The Holder of the Key

By

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Author's Notes

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Chapter 1

The leaves fell early this year. It was cold too. As he pulled into the drive, Jack Monroe noticed a footprint in the mud, close to the edge of the tarmac, and his instinct told him to exercise caution. With his station wagon now parked inside the garage, he looked around for signs of an intruder. Nothing else seemed amiss.

He exited the vehicle and walked to the adjoining side-door, before letting himself into the kitchen. There, on the floor, near the

hall entrance, he spied a tell-tale patch of mud, so drew his pistol and crept forward towards an under stairs door that led to the basement. It was closed when he'd left, but now stood slightly ajar.

Why is that open?

Curious now, he inched nearer, keeping his attention focussed squarely on the small crack of light emanating from beyond the opening. He tried hard not to make any noise and with his left hand, Jack gripped the doorknob. *Damn*, a slight creak of the hinge betrayed his presence, as he pulled the

panelled oak timber open a little further and peered inside.

With gun ready, he pointed the weapon downwards toward the bottom of the steps. Directly above, a gloved hand emerged from between the banister uprights and Monroe felt a sharp pinprick to the back of his neck. Jack's brain registered the assault, but before he could react, his vision blurred, he staggered, and then everything went black.

On coming to, he found himself lying on his sofa, tightly bound and unable to move. Above him, he eyed a man and a woman, muttering to each other in heavily accented

English, while around them lay the contents of drawers and cupboards.

They're looking for something.

The girl glanced at their victim and gave a slight smile, nodding to her accomplice, whose eyes followed her meaning. He reached down and pulled hard on the pendant secured around the captive's neck by a chain, causing a link to snap as the prisoner uttered a pained groan. The man examined the unusual medallion in his hand and grinned. *This is what we've come for.* Now all they needed was some information. The female produced a loaded syringe and pressed the

plunger a little until a small drop of liquid exited the end of the needle.

He mustn't die yet.

The hypodermic spike plunged into his arm and discharged the potent fluid. In a moment or two, he'd sing like a bird.

Four hours later, the New York Police Department (NYPD), arrived at the house following a call from a distraught Mrs Monroe, explaining how her husband was dead and their home left ransacked. The male officer assessed the situation whilst his female colleague consoled the victim's wife. Forensics were on their way. To Officer

Clark, it looked like a straightforward case of robbery and murder. *The guy probably came back and disturbed them,* he reasoned.

Further inquiries made of his widow revealed that Jack Monroe was a former agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and meant the inquiry would now move to a higher level. The FBI always took charge of their people's affairs, even the dead ones.

The autopsy results came twenty-four hours later. A lethal nerve agent, administered via an injection into the neck, had killed Jack in less than thirty seconds. Once the deadly substance entered his carotid artery, he didn't

stand a chance, meaning the killer knew exactly what they were doing. It bore all the characteristics of a professional hit. Three puncture marks to his body, plus the toxicology tests, showed the use of a truth drug, suggesting whoever killed him was also after information.

Subsequent investigations had drawn a blank. When asked what her husband had worn around his neck, Mrs Monroe described a silver medallion, larger and thicker than a dollar, bearing an American flag and Eagle motif on the front. On the back; an inscription... *'Ferox ad Finem.'* Latin for, *'Defiant unto the End.'* The coroner had

found a mark on Jack's neck consistent with a strong chain having been snapped away hard. According to Monroe's wife, he'd worn it ever since the day they'd met. A closer look into Monroe's background and Bureau service records resulted in a curt, 'Need to Know - Eyes Only,' rebuff from the internal computer system. FBI Area Head, Ralph Cooper, the investigating officer, knew this meant only one thing. Jack Monroe was indeed a *Special* Agent. Cooper filed his report and sent a copy to the Pentagon. This was their baby now.

*

Igor Gregorski sat in his cabin, together with his wife, Yulia, and daughter Polina, at the courtesy of Worldwide Shipping Ltd, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In less than three days' time, the former Station Head of the Russian Intelligence Service (GRU) and his family would embrace life in the Western world under a new identity. In recent times he'd grown to dislike the modern Russian hierarchy, not least because of the way they treated his late brother Yuri, an active opponent of the current leadership. The crunch moment came when learning of Yuri's death at the hands of an assassin. Investigative work by Igor's allies left little

doubt that the President-elect had sanctioned the murder. So, after much soul searching and personal angst, Igor decided to defect. Having served his country as man and boy with many medals to his merit, this was no easy decision.

Jim Croker a senior CIA field agent supervised the full operation and now sat in an adjacent cabin, normally reserved for the ship's officers. So far the plan was working well. The Gregorski family often spent their holidays in Europe, on this occasion, Genoa in Italy, an international seaport. A special container bound for the U.S. was carefully

loaded at short notice and within, hid America's latest asset, his wife and child.

They had to keep out of sight for the entire voyage, but this was no hardship to them if it meant staying alive. He'd served in the field of espionage himself, so no one knew better than Igor as to what the Kremlin did to traitors if they caught up with them. The former spy's tours of duty encompassed Europe and the United States, and he was already known to both powers as a person of interest. This more than anything helped guarantee his ticket out of the east.

Gregorski had much to offer the west but expected nothing less than five-star treatment in return. Already a large Colonial-style house in Florida awaited them. Igor and his family would want for nothing. Upon their arrival in the U.S., they would first stay in North Virginia, for the defector had yet to come through with his part of the deal, and that was - the supply of information.

*

Deep in the waters near the Florida coast, a small, tracked submersible vehicle inched its way along the seabed towards the shore. In an hour or so, it should reach the destination. A

purpose-built craft, capable of both ground traction and buoyant propulsion, depending on the terrain. Onboard, two highly trained Russian military commandos, manned the controls with expert skill. Waiting to meet them would be Jake Halliday, the GRU's most secret operative in this State. His real identity, known only to a few trusted souls at the Kremlin, was Vasily Khrushchev, one of several people recognized in this tight circle as a 'Sleeper Agent.' For the last twenty-five years, Comrade Khrushchev had lived a double life on American soil, posing as an ordinary citizen. However, in recent times, this dormant spy had received his coded

instructions to *awaken and serve*. Despite around the clock surveillance, a senior serving GRU officer had vanished, but a high-ranking American informant knew where they were taking him. Gregorski held information in his head, that the Kremlin preferred Uncle Sam not to know, and therefore he must die.

Progress proved slow and cautious for the Spetsnaz unit as they clawed their way towards the Everglades inlet. Their mission: To terminate a high-level traitor and failure was not an option. Admiral Vladoski had made that clear. Off the coast, hidden in international waters, was the Yasen class

submarine General Vlostok, waiting to ferry them home on completion of the task. Under cover of darkness the two-man crew would meet their contact, codenamed 'White Horse.' These soldiers formed part of the Russian Special Services whose motto was, *'Any Mission, Any Time, Any Place,'* and the United States of America was no exception.

Now at their destination, with deft precision, they manoeuvred the high-tech craft under and into the purpose-built hangar, nestled at the water's edge. From the outside the structure appeared to be a large old wooden boathouse, but inside, it was a different story, with a bespoke submarine

berthing, complete with recharging facilities for both machine and equipment.

The pilot surfaced and powered down the electronic vessel, a hatch swung open, and two men in wetsuits emerged. Vasily parked his brown Honda Accord at the planned location. A disused marina on Southside. The five-acre site had been up for sale for the past six years, and its remoteness provided the ideal spot for a secret infiltration. Khrushchev had himself chosen this abandoned area, knowing full well they would never sell it for as long as it belonged to the Kremlin. His cover occupation of Realtor served his cause perfectly, enabling

him to pinpoint strategic land and property for purchase by his masters in Russia. He checked his watch and waited. Twenty minutes later, two dark figures appeared from the shadows and walked towards his car. The leader spoke.

“Excuse me, we are lost. How can we get back to the inlet?”

“Go back down steam and turn left near the white horse statue.” On hearing this, the man smiled at Vasily.

“Thank you, Comrade.” He turned to his companion and issued an order. “Bring the bags.”

Vasily opened the trunk, into which the men deposited two sturdy canvas holdalls. His contacts then removed their wetsuits, placed them on top and closed the lid. They now looked like ordinary Americans in their shorts, tee shirts and baseball caps. The trio then set off for their contact's home, some three miles away, where he, and his new companions, would await further instructions.

Chapter 2

In Fort Meade, Maryland, National Security Head, Chuck Lewis, addressed his in-tray. Among the correspondence sat a curious document, detailing the recent murder of an 'A' list 'Guardian' operative named Jack Monroe. Having read the report, he called his second in command and asked him to dig out all the information they had regarding the Special Agent. Two hours later, his subordinate, Derran Gillespie, knocked and entered Chuck's office.

"Hi, Derran. So, what have you got?"

Gillespie shook his head as he answered.

“Not much. Agent Monroe is almost invisible on our system.”

“Almost...? So, what *do* you have?”

“His basic details. Name, address, contact number, and a single reference of his attending a meeting at the Pentagon in nineteen eighty-seven.

“Who did he meet with?”

“That’s just it. We don’t know. There are no records.”

Lewis stood. This was his usual reaction when confronted with a mystery.

“Well, it must have been important if he’s on the ‘A’ list?” Chuck said, knowing all ‘Guardian’ agents were the most trusted in the land.

“Yes, I agree. But what could be that secret, that even we, don’t know about it?” Gillespie asked.

“That’s what we’re going to have to find out, Derran. So, keep digging,” Lewis said, before adding... “Oh, before you go, see if anyone over in the Pentagon recognises this.” He handed a sketch of a medallion reproduced by

a skilled artist from the description given by Monroe's wife. Derran read the script aloud.

"Ferox ad Finem?"

"Defiant unto the End." Lewis gave the translation. Both men raised an eyebrow, acknowledging the intrigue.

Gillespie headed off back to his office. He knew the 'A' list only contained names of people deemed vital and important to matters of national security. Now sitting at his desk, Derran checked the Washington internal directory and availability of those people with whom he wanted to speak.

*

At the Friends Motel in Denver, Colorado. Silvina Drovik, and Alexi Yahontov, planned their next assault. The target, Ron Madison, resided near Hidden Lake, Berkley, in Adams County, a place the local tourist guides described as a pleasant residential area. Madison was a former DIA agent, now retired. Russian embassy staff had already reconnoitred the property, and it seemed this man lived alone. *Perfect*, they reasoned. For tonight, the pair would pay him a visit. Jack Monroe, they discovered, had not been privy to one vital detail, so they hoped Mr Madison would fare better. If not, it would have to be

the third and final subject: Miss Jefferson. Her home was in California. Some way from here, Alexi noted. He knew this mission was of paramount importance to the Kremlin, in offering the potential to swing the balance of world power firmly Russia's way for all eternity. Yahontov could visualise himself receiving the coveted 'Hero of the Russian Federation' medal from the President, but only if he and Silvina pulled this off.

*

The Pentagon stood thirty-two miles from Fort Meade, but still it took Derran the best part of an hour to get there. Instead of

growing impatient with the traffic hold-ups, the NSA operative diverted his thoughts to the matter in hand, and having thoroughly read the FBI's incident report twice, he knew Special Agent Jack Monroe had an impeccable service record, winning three bravery awards along the way. The man was a hero. Derran reasoned it would be wise to direct his initial questions towards those people of influence who were at Arlington in nineteen eighty-seven. He hoped they might be able to shed some light as to why Jack may have been there. Only two remained, and both were in their sixties.

Upon arrival at his destination, Derran showed his pass and gave the purpose of his visit to the uniformed officials at the security gate, who in turn directed him to a parking area. This had become a regular exercise for Agent Gillespie. After further checks and hurdles, he now waited in the lobby for someone from the Joint Intelligence Centre (JIC) to come and collect him. His first meeting would be with Senior Operational Coordinator, Dylan York. Five minutes later the two sat face to face across a desk where York read the FBI report for himself before giving comment.

“Intriguing, Mr Gillespie, and in answer to your questions, yes, I was here in nineteen eighty-seven, but I personally have no idea why Jack Monroe was called in. However, my assistant did find this.”

York handed Derran a photocopy of a Pentagon sign-in book, dated June 4th, 1987. Only one line was legible, the rest blacked out for security reasons. Before coming over from Fort Meade, Derran had asked York to dig out anything they had on Agent Monroe from around that year, and although the details were sparse, it did reveal who he’d come to see. The Director of the DIA:

Herbert. J. Damon. Gillespie felt a surge of optimism.

“Wow. The Top Dog. This must have been a hell of a big deal?”

“I’d say you’re right, Mr Gillespie. The problem is, Herbert Damon died nineteen years ago in the Nine Eleven attack on this very building.”

Derran’s heart sank. He was still no nearer to finding the truth. He shook his head, remembering now exactly where he was on that awful day. Everyone (over a certain age) remembered that too, he was sure, such was the enormity of the tragedy. The two men

paused in silent respect for all those fallen heroes.

Before their meeting ended, Dylan pledged to run down all leads within his domain. Already his staff had looked for a link between the unusual pendant worn by Monroe and his dealings with Damon. Both he and Gillespie knew it would take some time, with no guarantee of success, after all, nineteen eighty-seven was now a long time ago.

Derran pounded the corridors of the Pentagon once more. His next interview would be with a man he knew and trusted

implicitly and that was Commander Bart Walker, U.S. Army, Chief-of Staff. Several minutes later, at his office door, Bart extended a warm welcome to his visitor.

"Derran. Good to see you, how's Chuck these days?"

"He's well, sir, and passes on his best to you."

Bart and Derran last met when conducting a secret operation to rescue a State cyber professional from the clutches of a deranged torturer named Josef Krugle. Together with a specialist undercover team of field operatives called Unit Covert, they'd averted a global disaster by saving the Worldwide Web from

destruction. They'd also liberated the expert and his girlfriend, plus a British MI6 spy, who owed his life to Walker and his close-knit allies.

"Be sure to pass on my regards to him, too. Now... This business of the murdered agent. I met with Herbert Damon frequently and I can tell you this. The man kept the cards close to his chest. With regard to the date, my best guess is the meeting concerned the cold war. In nineteen eighty-seven Herbert ate, drank, and slept it. As for this strange medallion, the inscription intrigues me. *Defiant unto the End?"*

“Us too, sir. It must mean something... but what?”

“Sounds almost apocalyptic, don’t you think, Derran?”

“Sure does, sir. However, it may mean nothing at all. That’s the problem. Nobody seems to know.”

“I’ll get my people to sniff around. If I find anything, you and Chuck will be the first to know. Oh, by the way, I spoke with Blake West yesterday. He’s expanded his team. We now have two of the United States’ finest at our disposal. Both former Navy SEALs. They’re butting heads a little with the SAS,

but he's confident they'll all make it through together."

"That's great news, sir. Chuck will be pleased to hear that. What a team... The best of the absolute best, I'd say."

"I hope so. By God, we need these people more than ever now."

Gillespie, having bade farewell to Walker, was now outside the building making his way to the parking lot. From a nearby window, keen eyes studied him with interest.

This man could cause me problems.

The watcher resolved to contact his handler.

Chapter 3

"That's bollocks! My old Vincent Black Shadow would have been across the finish line while you were still at the side of the road fixing your Harley's oil leak."

Chas was yet again engaged in a disagreement with recent recruit, Wes Scott. The tough fighter gave his pointed opinion as to the historically superior performance of

British motorcycles compared to their American rivals.

“Okay, Bud, well let’s say you borrow one from a museum and I’ll bring in my new Harley Street 750 and we’ll see who’s really talking bollocks.”

Wes was rubbing in the fact that unlike Vincent, Harley still produced their exquisite machines. This kind of exchange was common of late because these two fighting men, although allies in the field, seemed to agree on scant else outside of their work. Each came from a different cultural background. Both had served in their

respective Nation's elite Special Forces, and both insisted their former regiment was the best in the world.

In training they'd proven to be a cohesive, effective, and potentially deadly force. However, their petty rivalry had grown more than a little wearing to the rest of their colleagues in Unit Covert, a special undercover troop created by their leader, former Colonel, Blake West. The Pentagon now oversaw and financed all the team's activities, having impressed Walker by how well they performed in operations, and not least, by the way they'd uncovered the

corrupt dealings of a group operating inside the U.S. Military establishment.

Unit Covert did not exist in any official capacity, so in consequence, all their operations would stay black.

Virginia Lowe, tired of listening to yet more pointless bravado, decided something needed to be done. Lowe was West's second in command, and she, like him, didn't want this childish competition spilling over into operations. That was the danger. Blake had noticed this too. Only that morning, Chas had beaten everyone to the firing range and decapitated the entire supply of target

dummies with precision sweeps of his M16A1 automatic rifle, then followed on by holding the weapon aloft and proclaiming aloud another success for Britain's best. Not to be outdone, Wes shot off all the legs, effectively leaving the rest of the team to practise with tin cans or bottles. It all had to stop... but how? Blake offered his deputy a seat.

"Yeah, I saw it all from the window. It's getting worse. Dammit, I don't want to lose either of these guys, but I won't have them damaging the team's morale. Any suggestions?" Blake asked this because he'd already had words and wasn't one for

repeating himself. He felt it needed a more illustrative solution.

“I have an idea: Blake, can we switch Wes and Mick for Friday’s cover? I’d like to invite Chas and Wes to a night out.”

West was a little puzzled, but trusted Virginia’s instinct. Since increasing the headcount, Blake decreed that at least one-half of Unit Covert should be ready on standby for the Pentagon, mindful that emergencies did not conform to any order. Things just flared up in an instant, and West liked to be prepared. Despite this, it had been quiet of late and if it stayed this way until the

weekend, Blake would grant two weeks' leave to ex-CIA operative Virginia, Chas Banks, and his erstwhile SAS colleague Mick Case. If trouble started next week, former Navy SEALs, Wes Scott and Lucas Allen would get their first taste of action with their new Unit. They'd be more than well supported by Chip Kirk, previously with U.S. Navy cyber intelligence and Sean Gideon, an ex U.S. Marine. Both seasoned experts in secret operations and military technology.

"I'm fine with that. What exactly do you have in mind?" Lowe gave a little more detail as her leader listened intently.

*

Moscow: Russia

In the Kremlin, Comrade Smirnov, Military Security (GRU) Station Head, did his best to assure Minister Popov that Gregorski's termination was in hand. It was just a matter of time. White Horse had successfully collected the operatives, so when the traitor and his family took up their new residence in Florida, Spetsnaz would hit him. There was a chance however that they might get to him sooner. His asset within the Pentagon hoped

to discover the place of Gregorski's initial debriefing in the next few days.

"Very well, Comrade Smirnov. We must silence him at our earliest opportunity. Your contacts are reliable?"

"Yes, Comrade Minister. White Horse is one of our assimilated sleepers, and Silver Bullet is under our control. Additionally, Admiral Vladoski is overseeing the sea operations."

"Alright, Comrade Smirnov, be sure to keep me updated. After that shambles in Belarus, the President has his scornful eyes on us all - Don't mess up."

“No, Comrade Minister.”

“You are dismissed.”

Dimitry Smirnov turned and marched out past the grand hardwood doors which opened up before him. He was on his last chance; he knew that much, having lost a prized Western spy by allowing unseen rescuers to outmanoeuvre his men near the border with Poland. He needed to impress his superiors and saw this as a golden opportunity to make amends.

Vasily sold the large, impressive property to the undercover CIA agents in person, and the Kremlin’s man in the Pentagon, Silver Bullet,

had corroborated the accuracy of the location. In Smirnov's mind, there was no doubt that Igor Gregorski would soon be dead.

*

The next day an urgent message from the FBI had reached Gillespie's desk... A second murder by lethal injection, this time in Denver. The victim. A retiree called Ron Madison, who'd served in the DIA. Ron's son recalled him owning a silver dollar medallion, but they could find no trace of it at the crime scene. Derran headed off towards Lewis's office.

“We have another hit and another missing pendant.” Chuck’s face took on a serious expression as Gillespie handed him the report.

“Denver. There must be a link.”

“Yes. Not only that. York’s people say Madison also visited Damon in nineteen eighty-seven.” Lewis stood, walked to the window, and looked out at the city sprawl.

“What the hell is this about?” he said, to no one in particular.

“I don’t know, but somebody wants those medallions bad enough to kill for them.”

“On that point, Forensics say, Monroe’s death bears a striking similarity to four GRU assassinations two years back in the U.K.,”

Chuck said. “Russia, again? We need to find the significance of those silver dollars. By the way, Commander Walker has his people looking into this too. I dropped by his office yesterday. He sends you his best regards.” Lewis smiled at hearing that.

“Did he have much to offer on this?”

“Only that he knew Damon well before his death, and that the man kept tight-lipped on everything.”

“As you would expect from someone in his position.” Lewis stated the fact.

“Yes, I agree, but why is there no record?”

“Well, that’s something we need to find out too. So... stay on it, Derran. If you want help, take Gallagher and Johnson. This is now our number one priority.”

Friday

The sequin club sat tucked away, a discreet distance off a side street in downtown Santa Monica, where the boys were more than happy to accompany Virginia and Sean for a drink at this exclusive night-time haunt. All

being well, Chas would take a hard-earned vacation as from Sunday, leaving his new buddies Wes and Lucas to hold the fort, and having trained with the newcomers for the last six-weeks, he felt sure they'd just about manage. Maybe not as effectively as he and Mick would, but the SEALs were sort of okay. As they enjoyed the drinks at their corner spot, both Wes and Chas eyed the local talent.

"I don't fancy yours, but I like her friend."

Chas spotted a gorgeous blonde with a plain-looking companion sat at a nearby table.

“Sorry to burst your bubble, bud, but she’s been giving me the eye since I walked in.”

“Not a chance, Pal. That lady is definitely sending me the vibe.”

“Ten bucks says you’re wrong.” Wes threw down the challenge... It was game on.

Virginia smiled in private amusement at the two, as Sean hurried them to finish their beers. After all, they were not on standby tonight. The pair obliged with gusto, neither wishing to be outdone by the other. Wes stated he could drink anybody under the table if need be. Chas hotly disputed that... of course.

In less than ten minutes, the warring duo were sitting at the same table as the voluptuous lady they'd spied earlier, and Candy and Dannie were more than happy to have someone supplying free drinks. Sean and Virginia made sure the beers kept coming for the boys. Wes took Candy for a dance, but Chas wouldn't be beaten. In no time, he'd cut in and replaced his rival, whilst Dannie sat there, arms crossed, looking rather left out. This continued for the rest of the evening and still the beers kept coming.

By the end of the night, both Wes and Chas, now both a little worse for wear, eagerly had their photographs snapped with the gorgeous

Candy when the other's back was turned. She'd even kissed them passionately for the pose. It was only after this that they'd learned to their shock that Dannie and Candy were in fact an item, and much to their dismay, the contest had to be declared a draw. Both, now in a state of advanced intoxication, watched as their current favourite 'gal' left the club, holding Dannie's hand and blowing her bemused admirers a parting kiss as she went. They were crestfallen.

*

The next morning at nine sharp, Blake West summoned Scott and Banks to his office. As

they headed up the stairs, the hung-over pair sensed they might be in some kind of trouble. The Colonel held an unreadable expression, when indicating for the two men to sit on the chairs he'd placed with purpose on the opposite side of the desk. West stood in front of a large wall mounted board, positioned directly behind him, and studied their faces before speaking.

"A hell of a night, eh, boys?"

Chas offered a blank look, so too, Wes. Blake then pinned up a photograph. It was from the night before in the Sequin club, showing Chas embracing a glamorous blonde

and even had a caption, ‘Confessions of a Cross Dresser.’

Both men sobered up in an instant, now looking shocked as Blake attached the next exhibit. This time it was Wes’s turn, with a pose entitled, ‘Cross-Dressing Candy’s Man.’ Before the gobsmacked duo could say anything, West spoke again...

“Do you often engage with these types of people?” He asked, as he affixed a third and final damning picture in place. It depicted a man in a suit, and in stark horror, the pair recognised the face without the make-up... or the wig.

“Meet Raymond Antonio. Santa Monica’s very own internet cross-dressing sensation. Does he look familiar?” There was no doubt it was the lady in the club. Wes was by now unconsciously wiping his lips. Chas just felt sick in the pit of his stomach, but Blake kept his finger on the agony button.

“I can’t imagine what Major McCullough and the rest of the guys at Hereford would make of this?” He checked Chas’s expression and knew his words were hitting home.

“I doubt Chief Iverson over in Little Creek would be impressed either, especially so, having recommended you.” He looked

directly at the former SEAL as Wes squirmed inside. Blake let the message sink in, then put them out of their misery, but only a little.

"You owe Ginny and Sean a big thank you. They seized this stuff before any damage was done, otherwise, you two would be all over the Worldwide Web and out of an occupation. You are professional soldiers, and you took your eye off the ball, gentlemen. This hi-jinks, gung ho bullshit stops right here and right now. You're hacking off the entire team. This is not the SEALs or the SAS. It is my unit and you're allegedly the best of the best. Now act like it. It seems you both need to remember your basic training,

but if you can't do that... then I don't want you. – Dismissed, gentlemen."

The pair headed for the door, realising they'd let the whole team down, badly. Neither spoke, they didn't need to. Both resolved that things would be different from here on because they'd make damned sure of that.

Blake did not enjoy berating these men, mindful of the fact that Chas had recently probably saved his life in Belarus, however, sometimes straight talking was necessary. He hoped he didn't have to do it again, for Blake would not give either of these guys a second

chance. He called down to Virginia and asked her to come and see him. A moment later she appeared.

“How did it go?”

“They know the score. How the heck could they not tell the difference?”

“Erm, well actually, Candy is a real woman. I trained her and her husband Dan at Langley and they’re good. He was there with them the whole time... posing as Dannie, Candy’s wife.”

Blake laughed loudly, but then asked...

“So, who’s Raymond Antonio?”

“Oh, him. Yes, well, I had to twist Chip’s arm to make him work some magic with a photo editor. He added a couple of subtle male features to Candy.”

“My God, Ginny, hah! You know, you’re pretty damned good yourself.”

“Do we tell the guys?” She asked, now feeling a tad guilty.

“No, not yet. I think we’ll let ‘em stew for a while.”

Chapter 4

It was Wednesday, a typically quiet time on the shores of Chesapeake Bay, when Igor Gregorski looked out across the still blue waters from the former fishing lodge, now serving as a CIA safe house. The Americans had treated him and his family well since their arrival, and so today, in return, Igor would show his appreciation by participating in his first debriefing and there was much to tell. In a short while, two specialist intelligence officers would arrive to conduct

the interview, where Igor Gregorski would do the United States a great favour, and Mother Russia a notable disservice. It would not bring Yuri back; he knew that; however, it would certainly damage the aspirations of the cold-hearted tyrant who'd ordered his death.

As they approached Westland, CIA officers, Dr Ruth Murray and Louie Regis took in the view, whilst they passed the Marina and headed towards Windmill Point. It was an area sparse in populace, where a few grand houses lined the road amidst a wooded backdrop of thick evergreens on one side. On the other ran the sandy coastline. Near the

end of the track, the black Chrysler saloon pulled to a halt on the gravel drive, outside an impressive residence of wooden construction, boasting its own beach and mooring facility. All nearby dwellings were empty holiday homes of the rich. A perfect location for unburdening a spy of his secrets, Ruth thought.

“My God, they certainly put out the red carpet for this guy.” Louie eyed the sprawling displays of success and wealth.

“He’s worth it and more if he gives us what we want."

“Yeh, well we’re here now, so let’s get to it”. After showing their I.D. to the plain-clothes security detail, the pair exited the car and followed the armed escort to the front porch.

Dr Murray, an expert in psychology, had insisted on a relaxed environment in order to put their subject at ease. This she knew from experience would get the best results and hopefully enable the United States to gain a deeper insight as to the intentions of their number one adversary. Russia. Louie on the other hand was a shrewd and often forceful inquisitor who could easily spot a lie. He’d served undercover at the American Embassy in Moscow for five years and had learned

much about the internal structure of the Russian political system. Often in attendance at meetings with the Kremlin representatives alongside the U.S. Ambassador, Louie already knew plenty about Comrade Gregorski, including the facts surrounding the death of his brother.

Now alone with their new ally, the pair introduced themselves as Leo and Mary because The CIA never used real names for this kind of activity. Louie kicked off the talks as agreed with Dr. Murray, knowing that expressing sympathy was always a good opening gambit for gaining trust.

“Mr Gregorski, The President extends his warmest sentiment in welcoming you to the United States and sends his sincere condolences regarding the death of your brother, Yuri.”

“Thank you. Please tell your President I am only too happy to be here.”

*

Despite what they insist on in spy films, Central Park is never a suitable location for conducting a covert activity. The authorities monitor everyone who enters this place, twenty-four seven. He knew this because in the past he’d helped to oversee these

operations, which is why Silver Bullet always enacted his treachery in the most unlikely of places. A visit to his tailor had never aroused any suspicion. A simple drop system within the changing booth was all it took, and the sealed envelopes never failed to find their way to 91st Street, New York. The home of the Russian Embassy.

Whilst walking back to the subway, the turncoat hoped to get the green light for his extraction to Russia soon, but knew at present, he was too useful to the Kremlin. Well past cursing himself for falling foul of the oldest trick in the book, he now looked to the future with some optimism. His drinking,

gambling, and womanising had put him in this position, and he knew he had only himself to blame. The GRU loved people like him and as for loyalty, well, that was just a word. Less than impressed with most of the inferior creatures who'd leapt over his head in recent times, this traitor was now loyal only unto himself.

Over the three decades he'd spent in the Pentagon, much information had crossed his desk. He even knew things the computers didn't. The embittered administrator always exercised reticence in a dutiful manner, right up until that awful day of two years ago, when he fell into a downward spiral of

madness. When he drank, his judgement became impaired, leading on to losing serious money... money he did not have. Then, looking for some extramarital comfort from his pain, he tumbled headlong into a honey-trap and the Kremlin did the rest. They'd snared him. Big time. The first he knew of it was when a mysterious brown package appeared on his car seat. Inside, a selection of colour photographs. He recalled the feeling of horror. Attached to these revealing bedroom stills was a note stating only a grid reference, time, and a blunt message.

'Be there or else!'

He'd only met his handler once and that was that. The Kremlin had settled his six figure gaming tab. Well, just enough to keep the mob off his back. However, they would hang on to those damning videos and stills, up until such a time they'd considered the debt cleared and when that would be, he could only hazard a guess. Despite this, the deceitful spy considered what he'd just given them to be priceless, so maybe they'd let him go now?

*

Silvina and Alexi had only one more call to make. The third subject it seemed was the

most important of all, because they would know the location. The Americans were clever when setting up the strategy of their incredible plan and Alexi had to admire their thinking, but it certainly made his job harder. He realised that finding the exact geographical spot was paramount to the success of this operation. He and Silvina would be careful to extract that information before killing yet another American Special Agent. Their next destination was over a thousand miles away and prompted the GRU killers to book a charter flight from a private airfield far enough away from Denver, so as not to arouse any suspicion. The Feds would

now be all over that city and watching every route out, including the airports. This was why Alexi and Silvina left by the back roads under cover of darkness, after executing the hit.

*

Vasily Khrushchev read the coded message, comprising a grid reference and an order to enact the termination as soon as possible. A major change of plan, he noted, but not impossible to arrange. Windmill Point stood at over nine hundred miles away, so setting this up would need a little time. However, as a long-standing member of the Flying Wings

club, he knew transport would not be a problem, for the Russian owned a Gulfstream jet. The Kremlin spared no expense when dealing with their arch foe. He quickly alerted the others... they needed to move fast.

At the private airport, the plane stood on the runway apron in preparation for the arrival of the three men because Vasily had called ahead, requesting the craft be made flight ready. He was taking his companions to an angling competition off the coast of Chesapeake Bay. At least, that's what he said when submitting the flight plan. Now boarding the aircraft, Colonel Gennady Babkin and Captain Misha Berezin looked

the part, complete with the fishing rods they'd borrowed from their host. In less than two hours the hit-squad would touchdown at an obscure airport near Richmond, where 'Black Knight,' their contact, would be waiting.

Chapter 5

At the Sun Harbour marina in Santa Monica, Virginia Lowe and Sean Gideon enjoyed a private meal at the 'Mariners Inn.' Ginny's favourite haunt. The pretty brunette and the tall, ex U.S. Marine grew closer of late, but kept their relationship casual. Neither let it interfere with their working arrangements in Blake's unit. Sean had been married before, and in truth, still held feelings for his ex-wife, Anne. In recent times, fate had brought them

together twice during operations connected to the team. However, it now seemed Anne Gideon had moved on with her life, becoming friendly with Sean's colleague, Chas Banks. Anne had first met the former SAS commando, after unwittingly getting caught up in an operation staged by Blake's team. She and Chas had been seeing each other frequently ever since, and Virginia could tell Sean was not happy.

"A penny for your thoughts?" Gideon's faraway look returned to the table.

"Sorry, Ginny, I was miles away."

"You're concerned for Anne. Am I right?"

"Well, not concerned exactly. It's just that I still sometimes feel a sense of duty for her welfare."

Sean had earlier learned that his ex-wife and Chas were now dating.

"Are you sure that's all?" Virginia was fishing.

"Positive. Don't you think maybe Chas is a bit young for her? I'd hate to see Anne get hurt, that's all."

"Stop worrying. Beneath that brash exterior, he's really a gentleman, and besides, she's a

big girl now." It was a clichéd reassurance, but seemed to fit the moment.

"Yes, I know that. Thanks for the advice."

He sounded sincere, but his partner couldn't help feeling that maybe underneath it all, he still held a candle for his ex. It was getting late and although Virginia was on leave, Sean was not - So on that note, they called it a night.

*

The following day, Murray and Regis were back at CIA headquarters in Langley reviewing the first tranche of intelligence

offered up by the defector, and in an instant they realised that if this information was accurate, then immediate action must ensue. With them was CIA Head, Vernon Dyke. Gregorski had opened the debriefing by insisting on giving them details of a serious Russian transgression, currently taking place on American soil. Dyke had his doubts as to the validity of this man's revelations.

"A search on the Pentagon's 'Ultra' database has so far thrown up nothing regarding 'Operation Homeland,' although, they're still looking. I passed those three names over to the JIC's office and we're awaiting feedback.

This could be a *red* herring in the truest sense."

Murray ignored the joke, as she was certain Igor believed he was being honest.

"In my professional opinion, he was telling the truth as he knows it. What do you think, Louie?"

"I agree. He came across as the real deal to me, and if he's right, then we've got problems. Especially regarding 'Silver Bullet and White Horse.'"

"The President is now aware of the claims and an outside team are hastily being

assembled to investigate this as we speak." Vernon said.

At that moment, his phone buzzed. Louie and Ruth saw the lowering of his eyebrows as Dyke processed the incoming information. He finished the call, his face the epitome of seriousness as he looked straight at the others.

"Two of the three people on Gregorski's list have been murdered in the last week."

"Jeez, so the intel is correct?" Louie was stunned. "We'll meet with him again tomorrow afternoon, I'm sure he has much more to give." Dr Murray was optimistic.

“Ok. Do that. Meanwhile, I need to share this with one or two friends.” Dyke knew some people he could trust.

*

Over at the Pentagon, Commander Walker sat with his chief administrator. They were discussing the mysterious meeting between the late Jack Monroe and Herbert Damon in nineteen eighty-seven, whilst perusing a sketch of the unusual medallion. Something rang a bell in Maggie’s head.

“You know, Commander. I’m almost sure I’ve seen this motif before. It must have been

a long time ago, and I'm darned if I can immediately place it."

"Well, I'd appreciate it if you can try Maggs, because it seems important to Chuck and Derran."

"Most peculiar. Doesn't even show up on our database and I was only eleven years old in eighty-seven, so this was way before my time. Yet this still looks vaguely familiar."

"If it is relevant to anything concerning our operations, then it must have been commissioned for manufacture by one of our approved suppliers of the day. Can you check this out, please, Maggs?"

“Yes, of course.”

Walker had already made some discreet enquiries of those who remembered or worked with Damon, and still nothing had been forthcoming. This was a complete conundrum.

*

Chas bowed down on one knee in a fun gesture, reminiscent of the English medieval era, as Anne Gideon answered her door. This would be their first vacation together and neither could wait to get away, having booked three nights at the famed Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. Their relationship was

not intimate, at least not yet, which is why they'd reserved adjoining rooms. The pair were more kindred spirits than actual lovers. Chas always made Anne laugh with his quick wit and corny English jokes and liked to be around her. Sean, Anne's ex-husband, was cool on the idea when learning of the romance; however, he did not explicitly condemn it. Chas was careful not to antagonise his colleague and on the back of his recent grilling from Blake, knew that would be a huge mistake right now.

"My lady, I throw myself at your feet."

“Ha. Get up, you fool; the neighbours might see.”

Chas got up off the doormat wearing his trademark wide grin and proffering a bunch of fresh red roses. Anne’s Favourite.

“They’re beautiful, Chas. Thank you,” she beamed.

Whilst the lady rushed to put the flowers in a vase of water, her trusty knight stood waiting beside his suitcase. He’d parked his Aston Martin sports car in Anne’s garage, noticing her black four by four standing at the ready for their trip. Anne quickly put out some food and water for the cat, before

grabbing her purse. Five minutes later the two were on the highway and heading north.

"Who's looking after Claude?" Banks asked in reference to Anne's cosseted pet.

"Angie, my neighbour. I do the same for her, sometimes."

"Well, I hope he likes her better than he likes me."

They both laughed, recalling how Claude had launched and attached himself to Chas's shoulder on their first meeting, claws drawn, scoring his favourite leather jacket. Chas had never liked what he termed, 'those furry

assassins' and guessed the feeling was mutual.

*

Igor stretched his legs on the vast sandbanks of Windmill Point, closely shadowed by his armed Secret Service escort, who kept his eyes open and wits keen for any signs of trouble. The protection officer maintained radio contact at all times with the other three highly trained agents posted around the property.

It was a clear day with a slight breeze from the south. The Russian filled his lungs with fresh air as he looked across the blue waters

near Clark Point. Meanwhile, his wife and daughter sat watching from the back of the house. This afternoon he would meet again with his inquisitors. On the back of what he'd revealed yesterday, how he would have liked to be a fly on the wall in the CIA headquarters this morning. He imagined them convening in a mood of disbelief, or maybe plain horror, and yet, there was so much more to tell. All in good time, he told himself, because bargaining chips did not come more lucrative than the secrets he held in his head. Despite their generosity, the Americans would have to stump up a bit more cash and assurance, if they wanted it all.

Their patience had been rewarded. Tucked into the tree line on the far side of the bay, Misha held his field glasses steady as he studied the faces of two isolated figures strolling across the wispy sands. The Russian signalled to his partner to take aim at the walker on the left, because he was in no doubt that this was their target. Some twelve-hundred yards across the watery stretch, Gennady zeroed in his VKS sniper's sight. Not an easy shot, but this marksman seldom missed. The breeze was negligible, always good for a distanced kill, and Misha noted the bodyguard had now turned around to check the rear.

“Now is perfect.” He advised the shooter. A moment later, Gregorski hit the sand, dead, with a 12 millimetre calibre bullet in his brain.

The bodyguard fell flat, yelling via the comms for a medic, weapon drawn, trying to determine where the shot had come from. He saw nothing. The two Russians had vanished into the woods, making their way to the waiting vehicle on the far side of the promontory; aware that in a few moments this entire area would be crawling with all that the authorities could muster. They needed to be quick... and quick they were. Black Knight would now ferry them out of

the area to an airfield south of New York, hidden in the specially converted trailer of a gasoline truck. White Horse would be waiting in the Gulfstream. Misha and Gennady slapped each other's palms, another treacherous pig silenced. Mission accomplished.

A mile before the major highway, Black Knight pulled over at a deserted stop area, where in a methodical fashion, he removed fake panels from the trailer tank and doors and handed them to the others through a concealed rear hatch. In so doing, his vehicle's appearance changed from red to white, and the well-known trademark from

white to green and advertised a different company name.

His planning was meticulous, even down to the bogus delivery roster, corroborated if necessary by fellow agents at specific filling stations. The water filled double-skinned tank, if tapped on the side, sounded full, and a dummy level check chamber held ample gasoline to fool a visual inspection. Heavy blocks of steel lined the floor, enough to satisfy the scales of a curious weighing station. To detect anything concealed inside would require the use of an x-ray machine, and State Troopers did not carry those yet. The sleeper agent had learned his craft at a

special school for espionage and deception, east of Moscow, where they drilled into students the importance of the small details - and Black Knight had listened well.

Chapter 6

Vernon Dyke thanked the other two people for attending the meeting at such brief notice, and Commander Bart Walker for the use of his office. Chuck Lewis completed the trio. Vernon delivered the stark information gleaned from Gregorski to his most trusted colleagues, who sat in silent disbelief. The notion of a mole deep inside the Pentagon did not sit well with any of these men. The Russian defector did not know Silver Bullet's identity, only that he'd been passing secrets from this very building for the last two years.

“Do these revelations indicate which area he works in?” Walker asked the question.

“Not as yet, because no one has heard of Operation Homeland.” Dyke sounded dismayed.

“The President’s men are now heading up this investigation, you say?” Chuck enquired.

“Yes. I shouldn’t even be discussing this with you guys, so discretion is the key word. We need to nail this bastard quickly and I believe nobody can do this better than us, and that’s why I’m telling you. I figure that by the time POTUS’s men get themselves organised

it might be too late. Gentlemen, we have to act fast."

At that moment, an aid appeared at the window of the outer office, signalling there was a message for Vernon. He excused himself and went next door to take a call on the secure phone line, leaving Lewis and Walker to ponder what they'd just learned. Bart peered over Chuck's shoulder, because through the glass, he could see Vernon holding the phone receiver in one hand, and his head in the other, a classic posture of someone listening to bad news. A minute later, Walker's hunch would prove to be correct when Dyke re-entered the room.

“Gentlemen. Igor Gregorski was shot dead this morning at one of our so-called safe houses. A professional sniper hit.”

“Jeez... So how the hell did they know where he was?” Lewis asked. None had an answer for that. Vernon then revealed the last name on the mysterious medallion list and asked a favour.

*

On Highway eighty-one, north of Hagerstown, the traffic had slowed to a near standstill. It was a police roadblock. In anticipation of this, Black Knight had purposefully sat behind another tanker,

bearing the exact same logo and colours as the one he'd imitated two hours earlier. A little later, a patrol officer waved the red emblazoned vehicle into a pull-out area, where men in overalls waited to inspect it. Black Knight presented his delivery list to the enquiring uniform. The officer studied it for a moment before thanking him and sending him on his way. In a few hours, he'd rendezvous with White Horse at an airfield few knew existed. In anticipation of scrutiny or closure of all airfields local to the shooting, Vasily had flown the Gulfstream to its new destination after dispatching the bogus

fishermen. Black Knight smiled to himself. *The small details mattered every time.*

*

In the Pentagon, Commander Walker's trusty aid's tireless effort had rewarded her with a supplier's name and documents pertaining to three titanium medallions. On entering Bart's office, she could hardly contain her excitement.

"Sir. I have something." Maggie laid the paperwork on his desk. Walker studied each sheaf for a few moments, then exclaimed.

"Well, I'm damned. They're keys?!"

The evidence was irrefutable. The sheets showed precisely detailed engineering drawings of a pendant exactly as described by Agent Monroe's widow. Complete with the inscription Ferox ad Finem. The written notes defined an operation entitled 'Key Activation.' A sharp tug of the chain yoke, in a similar action to a watch winder, released a serrated blade on the opposite side of the rim, by means of a simple but ingenious internal mechanism.

"Do we have any clue as to their purpose?"

“None that I can find, sir. I obtained these from the manufacturer, who incidentally, is still in business and this is all they had.”

“At least it’s a start Maggs, well done; I’ll pass this on to Chuck Lewis immediately.” Before she left, Walker asked one more thing.

“Maggs, did you ever hear of an operation called Homeland?” The lady froze as her mind raced back to an event she’d never... ever forget...

September 11th, 2001

The Pentagon: Virginia.

It was a warm, clear, late summer morning in Arlington County. The backlog of work, combined with the desire to beat the rush hour traffic, motivated Maggie Lewisham to get into the office early. She turned off Interstate 395, and once through the security perimeter, parked her Chevrolet in her allotted spot. It was just past seven-thirty. Plenty of time for a coffee and a bite to eat before starting the daily grind, she reasoned. Now past the inner security gate, Maggie

found her way to the small cafe area on the ground floor, here on the West side of this impressive five-faceted building. This was not her usual working location. The young administrator volunteered to move here temporarily from the Defence Intelligence Agency H.Q. sited across the Potomac River in Washington. Her task, to help transfer hard-copy legacy documents into the Pentagon's internal classified computer database.

An arduous labour, involving scanning and shredding on an industrial scale. Some of these papers dated back decades and were still top-secret, which was why only trusted

agents like Maggie would ever see them. She checked her watch, realising Helen would be here shortly and after downing her coffee, headed for the first floor where her boss would soon be arriving. Helen McColl was just getting into the elevator when she spied her charge approaching. The older woman held the door until they were both inside. Helen had worked here since graduating from college and now supervised this secure administrative area. Between them, she and Maggie proved a formidable team.

“Hi Helen, well done, you’re a few minutes early.”

“Yes. Is it my imagination or is the traffic problem getting worse?”

“I’ll say it is. That’s why I try to come in earlier.”

“Well, so do I, but now it seems everyone else has the same idea.” They laughed as the elevator drew to a halt at the first floor and the sheened steel doors hissed open.

Stood directly outside was Clive Wheeler, a uniformed security officer.

“Morning ladies, welcome to Paradise.” Clive’s dry humour seldom failed to make

them smile, his presence being more visible since the threat level had increased.

“Say Clive, if this was Paradise, are you sure you’d be in the right place?” Helen’s wit was legendary here, which is partly why she was so popular. Still chuckling to themselves, the ladies turned and headed off towards their office, leaving Wheeler slightly lost for words. At the door, they entered their codes to gain entry and were instantly greeted by Cyril, an older security officer, who checked their bags for the third time, before allowing them to pass.

All appeared normal until around nine o'clock, when Helen noticed Cyril growing increasingly animated, listening to his radio chatter. Not unusual for the Pentagon, because here, security was taken very seriously, and the current threat level was high. Helen diverted her attention back to the matters in hand, as she thumbed through the next batch of old documents. These were marked 'Ultra–Eyes Only' and dated November 1988. Whilst perusing the content, Helen realised they required a special filing protocol and an authorising signature, so she beckoned Maggie to her side.

“Maggs, we have a high level document. Would you mind going over west to Darryl and getting his autograph?” This action would require written permission from Helen’s boss, Darryl Noss, who, in her eyes, saw himself as more than just an ordinary administrator, because of his connections with the local theatre groups. For in his spare time, Senior Manager Noss was an amateur thespian. Helen filled out the necessary form, including the document title, ‘Operation Homeland,’ and a reference number. She passed the small slip of paper over to her junior colleague.

Maggie took the note and headed out for the long trek over to the other side of the building.

En route, she sensed something big was afoot, given away by the raised voices emanating from the nearby security kiosk. However, she had a job to do and so paid scant regard. Ten minutes later, the young woman arrived at her destination.

Back in the administration office, Helen checked her watch. It was nine thirty-seven. Too early for a break, she reasoned, when a sudden noise drew her attention to the window and looking out, she could not

believe what she was seeing. There, bearing down at speed and hurtling directly towards her, came an American Airlines 757 commercial jet. It would be the last thing Helen McColl ever saw.

Chapter 7

Present Day

Silver Bullet felt manifestly uncomfortable because his instinct told him something was wrong. Since yesterday evening, three new faces had appeared unannounced within his office. Were they on to him? Every time he looked at one of them, a knowing expression glared straight back at him, or so he thought. Or was he getting paranoid? No, he didn't think so. It was time to get out; he was sure, which was why he'd be paying his tailor another visit at lunchtime.

This time the letter in his jacket pocket would not contain secrets, but an urgent request for his immediate evacuation to Russia. They owed him that much, at least.

Across the far side of the office, Derran Gillespie studied the suspect's expression, hoping he would try to bolt. Chuck Lewis had redirected his right-hand man, plus Gallagher and Johnson, to this office with specific instructions to spook the suspect discreetly, something at which these grey suited men excelled. It was a gamble, but time was running out and Lewis wanted to nail the traitor fast. He knew from experience that

when someone guilty assumed they were being observed; they usually tried to make a run for it.

A check on Silver Bullet's bank details revealed an enormous amount of cash had passed through his account in recent times. Far more than his pay grade could justify, and his licence plate had often flagged up in red-light districts according to the police. This and his knowledge of safe house locations now made him a distinct person of interest. Unknown to his peers, Silver Bullet also knew all about Operation Homeland.

At five minutes to one, Gillespie and his two understudies retired to an adjoining meeting room. Silver Bullet saw his chance and in a flash, made his way to the elevator.

“He’s on the move.” Derran called down to the FBI unit waiting outside the main gate. When their target emerged on foot and headed for the subway with a sense of urgency, they followed him. Gillespie and Co headed out in pursuit, keeping out of sight and in contact with their FBI allies.

Half an hour later, on the other side of town and satisfied there was no tail, the traitor darted inside the familiar outfitting

establishment, where the man behind the till lifted his head and acknowledged his regular customer.

Two more potential sales entered the premises, one shortly after the other, and immersed themselves in checking out the many styles of quality clothing on display. Silver Bullet entered a changing cubicle clutching a jacket he'd removed from the rack. A moment later he re-emerged, and without a word, left the shop. The assistant reached into the cubicle to retrieve the jacket, and after removing the envelope from the inside pocket, replaced the garment back onto

the rack. Only then did he notice the two men in suits stood either side of him.

“FBI. Give me the envelope sir... THAT’S NOT A REQUEST.”

On the sidewalk and heading back towards the subway, the Pentagon employee took a deep breath, now feeling scared and tired of running errands for his Russian handler. Carefully checking his watch, he continued on his way. At the entrance to the Metro Center station, the FBI pounced, placed the suspect under arrest and whisked him away to an undisclosed location. Derran Gillespie and others were waiting for him, where they

would grill the traitor and squeeze him for every bit of information they needed.

*

Las Vegas looked stunning as the setting sun surrendered its light to the mighty God of neon. So, once they'd checked into the hotel, Anne Gideon chaperoned by her new partner, hit the town. The lady sincerely hoping not to come across any of the FBI's most wanted customers lurking in the vicinity. For a Special Agent such as her, it was just one of the drawbacks of the job, because in the bureau you were always on duty, even when on vacation.

She and Chas elected to stroll around the glittering streets before selecting somewhere to eat and maybe take in a show, and Vegas held an abundance of options. They decided upon the Top of the World restaurant. At over eight-hundred feet above the street, they figured the vista would be amazing, and the pair were not disappointed.

“Wow. I’d heard about this place, but actually being here is incredible. Just look at the view.” Anne felt happy. Chas quipped...

“Blimey. He would have loved it up here too, wouldn’t he?” Anne was puzzled at that remark and asked..

“Who would?”

“Lee Harvey Oswald.” He grinned.

“God, you’re terrible. That’s your worst joke yet, Banks.”

At times, Anne struggled with Chas’s dark humour, but still she had to stifle a laugh. This kind of absurdity was common to men of action like him, a sort of safety valve. The pair studied the menu whilst continuing to chatter.

“How is Sean of late?” She asked. He answered with caution, not wishing to mention Virginia in the same breath,

knowing there was some friction between her and Anne, because of Ginny's closeness to his date's ex-husband. In fact, Chas hadn't mentioned this Vegas trip to anyone in Unit Covert, especially those two. As far as he was concerned, what Sean didn't know would not hurt him.

"He's fine. As always, tends to keep things to himself."

"Yes, I know. Even now, he still won't say how he learned about his father's murder."

"Best not to keep asking, I think." Chas moved the conversation on. "Anyway, my lady... What do you fancy for starters?"

*

Now back in Florida, the trio's mood of triumph had slightly diminished when Vasily relayed the Kremlin's latest instructions to Gennady and Misha. The waiting submarine had to move away from the rendezvous point to avoid detection by an unexpected American Naval exercise. The orders now were to stay put until further notice.

The two Spetsnaz veterans wanted to leave as soon as possible, knowing every moment spent here increased the risk of their discovery. Khrushchev wasn't comfortable either, unsure if Gregorski, the traitor, knew

of his existence, reasoning the best thing was to carry on as normal. His home, by choice, sat in a remote spot, bordered by water on three sides, and had only one access road. Set in six acres of land, his comrades could fish the rivers to pass the time. They'd be fine, as long as they were mindful to stay away from other anglers and of course the predatory alligators and crocodiles, native to these parts.

*

It was an enjoyable, but heavy meal, and the pair had gorged themselves on the offerings of the five-star menu. Now in the street, they

walked off some calories, and window shopped the many souvenir outlets Las Vegas Boulevard offered. The couple held each other's hand as they strolled along the glittering sidewalk and inspected an impressive array of tacky merchandise at an outlet where they'd stopped to browse through the glass. Then, Anne's attention diverted to the reflection of a man stood on the far side of the road.

"Aw, damn."

"What's the problem?" Chas, instantly curious.

“Don’t look around, but that guy in the hat across the street is a wanted felon.”

“Shall I grab him for you?”

“No. Hell... No. I’ll call Harry my Area officer. Just keep an eye on him for me, will you?”

Chas nodded as Anne walked into the doorway and texted the FBI. At the same moment, the fugitive started walking off. Chas, quickly joined by Anne, followed at a discreet distance, crossing to the far sidewalk at their earliest opportunity. Something must have spooked him, they reasoned. The man quickened his pace, and despite the pair

keeping him in their sights, he was getting away.

“It’s no good. I’m going to have to take him down.”

She removed her pistol from her purse and held it close by her side so as not to alarm passers-by. As if on instinct, the fugitive made a dash for a nearby alley. His pursuers raced to catch him up. At the turn Anne’s phone buzzed, slowing her down when she answered her colleague’s call, but Chas was away and running the guy down. The side road led into a parking lot, where the man stopped to get his bearings. He turned around,

finding himself face to face with someone who didn't look too friendly.

"Stay put, pal. The only way out is past me."

In a flash, the trapped felon pulled a knife, the neon glinting off the polished steel blade as he did so. He swung the weapon in a wide arc as a warning, surprised his pursuer wasn't fazed, but had instead stood his ground. He lunged with the dagger at chest height. Chas turned to one side, dodging the jab and in one swift move, grabbed the attacker's wrist with one hand, and with the other, pushed up on the straightened arm at the elbow until, with a pained shriek, the assailant dropped the

knife. A second later, Chas slammed his assailant face first against the brick wall, holding him firm, the man's arm bent upward, hard against his back. Anne appeared with two companions, who swiftly cuffed the protesting thug and whisked him away.

“Well done, cowboy, but you took a big risk. He may have pulled a firearm.”

“True, but If he did, then he’d be just a burial expense instead of a lifetime burden to the state.”

From under the cover of his loose, untucked shirt, Chas drew the Glock pistol from the back of his waistband to emphasize the point.

Anne wasn't sure if he'd meant that comment or not.

"Well, officially, we weren't involved. Harry will claim the arrest."

They continued with their walk. After that excitement, Anne thought it best if they went back to the hotel. She didn't want her companion cleaning up the town single-handed... at least, not tonight anyway. They passed a passionate couple on the corner who clung to each other in a warm embrace. Chas seized the moment, as he took Anne's hand, and then kissed her on the cheek.

“Shall we play the one arm bandits?” She looked perplexed, not having heard the expression before.

“What are they?”

“You know. The slot machines in the hotel casino.” She laughed at the old terminology.

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

*

Walker had called an emergency meeting and now sitting around his desk were Chuck Lewis, Vernon Dyke, and Maggie Lewisham. Bart had already brought the two men up to speed on Maggie’s medallion findings and

related her limited knowledge of Operation Homeland. They now agreed that the nine-eleven attack probably destroyed all the relevant details. This explained why the Pentagon's computer system held no information and Vernon also had some interesting news.

"As we speak, a Pentagon employee is under interrogation. He knew about Operation Homeland, based on Maggie's recent information, and helped organise safe houses for the CIA."

“Good. However, we need to find the third key holder before the Russians do.” Chuck Lewis was adamant. Vernon gave an update.

“We have our people tracking down Miss Jefferson. It appears she’d moved since taking over the key from her late father in January two thousand and one. We’ll find her.” He assured them.

“As requested, I have Unit Covert on standby for an assist in dealing with Gregorski’s assassins. Are we any closer to finding where they’re hiding, Vern?”

“Not as yet. The FBI are still looking for a fuel tanker seen in the vicinity and following

up leads on White Horse." Bart thought for a moment and offered another idea.

"Look, Blake's people have proven to be very resourceful in recent times. I think they could also help us with these damned medallions and finding Miss Jefferson. They're based in California. Isn't that where the lady lived?" Dyke confirmed this and gave his assent.

"Yes, Bart. Let them in on it. We need all the help we can get now, but keep it discreet." Walker nodded and wasted no time in asking Maggie to send over the documents to West on the high security network. He'd call the man himself, later.

“One final thing. Can either of you think what these keys might open?” Walker inquired. Dyke speculated...

“Our tech department suggests they may not be used to open anything... It’s possible they could be launch control keys.”

“As used for nuclear missile launches in the nineteen-eighties?” Walker was stunned.

“Yes, but it’s only an educated guess.” A cautious reply from CIA Head. Walker and Lewis looked at each other with expressions that feared the worst.

*

On a street corner in Las Vegas, Alexi released his embracing grip on Silvina, as he watched their subject walking away hand in hand with her potentially problematic boyfriend.

“We will need to separate them. Come on. Let’s see where they’re going,” he said.

The field-trained and deadly pair kept well back as they trailed the holder of the third and final key. It had dismayed them to learn the lady was not at her home in San Diego, and Alexi was still smarting about being set upon by her cat. The scratch marks were still visible on the shoulder and back of his leather

jacket. He'd have snapped the creature's neck for sure, if it hadn't leaped into the bushes before he could grasp it.

On entering the property, he'd discovered the details of their target's whereabouts, inked onto a calendar with the words 'Vegas here we come!' and the paperwork upon the kitchen worktop revealed the hotel booking reservation. However, he didn't anticipate a surprise visit by the lady's neighbour. Unfortunate, but in this kind of occupation, these things sometimes happen, he reasoned. It wouldn't matter much, because Miss Jefferson would not live to see the ill-fated stiff now lying prone in her bathtub. The

scene at the house suggested a disturbed burglary, convincing enough to keep the authorities guessing until he and Silvina were long gone. Even so, they needed to get this done quickly. No doubt the police would contact the householder in due course, and that would be a distinct setback.

It was more or less a straight route to Caesars Palace along Sammy Davis Junior Drive, some three miles ahead of them. Anne enjoyed being with Chas, but was still undecided whether there was any future in their relationship. A niggling thought in the back of her mind gave the constant reminder that her feelings for Sean were still there,

especially since meeting him again in recent times. She dismissed the thought, because tonight, Anne Gideon wanted to have fun. About halfway down this busy stretch of road, they neared a bar.

“Shall we stop for a drink?” Her partner nodded his eager approval.

“Great idea.”

They chose a seat by the window, not paying any attention to the black Mercedes Benz campervan, pulling up outside in the parking lot. A familiar sight in this sparkling city. The pair finished their drinks. Chas, in true British style, liked to walk rather than

take a cab. Not so popular with Americans, but this was Vegas, and you see so much more on foot.

Alexi checked his watch. It was just past ten p.m.

“They’re heading back to the hotel. We’ll wait for them there.” With that, Silvina pulled out into the stream of traffic, careful not to speed or draw any unwanted attention. In the back of the vehicle sat a bag of mixed concoctions, including syringes and truth serums. A deadly vial of poison would complete the job. The embassy staff had done well to discover that Miss Anne Jefferson

later became Mrs Anne Gideon. Now a divorcee and Area Head for the FBI in Southern California, and getting her address proved a simple matter of checking the area birth and marriage records. The Kremlin knew where to place their people for maximum effect, and U.S. State departments were always a favourite choice. When the Berlin wall fell in nineteen eighty-nine, the KGB seized their chance to flood the western world with spies and sleepers. That visionary action now reaping huge rewards for Mother Russia.

By the time they'd returned to the Caesars hotel, it was ten forty-five, and both eagerly

anticipated sharing a drink and playing the famed slot machines. After all, this is what Vegas was all about. A gambler's paradise. On entering the lounge, they greeted the familiar clunking sounds of coins dropping into metallic trays, amid the myriad blinking lights of the many varied betting contraptions spread as far as the eye could see. The pair found a quieter spot near a side exit door. Chas headed for the bar to get the drinks, leaving his partner to win them some cash from the spinning wheels of fortune.

Standing there feeding in nickels and dimes into a greedy metallic monster, Anne grinned as it dropped a ten-dollar windfall. From

behind her, a man and a woman approached. The leather jacketed male started to play the machine two places to Agent Gideon's left. The woman appeared beside her to the right holding a five-dollar note and spoke enquiringly.

"Excuse me, do you know where I get the change?"

As Anne prepared to speak, a needlepoint hit her on the back of the neck, and in seconds she'd lost consciousness. In haste, Silvina and Alexi dragged her through the exit door and into the rear of the waiting Mercedes. A minute later Chas returned with the drinks,

surprised Anne wasn't where he'd left her. A quick glance around the area offered no clues as to where she might have gone. He put down the refreshments and raced outside. All he saw was the back end of a black campervan disappearing around a corner. He didn't immediately make the connection, thinking that maybe she'd gone to a restroom or even spotted another felon.

Where the hell did she go?

Chapter 8

It was getting late as Blake put down the phone after speaking with Commander Walker. He'd now printed off the highly classified documents sent through to him on the Secret Network, knowing it must be a hot potato for Bart to be still working at this hour. It was one a.m. over in Arlington. He studied the papers, taking in all the important details, and after a few minutes, Sean Gideon joined him.

“Bart sent over these documents. He’s trying to trace a lady who may live right here in California and thinks we can help.”

Sean picked up the drawing of the medallion and recognised it immediately.

“Anne has one like this.”

Blake leaned in to look at the print, and holding back his shock, asked his friend a question.

“Sean, what was Anne’s maiden name?”

“Jefferson. She’s a direct descendent of Thomas Jefferson, one of the founding fathers as a matter of fact.”

“Jeez. Well, that explains a lot, because as far as we know, there are only three of these medallions in existence. Messers Monroe and Madison had the others, and I bet their ancestors were Presidents too. Sean, you need to call her right now. She’s in danger.”

Blake didn’t want to mention the two deaths to his best friend just yet. Gideon hit the dial button.

“She’s not answering... Blake, why is Anne in danger?”

West explained as best he could, based on what he’d just read. Sean, now concerned, dialled Chas Banks in the hope he’d know

where she was. Meanwhile, West put out an urgent request for Virginia Lowe to come into the office. Unfortunately, Mick Case was in England visiting family and would not be available for this mission.

“When Virginia arrives, I’m sending Chip, Wes, and Lucas to Travis airbase, together with the refurbished Sikorsky. Walker has arranged for a Galaxy cargo hop across to Florida. It seems our services are required there as well. Ginny will take you and me to collect Anne.”

Sean acknowledged this as he waited for Chas to answer his phone. Things were moving up a gear for Unit Covert.

Over near the coast stood the team's newly acquired operations facility, set in ten acres of land far enough away from the metropolis to appear nondescript and anonymous, complete with its own runway. Here, Chip Kirk was checking out the latest addition to the group's air transport fleet. A Cessna Citation X jet.

The aircraft's interior, fitted out to strict specifications laid down by the team, looked impressive. He'd flown the sleek matt-black

craft down to California from the manufacturer's site in Kansas. It was fast with excellent manoeuvrability and bristling with high spec electronic gadgetry. This aircraft was perfect for urgent long-distance missions, out of range of their helicopters and even featured hidden cannons in each wing. Chip was more than satisfied.

In addition to this, the team took delivery of their repaired Sikorsky Raider helicopter, complete with a neat modification. The machine had taken some hits from automatic gunfire during their last mission in Belarus. New floor mounted hinged doors would enable the quick dispatch of personnel, high

in the air or near the ground. This change complemented the special detachable landing skids on both the unit's Raiders, which were fitted from new. Although these reduced the airspeed due to drag, they more than compensated for this by their increased operational flexibility.

*

At a secret interrogation building in Virginia, NSA agent Derran Gillespie roused the traitor from his short sleep. It was in the early hours here, but that didn't matter to the security services, they wanted information. In an adjoining room, Lewis and Dyke received

their unwilling Guest. Darryl Noss, deputy head of the DIA, who now appeared weary, dishevelled, and scared. An earlier encounter had revealed little.

It was time to turn up the heat.

“Sit down, Mr Noss. Now it’s like this. Either you cooperate fully, or we’ll make your life a living hell, in ways you couldn’t even begin to imagine.” Dyke was deadly serious. Noss was cracking as the stark realisation of his treachery crystallized within his brain. Vernon spoke again...

“This is your last chance, Darryl. What did you tell the Russians about Operation Homeland?”

*

Chas Banks checked out the entire casino floor, before once again, returning to the machine he last saw Anne playing. He glanced into the payout tray and spied a tranche of coins. Now realising she would not have left her winnings unattended, he then re-emerged onto the small sidewalk through the side door, and looking upwards at the wall to his left, the tough fighter noticed something unusual. A plastic bag deliberately tied over

a security camera, obscuring the lens. Then his mobile phone buzzed... *Sean Gideon?*

"Chas, are you with Anne?" Banks confirmed this, after all it was no secret he'd been seeing her.

"Sean, she's vanished. About five minutes ago. I'm scouring the hotel for her now."

"Hotel?.. Where?"

Chas took a breath before answering, still piecing together the theory of an abduction.

"We're in Vegas." Gideon baulked a little on hearing that, but he couldn't let a perceived

personal slight become an obstacle. His ex-wife was in great danger.

“Okay, I get the picture.”

He kept his voice neutral. “Now, give me the details. We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

*

Away in the distance, looking through his high-powered night vision binoculars, CIA operative Josh Crane was watching. Alongside him lay his colleague Jenna Stark, who with the aid of a telescopic microphone, listened in on the trio’s conversation.

“How come they did not know of the Naval exercise?” Gennady expected better support from his leaders.

“They did not expect it. That’s all I know,” Vasily said.

“We have recharged the submersible, so it is ready. We must go as soon as possible, Comrade.” Gennady was insistent.

“Yes. I will keep you informed, Comrade.”

The CIA had joined up all the dots, meaning anything connected to the murdered defector and the Pentagon suspect, merited meticulous scrutiny. The computer algorithm flagged up

a link between both safe houses, earmarked for the Gregorski family and a single government employee. A perfunctory check on the sale of the Florida residence threw up details of the Realtor, Jake Halliday. A sharp-eyed analyst found a flight plan to Richmond in his name, scheduled on the day of the assassination. This warranted further investigation leading to the discovery of a return flight from New York later that day, and was why the CIA now staked out the Realtor's home, noting three individuals resided within.

Under strict orders from Vernon Dyke, the pair now waited for a specialist unit from

California to come in and take the infiltrators down.

Off the Florida coastline, the U.S. Navy increased the number of vessels in their impromptu exercise and effectively sealed all the harbours. The Pentagon's Admirals were on the case as well.

*

Alexi put his foot down, aware of the need to get away from the street cameras this city seemed to have in abundance. Earlier he'd identified some waste ground near the now defunct railroad well off the beaten track, a perfect spot for his and Silvina's next task. In

the back of the wagon, his partner had restrained the still unconscious subject and was busy watching through the tinted rear window for any signs of a pursuer. Hidden at the site were two fast off-road motorcycles, placed there at Alexi's request by an anonymous ally of the Kremlin, juiced and ready for the pair's escape once they'd finished with the victim.

Now at the location, the Russian pulled off the highway onto some wasteland, stopping on the far side of a disused freight warehouse, across from a Speedway centre. He turned off the lights, before walking to the back and opening the double doors.

“Is she awake yet?” He demanded.

“No. It will take a little while for the incapacitating agent to wear off.” Alexi didn’t like that, but had to accept the assertion, because Silvina was an expert in weaponised chemical applications as well as a cold-hearted killer.

“Okay. So, we wait.”

Alexi had to concede, and so lit a cigarette, as he leaned against the decaying woodwork to pass the time.

*

With Virginia Lowe at the controls, the Sikorsky Raider helicopter sped across the Californian night sky at over two hundred and fifty miles per hour. The two men with her were engaged in deep discussion.

“Sean, did Anne give you any clue what the medallion key does or where it goes?”

West had already informed Bart Walker of the incredible revelation, who, on learning this, immediately sought answers from Gideon.

“No. It belonged to her late father, Clarke Jefferson, that’s all she’d ever say about it.”

In their marriage, Sean always considered himself the keeper of the big secrets, having worked at a highly classified redaction office and with a military aerial spying unit. This business with Anne and the medallion key had left him mystified.

Why didn't she tell me?

However, Gideon felt some small satisfaction on learning earlier that Chas had never noticed Anne wearing a medallion. This spoke volumes to Sean as to the depth of his ex-wife's relationship with his colleague, because he knew she always wore it hidden under her clothing.

Lowe informed them they would be at their destination in less than thirty minutes. Meanwhile, at the Caesars hotel, Chas was now liaising with Anne's colleagues Harry Luke and his partner Jade Sylvester, who'd gotten them entry into the establishment's security office. In haste they reviewed all the relevant camera footage available, whilst the FBI had already put out an All-Points Bulletin (APB) on a black Mercedes campervan. One of their own was at risk, therefore the Bureau would leave no stone unturned.

Blake received an update from Chip Kirk to let him know the galaxy was four hours out

of Florida and the two former Navy SEALs were raring to cut their teeth with Unit Covert.

“That’s good news, Chip. Get some rest and call me when you arrive.”

“Copy that... Out.”

West had already informed them to expect a confrontation with Spetsnaz, based on the latest intelligence report from the CIA. Wes and Lucas realised they’d need their wits about them, and as usual, were ready for anything.

Chapter 9

Darryl Noss had finally broken. In less than two hours, he'd given his interrogators every pitiful detail on how he'd fallen into the clutches of the GRU, and also detailed a chilling account as to the purpose of Operation Homeland. The traitor gave up the specifics of how, in the year two-thousand and one, the Director of the DIA had taken him into his confidence, and entrusted to him this most secret of documents, for filing within the Pentagon's secure computer

database. Noss had read every word before handing it over to his most dependable staff for scanning. No one expected what happened next. The sole written attestation to Operation Homeland, together with many associative technical documents, became ashes in the shocking aftermath of a terrorist attack on 11th of September 2001, along with their architect, Herbert. J. Damon.

Lewis and Dyke at last discovered the significance of the medallions and why the Russians wanted them enough to kill for. The three special keys, when inserted into a hidden control panel and turned in a certain

way, would trigger the single most devastating event in the history of the United States. The fundamental problem now was this. Damon did not include the geographical location of the 'Trigger' in his document. Therefore, Noss did not know it, and neither did the Kremlin, yet.

Darryl confirmed that apart from Damon, only one other person had been privy to that information. The third person on the list. - FBI Special Agent, Anne Jefferson.

Gillespie popped his head around the door and signalled to Chuck Lewis to come outside for a moment. He'd just discovered,

to his horror, this lady was missing in a presumed kidnapping.

“Holy shit. This is our worst nightmare, Derran.”

“You said it, boss.”

*

Virginia plunged the machine down into the clearing Chas had indicated, where a few moments later the former SAS commando clambered aboard. In seconds, the Sikorsky was airborne again. Once seated, Chas sensed Sean’s displeasure, however, and to his credit, Anne’s former husband didn’t show it.

“Head north, Ginny, follow the Freeway. The FBI’s last CCTV shot has them turning off Exit 54 towards the Speedway centre.”

Banks ran through the details of how at the hotel, they caught the campervan on film, stopped near the side exit. Although a distant shot, they could still make out a figure stood atop a vehicle and tampering with a wall camera. The quality was poor and partially obscured by a tree, but they could see two people entering the building and returning almost immediately with someone who needed support. They then bundled the individual into the back of the wagon. One minute later, saw Chas emerging from the

building just as the kidnappers turned the corner.

West informed the team that as a backup, the FBI were also in hot pursuit.

*

Anne was coming around, her disorientation only exceeded by a splitting headache.

Where am I?

“Relax Agent Jefferson, or is it Agent Gideon?” Alexi saw his victim’s alertness was returning.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

The voice croaked because the drug had given her a dry throat.

“Here, drink this.” Silvina put a glass of water to Anne’s lips. She refused it by turning her head to one side.

“Have it your way.” Alexi snapped, nodding to his assistant to inject the truth serum.

Silvina rolled back her patient’s sleeve and did as instructed. In a short while, Anne felt dreamy, her senses floating in a tranquil place where everything was at peace, and nothing mattered.

“What is the name of your cute little cat?”

A girlish giggle accompanied the reply.

“He’s called Claude.”

Alexi then held up the medallion he’d taken from her...

“This is a special key. Yes?”

Another giggle followed by a nod.

“Now Anne, I want you to tell me where it goes.” Her eyes narrowed. She was fighting the drug and said nothing. The Russian indicated for his partner to increase the dose.

“It could kill her,” she said, as a warning.

"Do it." Silvina injected a carefully measured amount.

*

Now near the Speedway centre, the Sikorsky circled low around the emptiness of the vast surrounding parking lot. On board, all eyes watched the thermal imaging camera displays mounted above the pilot's head.

"There!"

West spotted the heat from an engine compartment. They'd decided to check this area, because the connecting road either led back into the city or ran north, parallel to the

Freeway. To Blake that suggested their target stopped here, otherwise they'd have stayed on the main route, but it was only a guess. They all knew time was running out for Anne. Virginia came in from the side of the vehicle, with the helicopter in silent mode and all lights off. Sure enough, it was a black Mercedes campervan.

As hard as she tried, Anne could not stop herself from revealing the location of the trigger switch. Alexi slowly repeated the location and method of entry back to his captive, carefully assessing her affirmative responses to each detail. Ingenious, he thought. The Kremlin would have had no

idea, and according to his boss, Lebedev, neither had the Americans now. Satisfied, he turned to his partner...

“Okay. Finish it. I’ll ready the motorcycles.”

With that he left the rear of the vehicle and walked around to the side of the old wooden structure, where two trials bikes stood waiting. In the darkness, coming in closer, at five feet off the ground, those in the helicopter witnessed the man’s movements. On the magnified thermal-visual shot, they made out a figure standing inside the rear of the vehicle, hands raised at eye level, looking like a doctor might when filling a syringe.

Another figure lay close by, struggling to break free of hand and foot restraints. Chas and Sean, automatic weapons in hand, leaped from the helicopter and raced ahead. This was as close as the aircraft could get without being heard, and so Virginia projected the Sikorsky's gun sight laser point, onto the side of the vehicle, and voiced over the comms with a sense of great urgency.

"Hit the red spot… NOW!"

Both men dived to the ground, aimed and opened fire at such a rate, it blew a ten-inch hole in the side of the vehicle, and in so doing, obliterated the head of Silvina Drovik.

The pair then raced for the rear doors a hundred yards off. Alexi rushed back and peeked around the corner of the warehouse, quickly pulling back as live rounds peppered the woodwork. Blake had spotted him, and gave a volley of covering fire for the other two, from an open door of the helicopter. Now realising it was too late for his companion, Yahontov kick-started one of the Yamaha 250s and in seconds, sped off into the distance, but Virginia saw the escape.

"He's getting away on a motorcycle, heading south towards the main boulevard."

She'd now reached as close as she dared to the campervan, shortly followed by Sean and Chas. Gideon opened the back doors to the vehicle, dreading what he might find, but to his relief, Anne was still alive. He announced this over the comms as Chas peered over his shoulder to see Anne's look of delight at the sudden arrival of her former husband. Her expression was unmistakeable, and in that instant he felt like an unwanted outsider. Virginia saw it too and quickly diverted the fighter's attention back to the job in hand...

"Chas, quick. There's another bike at the side of the building."

Banks found the second machine, key in the ignition, and was now in hot pursuit, guided by Lowe, who had the target fixed on her night vision camera. Blake entered the van to assess the situation, first seeing the dead unrecognisable mess of the captor, and then Anne, sitting up and hugging her rescuer.

“I think she’ll be okay, Blake.”

On that news, West instructed Virginia to call in an ambulance, patted his friend on the shoulder, and headed back to the helicopter.

“Okay, Ginny. Let’s get after them.”

Chas would have given anything to have his Vincent Black Shadow right now, he'd have caught this guy in no time, he reasoned. Perched on the Yamaha, with his M16 Carbine slung across his chest, the tough commando chased down his foe. Then from right above him, the Sikorsky fired off cannon shot into the ground, making the Russian swerve away and down into a nearby drainage ditch. Alexi followed the run and accelerated, for up ahead he saw an unexpected opportunity.

Moments later Chas entered the ditch, to see in the distance, a red rear light disappeared into a tunnel which cut through a hillock.

“We’ll lose contact if you follow him in there.”

Chas heard this through the earpiece of his communications unit.

“Copy. Meet me on the far side.”

Virginia acknowledged and then pulled the helicopter up to clear the sudden rise in terrain, as Banks roared on into the darkness. After a few twists and turns, he noticed the escapee’s tail-light had mysteriously disappeared, and expecting a trap, killed the bike’s engine, turned off the lights and listened. He heard the other Yamaha, but it sounded more distant than expected. Quickly

restarting the machine, he sped further into the abyss until coming across two adjoining shafts, one on each side of him, merging from the general direction he'd come from, forming a kind of 'Y' junction. He killed the engine again and listened at each of the openings, aware he was losing valuable ground. It was on the left side. Chas revved up the motor, turned the bike, and like a demon on acid, headed into the offshoot.

*

The FBI wasted no time getting Anne to the nearest hospital, courtesy of an air ambulance. Sean held her hand all the way

there, still in awe at how she'd kept such a big secret from him for all those years and thankful he'd reached her in time. Upon arrival, the medics whisked the patient away into a private room. Gideon called Blake, who promptly told him to stay put and get the trigger location from Anne as soon as she was out of danger. They could handle the rest without him.

*

The tunnel seemed to wind on for some considerable distance, with Chas catching the occasional glimpse of red, but even at full throttle he could get no closer, because the

machines were too evenly matched. Now on a straight section of this subterranean shaft, he steered with one hand, whilst aiming his carbine with the other. It would be a long shot, but he needed to slow this guy down, so aiming as best he could and firing short bursts from the automatic rifle, the determined pursuer attempted to hit his target. At that precise moment, the exit emerged ahead, together with the spluttering sound of an engine. He'd hit something on the bike.

Alexi throttled the machine forward until finally abandoning it and making a run along the last few yards of the tunnel. Shots rang out from behind, sending sparks flying

around and above the sprinting Russian as the bullets ricocheted off the concrete surround.

He'd emerged into an old residential area and quickly scrambling out of the ditch, ran towards the nearest side street. This differed greatly from the glitzy neon lit centre, dank and dimmed by comparison, resembling in some ways the back streets of Chicago. Instead of waiting by the opening to shoot his hunter, he'd use the conditions to his advantage by blending in and disappearing. After all, he'd gotten everything he needed, so it would be stupid to risk losing it again.

Moments later, Chas carefully exited the tunnel on foot, expecting his prey to be lying in wait. He was not. By lifting his head slowly over the precipice, he eyed the dimly lit surroundings, and in the restricted light, made out fresh footprints heading away from the ditch. Before following, Banks decided to hide the automatic and rely on his Glock pistol, aware that a man wandering the streets with a high-powered rifle at this hour would draw a lot of unwanted attention. He first checked in with his allies via the comms and Virginia pinpointed his exact location...

"Copy... Seems you're in the poorer side of town. We'll be with you ASAP."

It was now well after midnight, as the Russian dodged the drunks and down and outs, who seemed plentiful in this area. Alexi was keen to get off the street until daylight, when he'd stand a better chance of escape by mingling in a crowd. The earlier ambush had caught him unawares, and he cursed having left his burner phone in the van. Up ahead, under a small lamp, a sign read Mission Hall. It was a gathering place where the homeless could get a hot meal and a bed, if they didn't drink or cause trouble. The Russian dishevelled his hair and pulled up the collar on his jacket, noticing then his jeans already looked suitably soiled from the mud in the

drainage ditch. At the entrance, he dragged open one of the large, curved topped wooden doors, and went inside.

Chas pushed away the beer soaked wretch who tried to grab his arm and crossed to the other side of the road. The footprints indicated his target came this way; however, the small sidewalk would not offer up any further clues. He followed his instinct.

What would I do? - Stay out of sight and plan from there.

A few paces inside the door, Alexi took one of the last empty places on the long bench seat. He now sat in between two old men

whose posture showed they'd played and lost the game of life a long time ago. He would have preferred to be on the other side of the equally long trestle table to view those entering, but there was no space. There were three tables available, however, he wanted to be near the exit, just in case he needed to get out quick.

Now casting his thoughts back to earlier on, he couldn't be sure if Silvina made it out alive, or indeed, if she'd killed the agent. He hoped she had, because if not, it would mean the Americans would now know the location of the trigger. If this were the case, he would kiss goodbye any thoughts of becoming a

‘Hero of the Russian Federation.’ His leaders would view this assignment as a failure. Alexi pushed the thought aside, as he resolved to assume Agent Gideon was dead, and the job was still viable. In the morning, he would contact a local aid.

A small group of vagrants shuffled into the Mission, followed closely by a man with his head down. Alexi, now eating some thin soup, did not notice the tailgater. Chas had used these people as a cover and now stood behind the small group who’d stopped to look for the empty spaces. His eyes scanned for a black jacket, similar to his own. Banks did not have a clear description of the target other

than his size and clothing, but looking now to his right, he spied a match. When strolling past and behind the seated figure, he determined that some scratch marks on the man's leather jacket resembled those carved upon his own, by Anne's confrontational cat... Claude.

He recalled Blake's last update from the FBI., where they'd reported a break-in and murder at Anne's house, and reasoned this must be how the Russians found her. In one swift move, Alexi turned, stood, and went to pull a pistol from his jacket. Chas knocked the weapon from his hand, sending it flying across the table and onto the floor. He pulled

the Glock pistol from his waistband, surprised when the Russian neatly struck out and sent it spinning across the room.

They grappled in this confined space, finally barrelling headlong through the doors and out into the narrow street. A bloody, brutal fight ensued. Both these men knew unarmed combat and how to hurt. Alexi fought well, but he'd not had to use his fists in the backstreets of Belfast like his adversary, and Chas knew all the dirty tricks. The Russian grabbed his opponent's collar, only to find both arms now trapped by an over arm sweeping grip. Next followed a sharp knuckle punch to his exposed ribcage and a

fierce knee to the groin that caused him to groan and bend forward in pain. A final blow to the side of his head put Alexi on his back—out cold.

Banks knelt beside his rival and checked the man's pockets. After finding what he was looking for, he then removed the Russian's belt and tied his hands behind his back. He secured his foe's feet, using his own belt, ensuring Alexi would be going nowhere. Then, from behind, came a shrill commanding voice...

"FBI... Freeze! Okay, now step away and keep your hands where we can see 'em."

Chas obeyed as a posse of gun totting policemen surrounded him, just like on the TV shows, he mused. Only these guys fired live rounds. Blake had issued him a special code word to use for such an occasion as this, and for all future combined operations, and that was 'Eagle.' To his relief, Anne's colleagues Harry and Jade appeared and took control of the situation. After retrieving his guns, Chas called in on the comms...

"Eagle: Subject neutralised, now in FBI custody. Keys secured... Virginia for Christ's sake get over here before the Feds use me for target practise."

“Copy that. Oh, and Chas, be especially careful. Someone told me Candy is in town tonight.”

His reply was predictable and in line with his reputation, but it didn’t matter. In anticipation, Ginny had temporarily muted her receiver. Blake on the other hand caught every ear-splitting expletive. With a grin, he made a mental note to let his troubled warriors in on the secret of Candy’s true gender identity, when all this was over.

Chapter 10

It took some persuasion before Sean convinced his former wife to disclose the trigger location, and to dispel her fear of retribution for betraying official secrets. No one understood the importance of keeping those more than Sean Gideon. Anne could hardly believe it when learning she was the only person alive who knew the trigger's whereabouts.

What if I had died on duty?

All Damon had given her was the precise location, access instructions, and method of operation. On receiving a codeword from the Pentagon, Anne would meet with the two other keyholders at a designated site in Washington, where the lady would repeat the word to them, as a means of identification. Then, each would produce their keys. Only after that would she lead them to the site. Once inside, all three keys had to be inserted, turned in unison and held until a green light at the centre of the console illuminated... and that was it. Damon never elucidated on what happened next.

“I’m intrigued at how it all came about.”

“When dad knew he was dying, he’d informed Damon and recommended me as his replacement. Herbert summoned me to the Pentagon and gave me the key, and the instructions to memorise before I went back home. He made it crystal clear I could tell no one... ever.” Sean shook his head. This was incredible.

“Did he give any clue at all as to what the keys triggered?”

“No. Nothing. He just said it was important to the Nation that the plan was executed in a precise and timely manner.” Sean would now

pass all this information on to Blake when he got here.

“Thanks for telling me all this.”

“Thank you for saving my life.”

Anne looked into his eyes, leaned in, and kissed him squarely on the lips, something she’d not done for a long time. Just then a nurse entered...

“Are you happy to receive more visitors Ms Gideon?” She nodded her assent, and in trooped three familiar faces. After Sean had relayed what he’d learned, they kept the conversation light for Anne’s benefit. To

both Chas and Virginia, the Gideons, hands firmly clasped together, looked every inch an item. Blake checked his watch...

“We have to go now. Sean, I want you to stay here and take care of the lady.”

With that, the trio made their way to the door. Chas reached into his pocket with a sense of slight disconsolation and handed Sean a key card.

“The room is all paid up at Caesars for two more nights, bud. A shame to waste it.”

Anne looked up at him and mouthed a discreet, *‘I’m sorry,’* before all three visitors

turned and left. The FBI had kept an eye on the helicopter until the team returned. Once aboard, Virginia took the sleek, eye-catching machine high up over the neon and headed west. - Unit Covert had another pressing engagement.

*

It was six a.m. in Arlington when Walker, Lewis and Dyke reconvened in the Commander's office. Now having more facts surrounding Operation Homeland as received from Blake, their next job was to assemble a party of Technicians and Engineers to examine the trigger location and work out its

function. Each one equally keen to fathom the mystery. The men decided the best approach would be to follow the instructions themselves and see first-hand what they were dealing with. The medallions were en route as they spoke; however, they did not need them to gain access.

Walker arranged for transport to take the trio across the Potomac River to the Lincoln Monument, whilst Lewis ordered his people to close it off to the public, even though it would be quiet at this early hour. Once there, they climbed three steps and stood to the right-hand side of the huge, seated figure. Walker had written down the next part. This

required each to push three specific sections of stone on the plinth simultaneously. They heeded the instruction with a sense of curiosity. As each section moved inwards, there was an audible click followed by a mechanical whirring sound, similar to an elevator's motor.

They stepped back in amazement as a section the size of a doorway slowly swung away from them, by means of an internal hinge mounted at its top. When open, a light flickered on, revealing some steps leading down to a steel door. At the centre, a wheel bordered by numbers presented itself. A combination lock, they saw. Now consulting

his notes, Walker turned the dial in accordance with the precise sequence he'd written down, and on completion, heard the locking bolts shoot free of their housings. The Commander pushed down on the adjacent chromed handle and opened the door. Lewis and Dyke glanced at each other with a sense of incredulity, feeling slightly embarrassed that despite their senior positions within the establishment, they didn't know a darned thing about this. Walker led the way into the concealed chamber as another light shimmered into life. It was bigger inside than they'd expected, around twenty feet square. Upon the wall, a large colourful crest faced

them. It featured the Union flag, an Eagle, and an inscription in gold capital letters. 'FEROX • AD • FINEM.' Directly below this was an electronic control console, with three key lock switches, spaced far enough apart as to allow three persons to turn them in unison. The men considered their incredible discovery in silence, and then Walker spoke.

"Well, gentlemen. What the heck are we to make of this?"

*

When Blake and the others returned to Santa Monica, they grabbed a few hours well-earned sleep. West had spoken with Chip

Kirk, acknowledging the Unit's arrival in Homestead airbase, Florida, and agreed to speak again after the trio had reconnoitred the Realtor's home. The leader would have preferred to be onsite with them, but deemed the unfolding events in Vegas to be more important.

With the new Citation jet at his disposal, he'd be joining them in less than four hours, overseeing the operation remotely en route from the aircraft's high-tech, purpose-built cabin. Virginia would fly them, and Chas would be on hand to help.

Florida

With the helicopter now unloaded, Kirk powered up for the short hop over to the Everglades, a remote part of the sunshine state, where CIA agents Crane and Stark would meet them. Wes and Lucas felt refreshed and prepared for this action, having slept when aboard the Galaxy transport aircraft. The intelligence report from Blake suggested they'd be up against Russia's finest fighters, Spetsnaz. Wes was no stranger to them, recalling now how an operation in Africa went wrong when his unit had crossed paths with the Bear's elite.

Ironically, at that time they were allies working towards the same goal of putting down a terrorist cell. In the darkness, however, it was hard to tell friend from foe.

Each group had assumed the worst, and that's when the fighting started. Wes found himself in hand-to-hand combat with a skilled and determined Eastern bloc soldier, and his right arm still bore the scars of the encounter. A closely matched pair. However, Wes had the edge that night, and although he didn't kill the man, he'd often wondered who he was. Three men lost their lives during the exchange. The world press would not know the truth, for at least fifty years because those

details, like so many others, had earned the enigmatic tag, ‘Redacted and Classified.’

Chip brought the helicopter down on a spot away from the property as indicated by the operatives at the scene. It was a good choice. The targets would not see them because the surrounding trees provided an excellent cover. Satisfied the craft was well hidden, the three men located their CIA allies, and it was still early when Agent Jenna Stark gave them an update.

“There’s some movement inside. Three people present. Two are keen to evacuate using a submersible hidden at a nearby

redundant marina. We have that site covered too."

"Unlikely they'll try to use that. We have their ride home on the run."

Chip knew the Navy had deployed ships at the behest of Commander Walker, who'd correctly guessed at the Russians method of escape.

"We should hit 'em now, whilst they're still waking up." Wes was adamant.

Chip contacted Blake via the encrypted phone and following a brief discussion, they got the green light...

“Okay, we’re on.”

They’d already agreed on a strategy. When Wes and Lucas were in position, they’d signal Chip to bring the chopper in closer and order the men out via a loudspeaker. It made sense to give them a chance to surrender with no bloodshed. If that failed, then gas grenades would be used to force them out into the open, whilst the CIA covered the exit road.

Three clicks on the comms and Kirk moved the Sikorsky to fifty yards from the building. Already Wes Scott saw a curtain move in a downstairs window. Chip broadcast the demand.

"YOU ARE SURROUNDED. COME OUT AT THIS SIDE OF THE BUILDING AND KEEP YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR."

He repeated his command. Lucas Allen lay hidden in long grass and covered the front and left-hand side of the property, whilst his partner watched the back and right. The kitchen door opened slightly. Wes fired into the woodwork just to make the point. It slammed shut. Again, Chip Kirk repeated the order. Scott and Allen prepared their grenade launchers, having decided these guys were not going to come quietly. Chip now had the craft hovering low off the ground, in a slight hollow, presenting a smaller target. He kept

his eyes peeled, outboard guns at the ready. Vasily's Honda Accord sat parked on the drive near the front door. So should they try to make a run for it, Kirk would shoot it to pieces.

To their surprise, a four by four Jeep burst through the wooden garage doors to the left of the property and accelerated across the vast open field, a single occupant in the cab. Lucas opened up with an M4 Carbine automatic rifle, shredding the tyres and bringing it to a halt. He approached with stealth, yelling for the driver to get out.

From his position at the far corner of the building, Wes could just see what had happened, but stayed put. Gunfire emerged from an upstairs window at the front, pinning Lucas to the ground, but he kept his eye on the Jeep. Chip manoeuvred the helicopter slightly to line up a shot, when a pistol muzzle held at the side of his head distracted his attention. Somehow, Gennady had slipped out of the house unnoticed and gotten into the back through the open boarding hatch.

“If you wish to live, then follow my instructions to the letter. Keep low and fly to the left side of the house behind the garage.”

Kirk cursed himself for failing to secure the cabin, and without a word, swung the craft in a wide arc around towards the side of the building. The pilot had to raise the chopper slightly to clear a hedgerow which ran parallel to the adjacent river. Now midstream, Gennady became alarmed when a red light flashed on the central control unit.

"What does that me...?"

He didn't have time to finish the sentence, because the floor fell away, sending him plunging into the murky water below. The Sikorsky's newly fitted means of egress had served its purpose and probably saved Chip's

life. The light meant the doors were about to open.

All the while, Misha kept Lucas under fire. Vasily did as instructed, and that was to create a distraction enabling Gennady to escape from the house. He knew the risk, but now lay down across the seats of the Jeep waiting for the shooting to stop.

He saw the chopper swing around and deposit his partner in the river, and this prompted Misha to head downstairs for the window behind the garage. It was through here that Gennady had earlier exited to circle unseen and reach the helicopter. By now Wes

Scott had arrived at that corner of the house as the Russian, who'd emerged into the open, raised his rifle to take aim at the pilot. The former Navy SEAL shot him in the leg. Misha went down, but still tried to swing his automatic in Wes's direction. Scott had no choice other than to shoot him dead. Chip issued an alert...

"Target is in the river and swimming for the far side."

Scott pushed through the hedgerow and ran to the water's edge. Gennady swam within a few feet of the bank, when a dark, unseen predator lurking below, pounced and

clamped its powerful jaws around his leg, dragging him under the water. It was a crocodile. One of thousands native to these parts. To Chip Kirk's surprise, Wes kicked off his boots, pulled his dagger from its sheath and clamped the blade firmly between his teeth.

After removing his fatigue jacket and helmet, he then dived into the water and swam to aid the stricken Russian. A flurry of activity followed, the water turning blood red, before the fearless fighter resurfaced, holding onto Gennady with one arm and using the other to swim to the far bank. He had risked his life, because to Wes, this man

was a fellow soldier, just carrying out orders like him, and deserving of a better end than this. Kirk landed the chopper nearby and ran to assist his colleague.

Another helicopter nestled down near the Sikorsky, bringing several pairs of hands to assist in the Russian's rescue. Walker had arranged the taxi ride here from the airbase for Blake and the others. Virginia and Chas stemmed the bleeding as best they could, before the U.S. air force flew the casualty away to hospital. Lucas, meanwhile, marched Vasily back towards the house and made him sit with his hands on his head until the CIA arrived.

Later, Blake congratulated the team on another successful mission, and decreed one night's stay here in Florida, to debrief, rest up and drink beer.

*

By mid-morning, behind a large canvas curtain put up to keep out prying eyes, the Lincoln Monument was swarming with all manner of technicians and structural specialists, carefully selected by Lewis's staff. These men and women were no strangers to the configuration and layout of key State assets, but this one had them scratching their heads for a while. They'd

now discovered the power source was a cleverly designed electrical spur from the City's main grid, enabling the key switches to operate.

The next part of the puzzle was not so easy to determine, because they'd need to excavate the surrounding grounds and that would take time. Walker and his close allies had stayed onsite and now oversaw the operation. Earlier, Lewis had an idea. He instructed his team to dig out the names and whereabouts of all senior personnel, known to have engaged in secret government infrastructure projects from the late nineteen eighties, in Virginia. It would be an arduous

task. However, he was sure Gillespie, having finished grilling the traitor, would be up to the challenge. Walker, deciding there was no more they could do here, appointed a deputy, giving firm instructions to contact him on any further discoveries. For now, the three Heads were going to get some long overdue sleep.

*

Moscow

Minister Popov had summoned Dimitry Smirnov to his spacious office, here inside the Kremlin. It pleased him to learn of Gregorski's termination, but he felt angry at

failing to secure the trigger keys. Nevertheless, he acknowledged it was not Dimitry's fault. That operation was the responsibility of Lebedev's department. Popov would deal with that later, for now he had another task for the GRU Head.

"May I congratulate you, Comrade Smirnov, on a successful operation?"

"Thank you, Comrade Minister, although I fear our operatives did not make it out. I will find out more directly."

"Yes, Comrade, it is a pity. Brave sons of the Motherland, but they knew the risks."

This sounded hollow to Smirnov because it meant the minister considered these brave men to be expendable, but despite his disgust, the GRU man maintained his courteous manner.

“You have further requirements, Comrade Minister?”

“Yes, Comrade Smirnov. Are you certain Black Knight was not compromised?”

“I am, Comrade Minister.”

“Then as a precaution, he will redeploy to California, and you will facilitate for this.”

“Of course, Comrade Minister.”

“Very well, you are dismissed. Send in Comrade Lebedev on your way out, I have much to say to him.”

Chapter 11

Back at the offices of Allied Solutions Ltd in Santa Monica, Unit Covert reconvened, minus Sean Gideon, who was looking after his ex-wife for a few more days. On learning of the murder of her neighbour, Anne decided she would not be going back to the house. Instead, she elected to stay at Sean's home in Los Angeles, along with Claude, whilst searching for a new place of residence.

Although she was no stranger to death, the thought of living at the scene of a murder did not bode well. Unbeknown to her, the Pentagon had sanctioned a special arrangement. Blake West had deposited a substantial sum of money into a private account payable on her retirement from the FBI. West knew they strictly forbade payments from outside sources to all serving members of government law enforcement agencies. However, when Special Agent Gideon gave up her badge, she'd discover she was in fact an extremely wealthy woman.

Despite the successful outcome of the mission, the mood in the office was distinctly

flat. The Gideons sudden show of unity had left both Chas and Virginia with a sense of rejection. Now browsing through the local paper, the former SAS commando spotted something he thought might raise the tone. A comic from England was performing at the Marina Fun House Club tonight. An old 70s style comedian called Larry Laffin, known in a professional capacity as Laughing Larry. Chas liked comedy shows. Wes wondered if this was how his buddy knew so many unfunny jokes, noting his most recent offerings seemed to relate to crocodiles.

Virginia was intrigued, so took up Chas's invitation to come along, more out of

curiosity than anything else. Wes and Lucas would join them. Blake and Chip would, as ever, be manning the station, evaluating the merits of perhaps recruiting another pilot. West had already enlightened his sparring charges as to the truth about the lady called Candy. In Blake's eyes, they'd earned the honour, and the relief was visible in both men's faces. He also reiterated his warning about personal conduct and keeping a low profile.

*

At the Seniors Retirement Home in Baltimore, Derran Gillespie introduced

himself to someone whose past governmental work had flagged up as possibly relevant to his investigation into Operation Homeland. Professor George Tyrell, a retired scientist, now well into his nineties, had been a frequent visitor to Herbert Damon's office and handled several communications projects in the late eighties.

To Derran, coming here seemed a good place to start. Although not in the best of health, the home's resident doctor had allowed the NSA agent half an hour of his patient's time, and no more. It would prove to be the most illuminating thirty minutes of Gillespie's career. Tyrell's brain was still

sharp, but his breathing was laboured and assisted by the oxygen cylinder at his side. Derran began by emphasising the urgency and importance of his visit, before getting to the point. He listened with great interest as the Professor took him into his confidence.

“All I can tell you, Mr Gillespie, is my part in a project, that Damon referred to as the President’s ‘Scorched Earth’ policy.”

*

Now back in Walker’s office at the Pentagon, the Commander, Lewis, and Dyke assessed the incoming information from the survey team at the National Mall. An initial

geophysical sweep of the surrounding area had confirmed the existence of a deep underground tunnel, stretching some way from Abe's gigantic chair, and ending at the iconic Washington Monument, a towering obelisk standing beyond the famed Reflecting Pool. The startling revelation led the technicians to believe this to be a cable route to whatever the trigger fired. They'd be examining that next. Walker's secretary entered, offered an apology for the interruption, and then alerted Lewis to the fact Gillespie needed to speak with him on an urgent matter.

*

Although delighted at securing the last table at the Marina Fun House, Chas was a little concerned when discovering it was the one nearest the stage. This was because in his experience, the closer you sat to a stand-up comedian, the higher your chance of becoming the butt of his jokes. He dismissed the concern. After all, if it came down to witty exchanges, he could give as good as he got, or so he thought. It was an all seated arrangement of fifty or so tables spaced along the walls and a lower central floor area. According to the programme, Laughing Larry would be the opening and closing act. The four followed an usherette and took their

seats at the table where they ordered some drinks, although for Wes and Lucas it was a zero alcohol night. They were on standby.

"Well, I hope this guy's jokes are better than yours, bud." Wes conveyed his expectations for the evening to Chas.

"So do I. This table cost me over a hundred bucks."

The chatter died down as the lights dimmed and the band struck up a jaunty tune. A spotlight illuminated the end of the stage as a disembodied voice made the introduction.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Please welcome live from England, Laughing Larry.”

On the right, emerging from the wing, came a stomping comedic figure, who for all the world, looked like an underfed clown. He wore a checked pattern suit at least two sizes bigger than a fit and atop his head, a bright red bowler hat. All that was missing was the greasepaint. Larry launched into his trademark, opening catchphrase.

“Good evening, my name’s Larry, and women love me because I’m quick, and I’m slick, and I’ve got a BIG—heart!”

The audience laughed, but Virginia groaned, now guessing at how the tone of the evening would progress. Her companions were laughing along with the rest when Laffin pointed down at Virginia, being his nearest female target, and immediately followed up with...

“You thought I was going to say dick, didn’t you, darling?”

Howls from the audience ensued. Larry continued with a joke...

“Cor, I had trouble getting here tonight. A policeman stopped my car, told me off and gave me a ticket. I said it’s not my fault you

Yanks paint your 'SLOW and STOP' markings upside down, is it?"

Lowe noticed this unpleasant man even laughed at his own jokes, a bit like Chas. Then Larry changed tack.

"I'm looking for a volunteer to come up and assist me." Virginia squirmed, but he pointed to Chas instead...

"You'll do, sir."

Banks smiled and shook his head, remembering Blake's last words. However, Larry was insistent.

“Aw, look, he’s shy... come on ladies and gentlemen, give the man some encouragement.”

With that, the audience followed the comedian’s slow handclap. Wes and Lucas included. Chas, having no choice, reluctantly got to his feet and climbed the few steps up onto the stage, where Larry spoke once more into the microphone held in his right hand.

“What is your name, sir?” He moved the mic towards his stooge.

“Steve.” Chas lied.

“So, Steve, what do you do for a living?” Banks thought of the first thing that came into his head.

“I’m a swimming instructor.”

“A swimming instructor?”

Larry repeated what he’d just heard. All comedians did that to gain a few seconds whilst trying to think of an associative joke. Then he got one...

“Funny you should say that Steve, because when I was at school, we had two girls in my class who could swim like fish... Anne Chovie and Sally Mander, ho-ho.”

A small groan as the crowd got the pun.

"Who are you with tonight, Steve?"

"My girlfriend, Betty," he said, smiling and looking straight down at Virginia, whose expression was priceless. Larry waved her up...

"Come on up, love. Ladies and gentlemen. Give a round of applause for Steve's girlfriend, Betty… yeahhhh!"

The lady got to her feet and fixed Chas with a look that said... *DIE!*

Wes and Lucas loved this. Virginia joined the other two on the stage, where she and

Chas now stood on each side of Larry and faced the audience. The comedian was quick to get on with the fun.

“So, Betty, what first attracted you to Steve?”

He pushed the microphone toward her, having flicked the off switch in a clever deception. The hidden one in his jacket switched on as Larry spoke for her in a deep, masculine voice like a ventriloquist.

“Because he’s got big biceps. Hee-hee-hee.”

To those seated, it looked just like she’d spoken the words. The audience roared. He repeated the drill, this time with Chas.

“Tell us, Steve, what first attracted you to Betty?”

“She didn’t wear any knickers.”

Said in a high-pitched squeaking voice. Wes and Lucas’s sides were hurting with laughing so much, and then Larry pretended he was getting hot by waving his hand like a fan in front of his face…

“Oh, my goodness. This is hot stuff... it’s making me sweat.”

He pulled a cloth from his jacket pocket, shook it out to reveal a pair of ladies’

panties,' complete with little black bows, and used it to wipe his forehead.

"Oh, look. You're sweaty too Betty... ha-ha-ha... Ladies and gentlemen, we've got a Sweaty Betty!"

The crowd was in hysterics as the comedian moved the undergarment toward her, making out to dab her forehead as well. A big mistake. In an instant, Ginny's hand shot up and now gripping his wrist, she dug her thumbnail into the soft fleshy underside. The effect was immediate. Laffin winced in pain as he tried to pull her arm away with his other hand.

Virginia looked at the audience, grinned, widened her eyes and gestured with her free hand as if to imply Larry was deliberately faking the agony. The lady then moved in close, still smiling, and spoke into his ear.

“Okay, Larry. Call it in, or it all turns very bad for you.”

He got the message. She released her grip, and Laffin signalled the band to play something... anything.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Let’s hear a big hand for our very sporting couple. Steve and erm... Betty.”

Loud cheers accompanied the pair as they left the stage.

Chapter 12

All hell broke loose when the final pieces of the puzzle fell into place. Already an army of technicians had descended upon the Washington Memorial, in the realisation that bypassing the trigger was a real possibility, whether it be by a deliberate action, or more likely, a short circuit of the aged wiring. The consequences, although not yet determined in full, would be apocalyptic, they knew that much. This because Gillespie had learned from the ailing Professor how the trigger worked, and more importantly, what it set-

off. As well as this, the last routine maintenance of the apparatus was in nineteen-ninety-nine, over fears surrounding something termed the ‘Millennium Bug.’ An unwarranted anxiousness over a possible computer system glitch, occurring at midnight on December 31st of that year, when the calendar clock year digits changed from 19 to 20.

Tyrell had explained how the trigger sent an electrical pulse to a sturdy black box atop of the monument’s lift shaft, activating an inboard computer. Its first function was to open a small circular aperture in the lid,

through which an antenna would extend and send a signal.

Six miles above, orbiting in the darkness of space, a large spherical satellite with many tentacles, aptly named Medusa, would acknowledge the call, awaken, adjust its course, and report it back to the originator. When the computer sensed the circling device was just about in position, a lens would emerge from the box of tricks and fire a laser, blowing a hole clean through the obelisk's apex. Then, powering back, it would fire again.

Medusa, when directly overhead, would absorb the ray, amplify it, and fire multiple bursts of power back down to Earth, obliterating her many designated targets in an instant. These, it came to transpire, were America's principal nuclear munitions sites. They designed Operation Homeland as a last act of defiance, for a scenario where the Soviets had defeated the United States' 'Star Wars,' laser infrastructure, and overrun the Nation's military. Other plans were in place to fight the invaders from abroad, therefore preventing them from using America's own weapons was imperative to its success.

However, the fun didn't end there. Medusa would also send out coded radio signals to many sensitive sites scattered around the Country, detonating the hidden explosives buried underneath their foundations. Once the technicians deactivated the satellite, these would prove to be the most difficult to find. To Walker and the others, it was truly the stuff of nightmares.

"Incredible." Dyke was staggered.

"It just emphasises how seriously the government of the day saw the Soviet threat," Walker said. He then received a message

from downstairs and reiterated it to his colleagues...

“That was security. The techs have located one of Damon’s doomsday surprises. Gentlemen, it appears we have to vacate the building immediately.”

“Holy Shit!” Lewis was aghast.

*

Unsurprisingly, Virginia didn’t stay for the rest of the performance. After the show, her three escorts had guessed where’d she’d be, and sure enough, sitting alone at a table in the Mariners Bar further along the strip was the

lady herself. They each took one of the vacant chairs.

“Before you ask, Ginny. No, I did not set that up.”

Chas put the record straight, but Virginia remained unconvinced. She was sure it was a payback for the night at the Sequin Club. Meanwhile, Wes attempted to break the ice.

“You know, guys. Its time you two stopped this childish bickering... It’s bad for morale. I mean that sincerely.”

“That’s rich, coming from the ‘Hero’ who wasted all the target dummies.” Virginia made her point.

“Nonsense. You seriously need to listen to me people.” He was insistent.

Their reply came back in unison.

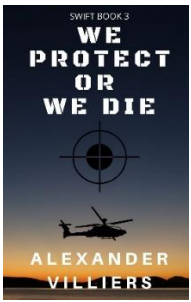
“Why?”

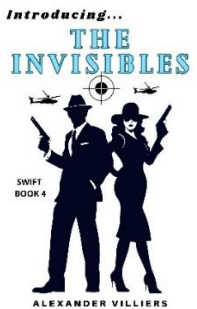
Wes stood up, placed his hand upon his chest and said... “Because I’m quick, and I’m slick, and I’ve got a BIG... heart!”

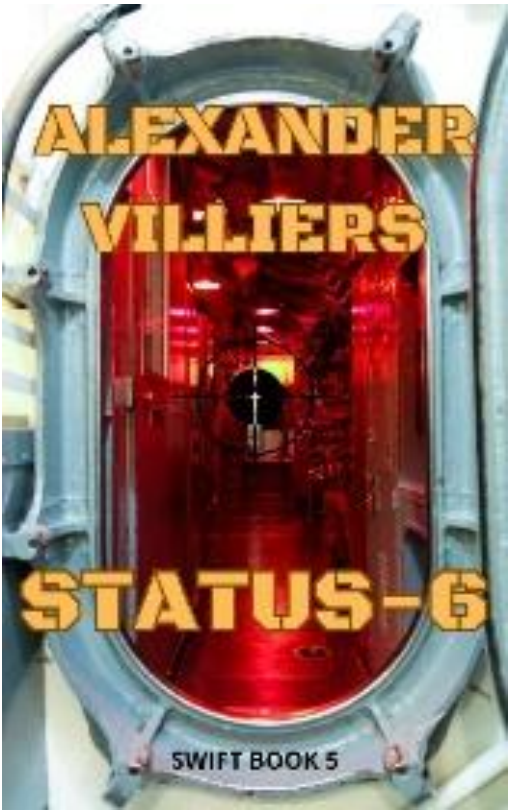
THE END

Unit Covert will return in…

We Protect… or We Die.






ALEXANDER
VILLIERS
STATUS-6
SWIFT BOOK 5

THE SWIFT SERIES

PREQUEL - REDACTED

THE NEW DAY CHAPTER - BOOK 1

THE HOLDER OF THE KEY - BOOK 2

WE PROTECT OR WE DIE - BOOK 3

THE INVISIBLES - BOOK 4

STATUS-6 - BOOK 5

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