charlotte was slightly more optimistic that she too might eventually make it back to England, hopefully still in one piece.

Charlotte's musings were distracted by Anderson shifting position, his eyes still firmly shut, brow furrowed as though in pain. Charlotte glanced again at the warships below. Far beyond the nearest vessel and further to her right, Charlotte suddenly noticed a curious bright light crossing the waves, a silver arrow heading at speed directly towards the warship. For a brief moment she thought it might be a reflection from the cabin window, then she saw a second light chasing after the first, two fiery streaks standing out against the opaque surface of the Baltic.

Charlotte's brain tried to ignore the thought processes that told her they were actually missiles, a fact immediately confirmed as an alarm screeched out from the helicopter cockpit, the pilot shouting out his own warning. A heartbeat later the warship herself reacted, a pair of missiles launching to meet the threat. The helicopter banked suddenly and Charlotte had to grab for support; as they levelled out, her gaze was drawn back towards the warship, watching fascinated as a hail of gunfire burst from the vessel. An instant later there was a massive explosion, then a second, the ship shrouded in smoke and flame.

Charlotte held her breath, assuming that the attack was in response to the deaths aboard the American destroyer, but still wanting the Russian ship to survive. The vessel slid into view, seemingly undamaged, sweeping round to port to head east. Charlotte did a quick double-take, realising that the missiles had come from the west, inside the exclusion zone, rather than from one of the NATO warships cruising impotently to the north.

With the Russian vessel escaping apparently unscathed, there was a raucous cheer from the Russian sitting opposite Charlotte, his compatriots immediately joining in his celebration.

Anderson grabbed Charlotte's arm. "What's happening?" he asked loudly, looking disoriented.

"World War Three," Charlotte shouted unhelpfully. "And we're right in the middle of it."

Graythorp, England

Rebane sat in McDowell's small office, blinds drawn, the mellow tones of piano and saxophone on the CD helping to relax him as he reviewed *August 14's* concluding moves. The initiative was now firmly with the secessionist cause and Rebane's team were focusing a good part of their attention on misinformation so as delay the authorities' response. Civil discontent was still spreading, gaining its own momentum as early successes revealed how brittle the Russian Federation actually was.

The coup d'état had been an inevitable consequence of Rebane's strategy, but it too should soon succumb to the constant pressure for change, with the military unable to contain the breadth and diversity of nationalist fervour. Rebane just needed to ensure that there was no let-up in the demands made upon the coup's leaders, and when their own survival was at risk then Moscow too would crumble. Rebane had always hammered home the need for *August 14* to be versatile, able to adjust its strategy to cope with each new set of circumstances. He still couldn't

quite believe how well everything had gone, Erdenheim's ability to shape events surpassing virtually everyone's expectations.

Many so-called experts derided the computer as no more than a data-analysis device, failing to believe it had even a minor role in a nation's armoury. To them, power resided in a more physical manifestation, such as a missile, a jet fighter or a warship. Yet Rebane and Carter had melded the tools of instant communication and cyber-terrorism to create a weapon able to torment and disrupt, dozens of diverse targets attacked simultaneously, often without anyone being aware until well after the event. And through social media the public itself could be manipulated—almost programmed—into becoming an unwitting fifth column.

Eglitis might have begun *August 14's* campaign with an act of old-fashioned terror, but their prime weapon was the more imaginative one conceived by people like Rebane. Erdenheim had cost little more than a single cruise missile, its software the same, but together they packed a much more effective punch, far greater than a hundred such weapons.

Exaggeration born of arrogance? Perhaps it was; but the evidence was all too clear, examples of Erdenheim's achievements stretching from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok. Total success in Russia was agonisingly close and with it complete justification as to Rebane's confidence and belief. The new Government would no doubt try to fight on, but once enough of the nationalist groups had gained control, then Moscow's authority would be lost forever.

A 'Statement of Intent' had been released by the National Committee for Democratic Unity, perhaps in the hope of encouraging a patriotic upsurge of support. One particular sentence seemed to exemplify how out of touch the Committee was, its hopes for the future ignoring the reality of today's Russia: 'With courage and steadfastness, we will create a nation once again vying for the title of superpower, a nation united together in a desire for peace through strength, with no place for the criminals and terrorists promising a futile independence'.

Brave words, but that's all they were, and Rebane was confident the Committee lacked the military might—and the military unity—to fix Russia's decline. Russia's army was undermanned, with morale remaining low due to poor conditions and lack of investment. Why risk your life fighting for an un-elected committee based a thousand miles from your home, especially when your first language was something other than Russian and the enemy were your own compatriots?

NATO could still prove to be a unifying element, a second common enemy that might yet alter the outcome. Nevertheless, Rebane felt in control, Erdenheim always ready to react to any new difficulty or complication. There were still a few loose ends to tidy up, and in a day or so, Anderson and Charlotte Saunders would be involved in a tragic accident, most likely a car crash. There would doubtless be some reaction—even accusations—from Jessica Saunders, but Rebane wasn't overly concerned. He could even afford to think ahead to a holiday and the next challenge, a book perhaps.

As to what came next for Erdenheim was unclear, and apparently some future arrangement for the Management Centre had been agreed between McDowell and Erdenheim's investors. Both McDowell and Rebane were set for a hefty bonus, everyone delighted with how much had been achieved with such a relatively frugal

outlay. Thirty million dollars had been his original estimate, and he hadn't been that far out; the number of personnel had also been minimal—slightly more than a hundred and fifty actively involved with *August 14*, their training, and of course Erdenheim.

Although the investors had insisted on maintaining their anonymity, Rebane had had regular face-to-face discussions with their intermediary, Klaudia Woroniecki. Every few months they would meet—usually at a neutral venue near to her home city of Warsaw—to review progress and assess future needs, both financial and human. Her one visit to Erdenheim had apparently been on impulse, a wish to show off the Management Centre to an influential ally. Quite why McDowell had felt the need to treat his special guests to the dubious charms of a traditional Lincolnshire pub had never been answered; Rebane suspected it was probably at Klaudia's instigation, knowing at first-hand how impulsive she could be.

Rebane and Woroniecki's shared profession had brought the two of them into regular contact for some twenty years, and Klaudia was well qualified to play the dual role of confidante and go-between. Friends, yes; lovers, once, many years ago; now co-conspirators—*August 14* had managed to add a new and challenging dimension to their long-term relationship.

The one aspect that still intrigued Rebane had as much to do with his own naiveté as any concerns about the identity of his employers. Once others had put their faith in him, Rebane had not bothered to question their motives, focusing all of his efforts into the evolution of Erdenheim and *August 14*. Was it arrogance or mere convenience that had made him assume he was working for some East European coalition? Why not Chinese, or Chechen? It was even possible that he was helping a conspiracy of Russian generals, his strategy by default creating the perfect environment for a military coup. The name *August 14* had been suggested to him, but that by itself meant nothing.

It was at such times that you learnt a lot about yourself, and it had come as something of a shock to Rebane to discover that whatever the motives or nationality of his sponsors, then he didn't particularly care. The torment of his youth and the need for revenge were suddenly and strangely irrelevant. It was enough that whoever they were, whatever their reasons, they had given him the opportunity to prove that one man—albeit with a modicum of help—could bring down a former superpower.

With a sigh of contentment, Rebane stood up and switched off the CD. It was only then that he realised the building seemed unnaturally quiet, no voices, none of the usual background sounds from the floor above.

He walked out into the entrance foyer and strode up the stairs. The multiple screens in the computer centre still silently displayed their various data-streams and news feeds, but such crucial information was being ignored, the lone figure of McDowell sitting beside one of the consoles, drinking a beer.

Rebane was merely confused, "Where's Carter?"

"Gone," McDowell said pleasantly. "Along with some of the others."

"Gone? Gone where?" Rebane asked, still not understanding.

"East Midlands Airport mostly. A couple weren't happy to leave, so I granted them their wish; sadly, they're in no fit state to join us."

Rebane stood as if transfixed, gaze wandering slowly across the main monitor screen then back to McDowell. “You killed them,” he said finally.

“That’s right, Marty. Erdenheim is now officially off-line. In a short while it will also be obliterated from existence.” He gave a sad frown, “I will miss it, but orders are orders, and it’s not for the likes of me to judge what is best.”

Rebane glared angrily at the American, someone he had once thought was a friend, “Whose orders? Klaudia Woroniecki? We’re so close to total success, it’s foolish to end it now! A few more days, a week at most; that’s all we need!”

“Sadly, your agenda and that of our employers has never quite matched. They appreciate what you’ve done but it’s time to move on.” McDowell reached beside him to grasp a snub-nosed Beretta, pointing the pistol lazily at Rebane. “Sorry, Marty; it’s nothing personal.”

Rebane stood silent, the shock of what McDowell was about to do slowly registering. Even then, he almost managed to convince himself it was some sort of sick McDowell joke until reality prompted the survival instinct to kick in, his body readying itself to fight or flee.

Rebane was barely halfway to McDowell when the first bullet exploded into his chest, joined an instant later by a second. He collapsed to the floor, a final anguished cry frozen forever on his lips.

* * * * *

McDowell mentally went through his checklist for one final time, knowing the importance of his ten minute video and the computer evidence. The multitude of computer simulations and hacking tools had been downloaded over the course of the afternoon, thus ensuring he had the most up-to-date versions and in any case Carter was still on the payroll, presently awaiting a flight to Portugal. The surviving members of Rebane’s team had seen at first-hand the penalty for ignoring McDowell’s instructions, and were similarly on their way to destinations unknown. It was hardly in their own interests to reveal what they knew about Erdenheim and *August 14*. Not that it would matter anyway: to them, Rebane *was August 14* and that version of the truth would do for now. And without Rebane, without Erdenheim, *August 14* was effectively without leadership, intelligence or even its most effective weapon.

The video was a simple and convenient means to show what Erdenheim represented, the camera’s focus being almost entirely on the computer centre and its range of resources. The three bodies would also help explain that such information hadn’t come easily. McDowell played back the video twice, looking for any reflected images or errors that might reveal who was behind the camera. He appreciated such precautions were probably unnecessary, and the recipients of all his hard work would doubtless carry out their own more thorough checks, but he prided himself on getting things right—after all, that was the prime reason he was being paid so handsomely.

It was late afternoon by the time McDowell left the Management Centre, his seven month tenure finally at an end. He deliberately chose not to look back, Erdenheim being relegated to some previous existence, the memories filed away without the need or even the desire to reminisce.

McDowell's car had just turned onto the Graythorp road heading north, when the first explosion shattered the silence, the windows of Erdenheim's upper floor bursting outwards, a smoky halo rising up from the roof. Three seconds later, a second more massive explosion tore through the ground floor, the building shivering in anguish as flames and smoke quickly hid it from view.

K-335 GEPARD

The GEPARD angled gently upwards, passing through thirty metres. The time slot for their regular call to Fleet HQ was almost over, Karenin delaying the moment for as long as he dared. Each new report was now made on the assumption it would end with Karenin's immediate recall to St. Petersburg, followed eventually by some formal reprimand for over-stepping his authority in attacking the JOHN FINN. Not that he had any regrets, and he would say as much at his court-martial. Perhaps he was being overly pessimistic, and so far there had been no official comment on his actions, neither condemnation nor praise; however, his superiors had now had well over a day to determine their response, and political necessity would surely influence Karenin's fate.

The crew of the GEPARD had informally expressed their opinion on the matter, and the attack on the USS JOHN FINN had seemingly met with almost universal approval: basically, the Americans only had themselves to blame for trying to beat the blockade, and Karenin had had little choice. The crew's brush with death was somehow reflected in the way each man went about his duties, a subtle mix of self-belief and pride endorsing their every action.

"Conn, Sonar. Faint contact; bearing zero-five-two. Signal too distorted for classification; probable submarine—designate Wolf-One. Range and course unknown."

"Ahead slow; steady on course zero-two-zero." Karenin was content to watch and wait. One disadvantage of a nuclear submarine was that coolant needed to be pumped continuously to keep the reactor from overheating. The GEPARD's designers had done much to subdue such unwanted sounds, but it was impossible to deaden them altogether, and Karenin was not so foolish as to assume the other boat was unaware of the GEPARD's presence.

The contact was elusive; like the GEPARD it might simply be curious, or it might be out for revenge. Karenin changed course every few minutes, guessing as to what the other boat would do, trying to keep the initiative. The GEPARD crept slowly north, Karenin trusting that their target would edge his way to the west and the edge of the exclusion zone.

Despite the potential for unwanted noise, he felt it prudent to add two more *Shkval*-3s to the pair already loaded into the torpedo tubes; a moment's reflection, then he also ordered the loading of two Type-53s. To remove a torpedo from a tube and re-position it on the rack ready for future use was far more complex than just simply reversing the loading process; consequently, loading was normally left until the last possible moment. That was fine for the vast space of the Atlantic where a potential target might be picked up tens of kilometres distant, but in the cramped confines of the Baltic such protocols were best ignored.

“Conn, Sonar. Wolf-One identified as a Virginia-class, USS MINNESOTA. Now bearing one-two-one; range 8700 metres; speed six knots; course two-four-five; re-designating contact by name.”

Karenin kept his face impassive but this wasn't quite what he wanted to hear. The GEPARD was close to presenting its stern to the enemy, the noise from the submarine's own propeller threatening to blank out all other sounds. The presence of the MINNESOTA just fourteen kilometres from the start of the exclusion zone appeared at best provocative, and at worst the prelude to an attack.

“Right five degrees rudder;” Karenin ordered. “Come to course one-three-zero.”

The GEPARD and USS MINNESOTA jockeyed for position like a pair of lumbering and half-blind gladiators. Karenin knew the Virginia-class to be a more than capable attack submarine, and the GEPARD would need to exercise extreme caution against such an adversary. The atmosphere in the control room was one of subdued confidence, the crew relishing their previous double success of torpedo attack and subsequent evasion.

“Conn, Sonar. MINNESOTA now bearing one-two-six; drifting two-six-four; range 7300 metres; contact fading.”

The GEPARD too slowed, drifting idly as Karenin waited for the Americans to strike or flee. With the USS MINNESOTA outside the exclusion zone, Karenin had no authority to attack, but full authority to do whatever was necessary to defend the GEPARD. Seven kilometres was uncomfortably close, the American submarine an unwelcome stranger encroaching upon the GEPARD's personal space. Close they might be, but neither boat could now hear the other, systems straining to catch a single unnecessary sound.

The tension became like an unbearable itch: time was on Karenin's side, the MINNESOTA with the ever present threat from the Russian surface ships and ASW helicopters. Cocooned inside the GEPARD's steel hull, the normal rules of life and death no longer seemed to apply, and Karenin was living almost entirely off nervous energy, barely able to sleep, yet still managing to stay one step ahead of the United States Navy.

After some forty minutes it was Karenin who finally lost patience. “Ahead dead slow; steady on course one-four-five.”

The MINNESOTA's response took less than a minute. “Sonar contact; bearing one-zero-six... *Tubes flooding!*”

“*All ahead one-third!*”

“High-speed screws; multiple contacts.” The sonar chief's voice was tense, apprehensive. “Bearing one-zero-five; range 4700 metres; up angle five degrees. Confirm three Mark-48 torpedoes; designate—Alpha-One, Two, and Three. MINNESOTA: similar bearing, range estimate 4800.”

Karenin's brain seemed to seize up, his mind struggling to understand how the Americans could have crept so close; he had only a few seconds to react, certainly no time for anything subtle.

“Left five degrees rudder; come to course one-zero-five; five degrees down angle.” He chose to drive the GEPARD directly at the oncoming torpedoes, providing them with the smallest target profile. “Tubes one through four—match present bearing and shoot!”

“Tubes one through four,” Alenikov confirmed, “automatic search on one-zero-five. Outer doors open...”

The GEPARD gave a gentle series of shudders as the four torpedoes were launched, and Karenin immediately rapped out new orders. “All ahead full!” Tubes five and six: set solution for the MINNESOTA, automatic presets. Reload tubes one through four with *Shkval*-3s.”

Judging by their previous spar with the American torpedoes, the *Shkval* was only fifty percent effective—not an encouraging record with three enemy torpedoes to combat. With submarine and torpedoes now closing together at a combined speed of over 150 kilometres per hour, the slightest error or electronic misjudgement could yet prove the GEPARD’s salvation.

“Alpha-One has locked on,” the sonar chief announced. “Range 3100 metres and closing.”

Karenin glanced across at Alenikov.

“*Shkval*-One through Four armed,” reported Alenikov, eyes darting from one console to another while watching the technicians operate the torpedoes’ guide wires. “*Shkval*-One and Two have acquired... Solution confirmed on the MINNESOTA.”

“Fire tubes five and six!” In the race to destruction the GEPARD was running well ahead of its adversary, with barely time to launch an attack.

Alenikov immediately depressed two buttons on the fire control console, and one after the other, the Russian torpedoes shot out from the GEPARD, accelerating toward the USS MINNESOTA.

Two of the American torpedoes were destroyed but the third continued to close. Karenin seemed to have stopped breathing, his body semi-rigid from the strain as the pings of the Mark-48’s active sonar grew ever louder. He glanced at a display to his left, impatient for the additional *Shkvals* to be loaded.

Alenikov kept up his commentary, “*Shkval*-Three and Four continuing in search mode; wires cut... Alpha-Three has locked on; twelve seconds to impact.”

“Launch noisemakers...” Karenin counted slowly to three, “Maximum down-angle... *now!*” Karenin remained confident, the combination of high closing speed and the GEPARD’s sudden dive requiring the torpedo to make a dramatic momentum change, testing the limits of the Mark-48’s manoeuvrability.

It proved to be a false hope. A massive explosion ripped through the GEPARD’s double hull near to the bow, destroying the external tubes housing the decoys and rupturing two of the main ballast tanks. Water at a pressure close to ten atmospheres drove its way into the torpedo room and crew accommodation, and even though the internal bulkheads were built to withstand far greater pressures, the hull breach was enough to accelerate the Gepard’s downward flight.

Karenin’s memory was of a crashing wall of sound, as though the whole frame of the submarine was about to crush in on him. He was thrown across the control room, smashing into the planesman’s metal chair.

The Diving Officer was the first to speak, his voice struggling to be heard against the squawk of an alarm. “Forward tanks one and two have been breached; depth now ninety-two metres; nine degrees bow-down...”

“*All back two-thirds!*” Karenin ordered, desperation adding an edge to his voice. “*Blow main ballast, three through eight!*”

There was the tortured scream of high-pressure air rushing into the ballast tanks. The numbers on the depth gauge immediately slowed their downward flight, and with a resentful sigh the GEPARD started to lift—stern-first. It was somewhat inelegant but at least they were heading towards the surface.

“All stop; cancel blow on tanks five and six.” Karenin’s tone was calmer now, the initial crisis having been quickly dealt with. “Sonar, report all contacts; your best guess if you have to.”

Every console flickered with red lights, and guesswork and instinct would have to supplement what little technology was still functioning. Karenin needed to understand exactly what dangers were still out there—only then would he know whether the GEPARD had any hope of surviving the next few minutes.

The sonar chief struggled to make sense of the barrage of noise surrounding the GEPARD, “Signals distorted, too much external noise... Possible contact bearing zero-five-zero, moving away; no close contacts detected.”

Karenin kept his surprise to himself, trying to maintain an air of confidence. Perhaps the GEPARD had a chance to make it home after all, the Minnesota unwilling—or perhaps unable—to take full advantage of their fallibility.

The GEPARD’s rush to the surface gradually became far more sedate, and as damage reports began to be relayed to the control room, it became clear that the submarine did indeed have a guardian-angel. For the eleven men in the flooded compartments, there was no hope; however, the GEPARD was still basically in one piece, and the majority of the crew had escaped unscathed. The nuclear reactor was behaving normally and the submarine could still manoeuvre effectively, if rather more slowly than normal. With the torpedo room flooded and decoys destroyed, they now had no physical or electronic defence against torpedoes, nor could they launch the GEPARD’s cruise missiles; in addition, their sonar capability had been severely reduced. In effect, the GEPARD was a hunter-killer which couldn’t hunt too well and couldn’t kill anything anyway.

Karenin shrugged off his disappointment; now that the immediate danger had passed, his thoughts returned to the problem of the American submarine. With so much external damage, the GEPARD was probably as noisy as a love-sick whale and an easy target if the USS MINNESOTA so desired. Fortunately, the GEPARD’s own wayward torpedoes would now be out of fuel and so no longer represented a threat. The surviving sonar systems were still behaving erratically with a range of spurious and distorted signals, and there was no knowing how close the MINNESOTA might actually be, or even if the Russian torpedoes had managed to match their opponent’s success.

Karenin gave it another fifteen minutes, then opted to contact Fleet HQ.

His report was received without comment, the details of the unprovoked attack by the USS MINNESOTA duly confirmed and noted. The corvette BOIKIY had already back-tracked to investigate, and Karenin was ordered to make his best safe speed to the naval base at Kaliningrad.

A deep breath to hide the frustration, then Karenin keyed the intercom. Despite his hopes and self-belief, he had failed to prove the GEPARD’s true worth, the disabling of an American destroyer little enough to compensate for the GEPARD’s own wounds. Now he would have to trust that his crew would be able to forgive his mistakes, as he most certainly could not.

Moscow

Anderson was feeling a little ill-used, hustled here and there without explanation and no clear sense as to what would happen next. That said, anywhere was probably better than what had awaited them in Gdansk.

The remainder of their flight into Kaliningrad had been rather more routine, the helicopter landing at Russia's Naval Base some forty minutes after the excitement of the missile attack. Anderson had immediately been hustled away, with no chance to speak to Charlotte, two guards marching him to a sad-looking room to be searched and questioned. Hours of questions, no force used or threats, just the same questions over and over again, each answer checked, re-checked and checked again. The unblinking eye of a camera lens had recorded every frown and shake of his head, various experts no doubt scrutinising each frame for evidence of Anderson's lies and distortions. He had slowly found himself getting confused, unsure exactly what he was being asked, seemingly destined to wander endlessly from one prison cell to another.

His watch had been confiscated early on, and Anderson guessed it to be late afternoon when eventually he had been reunited with Charlotte and Koval. It had then been a military flight to somewhere near Moscow, the three of them seated well apart, with no chance to talk. Charlotte had looked more angry than tired, Koval maintaining an air of studied indifference. Their future still looked very unclear, Anderson's concern growing in direct proportion to their increasing distance from the UK.

The final leg of their long journey had been by four-car convoy, traveling at speed through empty darkened streets before finishing in an underground car park; now there were just three cars, the one with Koval having diverted elsewhere.

One of their escorts led the way into the adjacent building, Charlotte hustled towards a wide flight of stairs. Anderson was taken elsewhere, a confusing journey along narrow corridors, before he was finally directed into a small room: bare walls, three chairs and a desk—all the familiar hallmarks of yet another interview room.

Anderson was now well-acquainted with the basic routine, readying himself for the next round of questions while knowing he'd have at least a half-hour to wait. He doubted he'd be allowed to sleep, but with nothing to distract him it was always going to be a losing battle. Even as his head began to droop, the door opened and a uniformed figure entered to sit down facing Anderson, pen and notepad resting on the table between them.

"Welcome to Moscow, Mr Anderson; my name is Major Eskov." The English was flawless with barely any accent, the man's tone friendly and relaxed. "I've studied the transcript of your interview at Kaliningrad and we'll go through everything in detail tomorrow; I'm sure you're looking forward to something to eat and an uninterrupted sleep. For now, there's just one aspect that I would like to clarify." He paused, as though waiting for Anderson to respond, even though it was

obviously a statement and not a question. "Please explain once again why you and Charlotte Saunders were aboard the PRINCESS ELOISE."

"It wasn't something we volunteered for." Anderson was on his guard, knowing full well how his version of the truth would be received. "Shipping us off to Poland was a convenient way of stopping us from publicising what we knew."

"Why just not kill you both, rather than sending you on a free cruise to the Baltic? I appreciate that it diverts suspicion away from this Erdenheim facility, but it still seems... unlikely?"

"Unlikely or not, that's what happened." Anderson realised he was beginning to sound desperate. "If Martin Rebane had something else in mind then he didn't share his plans. As it will say somewhere in one of your reports, Charlotte and I were locked in a cabin aboard the PRINCESS ELOISE, not free to roam at will."

"I appreciate you weren't paying passengers, but it doesn't mean you were actually prisoners. Some might see your confinement more as a minor inconvenience, and a sensible way to protect the crew from the curious gaze of a journalist."

Anderson stayed silent, mind numb and unable to think clearly.

"And there's no other reason for you to travel to Poland—a story about *August 14*, perhaps?"

"We were prisoners with a padlock on the door, and I've still got the bruises from McDowell's fists. No, I wasn't expecting to get a story out of it, just a bullet in the head."

Eskov gave a weak smile, "Charlotte Saunders seems to suggest you were expecting an exclusive on *August 14* and that's why you were going to Poland."

Anderson held his surprise in check, annoyed with himself for almost believing Eskov's manipulation of the facts; it would doubtless only be the first of many such mind-games. "I was held prisoner by Rebane and McDowell, and had to give Charlotte a good reason for my sudden disappearance; the idea of an exclusive was a convenient excuse. An *excuse*, not reality."

Eskov changed tack, "I understand that your computer file on Erdenheim, with its photographs and notes, was kept updated onto cloud storage?"

Anderson nodded, "I imagine it's been deleted, unless you can somehow restore it."

"We have that ability, but there's no evidence of anything having been deleted. I've read your article on Erdenheim, studied the photographs, and looked at your notes on Martin Rebane and Patrick McDowell. Surely, if Rebane was worried about how much you knew, he would have taken the basic precaution of erasing all such files? From what you say, Erdenheim has the expertise to hack into your account... Can you understand my confusion, Mr Anderson?"

Anderson was equally confused and struggling to work out how he could convince Eskov of his innocence. Guilt by association would doubtless be assumed even if Anderson's only perceived fault was co-operating with *August 14* on some news article.

Eskov persevered with the questions for another ten minutes, before finally leaving Anderson alone. Soup and bread arrived soon after, together with some sort of meat pie, washed down with black tea. Anderson ate slowly, thinking through Eskov's words to try and find some clue as how the Russians really

regarded their two guests. He couldn't complain as to how he was being treated, but it was worrying that Charlotte and Anderson were being kept apart, their own words twisted so as to accuse the other.

Meal duly finished, Anderson was taken by armed guard down to the basement and shown into a small cell, not that dissimilar to his room at Erdenheim. His watch lay on the bed, together with his clothes and other personal items from the PRINCESS ELOISE, all neatly laid out.

It wasn't much, but it did seem to be an encouraging sign for the future. And, after all that had happened, it would do for now.

Chapter 18

Monday, May 24th

Moscow

Grebeskov sat in his new Kremlin office in the Senate Building and watched a replay of Anderson's latest interrogation with professional interest, admiring Eskov's ability to tease out Anderson's story without the need—or even the implicit threat—of violence. Unlike the previous evening, Eskov now referred regularly to his notes, comparing what Anderson was telling him to what Charlotte Saunders had earlier revealed. Grebeskov did his own comparison, noting the impressive similarity between the two tales—whether that was due to their veracity or otherwise, he had yet to determine.

A short break, then Grebeskov picked out specific moments from the various interviews, ignoring the translation and turning down the sound, somehow trying to gauge the truth without the distraction of the spoken word. It worried him that he was wasting so much time on something so trivial. What did it matter whether Anderson and Saunders were involved with *August 14*? Yet, somehow, it seemed important, Anderson's intimate knowledge and understanding of Erdenheim giving him a crucial insight into the very heart of the terrorists' British base.

The video clip ended and Grebeskov sat staring at a frozen image on the screen, thoughts reflecting on how much had changed in the last twenty-four hours. However one looked at it, no single adjective could in any way justify the sudden reversal of fortunes that had struck *August 14* and its secessionist allies.

Moscow was now a relative haven of peace and tranquillity, transport and communications virtually back to normal, the city's infrastructure free from the disruptive cyber-attacks. Although wildcat strikes were still a minor problem, the Special Forces' recent successes had resulted in the FSB knowing exactly who to arrest and roughly where to find them. Elsewhere, the military had started to reclaim the initiative from the secessionists, with fighting restricted to the Siberian cities of Novosibirsk and Irkutsk. The nationalist groups in Dagestan and Tatarstan were also on the defensive, the federal authorities well on the way to regaining control. Russia's future had ultimately been decided by the people

themselves, the coup succeeding by virtue of a surge of popular support, the secessionists unable to ensure a similar loyalty in any but a vociferous minority.

The TV news stations were struggling to know which story to run as the main headline: should it be the spectacular—as in the destruction of *August 14*'s British base at Graythorp; the dramatic—as in the airborne assault on Yakutsk; or the shocking—as in the attack on the GEPARD and the missile strike against the destroyer NASTOYCHIVYY.

August 14's demise did seem truly spectacular and even if there were certain aspects still to be resolved, notably in Poland, the terrorists had received a deadly double blow. Firstly, the taking of the PRINCESS ELOISE; then, some ten hours later, the elimination of their command and control centre in England. Images from inside Erdenheim had been released to the media, together with damning extracts from computer files, detailing the terrorists' targets and methods. *August 14*'s leader—now publicly revealed as ex-CIA analyst Martin Rebane—was apparently dead, the British facility destroyed by several massive explosions.

Specific details as to how Erdenheim had been neutralised and the means by which Russia had obtained the video images were left unexplained, a spokesman vigorously denying any Russian involvement in its demise. Not that anyone in Moscow believed such denials, it purely political expediency, and people were just delighted *August 14* was finally being defeated. The British authorities had ridiculed the reports linking Erdenheim to terrorism, the explosion blamed on a gas leak with the video placed in the same category as that from Lithuania.

Grebeshkov had been briefed as to the more dramatic events immediately he had settled into the Kremlin, just part of the wealth of facts he now had to grapple with. Full disclosure as to the attack on Erdenheim was withheld even from him, elements within Valentin's SVR taking the credit. Such secrecy well illustrated that Grebeshkov was still an outsider, his exact authority unclear despite the smart office and helpful aides.

The triangular Senate building in the north of the Kremlin complex remained the key centre of government, and what had been the offices of the presidential administration were now under the authority of the National Committee for Democratic Unity. The majority of the bureaucrats were the same men and women as a week earlier, the only obvious difference the presence of armed guards on each of the Senate's three floors. Grebeshkov had still insisted on bringing in his own trusted aides, and that of course included a security element headed by Markova.

The coup d'état was not quite two days old but Russia was already reaping the benefit, public optimism spreading outwards from Moscow as the new Government showed its power and strength of purpose. With the secessionist threat steadily diminishing, the Committee's focus had turned towards the accelerating chaos in the Baltic.

First the GEPARD and MINNESOTA had battered each other into insensibility, one of the GEPARD's torpedoes exploding close to the American submarine's stern—no reports of casualties but the MINNESOTA was presently under tow, heading towards the German naval facility at Eckernförde. Less than hour later, the NASTOYCHIVYY had become the second Russian warship to be targeted by missiles fired from Polish soil, the destroyer suffering significant damage, with

sixteen seamen killed. Russia had immediately responded with a cruise missile attack against the naval facility at Gdynia; six reported dead.

An unofficial truce now existed, both sides taking stock while planning out their next move. So far, purely in terms of victory points, it looked to be fairly even. A solution to the crisis in the Baltic would surely guarantee the coup's long-term survival, but Grebeshkov could see no obvious compromise, or at least one acceptable to Russian public opinion, NATO's stance merely adding to people's sense of injustice. And with the evidence mounting as to significant involvement by the West in *August 14*, would any compromise ever be acceptable?

The capture of the PRINCESS ELOISE had in turn brought Erdenheim to the attention of Valentin's SVR, the vessel presently under escort to St. Petersburg. Captain Koval remained in the SVR's custody, leaving the FSB to learn what they could from their two British guests. Transcripts from each interrogation were being passed twice-daily between the two organisations, ensuring that both of Russia's security agencies were kept fully informed as to the latest revelations. That was theory; in practice, the SVR maintained a tight rein on information gleaned from Erdenheim and its computer files.

Rebane, McDowell, Carter, Koval, possibly also the Polish woman Klaudia Woroniecki: if Anderson and Saunders were to be believed, the wider conspiracy had been restricted to a few American academics and their East European allies. Yet Grebeshkov still found it odd that Anderson and Saunders had been allowed to voyage to Poland, Eskov arguing that it seemed over-complicated, questioning whether Anderson was specifically hunting for a story on *August 14*. Grebeshkov now began to wonder whether the reality was more subtle, with even Anderson's belief a flawed interpretation of the facts.

Grebeshkov looked afresh at how *August 14* had been dismantled, it almost as if there had been guiding hand leading the various investigators to a very specific conclusion. The video clip from Lithuania, the PRINCESS ELOISE with Anderson conveniently aboard, the computer files from Erdenheim... taken together, the evidence of American and East European involvement in *August 14* was overwhelming. To Grebeshkov, it was just a little too clear-cut, everything nicely packaged to tell one carefully-choreographed tale.

If that were true, it followed that Anderson and Charlotte Saunders were thus little more than convenient messengers. The FSB was responsible for Russia's internal security and it had no prior claim on the ELOISE's two passengers; like Koval, they should strictly be under the jurisdiction of the SVR. Instead they had generously been presented to the Lubyanka, their first-hand accounts meant to remove any lingering doubts the FSB might have as to the West's support for *August 14*. It was a prime example of overkill, pushing a specific premise to such an extreme that it merely made Grebeshkov suspicious; he had grown to expect something better, feeling strangely disappointed by such arrogance, Grebeshkov and the FSB almost being treated with disdain.

Once he continued with that line of logic, the ease with which the multiple and diverse threats to Russia's stability had been countered made perfect sense, it simple enough when those involved knew precise details of each and every danger. Russia had deliberately been taken to the brink of chaos and then dragged back, the SVR's timing for its various successes all-too perfect.

Overall, it was an outrageous and incredibly risky strategy. Was it even feasible that someone would have the gall to try? And with what precise aim in mind?

For the moment it was all conjecture and a dangerous reversal of the tale presently presented to the world. Grebeshkov was not someone to flinch from the truth, wherever it might lead, yet he had no evidence to support his belief, merely a frustrated desire to expose the masquerade that called itself *August 14*. The FSB had been tricked all-too easily, and Grebeshkov was concerned that Nabiyeu might not be the only viper in their midst, unknown accomplices continuing to distort and manipulate.

Decision made, Grebeshkov reached across and picked up the phone, speaking at length to Markova, then to one of his new Kremlin aides—perhaps Erdenheim still had a few more secrets yet to be revealed.

* * * * *

The ornate office was something to aspire to: birch panelling, luxurious leather chairs, antique oak table, electronic gadgets aplenty, even a mini-bar. To Anderson, it seemed an eminently appropriate environment in which to enjoy his new role as Erdenheim expert, although it was disappointing that his personal space was restricted to just a small section of the table. The remainder of its surface was occupied by a newly-assembled and complex array of computers, three fresh-faced members of the FSB making a final check to ensure everything was as it should be.

Their officer sat at right-angles to Anderson, impatient to begin. She had introduced herself simply as Captain Markova, and despite her excellent English had pointedly curtailed Anderson's various attempts at small-talk. Persistence had eventually helped him discover that he was now ensconced in the Senate Building, part of the Kremlin complex between the Arsenal and Building 14—not that Anderson was much the wiser, but it sounded rather less intimidating than the FSB's Lubyanka.

A few hours after Eskov's morning interrogation, Anderson had been offered a simple choice: co-operate fully and Charlotte would be on her way home; refuse and they'd both be coping with Russian hospitality for the foreseeable future. Anderson didn't harp on about International Law, or even protest that they were both innocent of any wrongdoing—he just accepted with good grace, knowing that it was the sensible way forward and a means of assuaging his guilt over Charlotte's involvement. He had been allowed a few brief minutes to say his goodbyes to Charlotte and by now she should already be on a plane to Heathrow. Anderson hadn't really known how much to tell her, and he hadn't wanted to justify or explain—still, he felt more at ease, happy that at least Charlotte was safe.

As to what would eventually happen to Anderson had been left unsaid, his freedom presumably dependent in part on the nature and extent of his co-operation. It was only then that he had learnt of Erdenheim's destruction. Shock had been his first reaction, followed soon after by despair: with Russia disclaiming all responsibility and Erdenheim a burnt-out shell, finding evidence to corroborate Anderson's innocence now seemed unlikely. Captain Koval might just about know enough to help Anderson's cause, but would he be that considerate? And in any

case did the Russians themselves really care whether Anderson was innocent or not? It certainly seemed of little interest to the good Captain Markova.

Anderson's relocation to the Senate had happened mid-afternoon, the transfer executed with a worrying degree of secrecy. He had even been given a smart FSB uniform to wear, the colour scheme of military blue-green matching those of his four Russian companions. Anderson was now starting to feel slightly more optimistic, keen to exert his new-found influence, even if it was somewhat temporary. And an attractive woman in uniform as his overseer seemed a fairly encouraging bonus. Sadly, Markova's sidearm only served to emphasise her secondary custodial role, and a constant reminder as to Anderson's true status.

Final checks complete, Markova deigned to explain to Anderson his part in their enterprise, it assumed his knowledge of Erdenheim would help in the continuing search to identify more of the Rebane's associates, even Yuri. It was to be a team effort, led by Markova, aided by Anderson, with each of Markova's three associates linked to a network of helpers—their exact number and whereabouts left open to conjecture. Not quite Erdenheim, but close enough.

Official resources, such as the FSB's intelligence database and Interpol, were available at the touch of a button, but not for some reason Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service or its military affiliate. If required, certain other data sources could be accessed, although there were limitations—details as yet unspecified.

Markova made no attempt to hide the fact that their undertaking was covert in nature, but quite why the need for such secrecy and why the Senate rather than the Lubyanka were not matters Anderson chose to dwell on, putting them down to normal Russian paranoia. Anderson just hoped he could be of some use, ignoring the fear that he was actually colluding with the enemy—his twenty years for treason could wait until he'd finished his ten years in the Siberian gulag.

Markova initially focused on Anderson's own computer files, his Erdenheim folder simply downloaded from the cloud. The FSB's facial-recognition software took just seconds to analyse all of the relevant photos, with only the images from the helicopter flight producing probable hits, four more Americans—three working in counter-terrorism, one a software designer—added to the list of Rebane's associates.

Markova duly kept Anderson apprised as to progress. For the time being there were no national security issues, the results merely reinforcing Anderson's own research. Without any photographic links to Yuri, the FSB was left with little choice but to rely on Anderson's dubious brand of assumptions and guesswork, it still not absolutely certain that Lara really was Klaudia Woroniecki.

Markova spoke briefly in Russian to the young man next to her; moments later she twisted her laptop around to allow Anderson to view the screen.

"Flight details," she reported nonchalantly, "for the helicopter company used by Erdenheim, filtered by trips to Graythorp. Fourteen in total; no passenger names, just how many. The last trip was Wednesday, May 19th; the one before that was Friday, May 14th, which would be the one you photographed."

Anderson was suitably impressed, although he assumed the database hadn't just that moment been hacked. His gaze settled on a different entry, the date a good match to the possible arrival of McDowell's two drinking companions.

Markova appeared to have read his thoughts, “Two passengers picked up from Heathrow, Sunday April 25th, 13:30; return flight from Erdenheim to Heathrow, Wednesday April 28th, 10:00.”

Whilst they now had some idea as to when Yuri and Lara might have arrived at Heathrow, only the airlines’ own reservation systems could supply more specific answers. Anderson realised he probably knew more than most about the intricacies of the booking process. The flow of data between airlines, travel agents and other agencies was a complex interplay between different systems, coordinated by several global distribution companies. Each booking resulted in a unique passenger name record (PNR), and although fears about unauthorised use—or even over-use by government agencies—had resulted in restrictions as to what information a PNR held and for how long, it still included all relevant booking and passport information. A PNR wasn’t erased even if a booking was cancelled. A list of PNRs would thus be a good starting point for any search, although futile without the matching passport photo.

Markova was still one step ahead of Anderson. “We can access the passenger name records for airlines operating out of Heathrow, but the more records we hack the greater the chance of being detected; the intrusion systems will then immediately send out a global alert. We would need to synchronise any attempts and restrict the search to specific carriers or agencies. With our present resources, that means no more than three.” Markova broke off to check something else, “Apparently, there is a booking profile for those terrorists entering Russia by plane.”

A questioning look from Anderson and she read out the key facts, “Bookings always made online using a credit card, no more than three days in advance; single seat booking; never first-class, usually business-class rather than economy; airline invariably a flag carrier, primarily Finnair, Lufthansa, and LOT; never Aeroflot.”

Anderson nodded his understanding, unsure how much faith to put in any such analysis. “The terrorists you’ve caught,” he asked thoughtfully, “did they all have genuine digital passports?”

Markova nodded, “Names and other details were false but they corresponded to the passports’ biometric data; none were stolen.”

“And all EU or Russian?”

“The majority, but not all.” Markova was quick to grasp what Anderson was suggesting. “You want to use the passport details from the PNRs to access the corresponding passport photographs? If the passport is genuine with the record stored in a national passport centre, then that should be possible, even if the names are false. But that could involve dozens of passport centres.”

Anderson wasn’t quite so pessimistic, “Hopefully we can filter the possibilities down to just a handful.”

Markova chose to consult further, eventually nodding in agreement. “Again, we would need to limit any such search to just three national passport databases. Accessing them could prove difficult...”

Despite Markova’s caution, Anderson was starting to sense nothing was beyond the FSB once it got its teeth into a problem. Their first task was to produce a target list of airlines, reducing the hundreds of flights arriving at Heathrow on the

morning of April 25th, and those departing on the afternoon of the 28th, to more manageable proportions.

Anderson had become blasé about such tactics, willing to cut a generous swathe through the various possibilities. Markova was rather more judicious, their final compromise eliminating those flight arrivals without a corresponding return departure, plus flights arriving at Heathrow from west of Brussels, east of Moscow, or south of Milan.

Anderson waited patiently, making good use of the contents of the mini-bar as an alternative to the regularly proffered tea. On Markova's laptop, the flights' spreadsheet flickered erratically as rows were deleted, until just over a hundred remained – still far more than Anderson would have liked. And still far too many airlines, even if they just picked out the flag carriers. And was it even safe to assume that the terrorists would always ignore Russia's Aeroflot? Anderson had asked if Aeroflot could be added as an extra to the choice of three airlines, but apparently not; it was the same with the passport data, Russia's data centre having to count as one of the magic three.

Anderson knew they were already restricting the search far too rigidly, but under the present limitations there seemed little choice. He studied the list of flights, worrying that the more popular airlines might not necessarily be the right ones to check.

Markova was first to speak, "BA and Lufthansa, plus one other? Finnair?"

"The Polish Airline, LOT," Anderson said positively.

Markova shrugged but didn't disagree. A quick consultation with her colleagues, and then their computer skills were finally put to a more stringent test, the booking databases hacked for passenger name records covering the relevant arrivals and corresponding departures. Anderson hoped he wasn't expecting the impossible: even if they could have checked every return flight, Yuri or Lara might simply have chosen a different way home, such as flying indirect via somewhere like Spain or the more convoluted option of Eurostar.

The minutes dragged by, Anderson's hopes resting on a virtual tug of war between the FSB and the airlines. One of *August 14's* most potent weapons was being turned against it, the hacking skills of Markova's team hopefully comparable to Jonathan Carter's.

A meal of cold meat, boiled potatoes, eggs and salad eventually arrived, together with tea and coffee. Despite the half-empty mini-bar Anderson tucked in, not quite knowing when or where his next meal might be.

It took the team just over an hour to complete the Heathrow task. The lists were then compared, matching names extracted, the PNR used to filter out anyone who didn't book online less than four days in advance and pay by credit card.

"Still over eighty matches," Markova announced. "Mostly British, Dutch and German." She kept tapping away, talking as she did so, "Ignoring the cancellations and no-shows, there are eighteen men of the right age; ten women; twelve different nationalities. Taking out economy class would help."

Anderson nodded his agreement, despite worrying that they were already well over-loaded on assumptions.

The updated listing appeared on Markova's laptop: five men, three women; six nationalities.

Anderson felt they were getting somewhere, although Markova's body language suggested she was far from convinced. It was still too many nationalities for a passport check, and they went through the whole process a second time, looking to find a logical way to reduce the numbers still further.

The number of possibilities remained fixed at eight...

Anderson decided it was time for a leap of faith. "The man's native language is either Russian or Polish; so forget the British, Dutch and Czech options. That would leave us with Polish or Ukrainian. Again, ignore the Dutch woman and we have German or Polish. We could check the national passport centres for Germany, Poland and the Ukraine, and pray we've got it right. It's either that or nothing."

Markova frowned, trying not to let Anderson's cavalier approach rush her into making a decision. "It seems reasonable," she said finally. "And, as you say, we have nothing else."

Again it was sit and wait. Even with a passport photo, there was still no guarantee the FSB's facial-recognition software would come up with a suitable match. Anderson tried to remain positive, wandering around the office, peering at every picture for what seemed the hundredth time, before sitting down once more to think about what tomorrow might bring—at least it would be summer in Siberia.

Markova suddenly leant back in her chair to give Anderson a winning smile, "Klaudia Woroniecki flew with Lufthansa from Hamburg under the name of Lena Brandt, returning the same way; German rather than Polish passport."

Anderson was pleased but hardly ecstatic—it was an awful lot of effort to prove something Charlotte had suggested a week ago.

Markova glanced down again at the screen, eyes confused.

Eventually Anderson was forced into asking the obvious, "You have the man?"

"It would seem so. Maxim Demanov; Ukrainian passport; age 42; flew with Lufthansa from Kiev."

Anderson persisted, "I presume that's not his real name?"

Markova stood up, snapping the laptop shut, face revealing nothing. Ignoring Anderson, she keyed the radio microphone attached to her lapel, speaking briefly, before rapping out new orders to her three associates.

Anderson sat in confusion, watching silently as the others began to pack up their equipment. He instantly reverted to feeling insecure, not knowing what new secret had been revealed, Markova's apparent irritation suggesting it wasn't good news.

Abruptly the office door was opened, two more uniformed figures entering to stand behind Markova.

"Gennadi and Nikolai will take care of you," Markova said dismissively. She gestured at the taller of the two men, "Nikolai spent two years in the United States, so you'll find his English is acceptable if a little rusty. Thank you, Mr Anderson, for all your help." A final word of command, then she strode out of the office, closing the door firmly behind her.

Anderson looked from one large Russian soldier to the other, heart sinking, thoughts racing through a half-dozen differing interpretations of 'will take care of you'.

* * * * *

The evening meeting of the Committee had been moved from the formal extravagance of the Security Council Meeting Hall to a room on the top floor of the Senate Building, the new venue offering a more relaxed and intimate environment. The fact that the room was also the Kremlin office of the President of the Russian Federation was merely a convenience—or so Valentin had insisted.

A few metres from the imposing central desk, running alongside two of the three windows, was a table with just enough space for seven chairs. Grebeshkov sat next to General Morozov, listening intently as Irina Golubeva detailed the latest status reports concerning the various internal threats.

Despite Grebeshkov's earlier doubts, Golubeva had been a revelation, someone able to produce resources seemingly from nowhere to shore up Russia's drive against the separatists. She had also been supportive of Grebeshkov's raft of suggested second-tier appointments, Grebeshkov determined to bring in like-minded associates able to drive Russia forward, corruption-free, strong and vibrant. Their present form of government might not be as equitable as Western-style democracy, but to his mind it was one better-suited to Russia's needs.

Valentin appeared to share Grebeshkov's hopes for a better Russia, the younger man's influence on the Committee far greater than Grebeshkov had expected. It was only now that Grebeshkov sensed the naked ambition driving Valentin forward. There was a hard edge to his every statement that made others pay attention, and Grebeshkov was seeing a very different side to the man who had seemed to be everyone's friend and confidante. It was clear that it was Valentin who had schemed and manipulated, Golubeva working all along under his direction, the two of them taking full advantage of a weak government.

General Morozov certainly seemed to regard Valentin as the *de facto* President, the elder man restricting his contribution purely to military matters. It seemed natural, therefore, that it was Valentin who acted as the meeting's chairman. The fifth member of the Committee, Alexander Cherenkov, was elsewhere, meeting with other politicians in an attempt to counter dissent and smooth the way forward, a new Constitution high on his list of priorities.

"With the exception of Yakutsk," Golubeva said in conclusion, "most cities should return to normal within a few days, and all are now back under our control. The data retrieved from Erdenheim has led to the identification of all the remaining activists, the total being rather less than the sixty we feared, and presently only five remain unaccounted for. Consequently, the curfew in Moscow can be relaxed at any time."

"No sign of political repercussions or political opposition?" Grebeshkov asked, surprised that the President's supporters weren't being more vociferous in their condemnation of the coup and its leaders.

Valentin responded first, "In return for certain assurances, the President has agreed to formally resign. In a month or so, he will be free to spend an honourable retirement at his home in St. Petersburg. His former allies will soon understand that their political future is now totally in our hands."

Grebeshkov said nothing, the answer confirmation that he was still being kept well outside of the decision-making process. Valentin had earlier given his version

of what had happened at Erdenheim, claiming it was down to a falling-out between Rebane and McDowell, the latter ashamed at what *August 14* had become. Grebeshkov had tried hard not to show his disbelief, conscious that Golubeva had been watching him carefully.

“Which leaves us,” Valentin continued, “with our remaining external problems, primarily Poland.”

“And the UK?” Grebeshkov’s tone was curious, intrigued as to how Valentin was planning to respond to the public revelation of Erdenheim; after all, Lithuania had ended the Prime Minister’s career, Poland the President’s.

Valentin was dismissive, “Their media is already on the warpath but not against us. The fallout for the British Government could be significant, and we would be well advised to do nothing. We have garnered all we can from Erdenheim—it is destroyed and Martin Rebane dead. I think we need to focus our thoughts elsewhere and try to find some compromise with NATO that will satisfy the people. We can only end the blockade if we have something positive to show for the loss of our comrades aboard the NASTOYCHIVYY and the GEPARD.”

“There is still a great deal we don’t know about *August 14*,” Grebeshkov said thoughtfully, “and I understand it will be several days before the latest intelligence has been fully evaluated. By then, we could be at war with NATO. Whatever the precise relationship between *August 14* and the West, the terrorists are defeated, the separatist elements on the run; such achievements should ensure that an acceptable public victory need not necessarily be a military one. If we can gain some concessions from Poland—however modest—it might just be enough.”

Valentin nodded in agreement, “I suggest we open informal discussions with NATO to see if we can find some common ground; we can even re-negotiate allowing certain vessels safe transit. Let us not waste this opportunity by demanding more than our enemies are prepared to give. If future evidence requires a more forceful response, then we can do so on our terms without rushing into a war we cannot win.”

With no dissenting voices, Valentin’s proposals were quickly confirmed, Grebeshkov given the authority to approach the Swiss mediators. Their discussions continued, the meeting only ending once general agreement had been reached as to all of the remaining major issues. The overall mood was optimistic, everyone confident that some acceptable compromise could be negotiated with the Americans, and even with Poland. Grebeshkov kept his suspicions as to *August 14* to himself, knowing that he needed something more tangible than just gut instinct.

Left alone with Valentin, Grebeshkov eased his chair back away from the table, waiting impatiently for his aide to arrive with his wheelchair—he could hobble a reasonable distance without help, but it seemed wise not to push his body too quickly.

Valentin stood up and walked across to the President’s desk where a large tray of food had been laid out, helping himself to some freshly-made apple and honey pastila. “Dmitry, can I get you something?” he asked, gesturing at the various delicacies.

Grebeshkov’s reply was cut short as the office door was thrust open; a stern-faced Markova entered, gaze searching out the General while pointedly ignoring

Valentin. She walked quickly to stand beside a puzzled Grebeshkov, bending down to whisper a few words.

Grebeshkov nodded in affirmation and their private conversation continued, Markova eventually striding from the room, still without acknowledging Valentin.

Valentin had watched the interplay between Grebeshkov and Markova with a mixture of concern and curiosity, and he returned to sit at the table, a plate of pastila in front of him.

“Is there a problem, Dmitry?” Valentin asked, his tone one of friendly concern. “Something seems to have upset the good captain.”

“Reality can do that,” Grebeshkov said quietly. “I too tried to ignore the truth, hoping that I would be proved incorrect, or that a more palatable version would be revealed.”

“That sounds very profound and rather too deep for me.”

There was a long pause before Grebeshkov responded. “Senior Lieutenant Vadim Reunkov,” he said, sounding out each word slowly and carefully.

Valentin frowned, “The officer who identified the PRINCESS ELOISE? What of him?”

“Idle curiosity made me check his personnel file—I hadn’t realised he was a relative of yours; that was stupid of me.”

Valentin gave a thin smile, “My wife’s nephew. Is that important?”

“I was very impressed by Reunkov’s report. Now it seems that was also stupid of me.” Grebeshkov’s tone was one almost of sadness, although there was anger in his eyes. “It was all a little too clever, Arkady; so much so that the real nature of *August 14* shines through with the utmost clarity. As does your part in this conspiracy to debase Russia.”

“I’m not sure I understand, Dmitry,” Valentin’s voice was casual, dangerous.

“Allow me to enlighten you. Every shred of evidence relating to *August 14* has directed us to one very clear conclusion, the ELOISE’s two passengers conveniently filling in any missing pieces. They even gave us Klaudia Woroniecki, thereby creating a direct link between the terrorists and the Polish Government. How could anyone doubt that *August 14* was anything other than an agent of the West? We all ignored the coincidences, too focused on the need to destroy the terrorists. With time, the inconsistencies in such a simple tale will no doubt be revealed; we might even be able to trace the money trail back to its true source.”

“I’m still unsure what you’re implying, Dmitry. You’re suggesting that *August 14* has nothing to do with Poland?”

“I’m suggesting that it has nothing to do with their government or any in the West, and everything to do with Russia. Apparently Woroniecki visited Erdenheim accompanied by a Ukrainian man named Demanov. I imagine he was there to make sure everything was on schedule before the terrorists’ final push. Except as we both know, he’s not Ukrainian and Demanov isn’t his real name—Major Konstantin Purvukhin, formerly Special Forces, now a Kremlin Adviser, with an office just along the hallway.” Grebeshkov’s eyes narrowed in anger, “The SVR has always been adept at cloaking its activities in layers of deceit, but this sets a new standard in hypocrisy. Woroniecki doubtless convinced Martin Rebane that she represented some anti-Russian faction, but she in turn was following *your* orders.”

He looked at Valentin accusingly, "How long has Woroniecki been working for the SVR?"

Valentin eyed Grebeshkov thoughtfully; finally, he gave a shrug of resignation, knowing that it was too late for denials. "Thirty years or so; she had been a somewhat wasted resource, until now... Your anger is understandable, Dmitry, but *August 14* was a necessary evil. The past shows us that Russia needs strong leadership to survive; leadership from men such as you and I. Surely you as much as anyone can understand that?"

"Hundreds killed, with Russia close to civil war. It's too big a price." The anger finally took control, Grebeshkov's voice shaking with the strain, "You tried to have me killed, Arkady! And now because it suits your needs, you want me to endorse this madness..."

Valentin raised his hand in denial, "I had no control over day-to-day events, merely an off switch to use at the optimum moment. I am truly sorry for all that you have suffered but we were all potential targets."

Grebeshkov tried to calm himself, ashamed as to his own part in Valentin's conspiracy of lies. He had been sucked in far too easily, willing to accept the convenience of Valentin's coup without questioning the reality.

"There were other ways," Grebeshkov said simply. "You could have used your influence to change policy, or even stood against the President, rather than stabbing him in the back."

Valentin gave Grebeshkov a pitying look, "Elections are always a long-term route to an uncertain victory. *August 14's* success proved how weak the President really was, and we needed to act before Russia's decline was irretrievable. Once we were a superpower; now we are a bear without claws, our military decaying away while billionaires defraud us to then play politics." Valentin flung his arms wide in a gesture of frustration, "The President had so many chances, and by the time he showed some backbone it was already too late."

"*Your* President; a man who deserved your loyalty." Grebeshkov had his emotions back under control, "I assume Golubeva and Morozov are part of this? Surely not Cherenkov as well?"

"You are mistaken, Dmitry; they know nothing of *August 14's* lineage or its true purpose. Together, we five can create a government the Russian people truly deserve. *Together*, Dmitry," Valentin emphasised. "Let's not waste the sacrifices of the past few months with pointless accusations, which at best can only help those that would destabilise Russia."

Grebeshkov took his time replying, choosing his words carefully, "A pretty speech, Arkady; but I cannot do as you ask. Little is achieved without risk, and I have given too much to accept some comfortable sinecure. I would demand that you step down, but I imagine that is pointless."

Valentin inclined his head in acknowledgement, "What now, Dmitry? You know more than I am comfortable with."

From the outer lobby came raised voices, and once again Markova entered, this time pushing Grebeshkov's wheelchair.

"If you're ready, General?" she enquired, her tone more insistent than polite.

It was Valentin who spoke first, "That would be a mistake, Dmitry," he said quietly. "We still have important matters to resolve."

“It would be a greater mistake to stay and be part of this folly.” Grebeshkov forced himself upright, spurning the waiting wheelchair and determined to leave with some semblance of dignity. Self-control helped him to turn his usual shuffle into a more rapid stiff-legged walk. In the adjacent lobby, two more Alpha Group waited impatiently, warily eyeing their opposite numbers from the SVR.

Valentin waited a few seconds, then with a resigned shake of his head issued new orders to the waiting *spetsnaz*. Grebeshkov had made his choice and there was little point in delaying the inevitable—truth could often be a confusing concept, and some truths were better left unsaid.

* * * * *

Gennadi and Nikolai had totally ignored Anderson, and once the others had cleared the desk and departed, they had made themselves comfortable, chairs pulled around so as to face the door. It was then non-stop jokes and banter, with Anderson left to worry as to what was happening. He would have asked Nikolai to explain but he doubted he would get a positive response, neither Russian looking pleased at having to babysit some foreign spy-cum-traitor.

The two men could easily have been brothers, late-thirties, stocky, bald heads and weather-beaten faces. Anderson wasn't sure whether they were there to guard or protect him—maybe it was a bit of both. The time dragged by, Anderson unsure why the three of them were just sitting, doing nothing. It was now well after nine, and the background noise of banging doors and footsteps had long since diminished to nothing, the Senate Building now presumably winding down for the night.

A sudden movement from Gennadi as he pressed his hand to his earpiece was the first sign that things were about to change. Gennadi spoke little, listening intently to his new orders, before giving a final word of confirmation into his radio-mic, gun freed from its holster. A quick-fire explanation to Nikolai, then he stood up and strode to the office door, motioning Anderson to follow him.

The long, narrow hallway outside was empty. Gennadi led the way, Nikolai walking half-backwards behind Anderson, both Russians with guns in hand and very wary of what lay ahead. Anderson too felt his nerves on edge, not knowing who or what they had to fear. Every few yards they passed another numbered door, a dozen or more already. Despite the ceiling lights and the gentle evening glow filtering through the windows to their right, the corridor still exuded a sense of gloom, Anderson having to suppress an unexpected shiver which ran across his shoulders.

Suddenly, there was the sound of gunfire, not close but definitely coming from somewhere within the Senate building. It grew rapidly in intensity before a strained silence returned. Neither of the two Russians made any comment, walking steadily along the corridor, Anderson growing ever more nervous.

The hallway turned sharply right. Gennadi disappeared from view, then immediately stepped back, speaking briefly to his colleague.

Nikolai grabbed Anderson's arm and gestured back the way they had come. “Change of plan. There's more stairs at the far end; wait for us there. Give it fifteen minutes and then you're on your own.” He pinched the insignia on the arm of his uniform, “Blue good, red not so good.”

Anderson nodded his understanding, thinking if he got close enough to study the badge colour on someone's sleeve then it was probably a bit late to do much about it. Within seconds of starting to retrace his steps, there was the double crack from Gennadi's handgun, followed instantly by the rapid chatter of automatic weapons.

Anderson sped up, jogging past the original starting point, the sustained gunfire from behind hurrying him on, the jog becoming a run. The hallway took him past another long line of office doors and he desperately looked for some guide as to where exactly might lie some stairs. Short side corridors projected off at regular intervals but invariably led only to another numbered office. There was no sign of anyone else, most of those still in the Senate wisely deciding it was best to keep a low profile.

Anderson kept moving, adrenalin adding a nervous edge to his unease. He was totally confused as to what was happening and it was bad enough worrying about being able to distinguish friend from foe, without the added fear that the bad guys might actually shoot you.

Ahead to the left was a double door, offering the hope of stairs beyond. As Anderson strode forwards, two uniformed figures stepped through from the stairway beyond and out into the hall, submachine guns held double-handed. Even as they noticed Anderson, he instinctively launched himself at the first man, no doubt in his mind they were the enemy. The Russian was smashed back against his colleague, the latter crashing upright against the door frame. An unwanted burst from one of the SMG's splattered the floor, then Anderson waded in once more, wrenching the first man's gun around and smashing the butt against his chin. The man collapsed unconscious to the floor, his colleague struggling to refocus with blood running down past his right ear.

Anderson grabbed at the second gun, his only wish to end the fight whatever it took. Some out-of-body calculation argued that the two of them were pretty evenly matched: the Russian was younger, fitter and far more experienced, but Anderson weighed an extra twenty pounds, and he was a good four inches taller. Desperation, surprise, anger, wounds—old and new—each added an extra dimension to the contest.

The force of Anderson's assault pushed the man back against the wall, the two of them wrestling for the gun. Abruptly the Russian lost his footing, and he dragged Anderson with him to the floor, the SMG twisting to one side. The two of them fell heavily, Anderson on top, both hands knocked from their grip on the gun. Instinctively, he clawed at the Russian's neck, thumbs and fingers locking around the man's throat, his legs and elbows squeezing tight, the gun sandwiched impotently between them. The Russian abruptly let go of the weapon and reached out to drag Anderson's hands away, but their grip was already secure; Anderson pressed his face to the floor, protecting it, the Russian's body thrashing wildly as he struggled to free himself, hands finally managing to grasp Anderson's throat.

In a macabre version of two lovers entwined, they fought out their personal battle. Another distant part of Anderson's mind analysed and accepted the pain his body was going through, the warning messages ignored—Anderson sensed victory and everything else was an unwanted distraction. His strength was ebbing

fast, yet he didn't relax, his body fighting against the black curtain closing over his eyes, fighting to stay alive.

The Russian's body suddenly went limp. Anderson kept squeezing, fearful that it was merely a ruse, and only gradually did he begin to relax.

Strong hands pulled him free, Nikolai saying nothing but giving him a broad wink as he dragged Anderson to his feet. Anderson stared down at his motionless adversary, worried now that he killed him, and noticing for the first time the red dagger insignia on the man's sleeve.

Nikolai pushed him through the door onto the landing and Anderson stood unsteadily, trying to gather his senses, the muted crack of two gunshots a warning as to the penalty for failure. Anderson found he was shaking all over, angry at himself for getting involved in someone else's war.

Nikolai then Gennadi joined him, the latter talking softly into his radio. A brief check as to his new orders, then Gennadi spoke rapidly in Russian to his colleague.

"The Presidential Regiment are staying neutral," Nikolai explained. "As is General Morozov. His troops have cordoned off the Senate Building while waiting to see who wins. It's turned into a straight fight between Grebeshkov and Valentin, Alpha versus the SVR's Zaslou."

Anderson didn't fully understand but he got the gist. "So now what?" he muttered warily.

"Grebeshkov's pinned down and needs our help. I suggest you keep out the way until this is all over."

A moment's indecision then Anderson slowly shook his head, "I somehow doubt the other lot have my best interests at heart, and I think I'll tag along and see what happens... A gun would be useful."

Nikolai sought a second opinion, Gennadi's frown of concern finally turning into a nod of agreement. Seconds later, the Russian led the way up the stairs, both the spetsnaz now armed with SMGs; Anderson nervously took up the rear, pistol in his right hand and fully committed to playing his part, the irregular rattle of gunfire not the most encouraging of signs.

There route was more complex than a simple trek along half-lit corridors, Gennadi doing what he could to avoid another confrontation. Anderson seemed to have gained Nikolai's respect and the Russian detailed more of what was happening: Grebeshkov had taken refuge in the Presidential Library, his bodyguards cut down from six to just four. The SVR numbered around twelve and while Anderson wasn't enamoured by possible odds of almost two to one, it seemed a little late to chicken out. In Russia's new and better world, there were no ballot papers or coloured balls to count, not even a simple show of hands, just a bloody fight to the finish. It threatened to be a modern version of an old-fashioned gunfight, with limited ammunition and basic weapons of submachine gun and pistol, the winner the side that took out the other's leader.

It was several minutes before Gennadi signalled a halt. The hallway ahead wasn't quite empty this time, three bodies resting untidily on the patterned carpet, spaced out over some fifteen yards. The sound of gunfire had been intermittent for some time; now there was only silence.

Gennadi paused beside the last body, focusing on elegant double doors further down the hallway to his right, one door slightly open. A few whispered words in his radio, then Gennadi spoke softly to Nikolai, motioning Anderson to stay where he was. Gennadi crept forward, hugging the right-hand wall; Nikolai matched him on the left, submachine gun aimed at the narrow gap between the two doors.

Anderson waited, not sure how he could help, but determined to do something useful—preferably without getting himself killed. Nikolai abruptly dropped to one knee to fire a rapid three-shot burst. The reply was almost instantaneous, Nikolai and Gennadi firing back as one, Anderson responding an instant later.

An ominous silence returned. Nikolai sat slumped against the wall, face distorted in pain, hand grasped to his left leg, blood oozing between his fingers, a second dark stain spreading down the side of his jacket. Gennadi quickly moved back into danger and Anderson edged across to try and aid Nikolai, the Russian merely shaking his head and gesturing at him to help Gennadi.

The right-hand door was now half open, a bloodied figure sprawled across the threshold. Gennadi stopped well short, body pressed tight against the wall. Opposite him, Anderson crouched down, eyes desperately searching the room beyond. A multitude of tall glass-fronted bookcases lined the library walls, surrounding a central round table; higher up there was some sort of semi-circular gallery or mezzanine. A second body laid face-down away to Anderson's right, the bookcase alongside shredded, a veil of dust drifting lazily through the still air.

A whispered remark dragged Anderson's attention back to Gennadi, the Russian glancing up at the ceiling, left hand tugging at his uniform. Anderson shook his head, confused, and a frustrated Gennadi looked back towards Nikolai before pointing towards the mezzanine floor. Anderson finally nodded his understanding, trusting that their non-verbal communication had successfully crossed the language barrier.

Gennadi gestured again at Anderson, hand signals detailing their next move, eyes daring him to disagree. Anderson thought he understood, the cut-throat gesture leaving little doubt as to their ultimate aim: basically charge in, Gennadi first, two bad guys to the right, the two to the left Anderson's responsibility, expect support from above.

A brief word into his radio, then with bloodied fingers Gennadi began counting down from five...

Gennadi leapt through the opening, Anderson following a brief second later and almost tripping over its late protector; unbalanced, he managed to fling himself at the base of the table, before twisting around to spot his targets past table leg and chairs. He glimpsed sudden movement beside a curve in the wall and fired without even taking aim, desperate to cut the odds.

There was gunfire all around, bullets smashing into the table, splinters flying. Something tugged sharply at Anderson's thigh, but he kept his focus, shooting at a second half-hidden shape, praying that Gennadi was doing his part.

Silence settled over the library. Ahead of Anderson two uniformed figures lay slumped against the mezzanine stairs, both all-too obviously dead. His gaze swept around to the opposite side, the bloodied scene repeated but now with three bodies, Gennadi lying prostate and unmoving across the ornate wooden floor.

Anderson heard footsteps from behind, and he wrenched himself around, pain lancing through his thigh.

“Rest easy, Mr Anderson,” said a familiar voice, Markova moving quickly to check the corridor outside. A second spetsnaz cautiously checked for survivors, a sad shake of his head his only comment as he knelt beside Gennadi.

Nikolai was still alive but in bad way, blood marking his uniform from stomach to knee. Markova was doing what she could to help but both knew he would be left to take his chances, Nikolai’s survival not the priority.

* * * * *

Grebeshevskov rested against the wall, wheelchair long since abandoned with no one spare to push it. They were just four now, including Anderson, their future more one of hope than expectation. The Presidential Library might have served them well as a temporary refuge but Grebeshevskov had grown tired of hiding and with the odds now more evenly stacked, he was determined to take the fight to Valentin.

Ahead was the President’s office, a naïve arrogance convincing Grebeshevskov that Valentin would still be there, but there were no guards, nothing to suggest Valentin had been so obvious, or indeed so vain. A shake of the head from Markova and Grebeshevskov hobbled forward, walking slowly to the central desk and easing himself into the President’s leather chair, flanked by the Presidential Standard and the flag of the Russian Federation.

Valentin deserves it more, he thought dispiritedly. Grebeshevskov knew he was far too old for such games and now even his intuition was playing him false. Idly, he picked up one of the phones to his left but there was no tone, only silence, and no response when Grebeshevskov demanded an answer. He smiled at his own foolishness, saddened that others had to die because of his mistakes.

From beyond the door came the sound of automatic gunfire, growing in intensity, a harbinger of Valentin’s final victory.

Chapter 19

Tuesday to Friday, May 25th to 28th

Moscow

The long table in the Security Council Meeting Hall was occupied along barely half its length, the new President’s inner circle gathering together for the first time. Grebeshevskov sat directly opposite the President’s empty chair, unable to join in the small-talk of his new colleagues. The trauma of the previous evening was still taking its toll, twenty hours barely long enough for both mind and body to return to anything approaching normality.

The President had been sworn in early that morning, the Russian Constitution simply bypassed as being outdated and impractical. It was a move few in Russia

had been brave enough to dispute, certainly in public, and for many it was confirmation of a more assertive leadership, even a return to the popular days of the Putin era. Grebeshkov had been informed in person that he was still an essential component in Russia's fight against dissidents and separatists, and although far from convinced, under the circumstances it had seemed churlish to refuse.

There was a sudden hush as the President entered, Grebeshkov standing with the rest until the President was seated. The latter's welcome to the hand-picked group of men and women who would now shape Russia's future was brief and business-like, typical Golubeva. She might be Russia's first woman president, but she was the one person able to match strength with stability, essential requirements after the turmoil of the past weeks, with leaders discarded seemingly every few days. Grebeshkov felt he owed Golubeva, if not perhaps his life, then at least some form of loyalty. It was Golubeva who had persuaded General Morozov to intervene, his troops storming the Senate building with orders to rescue Grebeshkov.

Quite why Golubeva had sided with Grebeshkov over Valentin was unclear, and despite Valentin's denial, Grebeshkov wasn't convinced that Golubeva was ignorant of the conspiracy behind August 14. With Valentin dead, it seemed best to leave such fears unsaid, Grebeshkov merely noting with interest that Valentin's SVR was presently undergoing a good old-fashioned purge, various high-ranking officers arrested, others suspended from duty. Grebeshkov didn't know what had happened to Reunkov or Purvukhin, but he sensed their life expectancy was likely to be relatively short.

"It is with sadness," Golubeva continued, "that I have to confirm the terrorist attack on this very building resulted in thirty-one killed, including Arkady Valentin. *August 14's* last desperate act has taken another of Russia's finest, and I would ask that we stand in silence as a token of respect for our comrades murdered here yesterday."

Grebeshkov struggled to his feet, unsure whether he would be able to stop the laughter from exploding from within, and fearful of what the others might think. Now Valentin, like the FSB's Nabiyeu, was a fallen hero and not a callous murderer whose ambition had resulted in months of heartache for the people of Moscow. From Russia's perspective, the imagined attack brought a more defined sense of closure to the terrorist assaults and the country was slowly returning to a form of optimistic normality, with just the situation in the Baltic still to be resolved, something that was next on Golubeva's short agenda.

A word of thanks and Golubeva sat down, moving straight on to events in Poland. "I am pleased to announce that after some feverish diplomatic activity, agreement has been reached with NATO, including of course Poland. A suitable compromise has been worked out with regard to the withdrawal of forces in the Baltic, and this is presently underway. In addition, an independent multinational inquiry will be held under the auspices of the International Court of Justice; their specific charge to undertake a full and impartial investigation into *August 14*, including the terrorists' possible relationship with various governments or government agencies."

But presumably not Russia, thought Grebeshkov bitterly. It wasn't the best compromise but it was the best NATO would offer, and it could be packaged in sufficient fine rhetoric to satisfy the Russian people.

"I have been assured," Golubeva continued, "that all relevant governments will provide their full and unequivocal support to the investigating team. The exact make-up of the inquiry will be decided over the next few days and I will be asking General Grebeshkov to lead negotiations on Russia's behalf."

Grebeshkov acknowledged Golubeva's words with the briefest of nods, realising that he was the obvious choice. The Russian people had listened to Valentin's lies and Grebeshkov was seen as the main instigator of *August 14's* demise; if Grebeshkov's name was associated with that of the International Court, then that might just be enough to allay any public concern.

"Finally," Golubeva reported, "an unofficial exchange has taken place, no publicity. Of the fifteen men and five women detained by the Polish authorities, and under investigation for their links with the terrorist base outside Gdansk, fourteen are Russian citizens. I am delighted to report that all fourteen have been forcibly repatriated to Russia; in return, the captain and crew of the PRINCESS ELOISE have been released without charge, and have been flown to Warsaw." Golubeva gave a cautious smile, "Once the dust has settled we can leak news of the exchange, and fourteen live terrorists are the best we could possibly hope for."

Nods of approval greeted the President's unexpected revelation, and even Grebeshkov was impressed. Russia had extracted more than it might have expected from the West, and so far had successfully hidden from the world the internal power struggle between the members of the coup. Even after a few days, the new Government was gaining a certain respectability, with an approval rating of over seventy percent according to a recent news poll.

For Grebeshkov there was much to be pleased with, perhaps even proud of, despite the obvious mistakes and the machinations of others. He had risen to a position of some influence, a well-respected and popular member of the ruling clique, lauded as being instrumental in the destruction of *August 14*. Although such an accolade might be undeserved, for some reason it seemed almost a fair exchange for the weeks of pain and anguish.

Warsaw

The mortuary was having a difficult day, the routine haul of corpses far more than was normal. Primarily, it was a consequence of the awful late-Spring weather, although a contributing factor had been the celebrations associated with the ending of the Russian blockade.

For the single female attendant still on duty, it was not an unfamiliar experience, and she was old enough to recall a dozen similar days, especially during the final years of Communist rule. If truth be told, she had a certain fondness for those times, when she had been unfettered by the demands of family and uncaring as to the political desires of her elders. And, as always, the memory of her first love brought a twinge of regret and a wistful smile.

Now she was twice-divorced and Poland had Western democracy, together with the trademark terrorism of extremists and fanatics. Yet few in Warsaw believed the Russian lies about *August 14*—it was all propaganda to help explain away their own internal divisions and home-grown terrorists. Russia had challenged Poland and been forced to beat a hasty retreat; no wonder Warsaw was celebrating.

Not that such complex issues were of particular interest to the attendant, and certainly of no further concern to the mortuary's clientele. To the woman's experienced eyes, each body told its own tale, and mixed in amongst the crushed skull of a car-crash victim and the blue-tinged lips of a suicide, was another reminder from the past. The mortuary's most recent arrival had suffered a single small-calibre wound to the side of the head, a fate once the feared hallmark of Communist repression but now relatively rare, and it was almost unheard of for the victim to be a woman.

Idle curiosity made the attendant check the woman's name – Klaudia Woroniecki. The name meant nothing, but the old woman gave a small nod of approval, strangely pleased that even for the well-manicured and obviously wealthy, destiny was still a fickle and unreliable friend.

Marshwick, England

It was a bright, crisp morning, with cotton-wool clouds silhouetted against a pastel-blue sky. Little had changed in the churchyard since the Commander's funeral—the weeds were perhaps a little sturdier than before and a few more flowers had come onto bloom—but to the church and its immediate surroundings, the confusion and fears of the past three weeks meant little of consequence.

For Anderson, this second visit was a far more personal affair than before, and he came now as a friend of the family, rather than a total stranger. Charlotte and Jessica stood arm in arm beside the grave, each with their own very private thoughts. Anderson waited a few paces further back, ready to offer a steadying hand should the need arise; however, the strength that had carried them through recent weeks was still evident. The Commander would doubtless have expected nothing less—tears were for shedding well outside of the public gaze.

The relationship between Charlotte and Anderson was at a difficult stage, their shared imprisonment aboard the *PRINCESS ELOISE* almost creating a barrier between them rather than bringing them closer together. To the British press and public, events in Russia had now been overtaken by domestic political turmoil, specifically the resignation of the Home Secretary—nothing supposedly related to *August 14* or Erdenheim. The Management Development Centre in turn had finally lost its news appeal, the official response being to rubbish stories linking it to *August 14* and blame the explosion on a gas leak. Rebane and McDowell were listed amongst those killed—no mention of Jon Carter. It was a confused and somewhat unsatisfying conclusion to the Erdenheim myth, with countless loose ends left hanging.

Anderson was keen not to muddy the waters with his version of the truth, and he was content to live out the lie for his own protection. He still had a painful reminder from those final chaotic hours in the Russian Senate, the stitches in his

thigh due not to a bullet but a large splinter. Grebeshkov had been insistent that it was in Anderson's interests to forget about what secrets he had learnt that day and it had seemed little enough in exchange for freedom and a flight home.

The British authorities had irritated him with the expected questions, their version of Major Eskov being rather less polite and far less perceptive. Eventually, Anderson had been let loose, his story first taken apart piece by piece to prove no-one would believe it, dire warnings made as to the consequences of publicising his tortuous tale.

Charlotte was clearly determined to put it all behind her and if she had guessed that Anderson knew Yuri's identity, then she had said nothing, and events involving Erdenheim or the PRINCESS ELOISE were apparently off-limits, even for Anderson. There was so much that needed saying, but neither of them knew how to begin.

It was just over three weeks since Anderson had first arrived in Marshwick to create general mayhem, and he still couldn't even guarantee that the Commander's murderer had been duly punished. The FSB had pursued the Demanov link all the way to Spain, the dates matching the Commander's death, but that didn't prove he had been the person responsible.

In retrospect it seemed doubtful whether Anderson had actually achieved anything worthwhile: he manifestly had done nothing to accelerate the downfall of *August 14* and it was thanks to his interference that Devereau had ended up in intensive care, his full recovery still not yet certain; Pippa Mason also now had a genuine axe to grind, Erdenheim's destruction leaving her with no job at all. Anderson hadn't even been an effective journalist, his article on Darren Westrope still as yet unpublished. All in all, it was a fairly poor record and the hamlet of Graythorp would never quite be the same again, the blackened ruin of Erdenheim a daily reminder of their fifteen minutes of fame—plastic explosives or gas leak, Anderson knew which one he believed.

His musings were cut short as Charlotte moved to stand beside him, allowing her mother to have a few private moments alone. Her hand slipped into Anderson's and slowly they walked back towards the church.

As they waited for Jessica, Anderson pulled Charlotte close, his arm trying to squeeze out the problems of the world. The PRINCESS ELOISE, *August 14*, Rebane and McDowell: all would soon be a distant memory—until then, they would just have to work a little harder to ignore past adversity.

Japan

The bullet train swept out of Tokyo on its race to the north, McDowell relaxing in the extra comfort of first-class, eyes closed, thoughts moving on from the success of the past towards an unclear future. He had a new identity, money to burn, no ties and no responsibilities—at least for a while—and McDowell was finding it hard adjusting to a relatively stress-free life, worrying that he might quickly succumb to the dubious pleasures of excess and extravagance.

With his Erdenheim role complete, McDowell had initially followed the latest from Moscow with only minor interest—that was until he had heard the new

President speak. Even though the language spoken was different and the sound quality far superior, he had instantly recognised the voice from his many cell-phone conversations, the physical reality totally at odds with how he had perceived his Russian contact. McDowell's surprise was tempered by something approaching pride, his arrogance fed by the knowledge that he had played an integral part in bringing Irina Golubeva to power.

If he had any regrets, it was those final hours at Erdenheim, specifically Rebane's death. The two of them had worked well together, Rebane unconcerned by McDowell's frequent criticism, treating it more as constructive than argumentative. By any definition, Rebane was more than just a colleague, but McDowell had happily ignored such complications, selfish concerns meaning far more than mere friendship. He knew he would invariably do the same again, the flaw in his character one he accepted as being an essential part of the whole. He hadn't even questioned the need for Rebane to die, his orders followed to the letter – still, he wished he had been less dramatic, a bullet in the back of the head far simpler than dragging out the inevitable.

In four months detailed planning for the second phase would begin in earnest, McDowell's paymasters delighted with the success of their initial investment. Arkady Valentin might have been their preferred candidate for President but Golubeva was a very acceptable alternative, their ultimate long-term goal still very much on track. There were obvious lessons to be learnt and the confrontation between NATO and Russia had proved to be an unexpected but key element, accelerating the internal divisions and magnifying the threat, ultimately easing the transition of power.

McDowell was well aware that the second target would require a more subtle approach, one geared to that particular nation's democratic strengths and its unique place in history. The proposed budget had been increased to compensate and the personal profiles of some six hundred individuals were already being gathered, their aspirations and weaknesses duly assessed.

McDowell's future role would also be expanded, it promising to be a suitably intriguing challenge and one McDowell's ego would not allow him to ignore...

