

Chapter 1

Caesar Casale and Antonio Bertoli were restless. They'd been waiting in the car in the narrow alleyway off the Via Rasella for nearly two hours. Casale glanced at the Rolex on his wrist, a souvenir from a previous mark. It was approaching 1 o'clock. He looked up at the rectangular silhouette of the second storey window above the street. There was no sign of occupancy. When the American did finally arrive home he would have to drive right past them to enter the garage at the rear of the property.

Antonio pulled a small silver case from his suit pocket and placed a cigarette to his lips.

"What do you think you're doing?" asked Casale.

"You know another way? What the fuck does it look like I'm doing? I'm having a smoke."

"Not in here you're not. I don't want to be breathing in your passive smoke." Casale waved his hand across the side of his seat. "And these seats are leather. I don't want my new leather stinking of your cigarettes. Besides, my wife doesn't like it".

"Your wife doesn't like it? Are you serious?" Antonio shook his head. "Maybe you should change your wife."

"I'm thinking about it. Anyway, maybe if you gave it up, you'd live longer?"

"That's bullshit. They've never proved if you quit you live longer. It just *feels* like longer. Plus, there's studies now that prove even if you do quit, it makes fuck all difference to what's gone into your lungs already. So the way I see it, I've got nothing to lose now, I'm committed."

Caesar shrugged. "It'll kill you."

Antonio's eyebrows knitted together. "Are you fucking kidding? Have you looked at what we do for a living? Last week it was those six guys in the restaurant. In a fucking restaurant for God's sake! I've got half of Saxony looking for my ass, and now tonight, we've been sitting in a car for two and a half hours waiting for some guy to come home so we can blow a fucking great hole in his head, and you're worried about inhaling fumes from my cigarette! Would you rather I used this?" He pulled the small Beretta 92 from his suit jacket and attached a silencer to the barrel. "It'd be quicker."

"At least I'd die healthy."

Twin beams of light arced across the windscreen as a small car pulled into the alleyway in front of them. Caesar and Antonio hunched low in their seats as the vehicle passed by. The large iron gates of the property opposite hummed as they slowly swung inward. The little hatchback passed through and descended toward the garage underneath the building.

Antonio and Caesar waited until they heard the engine stop. For a moment everything went still. The quiet darkness, briefly disrupted, was once again restored. Then the electric hum of the gates pierced the silence once more and the large iron barriers began to swing closed.

“Ok, let’s go.”

Casale and Bertoli slipped silently out of the parked Mercedes and with inches to spare passed through the closing gates and into the shadowy courtyard of the apartment compound. They reached the relative cover of a large topiary bush. Casale raised his hand, the Rolex glinting in the moonlight, and they waited. Moments later a light went on in a second floor window. Casale made a note of which room before they scurried across the courtyard taking up position either side of the door. Antonio drew the Beretta from his jacket pocket, while Caesar crouched down and inserted a small gun of his own into the keyhole. The electronic pick made short work of the lock housing and with a faint click the door swung open. The two of them crept through the entrance. A narrow hallway led toward the main living room at the front of the property. To the left of the hallway, facing the front door, a wooden stairway ascended to the bedrooms upstairs. As they reached the foot of the stairway Caesar drew the thin wire from his pocket and looped one end around his wrist for grip. This would be quick and easy, but just in case, Antonio could finish the job. They started slowly up the stairs.

A phone began to ring in Caesar’s jacket pocket.

“What the fuck?” Antonio hissed.

Caesar whipped the phone from his pocket. An instant before rejecting the call he registered the caller: *Bommarito*.

“Damn it!” He cursed under his breath, scurrying back for the door.

Outside in the cool night air, he whispered into the phone. “What is it? We haven’t finished the job yet!”

“Another more pressing matter has come to light. When you have finished there I need you to get to Fiumicino. I have another task for you.”

“At the airport?”

“No. Not at the airport, idiot. When you arrive head to the US Airways desk. There will be tickets waiting for you for US Air flight 719 to Philadelphia. I need you and Bertoli for an assignment in America.”

“America? But why...?”

“They have found the Trumpet.”

The hum of the dial tone replaced the echo of Don Bommarito's last words in Casale's ears.

#

Dan Messenger's thoughts wandered back over the past week's vacation. It had been nice to unwind with his parents in Chicago and enjoy a break from the craziness of the campaign trail. Outside the cab the neighbourhood blocks of his childhood rolled by. Streets where once he had played hockey as a youngster in between passing cars. Now, in the grey November twilight a group of teenagers played football in a parking lot in the shadow of Wrigley Field. Through the window the last leaves of fall drifted from the trees, like his memories, in shades of red and gold. They passed by his old high school, where Martin Luther King's 'Dream' had first entranced him in the power of speech to rally the passion of people. Tomorrow in Washington his first day back in the office would officially begin his tenure as Press Advisor for the new President Elect. Despite the election victory, the outgoing administration had made it clear that they had every intention to hold on to power until the last possible moment before the January 20th Inauguration Day ceremonies. In the meantime, Dan was already working through ideas for his new boss' Inauguration Day address. Martin Luther seemed fitting. The tall black woman from New Orleans had been swept into office on the promise of greater social reform. Now President Elect, Mary Whitman had already scheduled a meeting with her new team for first thing in the morning. Dan leaned over in the back seat and placed the black briefcase that had been sitting beside him on his lap. He carefully turned the little dials of the combination; 8-2-3 then 1-1-3. He flicked back the twin latches, opened the lid and sorted through some of the notes he had begun for the next day's address.

The cab arrived at O'Hare airport. Dan shut the case again, paid the driver, and made his way through the big glass doors toward the American Airlines check in desk. He'd scarcely made it to the end of the queue and placed both his vacation suitcase and his briefcase of notes down beside him when he was suddenly knocked sideways by a large man in a dark

woollen trench coat. Dan instinctively pushed his hands forward to save himself from toppling completely to the ground.

“Oh, I am so sorry!” The man turned around. “Honey, I’ll have to call you back”, he said curtly into his mobile phone. The stranger snapped the clamshell shut and placed his own bag on the ground next to Dan’s, freeing up his hands, one of which he now extended.

“Here, let me help you, it’s the least I can do”, he said, “God, I really should learn to look where I’m going!”

Dan reached for the extended hand, pulled himself up from the floor and brushed himself off.

“It’s ok,” Dan said. “No harm done.”

“Well, alright then, but I am really sorry”, the heavysset man repeated. Now that Dan was standing he saw that the man’s cheeks were flushed and he was breathing heavily. He was balding, and beads of sweat were forming around his temples.

“Honestly”, Dan repeated, “I’m fine”.

“Well, so long as you’re ok. Actually, I’m in a bit of a hurry myself...got a flight of my own to get to!” The man picked up his case again and disappeared back into the crowd of waiting travellers.

Dan shrugged the incident off and eventually made it to the counter to check his vacation case before retreating to the relative quiet of the airline lounge. Inside the retreat of the lounge a TV was playing the late evening news.

“Russia today stepped up its claims to territory in the Arctic, citing that the area, marked on Soviet maps as Russian territory since the 1920s, contains an underwater extension of the Siberian continental shelf. The move has been widely criticised by the current Whitehouse administration who say the Russian claim aims to gain monopoly control of newly accessible energy reserves underneath the Arctic Ocean and control of the fabled North West passage, which could soon become a reality as global warming contributes to shrinking ice flows. The action has further escalated tension on already deteriorating East/West diplomatic relations, sparking fears of reigniting a new Cold War.”

“In other news the death toll is expected to climb as authorities continue the search for survivors in the aftermath of Saturday’s 8.2 magnitude earthquake in Indonesia...”

Dan’s flight was called. He turned from the TV and made his way with a handful of others to the gate.

As he found his seat he looked down at his briefcase. He'd been full of good intentions to make a start on his notes before tomorrow's meeting, but then, would an extra couple of hours really make a difference? Besides, he thought, he was technically still on vacation until tomorrow. He pushed the briefcase into the locker above and decided to forget about it until the morning.

The plane pushed back and the engines whined into life as it rolled out onto the taxiway. Dan pushed back in his seat. Although it'd only be two hours before he arrived in Washington he might as well get some sleep now. From tomorrow, the weeks leading up to inauguration were going to be long ones.

As Daniel Messenger drifted off and American Airlines flight 2357 climbed out of Chicago O'Hare towards an altitude of thirty thousand feet on a calm Sunday evening in America, in the early hours of Monday morning in Rome, a black Mercedes Benz was speeding silently down the Autostrada Roma Fiuminico.

#

In his office of the SVR headquarters building in Yasenevo, just outside of Moscow, Dmitri Korsakov put down the phone. The SVR Director was pleased. The call to the Italian had gone well. He suspected little, and soon the Trumpet would be back in Korsakov's hands. Using Bommarito's men would ensure there were no comebacks pointing back to Russian involvement. Furthermore, it would reduce the risk of any further leaks, like the one which had lead to the Trumpet falling from their hands in the first place. This latter thought played on his mind. The agency had been compromised, and hopefully using the Italian would flush out where the hole existed. Still, there could be no mistakes this time. Bommarito's men may not realise the importance of the task at hand but already Bommarito would be questioning why they weren't just doing the job themselves. Korsakov decided against taking any chances. Let Bommarito's men do the dirty work but as soon as the Trumpet was recovered they would be eliminated from the picture. This would require a resource he could trust. He would need to assign one of his most experienced operatives. He picked up the secure telephone on his desk again.

“Get me Belobrov.”

#

Antonio stood silhouetted in the open doorway.

“What the fuck was that!” He hissed. “How many God damn jobs have we done, and you forget to switch off your fucking phone!”

“Is it done?”

“Yes it’s fucking done”, he said, replacing the Berretta back into the jacket pocket it had come from, “No thanks to you, motherfucker! Are you *trying* to get me killed?”

“That was Bommarito. He has another job for us.”

“I don’t care if it was the queen of fucking England, if you pull that shit on me again, I’m not doing it.”

“Shut up. He wants us to go to the airport...now.”

“Now, it’s two in the fucking morning? What the hell does he want us to do at the airport? That must be one hell of a shipment.”

“It’s not at the airport, idiot. He needs us to go to America.”

“America? What the fuck for?”

“They have found the Trumpet.”

Antonio was quiet.

#

Alexander Belobrov crossed the large office in the Lubyanka building until he stood before the solid oak bureau.

“You wanted to see me?”

On the opposite side the SVR Director signalled for him to sit, with a motion of his wrist.

“I have a smoking bolt job for you”, he began. “We need you to recover something, an artefact of great value to the state, which has been detected in America. Except”, he continued, “you will not be recovering the item directly.”

He passed a large yellow envelope across the table and gestured for Belobrov to open it.

Inside were a number of photographs, a driver’s license, passport, and travel documents to the US. Belobrov spread three photos of three different men across the desk in front of him and studied them intently. The first photo was in colour. It was of a heavyset balding man with fine purple lines etched across his cheeks. From across the desk the Director placed a finger on the corner of the photograph.

“You may already recognise this one”, he said. “Hershel Rubenstein, MOSSAD.”

“MOSSAD? What are the Israelis doing in America?”

“Let’s just say for now that the artefact we are after is also of interest to the Jews. One week ago one of our American operatives picked up information that indicated that Rubenstein was carrying the article which we are looking to retrieve. Unfortunately for us Rubenstein was terminated two days ago in Chicago, before we could get to him.”

“And this article he was carrying?”

“The article was not recovered. But we don’t believe that whoever killed Rubenstein managed to find it either.”

“How can you be sure?”

“We can’t. But none of the usual channels have shown any indication that any of the other agencies have found anything. Had they discovered the artefact there would have been a change in their communication patterns.”

“Any idea who got to Rubenstein?”

“CIA, most likely. The Americans themselves are desperate to retrieve the article and it will be especially embarrassing to them that they have not, if it turns out to be in their own backyard.” The Director continued, “We believe that Rubenstein came across the border from Canada where he would have received the artefact, but was tipped off as to our knowledge of it before we could get to him ourselves. We think that he was trying to deliver it to someone in the US.”

“And these two?”, Belobrov moved on to the remaining black and white photographs, one of an older stocky man with thick jowls and silver flecked hair, the other, a younger slim unshaven man with jet black locks.

“Caesar Casale, forty two years old from Naples Italy. The other is Antonio Bertoli, twenty eight year old Sicilian.”

Agent Belobrov raised an eyebrow.

“Mafiosos?”

“Correct. They will collect the article on our behalf. Only once they have it in their possession, are you to set up a meeting and take it from there.”

“But if this article is so important, why trust it to these amateurs?”

“These are two of Don Bommarito’s most experienced men. They should be quite capable of recovering the artefact without arousing suspicion. But I never said I trusted them. That is precisely why I need you to take care of things. Rubenstein was tipped off by someone. Until we establish who, I am not prepared to take any further risks. The attentions of the American organisations eyes and ears have been already drawn to the article. It would be of great embarrassment to them if on Americas own soil, someone else got to it first. This job

will require retrieval of the object from right underneath their noses. If Bommarito's men slip up it will not draw focus to our own activities. Only once they have the artefact are you to take possession. Is that understood?"

Alexander Belobrov nodded.

"And how will I recognise this...artefact?"

Director Korsakov slid open a drawer of the bureau and placed a further colour picture on the table. Belobrov regarded it closely. In the photograph was what looked like an elongated gemstone, except unlike any gem he had ever seen, this was about three quarters of a foot in length. This stone also appeared to be hollow and splayed out at its base into a wide funnel shape. The other thing that was odd, even from the photograph, was the way in which the light refracted through the crystal, in a kind of kaleidoscope of different colour.

"It is very beautiful. What is it, some kind of diamond?"

"Not exactly, no. But it is a very rare form of crystal, quite unique...and exceptionally valuable. That is all you need know for now. Very few people have ever seen it. I am only showing it to you now so that you know exactly what it is you are looking for."

"So where is it now?"

"That we are not sure. It is possible that Rubenstein may have hidden it when he became aware of our knowledge of his possession of it. But given its value and his movements, that seems unlikely. It appears that he was very keen to deliver it to someone."

"Any leads as to whom?"

"We have traced back all the likely connections that would have had contact with Rubenstein in the past seven days, so far without success."

"So we have nothing?"

"Not quite. I said we have exhausted all of the *likely* connections. There is another possibility. We believe that Rubenstein may have panicked and passed the artefact on to a mule. This person may not even know its value, but from them another associate may be able to retrieve it at a subsequent point."

"Do we have anything on this mule?"

The Director nodded toward the yellow envelope on the table.

Agent Belobrov held it up and shook out a remaining photograph, which had stuck inside.

Daniel Messenger's picture landed on the table.

#

Chapter 2

A short distance from Washington, in the quiet suburb of Silver Spring, north of the Potomac River, Dan Messenger arrived home. It was late and the cold streets were still, as he fumbled with his keys in the front door and went inside. He dragged the large suitcase to the bottom of the stairs and left it there. He could sort his vacation laundry tomorrow. He climbed the stairway to the second level bedroom where he dropped the briefcase full of papers for the morning on the bed and decided to head for a quick shower.

Dan flicked on the hot tap. Soon the ensuite bathroom filled with a warm blanket of steam. The hot water cascaded over his shoulders, soothing the stiffness in his bones from the flight and the cold Washington frost outside. He closed his eyes and let the warmth flow through him. Outside, toward the bedroom he heard a faint thump, most probably the sound of the late autumn wind rocking the old boughs of the elm tree in the front yard against the outside of the house. He finished washing and turned the tap off. Everything was quiet once more. Peculiarly quiet. Even the rocking of the old elm had ceased as quickly as it had begun. He shuddered. On late nights like these he hated living alone. He brushed the thought aside and finished towelling himself off. Back in the bedroom he perched on the side of the bed and pulled over the briefcase to go through his notes for tomorrow. He turned the little dials of the combination; 8-2-3 then 1-1-3. He went to flick back the twin latches and open the lid, but they remained stuck fast. *That's odd*, he thought. He tried again, checking to make sure that he'd lined the dials of the combination up correctly. The case stubbornly refused to budge. Out of frustration he decided to simply switch them all to zeros and tugged hard at the lid of the case to see if he could get it to budge. The lid sprang open with a click.

“What the...?”

Instead of the series of folders containing his notes for tomorrow, the case was almost empty. For an instant he thought someone must have stolen his notes, but then inside the case was a long black box. Dan recalled the incident at the airport with the heavyset balding man. The man had put his case down next to his own when he had helped him up. In his rush he must have picked up the wrong briefcase.

“Damn it!”

Now what was he going to do? He would just have to get by in tomorrow's meeting without his notes, until he could trace them.

Dan's eyes were drawn back to the oblong shaped box. It looked like an oversized glasses case, or maybe a box for a small musical instrument. Perhaps he should open it? After all, with nothing else to trace the man from Chicago airport it might at least contain a name or a phone number. Besides, chances were somewhere on the other side of the country someone else was already going through his own briefcase. Although, he thought, if they had, surely they would have been in contact with him already? It did after all have several things with his number on them. No harm in looking, he supposed. He placed his fingers either end of the box and gently opened it from the edges. Inside was a long black velvet bag tied at one end with a gold cord. Within this was something quite heavy. He undid the cord and slid the item out of its velvet cover and into his hands.

He drew an involuntary breath.

"Wow." He whispered to himself. Lying across his palms was a long flute shaped crystal about nine inches long, which splayed out at the end into a kind of trumpet shape. The workmanship was breathtaking. As he turned it in his hands light danced hypnotically along its length. Dan had no idea how long he had been sitting on the edge of the bed mesmerised by it when the wind outside caught his attention again. He gently slid it back into its velvet cover. He placed the cloth back into the black box and in turn re-closed the briefcase. He glanced at the clock beside the bed. It was nearly one thirty. For now it could wait. Maybe at the office he could get Carol to run a check on it. Someone may already have placed a call with the airline for the lost bag, and hopefully he could get his own briefcase back. He pulled back the covers and turned out the light, but sleep was uneasy and his dreams were filled with the troubled images of an anxious mind.

As Dan slipped into a restless slumber in Washington DC, three and a half thousand miles away a Russian Delfin class nuclear submarine slipped quietly beneath the surface of the Barents Sea.

#

Midway across the Atlantic on US Airways flight 719 the dark haired man in seat 61J pressed the attendant call button.

"I fucking hate flying," Antonio muttered. He swished the remaining ice around in his empty plastic cup. "Where the hell is that girl? I need another drink."

Caesar looked up from his magazine.

“A drink? Or a smoke?”

“Shut up.”

“I thought you were going to get nicotine patches at the airport?”

“I did”, Antonio grumbled, “And the gum.” He rolled up his sleeve to show a small clear square on his forearm. “They don’t fucking work.” He tipped up the cup and crunched loudly on the remnants of ice.

Casale cringed.

“Maybe you should’ve gone for a body wrap.”

“Fuck you.”

The flight attendant arrived.

“Sir?”

“Another scotch”, Antonio said gruffly. He thrust out the empty plastic cup.

For a moment the attendant just stared blankly at him. “We’re very busy right now sir.”

“Look”, he said. “I’ve been stuck in this seat for four hours, I just want a drink.”

“I’ll see what I can do sir.” She took the cup and disappeared down the aisle toward the rear of the plane.

“Why don’t you watch a movie?” Caesar asked, putting the magazine back down in his lap.

“I’ve seen them. Besides, they edit all the good shit out on aircraft so they can get a PG rating.”

The two of them sat uncomfortably.

“What’s taking that woman so long? I don’t see how they’re so busy?”

“They’re not. But now she probably thinks you’re going to be an aggressive drunk, so she’s trying to slow you down.”

“Any slower and I’ll be aggressive, but I’ll still be sober.”

“Maybe if you were a little less abrupt she would have got it for you straight away.”

Antonio sighed.

“You know what I still don’t understand?”

“About you’re drink?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“If all Bommarito wants is for us to pop some guy and retrieve a little black case with a crystal in it, then why can’t he just get a local to do it?”

“Apparently this job is delicate. We may not be the only ones who know about the crystal. He cannot afford word being leaked by some local chapter. Besides which, it is supposed to be priceless. If you were looking to retrieve something of great importance to the organisation would you trust anyone but your best men to retrieve it for you?”

Antonio shrugged then he smiled.

“Bommarito said we were the best?”

“Was there ever any question?”

#

Dan slid in to the driver's side of the silver Buick, dropping the briefcase down in the passenger seat next to him. He turned the ignition and backed out into the frosty autumn morning. He waited for the garage door to close before reversing all the way out into the street and heading south toward the Capitol. As the house receded in the mirror he didn't notice the small black Honda parked across the street pull out behind him. He flicked on the radio to the WMAL breakfast news.

“Our lead story this morning, and the Whitehouse and Department of Homeland Security have today once again raised the terror alert level from Elevated to High, based on quote...‘credible evidence having been received suggesting a possible imminent threat to US security.’ The outgoing administration has not offered any further specific comment at this stage; however in the wake of last fortnight's election, political commentators are already looking toward how this will be likely to shape the presidency of President Elect Whitman, who is scheduled to hold a press conference later today.”

Dan's mind was already focused on the afternoon press conference. Mary Whitman's speech had been expected to look back on the recent election and then present some more detail on the party's public policies. They were going to cover social issues, the party's main campaign stage, reducing unemployment, how the incoming President would deal with inflation, then finish with something showing the human side of the President, how much she was looking forward to serving the people, maybe how Walt Whitman felt being the Whitehouse's first househusband, that sort of thing. Now all that would go out the window. Dan looked at the briefcase on the passenger seat. More than ever he wished he had his notes instead of this useless luggage with a box and a piece of glass in it.

The radio chattered on as he cruised down Sixteenth Street.

“Thousands of people left without water as heavy floods continue to plague Great Britain...”

A couple of blocks short of the office he pulled the Buick into the curb. He jumped out of the car and hurried over to the coffee cart. Fifty yards behind, a black Honda also pulled into the curb. A man and a woman wearing heavy coats and dark glasses got out.

“Tall cappuccino to go, thanks.” Dan fumbled around in his coat pocket for change.

“There you are Sir.”

“Thanks.”

He started back to the car when he noticed the stocky greying man and the tall woman with dark hair heading briskly in his direction. He hesitated, wondering if they were coming over to him. Either that or they were in a hell for a hurry for coffee. His cell phone rang. He turned back toward the car.

“Yeah, I just heard. Ok, I know. I’ll be there in about two minutes.” Whitman had brought the morning staff briefing forward to discuss the terror alert. Dan hurried back into the car, snapped the phone shut and sped off toward the office.

#

Chapter 3

The young clerk at the registration desk of the Hyatt Regency in Chicago smiled at the gentleman standing at the faux marble counter.

“And it’s just the one night that you’ll be staying with us Mr Black?”

“Yes hopefully. I have some unfinished business to attend to in Chicago.”

The clerk pushed a small card and a pen across the counter. “Well then I just need your signature here, and here is your room key”, he said, handing the gentleman a white plastic key card. “And will you need a wakeup call or an extended checkout in the morning?”

“That won’t be necessary.” The man at the counter replied curtly.

“Then enjoy your stay.” The reception clerk smiled.

The gentleman turned, entered the closest lift at the far end of the lobby and pushed the button for the fourth floor. He made his way to room 408 and pushed the small plastic card into the metal slot mounted on the door. There was an audible click in the lock housing and the small light winked green at him. He entered and carefully shut the door behind him. After a cursory view of the room Agent Belobrov walked over to the telephone and dialled an outside line.

#

From the basement car park Dan got in the lift and headed to the tenth floor. The doors opened and he stepped out into the lobby. He turned left, waved his security pass at the card reader and pushed through the big frosted glass doors and into the department. At the desk outside his office Carol glanced up from her workstation.

“Morning Dan”, she said. “Welcome back.”

“Thanks.”

“Did you get the message? After the news this morning, Whitman wants to get everyone together early to go over this afternoon.”

“Yeah, I’m on my way”, Dan called out already half way through the open doorway to his office. He dropped his coat over the back of the chair and came back out. “Which room are they in?”

“Jefferson, on twelve.”

“Ok, I’m heading there now.” He looked at the briefcase still in his hand. He thought about giving it to her now to see if she could trace its owner while they were in the meeting. But right now he didn’t have time to explain. He decided to take it with him.

#

Eleven hundred kilometres north of the Arctic Circle at Thule air force base on Greenland’s west coast, a young intercept officer picked up the telltale interference pattern of a submarine deep beneath the polar ice flows.

“Sir”, he called over his commanding officer, “looks like we’ve got another one.”

The commanding officer approached the screen.

“Where’s it heading?”

“Tracking NNW, looks deep. Close to the floor.”

“Speed?”

“Barely moving, Sir. One or two knots, if that.”

“What the hell are they up to?”

“Beats me Sir, but that’s the third one this week.”

For a moment the two men just watched the stationary green dot on the screen.

“Shall I send a Flash message through to Langley Sir?”

The C.O. scraped a hand back and forth across his chin. “No, not just yet, they’re not going anywhere in a hurry. Let’s just hold on to it for now, until it becomes clearer what they’re doing there. No point in us getting a whole lot of people out of bed in Washington until we know what we’re dealing with. But in the meantime put a call through to General McGovern. He should know what’s going on, just in case.”

#

Just before 11pm on a bitter evening in Chicago, an old derelict sat on a park bench quietly staring out at the banks of the Chicago River. He crumpled a paper bag around the grimy neck of a bottle through fingerless gloves and took sip. Underneath the bench a roll of old dirty blankets lay stashed on the ground. Few people were still alongside the river at this time on the cold autumn night. The one or two passersby quickly hurry on; keen to get to the warmth of their homes. Those that notice the old vagrant at all pretend not to, turning their heads from the outstretched hand and the raspy voice that begs for change. Once he might

have been one of them; a loved son, a brother, someone's long forgotten passionate lover. But tonight, on a cold autumn evening in Chicago, he is just another anonymous victim of the city.

A tall man in a grey coat ambled slowly past the old man on the bench.

"Mister? Spare change for a coffee?"

The man in the coat hesitated. "How do you drink your coffee old man?"

"Mister, coffee should be black as hell, strong as death, and sweet as love."

Alexander Belobrov sat down next to the man on the bench.

"Good evening comrade. Do you have the briefcase?"

The hobo reached under the bench and placed the roll of blankets on his lap. He deftly peeled back a corner and slid the briefcase within onto Agent Belobrov's lap.

"Here you are my friend. Everything you need to know about the one you seek is inside."

Belobrov flicked open the twin latches of the case and narrowly opened the lid. Inside were various papers, some handwritten notes, and a handful of pens. He slid out a piece of paper with an address in Washington DC.

"This is everything?"

"Yes."

"And it is as you found it from Rubenstein?"

"Yes."

He replaced the paper and re-shut the case.

"How long were you following Rubenstein?"

"Three days."

"Three days? And you didn't move to retrieve the article sooner?"

"I didn't know at that point that he had it in his possession. It was unusual to see him here."

"Where did you pick him up?"

"He'd been operating out of Ottawa. Standard diplomatic assignments mostly I believe. But then I picked him up when he came across the border on a recognised shoe."

"Careless", Agent Belobrov shook his head. "Do you have the name he was using?"

"David Mason. You might be able to collect more tracing him under that identity, but I found nothing further back than a couple of days. He came across the border from Winnipeg in a hire car, overnights in Minneapolis, dumped the car and then caught a train to Chicago."

"An unusual route to get to Washington from Ottawa", Belobrov raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“I agree. This is why I suspected he had something of interest to us in his possession, but I wasn't yet sure. My guess is the article came ashore from Hudson Bay and he was on route to deliver it to someone here in the U.S. He would have been avoiding the direct route so it wasn't as clear who.”

“And then?”

“Unfortunately he got spooked here in Chicago and headed directly for the airport. That was when I realised I would need to neutralize our risk before one of the other agencies got to him first.”

“Interesting, I was told that they had.”

“They did. He came into the country on a known identity. You don't think that if I picked him up when I wasn't even looking, that the NSA wouldn't have been crawling all over it?”

“So how did you recover this case?”

“When I arrived at the airport Rubenstein was just entering the upper level at terminal 1. I lost him for a minute in the crowd, but then picked him up doubling back and out the ground floor exit heading toward the car park, directly across from the Hilton. He was being followed.”

“By who?”

“CIA.”

“And so when did they get to Rubenstein?”

“Rubenstein must have suspected they were closing. He stayed in the open and travelled back right outside the Hilton entrance where there would be lots of people. But he must have been in a hurry to get to the airport because he left his car under cover. That's where their man took him down. Fortunate for me, but I needed to act quickly.”

Belobrov simply nodded.

“Luckily Rubenstein had a big trunk.”

“The foreign asset, you are sure that he did not have a chance to relay what Rubenstein was carrying?”

“Positive. At least not afterwards, I completed the recovery within seconds. Even if he had been able to do so before, as far as the other agencies would know, Rubenstein was just carrying a briefcase, and both he and the case would have gone cold.”

“There would have been cousins involved?”

“No, not as far as I could see, the foreign asset was alone.”

“Where are the bodies now?”

“They have been disposed of.”

“Where?”

“Right now they will be encased in concrete, propping up the foundations of the Block 37 building on State Street.”

“Excellent.”

“So you are positive no one else knows about the briefcase?”

“No one. Just you and me.” He took a swig from the nearly empty bottle still in his hands.

“Tell me, what is going on here, that the Centre decides to send a senior asset on a simple collection job? I thought being a courier would be below you my friend?”

“I am here to tie up some loose ends.” Belobrov’s mouth stretched out at the edges. Then he pulled a semi automatic pistol from his coat pocket and shot the old man directly in the forehead. “And I am not your friend.”

Belobrov checked no one was around, then dragged the body across the pathway and tipped it over the railing and into the river. He watched as the corpse drifted east toward the lake before disappearing under the surface. Just another drowned derelict. Just another anonymous victim of the city.

#

In his office at Bolling, near the Whitehouse, the Director of National Intelligence, Howard J Marshall picked up the secure line on his desk.

“Sir, we’ve had a contact from General McGovern at Thule.”

“Yes?”

“They’re currently tracking a Russian nuclear sub deep under the Arctic shelf, moving slowly toward north eastern Greenland.”

“Anything else unusual in its activity?”

“It’s the third one we’ve tracked this week Sir, they’ve all been unusual. All hugging the bottom, all travelling slow. This one is the first one that’s come this far over the top though. What do you want us to do with it?”

There was a long silence while the Director considered what he had just heard.

“Sir? What should we do Sir?”

“We do nothing, at least not directly. I don’t want anything from this one being traced back to the agency. The last thing I need is a bunch of Washington bureaucrats crawling all over my back. Contact Admiral Hayden. He should be aware, even if McGovern hasn’t already contacted him, but I want him to know that we’re looking over his shoulder, then get me a list

of what Navy assets we currently have deployed in that area. And strongly *suggest* to Hayden that it would be in our mutual interest if he was to dispatch a vessel to shadow it and await further instructions. The USS Jimmy Carter should be on assignment in that vicinity.”

There was a long pause at the other end of the phone.

“Sir?”

“Yes?”

“Shall we inform the President?”

“No. Not yet. Like I said, let’s keep the bureaucrats out of this if we can avoid it. I’ve got a briefing with the President later today. If anything changes between now and then I’ll inform him personally.”

“Yes Sir.”

The Director hung up and leaned back in his chair. A few moments later he picked up the handset again and placed another secure call.

“It’s me. Have you retrieved the object?”

#

Dan entered the Jefferson boardroom and quietly closed the door behind him. Inside the room a dozen of the President Elect’s staff sat around the long table.

“Dan”, President Elect Mary Whitman extended a hand and urged him into the room. “Come in, sit down, we’ve only just started. As you know the focus of this afternoon’s press briefing was going to be on policy reiteration & a general meet and greet, but with the outgoing administrations announcement of an increased terror alert this morning that’s all changed.

With them keeping tight lipped on it themselves, the press are going to be all over us for our reaction.”

Dan took his seat. Conscious of his interruption, he could feel the other eyes in the room as he sat down.

“Paul”, Whitman turned to the man sitting across the table from Dan, “please go on.”

Paul Burr, Whitman’s National Security Advisor designate, was the elder statesman of the team. It had been Paul Burr who had taken Dan under his wing in the early months of his career, teaching him the political ropes of Washington and looking over his back. Dan had learned a lot from Paul over the previous months of the campaign and they had become good friends. Now, Burr flicked up a slide on the overhead projector, displaying a map of the Arctic Circle with a number of red arcs traced across it. He pointed to a shaded wedge shape

that swept across from northern Siberia, deep under the Arctic Circle and to the North Pole, before curving all the way across to the top of Iceland.

“This map”, he said, “shows an area of the Arctic which is currently recognised as non territorial. However, under international law the Russians are claiming this zone, the Lomonosov Ridge, as Russian territory. Over the past week we’ve tracked at least three Russian nuclear submarines leaving Zaozersk near Murmask on the Kola Peninsula, into the Barents Sea and deep into this space.”

“But that’s not particularly unusual is it?” Whitman asked. “I mean, strategically the area across the Arctic has always been important as an effective US/Russian border, so they would have patrolled this area for years. What’s so different now?”

“The difference is the Russians haven’t actively laid claim to the area before now. Sure they’ve always disputed it, even back as far as the 1920’s, but they’ve never actually pushed for an undersea land grab.” Burr turned back to the screen and highlighted a dark elongated band that stretched from the Siberian coastline, across the Barents Sea and underneath the North Pole.

“This is the Lomonosov Ridge. This is the basis of the Russian claim. They contend that this ridge is an extension of the Siberian land mass. Under current international law if they can prove that this ridge is indeed a part of the Russian continental shelf, then they may be able to set a precedent claim to the territory.”

“And if they do? Where do we stand on this?”

Whitman turned to Clark Thomas, her Attorney General designate. “Clark?”

“Well, there are a couple of things here. Firstly, they would have to prove that the ridge is part of the same land mass as the current Russian territory. To do that, they need to base a claim on scientific evidence. They can’t just plant a flag on the ocean floor. They would need to match samples of the Lomonosov crust with that of the Siberian mainland. Even then, it’s not clean cut. If the Lomonosov rocks are consistent with the continent, it still doesn’t necessarily prove that the ridge should automatically be considered part of Russia. It could equally well be claimed to belong to Denmark, Iceland or Canada. They would need to take samples from the whole length of the ridge. Our position is that even if they can prove the ridge to be continental, there is no basis to make a claim with such significant detachment from the coastline.”

“Nevertheless, they still might have a case?”

“It’s a possibility, remote, but still a possibility.”

“That’s not a possibility I want to get into a position to eventuate, no matter how remote it is”, Whitman replied.

“Well, as I see it”, Burr interjected, “until the present administration hands over power, our hands are tied.”

“Damn it!” The President Elect slammed a hand on the table. What the hell are they playing at? She took a couple of breaths and recomposed herself.

“The thing I don’t understand”, she said, “is why now? If they’ve disputed this area for the past hundred years, what’s suddenly changed that they are so desperate to push into it now?”

“I think I can answer that.”

The attentions of those sitting around the long table turned toward Secretary of State designate Janet Wells.

“Paul’s quite right when he says that historically the Russian’s have always wanted to get their hands on the area above the Arctic Circle. For centuries most of the European countries have recognised the strategic importance of the area economically. They realised that if the fabled North West passage could be found, whoever gained control of that supply route could effectively control the flow of trade to the Western hemisphere. And with the retreating ice shelf of the past decade, that passageway could soon become a reality.”

Mary Whitman tapped a finger slowly against her lips.

“Yes”, she said, “but subs have been navigating that route under the ice for decades already, so again, why such a rush for it now?”

“Because now there’s a far greater prize at stake.”

“Which is?” The President Elect leaned closer to the table.

“Oil and gas. The retreating ice shelf has opened up previously inaccessible areas to geological survey. The early data indicates that the area they are looking at could hold massive untapped reserves of oil and gas that were previously unidentified, inaccessible, and untapped. The Russians already have a near monopoly stranglehold on gas supplies into Eastern, and more and more progressively, Western Europe. If they could gain a legal claim to the area underneath the northern Arctic Circle they could potentially secure control of up to a third of all the energy reserves on the planet. And it doesn’t just stop at oil and gas that they could stand to gain. Geological teams from Scandinavia and Iceland are now just uncovering a seam of diamonds of previously unprecedented size and quality to the north of Iceland. With that in mind, it’s hardly surprising that they’re all over the area.”

“Paul?” Whitman returned to her Security Adviser. “Does this fit with what your guys are seeing?”

“It’s plausible. Since announcing a claim to this part of the Arctic as Russian territory they have been stepping up the patrols. What’s unusual though, is the change in range and depth of the sorties. These guys are coming right over the top, closer to US waters than they ever have, both deeper and slower. They’re practically walking across the ocean floor toward us!”

“So what are they doing down there? Drilling?”

“I don’t think so. If that’s all they were doing they’d use some kind of mini subs with surface support, or a surface based drilling platform and survey ships.” He pointed back to the paths of three dark red lines that ran across the map still projected against the wall. “But in this case these are all Delfin IV class submarines from the Russian Northern fleet, based out of Olenya Bay.” He ran a pointer over a spot at the end of each of the three lines. “We’ve identified them as; K84 Ekaterinberg, K114 Tula, and K117 Bryansk. These are strategic nuclear attack submarines, designed to attack cities, military and industrial installations and naval bases. They are setup to be able to attack targets in the US without having to pass the SOSUS sensors in the GIUK gap to launch their missiles. Whatever they’re doing down there with these guys, you can bet it’s not digging up rocks.”

“So the terror alert is a real and credible threat then?”

“It looks a lot like it.”

“What the hell are they playing at? They must know we are watching? It’s deliberate provocation.”

“At the moment, who knows? They may be trying to force some kind of deal. I suspect it’s their way of upping the pressure on the outgoing administration now, in order to broker a quick agreement of some sort. But in the meantime all we can surmise is that they’ve found something pretty important to them. Something worth them deciding to secure this area for themselves, now. And apparently they want everyone else kept the hell out.”

The President Elect turned to face Dan.

“Dan, you’re the wordsmith here. How do we handle the press on this one?”

Dan paused to think for a moment, “Well, let’s start by trying to keep the focus on the agenda for the briefing. Open with how the election result was fantastic, but now you’re really looking forward to rolling up your sleeves and getting on with the job. Keep bringing the focus back to policy and how you want to build on forward momentum to implement as many of the key programs as soon as possible. Talk about industrial relations, the environmental platform and computers for schools. It’s unlikely that they’ll buy it for long without at least wanting a comment on the terror alert, but by coming back to the routine you’ll be giving them the message that this isn’t anything so out of the ordinary as to be concerned about. It’s

business as usual. If they continue to press, maintain the standard position - that there has been credible intelligence received by the agencies, but the outgoing administration is handling it.”

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