

## The White Mercedes

Going to work was the same everywhere, and the changeover from Marxism-Leninism to Chaos-Capitalism hadn't changed matters much—well, maybe things were now a little worse. Moscow, a city of wide streets, was harder to drive in now that nearly anyone could have a car, and the center lane down the wide boulevards was no longer tended by militiamen for the Politburo and used by Central Committee men who considered it a personal right-of-way, like Czarist princes in their troika sleds. Now it was a left-turn lane for anyone with a Zil or other private car. In the case of Sergey Nikolay'ch Golovko, the car was a white Mercedes 600, the big one with the S-class body and twelve cylinders of German power under the hood. There weren't many of them in Moscow, and truly his was an extravagance that ought to have embarrassed him . . . but didn't. Maybe there were no more *nomenklatura* in this city, but rank *did* have its privileges, and he was chairman of the SVR. His apartment was also large, on the top floor of a high-rise building on Kutusovskiy Prospekt, a structure relatively new and well-made, down to the German appliances which were a long-standing luxury accorded senior government officials.

He didn't drive himself. He had Anatoliy for that, a burly former Spetsnaz special-operations soldier who carried a pistol under his coat and who drove the car with ferocious aggression, while tending it with loving care. The windows were coated with dark plastic, which denied the casual onlooker the sight of the people inside, and the windows were thick, made of polycarbonate and specced to stop anything up to a 12.7-mm bullet, or so the company had told Golovko's purchasing agents sixteen months before. The armor made it nearly a ton heavier than was the norm for an

S600 Benz, but the power and the ride didn't seem to suffer from that. It was the uneven streets that would ultimately destroy the car. Road-paving was a skill that his country had not yet mastered, Golovko thought as he turned the page in his morning paper. It was the American *International Herald Tribune*, always a good source of news since it was a joint venture of *The Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, which were together two of the most skilled intelligence services in the world, if a little too arrogant to be the true professionals Sergey Nikolay'ch and his people were.

He'd joined the intelligence business when the agency had been known as the KGB, the Committee for State Security, still, he thought, the best such government department the world had ever known, even if it had ultimately failed. Golovko sighed. Had the USSR not fallen in the early 1990s, then his place as Chairman would have put him as a full voting member of the Politburo, a man of genuine power in one of the world's *two* superpowers, a man whose mere gaze could make strong men tremble . . . but . . . no, what was the use of that? he asked himself. It was all an illusion, an odd thing for a man of supposed regard for objective truth to value. That had always been the cruel dichotomy. KGB had always been on the lookout for hard facts, but then reported those facts to people besotted with a dream, who then bent the truth in the service of that dream. When the truth had finally broken through, the dream had suddenly evaporated like a cloud of steam in a high wind, and reality had poured in like the flood following the breakup of an icebound river in springtime. And then the Politburo, those brilliant men who'd wagered their lives on the dream, had found that their theories had been only the thinnest of reeds, and reality was the swinging scythe, and the eminence bearing *that* tool didn't deal in salvation.

But it was not so for Golovko. A dealer in facts, he'd been able to continue his profession, for his government still needed them. In fact, his authority was broader now than it would have been, because as a man who well knew the surrounding world and some of its more important per-

sonalities intimately, he was uniquely suited to advising his president, and so he had a voice in foreign policy, defense, and domestic matters. Of them, the third was the trickiest lately, which had rarely been the case before. It was now also the most dangerous. It was an odd thing. Previously, the mere spoken (more often, shouted) phrase "State Security!" would freeze Soviet citizens in their stride, for KGB had been the most feared organ of the previous government, with power such as Reinhart Heydrich's *Sicherheitsdienst* had only dreamed about, the power to arrest, imprison, interrogate, and to kill any citizen it wished, with no recourse at all. But that, too, was a thing of the past. Now KGB was split, and the domestic-security branch was a shadow of its former self, while the SVR—formerly the First Chief Directorate—still gathered information, but lacked the immediate strength that had come with being able to enforce the *will*, if not quite the *law*, of the communist government. But his current duties were still vast, Golovko told himself, folding the paper.

He was only a kilometer away from Dzerzhinskiy Square. That, too, was no longer the same. The statue of Iron Feliks was gone. It had always been a chilling sight to those who'd known who the man was whose bronze image had stood alone in the square, but now it, too, was a distant memory. The building behind it was the same, however. Once the stately home office of the Rossiya Insurance Company, it had later been known as the Lubyanka, a fearsome word even in the fearsome land ruled by Iosef Vissarionovich Stalin, with its basement full of cells and interrogation rooms. Most of those functions had been transferred over the years to Lefortovo Prison to the east, as the KGB bureaucracy had grown, as all such bureaucracies grow, filling the vast building like an expanding balloon, as it claimed every room and corner until secretaries and file clerks occupied the (remodeled) spaces where Kamenev and Ordzhonikidze had been tortured under the eyes of Yagoda and Beriia. Golovko supposed that there hadn't been too many ghosts.

Well, a new working day beckoned. A staff meeting at

8:45, then the normal routine of briefings and discussions, lunch at 12:15, and with luck he'd be back in the car and on his way back home soon after six, before he had to change for the reception at the French Embassy. He looked forward to the food and wine, if not the conversation.

Another car caught his eye. It was a twin to his own, another large Mercedes S-class, iceberg white just like his own, complete down to the American-made dark plastic on the windows. It was driving purposefully in the bright morning, as Anatoliy slowed and pulled behind a dump truck, one of the thousand such large ugly vehicles that covered the streets of Moscow like a dominant life-form, this one's load area cluttered with hand tools rather than filled with earth. There was yet another truck a hundred meters beyond, driving slowly as though its driver was unsure of his route. Golovko stretched in his seat, barely able to see around the truck in front of his Benz, wishing for the first cup of Sri Lankan tea at his desk, in the same room that Beriya had once . . .

. . . the distant dump truck. A man had been lying in the back. Now he rose, and he was holding . . .

"Anatoliy!" Golovko said sharply, but his driver couldn't see around the truck to his immediate front.

. . . it was an RPG, a slender pipe with a bulbous end. The sighting bar was up, and as the distant truck was now stopped, the man came up to one knee and turned, aiming his weapon at the other white Benz—

—the other driver saw it and tried to swerve, but found his way blocked by the morning traffic and—

—not much in the way of a visual signature, just a thin puff of smoke from the rear of the launcher-tube, but the bulbous part leapt off and streaked into the hood of the other white Mercedes, and there it exploded.

It hit just short of the windshield. The explosion wasn't the fireball so beloved of Western movies, just a muted flash and gray smoke, but the sound roared across the square, and a wide, flat, jagged hole blew out of the trunk of the car, and that meant that anyone inside the vehicle would now be dead, Golovko knew without pausing to think on it. Then

the gasoline ignited, and the car burned, along with a few square meters of asphalt. The Mercedes stopped almost at once, its left-side tires shredded and flattened by the explosion. The dump truck in front of Golovko's car panic-stopped, and Anatoliy swerved right, his eyes narrowed by the noise, but not yet—

*"Govno!"* Now Anatoliy saw what had happened and took action. He kept moving right, accelerating hard and swerving back and forth as his eyes picked holes in the traffic. The majority of the vehicles in sight had stopped, and Golovko's driver sought out the holes and darted through them, arriving at the vehicle entrance to Moscow Center in less than a minute. The armed guards there were already moving out into the square, along with the supplementary response force from its shack just inside and out of sight. The commander of the group, a senior lieutenant, saw Golovko's car and recognized it, waved him inside and motioned to two of his men to accompany it to the drop-off point. The arrival time was now the only normal aspect of the young day. Golovko stepped out, and two young soldiers formed up in physical contact with his heavy topcoat. Anatoliy stepped out, too, his pistol in his hand and his coat open, looking back through the gate with suddenly anxious eyes. His head turned quickly.

*"Get him inside!"* And with that order, the two privates strong-armed Golovko through the double bronze doors, where more security troops were arriving.

"This way, Comrade Chairman," a uniformed captain said, taking Sergey Nikolay'ch's arm and heading off to the executive elevator. A minute later, he stumbled into his office, his brain only now catching up with what it had seen just three minutes before. Of course, he walked to the window to look down.

Moscow police—called militiamen—were racing to the scene, three of them on foot. Then a police car appeared, cutting through the stopped traffic. Three motorists had left their vehicles and approached the burning car, perhaps hoping to render assistance. Brave of them, Golovko thought, but an entirely useless effort. He could see better now, even

at a distance of three hundred meters. The top had bulged up. The windshield was gone, and he looked into a smoking hole, which had minutes before been a hugely expensive vehicle, and which had been destroyed by one of the cheapest weapons the Red Army had ever mass-produced. Whoever had been inside had been shredded instantly by metal fragments traveling at nearly ten thousand meters per second. Had they even known what had happened? Probably not. Perhaps the driver had had time to look and wonder, but the owner of the car in the back had probably been reading his morning paper, before his life had ended without warning.

That was when Golovko's knees went weak. That could have been him . . . suddenly learning if there were an after-life after all, one of the great mysteries of life, but not one which had occupied his thoughts very often . . .

But whoever had done the killing, who had been his target? As Chairman of the SVR, Golovko was not a man to believe in coincidences, and there were not all that many white Benz S600s in Moscow, were there?

"Comrade Chairman?" It was Anatoliy at the office door.

"Yes, Anatoliy Ivan'ch?"

"Are you well?"

"Better than he," Golovko replied, stepping away from the window. He needed to sit now. He tried to move to his swivel chair without staggering, for his legs were suddenly weak indeed. He sat and found the surface of his desk with both his hands, and looked down at the oaken surface with its piles of papers to be read—the routine sight of a day which was not now routine at all. He looked up.

Anatoliy Ivan'ch Shelepin was not a man to show fear. He'd served in Spetsnaz through his captaincy, before being spotted by a KGB talent scout for a place in the 8th "Guards" Directorate, which he'd accepted just in time for KGB to be broken apart. But Anatoliy had been Golovko's driver and bodyguard for years now, part of his official family, like an elder son, and Shelepin was devoted to his boss. He was a tall, bright man of thirty-three years, with blond hair and blue eyes that were now far larger than usual, be-

cause though Anatoliy had trained for much of his life to deal with and in violence, this was the first time he'd actually been there to see it when it happened. Anatoliy had often wondered what it might be like to take a life, but never once in his career had he contemplated losing his own, certainly not to an ambush, and most certainly not to an ambush within shouting distance of his place of work. At his desk outside Golovko's office, he acted like a personal secretary more than anything else. Like all such men, he'd grown casual in the routine of protecting someone whom no one would dare attack, but now his comfortable world had been sundered as completely and surely as that of his boss.

Oddly, but predictably, it was Golovko's brain that made it back to reality first.

"Anatoliy?"

"Yes, Chairman?"

"We need to find out who died out there, and then find out if it was supposed to be us instead. Call militia headquarters, and see what they are doing."

"At once." The handsome young face disappeared from the doorway.

Golovko took a deep breath and rose, taking another look out the window as he did so. There was a fire engine there now, and firefighters were spraying the wrecked car to extinguish the lingering flames. An ambulance was standing by as well, but that was a waste of manpower and equipment, Sergey Nikolay'ch knew. The first order of business was to get the license-plate number from the car and identify its owner, and from that knowledge determine if the unfortunate had died in Golovko's place, or perhaps had possessed enemies of his own. Rage had not yet supplanted the shock of the event. Perhaps that would come later, Golovko thought, as he took a step toward his private wash-room, for suddenly his bladder was weak. It seemed a horrid display of frailty, but Golovko had never known immediate fear in his life, and, like many, thought in terms of the movies. The actors there were bold and resolute, never mind that their words were scripted and their reac-

tions rehearsed, and none of it was anything like what happened when explosives arrived in the air without warning.

*Who wants me dead?* he wondered, after flushing the toilet.

**T**he American Embassy a few miles away had a flat roof on which stood all manner of radio antennas, most of them leading to radio receivers of varying levels of sophistication, which were in turn attached to tape recorders that turned slowly in order to more efficiently use their tapes. In the room with the recorders were a dozen people, both civilian and military, all Russian linguists who reported to the National Security Agency at Fort Meade, Maryland, between Baltimore and Washington. It was early in the day, and these people were generally at work before the Russian officials whose communications they worked to monitor. One of the many radios in the room was a scanning monitor of the sort once used by American citizens to listen in on police calls. The local cops used the same bands and the exact same type of radios that their American counterparts had used in the 1970s, and monitoring them was child's play—they were not encrypted yet. They listened in on them for the occasional traffic accident, perhaps involving a big shot, and mainly to keep a finger on the pulse of Moscow, whose crime situation was bad and getting worse. It was useful for embassy personnel to know what parts of town to avoid, and to be able to keep track of a crime to one of the thousands of American citizens.

"Explosion?" an Army sergeant asked the radio. His head turned. "Lieutenant Wilson, police report an explosion right in front of Moscow Center."

"What kind?"

"Sounds like a car blew up. Fire department is on the scene now, ambulance . . ." He plugged in headphones to get a better cut on the voice traffic. "Okay, white Mercedes-Benz, tag number—" He pulled out a pad and wrote it down. "Three people dead, driver and two passengers and . . . oh, shit!"

"What is it, Reins?"



“Sergey Golovko . . .” Sergeant Reins’s eyes were shut, and he had one hand pressing the headphones to his ears. “Doesn’t he drive a white Benz?”

“Oh, shit!” Lieutenant Wilson observed for herself. Golovko was one of the people whom *her* people routinely tracked. “Is he one of the deaders?”

“Can’t tell yet, ell-tee. New voice . . . the captain at the station, just said he’s coming down. Looks like they’re excited about this one, ma’am. Lotsa chatter coming up.”

Lieutenant Susan Wilson rocked back and forth in her swivel chair. Make a call on this one or not? They couldn’t shoot you for notifying your superiors of something, could they . . . ? “Where’s the station chief?”

“On his way to the airport, ell-tee, he’s flying off to St. Petersburg today, remember?”

“Okay.” She turned back to her panel and lifted the secure phone, a STU-6 (for “secure telephone unit”), to Fort Meade. Her plastic encryption key was in its proper slot, and the phone was already linked and synchronized with another such phone at NSA headquarters. She punched the # key to get a response.

“Watch Room,” a voice said half a world away.

“This is Station Moscow. We have an indication that Sergey Golovko may just have been assassinated.”

“The SVR chairman?”

“Affirmative. A car similar to his has exploded in Dzerzhinskiy Square, and this is the time he usually goes to work.”

“Confidence?” the disembodied male voice asked. It would be a middle-grade officer, probably military, holding down the eleven-to-seven watch. Probably Air Force. “Confidence” was one of their institutional buzzwords.

“We’re taking this off police radios—the Moscow Militia, that is. We have lots of voice traffic, and it sounds excited, my operator tells me.”

“Okay, can you upload it to us?”

“Affirmative,” Lieutenant Wilson replied.

“Okay, let’s do that. Thanks for the heads-up, we’ll take it from here.”

\* \* \*

Okay, Station Moscow out,” heard Major Bob Teeters. He was new in his job at NSA. Formerly a rated pilot who had twenty-one hundred hours in command of C-5s and C-17s, he’d injured his left elbow in a motorcycle accident eight months before, and the loss of mobility there had ended his flying career, much to his disgust. Now he was reborn as a spook, which was somewhat more interesting in an intellectual sense, but not exactly a happy exchange for an aviator. He waved to an enlisted man, a Navy petty officer first-class, to pick up on the active line from Moscow. This the sailor did, donning headphones and lighting up the word-processing program on his desktop computer. This sailor was a Russian linguist in addition to being a yeoman, and thus competent to drive the computer. He typed, translating as he listened in to the pirated Russian police radios, and his script came up on Major Teeters’s computer screen.

I HAVE THE LICENSE NUMBER, CHECKING NOW, the first line read.

GOOD, QUICK AS YOU CAN.

WORKING ON IT, COMRADE. (TAPPING IN THE BACKGROUND, DO THE RUSSKIES HAVE COMPUTERS FOR THIS STUFF NOW?)

I HAVE IT, WHITE MERCEDES BENZ, REGISTERED TO G. F. AVSYENKO (NOT SURE OF SPELLING), 677 PROTOPOPOV PROSPEKT, FLAT 18A.

HIM? I KNOW THAT NAME!

*Which was good for somebody*, Major Teeters thought, but not all that great for Avsyenko. Okay, what next? The senior watch officer was another squid, Rear Admiral Tom Porter, probably drinking coffee in his office over in the main building and watching TV, maybe. Time to change that. He called the proper number.

“Admiral Porter.”

“Sir, this is Major Teeters down in the watch center. We have some breaking news in Moscow.”

“What’s that, Major?” a tired voice asked.

“Station Moscow initially thought that somebody might have killed Chairman Golovko of the KG—the SVR, I mean.”

“What was that, Major?” a somewhat more alert voice inquired.

“Turns out it probably wasn’t him, sir. Somebody named Avsyenko—” Teeters spelled it out. “We’re getting the intercepts off their police radio bands. I haven’t run the name yet.”

“What else?”

“Sir, that’s all I have right now.”

**B**y this time, a CIA field officer named Tom Barlow was in the loop at the embassy. The third-ranking spook in the current scheme of things, he didn’t want to drive over to Dzerzhinskiy Square himself, but he did the next best thing. Barlow called the CNN office, the direct line to a friend.

“Mike Evans.”

“Mike, this is Jimmy,” Tom Barlow said, initiating a pre-arranged and much-used lie. “Dzerzhinskiy Square, the murder of somebody in a Mercedes. Sounds messy and kinda spectacular.”

“Okay,” the reporter said, making a brief note. “We’re on it.”

At his desk, Barlow checked his watch: 8:52 local time. Evans was a hustling reporter for a hustling news service. Barlow figured there’d be a mini-cam there in twenty minutes. The truck would have its own Ku-band uplink to a satellite, down from there to CNN headquarters in Atlanta, and the same signal would be pirated by the DoD downlink at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and spread around from there on government-owned satellites to interested parties. An attempt on the life of Chairman Golovko made it interesting as hell to a lot of people. Next he lit up his desktop Compaq computer and opened the file for Russian names that were known to CIA.

**A** duplicate of that file resided in any number of CIA computers at Langley, Virginia, and on one of those in the CIA Operations Room on the 7th floor of the Old Headquarters Building, a set of fingers typed A-V-S-Y-E-N-K-O . . . and came up with nothing other than:

ENTIRE FILE SEARCHED. THE SEARCH ITEM WAS NOT FOUND.

That evoked a grumble from the person on the computer. So, it wasn't spelled properly.

"Why does this name sound familiar?" he asked. "But the machine says no-hit."

"Let's see . . ." a co-worker said, leaning over and respelling the name. "Try this . . ." Again a no-hit. A third variation was tried.

"Bingo! Thanks, Beverly," the watch officer said. "Oh, yeah, we know who this guy is. Rasputin. Low-life bastard—sure as hell, look what happened when he went straight," the officer chuckled.

**R**asputin?" Golovko asked. "*Nekulturniy* swine, eh?" He allowed himself a brief smile. "But who would wish *him* dead?" he asked his security chief, who, if anything, was taking the matter even more seriously than the Chairman. His job had just become far more complicated. For starters, he had to tell Sergey Nikolay'ch that the white Mercedes was no longer his personal conveyance. Too ostentatious. His next task of the day was to ask the armed sentries who posted the corners of the building's roof why they hadn't spotted a man in the load area of a dump truck with an RPG—*within three hundred meters of the building they were supposed to guard!* And not so much as a warning over their portable radios until the Mercedes of Gregoriy Filipovich Avseyenko had been blown to bits. He'd sworn many oaths already on this day, and there would be more to come.

"How long has he been out of the service?" Golovko asked next.

"Since '93, Comrade Chairman," Major Anatoliy Ivan'ch Shelepin said, having just asked the same question and received the answer seconds earlier.

The first big reduction-in-force, Golovko thought, but it would seem that the pimp had made the transition to private enterprise well. Well enough to own a Mercedes Benz S-600 . . . and well enough to be killed by enemies he'd made

along the way . . . unless he'd unknowingly sacrificed his own life for that of another. That question still needed answering. The Chairman had recovered his self-control by this point, enough at any rate for his mind to begin functioning. Golovko was too bright a man to ask *Why would anyone wish to end my life?* He knew better than that. Men in positions like his made enemies, some of them deadly ones . . . but most of them were too smart to make such an attempt. Vendettas were dangerous things to begin at his level, and for that reason, they *never* happened. The business of international intelligence was remarkably sedate and civilized. People still died. Anyone caught spying for a foreign government against Mother Russia was in the deepest of trouble, new regime or not—state treason was still state treason—but those killings followed . . . what did the Americans call it? *Due process of law*. Yes, that was it. The Americans and their lawyers. If their lawyers approved of something, then it was civilized.

"Who else was in the car?" Golovko asked.

"His driver. We have the name, a former militiaman. And one of his women, it would seem, no name for her yet."

"What do we know of Gregory's routine? Why was he there this morning?"

"Not known at this time, Comrade," Major Shelepin replied. "The militia are working on it."

"Who is running the case?"

"Lieutenant Colonel Shablikov, Comrade Chairman."

"Yefim Konstantinovich—yes, I know him. Good man," Golovko allowed. "I suppose he'll need his time, eh?"

"It does require time," Shelepin agreed.

*More than it took for Rasputin to meet his end*, Golovko thought. Life was such a strange thing, so permanent when one had it, so fleeting when it was lost—and those who lost it could never tell you what it was like, could they? Not unless you believed in ghosts or God or an afterlife, things which had somehow been overlooked in Golovko's childhood. So, yet another great mystery, the spymaster told himself. It had come so close, for the first time in his life. It was disquieting, but on reflection, not so frightening as he

would have imagined. The Chairman wondered if this was something he might call courage. He'd never thought of himself as a brave man, for the simple reason that he'd never faced immediate physical danger. It was not that he had avoided it, only that it had never come close until today, and after the outrage had passed, he found himself not so much bemused as curious. *Why* had this happened? *Who* had done it? Those were the questions he had to answer, lest it happen again. To be courageous once was enough, Golovko thought.

**D**r. Benjamin Goodley arrived at Langley at 5:40, five minutes earlier than his customary time. His job largely denied him much of a social life, which hardly seemed fair to the National Intelligence Officer. Was he not of marriageable age, possessed of good looks, a man with good prospects both in the professional and business sense? Perhaps not the latter, Goodley thought, parking his car in a VIP slot by the cement canopy of the Old Headquarters Building. He drove a Ford Explorer because it was a nice car for driving in the snow, and there would be snow soon. At least winter was coming, and winter in the D.C. area was wholly unpredictable, especially now that some of the ecnuts were saying that global warming would cause an unusually *cold* winter this year. The logic of that escaped him. Maybe he'd have a chat with the President's Science Adviser to see if that made any sense talking with someone who could explain things. The new one was pretty good, and knew how to use single-syllable words.

Goodley made his way through the pass-gate and into the elevator. He walked into the Operations Room at 5:50 A.M.

"Hey, Ben," one said.

"Morning, Charlie. Anything interesting happening?"

"You're gonna love this one, Ben," Charlie Roberts promised. "A big day in Mother Russia."

"Oh?" Narrowed eyes. Goodley had his worries about Russia, and so did his boss. "What's that?"

“No big deal. Just somebody tried to whack Sergey Nikolay’ch.”

His head snapped around like an owl’s. “*What?*”

“You heard me, Ben, but they hit the wrong car with the RPG and took out somebody else we know—well, used to know,” Roberts corrected himself.

“Start from the beginning.”

“Peggy, roll the videotape,” Roberts commanded his watch officer with a theatrical wave of the arm.

“Whoa!” Goodley said after the first five seconds. “So, who was it really?”

“Would you believe Gregory Filipovich Avseyenko?”

“I don’t know that name,” Goodley admitted.

“Here.” The watch officer handed over a manila folder. “What we had on the guy when he was KGB. A real sweetheart,” she observed, in the woman’s neutral voice of distaste.

“Rasputin?” Goodley said, scanning the first page. “Oh, okay, I have heard something about this one.”

“So has the Boss, I bet.”

“I’ll know in two hours,” Goodley imagined aloud. “What’s Station Moscow saying?”

“The station chief is in St. Pete’s for a trade conference, part of his cover duties. What we have is from his XO. The best bet to this point is that either Avseyenko made a big enemy in the Russian Mafia, or maybe Golovko was the real target, and they hit the wrong car. No telling which at this point.” Followed by the usual NIO damned-if-I-know shrug.

“Who would want to take Golovko out?”

“Their Mafia? Somebody got himself an RPG, and they don’t sell them in hardware stores, do they? So, that means somebody deeply into their criminal empire, probably, made the hit—but who was the real target? Avseyenko must have had some serious enemies along the way, but Golovko must have enemies or rivals, too.” She shrugged again. “You pays your money and you takes your choice.”

“The Boss likes to have better information,” Goodley warned.

“So do I, Ben,” Peggy Hunter replied. “But that’s all I got, and even the fuckin’ Russians don’t have better at this point.”

“Any way we can look into their investigation?”

“The Legal Attaché, Mike Reilly, is supposed to be pretty tight with their cops. He got a bunch of them admitted to the FBI’s National Academy post-grad cop courses down at Quantico.”

“Maybe have the FBI tell him to nose around?”

Mrs. Hunter shrugged again. “Can’t hurt. Worst thing anybody can say is no, and we’re already there, right?”

Goodley nodded. “Okay, I’ll recommend that.” He got up. “Well,” he observed on his way out the door, “the Boss won’t bitch about how boring the world is today.” He took the CNN tape with him and headed back to his SUV.

The sun was struggling to rise now. Traffic on the George Washington Parkway was picking up with eager-beaver types heading into their desks early, probably Pentagon people, most of them, Goodley thought, as he crossed over the Key Bridge, past Teddy Roosevelt Island. The Potomac was calm and flat, almost oily, like the pond behind a mill dam. The outside temperature, his dashboard said, was forty-four, and the forecast for the day was a high in the upper fifties, a few clouds, and calm winds. An altogether pleasant day for late fall, though he’d be stuck in his office for all of it, pleasant or not.

Things were starting early at The House, he saw on pulling in. The Blackhawk helicopter was just lifting off as he pulled into his reserved parking place, and the motorcade had already formed up at the West Entrance. It was enough to make him check his watch. No, he wasn’t late. He hustled out of his car, bundling the papers and cassette into his arms as he hurried inside.

“Morning, Dr. Goodley,” a uniformed guard said in greeting.

“Hi, Chuck.” Regular or not, he had to pass through the metal detector. The papers and cassette were inspected by hand—as though he’d try to bring a gun in, Ben thought in



passing irritation. Well, there had been a few scares, hadn't there? And these people were trained not to trust anybody.

Having passed the daily security test, he turned left, sprinted up the stairs, then left again to his office, where some helpful soul—he didn't know if it was one of the clerical staff or maybe one of the Service people—had his office coffee machine turning out some Gloria Jean's French Hazelnut. He poured himself a cup and sat down at his desk to organize his papers and his thoughts. He managed to down half of the cup before bundling it all up again for the ninety-foot walk. The Boss was already there.

"Morning, Ben."

"Good morning, Mr. President," replied the National Security Adviser.

"Okay, what's new in the world?" POTUS asked.

"It looks as though somebody might have tried to assassinate Sergey Golovko this morning."

"Oh?" President Ryan asked, looking up from his coffee. Goodley filled him in, then inserted the cassette in the Oval Office VCR and punched PLAY.

"Jeez," Ryan observed. What had been an expensive car was now fit only for the crushing machine. "Who'd they get instead?"

"One Gregoriy Filipovich Avseyenko, age fifty-two—"

"I know that name. Where from?"

"He's more widely known as Rasputin. He used to run the KGB Sparrow School."

Ryan's eyes went a little wider. "That cocksucker! Okay, what's the story on him?"

"He got RIF'd back in '93 or so, and evidently set himself up in the same business, and it would seem he's made some money at it, judging by his car, anyway. There was evidently a young woman in with him when he was killed, plus a driver. They were all killed."

Ryan nodded. The Sparrow School had been where for years the Soviets had trained attractive young women to be prostitutes in the service of their country both at home and abroad, because, since time immemorial, men with a cer-

tain weakness for women had often found their tongues loosened by the right sort of lubrication. Not a few secrets had been conveyed to the KGB by this method, and the women had also been useful in recruiting various foreign nationals for the KGB officers to exploit. So, on having his official office shut down, Rasputin—so called by the Soviets for his ability to get women to bend to his will—had simply plied his trade in the new free-enterprise environment.

“So, Avseyenko might have had ‘business’ enemies angry enough to take him out, and Golovko might not have been the target at all?”

“Correct, Mr. President. The possibility exists, but we don’t have any supporting data one way or the other.”

“How do we get it?”

“The Legal Attaché at the embassy is well connected with the Russian police,” the National Security Adviser offered.

“Okay, call Dan Murray at FBI and have his man nose around,” Ryan said. He’d already considered calling Golovko directly—they’d known each other for more than ten years, though one of their initial contacts had involved Golovko’s pistol right in Jack’s face on one of the runways of Moscow’s Sheremetyevo Airport—and decided against it. He couldn’t show that much immediate interest, though later, if they had a private moment together, he’d be able to ask a casual question about the incident. “Same for Ed and MP at CIA.”

“Right.” Goodley made a note.

“Next?”

Goodley turned the page. “Indonesia is doing some naval exercises that have the Aussies a little interested. . . .” Ben went on with the morning briefing for twenty more minutes, mainly covering political rather than military matters, because that’s what national security had become in recent years. Even the international arms trade had diminished to the point that quite a few countries were treating their national military establishments as boutiques rather than serious instruments of statecraft.

“So, the world’s in good shape today?” the President summarized.

“Except for the pothole in Moscow, it would seem so, sir.”

The National Security Adviser departed, and Ryan looked at his schedule for the day. As usual, he had very little in the way of free time. About the only moments on his plan-of-the-day without someone in the office with him were those in which he’d have to read over briefing documents for the next meeting, many of which were planned literally weeks in advance. He took off his reading glasses—he hated them—and rubbed his eyes, already anticipating the morning headache that would come in about thirty minutes. A quick re-scan of the page showed no light moments today. No troop of Eagle Scouts from Wyoming, nor current World Series champs, nor Miss Plum Tomato from California’s Imperial Valley to give him something to smile about. No. Today would be all work.

*Shit*, he thought.

The nature of the Presidency was a series of interlocking contradictions. The Most Powerful Man in the World was quite unable to use his power except under the most adverse circumstances, which he was supposed to avoid rather than to engage. In reality, the Presidency was about negotiations, more with the Congress than anyone else; it was a process for which Ryan had been unsuited until given a crash course by his chief of staff, Arnold van Damm. Fortunately, Arnie did a lot of the negotiations himself, then came into the Oval Office to tell the President what *his* (Ryan’s) decision and/or position was on an issue, so that *he* (van Damm) could then do a press release or a statement in the Press Room. Ryan supposed that a lawyer treated his client that way much of the time, looking after his interests as best he could while *not* telling him what those interests were until they were already decided. The President, Arnie told everyone, had to be protected from direct negotiations with everyone—especially Congress. And, Jack reminded himself, he had a fairly tame Congress. What had it been like for presidents dealing with contentious ones?

And what the hell, he wondered, not for the first time, was he doing here?

**T**he election process had been the purest form of hell—despite the fact that he'd had what Arnie invariably had called a cakewalk. Never less than five speeches per day, more often as many as nine, in as many different places before as many diverse groups—but always the same speech, delivered off file cards he kept in his pocket, changed only in minor local details by a frantic staff on the Presidential aircraft, trying to keep track of the flight plan. The amazing thing was that they'd never made a mistake that he'd caught. For variety, the President would alter the order of the cards. But the utility of that had faded in about three days.

Yes, if there were a hell in creation, a political campaign was its most tangible form, listening to yourself saying the same things over and over until your brain started rebelling and you started *wanting* to make random, crazy changes, which might amuse yourself, but it would make you appear crazy to the audience, and you couldn't do that, because a presidential candidate was expected to be a perfect automaton rather than a fallible man.

There had been an upside to it. Ryan had bathed in a sea of love for the ten weeks of the endurance race. The deafening cheers of the crowds, whether in a parking lot outside a Xenia, Ohio, shopping mall, or in Madison Square Garden in New York City, or Honolulu, or Fargo, or Los Angeles—it had all been the same. Huge crowds of ordinary citizens who both denied and celebrated the fact that John Patrick Ryan was one of them . . . kind of, sort of, something like that—but something else, too. From his first formal speech in Indianapolis, soon after his traumatic accession to the Presidency, he'd realized just how strong a narcotic that sort of adulation was, and sure enough, his continued exposure to it had given him the same sort of rush that a controlled substance might. With it came a desire to be perfect for them, to deliver his lines properly, to seem sincere—as indeed he was, but it would have been far easier doing it once

or twice instead of three hundred and eleven times, as the final count had been reckoned.

The news media in every place asked the same questions, written down or taped the same answers, and printed them as new news in every local paper. In every city and town, the editorials had praised Ryan, and worried loudly that this election wasn't really an election at all, except on the congressional level, and there Ryan had stirred the pot by giving his blessing to people of both major parties, the better to retain his independent status, and therefore to risk offending everyone.

The love hadn't quite been universal, of course. There were those who'd protested, who got their heads on the nightly commentary shows, citing his professional background, criticizing his drastic actions to stop the terrorist-caused Ebola plague that had threatened the nation so desperately in those dark days—"Yes, it worked in this particular case, *but . . . !*"—and especially to criticize his politics, which, Jack said in his speeches, weren't politics at all, but plain common sense.

During all of this, Arnie had been a godsend, preselecting a response to every single objection. Ryan was wealthy, some said. "My father was a police officer" had been the answer. "I've *earned* every penny I have—and besides [going on with an engaging smile], now my wife makes a lot more money than I do."

Ryan knew nothing about politics: "Politics is one of those fields in which everybody knows what it is, but nobody can make it work. Well, maybe *I* don't know what it is, but I am *going* to make it work!"

Ryan had packed the Supreme Court: "I'm not a lawyer, either, sorry," he'd said to the annual meeting of the American Bar Association. "But I know the difference between right and wrong, and so do the justices."

Between the strategic advice of Arnie and the preplanned words of Callie Weston, he'd managed to parry every serious blow, and strike back with what was usually a soft and humorous reply of his own—leavened with strong

words delivered with the fierce but quiet conviction of someone who had little left to prove. Mainly, with proper coaching and endless hours of preparation, he'd managed to present himself as Jack Ryan, regular guy.

Remarkably, his most politically astute move had been made entirely without outside expertise.

**M**orning, Jack," the Vice President said, opening the door unannounced.

"Hey, Robby." Ryan looked up from his desk with a smile. He still looked a little awkward in suits, Jack saw. Some people were born to wear uniforms, and Robert Jefferson Jackson was one of them, though the lapel of every suit jacket he owned sported a miniature of his Navy Wings of Gold.

"There's some trouble in Moscow," Ryan said, explaining on for a few seconds.

"That's a little worrisome," Robby observed.

"Get Ben to give you a complete brief-in on this. What's your day look like?" the President asked.

"Sierra-square, Delta-square." It was their personal code: SSDD—*same shit, different day*. "I have a meeting of the Space Council across the street in twenty minutes. Then tonight I have to fly down to Mississippi for a speech tomorrow morning at Ole Miss."

"You taking the wheel?" Ryan asked.

"Hey, Jack, the *one* good thing about this damned job is that I get to fly again." Jackson had insisted on getting rated on the VC-20B that he most often flew around the country on official trips under the code name "Air Force Two." It looked very good in the media, and it was also the best possible therapy for a fighter pilot who missed being in control of his aircraft, though it must have annoyed the Air Force flight crew. "But it's always to shit details you don't want," he added with a wink.

"It's the only way I could get you a pay raise, Robby. And nice quarters, too," he reminded his friend.

"You left out the flight pay," responded Vice Admiral R. J. Jackson, USN, retired. He paused at the door and turned.

“What does that attack say about the situation over there in Russia?”

Jack shrugged. “Nothing good. They just can’t seem to get ahead of things, can they?”

“I guess,” the Vice President agreed. “Problem is, how the hell do we help them?”

“I haven’t figured that one out yet,” Jack admitted. “And we have enough potential economic problems on our horizon, with Asia sliding down the tubes.”

“That’s something I have to learn, this economic shit,” Robby admitted.

“Spend some time with George Winston,” Ryan suggested. “It’s not all that hard, but you have to learn a new language to speak. Basis points, derivatives, all that stuff. George knows it pretty good.”

Jackson nodded. “Duly noted, sir.”

“‘Sir’? Where the hell did that come from, Rob?”

“You still be the National Command Authority, oh great man,” Robby told him with a grin and a lower-Mississippi accent. “I just be da XO, which means Ah gits all the shit details.”

“So, think of this as PCO School, Rob, and thank God you have a chance to learn the easy way. It wasn’t like that for me—”

“I remember, Jack. I was here as J-3, remember? And you did okay. Why do you think I allowed you to kill my career for me?”

“You mean it wasn’t the nice house and the drivers?”

The Vice President shook his head. “And it wasn’t to be a first-black, either. I couldn’t say ‘no’ when my President asks, even if it’s a turkey like you. Later, man.”

“See ya at lunch, Robby,” Jack said as the door closed.

“Mr. President, Director Foley on three,” the speaker-phone announced.

Jack lifted the secure phone and punched the proper button. “Morning, Ed.”

“Hi, Jack, we have some more on Moscow.”

“How’d we get it?” Ryan asked first, just to have a way of evaluating the information he was about to receive.

“Intercepts,” the Director of Central Intelligence answered, meaning that the information would be fairly reliable. Communications intelligence was the most trusted of all, because people rarely lied to one another over the radio or telephone. “It seems this case has a very high priority over there, and the militiamen are talking very freely over their radios.”

“Okay, what do you got?”

“Initial thinking over there is that Rasputin was the main target. He was pretty big, making a ton of money with his female . . . employees,” Ed Foley said delicately, “and trying to branch out into other areas. Maybe he got a little pushy with someone who didn’t like being pushed.”

“You think so?” Mike Reilly asked.

“Mikhail Ivan’ch, I am not sure what I think. Like you, I am not trained to believe in coincidences,” replied Lieutenant Oleg Provalov of the Moscow Militia. They were in a bar which catered to foreigners, which was obvious from the quality of the vodka being served.

Reilly wasn’t exactly new to Moscow. He’d been there fourteen months, and before that had been the Assistant Special Agent in Charge of the New York office of the FBI—but not for Foreign Counter-Intelligence. Reilly was an OC—Organized Crime—expert who’d spent fifteen busy years attacking the Five Families of the New York Mafia, more often called LCN by the FBI, for La Cosa Nostra. The Russians knew this, and he’d established good relations with the local cops, especially since he’d arranged for some senior militia officers to fly to America to participate in the FBI’s National Academy Program, essentially a Ph.D. course for senior cops, and a degree highly prized in American police departments.

“You ever have a killing like this in America?”

Reilly shook his head. “No, you can get regular guns pretty easy at home, but not anti-tank weapons. Besides, using them makes it an instant Federal case, and they’ve learned to keep away from us as much as they can. Oh, the wiseguys have used car bombs,” he allowed, “but just to kill



the people in the car. A hit like this is a little too spectacular for their tastes. So, what sort of guy was Avseyenko?"

A snort, and then Provalov almost spat the words out: "He was a pimp. He preyed on women, had them spread their legs, and then took their money. I will not mourn his passing, Mishka. Few will, but I suppose it leaves a vacuum that will be filled in the next few days."

"But you think he was the target, and not Sergey Golovko?"

"Golovko? To attack him would be madness. The chief of such an important state organ? I don't think any of our criminals have the balls for that."

*Maybe, Reilly thought, but you don't start off a major investigation by making assumptions of any kind, Oleg Gregoriyevich.* Unfortunately, he couldn't really say that. They were friends, but Provalov was thin-skinned, knowing that his police department did not measure up well against the American FBI. He'd learned that at Quantico. He was doing the usual right now, rattling bushes, having his investigators talk to Avseyenko's known associates to see if he'd spoken about enemies, disputes, or fights of one sort or another, checking with informants to see if anyone in the Moscow underworld had been talking about such things.

The Russians needed help on the forensic side, Reilly knew. At the moment they didn't even have the dump truck. Well, there were a few thousand of them, and that one might have been stolen without its owner/operator even knowing that it had been missing. Since the shot had been angled down, according to eyewitnesses, there would be little if any launch signature in the load area to help ID the truck, and they needed the right truck in order to recover hair and fibers. Of course, no one had gotten the tag number, nor had anyone been around with a camera during rush hour—well, so far. Sometimes a guy would show up a day or two later, and in major investigations you played for breaks—and usually the break was somebody who couldn't keep his mouth shut. Investigating people who knew how to stay silent was a tough way to earn a living. Fortunately, the criminal mind wasn't so circumspect—except for the smart

ones, and Moscow, Reilly had learned, had more than a few of them.

There were two kinds of smart ones. The first was composed of KGB officers cut loose in the series of major reductions-in-force—known to Americans as RIFs—similar to what had happened in the American military. These potential criminals were frightening, people with real professional training and experience in black operations, who knew how to recruit and exploit others, and how to function invisibly—people, as Reilly thought of it, who'd played a winning game against the FBI despite the best efforts of the Bureau's Foreign Counter-Intelligence Division.

The other was a lingering echo of the defunct communist regime. They were called *tolkachi*—the word meant “pushers”—and under the previous economic system they'd been the grease that allowed things to move. They were facilitators whose relationships with everyone got things done, rather like guerrilla warriors who used unknown paths in the wilderness to move products from one place to another. With the fall of communism their skills had become genuinely lucrative because it was still the case that virtually no one understood capitalism, and the ability to get things done was more valuable than ever—and now it paid a *lot* better. Talent, as it always did, went where the money was, and in a country still learning what the rule of law meant, it was natural for men with this skill to break what laws there were, first in the service of whoever needed them, and then, almost instantly afterward, in the service of themselves. The former *tolkachi* were the most wealthy men in their country. With that wealth had come power. With power had come corruption, and with corruption had come crime, to the point that the FBI was nearly as active in Moscow as CIA had ever been. And with reason.

The union between the former KGB and the former *tolkachi* was creating the most powerful and sophisticated criminal empire in human history.

And so, Reilly had to agree, this Rasputin—the name meant literally “the debauched one”—might well have been part of that empire, and his death might well have been

something related to that. Or something else entirely. This would be a very interesting investigation.

“Well, Oleg Gregoriyevich, if you need any help, I will do my best to provide it for you,” the FBI agent promised.

“Thank you, Mishka.”

And they parted ways, each with his own separate thoughts.