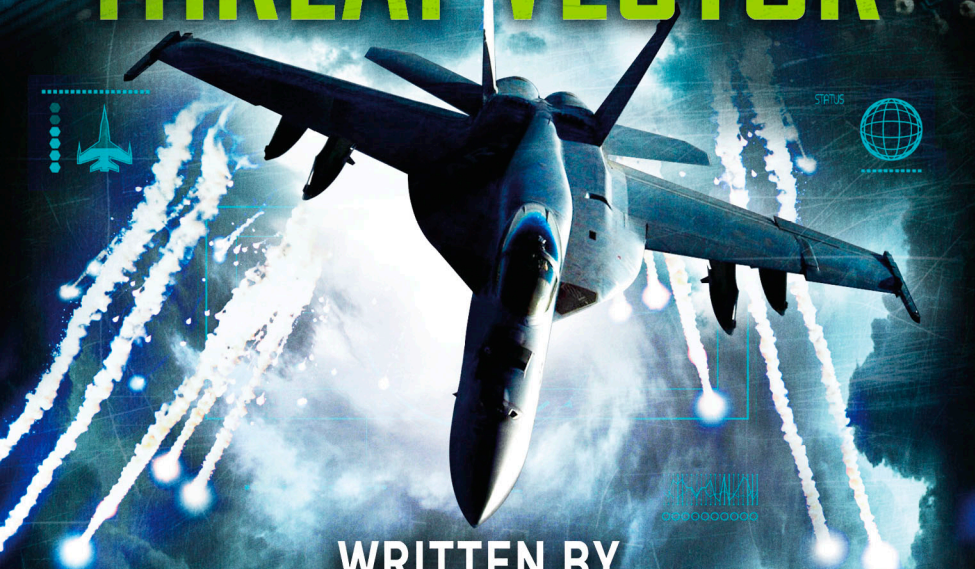


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TOM CLANCY'S THREAT VECTOR



WRITTEN BY
MARK GREANEY

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THREAT VECTOR

Thirty years ago Tom Clancy was a Maryland insurance broker with a passion for naval history. But he had always dreamed of writing a novel, and his first effort, *The Hunt for Red October*, catapulted on to the *New York Times* bestseller list. From that day forward, Clancy established himself as an undisputed master at blending exceptional realism and authenticity, intricate plotting, and razor-sharp suspense. He passed away in October 2013.

Mark Greaney is the co-author of three Number One *Sunday Times* bestsellers with Tom Clancy: *Locked On*, *Threat Vector* and *Command Authority*. In his research for these novels, Greaney travelled to seven countries and trained alongside military and law enforcement in the use of firearms, battlefield medicine and close-range combat tactics. He now writes for the Tom Clancy series of novels alongside Grant Blackwood. He lives in Memphis, Tennessee.

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Threat Vector

TOM CLANCY

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Principal Characters

United States Government

- John Patrick ‘Jack’ Ryan: President of the United States
- Arnold van Damm: the President’s chief of staff
- Robert Burgess: secretary of defense
- Scott Adler: secretary of state
- Mary Patricia Foley: director of national intelligence
- Colleen Hurst: national security adviser
- Jay Canfield: director of the Central Intelligence Agency
- Kenneth Li: U.S. ambassador to China
- Adam Yao: operations officer, National Clandestine Service, Central Intelligence Agency
- Melanie Kraft: reports officer, Central Intelligence Agency (on loan to Office of the Director of National Intelligence)
- Darren Lipton: senior special agent, Federal Bureau of Investigation, National Security Branch, Counterintelligence Division

United States Military

- Admiral Mark Jorgensen: United States Navy, commander Pacific Fleet
- General Henry Bloom: United States Air Force, commander United States Cyber Command

- Captain Brandon ‘Trash’ White: United States Marine Corps, F/A-18C Hornet pilot
- Major Scott ‘Cheese’ Stilton: United States Marine Corps, F/A-18C Hornet pilot
- Chief Petty Officer Michael Meyer: United States Navy, SEAL Team Six element leader

The Campus

- Gerry Hendley: director of Hendley Associates/director of The Campus
- Sam Granger: director of operations
- John Clark: operations officer
- Domingo ‘Ding’ Chavez: operations officer
- Dominic Caruso: operations officer
- Sam Driscoll: operations officer
- Jack Ryan, Jr: operations officer/analyst
- Rick Bell: director of analysis
- Tony Wills: analyst
- Gavin Biery: director of information technology

The Chinese

- Wei Zhen Lin: president of the People’s Republic of China/general secretary of the Communist Party of China
- Su Ke Qiang: chairman of the Central Military Commission of China
- Wu Fan Jun: intelligence officer, Ministry of State Security, Shanghai

- Dr Tong Kwok Kwan, aka ‘Center’: computer network operations director of Ghost Ship
- Zha Shu Hai, aka ‘FastByte22’: Interpol-wanted cybercriminal
- Crane: Leader of ‘Vancouver Cell’
- Han: factory owner and high-tech counterfeiter

Additional Characters

- Valentin Olegovich Kovalenko: Ex-SVR (Russian foreign intelligence), assistant *resident* of London Station
- Todd Wicks: territory sales manager of Advantage Technology Solutions
- Charlie ‘DarkGod’ Levy: amateur hacker
- Dr Cathy Ryan: wife of President Jack Ryan
- Sandy Clark: wife of John Clark
- Dr Patsy Clark: wife of Domingo Chavez/daughter of John Clark
- Emad Kartal: ex-Libyan intelligence officer, communications specialist

■ CHINA AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA ■



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Prologue

These were grim days for former operatives of the Jamahiriya Security Organization, the dreaded national intelligence service of Libya under Moammar Gaddafi. Those members of the JSO who had managed to survive the revolution in their home nation were now scattered and in hiding, fearing the day when their cruel and brutal past would catch up with them in a cruel and brutal way.

After the fall of Tripoli to Western-backed rebels the year before, some JSO operatives had remained in Libya, hoping that by changing their identities they would save themselves from reprisal. This rarely worked, as others knew their secrets and were all too happy to finger them to revolutionist headhunters, either to settle old scores or to win new favors. Gaddafi's spies in Libya were rounded up wherever they hid, tortured, and then killed; in other words, they were treated no worse than they deserved, though the West had held out some naive hope that fair trials for past crimes would be the order of the day when the rebels took power.

But no, mercy did not follow Gaddafi's death any more than mercy had preceded it.

Meet the new boss, same as the old.

The smarter JSO spies made it out of Libya before capture, and some went to other African nations. Tunisia was close, but it was hostile to former spies of the Mad Dog of the Middle East, a fitting nickname bestowed on Gaddafi by Ronald Reagan. Chad was desolate and similarly unwelcoming to the Libyans. A few made it into Algeria and a few more

into Niger, and in both places they found some measure of security, but as guests of these dirt-poor regimes their future prospects were severely limited.

One group of former Jamahiriya Security Organization operators, however, fared better than the rest of their hunted colleagues because they possessed a marked advantage. For years this small cell of spies had been working not just in the interests of the Gaddafi regime, but also for their own personal enrichment. They accepted after-hours work for hire, both in Libya and abroad, doing odd jobs for organized criminal elements, for Al-Qaeda, for the Umayyad Revolutionary Council, even for the intelligence organizations of some other Middle Eastern nations.

In this work the group had suffered losses even before the fall of their government. Several had been killed by American operators a year before Gaddafi's death, and during the revolution several more died at the port of Tobruk in a NATO airstrike. Two others were captured boarding a flight out of Misrata and burned with electric shocks before being hung naked from meat hooks at the market. But the cell's seven surviving members did make it out of the country, and even though their years of extracurricular assignments had failed to make them rich men, when it came time to jump like rats from the ship called the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, their international connections helped keep them safe from the rebels back home.

The seven made their way to Istanbul, Turkey, where they were sponsored by elements in the local underworld who owed them a favor. Soon two of their number left the cell and went into honest work. One became a jewelry store security guard and the other found a job in a local plastics factory.

The other five remained in the spy game, and they farmed

themselves out as a highly experienced unit of intelligence professionals. They also attempted to focus on both their personal security and their operational security, knowing that only by maintaining strict PERSEC *and* OPSEC could they be safe from the threat of reprisals from agents of the new government of Libya, just across the Mediterranean Sea.

This attention to security kept them safe for a few months, but complacency returned, one of their number grew overconfident, and he did not do as he was told. In a breach of PERSEC, he contacted an old friend in Tripoli, and the friend, a man who had switched allegiance to the new government to keep his head attached to his neck, reported the contact to Libya's new and fledgling intelligence service.

Though Tripoli's new crop of spies was excited by the news that a collection of their old enemies had been tracked to Istanbul, they were in no position to act on the intel. Infiltrating a team into a foreign capital with a kill/capture objective was no move for a rookie agency just finding its way around its new building.

But another entity intercepted the information, and it had both the means and the motive to act.

Soon the Istanbul cell members of former JSO operatives became targets. Not targets of the Libyan revolutionaries looking to eradicate the last vestiges of the Gaddafi regime. Not targets of a Western intelligence agency looking to settle scores with members of a former enemy spy shop.

No, the five Libyans became targets of an off-the-books assassination team from the United States of America.

More than a year earlier, a member of the JSO cell had shot and killed a man named Brian Caruso, the brother of one of the Americans, and a friend of the rest. The shooter

had died soon after, but his cell lived on, surviving the revolution, and now they flourished in their new lives in Turkey.

But Brian's brother and Brian's friends did not forget.

Nor did they forgive.

I

The five Americans had been lying low in the decrepit hotel room for hours, waiting for nightfall.

Sheets of warm rain rapped on the window, generating the majority of the sound in the dim room, as there was little talk among the men. This room had served as the base of operations for the team, though four of the five had stayed at other hotels throughout the city during their weeklong stay. Now that preparations were complete, those four had checked out of their quarters and consolidated their gear and themselves here with the fifth man in their group.

Though they all were still as stones now, they had been a blur of activity over the past week. They had surveilled targets; developed op plans; established covers; memorized their primary, secondary, and tertiary exfiltration routes; and coordinated the logistics of the mission to come.

But preparations were now complete, and there was nothing left to do but sit and wait for darkness.

A rumble of thunder rolled in from the south, a lightning strike far out in the Sea of Marmara illuminated the five statues in the room for an instant, and then the darkness covered them once again.

This hotel was situated in the Sultanahmet district of Istanbul, and it was chosen as the team safe house due to the courtyard parking for their vehicles and the fact that it was more or less equidistant to where the operations would be carried out later in the evening. The hotel was not, however, chosen for the vinyl bedspreads or the grimy hallways or the

surly staff or the stench of pot smoke that wafted up from the youth hostel on the ground floor.

But the Americans did not complain about their accommodations; they thought only of their tasks ahead.

At seven p.m. the leader of the cell looked down to the chronograph on his wrist; it was fastened over bandaging that covered his entire hand and a portion of his forearm. As he stood up from a wooden chair, he said, 'We'll head out one at a time. Five-minute separation.'

The others – two seated on a bed speckled with rat shit, one leaning against the wall by the door, and one more standing by the window – all nodded.

The leader continued. 'I sure as hell do *not* like splitting up the op like this. This is not how we do business. But frankly . . . circumstances dictate our actions. If we don't do these mutts damn near simultaneously, word will get out and the roaches will scatter in the light.'

The others listened without responding. They'd been over this a dozen times in the past week. They knew the difficulties, they knew the risks, and they knew their leader's reservations.

Their leader's name was John Clark; he'd been doing this sort of thing since before the youngest of the men on his team had been born, so his words carried weight.

'I've said it before, gentlemen, but indulge me one more time. No points for style on this one.' He paused. 'In and out. Quick and cold. No hesitation. No mercy.'

They all nodded again.

Clark finished his speech and then slipped a blue raincoat over his three-piece pinstripe suit. He stepped over to the window and reached out with his left hand, shaking the offered left hand of Domingo 'Ding' Chavez. Ding was dressed in a three-quarter-length leather coat and a heavy watch cap. A canvas bag lay at his feet.

Ding saw perspiration on his mentor's face. He knew Clark had to be in pain, but he'd not complained all week. Chavez asked, 'You up for this, John?'

Clark nodded. 'I'll get it done.'

John then reached a hand out to Sam Driscoll, who stood up from the bed. Sam was dressed in a denim jacket and jeans, but he also wore knee and elbow pads and, on the bed next to where he'd been sitting, a black motorcycle crash helmet lay on its side.

'Mr C.,' Sam said.

John asked, 'You ready for the fly swat?'

'Bout as ready as I'm gonna get.'

'It's all about the angle. Get the angle right, commit to it, and let momentum do the rest.'

Sam just nodded as another flash of lightning lit up the room.

John stepped over to Jack Ryan, Jr. Jack was in head-to-toe black; cotton pants, a pullover knit sweater, and a knit mask rolled up above his face so it looked like a watch cap, similar to the one worn by Chavez. He also wore soft-soled shoes that looked like black slippers. With a handshake Clark said, 'Good luck, Junior,' to the twenty-seven-year-old Ryan.

'I'll be fine.'

'I know you will.'

Last, John walked around the bed, and here he shook the left hand of Dominic Caruso. Dom wore a red-and-gold soccer jersey and a bright gold scarf, upon which the word *Galatasaray* was emblazoned in red. His attire stood out from the muted colors around the room, but his countenance was much less bright than his dress.

With a severe expression Dom said, 'Brian was *my* brother, John. I don't need —'

Clark interrupted. 'Have we talked about this?'

‘Yes, but —’

‘Son, whatever our five targets are up to here in Turkey, this op has gone way past simple revenge for your brother. Still . . . we are all Brian’s brothers today. We are all in this together.’

‘Right. But —’

‘I want your mind on your job. Nothing else. Every one of us knows what we are doing. These JSO assholes have committed other crimes against their own people and against the U.S. And it’s clear from their present movements that they are up to no good. Nobody else is going to stop them. It’s up to us to shut them down.’

Dom nodded distractedly.

Clark added, ‘These fuckers have it coming.’

‘I know.’

‘Are you good to go?’

Now the young man’s bearded chin rose. He looked into Clark’s eyes. With a resolute tone he said, ‘Absolutely.’

And with that John Clark picked up his briefcase with his non-bandaged hand and left the room without another word.

The four remaining Americans checked their watches and then stood or sat quietly, listening to the rain pelt the window.

The man the Americans had dubbed Target One sat at his regular bistro table at the sidewalk café in front of the May Hotel on Mimar Hayrettin. Most nights, when the weather was nice, he stopped here for a shot or two of raki in chilled sparkling water. The weather this evening was awful, but the long canopy hung over the sidewalk tables by the staff of the May kept him dry.

There were just a few other patrons seated under the canopy, couples smoking and drinking together before either heading back up to their rooms in the hotel or out to other Old Town nightlife destinations.

Target One had grown to live for his evening glass of raki. The anise-flavored milky white drink made from grape pomace was alcoholic, and forbidden in his home country of Libya and other nations where the more liberal Hanafi school of Islam is not de rigueur, but the ex-JSO spy had been forced into the occasional use of alcohol for tradecraft purposes during his service abroad. Now that he had become a wanted man, he'd grown to rely on the slight buzz from the liquor to help relax him and aid in his sleep, though even the liberal Hanafi school does not permit intoxication.

There were just a few vehicles rolling by on the cobblestone street ten feet from his table. This road was hardly a busy thoroughfare, even on weekend nights with clear skies. There was some foot traffic on the pavement around him, however, and Target One was enjoying himself watching the attractive women of Istanbul pass by under their umbrellas.

The occasional view of the legs of a sexy woman, coupled with the warming buzz of the raki, made this rainy night especially pleasant for the man seated at the sidewalk café.

At nine p.m., Sam Driscoll drove his silver Fiat Linea calmly and carefully through the evening traffic that flowed into Istanbul's Old Town from the outlying neighborhoods.

The city lights sparkled on his wet windshield. Traffic had thinned out more and more the deeper he got into Old Town, and as the American stopped for a red light, he glanced quickly at a GPS locator Velcroed onto the dashboard. Once he reconfirmed the distance to his target, he reached over to the passenger seat and wrapped his hand around his motorcycle helmet. As the light changed he did a long neck roll to relax himself, slipped the crash helmet over his head, and then lowered the visor over his eyes.

He winced at what was to come, he could not help it. Even though his heart was pounding and nearly every synapse of his brain was firing in the focus of his operation, he still found the perspective to shake his head and talk to himself.

He'd done a lot of nasty things in his days as a soldier and an operator, but he had never done this.

'A goddamned fly SWAT.'

The Libyan took his first sip from his second glass of raki of the evening as a silver Fiat headed quickly up the street, some eighty yards to his north. Target One was looking in the opposite direction; a beautiful Turkish girl with a red umbrella in her left hand and a leash to her miniature schnauzer in her right passed by on the sidewalk, and the seated man had a great view of her long and toned legs.

But a shout to his left caused him to shift his attention toward the intersection in front of him, and there he saw the

silver Fiat, a blur, racing through the light. He watched the four-door shoot up the quiet street.

He expected it to shoot on by.

He brought his drink to his lips; he was not worried.

Not until the car veered hard to the left with a squeal of its wet tires, and the Libyan found himself staring down the approaching front grille of the car.

With the little glass still in his hand, Target One stood quickly, but his feet were fixed to the pavement. He had nowhere to run.

The woman walking the miniature schnauzer screamed.

The silver Fiat slammed into the man at the bistro table, striking him square, running him down, and sending him hard into the brick wall of the May Hotel, pinning him there, half under and half in front of the vehicle. The Libyan's rib cage shattered and splintered, sending shards of bone through his vital organs like shot from a riot gun.

Witnesses at the café and on the street around it reported later that the man in the black crash helmet behind the wheel took a calm moment to put his vehicle into reverse, even checking the rearview mirror, before backing into the intersection and driving off toward the north. His actions seemed no different than those of a man on a Sunday drive who had just pulled into a parking space at the market, realized he had left his wallet at home, and then backed out to return for it.

One kilometer southeast of the incident, Driscoll parked the four-door Fiat in a private drive. The little car's hood was bent and its front grille and bumper were torn and dented, but Sam positioned the car nose in so the damage would not be evident from the street. He stepped out of the vehicle and walked to a scooter locked on a chain nearby. Before unlocking it with a key and motoring away into the rainy night, he

transmitted a brief message into the radio feature of his encrypted mobile phone.

‘Target One is down. Sam is clear.’

The Çırağan Palace is an opulent mansion that was built in the 1860s for Abdülaziz I, a sultan who reigned in the midst of the Ottoman Empire’s long decline. After his lavish spending put his nation into debt he was deposed and ‘encouraged’ to commit suicide with, of all things, a pair of scissors.

Nowhere was the extravagance that led to the downfall of Abdülaziz more on display than the Çırağan. It was now a five-star hotel, its manicured lawns and crystal clear pools running from the façade of the palace buildings to the western shoreline of the Bosphorus Strait, the water line that separates Europe from Asia.

The Tuğra restaurant on the first floor of the Çırağan Palace has magnificent high-ceilinged rooms with windows affording wide views of the hotel grounds and the strait beyond, and even during the rain shower that persisted this Tuesday evening, the bright lights of passing yachts could be seen and enjoyed by the diners at their tables.

Along with the many wealthy tourists enjoying their exquisite meals, there were also quite a few businessmen and women from all over the world, alone and in groups of varying number, dining in the restaurant.

John Clark fit in nicely, dining by himself at a table adorned with crystal, fine bone china, and gold-plated flatware. He’d been seated at a small table near the entrance, far away from the grand windows overlooking the water. His waiter was a handsome middle-aged man in a black tuxedo, and he brought Clark a sumptuous meal, and while the American could not say he did not enjoy the food, his focus was on a table far across the room.

Moments after John bit into his first tender bite of monkfish, the maître d' seated three Arab men in expensive suits at the table by the window, and a waiter took their order for cocktails.

Two of the men were guests of the hotel; Clark knew this from his team's surveillance and the hard work of the intelligence analysts employed by his organization. They were Omani bankers, and they were of no interest to him. But the third man, a fifty-year-old Libyan with gray hair and a trim beard, *was* John's concern.

He was Target Two.

As Clark ate with his fork in his left hand, a maneuver the right-handed American had been forced to learn since his injury, he used a tiny flesh-colored hearing amplifier in his right ear to focus on the men's voices. It was difficult to separate them from others speaking in the restaurant, but after a few minutes he was able to pick out the words of Target Two.

Clark returned his attention to his monkfish and waited.

A few minutes later a waiter took the dinner order at the table of Arabs by the window. Clark heard his target order the Kulbasti veal, and the other men ordered different dishes.

This was good. Had the Omanis ordered the same as their Libyan dining companion, then Clark would have switched to plan B. Plan B would go down out in the street, and in the street John had a hell of a lot more unknowns to deal with than he did here in the Tuğra.

But each man had ordered a unique entrée, and Clark silently thanked his luck, then he popped the earpiece out of his ear and slipped it back into his pocket.

John sipped an after-dinner port while his target's table was served cold soups and white wine. The American avoided looking down at his watch; he was on a precise timetable but

knew better than to give any outward appearance of anxiety or fretfulness. Instead he enjoyed his port and counted off the minutes in his head.

Shortly before the soup bowls were cleared from the table of Arab men, Clark asked his waiter to point the way to the men's room, and he was directed past the kitchen. In the bathroom John slipped into a stall and sat down, and quickly began unwrapping the bandaging around his forearm.

The bandage was not a ruse; his wounded hand was real and it hurt like hell. A few months earlier it had been smashed with a hammer, and he'd undergone three surgeries to repair bones and joints in the intervening months, but he'd not enjoyed a decent night's sleep since the day of his injury.

But even though the bandaging was real, it did serve an additional purpose. Under the heavy wrapping, between the two splints that held his index and middle fingers in fixed positions, he had secreted a small injector. It was positioned so that with his thumb he could push the narrow tip out of the wrapping, pop off the cap that covered the needle, and plunge it into his target.

But that was plan B, the less desirable action, and John had decided to go for plan A.

He removed the injector and placed it in his pocket, and then slowly and gingerly rewrapped his hand.

The injector contained two hundred milligrams of a special form of succinylcholine poison. The dose in the plastic device could be either injected into a target or ingested. Both methods of transfer to the victim would be lethal, though injection was, not surprisingly, the far more efficient delivery method for the poison.

John left the bathroom with the device hidden in his left hand.

Clark's timing was less than perfect. As he came out of the

bathroom and passed by the entrance to the kitchen, he had hoped to see his target's waiter exiting with the entrées, but the hallway was empty. John pretended to regard the paintings on the walls, and then the ornate gilded molding in the hallway. Finally the waiter appeared with a tray full of covered dishes on his shoulder. John stood between the man and the dining room, and he demanded the server put down the tray on a tray jack right there and fetch him the chef. The waiter, hiding his frustration behind a veneer of politeness, did as he was told.

As the man disappeared behind the swinging door, Clark quickly checked the covered dishes, found the veal, and then dispensed the poison from the injector directly into the center of the thin piece of meat. A few clear bubbles appeared in the sauce, but the vast majority of the poison was now infused in the veal itself.

When the head chef appeared a moment later, Clark had already re-covered the dish and pocketed the injector. He thanked the man effusively for a splendid dinner, and the waiter delivered the food quickly to his table so that the dishes were not refused by the guests for being served cold.

Minutes later John paid his bill, and he stood to leave his table. His waiter brought him his raincoat, and as he put it on he glanced over quickly at Target Two. The Libyan was just finishing the last bite of the Kulbasti veal; he was deep in conversation with his Omani companions.

As Clark headed out into the lobby of the hotel, behind him Target Two loosened his tie.

Twenty minutes later the sixty-five-year-old American stood under his umbrella in Büyükşehir Belediyesi Park, just across the street from the hotel and restaurant, and he watched as an ambulance raced to the entrance.

The poison was deadly; there was no antidote that any

ambulance on earth would carry in its onboard narcotic box.

Either Target Two was already dead or he would be so shortly. It would look to doctors as if the man had suffered a cardiac arrest, so there would likely be no investigation into the other patrons of the Tuğra who just happened to be dining around the time of the unfortunate, but perfectly natural, event.

Clark turned away and headed toward Muvezzi Street, fifty yards to the west. There he caught a taxi, telling the driver to take him to the airport. He had no luggage, only his umbrella and a mobile phone. He pressed the push-to-talk button on his phone as the cab rolled off into the night. 'Two is down. I am clear,' he said, softly, before disconnecting the call and slipping the phone under his raincoat and into the breast pocket of his suit coat with his left hand.

Domingo Chavez took the calls from Driscoll and then Clark, and now he focused on his own portion of the operation. He sat alone on the old state-owned passenger ferry between Karaköy, on the European bank of the Bosphorus, and Üsküdar, on the Asian bank. On both sides of him in the cabin of the huge boat, red wooden benches were full of men and women traveling slowly but surely to their destinations, rocking along with the swells of the strait.

Ding's target was alone, just as his surveillance indicated he would be. The short forty-minute crossing meant Chavez would need to take his man here on the ferry, lest the target receive word that one of his colleagues had been killed and adopt defensive measures to protect himself.

Target Three was a thickly built thirty-five-year-old. He sat on the bench by the window reading a book for a while, but after fifteen minutes he went out on the deck to smoke.

After taking a few moments to make certain no one else in

the large passenger cabin paid any attention to the Libyan as he stepped outside, Chavez left his seat and headed out another door.

The rain was steady and the low cloud cover blocked off even the faintest light from the moon, and Chavez did his best to move in the long shadows cast from the lights along the narrow lower deck. He headed to a position on the railing some fifty feet aft of his target, and he stood there in the dim, looking out at the twinkling lights of the shoreline and the moving blackness as a catamaran crossed under the Galata Bridge in front of the lights.

Out of the corner of his eye he watched his target smoking near the rail. The upper deck shielded him from the rain. Two other men stood at the rails, but Ding had been following his man for days, and he knew the Libyan would linger out here for a while.

Chavez waited in the shadows, and finally the others went back inside.

Ding slowly began approaching the man from behind.

Target Three had gotten lazy in his PERSEC, but he could not have made it as long as he did as both an operative of his state security service and a freelance spy by being a fool. He was on guard. When Ding was forced to cross in front of a deck light to close in on his target, the man saw the moving shadow, and he flicked away his cigarette and spun around. His hand slid down into his coat pocket.

Chavez launched himself at his target. With three lightning-fast steps he arrived at the edge of the railing and shoved his left hand down to secure whatever weapon the big Libyan was reaching for. In Ding's right hand he swung a black leather sap down hard against the left temple of the man, and with a loud crack Target Three went out cold, slumping down between the railing and Chavez.

The American slipped the sap back into his pocket and then hefted the unconscious man by his head. He looked around quickly to make sure no one was around, and then with a short, brutal twist he snapped his target's neck. After a final glance up and down the lower deck to make sure he remained in the clear, Ding rolled the Libyan up onto the railing and let him tip over the side. The body disappeared into the night. Only the faintest splash could be heard above the sounds of the ocean and the rumbling engines of the ferry.

Chavez returned to a different seat on the red bench in the passenger cabin a few minutes later. Here he made a quick transmission on his mobile device.

'Three is down. Ding is clear.'

The new Türk Telecom Arena seats more than fifty-two thousand spectators and fills to capacity when local Istanbul soccer team Galatasaray takes the pitch. Though it was a rainy night, the huge crowd remained dry, as they were protected under a roof that was open only above the playing field itself.

The match tonight against crosstown rival Beşiktaş had the stands overflowing with locals, but one foreigner in attendance did not watch much of the play on the field. Dominic Caruso, who knew precious little about the game of soccer, instead focused his attention on Target Four, a thirty-one-year-old bearded Libyan who'd come to the match with a group of Turkish acquaintances. Dom had paid a man sitting alone just a few rows above his target to trade seats with him, so now the American had a good view of his target, as well as a quick outlet to the exit above.

For the first half of the match there was little for Caruso to do but cheer when those around him cheered, and stand

when they stood, which was virtually all of the time. At half-time the seats all but emptied as fans headed for concession stands and restrooms, but Target Four and most of his mates remained in their seats, so Caruso did the same.

A goal by Galatasaray against the run of play livened the crowd just after halftime. Shortly after this, with thirty-five minutes remaining in the match, the Libyan looked down at his mobile phone, then turned and headed for the stairs.

Caruso shot up the stairs ahead of his target, and he rushed to the closest bathroom. He stood outside the exit and waited for his target.

Within thirty seconds Target Four entered the bathroom. Quickly Dominic pulled from his jacket a white paper sign that read *Kapalı*, or 'Closed,' and taped it onto the exit door of the restroom. He pulled an identical sign out and taped it to the entrance. He entered the bathroom and shut the door behind him.

He found Target Four at a bank of urinals, alongside two men. The other pair was together, and soon they washed up and headed back out the door. Dom had stepped up to a urinal four down from his target, and while he stood there he reached into the front of his pants under his jacket and retrieved his stiletto.

Target Four zipped up, stepped back from the urinal, and walked toward the sink. As he passed the man wearing the Galatasaray jersey and scarf, the man suddenly spun toward him. The Libyan felt the impact of something on his stomach, and then found himself being pushed back by the stranger, all the way into one of the stalls on the far side of the bathroom. He tried to reach for the knife that he kept in his pocket, but his attacker's force against him was so relentless he could only stumble back on his heels.

Both men fell into the stall and onto the toilet.

Only then did the young Libyan look down at where he had felt the punch to his gut. The hilt of a knife protruded from his stomach.

Panic and then weakness overtook him.

His attacker shoved him down onto the floor next to the toilet. He leaned forward, into the Libyan's ear. 'This is for my brother, Brian Caruso. Your people killed him in Libya, and tonight, every last one of you is going to pay with your lives.'

Target Four's eyes narrowed in confusion. He spoke English, so he understood what the man said, but he did not know anyone named Brian. He'd killed many men, some in Libya, but they were Libyans, Jews, rebels. Enemies of Colonel Gaddafi.

He'd never killed an American. He had no idea what this Galatasaray fan was talking about.

Target Four died, slumped on the floor by the toilet in the bathroom of the sports stadium, certain that this all must have been some terrible mistake.

Caruso pulled off his blood-covered soccer jersey, revealing a white T-shirt. This he ripped off as well, and under it was another jersey, this one for the rival team. The black and white colors of Beşiktaş would help him blend in with the crowd just as he had in the red and gold of Galatasaray.

He jammed the T-shirt and the Galatasaray jersey into the waistband of his pants, pulled a black cap out of his pocket, and put it on his head.

He stood over the dead man a moment more. In the blind fury of revenge he wanted to spit on the dead body, but he fought the urge, as he knew it would be foolish for him to leave his DNA at the scene. So instead he just turned away, walked out of the bathroom, pulling both *Kapalı* signs off the doors as he headed toward the exit of the stadium.

As he passed through the turnstiles at the exit, leaving the cover of the stadium and walking into the heavy rain, he pulled his mobile from the side pocket of his cargo pants.

‘Target Four eliminated. Dom’s clear. Easy money.’

Jack Ryan, Jr, had been tasked with eliminating the target with the fewest question marks surrounding him. A lone man sitting at his desk in his apartment, or so said all their surveillance.

It was supposed to be the easiest op of the night, and Jack understood this, just like he understood he was getting the mission for the simple fact that he was still the low man on the operational totem pole. He had worked high-risk clandestine ops all over the world, but still fewer than the four other operators in his unit.

Initially he was going to be sent on the op at the Çırağan Palace to go after Target Two. It was decided that dousing a piece of meat with poison would be the easiest hit of the night. But Clark ended up getting that op because a sixty-five-year-old man dining alone would not be a queer occurrence in a five-star restaurant, where a young Westerner, just a couple of years out of college, eating such a meal in such a place all by himself would pique the interest of the restaurant staff to the degree that someone might remember the lone diner after the fact in the unlikely event authorities came with questions when another patron dropped dead a few tables over.

So Jack Junior was tasked with taking down Target Five, a communications specialist for the ex-JSO cell, named Emad Kartal. Certainly not a walk in the park, but, the men of The Campus decided, Jack had it covered.

Kartal spent virtually every evening on his computer, and it

was ultimately this habit that brought about the eventual compromise of the JSO cell. Six weeks earlier he'd sent a message to a friend in Libya, and this message had been picked up and decoded, and Ryan and his fellow analysts back in the States had subsequently intercepted the intelligence.

They'd further compromised both the man and his cell by hacking into his mobile phone's voice mail; from this, they'd listened to correspondence among the cell members that indicated they were working together.

At eleven p.m., Ryan found himself entering the apartment building of his target via a counterfeit keycard created by the technical gurus of his organization. The building was in the Taksim neighborhood and within sight of the five-hundred-year-old Cihangir Mosque. It was a slightly upscale property in an upscale neighborhood, but the flats themselves were tightly packed-together studio units, eight to a floor. Jack's objective was on the third floor, smack in the middle of the five-story building.

Ryan's orders for the hit had been succinct. Make entry on Target Five's flat, confirm the target visually, and then shoot him three times in the chest or head with subsonic rounds fired from his .22-caliber suppressed pistol.

Ryan climbed the wooden staircase in his soft-soled shoes. While doing so, he pulled his black cotton ski mask down over his face. He was the only man operating with a mask tonight, simply because he was the one member of the team not working in public, where a masked man would draw more attention.

He made his way to the third floor, and then entered the brightly lit hallway. His target was three doors down on the left, and as the young American passed the other units he heard people talking, the sounds of televisions and radios and phone conversations. The walls were thin, which was

not good news, but at least the other residents of the floor were making some noise themselves. Jack hoped his silencer and his quieter-than-normal subsonic ammo would work as advertised.

At his target's door he heard the sounds of rap music coming from inside the flat. This *was* good news, as it would aid in masking Ryan's approach.

His target's door was locked, but Ryan had instructions on how to get in. Clark had been in the building four times in the past week during his target reconnaissance before he'd switched ops with the youngest member of the team, and Clark had managed to pick several of the locks of unoccupied flats. The locks were old and not terribly difficult, so he bought a similar model at a local hardware store, then spent an evening tutoring Jack on how to quickly and quietly defeat the device.

Clark's instruction proved effective. With only the faint sounds of the soft scratching of metal on metal, Jack picked the door lock in less than twenty seconds. He drew his pistol and stood back up, then opened the door.

In the studio flat he found what he expected. Across a small kitchen was a living area, and then, at the far wall, a desk facing away from the entrance. At the desk a man sat with his back to Ryan in front of a bank of three large flat-screen computer monitors as well as various peripherals, books, magazines, and other items within reach. Foam containers of half-eaten Chinese takeout sat in a plastic bag. Next to this, Ryan confirmed the presence of a weapon. Jack knew handguns, but he could not immediately identify the semiautomatic pistol just a foot from Emad Kartal's right hand.

Jack stepped into the kitchen and quietly pulled the door closed behind him.

The kitchen was bathed in light, but the living area where his target sat was dark, other than the light coming from the computer monitors. Ryan checked the windows to his left to make sure no one could see in from the apartments across the street. Confident his act would go undetected, he took a few steps forward, closer to his target, so that the gunfire would be centered in the room and no closer to the hallway than necessary.

The rap music thumped throughout the room.

Perhaps Jack made a noise. Maybe he threw a shadow across the shiny surfaces in front of his victim, or cast his reflection on the glass of the monitors. For whatever reason, the JSO man suddenly kicked back his chair and spun around, reaching desperately for his Turkish-made Zigana 9-millimeter semiautomatic. He took the weapon in his fingertips and raised it at the intruder while he was still in the process of obtaining a firing grip on the gun.

Jack identified the target from his surveillance photos and then he fired once, sending a tiny .22-caliber bullet into the man's stomach, right where the back of his head would have been had the man not startled. The Libyan dropped his pistol and lurched back onto his desk, not from the force of the impact but rather from the natural urge to escape the searing pain of the bullet wound.

Jack fired again, hitting the man in the chest this time, and then again, this bullet striking dead-center mass, between the pectoral muscles. The middle of the man's white undershirt bloomed dark red.

The Libyan clutched his chest, grunted as he spun around, and then slumped over on his desk. His legs gave out totally and gravity took over. The ex-JSO operative slid down onto the floor and rolled onto his back.

Quickly Ryan walked up to the man and raised his weapon

for a final shot to the head. But then he thought better of it; he knew the report of the gun, though quiet, was in no way silent, and he also knew this apartment was surrounded by other units that were occupied. Instead of creating another noise that could be heard by a dozen or so potential witnesses, he knelt down, felt for the man's carotid artery, and determined him to be dead.

Ryan stood to leave, but his eyes flicked up to the desktop computer and the three monitors on the desk. The hard drive of the machine would contain a treasure trove of intelligence, Jack knew, and as an analyst, he found nothing on this earth more enticing than an intel dump at his fingertips.

Too bad his orders were to leave everything behind and bolt the instant he neutralized his target.

Jack stood quietly for a few seconds, listening to the ambient noises around him.

No screams, no shouts, no sirens.

He felt confident no one heard the gunfire. Maybe he could find out what the Libyans were working on. They'd picked up only bits and pieces during their surveillance, just enough to know the JSO men were operational, likely doing work for some syndicate based outside of Istanbul. Jack wondered if he could find enough pieces here on Emad Kartal's computer to put the puzzle together.

Shit, thought Jack. Could be drugs, forced prostitution, kidnapping. Ninety seconds' work right now might well save lives.

Jack Ryan quickly dropped to his knees in front of the desk, pulled the keyboard closer, and grabbed the mouse.

Though he was not wearing gloves, he wasn't worried at all about leaving prints. He'd painted New-Skin onto the tips of his fingers; it was a clear, tacky substance that dried clean and clear and was used as a liquid bandage. All the operators were

using it in situations where gloves were either not practical or would look out of place.

Jack pulled up a list of files on the machine and slid the folders over to the monitor closest to him. There was a splatter of blood from Kartal's chest wound diagonally across the monitor, so Jack grabbed a dirty napkin out of the bag of half-eaten Chinese take-out food and wiped the screen clean.

Many of the files were encrypted, and Ryan knew he did not have the time to try and decrypt them here. Instead he looked around the desk and found a plastic baggie with a dozen or so portable flash drives in it. He pulled out one of the drives and slid it into a USB port on the front side of the computer, then copied the files to the drive.

He saw Target Five's e-mail client open, and he began pulling up e-mails. Many were in Arabic, one looked like it might have been in Turkish, and a few were just files without any subject headings or text. One after another he opened these e-mails and clicked on attachments.

His earpiece chirped. Jack tapped it with his fingertip. 'Go for Jack.'

'Ryan?' It was Chavez. 'You're late reporting in. What's your status?'

'Sorry. Just a slight delay. Target Five is down.'

'There a problem?'

'Negative.'

'You clear?'

'Not yet. Getting a sweet intel dump off the subject's PC. Another thirty seconds and I'm done.'

'Negative, Ryan. Leave whatever you find. Get out of there. You've got no support.'

'Roger that.'

Ryan stopped clicking through the e-mails, but a new

message appeared in Kartal's inbox. Instinctively he double-clicked on the attached folder and JPEG photos opened in a grid across one of the monitors in front of him. 'What if we can use this stuff?' he asked, distraction in his voice as he expanded the first photo in the grid.

'Quick and clean, kid.'

But Jack was not listening to Chavez now. He scrolled through the images hurriedly at first, but then he slowed and looked at them carefully.

And then he stopped.

'Ryan? You there?'

'Oh my God,' he said, softly.

'What is it?'

'It's . . . it's *us*. We're burned, Ding.'

'What are you talking about?'

The images on the screen in front of Jack seemed to be taken from security cameras, and the quality of the shots varied, but they were all good enough for Jack to ID his team. John Clark standing in the doorway of a luxurious restaurant. Sam Driscoll driving a scooter up a rainswept street. Dom Caruso walking through a turnstile in a cavernous passage, like that of a sports stadium. Domingo Chavez talking into his mobile phone on a bench inside a ferryboat.

Jack came to the realization quickly that these pictures had been taken this evening. All within the last hour or so.

As Ryan rose from his knees, his legs felt weak from the near panic of knowing his team's actions tonight in Istanbul were under surveillance. Another message popped up at the top of the inbox. Jack all but dove at the mouse to open it.

The e-mail contained one image; he double-clicked to open it.

Jack saw a masked man kneeling at a keyboard, his intense eyes peering at a point just below the camera that captured

the image. Behind the masked man, on the floor, Ryan could just make out the foot and leg of a man lying on his back.

Ryan turned his head away from the monitor, looked back over his left shoulder, and saw Target Five's foot sticking up.

Jack looked on the top of the center monitor and saw the small camera built into the display's bezel.

This image had been taken sometime in the last sixty seconds, while Ryan downloaded data off the hard drive.

He was being watched this very second.

Before Jack could say anything else, Chavez's voice blasted his right ear. 'Fucking split *now*, Jack! That's a *goddamned* order!'

'I'm gone,' he said, his voice a whisper. His eyes locked onto the lens of the tiny webcam, and his thoughts on whoever was behind it, looking at him right now.

He started to reach for the USB drive in the computer, but it occurred to him this machine would retain all the pictures of his team on it, which could easily be seen by whoever came to investigate Target Five's death.

In a flurry of movement Jack dropped to the floor, unplugged the computer, and frantically ripped cables and cords out of the back of the machine. He hefted the entire thirty-pound device and carried it with him out the door of the flat, down the stairs, and out into the street. He ran through the rain, which was prudent as well as good trade-craft. It seemed a fitting thing for a man with a computer clutched in his arms to do in the rain. His car was a block away; he dumped the machine in the backseat and then drove out of Taksim toward the airport.

As he drove he called Chavez back.

'Go for Ding.'

'It's Ryan. I'm clear, but . . . shit. *None* of us are clear. All five of us have been under surveillance tonight.'

‘By *who*?’

‘No idea, but *somebody* is watching us. They sent images of the entire team to Target Five. I took the hard drive with the pictures on it. I’ll be at the airport in twenty minutes, and we can —’

‘Negative. If somebody is playing us you don’t know that that box of wires in your car is not bugged or fitted with a beacon. Don’t bring that shit anywhere near our exfil.’

Jack realized Ding was right. He thought it over for a second.

‘I’ve got a screwdriver on my utility knife. I’m going to pull over in a public place and remove the drive from the tower. I’ll inspect it and leave the rest right there. Dump the car, too, in case anyone planted something while I was in Five’s flat. I’ll find another way to the airport.’

‘Haul ass, kid.’

‘Yeah. Ryan out.’

Jack drove through the rain, passing intersections with mounted traffic cameras high above, and he had the sick feeling that his every move was being watched by an unblinking eye.

Wei Zhen Lin was an economist by trade, he had never served in his nation's military, and consequently he had never even touched a firearm. This fact weighed heavily on him as he looked over the large black pistol on his desk blotter as if it was some rare artifact.

He wondered if he would be able to fire the weapon accurately, though he suspected he would not need much skill to shoot himself in the head.

He'd been given a thirty-second primer on the gun's operation by Fung, his principal close protection agent, the same man who'd loaned him the weapon. Fung had chambered a round and flipped off the safety for his protectee's benefit, and then, in a grave yet still somewhat patronizing tone, the ex-police officer had explained to Wei how to hold the weapon, and how to press the trigger.

Wei had asked his bodyguard where, exactly, he should point the gun for maximum effect, and the response Wei received was not as precise as the former economist would have liked.

Fung explained with a shrug that placing the muzzle against most any part of the skull around the brain should do the trick as long as medical attention was delayed, and then Fung promised that he would see to it that medical attention was, in fact, delayed.

And then, with a curt nod, the bodyguard had left Wei Zhen Lin alone in his office, sitting behind his desk with the pistol in front of him.

Wei snorted. 'A fine bodyguard Fung turned out to be.'

He hefted the pistol in his hands. It was heavier than he expected, but the weight was balanced. Its grip was surprisingly thick, it felt fatter in his hand than he'd imagined a gun would be, but that was not to say he'd spent much time at all thinking about firearms.

And then, after looking the weapon over closely for a moment, reading the serial number and the manufacturing stamp just out of curiosity, Wei Zhen Lin, the president of the People's Republic of China and the general secretary of the Communist Party of China, placed the muzzle of the weapon against his right temple and pressed his fingertip against the trigger.

Wei was an unlikely man to lead his country, and that was, to a large degree, why he decided to kill himself.

At the time of Wei Zhen Lin's birth in 1958, Wei's father, then already sixty years old, was one of thirteen members of the Seventh Politburo of the Communist Party of China. The older Wei had been a journalist by trade, a writer and newspaper editor, but in the 1930s he left his job and joined the Propaganda Department of the CPC. He was with Mao Zedong during the Long March, an eight-thousand-mile circling retreat that solidified Mao as a national hero and the leader of Communist China, and which also secured a comfortable future for many of the men around him.

Men like Wei's father, through the happenstance of history that put them alongside Mao during the revolution, were considered heroes themselves, and they filled leadership positions in Beijing for the next fifty years.

Zhen Lin was born into this privilege, raised in Beijing, and then sent to an exclusive boarding school in Switzerland. At the Collège Alpin International Beau Soleil near Lake

Geneva he developed friendships with other children of the party, sons of party officials and marshals and generals, and by the time he returned to Beijing University to study economics, it was all but preordained that he and many of his Chinese friends from boarding school would go into government service in one form or another.

Wei was a member of a group that became known as the Princelings. They were the rising stars in politics, the military, or in business in China who were the sons or daughters of former top party officials, most of them high-ranking Maoists who had fought in the revolution. In a society that denied the existence of an upper class, the Princelings were unquestionably the elite, and they alone were in possession of the money, power, *and* political connections that gave them the authority to rule the next generation.

After he graduated from college Wei became a municipal official in Chongqing, rising to the role of assistant deputy mayor. He left public service a few years later to go to Nanjing University Business School for his master's in economics and a doctorate in administration, and then he spent the latter half of the 1980s and all of the 1990s in the international finance sector in Shanghai, one of China's new Special Economic Zones. The SEZs were areas established by the Communist central government where many national laws were suspended to allow more free-market practices in order to encourage foreign investment. This experiment with pockets of quasi-capitalism had been an unmitigated success, and Wei's education in economics, and to a greater extent his business and party connections, put him at the center of China's financial growth and positioned him for even greater things to come.

He was elected mayor of Shanghai, China's largest city, at the turn of the millennium. Here he pressed for further

investment from abroad and further expansion of free-market principles.

Wei was handsome and charismatic, and popular with Western business interests, and his star rose at home and around the world as the face of the New China. But he was also a proponent of strict social order. He supported only economic freedom; the residents of his city saw no liberalization whatsoever in their personal freedoms.

With China's humiliating loss to Russia and the USA in the war over Siberia's gold mines and oil fields, the majority of the government in Beijing was sacked, and Wei, the young, vibrant symbol of the New China, was called to national service. He became the Shanghai party chief of the Communist Party and a member of the Sixteenth Politburo.

For the next few years Wei split his time between Beijing and Shanghai. He was a rarity in government, a pro-business communist who worked to expand the SEZs and other free-market areas across China while, at the same time, supporting hard-line stances in the Politburo against liberal political thought and individual liberty.

He was a child of Mao and the party, *and* he was a student of international finance. Economic liberalism was a means to an end for Wei, a way to bring foreign money into the country to *strengthen* the Communist Party, not a way to subvert it.

After China's brief war with Russia and the United States, it was thought by many that China's economic hardships would destroy the country. Famine, a complete breakdown of national and provincial infrastructure, and ultimately anarchy were on the horizon. Only through the work of Wei and others like him was China able to stave off a collapse. Wei pressed for the expansion of the Special Economic Zones and the establishment of dozens of smaller free-market and free-trade areas.

A desperate Politburo conceded, Wei's plan was implemented in its entirety, and China's quasi-capitalism grew by leaps and bounds.

The gambit paid off. Wei, the chief architect of the financial reform plan, was rewarded for his work. His successes, along with his Princeling status and political pedigree, made him a natural to take over the role of China's minister of commerce in the Seventeenth Politburo. As he stepped into the role of director of national financial policy, China's economy was blessed with double-digit growth rates that seemed like they would last forever.

But then the bubble burst.

The world economy entered a protracted downturn shortly after Wei became commerce minister. Both foreign investment into China and exports out of China were hit hard. These two components of the economy, both of which Wei deserved credit for revolutionizing, were the major driving factors of the nation's double-digit growth rate. They were wellsprings of money that all but dried up when the world stopped buying.

A further expansion of SEZs orchestrated by Wei failed to stop the downward spiral toward catastrophe. Chinese purchases of real estate and currency futures around the world turned into money pits as the European financial crisis and the American real estate downturn broke.

Wei knew how the winds blew in Beijing. His earlier success in free-market reforms to save his country would now be used against him. His political enemies would hold up his economic model as a failure and claim that increasing China's business relationships with the rest of the world had only exposed China to the infectious disease of capitalism.

So Minister Wei hid the truth of China's failing economic model by shifting his focus to gargantuan state projects, and

by encouraging loans to regional governments to build or upgrade roads and buildings and ports and telecommunication infrastructure. These were the types of investments seen in the old communist economic model, a central government policy to foster economic expansion via massive central planning schemes.

This looked good on paper, and Wei presented growth rates in meetings for three consecutive years that, while not as good as in those first years of expansion after the war, still hovered at a respectable eight or nine percent. He dazzled the Politburo and the lesser houses of government in China, as well as the world's press, with facts and figures that painted the picture that he wanted them to see.

But it was smoke and mirrors, Wei knew, because the borrowing would never be repaid. Demand for Chinese exports had weakened to a relative trickle, regional government debt had reached seventy percent of GDP, twenty-five percent of all loans were nonperforming in Chinese banks, and still Wei and his ministry encouraged more borrowing, more spending, more building.

It was a house of cards.

And coinciding with Wei's desperate attempt to hide his nation's economic problems, a new troubling phenomenon swept across his country like a typhoon.

It was called the Tuidang movement.

After the central government's woeful response to a calamitous earthquake, protests filled the streets all over the nation. The government pushed back against the protesters, certainly not as forcefully as they could have, but with each arrest or discharge of tear gas the situation grew more unstable.

As the leadership of the crowds was dragged off and imprisoned, the demonstrations moved off the streets for a time, and the Ministry of Public Security felt they had the

situation well in control. But the protests moved online in the new social networking and chat board sites available in China and abroad, via well-known workarounds to get past Chinese government Internet filters.

Here, on hundreds of millions of computers and smart phones, the spontaneous protests turned into a well-organized and powerful movement. The CPC was slow to react, while the Ministry of Public Security had batons and pepper spray and paddy wagons but no effective weapons with which to counterpunch the electronic 1's and 0's of a viral uprising in cyberspace. The online manifestation of the protests morphed into a revolt over the span of many months, culminating in Tuidang.

Tuidang, or 'renounce the party,' was a movement whereby first hundreds, then thousands, and then millions of Chinese citizens publicly left the Communist Party of China. They could do it online, anonymously, or they could make a public announcement outside the country.

In four years the Tuidang movement boasted more than two hundred million renunciations.

It was not the raw number of people who had left the party in the past four years that had the party concerned. In truth, it was difficult to determine the true number of renunciations, because many of the names on the list distributed by the leadership of the Tuidang movement contained pseudonyms and common names that could not be independently verified. Two hundred million dissenters may have been, in truth, only fifty million dissenters. But it was the negative publicity created for the party by those who publicly renounced their membership abroad, and the attention that the success of the uprising was getting in the rest of the world, that scared the Politburo.

Commerce Minister Wei watched the growing Tuidang

movement and the anger, confusion, and fear that it created within the Politburo, and he considered the hidden economic problems of his nation. He knew that now was not the time to reveal the looming crisis. Any major austerity reforms would have to wait.

Now was no time to show the central government's weakness in dealing with *anything*. It would only inflame the masses and bolster the revolt.

At the Eighteenth Party Congress something incredible happened that was completely unforeseen by Wei Zhen Lin. He was named president of China and general secretary of the Communist Party, making him the ruler of his house of cards.

The election had been, in Chinese Politburo terms, a raucous affair. The two standing members deemed the most likely to take over had both fallen from grace within weeks of the congress, one for a corruption scandal in his home city of Tianjin, and the other due to an arrest of a subordinate and a charge of espionage. Of the remaining Standing Committee members eligible in the election, all but one were members of alliances with one or the other of the disgraced men.

Wei was the odd man out. He was considered an outsider still, unaligned with either faction, so at the relatively tender age of fifty-four he was elected as the compromise candidate.

The three highest offices in China are the president, the general secretary of the Communist Party of China, and the chairmanship of the Central Military Commission, the chief of the military. At times the same person holds all three roles simultaneously, but in Wei's case, the CMC chairmanship went to another man, Su Ke Qiang, a four-star general in the People's Liberation Army. Su, the son of one of Mao's most trusted marshals, had been a childhood friend of Wei's,

together in Beijing and together in Switzerland. Their simultaneous ascendance to the highest levels of power in the nation proved that the Princelings' time to rule had come.

But from the beginning Wei knew the co-leadership would not mean partnership. Su had been a vocal proponent of military expansionism; he'd given hawkish speeches for domestic consumption about the might of the People's Liberation Army and China's destiny as the regional leader and a world power. He and his general staff had been expanding the military over the past decade, thanks to twenty percent annual increases in spending, and Wei knew that Su was not the type of general to build his army only so that they would impress on the parade ground.

Wei knew Su wanted war, and as far as Wei was concerned, a war was the last thing China needed.

Three months after taking two of the three reins of power, at a Standing Committee meeting at Zhongnanhai, the walled government compound in Beijing west of the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square, Wei made a tactical decision that would result in his placing a pistol against his temple just a month later. He saw it as inevitable that the truth about the nation's finances would come out, at the very least to those on the Standing Committee. Already rumors of problems were filtering out of the Ministry of Commerce and up from the provinces. So Wei decided to head off the rumors by informing the committee about the coming crisis in 'his' economy. To a room of expressionless faces, he announced that he would propose a curtailing of regional borrowing and a number of other austerity measures. This, he explained, would strengthen the nation's economy over time, but it would also have the unfortunate effect of a short-term downturn of the economy.

‘How short-term?’ he was asked by the party secretary of the State Council.

Wei lied. ‘Two to three years.’ His number crunchers told him his austerity reforms would need to be in place for closer to five years in order to have the desired effect.

‘How much will the growth rate drop?’ This was asked by the secretary of the Central Commission of Discipline Inspection.

Wei hesitated briefly, and then spoke in a calm but pleasant voice. ‘If our plan is enacted, growth will necessarily contract by, we estimate, ten basis points during the first year of implementation.’

There were gasps throughout the room.

The secretary said, ‘Growth is currently at eight percent. You are telling us we will experience *contraction*?’

‘Yes.’

The chairman of the Central Guidance Commission for Building Spiritual Civilization shouted to the room, ‘We have had thirty-five years of growth! Even the year after the war, we did not contract!’

Wei shook his head and replied in a calm manner, striking a stark contrast with most of the rest of the men in the room, who had grown animated. ‘We were deceived. I have looked at the ledgers for those years. Growth came, mostly as a result of foreign trade expansion that I initiated, but it did not happen in the first year after the war.’

Wei saw, rather quickly, that most in the room did not believe him. As far as he was concerned, he was merely a messenger informing others of this crisis, he was not responsible for it, but the other Standing Committee members began leveling accusations. Wei responded forcefully, demanding that they listen to his plan to right the economy, but instead the others spoke of the growing dissent in the

streets, and fretted among themselves about how the new problems would affect their standing in the Politburo at large.

The meeting only deteriorated from there. Wei went on the defensive, and by the end of the afternoon he had retreated to his quarters in the compound of Zhongnanhai, knowing that he had overestimated the ability of his fellow Standing Committee members to understand the grave nature of the threat. The men were not listening to his plan; there *would be* no more discussion of his plan.

He had become secretary and president because he had not joined an alliance, but in those hours of discussions about the grim future of the Chinese economy, he realized he could have done with some friends on the Standing Committee.

As an experienced politician with a strong sense of real-politik, he knew his chances for saving his own skin in the current political climate were small unless he announced that the growth and prosperity proclaimed by thirty-five years of previous leadership would continue under his leadership. And as a brilliant economist with complete access to the ultra-secret financial ledgers of his country, he knew that prosperity in China was about to grind to a halt, and a reversal of fortune was the only future.

And it was not just the economy. A totalitarian regime could – theoretically, at least – paper over many fiscal problems. To one degree or another this is what he had been doing for years, using massive public-sector projects to stimulate the economy and give an unrealistic impression of its viability.

But Wei knew his nation was sitting on a powder keg of dissent that was growing by the day.

Three weeks after the disastrous meeting in Zhongnanhai compound, Wei realized his hold on power was under threat.

While on a diplomatic trip to Hungary, one of the Standing Committee members, the director of the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party, ordered all the state-run media outlets in the nation, as well as CPC-controlled news services abroad, to begin airing reports critical of Wei's economic leadership. This was unheard of, and Wei was furious. He raced back to Beijing and demanded a meeting with the propaganda director but was told the man was in Singapore until the end of the week. Wei then convened an emergency meeting at Zhongnanhai for the entire twenty-five-member Politburo, but only sixteen members appeared as requested.

Within days, charges of corruption appeared in the media, claims that Wei had abused his power for personal gain while mayor of Shanghai. The charges were corroborated with signed statements by dozens of Wei's former aides and business associates in China and abroad.

Wei was not corrupt. As the mayor of Shanghai he'd fought corruption wherever he found it, in local business, in the police force, in the party apparatus. In this endeavor he made enemies, and these enemies were only too willing to give false witness against him, especially in cases where the high-ranking coup organizers made offers of political access in return for their statements.

An arrest warrant was issued for the Princeling leader by the Ministry of Public Security, China's equivalent of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Wei knew exactly what was going on. This was an attempted coup.

The coup came to a head on the morning of the sixth day of the crisis, when the vice president stepped in front of cameras in Zhongnanhai and announced to a stunned international media that until the unfortunate affair involving President Wei was resolved, he would be taking charge of

the government. The vice president then announced that the president was, officially, a fugitive from justice.

At the time Wei himself was only four hundred meters away in his living quarters at Zhongnanhai. A few loyalists had rallied at his side, but it seemed as though the tide had turned against him. He was informed by the office of the vice president that he had until ten a.m. the next morning to allow representatives from the Ministry of Public Security into his compound to effect his arrest. If he did not go quietly, he would be taken by force.

Late in the evening on the sixth day Wei finally went on the offensive. He identified those in his party who were conspiring against him, and he convened a secret meeting with the rest of the Politburo Standing Committee. He stressed to the five men who were not conspirators that he considered himself a 'first among equals' and, should he remain president and general secretary, he would rule with an eye toward collective leadership. In short, he promised that each and every one of them would have more power than they would have if they put someone else in his place.

His reception from the Standing Committee was cold. It was as if they were looking at a doomed man, and they showed little interest in aligning themselves with him. The second-most-powerful man in China, the chairman of the Central Military Commission, Su Ke Qiang, did not say a single word during the meeting.

Throughout the night Wei had no idea if he would be overthrown in the morning – arrested and imprisoned, forced to sign a false confession, and executed. In the predawn hours his future looked even darker. Three of the five PSC members who had yet to commit to the coup sent word that, though they would not encourage his deposal, they did not have the political clout to help him.

At five a.m. Wei met with his staff and told them he would step down for the good of the nation. The Ministry of Public Security was notified that Wei would surrender, and an arrest team was dispatched to Zhongnanhai from the MPS building on East Chang'an Avenue, on the other side of Tiananmen Square.

Wei told them he would go quietly.

But Wei had decided that he would *not* go quietly.

He would not go at all.

The fifty-four-year-old Princeling had no desire to play the role of a prop in a political theater, used by his enemies as the scapegoat for the country's downfall.

They could have him in death, they could do with his legacy what they wished, but he would not be around to watch it.

As the police contingent from the Ministry of Public Security drove toward the government compound, Wei spoke to the director of his personal security, and Fung agreed to supply him with a pistol and a tutorial on its use.

Wei held the big black QSZ-92 pistol to his head; his hand trembled slightly, but he found himself to be rather composed, considering the situation. As he closed his eyes and began pressing the trigger harder, he felt his tremors increase; the quivering grew in his body, beginning in his feet and traveling upward.

Wei worried he would shake the muzzle off target and miss his brain, so he pressed the gun harder into his temple.

A shout came from the hallway outside his office. It was Fung's voice, excited.

Curious, Wei opened his eyes.

The office door flew open now, Fung ran in, and Wei's body shook to the point he worried Fung would see his weakness.

He lowered the gun quickly.

‘What is it?’ Wei demanded.

Fung’s eyes were wide; he wore an incongruous smile on his face. He said, ‘General Secretary! Tanks! Tanks in the street!’

Wei lowered the gun carefully. *What did this mean?* ‘It’s just MPS. MPS has armored vehicles,’ he responded.

‘No, sir! Not armored personnel carriers. *Tanks!* Long lines of tanks coming from the direction of ‘Tiananmen Square!’

‘Tanks? *Whose* tanks?’

‘Su! It must be General . . . excuse me, I mean Chairman Su! He is sending heavy armor to protect you. The MPS won’t dare arrest you in defiance of the PLA. How can they?’

Wei could not believe this turn of events. Su Ke Qiang, the Princeling four-star PLA general and the chairman of the Central Military Commission, and one of the men he had made a direct appeal to the evening before, had come to his aid at the last possible moment.

The president of China and the general secretary of the CPC slid the pistol across the desk to his principal protection agent. ‘Major Fung . . . It appears I will not be needing this today. Take it from me before I hurt myself.’

Fung took the pistol, engaged the safety, and slid it into the holster on his hip. ‘I am very relieved, Mr President.’

Wei did not think that Fung really cared whether he lived or died, but in this heady moment the president stood and shook his bodyguard’s hand anyway.

Any allies, even conditional allies, were worth having on a day like this.

Wei looked out the window of his office now, across the compound and to a point in the distance beyond the walls of Zhongnanhai. Tanks filled the streets, armed People’s

Liberation Army troops walked in neat rows alongside the armor, their rifles in the crooks of their arms.

As the rumbling of the approaching tanks shook the floor and rattled books, fixtures, and furniture in the office, Wei smiled, but his smile soon wavered.

‘Su?’ he said to himself in bewilderment. ‘Of all people to save me . . . why Su?’

But he knew the answer. Though Wei was happy and thankful for the intervention of the military, he realized, even in those first moments, that his survival made him weaker, not stronger. There would be a quid pro quo.

For the rest of his rule, Wei Zhen Lin knew, he would be beholden to Su and his generals, and he knew exactly what they wanted from him.

John Clark stood at his kitchen sink; he looked out the window and watched mist form in his back pasture as a gray afternoon turned into a grayer evening. He was alone, for a few minutes more anyway, and he decided he could put off no longer what he'd been dreading all day.

Clark and his wife, Sandy, lived in this farmhouse on fifty acres of rolling fields and forestland in Frederick County, Maryland, close to the Pennsylvania state line. Farm life was still new to John; just a few years ago the thought of himself as a country gentleman sipping iced tea on his back porch would have made him either chuckle or cringe.

But he loved his new place, Sandy loved it even more, and John Patrick, his grandson, absolutely adored his visits out to the country to see Grandpa and Grandma.

Clark wasn't one for lengthy reflection; he preferred to live in the moment. But as he surveyed his property and thought about the task at hand, he did have to admit that he had managed to put together a good personal life for himself.

But now it was time to see if his professional life was over.

It was time to remove his bandages and test the function of his wounded hand.

Again.

Eight months earlier his hand had been broken – no, his hand had been *shattered* – by unskilled but energetic torturers in a seedy warehouse in the Mitino district of northwest Moscow. He'd suffered nine fractures to bones in his fingers, palm,

and wrist, and had spent much of his time since the injury either preparing for or recovering from three surgeries.

He was two weeks post his fourth time under the knife, and today was the first day his surgeon would allow him to test the strength and mobility of the appendage.

A quick look at the clock on the wall told him that Sandy and Patsy would be home in a few minutes. His wife and his daughter had driven together to Westminster for groceries. They told him to wait on the function test of his hand until they returned, so they could be present. They claimed they wanted to be there to celebrate his recovery with dinner and wine, but John knew the real reason: They did not want him going through this alone. They were worried about a poor outcome, and they wanted to be close for moral support if he was not able to move his fingers any better than he could before surgery.

He agreed to their request at the time, but now he realized he needed to do this by himself. He was too anxious to wait, he was too proud to strain and struggle in front of his wife and daughter, but more than this, he knew he would need to push himself much further than his daughter, the doctor, or his wife, the nurse, would allow.

They were worried he might hurt himself, but John wasn't worried about pain. He'd learned to process pain better than almost anyone in the world. No, John worried he might fail. He'd do whatever he physically could to avoid it, and he had a feeling it would not be pretty to watch. He'd test his strength and mobility by pushing himself as far as humanly possible.

Standing at the kitchen counter, he unwrapped his bandages and removed the small metal splints from between his fingers. Turning away from the window, he left the dressings on the counter and moved to the living room. There he sat on his leather chair and raised his hand to examine it. The

surgical scars, both new and old, were small and not particularly dramatic, but he knew they belied the incredible damage done to his hand. His orthopedic surgeon at Johns Hopkins was regarded as one of the best in the world, and he had performed the surgery through tiny incisions, using laparoscopic cameras and fluoroscopic images to help him find his way to the damaged bones and scar tissue.

John knew that even though his hand did not look too bad, his chances for a complete recovery were less than fifty percent.

Perhaps if the blunt trauma had been just a little higher on the hand, then the joints of the fingers would have less scar tissue, the doctors had said. Perhaps if he had been a little younger, his ability to heal would be enough to ensure a complete recovery, they hinted without saying.

John Clark knew there wasn't a damn thing he could do about either issue.

He pushed the poor prognosis out of his mind and steeled himself for success.

He picked a racquetball off the coffee table in front of him and he looked it over – his eyes fixed with resolve.

'Here we go.'

Clark slowly began closing his fingers around the ball.

Almost immediately he realized he was still unable to completely mobilize his index finger.

His trigger finger.

Shit.

Both the proximal and middle phalanx bones had been virtually crushed by the torturer's hammer, and the interphalangeal joint, already slightly arthritic from a lifetime of trigger pulling, was now severely damaged.

As his other fingertips pressed into the little blue ball, his trigger finger merely twitched.

He pushed this setback, and the sharp burning sensation that came with it, out of his mind and squeezed harder.

It hurt more. He grunted with the pain but kept trying to crush the little racquetball in his fist.

His thumb seemed as good as new, his last two fingers compressed the ball nicely, and his middle finger formed around it, its mobility restored by the surgery, though it did not seem to retain much strength.

He squeezed tighter on the ball, and a sharp ache in the back of his hand grew. Clark winced, but squeezed harder. The index finger had stopped twitching and relaxed, the frail muscles exhausted, and it went almost ramrod straight.

His hand hurt from the wrist all the way to his fingertips while he squeezed now.

He could live with the pain, and he could live with a slight lack of grip strength.

But the trigger finger was all but nonfunctional.

John relaxed his hand and the pain lessened. Sweat had formed on his forehead and around his collar.

The ball dropped to the hardwood floor and bounced across the room.

Yes, this was just his first test after the surgery, but he knew. He knew without a doubt that his hand would never be the same.

John's right hand was damaged now, but he knew he could shoot a gun left-handed. Every Navy SEAL, and every CIA Special Activities Division paramilitary operations officer, spends more time on weak-hand shooting than most law enforcement officers do on strong-hand shooting, and John had spent nearly forty years as either a SEAL or a CIA operator. Weak-hand fire was necessary training for every shooter, because every shooter ran a real risk of getting wounded on or near his gun hand.

There is a widely held theory behind this phenomenon. When faced with the imminent danger of a gunfight, a potential victim tends to focus acutely on that which is threatening him. Not just the threat of the attacker, but the threat of the weapon itself. The little fire-breathing, lead-spitting tool that is trying to reach out and rip the intended victim apart. For this reason it is disproportionately common for people involved in gunfights to take damage to their dominant firing hand or arm. The other gunfighter is looking at and focusing on the gun as he fires back, so it only stands to reason that much of his fire is directed right at the gun itself.

Weak-hand shooting is, therefore, an absolutely crucial skill to develop by anyone who might find him- or herself up against an armed opponent.

Clark knew he could fire a gun accurately again with his left hand if he stepped up his practice.

But it wasn't just the hand. It was the rest of him, too.

'You're old, John,' he said to himself as he stood up and walked out to the back porch. He looked out on the pasture again, watched the mist roll across the dewy grass, saw a red fox dart out of the trees and race across open ground. Pooled rainwater splashed into the air behind it as it skittered back into the forest.

Yeab, Clark told himself. He *was* old for operational work.

But not *that* old. John was roughly the same age as both Bruce Springsteen and Sylvester Stallone, and they were still going strong in careers that required no small amount of physicality, even if there was no danger involved. And he'd recently read an article in the paper about a sixty-year-old Marine staff sergeant fighting in Afghanistan, walking daily mountain patrols in enemy territory with men young enough to be his grandchildren.

John thought he'd love to drink a beer with that guy, two

tough sons of bitches sharing stories about the old days.

Age is just a number, John had always said.

But the body? The body was real, and as the number of years ticked ever higher, the mileage put on a man in John Clark's profession wore the body down as certainly as a swiftly moving stream cuts a depression through a valley. Springsteen and Stallone and the other geezers out there jumping around for a living had jobs that did not require one-fiftieth the hardship that Clark had endured, and no amount of rationalizing could change that.

Clark heard his wife's SUV pull up in the gravel drive. He sat down on a rocker on the back porch and waited for them to come in.

A man in his mid-sixties sitting on the porch of a quiet farmhouse created a vision of peace and tranquility. But the image was deceptive. Inside the mind of John Clark, his prevailing thought was that he would like to get his good hand around the throat of that son of a bitch Valentin Kovalenko, the opportunistic Russian snake who did this to him, and then he'd like to test the strength and mobility of that hand on that bastard's windpipe.

But that would never happen.

'John?' Sandy called from the kitchen.

The girls came in through the kitchen door behind him. John wiped the last vestiges of his sweat from his forehead, and he called, 'I'm out here.'

A moment later Patsy and Sandy sat outside on the porch with him, waiting for him to speak. They'd each spent a minute chastising him for not waiting on their return. But any frustration melted away quickly when they read his mood. He was somber. Mother and daughter leaned forward anxiously, worried looks on both their faces.

'It moves. It grips . . . a bit. Maybe after some PT it will improve a little more.'

Patsy said, 'But?'

Clark shook his head. 'Not the outcome we'd hoped for.'

Sandy moved to him, sat in his lap, and hugged him tightly.

'It's okay,' he said, comforting her. 'Could have been a hell of a lot worse.' Clark thought for a moment. His torturers had been about a second away from driving a scalpel through his eye. He had not told Sandy or Patsy about this, of course, but it did pop into his head every now and then when he was dealing with his battered hand. He had a damn lot to be thankful for, and he knew it.

He continued. 'I'm going to concentrate on PT for a while. The docs have done their part to fix me up; time for me to do mine.'

Sandy released the hug, sat up, and looked John in the eye.

'What are you saying?'

'I'm saying it's time for me to pack it in. I'll talk to Ding first, but I'm going to go in and see Gerry on Monday.' He hesitated a long time before saying, 'I'm done.'

'Done?'

'I'm going to retire. Really retire.'

Though she clearly tried to hide it, John saw a relief in Sandy's face that he had not seen in years. In decades. It was virtually the same as joy.

She had never complained about his work. She'd spent decades enduring his late-night dashes out of the house with no information as to where he was headed, his spending weeks away at a time, sometimes coming home bloodied and bruised and, more distressing to her, silent for days before he lightened up, his mind left the mission that he'd just returned from, and he could once again smile and relax and sleep through the night.

Their years in the UK with NATO's counterterror unit Rainbow had been some of the best times of her life. His hours were almost normal and their time together had been well spent. But still, even during their time in the UK, she knew that the fate of dozens of young men rested on his shoulders, and she knew this weighed heavily on him.

With their return to the States and his employment at Hendley Associates, once again Sandy saw the stress and strain on his body and mind. He was an operator in the field again – she knew this without a doubt, though he rarely went into details about his activities away from home.

The previous year her husband had been dubbed an international outlaw by the American press, he'd gone on the run, and she'd worried day and night while he was away. The matter had been put to bed in the press quickly and cleanly with a public apology by the outgoing U.S. President and John's life had been given back to him, but when he'd come back from wherever he'd been off to, it was not to come home. It was, instead, to go into the hospital. He'd been beaten badly, to within an inch of his life, one of his surgeons had told Sandy quietly in a waiting room while John was under anesthesia, and though he'd come out of his ordeal with a damaged right hand, she thanked God every day that he'd come out of it at all.

John talked it over with the two women in his life for a few minutes more, but any doubts he had about his decision were put to rest the instant he saw the relief in Sandy's eyes.

Sandy deserved this. Patsy deserved this, too. And his grandchild deserved a grandfather who would be around for a while. Long enough to cheer him on at baseball games, long enough to stand proudly at his graduation, long enough, just maybe, to watch him walk down the aisle.

John knew that, considering the line of work he'd been in since Vietnam, he'd lived most of his life on borrowed time.

That was over now. He was out.

Clark was surprised to find himself at peace with his decision to retire, though he imagined he *would* harbor one regret – that he never got a chance to wrap his hand around the throat of Valentin Kovalenko.

Oh, well, he thought as he gave a gentle hug to his daughter and headed into the kitchen to help with dinner. Wherever Kovalenko was right now, John was near certain he wasn't exactly enjoying himself.

Matrosskaya Tishina is a street in northern Moscow, but it also serves as shorthand for a facility with a much longer name. Federal Budget Institution IZ-77/1 of the Office of the Federal Penitentiary Service of Russia in the City of Moscow does not roll so trippingly off the tongue, so those referring to the massive detention facility on Matrosskaya Tishina normally just refer to the street itself.

It is one of Russia's largest and oldest pretrial lockups, built in the eighteenth century, and it shows its age. Though the seven-story façade that faces the street is well maintained and almost regal in appearance, the cells inside are small and decrepit, the beds and bedding are infested with lice, and the plumbing is unable to keep up with the building's current population, which is more than three times the capacity for which it was built.

Just before four in the morning, a narrow gurney with squeaky wheels rolled down a green-and-white painted hallway inside the old main building of Matrosskaya Tishina. Four guards pushed and pulled it along while the prisoner on the bed fought against his bindings.

His shouts echoed off the poured concrete floors and the cinder-block walls, a sound just louder and no less shrill than the squeaky wheels.

'Answer me, damn you! What's going on? I am not ill! Who ordered me transported?'

The guards did not answer; obeying the profane commands of prisoners in their charge was precisely the opposite

of their job description. They just kept rolling the gurney down the hall. They stopped at a partition of iron grating and waited for the gate in the center to be unlocked. With a loud click the gate opened, and they pushed their prisoner through and rolled him on.

The man on the gurney had not told the truth. He *was* ill. Everyone who had spent any time behind bars in this hell-hole was ill, and this man suffered from bronchitis as well as ringworm.

Though his physical condition would be appalling to a citizen on the outside, the prisoner was no worse than most of his cellmates, and he was correct in his fear that he had not been hauled from his cell in the middle of the night in order to receive treatment for maladies shared by virtually every other prisoner in the building.

He yelled again at the four men, and again they took no notice of him.

After more than eight months here at Matrosskaya Tishina, thirty-six-year-old Valentin Kovalenko still had not gotten used to being ignored. As a former assistant *rezident* of Russia's foreign intelligence arm, the Sluzhba Vneshney Razvedki, he had grown accustomed to having his questions answered and his orders obeyed. He'd been a rising star in the SVR from his early twenties until his mid-thirties, achieving the plum assignment of number-two man in their London Station. Then, some months ago, a personal and professional gamble had failed, and he'd gone from meteoric rise to free-fall drop.

Since his arrest by internal security officers in a warehouse in Moscow's Mitino district in January he'd been held at the pretrial facility under an executive order of the office of the president, and he'd been told by those few prison officials that he'd met that his case would be delayed and delayed

again, and he should mentally prepare himself to spend years in his cell. Then, if he was lucky, all would be forgotten and he'd be sent home. On the other hand, they warned, he could be shipped east and ordered to serve time in Russia's gulag system.

This, Kovalenko knew, would be a virtual death sentence.

For now he spent his days fighting for a corner of a cell shared by one hundred prisoners and his nights sleeping in shifts on a bug-ridden cot. Disease and disputes and despair encompassed every hour of every day.

From other inmates he learned that the average wait to see a judge for someone whose case had not been sped up by bribes or political corruption was between two and four years. Valentin Kovalenko knew he did not have two to four years. When the other inmates in his cell learned who he was, a former high-ranking member of Russian intelligence, he would likely be beaten to death within two to four minutes.

Most residents of Matrosskaya Tishina were no great fans of the government.

This threat of exposure and then reprisal had been used effectively by Kovalenko's enemies outside the prison, mostly at the Federal'naya Sluzhba Besopasnosti, Russian internal security, because it ensured that their inconvenient prisoner would keep his mouth shut while on the inside.

In the first month or two of incarceration Kovalenko had had sporadic contact with his frantic and confused wife, and in their brief phone conversations he'd only assured her that everything would be straightened out and that she had nothing to worry about.

But his wife stopped coming to the prison, and then she stopped calling. And then, he had been told by the assistant warden, his wife had filed for dissolution of the marriage and full custody of his children.

But this was not the worst news. Rumors began filtering down to Kovalenko that no one was working on his case. It was frustrating no one was on his defense, but the fact no one was working on his prosecution was even more ominous. He was just sitting here, in a cage, rotting away.

He worried he would be dead of disease inside of six months.

As the gurney turned to the right and rolled under a recessed light in the ceiling, Kovalenko looked at the guards. He did not recognize any of them, but to him they appeared to be just as robotic as the rest of the staff here. He knew he would get no useful information from them, but out of growing panic he shouted again as they took him through another gate that led out of his cell block and into an administrative portion of the facility.

In another moment he was wheeled into the prison infirmary.

Valentin Kovalenko knew what was happening. He'd imagined this. He expected this. He could have penned the script for this event himself. The late-night rousing. The leather bindings on the gurney with the squeaky wheels. The silent guards and the trip into the bowels of the prison.

He was about to be executed. In secret and in defiance of the law, his enemies were going to remove him from their list of worries.

The massive infirmary was empty of doctors, nurses, or any prison employees except for the men who rolled his gurney, and this reconfirmed Kovalenko's fears. He'd been taken here once before, when a guard's rubber club had opened a wound on his face that needed stitches, and even though that had happened late at night, the medical facility had been well staffed.

Tonight, however, it appeared as though someone had cleared out any witnesses.

Valentin fought against his wrist and ankle straps in vain.

The four guards rolled him into an exam room that appeared to be empty, and then they backed out of the doorway, shutting the door behind them and leaving him in the dark, bound and helpless. Kovalenko shouted as they left, but when the door closed, he looked around in the low light. To his right was a rolling curtain partition, and behind this he could hear movement.

He was *not* alone.

Kovalenko asked, 'Who's there?'

'Who are *you*? What is this place?' replied a gruff male voice. The man sounded like he was just on the other side of the partition, also on a gurney, perhaps.

'Look around, fool! This is the infirmary. I asked who you are?'

Before the man behind the curtain answered, the door opened again, and two men entered. Both wore lab coats, and both were older than Kovalenko. He put them in their fifties. Valentin had never seen them before but assumed them to be doctors.

Both men looked nervous.

Neither doctor regarded Kovalenko on his gurney by the door as they passed by. They then removed the curtain partition, rolling it out of the way up against the wall, giving Kovalenko a view of the rest of the space. In the faint light he saw another man on a gurney; the second prisoner's body below the shoulders was covered by a sheet, but he was clearly bound by his hands and feet much the same as was Kovalenko.

The other prisoner looked at the doctors now. 'What is this? Who are you?'

Valentin wondered what was wrong with the man. *Who are*

you? Was it not clear where he was and who they were? The better question would have been *'What the hell is going on?'*

'What the hell is going on?' Kovalenko shouted at the two older men, but they ignored him and walked now to the foot of the other prisoner's bed.

One of the doctors had a black canvas bag on his shoulder, and he reached into the bag and took out a syringe. With a quiver in his hands and a tightness in his jaw that Valentin could register even in the dim, the man popped the cap off the syringe, and then he lifted the sheet off the bare feet of the other prisoner.

'What the fuck are you doing? Don't touch me with —'

The doctor took hold of the man's big toe while Kovalenko watched in horror and utter confusion. Valentin quickly looked up at the prisoner and saw similar bewilderment on the man's face.

It took the doctor with the syringe a moment to separate the skin from the nail at the tip of the man's toe, but as soon as he accomplished this he jabbed the needle deep under the nail and pressed the plunger.

The man screamed in terror and pain as Kovalenko looked on.

'What is that?' Valentin demanded. 'What are you doing to this man?'

The needle came out of the toe, and the doctor tossed the syringe into the bag. He wiped the site with an alcohol prep pad, and then he and his colleague just stood at the foot of both gurneys, their eyes fixed on the man to Valentin's right.

Kovalenko realized the other man had fallen silent. He looked over at his face again and saw confusion, but before Valentin's eyes the face contorted in sudden and sharp pain.

Through clenched teeth the prisoner growled, 'What did you do to me?'

The two doctors just stood there, watching, tension in their own faces.

After a moment more the man on the gurney began thrashing against his bindings; his hips rose high in the air and his head jerked from side to side.

Valentin Kovalenko shouted for help at the top of his lungs.

Foam and spit came out of the agonized man's mouth, followed by a guttural moan. He kept convulsing at the limit of his straps, as if he was trying in vain to expel whatever toxin had been injected into him.

It took the prisoner a slow, torturous minute to die. When he stilled, when his body came to rest contorted but restrained by the straps, the man's wide eyes seemed to stare right at Kovalenko.

The ex-SVR assistant *resident* looked toward the doctors. His voice was hoarse from his shouting. 'What did you do?'

The man with the bag on his shoulder stepped over to the foot of Kovalenko's gurney and reached inside his bag.

As he did this, the other man pulled the bedsheet off Kovalenko's legs and feet.

Valentin screamed again, his voice cracking and faltering. 'Listen to me! Just listen! Don't touch me! I have associates who will pay you . . . pay you or kill you if you –'

Valentin Kovalenko shut up when he saw the pistol.

From out of the bag the doctor had retrieved not a syringe, but instead a small stainless-steel automatic, and he leveled it at Kovalenko. The other man stepped up to the gurney and began unfastening the bindings around the younger Russian's arms and legs. Kovalenko lay there quietly, sweat alternately stinging his eyes and chilling him where it had dampened the sheets.

He blinked out the sweat and kept his eyes fixed on the pistol.

When the unarmed doctor finished releasing Valentin from the leather straps, he stepped back to his colleague. Valentin sat up slowly on the gurney, keeping his hands slightly raised and his eyes locked onto the pistol in the quivering hand of the man who had just murdered the other patient.

‘What do you want?’ Valentin asked.

Neither of the two men spoke, but the one with the pistol – Kovalenko identified it now as a Walther PPK/S – used the barrel of his tiny weapon as a pointer. He twitched it toward a canvas duffel on the floor.

The Russian prisoner slid off the gurney and knelt down to the bag. He had a hard time taking his eyes off the gun, but when he finally did he found a full change of clothes and a pair of tennis shoes. He looked up to the two older men, and they just nodded at him.

Valentin changed out of his prison garb and into worn blue jeans and a brown pullover that smelled like body odor. The two men just watched him. ‘What’s happening?’ he asked while he dressed, but they did not speak. ‘Okay. Never mind,’ he said. He’d given up getting answers, and it certainly did not look as though they were about to kill him, so he allowed them their silence.

Were these murderers actually helping him escape?

They left the infirmary with Kovalenko in the lead and the doctors walking three meters behind him with the Walther leveled at his back. One of the men said, ‘To the right,’ and his nervous voice echoed in the long and dark hallway. Valentin did as he was instructed. They led him up another quiet corridor, down a staircase, through two iron gates that were unlocked and propped open with waste bins, and then to a large iron door.

Kovalenko had not seen another soul during the entire walk through this part of the detention center.