

# **Conspiracy theory and conspiracy practice: a novel and exegesis**

by

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## **Abstract**

Conspiracy thriller novels and popular conspiracy theories proliferate in response to a perceived threat to the national group, or to transnational groups such as ‘the West’. The research question addressed by this PhD project is: Do social identity processes work similarly in the production and functioning of popular conspiracy theories and conspiracy thriller novels? It uses practice-led research (PLR) to test the hypothesis that there are similarities in the social production and functioning of conspiracy theories and conspiracy thrillers that are predicted by the social identity approach (SIA) to social psychology.

PLR is a research methodology that either applies academic theory to the process of artistic creation – for example, painting, sculpting, or writing a novel – or generates academic knowledge through the process of artistic creation. In this project, the novel is accompanied by an exegesis that discusses the production process and what original knowledge was generated through this process. My research uses the model of PLR put forward by Bolt (2006) and exemplified by Hockney (2001), which treats the process of making art as an experimental method.

Essentially, I set out to test for similarities in the social production and functioning of conspiracy thrillers and popular conspiracy theories by writing a popular conspiracy thriller that transmits a popular conspiracy theory and observing and recording my own social psychological processes as a member of two groups: the group of conspiracy thriller writers and the group of transmitters of a famous Polish conspiracy theory.

The ‘raw data’ generated by this experiment are: first, the scenes written for a novel called *The red web*; second, the observations recorded in the reflective journal I kept throughout the creative process; and, third, data collected by other means to triangulate the findings emerging from my practice. The discussion of the results is presented as an argument which incorporates reviews of the literature at relevant points.

Considerable support is found for the hypothesis. From an SIA perspective, the producers of both types of narrative behave as social groups responding to an external threat from an outgroup, and both types of narrative can be fruitfully studied as the products of social identity processes including self-categorisation, depersonalisation, referent informational influence and uncertainty reduction. To scholarship of fiction production this research contributes the novel argument that genre conventions can be regarded as criterial norms of behaviour for the social group of writers producing works in that genre, and that these writers behave as a social group in other ways predicted by the SIA.

## Acknowledgments

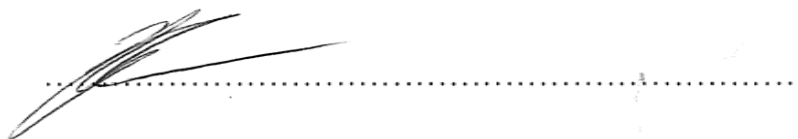
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## Declaration by candidate

I certify that the thesis entitled *Conspiracy theory and conspiracy practice: a novel and exegesis*, submitted for the degree of PhD, contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma; to the best of my knowledge contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; and is not based on joint research or publications.

Full name: Thomas Motyl-Coverdale

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink is written over a horizontal dotted line. The signature is cursive and appears to read 'Thomas Motyl-Coverdale'.

Date: 11 December 2019

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## Conspiracy practice: *The red web*



# THE RED WEB

For Claudia, Leo, and Sol, with love and gratitude.



Adapted from Google Maps 2019

## CHAPTER 1

*Van Horn, Texas Borderlands, March 28*

Adam Nation had just decided it was time to go looking for his past when it came looking for him. It was three o'clock in the morning and Nation was finishing his second cup of coffee when two bikers pulled in to the truck stop where he spent his sleepless nights. Their arrival was drowned by the diesel thunder of a rig pulling out, but he saw them through the window of the truck stop's diner and registered them as he registered any kind of threat. He wasn't in the best shape to meet a threat or be one. Hadn't taken his sleeping pills in three nights and he'd hardly slept in four.

He watched them climb off their hogs and fill their tanks. Their patches said Cossacks. He didn't know much about the Cossacks, except they were newer. A one-percenter gang for white guys. One guy was tall and dark, the other big and blond-goateed. Slavs, no doubt about it. He'd kept an eye out for Slavs most of his life. Slav and threat went together in his mind the same way Arab and threat had come to in the years of his service. More Slavs in the biker gangs nowadays. They'd come as refugees in the years following the Balkan Wars. Serbs, Bosnians, Croats, Kosovars, stumbling around in the new country, no longer knowing who was friend and who was foe. The gangs provided them with structure, a set of rules, and enemies.

Maybe he should join a gang himself; he could use a little structure.

As they filled their tanks, the bikers checked out the collection of strange critters you get in the fluorescent aquarium of an Interstate truck stop diner at 3 a.m. There were half a dozen men besides Nation, all truckers. Three of them Mexican. Three of them fat. One with pupils that failed to shrink in the bright lights. One clutching his shower ticket and staring at the door to the showers like it was the gates of Eden. Another wandered the merchandise aisles, picking up then putting back magazines, CB handsets, hunting knives. Two were eating meals, two drinking coffee. Nation sat with his back to the only wall that wasn't glass, facing the door. His right leg jiggled.

The bikers looked at every customer in turn. Nothing surprising about that: bikers have to scan for threats too. And these guys were at war. A while back, eight Cossacks had been killed in a shootout with Bandidos in Waco. Eight dead Cossacks, one dead Bandido, stretched out side by side for the press photographers in the parking lot of the Twin Peaks restaurant. His wife Grace had stabbed the screen with her forefinger, snorting, as if it proved her point, "Will you look at this list of dead fools!"

He'd looked. The dead Cossacks had white-guy names and some of their survivors were Slavs. The one dead Bandido was Sanchez or something and all his compadres were Mexican. She'd dated a Bandido before they met, and she was in touch with him. She still had a loyalty to them he didn't understand and didn't like one bit.

The dark guy dropped his eyes when he saw Nation. He finished filling his tank, then took out his phone and pecked it with his forefinger. He crossed to his buddy and showed him the screen. After an interval his buddy holstered the pump and glanced in Nation's direction. They ambled to the entrance without looking at him again.

They paid for their gas at the fuel and merchandise counter, then crossed to the diner.

Ellen the night-shift bust through the batwings from the kitchen. She was a one-time Queen of the Lubbock rodeo, faded in her glory now, like him. She

grew up on the Comanche, but her brothers got the ranch, which made her kind of an exile from her own country. They had that in common, too.

Most of last week he'd kept watch with his rifle at Ellen's house on the Cajoncitas Road to catch a *coyote* who'd threatened to burn her place down. The hombre considered it her duty to let his mules sleep in her feed shed. She'd turned to Nation because she didn't trust the sheriff. The *coyote* showed up on Sunday night, mules in tow. Nation held him at gunpoint till two Border Protection officers arrived from Sierra Blanca. It hadn't been any trouble: he'd been in the military, and it wasn't like he ever slept.

Ellen tucked a blonde strand behind her ear, nodded at the bikers without smiling and waited for them to read the menu on the board above her head.

"Yes, gentlemen?"

He studied them as they ordered. The dark one had a voice that rumbled like a blues-joint jukebox, a four-day growth, eyes in caverns, and greasy black biker locks. But under his jacket he had the hunched traps and melon deltoids of a lifter. The guy with the blond goatee was buzzcut and wide-assed and built on a Humvee scale. But his voice was lighter, and it overstressed the letter 's'. Too far away to pick any accents.

Biker gangs hunted in packs. Seeing just two told him what? They weren't hunting? They weren't Cossacks? Or told him it was 3 a.m. and even bikers have to sleep.

He downed his coffee, got up, and made for the door. He said bye to Ellen, and she hauled a plastic sack of bottles from under the counter. The bikers stood aside so she could hand it over to him.

She said, "Thanks again for Sunday. Get some sleep, honey."

"My luck I'll get to sleep the minute before the fucking train comes through."

"You'll go back to sleep. Missouri-Pacific ain't more than a mile long."

He shouldered the sack and patted the counter in farewell.

He stared at the bikers. The bikers didn't stare back, and that in itself was strange.

As he walked under the I-10 overpass, an eighteen-wheeler truck thundered across the expansion joints overhead. He turned onto Broadway, a two-mile frontage of motels and auto shops. The bottles clinked as he walked.

On the cracked glass door of Oaxaca's Garage was a faded poster: "Re-elect Sheriff Hector Turrillo." Hector Turrillo was a stand-up guy for a cop. Unfortunately, he'd lost the election to Sheriff Emilio Rodriguez, who was a different breed. The number of people walking across the Rio Grande to the Interstate at Van Horn had skyrocketed on Rodriguez's watch. Ellen swore Rodriguez was a stoolpigeon for the Juarez Cartel. Maybe he was. Or maybe, like Nation, he just wished those people luck because he'd walked in their shoes.

An un-muffled hog was kicked to life back at the truck stop. Then a second bike. The machines cleared their throats a couple times, ripping the desert night open. Nation shivered.

He didn't like talking about it, because it didn't fit with the way he saw himself, but after sixteen years in combat zones he'd been forced to do the PTSD questionnaire. He'd admitted to the VA shrink that sometimes on backroads the sight of hills across a plain made him bust out crying for no reason. And that he was generally cold and numb about things he didn't want to feel cold and numb about. When Nation had refused medication, the shrink, a retired military psychologist named Westberg, had not insisted. He'd taken a legal risk in allowing Nation to manage his symptoms by breaking bottles in the shed. Nation was grateful to Westberg for that.

He glanced back when the first motorcycle turned onto Broadway behind him. He was in plain sight as he approached one of the few streetlights. Ahead, nothing but closed auto shops before the motels started.

He took out his phone. There was a text message he hadn't heard arrive. He'd silenced the phone hours ago when he was still trying to sleep.

When he saw it was from his mother, his heart got going like a tired old mouse on a familiar wheel, its feet still fast as fear.

## CHAPTER 2

The message read: “Just had to walk the plank. I’m OK. Take good care of those boys.”

Jesus God. He checked the time: it had arrived three hours ago. Somebody had come for his mother tonight. Thank God, she’d gotten clear.

Behind him, the engines of the motorcycles slowed to a chug.

He turned to walk backwards, put a hand in his jacket pocket. Only his wallet and crumpled receipts in there, but they didn’t know he was unarmed. How complacent he’d gotten.

They trailed him at a walking pace, the dark guy drinking his coffee as he rode, the blond guy smoking. Their lights were off.

The blond guy with the goatee called, “Nation, wait a minute!”

Sure enough, he had an accent.

Hand still in pocket, Nation set down the sack of bottles on the forecourt of M&T Auto Service and looked for cover. There was a tow truck to get behind and Manuel Hernandez’s forever-unrepaired F150. Enough solid steel, just maybe.

He glanced back to see the dark biker drop the cardboard coffee cup and reach into his jacket pocket. Sodium light slid along gunmetal. Suddenly his adrenal glands were squirting like a pair of fuel injectors.



The blond Cossack threw away his half-smoked cigarette and reached beside his left leg. From the corner of his eye Nation saw the sawn-off shotgun.

He dived behind the tow truck.

The pistol cracked twice. The shotgun boomed. A front tire burst.

Nation low-crawled on knees and elbows towards the tank trailer on blocks outside JH Truck & Trailer Service. A boom resounded inside the tank as shot rang against it. He ran fifteen yards behind the cover of the tank then ten yards without cover across the cracked concrete of the JH forecourt. He covered his face with his forearms and ran at the plate glass window of Ray Quality Prescott Auto Repairs ('My middle name is Quality'). The pistol cracked again. The plate glass exploded before his shoulder met it. He skidded on his belly against a shelf stacked with auto parts.

The shotgun boomed.

Boots pounded the forecourt. The dark biker was running, emptying the pistol through the window as he ran. Rounds skittered around Nation as he slithered on his belly through the doorway into the main workshop.

His cell rang. His mom? Grace?

He kicked the door shut, then stood and locked it. His cell stopped ringing. Boots crunched the broken glass beyond the door. Taking their time. They had their prey cornered and plenty of ammo left. He killed the sound on his cell.

They'd missed his mother, so they'd come for him. The question was had they pulled off the Interstate to fill up before they went to his home? Or had they already gone hunting at his home and found his wife and the kids?

A drill sergeant snarled in his head: *You only have to fuck up once; you don't get to fuck up twice.*

No, they'd come down the Interstate from the east, of that he was sure, not from the town. They'd been surprised to see him at the truck stop. They'd planned to find him sleeping.

But maybe they had buddies who were at his house right now.

Sounds of a shotgun being broken, reloaded, snapped shut. Another clip clacked home in a pistol. A thoughtful couple of seconds, then the slide was racked. The workshop door was nothing – just flimsy hollow core. They'd break it down with one kick.

Glass crunched under boots. Keeping clear of the door, Nation picked up a jack and swung it with both hands against the light switch. The plastic cover split apart then fell away. He jerked out the live wire.

Two shots holed the door at crotch height and yellow streetlight speared through 9 mm holes. Shooting low.

A biker was talking to himself with pauses. His voice wasn't deep, so that would be the blond guy. Calling the rest of the pack down?

Nation dropped and low-crawled away from the door. He knew where Ray Prescott had his shadow board and made for it in the dark. He skirted wide around the grease pit. Above the pit was a pickup on a hydraulic hoist, silhouetted against the strips of starlight where Ray had yet to replace the shingles on his roof.

He got to his feet a couple of yards from the bench and tripped over an extension cord. A cage light whipped down from under the vehicle. The bulb smashed. He stumbled up against the bench, making the hanging tools clang like Sunday morning. Heart knocking, he shoved tools into his jacket pockets, then moved clear of the racket. Tools clanked and clinked and settled.

A text message buzzed. He checked his cell.

It was from Ellen at the truck stop: "Called the cops."

Great. Sheriff Rodriguez wasn't known for his rapid response.

The door crashed open. In the spill of streetlight, a leather-clad arm reached around and slapped for the light switch. It found the broken plastic bracket and withdrew. Another arm reached around and fired two wild, low shots.

The blond Cossack with the shotgun stepped into the doorway, fired. The muzzle flash lit up the shop and tools on the shadow board tinkled and fell off

their nails. He stepped out of sight as Nation hurled a crescent wrench. It spun end over end through the empty doorway.

The guy wasn't stupid: he'd fired and stepped back, knowing a cornered man will throw anything he can lay hand to, that in an auto shop he can lay hand to plenty.

The dark biker called, "We just need to ask you some questions!"

Funny they hadn't thought to ask them back at the truck stop.

Dazzled by the muzzle flash, Nation slid along the wall and crouched behind a wheel balancer. He looked for holes made in the tin wall by buckshot, but there were none. Was the guy shooting birdshot?

A truck roared to life back at the truck stop and ground into motion. He listened: headed this way.

They'd have to make their move soon. The shots would have been heard by everyone in Van Horn.

He fished a heavy screwdriver from his pocket, stood and rocked his weight onto his back foot like a pitcher, left arm extended, right arm cocked, pinching the last inch of blade.

The two Cossacks stormed through the doorway, shooting. The dark guy swiveled and fired along the wall, as if he was expecting the ambush, or he'd done room clearances before. Pain flared in Nation's thigh.

He threw the screwdriver.

The butt hit the dark Cossack flush on the Adam's apple. In the wash of gold light from the doorway, he clutched his throat.

Nation crouched with his back to the wheel balancer and pain branched out like lightning along all his nerves. It sucked back into the wound in his thigh as adrenalin shut it down. He took a deep breath and slid the next tool from his jacket with his left hand. Pipe wrench.

The biker was whining now as he choked on his own throat. His buddy said nothing to reassure him.

The shotgun blasted and shot rattled the balancer.

Nation shoved off the wall with one foot and rolled across a gap of two yards to a truck engine on blocks. He rose and threw the wrench.

The blond Cossack was facing him, clawing in his jacket pocket for shells. The wrench struck him in the chest. He grunted, staggered back. He gave up fishing for shells. Wheezing like a pig in a pipe, he tugged a pistol from his leather vest.

Outside, a truck engine stuttered down through the gears. Light washed under the shop's roller door, and then the air brakes bit and thirty-inch tires howled on the blacktop. A crunch followed by a long screech as something made of metal was dragged down the road. The screeching stopped and the truck's engine cut out.

The blond guy grabbed the dark guy by the collar of his jacket and towed him towards the door, using him as a shield. Nation kept his head down.

Once outside, the biker started shooting at something else.

Nation counted to ten, crept to the door, then low-crawled through the broken glass. He peered over the window frame of the showroom. The blond Cossack was dragging his buddy to their bikes. Correction: bike. One Harley lay mangled under the wheels of the truck. The remaining bike was on its side: the trucker hadn't succeeded in running over both machines. No one visible in the cab of the truck.

The barrel of a rifle poked around the truck's bull-bar and fired. A window shattered on Manuel Hernandez's Ford. Another little job for Manuel to look forward to.

Under the streetlight, the blond guy crouched down and fired twice under the rig, skipping rounds off the tar. The trucker cursed and withdrew his rifle. The blond guy hauled the intact Harley upright and swung himself on. His gasping buddy got his leg over, then slumped against the rider's back. Dead weight. The

blond guy didn't try to hold him on as the bike fishtailed. The dark Slav fell off and lay still on the road.

The radar zigged and zagged down Broadway, but there was no need. The trucker held his fire; too many motels. The biker leaned right into La Caverna Street, crested the railroad berm, and was gone.

Nation recognized the trucker from back at the truck stop, a long drink of water in his early twenties with a long goatee.

He jogged towards Nation on hand-tooled boots. "You OK, man?"

Nation bent to see. Lips of fat pouted through the rip in his jeans, high on the inner thigh.

He grimaced, said, "Could've been worse, I guess."

The trucker sucked back spit, shook his head, eyes glinting for a moment with some joke he didn't make. "I'll take you to the hospital," he said.

In the distance a freight train sounded its sorrowful warning. It took Nation a couple of seconds to register the sound. Then it hit him: the track was between him and his family. The Missouri-Pacific was a mile long, and it took ten minutes to crawl through Van Horn.

"No, I need to get home now."

The man swallowed, big Adam's apple bobbing, weighing the further risk.

Nation started towards the truck. He'd drive the fucking thing himself.

The trucker said, "OK. OK. Jesus," and waved him to get in.

The rig rocked as the remaining wheels rode over the dead Harley.

As he crunched the gears down Broadway, the trucker eyed Nation sideways. "You involved in something I should know about? Bandido maybe?"

That was how it would look from the outside: Nation was a veteran of Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The military would provide the media with photographs of a buzzcut man with lozenges on his shoulder saying Ranger, Sapper, and EOD, the Silver Star and Purple Heart on his chest. The VA indicated possible PTSD,

but no formal diagnosis. Not much of a sleeper. Screaming fights with his wife. And his wife had Bandido connections. Chances were Sheriff Rodriguez would look no further.

Nation stared at the trucker without blinking, forcing the man to meet his eyes.

“No, sir, I am not. What’d you say your name was?”

“Vince Schillingburg.”

“Adam Nation. Much obliged to you, Vince.”

Vince glanced at him as he swung wide into La Caverna. “That your real name? Maybe sellin’ a little speed at the truck stop? Someone else’s turf?” His goatee bobbed as he swallowed. “Kinda thing?”

Nation took a couple of breaths to cool his anger. He couldn’t blame the guy for being nervous. A truck driver makes his living on the road. You don’t want an outlaw motorcycle gang putting an APB out on your truck. No: what this civilian had done back there was heroic.

He said, “Ellen send you after me, Vince?”

The trucker nodded, relenting.

“She seems to like you. Said you got family in town.”

“Wife and two little boys.”

The big rig rocked over the trackbed a hundred yards ahead of the train’s headlight. Its horn blared.

Vince swallowed hard and checked his mirrors.

He said, “Well, no kid deserves to get woke by that motherfucker.”

## CHAPTER 3

No motorcycles at his home. Not yet. Nation opened the front door and made for the kids' room in the dark. Wes slept with his fists beside his head like a champ, his bedclothes on the floor. Little Dean's eyelids fluttered as he dreamed of rescuing princesses. Many a sleepless night he'd sat on the floor with his back against the wall while they slept and thought, "I may not be able to feel much now, but I would jump on a grenade for you," until he began to feel a tightness in his chest. He took a deep breath and entered his bedroom. Grace snored on the queen bed, the sleep of the worn-out young mom.

His ruck was on the top shelf of the robe. It was already packed with a change of clothes, a roll of banknotes, a Beretta M9 pistol, a Gerber and a ceramic knife from his EOD war chest, along with other necessary items. When he released the clips and drawstring to haul out the gun, the depths of the ruck gave up the warm smells of gun oil and peanut butter from a burst meal, trapped there since his last Afghan summer.

The flashback hit. He couldn't stop it. Memory swept away the Texas night. He was once more sweeping in the Kandahar *karez*, twenty yards under the desert. Four frustrated CIA Special Operations Group operators creeping behind him in hunched single file, following the EOD tech.

The SOG team had entered the dry irrigation tunnel two hours back through a well, on a credible tip that down here somewhere was a high-value target and a big arms cache. There were thousands of kilometers of tunnels, ranging in age from a thousand years to a couple of days. It wasn't the first time his SOG team

had lost track of a hostile down here in the *karez*. The operators behind him were pissed, but they couldn't complain about the slowness of their progress, because he'd detected and sprayed fluorescent circles around no less than nine devices buried in the tunnel's floor.

The tunnel had been rising for some time, coming up out of the earth. When he came to a flight of steep steps cut into the rock to one side, he glanced back, and Paramilitary Officer Cody Ramirez signaled *Go on up*.

He was two steps up when thunder erupted overhead.

The grind of a truck up-shifting too fast jolted Nation back to the present. His breath came fast and ragged. It was night. He was standing in his house. His house was in Van Horn, Texas. The truck was Vince Shillingburg's truck. Thank fuck for Vince Shillingburg's truck. He wiped cold sweat from his forehead, caught his moonlit face in the mirror. His eyes stared out of a mask of helmet metal, melted down over the skin. Nothing like smells to trigger flashbacks.

The VA shrink, Westberg, had showed him that you can see the changes war has made in you not as something lost but as something gained. Eighteen months out and what he'd gained still seemed like a full-grown alligator he struggled every day to tame.

The truck thundered away, gathering speed. Evidently, Vince preferred to loop back to the Interstate on back roads to waiting at the level crossing for the train to pass. Nation didn't blame him: the blond Cossack was somewhere on this side of the tracks.

Moving fast, he hauled down the rucks he kept packed for Grace and the kids, then fetched a bandage and ointment from the kitchen. He'd dress the wound when they were down the road some.

Back in the bedroom he looked a couple of seconds at Grace's face in the moonlight. He loved her when she was asleep. Awake, she was too much like him. He apologized to her silently, because any chance she'd had of a peaceful life, he'd killed.



When he shook her, she grumbled and tried to roll over.

He shook her again. “They found me, Grace!”

She jerked awake, black eyes flashing.

“We gotta go, Grace!”

She reached for the nightstand, shoved herself upright.

Her eyes were wide. “Fuck, Adam, they found you?”

He straightened and shrugged his ruck on. “Put on your ruck. Clothes are in there. Dress later.”

Her eyes narrowed. “*Who* found you?”

“Guys with guns.”

He held up a hand, listened. As Vince’s truck receded and the last of the train clunk-clunked through town, another sound became audible. She heard it too. The rumble of distant motorcycle engines. A large number of motorcycles.

He said, “Cossacks. Come on!”

She shut her mouth and hauled herself out of bed, went for the light switch.

“No lights!”

“Asshole! What’ve you done?”

She didn’t wait for an answer but slipped the ruck on over her singlet. They each scooped a kid out of bed and lurched out to the vehicle, Grace’s slight body bent double under the weight of ruck and kid, Nation hobbling.

By the time the kids were stowed in the back seat, both of them were awake and grizzling.

He wound down the window and tried to get a bearing on the direction of the approaching motorcycles.

He said, “Boys! Shut up a minute.”

They didn’t.

“Seat belts!” Grace ordered.

“Forget it!”

But she was already hauling to her knees on the front seat, leaning into the back seat, muttering.

It sounded like the motorcycles were coming from the east on the I-10, same direction their two scouts had come from. They were decelerating now, crossing the tracks into the grid of streets on this north side of Broadway.

His right leg jiggled. He wagged his jaw to ease the muscles and waited. If he exploded now, Grace would explode, and she was the most dangerous kind of IED he knew.

One seatbelt clacked.

“Where we going?” she snapped.

“Vaughan’s.”

At last the other seatbelt clacked. She thudded back into her seat, glared at the side of his face. He avoided looking at her, unclenched one hand from the wheel and turned the key. The diesel clattered to life.

He left the headlights off but turned right, as if making for Broadway and the Interstate. Under intimidation or pain his neighbors would only be able to say that Nation’s truck had turned towards Broadway.

The one good thing was the bikers wouldn’t hear his vehicle over the noise of their motorcycles. What kind of fools came for someone on Harley Davidsons? He thought of how the dark guy had moved: room-clearance trained. No, not fools. It might be that for those two guys the Cossacks Motorcycle Club was cover.

No way could he take the I-10. There were just three railway crossings, at Elm, Crockett, and La Caverna, and he figured the bikers would post someone at each of them. Instead of crossing, he looped back and took Texas 54, which followed the foothills of the Guadalupe Mountains north. Clear of town, he turned off

onto dirt roads, heading for the paved farm road that ran northeast of Van Horn towards the Apache Mountains.

When he checked the rearview mirror there was a cloud of white dust. No good. He slowed the vehicle. Fifteen miles an hour was as fast as he could go without dust.

He turned in his seat to meet the eyes of his eldest boy. Wide, but not crying. He corrected the vehicle, found Wes in the mirror.

He spoke over the rumble of tires on gravel: “You hear those motorcycles back there?”

Wes nodded.

He said, “Those are bad men coming to get us,” and as he said it, he heard an echo of his mother’s voice giving the same warning.

“They’re coming to get us?”

He’d always prayed he would never have to say it to his own kids.

Chest tight, eyes burning, he took a deep breath and said, “That’s right. But you know I won’t let anything happen to you, so just go back to sleep, OK?”

A rock hit the vehicle beneath his feet, and he braced reflexively. Grace glanced at him, knowing it was one of his triggers. He grimaced.

He said, “Wes?”

Wes whimpered, “OK.”

“Dean?”

The kid just nodded, too terrified to speak.

It had to end here. He couldn’t screw up their lives the same way his own had been screwed. No more running. He would make his family safe, then he would run no more.

Wes said, “Go faster!”

“We can’t make dust.”

Dean said, “Are we gonna visit with Grandma?”

“Grandma’s away right now.”

“Where is she?”

“On vacation.”

Grace exploded in an undertone, “*Ah chingado!* You’ve got a lot of explaining to do, partner.”

The sky was clear but for a few cotton clouds. The road was a pale white ribbon stretching towards buttes and mesas and a silver horn of moon. He drove in silence, checking on the kids in the rearview mirror. Within twenty minutes, they were asleep again.

He said to Grace, “Mom’s gone to ground now. I can’t contact her for the next three months. Do me a favor, turn that phone off and take the battery out. Yours too.”

“I’ll call Ram –”

“No, goddammit! Ramon can’t help. Bandidos can’t protect you. One of them might just kill you. These guys can reach into motorcycle clubs. Only thing to do now is drop off the face of the earth, like Momma.”

She thumped the dash, hissed, “Jesus! You are the biggest mistake I ever made. You fight with me over bullshit, you throw the vacuum through the window, you try to choke me in your sleep, now you got us running in our fucking pajamas? You can’t even keep your family safe! I can’t do this anymore. Let us out in Pecos. It’s you they want, not us.”

“Then what? You go back to your peaceful life with Ramon the outlaw biker?”

“At least Ramon can protect his woman!”

It was like her to get her nails into his nuts at a time like this.

“Sure, those guys take real good care of their women. One after the other, I heard.”

She thumped his leg. The torn nerves flared around the wound and his hand flew to protect it.

“Oh, Jesus, what happened?”

He checked the rearview mirror. Still asleep. Keeping his voice low, he told her the story.

She wasn't shocked, just exhausted. She found Tylenol in the glove compartment, shook some into his hand, then set to work dismantling the phones, clicking her tongue and muttering in Spanish.

He said, “The shotgun was loaded with birdshot. Ain't gonna kill anything much bigger than a bird. The guy with the handgun shot low. They didn't want me dead. You're wrong: it's not me they want, it's Momma. But if we don't hide ourselves, they'll use us to find her.”

After a while she muttered, “You think it's the same people who killed your daddy, don't you?”

He nodded.

“That was thirty years ago!”

“Someone came for Momma in Houston, but they missed her. Then hours later they came for me. Must be the same people. They lost us for eighteen years. Now they found us.”

“*How?*”

He glanced at her. Her black eyes glinted in the moonlight. No point holding back now.

“I did something stupid. You don't sleep for days, you get stupid. End of last week, I sent an email to this place in Warsaw. Requested my daddy's SB file – his secret police file. I guess I couldn't believe we were still in danger. They must have traced the email.”

She shook her head, brow furrowed. Exhaled.

She said, “It’s this nightmare, isn’t it? You killed that kid’s father, now you want to know what happened to yours.”

He couldn’t deny it.

She said, “You’re stupid, you know that? Just forget it. Your daddy was a killer!”

Blood rushed to his face. “What the hell would you know? He never stood trial.”

Her eyes glittered but she kept her mouth shut.

He shook his head. She was like a picador, sticking you, then stepping back. And she’d had nine years to work this bull out.

They climbed into the foothills of the Apaches. Cresting a rise, the rearview mirror flashed in his eyes. He slowed down at the next rise. The town appeared in the mirror, an orange glow above it. Black smoke blotted out a wedge of stars above the glow.

He pulled over.

Grace said, “What is it?”

He’d seen the same thing on his overseas deployments often enough to recognize it for what it was. He climbed out quietly so as not to wake the kids, tugged binoculars from under his seat. He focused the glasses on Van Horn.

Their house was burning.

Insect people milled about in silhouette. The fire engine was already there, hose trained on the house. Too late to save much. And now at last the law was coming, under lights and sirens. Sheriff Emilio Rodriguez, leaping into action.

His teeth pressed against each other, hard enough to chip. He closed his eyes a moment, took a deep breath, wagged his jaw to relax it. Opened his eyes. He traced the highway east and west. Four motorcycles were headed west and four were headed east on the Interstate, moonlight flashing off chrome. There was a

dust cloud on the Valentine road running south of Van Horn: two more bikes, with their headlights off.

He lowered the binoculars and let his eyes rest on the dark at his feet awhile, then lifted them to his eyes again and traced the road he was standing on back towards the fire. Just as the fire came into view and his pupils shrank again, he caught it: a smudge of pale dust right of the fire, where the Davis Ranch Road left the paved farm road. The route they'd just traveled.

He waited, glasses trained on the rise ahead of the dust. He didn't have to wait long before two men on hogs were skylined against the fire's glow. No headlights. He held the glasses there a moment. No other bikes followed. Just the two.

He ran back to the vehicle.

## CHAPTER 4

He eased open the driver's door and climbed in.

Grace hissed, "Is it a fire?"

"Yes."

"Our place?"

"It was."

"*Madre de Dios*. Those dogs are gonna pay."

He shoved the vehicle out of gear and let it roll into the mesquite.

"What you doing?"

They rolled down the ridge, bumping over rocks and holes. He braked just before a shallow arroyo. These western ridges of the Apache Mountains were inscribed with arroyos that branched like lightning into the flat valley. No tree cover, just a scrub of mesquite and creosotebush. But the vehicle would be hard to see if someone wasn't looking hard for it.

He hauled the park brake on, checked on the kids. Still asleep.

He whispered, "You're gonna hear gunfire. Motorcycles come over the rise, keep still. They won't see you if you keep still. If I'm not back in five minutes, or if they see you, strike out across the arroyos. You'll get across in low range. They can't follow – their bikes are lower than a lizard's belly. Keep your heads down. Yonder is the Figure 4 Ranch Road: it'll take you to Toyah."



He got out and shut the door gently, then crouched and twisted the wheel hubs into four-wheel-drive. Hunkered by the second wheel, he heard his steady breathing and was for a moment conscious of the efficiency of his movements and thoughts. This was the kind of situation in which he functioned well. Well as just about anyone. In this world of the hunter and hunted adrenalin was warranted and his training wasn't dangerous but useful. It was good to be reminded that he wasn't a fuckup in every way.

He eased open the rear passenger door so as not to wake the kids. Took down his hunting rifle from its brackets above the rear window of the cab, taking care not to bump Wes's head.

He low-crawled to the crest and rose behind a boulder at the roadside. He rested the gun on it and trained the glowing red crosshairs just above a rise half a mile distant. He could hear the thunder of the hogs from here. Stupid machines. Efficient machines don't waste energy on producing noise for the sake of noise. He let his breathing slow, conserving energy, an efficient machine.

As they crested the rise, the bikers showed on the dark green night as ghost riders on the blazing white heat clouds of their engines.

He opened his left eye long enough to check by visible light. Sure enough, they were riding with their headlights off. He didn't know who they were, but they'd come for him and they'd burned his house down.

He'd switched his own lights on when they left the farm road. Maybe they'd spotted him from a high place.

What would they do now his lights had disappeared?

They descended and disappeared from view. He shifted the crosshairs to where the road crested the next rise and pressed a button on the side of the scope. In the readout above the reticle the built-in laser rangefinder gave the range as 715 yards.

As they crested that rise, their eyes shone white in their pale green faces. Fine though the Winchester Model 70 is for hunting a standing deer, he stood little

chance of hitting a moving target that far out. He checked the safety was off, kept the crosshairs on the middle of the road. He practiced little movements left and right, to get a feel for the width of the roadway at that range.

When the heat clouds crested the last rise the range was 423 yards and his sights were a little low. The guy on the right was just behind the guy on the left. He shifted the rifle up and right, centering the hairs just ahead of center mass. He exhaled, squeezing the trigger. He was aware of the heat cloud toppling, the eyes going around, then down and out. Then the sound reached him: thuds, snarling of an engine throttled against no resisting road, a shout, then the engine cutting out.

The white face of the remaining rider swiveled as he heard his buddy go down. Nation shifted the crosshairs to a point ahead of him.

The guy braked, skidding till his descent was almost halted, but then he changed his mind and accelerated so fast the bike fishtailed. Nation tried to follow with the scope. He shifted the crosshairs till they were just in front of the slewing rider. Exhaled and squeezed.

He missed.

The guy slammed his brakes on again. He came to a stop in a cloud of white dust just a hundred yards distant. He leapt off his bike and lumbered for the mesquite thicket beside the road. It was the only vegetation high enough to conceal a man.

With the scope he followed the guy's heat into the dark brush. It dived into the earth and disappeared.

OK, the guy was in an arroyo or behind a boulder or bank of earth. He was scared. Gussed there was a shooter but didn't know where he was. Didn't have night vision himself. Hadn't thought he'd need it for this job. If he was smart, he'd figure Nation did have night vision and keep his head down. But it's hard to be smart when you're scared. And any time now he would figure that the only way out for him was to get back to his bike and hightail it.

Nation rose and started downslope, scope to one eye, the other open to check the ground ahead. When he'd moved silently for fifty yards, he deliberately set his foot down on a dead mesquite branch. The sudden crack of twigs was followed by a moment of complete silence in which Nation's ears rang from his shots. The engine of the bike ticked.

Then the man erupted out of the brush like a quail. The green world in the scope was lit by a white explosion. Handgun. Four more explosions followed, stepping closer to the road. Nation flinched as a slug whanged off a rock close by.

His cross-hairs chased the running biker.

The guy hauled his bike upright. The bike roared back to white heat. He threw his leg over it.

Nation shot him through the middle. Biker and bike collapsed in a heap. He watched the pile of heat through the scope. It didn't shift. The engine grumbled, spluttered and died.

He was using sharp-point ammo, which is more accurate at long range, but punches straight through a body without doing the internal damage a round or flat-nosed bullet does. Aiming center mass, he'd hoped that the guy would stay alive to answer some questions, but the guy wasn't moving or making any sound.

There was a chance he was playing dead.

Nation started towards the rider, rifle at his shoulder, a buzz of dread in his belly. His body was behaving as if this was Iraq or Afghanistan, where US soldiers had been the law, but this was America, and pretty soon the law would be after him.

Beyond the rise in the road, the Chev's engine chuckled to life. He'd taken longer than five minutes. Grace was about to head for the hills. There was no way of calling her back.

He cursed. Questions would not be possible.

He slung the rifle onto his back and ran back up the hill. He reached the crest and saw the truck smashing its way through mesquite downslope.

On top of the rise he waved his arms and yelled after her. The vehicle stopped before a deep arroyo at the bottom of the hill. The white of her top emerged from the driver's side window. She was trying to see down into the gulch ahead.

“Graaaaace!”

On the other side of the ridge a Harley revved to life. It took off, shifted up through the gears, retreating towards Van Horn.

Fuck.

One of the bikers had lived, which meant pretty soon the pack would find out which way he'd run.

## CHAPTER 5

Warsaw, Poland

The helicopter lifted off from the rooftop of the WarPharm building. From the chopper's glass bubble the Director looked down at Warsaw. The morning rain brought the fog to earth like fallout, revealing the Old Town by the Vistula River with the Royal Castle at its center. Town and castle had been rebuilt stone-by-stone by the postwar puppet government, more as a memorial than anything, amid a sea of Soviet flat blocks. Roads radiated out from Old Town like the wet threads of a spider's web.

The chopper flapped over suburb after suburb of hives full of insect minds. The system changes but the drones don't. You can haul out most of the honeycomb, and take it for yourself and they carry on, insect-like, buzzing out and buzzing home, making more honey for you. Before his sudden death in 1965, his foster father used to say, "You could change the system tomorrow and kick the bastards out, and in ten years the same lot of bastards would be in charge again." His foster father was a drone, but he'd been right.

Forty-five years of barracks and flat blocks. Then in '89 communism collapsed, and the Director had had to rebuild himself out of its ruins. That was an anxious time, but he'd coped better than most because he'd prepared a lifeboat in advance.

They flew over the patchwork fields of Mazovia. To the north, chains of lakes multiplied. The pilot veered northeast, towards the dark stain of Augustów Forest on the horizon. It stretched east into Belarus and Lithuania, almost to Vilnius. North of that was another stain, the Romincka Forest, where he maintained a hunting lodge. Between the two forests was the Suwalki Gap, a seventy-kilometer stretch of Lithuanian fields as worrisome to NATO as the Fulda Gap had been during the Cold War.

From a hillside on the edge of the Augustów Forest rose the steeple of Źródła village and a cloud of steam from the thermal spa. Above the village, atop the crag at the high end of a long ridge, was Castle Gratka, his main home. It had lain in ruins between 1939 until his first privatization windfall in 1993. He'd rebuilt it, brick by brick, stone by stone, using local masons. A Polish tradition, the rebuilding of castles.

## CHAPTER 6

At 4:30 in the morning, they found the last pay phone in Pecos and Nation called his mother on her landline. A machine's female voice invited him to leave a message. He didn't. Just to be sure, he called her cell. The recorded message said her cell was off or out of range.

He called Mrs. King, the old black lady who lived next door to his mother.

"Mrs. King, it's Adam Nation."

"Who?"

"Adam Nation, Krissie's son. I'm real sorry about the time."

"Hello, Adam. I found two planks in my bedroom just now."

The relief made Nation weak at the knees.

He said, "Thank you, Mrs. King. Thank you."

"And she left a note for you on my bed."

"Oh?"

"On the envelope it says –" she fumbled around for a moment, breathing into the receiver. Nation counted five exhalations.

"'To my son Adam.' But the note is in another language. Czech, I guess."

It wasn't Czech; it was Polish, their secret language.

"That it is, ma'am. Spell it out for me, please."

“Spell it all out?”

“Yes’m.”

He signaled to Grace to bring him a pen. Puffy-eyed and sulking, she handed him a chewed Bic and the vehicle’s service log.

As Mrs. King spelled out the note, he wrote down the Polish words on the back of the log book. His mother wrote that *myslimi* came for her last night, that both her alarms went off. The Polish word for ‘hunters’ gave him an image not of bikers but of deer stalkers in the black felt hats of the Polish mountain people.

When they were making preparations for her escape, he’d set infrared alarms at the front door and in the yard-and-a-half of space that separated his mother’s house from Mrs. King’s. Anybody wanting to reach the back door would have to climb the side fence and go through that trench.

If his mother had followed the escape plan, she would have given the back-door man time to reach her back courtyard before she slid up her bedroom’s sash window and laid the plank between her second-floor sill and the facing bedroom window of Mrs. King’s house. He’d silenced both windows with felt and provided Mrs. King next door with an identical plank. Houston’s Sunnyside was a bad neighborhood. The *Chronicle* said old ladies had been killed in their beds for drug money in Sunnyside. Nation doubted Mrs. King would still be able to crawl across her own plank. He was proud that his mother had done it.

Mrs. King was still spelling out the Polish words. His hand wrote the letters down. His mother said she was OK. She would follow the plan and ditch her phone. She hoped that if he got this note it was because he and Grace and the kids were OK. She sent her love to them and called him *kochanie*, beloved.

Mrs. King said, “Do you know what time she’ll be back?”

“She won’t be back, Mrs. King. Anything you want from the house, take it. You have your key? No, she’d want you to. You take care, OK?”

He hung up and poured half a pack of gum into his mouth. When he had a good wad going, he dialed Cody Ramirez’s number in Houston.



He said, “Hey, man, it’s your good buddy from the borderlands.”

There was the briefest pause while the mind at the other end of the line slipped into gear, then Ramirez croaked, “Jesus. Four thirty. How you doin’, buddy? I can hardly hear you. What’s with the line?”

“I’m on a payphone. Trouble with my cell.”

“Uh huh.”

“Listen, compadre, I’ll be over tomorrow. How’s about we hit the shore?”

“Another surprise visit with your momma, huh?”

Nation forced a chuckle, “Yessir.”

“One day you’ll drive all the way across Texas and find she’s not home.”

He forced another chuckle and closed his eyes with relief. Ramirez had gotten her away.

After they said goodbye, he called Vaughan Holly and gave him an ETA.

He went back to the vehicle, glanced at his watch, then up and down the familiar street of filling stations and fast-food joints. Roughnecks would be on the road soon to reach distant oil wells by sunup. He suddenly missed the simplicity of that life. After Afghanistan, he’d roughnecked 14 months out of Pecos. It was some kind of a decompression chamber for him between the West and the Middle East. Like a Middle-Eastern Forward Operating Base, it was in the desert, with a view of mountains. As in the military, you worked yourself to exhaustion, then bunked down in sweaty hooches that stank of men’s sweat, and after a twelve-hour day in the sun you slept like a baby.

He used the screwdriver on his Leatherman to unscrew the number plates on a Dodge Ram. It took him ten minutes to swap the plates with his own. The sun was almost up when he finished.

He hoped their pursuers, who must now include the police, would figure a man who stole plates was fixing to run a good way.

## CHAPTER 7

Nation wasn't fixing to run far, but to double back to Vaughan's ranch. In the first faint light of day a plain of nodding pumpjacks became visible. The pumpjacks petered out as the road climbed back into the arid Gyp Hills west of Toyah. He turned left at a sign stencil-cut with an oxy torch from rusted steel plate: "Lazy L," with the L in Lazy reclining. They crossed a cattle guard in the boundary fence. In another quarter hour they reached the modest ranch house and sprawl of outbuildings of Vaughan Holly's ranch.

Vaughan was a nurse at Odessa's Permian Basin General. He also taught bullfighting at the Odessa College on Fridays. Promising rodeo clowns from all over the world came to take his course, because back in the day Vaughan had been the best protection clown in the business. On the weekends he tried to keep the old family ranch going, but he was a small-time cattleman nowadays.

They passed a timber-railed pasture for quarter horses and a rectangle of oiled dirt fenced with railway iron where Vaughan practiced fighting bulls. Nation had climbed on his first wild bull there at the age of fifteen, back in those golden days when they always seemed to be jumping on things or off things.

Nation parked in front of a low, blonde-brick ranch house on the slope below the old stone place. Sprinklers watered the vegetable garden out front. He got out and breathed deep the good smells of horseshit and Trans-Pecos well water. A door clapped under the deep verandah and Vaughan stepped into the sunlight and stretched. His face was puffy with sleep and he was a little stouter, but still

bullfighting fit. Though he was two years older than Nation the bastard still had every hair on his head.

He hollered, “Well if it ain’t Adam Nation and all the little Nations!”

Nation got out and started towards him. Vaughan stopped and frowned at his friend’s bloody jeans.

“You hurt?”

Nation glanced back at the vehicle. The kids were waking up.

In a low voice, he said, “Gunshot. I think it needs stitching.”

“What in hell’s name have you gotten yourself into?”

“Can you do it? I can’t go to any hospital.”

Vaughan rubbed his forehead. “I could, but if I was you, I’d get Chunmei to do it.”

The ranch house door clapped. Shouts from the verandah. Vaughan’s two kids ran out of the house in their pajamas. Wes and Dean were suddenly wide awake. They clambered out of the vehicle.

Grace got out and Vaughan summoned a grin and kissed her. He shook his head as he helped them haul their rucks from the tray.

\*

Vaughan’s Chinese wife Chunmei was nearing forty and still beautiful. Her movements were still constrained, it seemed to Nation, by a more cluttered world.

She’d been four years into a medical degree at Arizona State when her mother had disappeared into China’s network of re-education through forced labor camps. Chunmei went back to China to look for her. It took years, and Nation never had heard the full story, but the short of it was Chunmei never did go back to med school.

He lay on the long dining table in his underpants, in an area marked off from the living room by the boundary between tiles and carpet.

Chunmei swabbed the wound with antiseptic and used forceps to hold one end of it together.

She said, “Not infected. Maybe ten stitches. I’m out of practice...”

“Chunmei, I’m finished with hospitals. Finished with doctors.” He pulled aside his collar to show her the welt of clumsy stitches on his neck. “Body doctors, brain doctors. Finished with all of ’em. Close it up, ma’am. If it looks no worse than a chaff bag, I’m happy.”

He let his head flop back and rolled it sideways to see what the kids were watching. Women shaking their asses on MTV. His mother would tell them to switch it off but Grace and Chunmei didn’t give a damn. Women were shaking their asses everywhere these days, anyway. Probably wouldn’t bother him either, except he was an adult male whose wife had lost interest in sex. He shifted his gaze to the old photograph of Civil War soldiers; one of them was Vaughan’s great-grandfather, killed in the Battle of Palmito Ranch. He and the confederate warrior glared at each other as Chunmei pushed the needle through the wound.

Vaughan returned from feeding the animals and asked questions over his shoulder as he fried up *buevos rancheros*, ham with red-eye gravy, green tomatoes and *pain perdu*. Nation filled him in on the siege at Ray Quality Prescott’s and his sharp-shooting in the Apache foothills. It would come out on the news, anyway.

He said, “They came for me after they missed Momma in Houston.”

A pause. “Was it about your daddy?”

“I think so.”

“One day you’re gonna tell me the whole story of how you and your momma came to Texas, ’cause every time you mention your daddy, I hear the *X Files* music.”

Growing up together, he’d often had the urge to tell Vaughan. But his mother had always said that telling anyone would put that person in danger. Now, sure

enough, here he was with the past on ass, lucky to still have both testicles. He couldn't put Vaughan in any more danger than he was in already.

He said, "That I guarantee."

## CHAPTER 8

Lances of light speared through the trapdoor overhead. Automatic fire tore up the floor of the tunnel in front of them. Nation dropped the metal detector, flattened himself against the wall, swung up his HK. He fired a burst on full-auto. Someone screamed above. He fired till the pin clicked.

No return fire. He jerked out the empty clip, slapped another one home.

The narrow passage was full of dust, the smell of cordite and hot gun oil. He charged up the stairs through light-perforated dust, Ramirez on his heels. Nation counted down on his fingers, then threw back the hinged trapdoor. Ramirez tossed up a flashbang and the pair of them swarmed out of the hole back-to-back, an eight-limbed firing man-spider. But no one shot back.

A mud-floored room. Window with no glass. Fierce sunlight through the gunsmoke. A broken rectangle of mud over the upside-down carpet that had covered the wooden hatch.

A bearded man lay dead on the floor amid his brass, still clutching the old Russian Kalashnikov. A hole smashed through one sandaled foot, a neater hole under his chin, *pakol* blown off with the top of his head, *kameez* rucked up.

Movement left.

Nation swung round, firing.

He stopped when he saw it was a kid. The kid lay flat on his belly against a wall, which was now stitched with Nation's bullet holes. A boy. When he saw they weren't going to shoot him he crawled to the body, whimpering. Shook it.

He started crying, "Plaar! Plaar!"

The kid's skin was dusty and aged prematurely by the sun, but Nation thought he was no older than ten. He kept repeating the word, over and over, but now he was moaning it and pulling the *kameez* down over his father's legs, to spare him shame in death. But his father's brains were on show all over the ceiling and thanks to Nation the kid was *beep láara* now. Fatherless.

Nation woke. His whole body was slick with sweat and the bedding was on the floor. He'd seen a lot worse things in Afghanistan and Iraq, but making that kid fatherless was the scene his brain replayed more than any other.

He tried to locate himself, then remembered: Vaughan's guest quarters. He'd finally crashed after breakfast. He checked his watch: 17:05. Nine hours' sleep. He'd been at Vaughan's nearly twelve hours and he was still alive.

Grace was gone. The kids' folding camp beds were also empty.

In the bathroom he slapped water on his face and let his hammering heart subside. The flashbacks came more in sleep than waking. They produced now the kinds of reactions he should have had back then, but at the time he had shot his way up those stairs with pulse barely elevated and he had watched the kid howl over his dead father and felt absolutely nothing. He'd known to feel nothing was wrong, and it was guilt that made him see these things he could not unsee, over and over.

He looked at himself in the mirror. Green eyes the women used to like, which didn't sparkle anymore. Women used to like his slow smile too, back when he used to smile. Scars from assorted pieces of hot metal on ribs, neck, belly, and hip. The deformed 7.62-millimeter sniper round, which went through his neck with sufficient concussive force to crack a rib, had tumbled out below the scapula into his body armor. It hung on a chain around his neck now. Despite the scars, the body was aging better than the face. That was because he worked it

desperately hard, getting up early to pump iron or run or free climb in the Guadalupe foothills, turning chest, abs, back, and obliques into a flak jacket under the skin. Exercise helped him sleep, and generally kept him ahead of his demons.

It occurred to him he looked like the pictures of his father, the year he disappeared. And last night he'd nearly repeated his old man's exit.

The generator cut out. So quiet out here it made your ears ring. He listened. He couldn't hear the kids. Anxiety made him towel off and dress fast. He jogged to the door of the guest quarters and across the flat through the long shadow of the diesel tank on its tower.

When he flung open the door of the ranch house, he found the kids and Grace seated at the table with Vaughan and Chunmei, and their two kids Willie and Liling.

Vaughan was watching the television news as he ate, jowls working like a pair of wrestlers. His eyes shifted to Nation. His jowls stopped.

He stared at his friend's face. "OK, buddy?"

Nation exhaled. "Sure..."

"Sleep well?"

"Slept great," shaking his head at the marvel of it.

Chunmei was eyeing his hairline.

He ran a hand over it, glancing up. "It's global warming, ma'am: the coastlines are receding. Ain't nothin' to be done."

She laughed and stood to invite him to sit. He crossed to the table and put a hand on each of the boys' shoulders, nodded to Grace. She was still pouting, her eyes smoldering. He didn't try to touch her.

He nodded at Willie and Liling. They were nice kids. Polite.

He sat and served himself pork buns, a little white rice, a small serve of a meat dish, a small serve of pickles.



He bit a pork pun. “Mm mm. Damn, but this is good. Can you cook like your momma, Lily?”

“I’m gonna be a pediatrician and marry a chef.”

“Good plan. Marry anyone but a cop.” He glanced at Grace, “Or a soldier.”

Chunmei smiled; Grace didn’t.

“Or a rodeo clown,” Vaughan added.

Nation pointed to a bowl of chili seeds in oil. “Some of that please, buddy.”

Vaughan passed it without looking. It struck Nation it wasn’t like Vaughan Holly to have the television on while they ate. His momma had raised him better than that. He turned to look at the screen. Under the TV anchorman a caption said: “Biker retaliation.”

Vaughan toggled the sound up. The anchorman intoned, “Texas Governor Jeff Abbott says his state will not stand for the type of lawlessness seen in last night’s attack by Cossacks MC gang members on a house in Van Horn, Texas. Guillermo García is at the scene of the fire.”

Guillermo was standing in front of the damp, blackened mess of Nation and Grace’s place.

He said, “The fire seems to be another reprisal attack in the ongoing war between two notoriously criminal biker gangs, the Bandidos and the Cossacks, which began with a shootout in the parking lot of the Waco Twin Peaks restaurant in 2015.”

Guillermo nodded at the camera, queuing file footage of police shepherding handcuffed bikers.

The scene cut back to Guillermo. “Van Horn residents were woken at 3:30 this morning by a large number of motorcycles. We spoke to one neighbor who witnessed the attack.”

The scene cut to a daylight interview with Earl Sorrell. The burnt-out house behind him was still smoking. Earl's middle-aged mestizo eyes were a pair of hot coals.

He said, "Yessir, I heared this thunder and looked out window. They musta been a dozen motorsickles. Couple of 'em was running away from the house...Yessir, they were bikers. Said Cossacks MC, right here." He slapped his breast. "I ain't see 'em go in, but they musta paid a visit on the family first. The ones outside was lightin' up Molotov cocktails. When these two guys was clear they throwed 'em through the windows, then they all hightailed it in different directions. Clapboard house went up like a tinderbox."

"Do you have any idea why they'd target this property?"

"People lived there was friends with a biker used to visit. Any rate the girl was. Biker used to visit when the feller was gone, while the kids was at school. Used to pull up on his Harley. Long hair, looked like he hardly ever washed." Earl slapped his breast again: "Bandido. Husband was away most of the time. I-raq? Afghanistan? Real [beep] but at least he served his country."

The beeped-out word looked to Nation like "fuckup." Earl looked embarrassed, turned his head to spit, caught himself in time and gestured with disgust towards whatever neighbors were standing out of shot. "Everyone's too scared to talk, but goddammit somethin's gotta be done about these outlaws."

Vaughan had stopped chewing. He glanced at Grace.

She shot her chair back across the tiles. "That's bullshit!"

She stared at Nation, eyes wide, pout gone. Then she glanced at Wes. Nation looked from her to Wes. The look on Wes's face told him it wasn't bullshit. The kid was only nine, but he knew.

On the screen, Guillermo said, "Other neighbors report seeing an unidentified Bandidos biker visit the house many times in recent years. Police confirm that no bodies were found inside the house. Ed?"

The scene switched back to the newsroom.

The front door slammed behind Grace.

Nation looked at his hand around the chili bowl. The knuckles were white.

Vaughan dropped his chopsticks and shot his own chair back.

Face numb, chest tight, blood like wind in his ears, Nation let go the chili bowl and grabbed his chopsticks. He tried to shoot his chair back.

It wouldn't go. Vaughan had stretched a leg out to block it in. He reached around Nation and gripped his right wrist.

Nation struggled to free his arm. The grip was too strong.

"I'll kill her!"

"Easy!"

"I'll fucking kill her! Let go!"

## CHAPTER 9

Nation threw his left elbow back at Vaughan's head. It connected, but Vaughan was too close, it had no momentum. Vaughan wrapped his left arm across Nation's chest.

"No, that ain't you. You're not gonna kill her. You're not gonna touch her."

"Let go, you fucking —"

He tried to hurl them both backwards. Vaughan's left arm squeezed tight, crushing his own left arm against his sternum. With a snarl he tried to twist his neck to get his teeth into Vaughan's forearm. But Vaughan shifted his arm and grabbed the chair's back, pinning Nation's shoulders to it. Vaughan squeezed, crushing the breath out of him.

Fifteen years earlier, on leave from Kosovo, he'd come to the Lazy L to help out with the branding. He'd stood with Vaughan's daddy, Gordon, and old Augie White and a couple of other ranch hands, and watched Vaughan grab a young Brahman Cross bull by the horns and twist it to the ground for branding. An astonishing feat of strength.

Nation shoved off the floor, again trying to throw himself backwards on top of his friend. He couldn't do it. Vaughan was too big, too strong.

Vaughan grunted, "Easy!"

Nation's breath came in hisses through clenched teeth. His eyes sought weapons, then he registered faces. The kids and Chunmei were staring at him. He

stared back, hissing through his teeth. His vision began to cloud. He felt himself going limp.

Vaughan eased the pressure and he heaved in air.

Chunmei was on her feet now. Face set, she started collecting empty dishes as if she didn't know what else to do.

The kids' heads swiveled between his face and Vaughan's and Chunmei's. She snapped something at her kids. They lowered their eyes to their plates, started chewing, casting quick glances up at him.

He registered what Vaughan was mumbling in his ear, "How many soldiers you know was faithful to their wives? Huh? How many wives you know was faithful to their soldiers? You knew. You knew it all along."

Thick-tongued, he growled, "I didn't!"

"You knew. How many soldiers can say they never cheated on their wives?"

He couldn't deny he probably would have in the last few years, but the thing about Afghanistan and Iraq is you can't just wander out from behind the wire and look for a whorehouse. And while single men had sometimes taken leave in places like Thailand, he'd always gone home. He tried to lunge backwards again.

Vaughan squeezed his chest. "Huh?"

Nation panted. His eyes stung.

Vaughan said, "All of it's in the past. It's your PTS, huh?"

He strained again to bust free, hissed, "Let the fuck go of me!"

"You saw the VA shrink."

"Let go!"

"He gave you a plan. What's your plan?"

Nation tried twisting loose.

Vaughan squeezed.

Nation grunted, "Work out. Climb."

“That’s prevention. What was the plan for triggers? Break bottles in the shed?”

Black spots blurring his vision, Nation rasped, “Yeah.”

“That’s a good plan. I got sheds. Ol’ Augie has his goddamn bottles piled halfway up the wall of the tack shed. I’m gonna let you go now. We’ll go to the shed and you’ll break bottles, then we’ll talk about what we’re gonna do next. OK?”

Nation was staring at Wes. Wes stared back, rigid with fright.

He croaked, “Lemme go.”

“OK?”

“OK! Let go!”

Vaughan let him go and backed away. Nation stood and stared at him, breathing hard. Though Vaughan had let go, the muscles of his diaphragm were cinched tight as steel tape. Vaughan put his hands up, knowing well enough his friend could kill him several different ways, now. Nation’s eyes flicked from the cutlery on the table to the knife block in the kitchen to the bull-riding trophies on the trophy cabinet with their sharp-cornered marble bases. He stared at Vaughan with narrowed eyes. Vaughan wore his poker face and his eyes followed Nation’s from object to dangerous object. He was taking a gamble on his friend’s sanity.

Vaughan glanced at the back door. Nation hesitated, glaring at him. He crossed to the door, hands clenched, breathing ragged. Exited and made for the tack shed. Vaughan kept a short distance behind, wisely keeping his mouth shut.

In his own fucking home. And his own kids *kenen!* He could cut around to the front of the house and go after her. But if he went after her Vaughan the asshole might run him down. Vaughan was still able to outrun bulls. He’d have to take Vaughan out first.

He kept on towards the shed, eyes on the pile of beer bottles old Augie White, Vaughan’s sole remaining ranch hand, had stacked against it. He imagined the heft of the bottles, the noise of breaking glass. He felt a little better.

He imagined the heft and the noise and walked into a wave of shame. It wasn't his kids: the kids had seen him lose it often enough in the past couple of years. Over the neighbors parking too close to the house. At having some asshole jump the queue at the Walmart in El Paso. His sons had seen him launch the vacuum through the window into outer space. They'd seen him punch a hole in the drywall and yell "I'm *not fucking* angry!" at their mother. Another time, they'd watched blank-faced as he tore off Earl Sorrell's wing mirror when Earl confronted him about all the ruckus. They'd heard him smash a lot of bottles in the shed. Stupid, shameful things. He was still ashamed to be seen thus by his sons, but it was now a familiar shame.

And it wasn't Vaughan witnessing his behavior that made him wince now: Vaughan was a trauma nurse with mental health first-aid tickets. Diseases of the human mind did not disgust him. More than that, it was his nature to wrestle to the ground anything that frightened him.

What made him cringe most was how he must look to Chunmei. Father locked away without trial by the police state back in China, mother tortured half to death. Never even got to fire a gun at those bastards. And yet he'd never seen her lose it.

He wrenched his mind back to the heft of longneck bottles. He grabbed four bottles, flung open the door of the tack shed. He searched the gloom for something to hurl them at. No windows in the tack shed, to preserve the leather. As far as he could tell there was nothing in here but saddles on rails and bridles on nails. He smashed a bottle on the floor. He'd been a fool to frighten the kids back there, a fool in front of Chunmei. A fool to trust that woman. He broke another bottle, breathing hard, then hefted a third.

The tack shed smelled of saddle soap. He thought of mixing saddle soap from Ivory soap, beeswax and neatsfoot oil with Vaughan and old Augie. "Old" even back then when Nation was only fifteen and learning to be an American man.

If he kept breaking bottles it was only adding to the mess he was already leaving Vaughan to clean up. He lowered his arm. He set the two bottles down and knelt with his face on a saddle. He breathed the smell of saddle soap and rocked his

face on the leather, wishing the tears would flow and release the tightness in his chest, like when he was a kid. He pressed his thumbs into his eyes. They watered but no sobs came. Just numb. After a while he got up and wiped his eyes and went outside, feeling foolish. Vaughan stood aside to let him by. Head down, Nation took three steps towards his friend and embraced him.

At length he muttered round the lump in his throat, “Now you see what I’m like.”

“You think I couldn’t see? You’re a hundred percent better than you were a year ago. You’re gonna have relapses. A big trigger like this will do it. But you know your triggers.”

“I never had a better friend than you.”

Vaughan clapped him on the back. “We’re not friends; you’re a brother to me.”

Wes and Dean were peering out the mesh in the back door.

There were tears in his friend’s eyes when he let go. He went to the house and knelt down on the back porch. He held his arms wide. The kids opened the door and came to him, their faces blank.

With his arms around them he said, “I’m so sorry, *compadres*.”

Dean said, “Why do you wanna kill Momma?”

He glanced at Wes. Wes knew.

“I don’t want to kill Momma.”

“Is it your goddamn wonky head?”

“Yessir, it is. I’ll get it straightened out eventually.”

“And then you’ll coach the Eaglets?”

“Right.”

He held tight to his boys. They seemed to forgive him anything.

An hour later Grace hadn’t returned. Chunmei was about to go looking for her when they heard the motorcycle.



## CHAPTER 10

*Castle Gratka, Northeast Poland*

As the chopper descended to the castle, the Director noted with approval that the guards at the gate were searching a delivery van before they let it through. Much easier to recruit guards who knew what they were doing in these days when so many soldiers were leaving the Polish military. Other vans and trucks were parked in the semi-circular white gravel drive. Preparations for tonight's fundraiser were in full swing. Two more armed guards stood at the entrance to the baroque wing and one patrolled the parapet wall between the south and west turrets.

He'd added a few things when he rebuilt the castle: a commercial kitchen, a gymnasium and pool, plenty of technology, and, suspended on immense girders five meters above the lush garden of the central courtyard, a steel and glass helipad. The pilot lowered the bird below the battlements and set it down.

The Director's secretary, Cyprian, battled the downdraft to take his briefcase. Cyprian was whip-thin and nearing sixty. He was blown back by the downdraft, only managing to pull up a couple of meters short of the edge of the helipad. His eyes gleamed with enjoyment at being propelled by a force greater than himself.

The Director climbed out and pointed up at the north tower and shouted, "I'll have my soup up there."

Cyprian shouted, "There's a storm coming."

"We need a good storm!"

On the tower's turret, grunting and the smell of pig shit rose to the Director on the wind. He leaned over the rampart to look down at the sty. When she was alive, his wife had wanted the sty moved further away. It was true that when the wind was from Russia it smelled bad. But the Director liked to be reminded of the short distance between man and the pigs.

The tinny sounds of a 1950 Warsaw Workers' Vaudeville chorus drifted up the stairs from the record player in his office:

We are building a new home  
Yet another brand-new home  
For the better days to come  
O Warsaw!

From the basement to the top  
Let the buildings rise with luck  
For the dreams of all of us  
O Warsaw!

Cyprian brought a bowl of soup on a tray and set it on the cast iron table. It was *żurek*, with sliced sausage and a boiled egg. A thick slice of dark bread on the side.

The Director said, "You haven't been feeding the pigs too much?"

"Not since she littered. She pushed the runt off the teat this morning."

He nodded, pleased, and inhaled the sour-smelling steam. Cyprian obliged him by withdrawing, knowing the Director didn't like it when people watched him eat.

He ate fast, with his arm crooked around the bowl, guarding it. One of those habits from his orphanage days that it still comforted him to indulge when he was alone. He crooned intermittently with the cultural workers of the Workers' Vaudeville as he chewed and swallowed. The nuns who ran the orphanage in his earliest years would only let the children sing hymns, and they wouldn't let him sing at all, because he had a tin ear. But when the comrades took over, they had allowed him to sing the new songs – loud and proud and out of tune. He wiped the bowl clean with bread and gulped it down, then leaned back with his eyes closed, enjoying the sun on his face.

A high-pitched squealing from below. He rose and went to the battlement, leaned over in the gap between two merlons to look down on the pig pen. The

sow had littered on Wednesday night, while he was sleeping at his Warsaw penthouse. Friday afternoon now and already she'd pushed the runt off the teat. It fascinated him: at first the runt would struggle to live, and the sow would encourage it to suckle. If it got stronger, the sow would encourage it to suckle more. But if it did not get stronger quickly, she'd push it away and the runt would soon cease its struggle, accepting its fate.

Cyprian appeared at the head of the stairs. "Gajos is here."

The Director's lips thinned. "Send him up. And bring up the samovar and thallium."

"The thallium?" Cyprian stared at the Director's face a moment to make sure he'd understood right. "And the Prussian Blue?"

The Director snapped, "Yes, yes!"

## CHAPTER 11

Nation and Vaughan held still and listened. Only one motorcycle. Not approaching; retreating.

Vaughan scowled. "That's a big engine. Stay put. Let me go see."

"No way."

Vaughan shook his head but turned and jogged to his pickup. Nation followed and climbed into the passenger seat. As they wove along the sandy road towards the ranch gate a rodent gnawed at his innards. He wound down the window. The air was hot and dry and clean, and he breathed deep until his brain was working again. It helped to have a mission.

He said, "Your buddy still work at the weigh station on the Interstate?"

"Wendell Curtis?" Vaughan checked his watch. "Should be there."

Vaughan extracted his cell from his breast pocket, handed it over. Nation found Wendell's number and dialed it, handed the phone back.

"Wendell? Vaughan. Listen: sometime in the next ten minutes you might see a motorcycle turn out where I do. I want you to tell me who's on it. It's kinda important."

He hung up and dropped the phone in a drink holder. They crossed the cattle guard at the Lazy L sign and turned onto the public road.

Vaughan's phone rang and he picked it up. "Wendell. Sure?" His jaw tightened. "What was she wearin'? Uh huh. Thanks, buddy. Chunmei'll bring you boys some eggs on her way in."

He killed the call, pulled the vehicle over.

He said, "Harley chopper. Guy was a Bandido."

"He sure?"

"I guess everybody in Texas knows their patch now. Mexican. Braided long hair, beard like a billy goat."

"Grace?"

"On the pillion."

Nation swallowed, nodded. "Headed?"

"East."

Nation nodded. Nodded like one of the sorrowful pumpjacks out there on the mesquite savannah with not a thing to do but nod.

Eventually he said, "Ramon is Sergeant-at-Arms of the Bandidos' San Angelo chapter. How far are we from San Angelo?"

"Couple hundred miles."

Nation checked his watch, nodded again. "Give me your cell. You got her number?"

"Under Adam's Grace."

He found the number and dialed, holding his breath.

The cell phone rang. Nobody answered, but it rang.

"Fuck." Nation killed the call. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Her cell's on."

"So?"

"We took the batteries out last night, but hers is on now. She used her cell to call him."

“So?”

“Turn the vehicle around.”

Vaughan stared at him, comprehension dawning. He swung the vehicle around.

“What makes you think these people can locate a cell phone?”

“I don’t know, but they traced an email. Even if we’re only running from an outlaw motorcycle gang, well, the outlaw gangs have women working for the police and such. Grace was working at the MVD for the Bandidos when I met her.”

Vaughan was silent a moment, then said, “Ever think you should’ve left her at the MVD?”

“I was hypoxic at the time. By the time I was sober, she was pregnant. I couldn’t leave her alone in that condition.”

A Catholic upbringing was one of a few things they had in common. Neither of them had considered an abortion.

Vaughan sucked the reflective spit through his teeth. “You know, soon as she’s thinking straight, she’ll want the kids. She might even come crawling back to you.”

“She knows I can’t wait for her. You think I’m gonna wait for her to change her mind?”

“My point is, whether she wants to set it right with you or not, she’s gonna want the kids. And she knows you’ll go to ground. Now, is she gonna count on the law to find you?” He shook his head. “You got to expect that Ramon and his bad boys will try to help her get ’em back. You better work on the assumption you have at least two outlaw gangs on your tail.”

He hadn’t thought of that. Knowing Grace, Vaughan was probably right. All her life, from Ciudad Juarez to El Paso to Houston, she’d relied on gangs, never the police. Suspicion of police was another thing they had in common.

When they got back to the house Nation checked the guest quarters. Sure enough, Grace's handbag and cell were missing from the nightstand.

He shoved the boys' pajamas into their rucks and packed his own ruck.

Over his shoulder he said, "Can I take a vehicle?"

"Take the Ford."

Nation and Vaughan humped the rucks out into the long shadows of sundown. Fifty yards off, the four kids were cantering in a string across the flat. Playing at wild horses. The screen door clapped. Chunmei emerged from the main house to round them up.

Vaughan indicated Nation's Chev with his chin. "Augie and I'll move it out to the old shed at Pickles Well before I go to work."

"I owe you."

"Damn right."

There was a screech of sand-choked steel rollers as Vaughan opened his maintenance shop, revealing a light truck, a number of dirt bikes, and a king cab Ford Super Duty. While Vaughan fetched a foam mattress for the truck bed, Nation loaded the kids.

Chunmei put three sleeping bags on the front passenger seat and checked the kids' seatbelts were fastened.

Nation embraced her. "I'm so sorry, Chunmei. I'll make it up to y'all someday."

She was awkward in the hug as a little wooden soldier girl. But she kissed his cheek and squeezed his arm.

Liling and Willie were bobbing up and down by the rear windows, blowing fart noises. He was grateful Wes and Dean were distracted.

He embraced Vaughan and said, "These people play for keeps, buddy. Make sure you go armed for a week or two."

Vaughan nodded. "What'll you do?"

"Go to ground awhile."

“And the kids?”

“Them too.”

Vaughan turned so the kids couldn't see his face. “You want, you can leave them with us.”

“It's not safe. Someone will come for them. The *best*-case scenario would be their mother and a bunch of outlaws.”

Vaughan sucked spit through his teeth. “Maybe they'd be safer with her right now.”

Nation set his jaw. “Would you leave your kids with an outlaw biker gang?”

“I guess it would depend on what the alternative was.”

“They wouldn't be safe with her.”

Chunmei judged by Nation's expression that the topic was closed, and handed him her cell.

She said, “For emergency.”

He hesitated, then took it. “Thanks. I won't use it unless I have to.”

Vaughan said, “Grace know where you're headed?”

“No.”

“What should I say when she comes here?”

“Tell her east. She knows we weren't planning to visit with you long.”

He embraced them both again and said, “I'm sorry, Vaughan. I hope and pray I haven't brought you trouble.”

\*

The sandy track out of the Lazy L was blood red now. The shadows of the nodding pumpjacks stretched for miles. The interrogation began.



Wes said, “Why did Momma go?”

He thought: Because she’s been illegal half her life. Doesn’t want to run anymore.

He said, “Her friend came and got her.”

He’d like to have a talk with her friend, *mano a mano*.

“Was that the motorcycle we heard?”

“Yeah.”

Wes muttered, “Was it Ramon?”

“Yeah.”

Silence, then Dean said, “Momma went with Ramon?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“I guess she wanted to say goodbye.”

“Why?”

“We’re going away for a while.”

“Where?”

“Overseas.”

“Why?”

No choice. He didn’t want to leave Texas, but he had no choice.

Wes said, “So it was about your daddy?”

“I think so.”

“What happened to him?”

“I don’t know. Grandma says the SB took him.”

“Who?”

He looked out the window. Cottontails scampered for their holes. They knew what it was to live in fear and trembling.

“We left Poland when I was your age because it was a communist country. In communist countries they have regular police who protect the people, like the police here, but they also have secret police. In Russia they were called the KGB; in Poland the KGB was called the SB – the Esbeks. The secret police protect the government from the people. They spy on the people and lock up anyone who says anything bad about the government.”

“Because the people don’t like the government?”

“In those countries, the people hated the government.”

Wes said, “Did Grandpa hate them?”

“Yessir.”

Dean said, “And Momma’s coming?”

“Yessir.”

Maybe it wasn’t a lie. There was a chance she’d change her mind and meet them somewhere on the road. They’d been OK together – so he’d thought, anyway. She’d put up with a lot of shit from him and she was a good mother. Two good kids.

“You’re not gonna kill her?”

“No.”

He looked for a payphone in Odessa, but they were all gone. He switched on Chunmei’s cell and called Grace. Her phone was out of service. Either the battery was flat, or she’d come to her senses and switched the thing off. That was something, anyway. He turned off the cell and took the battery out.

By the time they passed through Saragosa the kids were asleep. He couldn’t find the news station. Nothing but Spanish and country from the left side of the dial to the right. Surely, he could risk a stretch on the I-10. He turned onto it, but a few miles later the news station came back, and it wasn’t long before the

newsreader said, “The body count continues to rise in the ongoing gang war between the Cossacks and the Bandidos Motorcycle Clubs. Another member of the Cossacks was found dead on a backroad north of Van Horn this morning. Wanted for questioning is Adam Nation, a veteran of the Ranger Regiment who served in Afghanistan and Iraq, whose home in Van Horn was burned down in a Cossacks attack on Tuesday. With him are his wife Grace Nation, formerly Grace Gutierrez, a long time Bandidos associate, and their two children. The family was in a black Chevrolet Silverado 1500 crew cab. Police warn that if sighted they should not be approached. Nation has a gunshot wound in the left leg. He is believed to be armed and is understood to suffer PTSD. He should not be approached under any circumstances.”

He took the next exit off the Interstate.

## CHAPTER 12

The Director glanced behind him to see a big man emerge from the stairhead. Former SB lieutenant Anton Gajos had a head from Easter Island. In a vain effort to look youthful, he'd shaved the sides of it, leaving a broad strip of longer hair down the middle in the Samartian style of a magnate. Everything old becomes new again.

He said, "Come and watch this, Gajos."

Gajos's nose wrinkled as he looked over the parapet wall. His nose was big and malleable, as if made of rubber.

Below, the sow pushed the runt away from her teats. The same genes piloted both sow and runt. If they calculated the runt was more likely to die than live, then it followed logically that the food spent on preserving the runt was wasted, because those kilojoules would be better spent on preserving the same genes in the runt's litter mates. Genes are concerned with their own survival, not the survival of the robots they pilot.

The sow bit the runt's head off.

The Director explained the genes' point of view to Gajos, but the man's face had turned the color of lard and he didn't seem to take much in. Gajos was a former SB interrogator; his curiosity had been trained within narrower limits, like a sniffer dog's.

The Director's secretary Cyprian emerged from the stair head with the samovar. He set it down on the table, took two dry pine cones from his blazer pockets and fed them into the coals of the central burner.

The Director turned to Gajos, who tensed. "So, Gajos, you missed them in Texas, eh?"

"Yes, but – "

"Eh? Missed them again."

"Yes, Pan Director."

"Mother and son both. Cups and saucers, Cyprian."

He turned and fixed Gajos with the stare he had once used on unhelpful informers. It had never failed to convey that he could see into them like an x-ray machine.

Gajos' lips wiped each other. "The Cossacks screwed up. The beetroots started shooting at the son when he ran."

"The Cossacks you hired? You excuse yourself, Gajos?"

"No, Pan Director."

"Eh?"

"No, I'm just clarifying."

"I'm clear, Gajos: you excuse yourself."

"No, Pan Director. Partly."

"I'm only partly clear? Well, I'm not going to debate you, Gajos."

Cyprian took white porcelain cups from a wicker basket and poured tea from the samovar's brass spout.

The Director's eyes felt hot and he had to look away from Gajos to cool them.

He said, "Have some tea, Gajos."

Cyprian set a saucer on the merlon in front of each of them. The Director poured tea from the cup into the saucer, then lifted the saucer on the splayed fingers of his right hand.

He inhaled the steam of tea and pine. “Cyprian suggested you use the Brooklyn *vory*, but you ignored him and used your Cossacks.”

He sipped.

Gajos was trying to imitate him, spilling a little, as if he'd never before had tea in the Russian manner. “The FBI are too interested in the Russian mafia. More than the Columbians even. The Cossacks gave us better cover.”

“A motorcycle gang vendetta?”

“The son's wife is still a biker slut. If such people rub each other out, the FBI doesn't care.”

“At your age Gajos, you should know it's important to pick the right gang.”

“Yes, Pan Director.”

As he watched the sow eat her piglet, the Director was reminded of Mao Zedong. When starvation settled on the provinces of China in 1959, Chairman Mao told the Party leaders, “When there isn't enough to eat, people starve to death. It's better to let half the people die so the other half can eat their fill!” Stalin had had the same idea, but he'd died too early. Perhaps Chinese communism still thrived, long after the death of the Soviet kind, because it was more attuned to nature.

He said, “You play chess, Gajos?”

“Badly, Pan Director.”

“You can't see it, but out there the pieces are moving again.” He swept his arm through an arc between Kaliningrad and Moscow, and Gajos followed his gaze across the fields of wheat, hops and corn. “Very big pieces. Moves of historical consequence. A game to decide the world championship.”

Gajos groaned, “I don't understand”, and doubled over.

“Kaczyński has made himself an American puppet. He’s signed deals to buy Patriot Missiles and Texan LNG. He wants to wean us off Russian gas. How do you think Russia likes that? Poland on its doorstep, united with America in rockets, gas and God?”

Gajos vomitted.

The Director studied the man heaving at his feet. The runaway of hair had been groomed with some greasy substance. A porcine roll of thick neck, sunburnt and bristled, bulged above the white shirt collar. The Director found himself blinking rapidfire.

Gajos croaked, “What have you given me?”

The Director looked out over the fields to ease his eyes. “Thallium. Tasteless. Odorless. A radioactive heavy metal.” His voice remained neutral, but a little more pronounced in the sibillants. “They used to treat syphilitics with it. Much smaller doses, of course. How do you feel?”

“What will it do?”

“Radiation sickness. You can expect to bleed from the nose, gums and rectum. Perhaps you’ll lapse into a coma. You’ll certainly lose your hair. No great loss.” He took a bottle from the pocket of his suit jacket. “This will fix you: Prussian Blue. Apologize to Cyprian and you can have some.”

Gajos groaned and twisted his head sideways. An eye bulged above the curve of shaved head, fixed on the bottle.

Gajos wiped his mouth with the back of a hand, groaned, “I’m sorry, Cyprian.”

Cyprian’s face remained expressionless.

The Director calculated. “Alright, then. You’ll need a large dose. Three grams, I would say – six pills.”

He held the bottle over the parapet and emptied it into the sty below.

Gajos screamed, “No!”

Grunting and squealing erupted among the pigs.

Gajos sobbed. He tried to stand, but he was unable to balance. He fell back onto hands and knees.

The Director and Cyprian stood aside to let him crawl to the stairs.

“Down you go, Gajos! Quick, the pigs are hungry!”



## CHAPTER 13

Nation drove south on backroads. Around eleven he made a fireless camp on the bank of the Pecos south of McCamey, at a secret knuckle of river where, back in the days before New Mexico stole the water, the river was deep and the catfish were obliging. He and Vaughan had meant to bring the kids fishing here, but had never yet gotten around to it. They slept in the truck bed in the sleeping bags. Nation slept little.

They were on the road before sunup. As the sun rose it brought out the smell of mesquite sap, of fresh deer shit in the thickets and, when the wind rose in the west, the ancient and obscene odor of crude oil. He left the window open, to keep smelling it all. As the sun climbed, the air began to quiver like gasoline fumes. West of Ozona the pumpjacks petered out, the creeks were dry and new windfarms lined the buttes. All you could harvest from this country was wind and Illegals.

Between Ozona and Sonora, the Chihuahuan Desert gave way to the hill country. The kids started fighting again an hour short of Austin. Nation's wound throbbed and so did his head.

From the top of the hill he pointed at a vista of live oak and horse pasture running up to the Grecian columns of a front porch.

He said, "Hey look! Ain't that pretty?"

They didn't look; they howled louder. In the rearview mirror he saw they had each other by the hair.

He said, “Goddammit! If you don’t quit I’ll stop the fucking vehicle and bang your heads together till you do!”

Dean started crying for his mom.

He shook his head and reached through the seats, tried to stroke the boy’s head.

“I’m sorry.” Then he lied again: “We’ll see her soon, honey boy.”

Time to get some food into them. On the outskirts of Austin, he pulled into a mall. As they crossed the hot parking lot, he wore his ballcap and shades and walked slow to try to hide his limp. At a Dairy Queen he bought burgers and shakes and sat the boys in a corner. He switched on Chunmei’s phone. The news websites had an eight-year-old picture of him in uniform. Face leaner, hair buzzcut. Some sites also had school photographs of his kids.

He logged in to his email. There was a message from Grace.

I saw Vaughan and Chunmei this morning. They said you went east. You did your best and so did I. We both know it was an accident being together. I was so lonely. You go do what you have to, but you need to leave the kids with me. You know they will not be safe. It was blind luck we did not burn in our beds two nights ago. Luck runs out. I have seen it many times in Juárez even for one of my own brothers. Call me superstitious. I don’t want to live like a dog again or my kids to live like dogs. They will be safe with me as I have an army to protect me here. I have turned off my cell again like you said. Please call me on one of these numbers below. I can meet you anywhere. You must not be selfish you must think of their safety. If something happens to them how will you ever set it right with God?

He pressed his temples, hesitated, then wrote down the numbers.

Before he switched off the phone he opened a Polish news site to see what he was heading into. The Polish government was still on the rampage, firing ex-communists from the courts and the army and everything else. It was replacing them with people loyal to the ruling Law and Justice Party. The opposition was outraged. The European Union was outraged. The armed forces were on the verge of revolt. Putin was smirking.

Nation didn't have any sympathy for old Reds: he and his mother had been running from them all his life. And he had a strong feeling they were behind the events of two nights back.

He switched off the phone and removed the battery.

## CHAPTER 14

Under communism, ordinary citizens had been conditioned by fear of the secret police and their informers, with every ordinary citizen reminding himself several times a day: “I’d better be careful of you, because you might be one of Them.” The Director had been less fearful, because he was one of Them.

Standing at the entrance of Castle Gratka’s great ballroom, a sweep of marble staircase behind him, he greeted his masked guests with three kisses. In a lull between arrivals, he surveyed the gathering from behind his mask. Most of his guests had also been members of Them, the communist *nomenklatura* and the security forces who kept them in power. Ironically enough, this network journalists called the Red Spiderweb, was now held together by a fear of betrayal – even in Russia, where Putin’s branch of the Web still held power. All across the Eastern Bloc, from Vladivostok to Wrocław, the unspoken contract governing relations nowadays was, “I know what you used to do, and you know what I used to do, so let’s keep our mouths shut and we’ll both do very well.”

But if the Director’s plans came off, that was going to change. If his plans came off, there would no longer be any need for disguise.

He turned to Stanek Lipiński, the new leader of his new party, the Democratic Defense League, and muttered, “We have to spread the word Kaczyński’s staging a coup.”

His mutter came out too loud and he glanced around to see if anyone had heard. He was still getting used to the way the Greek theater mask amplified his voice.

Lipiński too wore a Greek theater mask, but whereas the Director wore Tragedy, Lipiński's wore Comedy.

His reply boomed out in an operatic baritone: "Which he is!"

Heads turned twenty meters away across the parquet floor, and faces lit up at the sight of the candidate's red-blooded, telegenic bulk.

"Eh?"

"Which he absolutely is!"

"Which he is. The trouble is he's doing it so slowly people can't see it."

Lipiński nodded. "You're right."

"Eh?"

"You're absolutely right!" Lipiński lowered his voice a few decibels. "He's careful, and he stays in the shadows. But he's the one pulling the Prime Minister's strings. He hates Russia, but he's doing exactly what Putin did to Russia. Purging the media, then the bureaucracy, then the army – throwing out generals right and left!" Lipiński mimed hurling generals. "Have you seen who he's going after now? '700 communist judges – loyal servants of Moscow!"

Supreme Court judge Kolenda and his wife, masked like birds of prey, were in the foyer between the cloak room and the ball room. At the bellowed headline, they stopped and looked at each other. Kolenda was one of the former communist judges with his head on the chopping block.

The Director strode to greet them, and they lifted their masks, perhaps unsure if he would recognize them. He lifted his own mask and glimpsed himself in the hall mirror. A high-cheekboned face that was refined from the eyes up; brutal below. A mouth that was firm these days. A not-unelectable face, but he preferred to keep it out of the news. The body running to fat a little now, but it retained the

strength that had allowed him to press three boys into his service at the Lavrentiy Beria Children's Home before his voice broke.

He hailed the Kolendas and kissed them three times and ushered them into the ballroom. He was muttering encouragement to the judge when young Kuba Dorn materialized in their midst. Dorn was costumed as Don Juan, with a mustache like a second set of eyebrows above his full mouth. His Lordship Kolenda had admitted the young man to his chambers when he left university. Dorn had his brains from his father, the former secret police chief Jakub Dorn, and his looks from his mother, a stunningly beautiful actress in the Wola Worker's Theater. He was a judge himself now, before the age of forty, thanks to old Kolenda's patronage.

Not for the first time, the Director thought that what held the red spiderweb together, besides a careful civility, was a readiness to help each other's children. Nobody could blame the children for whatever crimes their parents may or may not have committed in the distant past, and men like Kuba Dorn and Stanek Lipiński wore their laundered prestige with innocence.

He said, "You're a chip off the old block, Kuba, slipping in like that."

Kuba flashed a smile that faded fast, as if he were on the red carpet and the Director was a *paparazzo*.

"I've not been here long."

"I didn't see you slip in, though."

"Must be my blood, as you say."

The Director blinked at him, then said, "How *is* your father?"

"They've stopped chemotherapy. The cancer went through him like a storm before they picked it up. I think there were a lot of things he wanted to put in order before he died. He won't get a chance now."

The Director wondered if there were any files on him among his old mentor's documents. He searched Kuba's face, but there was nothing accusing there.

He said, “I’ll visit him Monday. Let me know if there’s anything I can do. Anything at all. Join us for a hand of cards later, won’t you? You can meet the candidate unmasked.”

Dorn shook hands with Lipiński, glancing up at the banner above the fireplace, which bore a five-meter-high head and shoulders of the smiling candidate. Under it was the phrase ‘Building bridges’ and the eagle crest of the Democratic Defense League.

He flashed a grin at Lipiński. “I look forward to meeting the man behind the slogan.”

As the room filled, the smiles became more confident, and the voices gathered volume. Hearts and voices were lifted not only by the company and the good wine and food, but also, the Director was pleased to think, by the splendor of the vaulted ceiling and the chandeliers, the pianist playing Chopin, the marble staircase, the hundred-million-zlotys worth of artwork, sacred and secular, which anchored their cause in history. Above the great fireplace hung a magnificent life-size portrait of Albertus, Margrave of Brandenburg and Duke of Prussia, in full beard, sword and heavy black furs, at the height of his power in 1599, and around it likenesses of other men who’d ruled here – Swedes, Muscovites, Lithuanian magnates. Men who hadn’t felt the least bit guilty about taking the spoils of history and changing allegiances when it suited them.

The Director led Lipiński across the vast parquet floor to meet a long-beaked plague doctor who was leaning beside the fireplace. Near the doctor was a small man in a cuckoo mask. The Director nodded at the cuckoo, then ignored him. He embraced the plague doctor and the two men bumped masks in a parody of three kisses.

Eyes bulged blue behind the mask’s glass goggles, giving the plague doctor a hunted look, which, the Director reflected, was probably historically accurate. The mask had been chosen because it hid the whole face. It was made of leather and brass rivets and looked heavy, even for a man as big as the plague doctor.

He introduced the plague doctor as “Arkady,” then took Lipiński’s elbow to present him. “Arkady, I’d like you to meet the next Prime Minister of Poland.”

Arkady spoke in a Russian-accented rumble. “Glad to. Not hostile to Moscow, I hope?”

Lipiński was staring at Arkady’s enormous fist, which enveloped even his big hand. “What’s that?” He forced a laugh. “No, I think we’ve had enough of that, don’t you? Little Chairman Kaczyński talks as if he carried a big stick! Do you know there are soldiers running our army now who’ve been promoted twelve ranks in twelve months? If Russia were to invade – and I’m not suggesting it – but if you did, you’d be met by squads of Boy Scouts!”

A neutral “I know” echoed from the plague doctor.

The Director blinked at his friend. Arkady let go Lipiński’s hand and changed the subject. “Putin’s livid about this LNG deal of yours.”

Lipiński said, “Not our deal, Arkady. Chairman Kaczyński’s deal. What are we, Trump’s bimbos? Please let us buy your rockets! Please let us buy your gas! Please let us suck your mushroom-headed *ptak!*”

Arkady wagged a huge forefinger, “Now, candidate, don’t be too hard on our Donald.”

“Ha! *Our* Donald. That’s good. Yes, the FSB’s Donald! For God’s sake, Russian gas is forty percent cheaper! First thing we do when we get in is tear up the LNG contract. It’s all about his brother: little Kaczyński never misses a chance to poke Putin in the eye. Russians must be tired of getting the blame for every fucking plane crash. In my experience, if it’s a choice between conspiracy and fuckup, choose fuckup every time.”

The Director said, “And don’t forget the traitors in our midst.”

“That’s right! The enemy within!”

“Eh?”

“Loyal to Moscow! Reds under the bed! Under all the furniture!”



Lipiński checked under a table for traitors.

The Director said, “Just look how he’s going after me. Two weeks after we register a new opposition party, he launches an attack on the pockets of the man funding it.”

Lipiński nodded. “You’re right!”

The Director said, “You know what I’m talking about?”

Lipiński smiled disarmingly, admitted, “Not specifically. You’re right about his paranoia, though.”

The Director said, “He’s just blocked our new drug, Thyroglan.”

“Cancer drug?”

The Director nodded, his attention caught by someone who had just entered the ballroom.

Lipiński said, “I’ll put something on *Fakty*. ‘Kaczyński blocks cancer cure! We’ll humiliate the fucker.’”

Near the entrance to the ballroom, a man in a lion mask refused the champagne a waiter offered him. He caught sight of the Director and made straight for him. Below the mask, he wore military fatigues. Cyprian moved to intercept, hissing on his way past, “I *told* him it was evening dress.”

The Director saw dark eyes with yellow flecks staring at him as Cyprian murmured urgently in the lion’s ear. The lion allowed himself to be led to a small door, out of sight of the main ballroom.

He took Lipiński’s elbow. “Come on, candidate, I’ll introduce you to some people with deep pockets.”

The Director didn’t introduce the plague doctor to anyone else.

## CHAPTER 15

Nation sat on a stool in a three-story bar on the Galveston Island shore. The place looked as if it had been nailed together from driftwood. The walls were hung with ropes and other nautical junk. Bob Marley on the sound system. A couple at a nearby table sipped piña coladas. The plastic blinds were rolled up to let in the ocean breeze and he had a good view of the Ocean Breeze Motel on the other side of Seawall Boulevard. After a long swim in the Gulf, the kids were asleep in their second-floor motel room. It was a beautiful night, only a little blurred by the correction on the Walmart eyeglasses he'd bought to change his appearance. His stubble had grown long enough to itch, and it had a ways to go yet.

Across the high, round table his brother-in-arms Cody Ramirez belched quietly, and stared at Nation as if looking into a campfire.

He said, "You want passports."

"Polish and Canadian, for me and the kids."

"Not Grace?"

"Deserted."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"Another time."

Ramirez glanced at the folder of documentation for the American legends he'd prepared: a guy out of Corpus Christi with a wife and two boys. Real Southerners who had died in a smash on the I-10 back in 2009. Solid identities.

He said, "You're putting a little strain on the friendship."

"I know."

"Guess I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you though, huh?"

"You wouldn't be here two or three times."

Ramirez shook his head. "Well, you're in luck. I'll be in Houston another month, which should be long enough to get it done."

"How's that?"

"I'm getting out of here."

"You're kidding me."

"The Agency is posting me to Moscow Station. Diplomatic cover. Seems we're destined to operate in the same theater, my brother."

Ramirez raised his bottle in toast. They clinked.

Nation said, "That's good news, man. I guess you served your time then, huh?"

"You know it. Five years hard as a PowerPoint ranger trying to teach tradecraft to ICE agents and you feel like the dog that tried to screw the skunk: didn't get all he wanted, but he got all he could stand."

In the early days of the occupation of Afghanistan, the US Special Forces had been unprepared for the effectiveness of insurgent IEDs. Nation had trained with Third Battalion, Seventy-fifth Ranger Regiment, and he'd been to both the Sapper and Explosive Ordinance Disposal (EOD) schools, so that made him a precious commodity: a guy who could both dispose of IEDs and keep up with the Special Forces. Within months of the invasion he was pulled out of Camp Benning and seconded to Cody's CIA Special Activities Division/Special Operations Group (SAD/SOG) team of black-ops paramilitaries.

After SAD/SOG had turned to hunting down the masterminds of jihad in Pakistan, Nation carried on clearing compounds and blowing up arms caches with the Rangers in Helmand and Kandahar. He tried out for Delta Force in 2006 and made it through with five other guys of the starting 125. He subsequently operated as a Delta EOD tech, mostly in Iraq and Afghanistan. By that time, Cody had moved out of SOG and gone undercover as a CIA field agent in Peshawar. There he had spent the next decade gathering intel and calling in drone strikes on Taliban, Al Qaeda and Haqqani. He'd left Peshawar in an undignified hurry after shooting dead an ISI – Pakistani intelligence – agent who pulled a gun on him at an unofficial road block. A Peshawar tabloid carried a photograph of the “killer spy” and the incriminating objects found in the CIA agent’s vehicle: fake number plates, a Glock handgun and 9 mm ammunition, an infrared light, a portable telescope and pocket GPS, two cell phones, a satellite phone, several ATM and military ID cards in different names, a diplomatic passport in one name and a regular one in another, identification cards from the US consulates in Lahore and Peshawar, a camera, and a fake beard. A huge embarrassment for the US government, though the Agency had managed to pay off the ISI before the story went any wider. For his sins, Ramirez had been busted back to his desk-jockey job in Houston.

Nation examined his friend: high cheekbones, straight Latin nose, black eyes crackling with a higher voltage than was needed for the mundane actions he now performed. After four years cooling his heels in Houston, Ramirez was still lean and hungry as a knife. The thought of having his friend just over the border in Russia made the trip ahead of Nation seem less lonely.

The waitress was Belle, a magnolia bloom in her early twenties. She set two more beers in front of them and Ramirez said, “You’re a peach, Belle.”

She leaned over to pick up the empties, locked eyes with him, said huskily, “No fuzz here.”

“No?”

“Uh uh.”

She exhaled through her nose with amusement, winked at both of them and sashayed away.

Ramirez grinned. “What is it with these Gulf Coast girls?”

The guy’s appetite for risk was surpassed only by his lust. It struck Nation that Ramirez in Moscow might prove interesting, but he didn’t have time for this now.

“You think I can have your undivided attention just a little longer?”

Ramirez chuckled at his impatience, then frowned at his beer.

He said, “You know, the offer’s still there, man: you could come work for us. That would give you a helluva lot more protection than you have now. Hell, you already did work for us! What’s stopping you?”

What was stopping him? He’d been saying no for years. But now everything had changed.

Thunder of motorcycles on the Boulevard.

He stood up and went to the open window. Four big bikes stopped at the lights, side-by-side. He watched them sit there, making way more noise than necessary, heart beating a little faster as he waited to see if they would turn into the bar’s parking lot. He couldn’t make out the riders’ patches from here.

The lights changed and they took off, thundering and blatting and popping, screaming ‘look at me!’ Obliging strollers turned their heads; the bikes kept right on, gathering speed.

He checked the parking lot and the beach for surveillance. The lot was empty. There was a guy on the seawall, but he was looking out to sea.

He leaned on the window ledge and bent one leg then the other, to ease his lower back. Too many hours behind the wheel. On the Pleasure Pier the Ferris wheel had stopped turning. He stared unseeing at the moon path on the water.

Ramirez propped beside him.

Nation said, “I was an EOD tech with a SADSOG team. I can’t go back to EOD.”

“You were a lot more than that. Black Ops is only gonna keep growing, and you’ve done them in all the worst places: we know it and Langley knows it.”

Nation scratched his itchy neck stubble. “With my condition, I wouldn’t pass the psych tests.”

“Sure you would. They never formally diagnosed you, so your security clearance is intact. Langley owes you, man. I’m not the only operator whose ass you saved. Some of those guys from our team have pull, nowadays.”

On the Pleasure Pier the lights were going out. Just the idea of going back to that part of the world depressed him.

He shook his head. “Momma and I have been hiding from these people thirty years. This is the second time they found us. I don’t want my kids to repeat my life. I have to find out who’s hunting us.”

“Your momma’s safe. Come work for us – we can make the kids safe.”

“I’ll think it over. Maybe when I get back. And they won’t find her?”

“They won’t find her. I told you, it’s a solid legend. She’ll contact me in three months, and we’ll see if it’s safe for you two to be in touch.”

“Did the Van Horn Sheriff find that biker choked out on Broadway? He had a cell phone.”

Ramirez shook his head. “The trucker told the sheriff about him, but the body was gone by the time he showed up. One of your neighbors said a Cossack had a body across his pillion when they torched your house.”

“What about the guy I shot near the Figure 4 turnoff?”

“They found the body, but no cell. He had a printout of your picture in the Van Horn Advocate from 2008, wearing your new Silver Star.”

Nation nodded, slow as a pumpjack. “I have to go to Poland.”

Ramirez sighed. “It’s your funeral. I just hope it’s not your kids’. Anyway, I got some stuff for you.”

They sat and from the briefcase by his leg Ramirez pulled a phone. He slid it across the table, said in a low voice, “It’s encrypted. CIA-grade. It’s worth twenty grand, so don’t drop it.” Next he slid over a laptop. “Folds into a tablet. It’s got a VPN and a good firewall and what-all. Don’t access your old email accounts. The Polish legends’ll take a couple weeks because I’ll have to get you on the Polish databases. They got that little hardass running Poland now – Kaczyński.”

Nation frowned.

Ramirez nodded. “I know: he’s not the President or the Prime Minister, but Law and Justice is his party and what he says goes. It’ll be OK. He needs us.”

“Because of Russia?”

Ramirez nodded again. “And Trump likes him because he’s kind of a sawn-off Trump. But, yeah, Defense’s plan is to build up Poland as the bulwark against Russia’s westward expansion.”

“Not Germany?”

“Too politically divided, and too dependent on Russian gas. Besides, it’s better to block Russia before its armor can spread out across the North European Plain. I’ve seen analysis Stratfor did for the Agency that shows in forty years Poland will have the biggest economy and the best military in Europe: we’ll pump so much cash and technology into it. And Kaczyński also needs the US because he’s fallen out with the EU. Polish intelligence will cooperate, but it takes a little time. My buddy in El Paso FBI is keeping me updated about the hunt for your Cossack buddies, or whatever they are. Keep your heads down. Any problems, call me.”

\*

In the Ocean Breeze, Nation found Wes and Dean had moved from their single beds to his double. They woke while he was taking his boots off and pleaded with him to tell them their bedtime story.

He sighed and lay down carefully between them. He tried to collect his pinballing thoughts. There was only one story that came to mind. It had been told him at the point of the biggest crisis in his life and it was the only whole story of his father's he remembered. It was called "The Well of Forgetfulness."

He began: "Once upon a time on the plain of Semey, not far from the great road that connected Krakow and the land of the Khans, there was a village where the people remembered everything..."



## CHAPTER 16

After they had kissed the last guests goodnight, the Director, the big Russian plague doctor, “Arkady”, Judge Kuba Dorn, and a tired but triumphant Candidate Lipiński entered a walnut-paneled drawing room. The Director’s secretary Cyprian was there already, setting a card table with snifters and a bottle of cognac. There were two other men already in the room, but Lipiński didn’t notice them at first. Turning to take in the menagerie of stuffed animal heads and ikons mounted on the walls, he spotted the lion-masked man in military fatigues standing in front of an ikon of St. Iosef. St. Iosef stared back from wide blue eyes under delicate, tapered eyebrows. St. Iosef’s forehead was bulbous and his nose was one long bridge, with two protuberant nostrils at the end. The white mustaches that hid his top lip flowed into a white beard that overflowed onto his gown. His ears were weird, like jug handles.

St. Iosef had a weird head, but refined. The head of the man who now took off his lion mask was weird, but barbaric.

The Director said, “Hello, Durgan.”

In the arrangement of its features, Major Durgan Maga’s face was not so very different from that of the mask he had just removed. He had a mane of black hair swept back from a forehead that was deeply furrowed between the eyes. His eyes were big and wider spaced than is normal in humans. A birth defect. The nose as barbarically broad and flat as St. Iosef’s was thin and refined.

Maga and the Director embraced and exchanged the triple kiss. He was shorter than the Director, less than 170 centimeters, but muscles like Gdansk tug hawsers moved under the quilted military overshirt.

“Arkady” unbuckled his plague doctor mask with a sigh of relief, grumbling, “I begin to know what Ivan the Fourth’s victims felt.”

With his flushed, handsome face, hyperthyroidal blue eyes and hair plastered by sweat to the onion dome of his brow, he wasn’t quite roasted alive, but he did look as if he’d just undergone interrogation.

Maga released the Director, as if he suddenly needed to have both hands free. “What’s he doing here?” He stepped sideways to face the unmasked Russian.

The Director chortled. “Now, Durgan, my friendship with Mitkin is older than you are.”

“They let him into Poland?”

“I let him in. Through the forest.”

The Russian stared back at Maga, eyes smiling. His gaze made most men look away. But Maga’s yellow-flecked animal eyes didn’t even blink.

Candidate Lipiński looked at the two men in surprise. He too had registered that the man inside the plague doctor mask was no Arkady, but Colonel General Artyom Mitkin, the director of Russia’s internal security service, the FSB. Under Mitkin that organization was almost as feared as it had been when it was called the KGB. Mitkin was a leading member of the *siloviki*, the most powerful faction in the Kremlin, a gang of kleptocratic former security apparatchiks led by Putin himself.

The *silovik* Mitkin didn’t try to match Maga’s stare, but clasped his enormous hands behind his back and turned to the armchair on the edge of the lamplight. It was then that Lipiński noticed the other man. This individual stuck a thin cigar into a nicotine-stained hole in his gray beard and used the arms of the leather armchair to lever himself upright. Candidate Lipiński noted that Mitkin nodded at the man as if he already knew him. The man came forward to shake hands with

Lipiński and mumbled something around the cigar that sounded like “Zbigniew Rusak.”

“My gamekeeper,” the Director explained, dismissively. He allowed Candidate Lipiński just enough time for a handshake before taking his arm and turning him back to face Mitkin.

Lipiński said, “You hunt in the Augustów Forest?”

The Director jerked his head north. “The Romincka. Rusak here looks after my lodge and dogs. Or the dogs look after him, I don’t know.” He eyed his gamekeeper’s red nose and nicotine-stained whiskers disdainfully. “There seems to be a certain convergence going on. Eh, Rusak? Catalyzed by vodka.” He did not allow Rusak time to respond and Rusak didn’t try. “Mitkin and I are heading up there for a few days hunting. Sorry to deceive you out there. ‘Arkady’ is for them, not you. The truth is Mitkin’s here in mufti partly for your sake. It wouldn’t be in your interest or ours for the Director of the FSB to make a public appearance on your big night. Eh?”

Candidate Lipiński, the Director reasoned, wasn’t likely to squeal: his popular news website *Fakty – The Facts* – had made a lot of money out of laundering stories manufactured by the Kremlin.

As if hypnotized, Lipiński said, “No.”

“Eh?”

Lipiński roused himself, winced. “No, it wouldn’t.”

The Director smiled. “Mitkin and I were colleagues in Russia in the seventies and eighties. I hope you’ll forgive us.”

Lipiński rubbed his floppy schoolboy’s fringe, boomed, “No! I mean, of course! Well, fuck me! You never know who you’ll meet at a *maskarada*! I was joking out there about what the FSB has on Trump, and fuck me if I wasn’t talking to it!”

There was a knock at the door. Cyprian opened it to admit the little cuckoo-masked man who had been with the plague doctor by the fireplace. He now

carried a briefcase. The man removed his mask, revealing a bony face with a thin-lipped mouth and thick eyebrows drawn together in a perpetual frown.

The Director said, “Come in, Roman. Come in. This is Candidate Stanek Lipiński.”

Lipiński smiled and held his hand out.

The little man met the candidate’s smile with a dyspeptic grimace, shook the hand with a bow, and introduced himself as Roman Novak. He slid past Lipiński and put the briefcase down by the drinks cabinet.

\*

Seven men settled round the big card table in the Director’s drawing room: the Director, FSB Chief Mitkin, Candidate Lipiński, Judge Kuba Dorn, Gamekeeper Rusak, little Roman Novak, and the lion-headed soldier, Durgan Maga. A number of men smoked and only Maga was not drinking.

Mitkin sipped the cognac, nodded approval, quaffed it, refilled his glass, and picked up the deck of cards. It disappeared inside his huge hand.

He rumbled, “Who’s for *durak*?”

The Director said, “Oh-hoh! Now we’re getting serious!”

Little Roman Novak grimaced his approval and muttered, “Attack passing: allowed or not?”

The Director said, “Of course. *Durak* is political; the attack can always be delegated to some useful idiot.”

The Director noticed Lipiński’s confusion. “Never played, candidate? I think you’ll like it. *Durak* is Russian for fool.”

“That much I know.”

“You have to get rid of all your cards and the last man holding a card is the fool. You’ll get the hang of it.”

Candidate Lipiński watched the *silovik* FSB chief Mitkin shuffle the deck and remove the cards numbered two to five. He dealt six cards to each player and invited Lipiński to remove the bottom card from the deck and place it face up on the table. He placed the deck at right angles across this trump card.

He nodded at the pile and told Lipiński, “The *prikup*.”

“*Prikup*?” Lipiński made raptor claws of two fingers. “Talon?”

Mitkin clapped Lipiński on the back, “He knows Russian, too! The *prikup* is the draw pile.”

Lipiński said, “You mentioned useful idiots, Director Mitkin. Doesn’t your FSB have one in the Oval Office now?”

The FSB Chief met the candidate’s twinkling eye and said archly, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Lipiński grinned. “Come on! You must have more cameras and microphones in the Moscow Ritz-Carlton than a Hollywood studio. Don’t try to tell me there are no sex tapes! Trump’s been staying in Moscow hotels since 1987! You’ve seen it, haven’t you? Trump making the hookers piss on each other? Come on: give me the scoop for *Fakty*. Imagine the traffic!”

Mitkin wagged a huge forefinger, “Now, now, candidate, we’re busy here with agriculture.”

Mitkin’s laughter rumbled in his huge chest. Lipiński’s laugh boomed out, alarming little Novak.

Novak had drawn the lowest trump, which gave him the right to attack first. He slapped down a jack of diamonds, lips pursed, frowning. The Director drew a sharp breath. He defended himself with a queen and started another pile next to the *prikup* with the successful defense card.

After a few hands, Candidate Lipiński said, “You mentioned a problem with your new drug, Director?”

The Director exhaled a cloud around his nicotine vaporizer, a curious object carved from ivory or bone. “Nothing wrong with Thyroglan; Chairman

Kaczyński's the problem. It treats a common type of thyroid cancer. Do you know, Lipiński: all over the world thyroid cancer is the only form of cancer that's on the rise? Nobody knows why. Our drug is the first successful angiogenesis inhibitor for thyroid tumors."

Lipinski nodded as if he understood.

"We were about to go to market, then suddenly the regulator starts an investigation, rules our biggest human trial invalid. Not the EU regulator, mind you, the fucking *Polish* regulator! Yes, we have one! Some little shit working out of an office under Chairman Kaczyński's desk."

Mitkin leaned towards Lipiński and rumbled around his cigar, Groucho Marx-style, "You might say little Kaczyński passed the attack."

The Director shook his head. "Which means we have to find another 750 patients to trial our drug on. It sets us back years. And 275 million."

Lipiński said, "It's outrageous!"

"Eh?"

"You must let me put something on *Fakty*. Really, it's perfect: half Kaczyński's base has cancer!"

The Director's eyes narrowed. "'Kaczyński blocks cure for cancer.' You really do have a genius for headlines. What do you think, Mitkin?"

Mitkin raised a glass, toasted, "To headlines."

## CHAPTER 17

*Warsaw, Poland: five weeks later*

Nation came to the end of the “Well of Forgetfulness.” His voice was heavy with sleep, the way his mother’s used to get when she lay in bed with him and told him the story in the years after his father disappeared.

“The blind bard Sipek weighed the head in his hand. He said it must have been transmuted into lead by absorbing the memories of all who had drunk from the well. Eight days of memories of men and birds were in the head.”

It was their second week in Warsaw. Till now, they’d slept in a shoebox hotel room with low ceilings. He’d spent the days looking for a place, in sleet and rain, under a sky like wet newspaper. This was their first night in their new apartment on Elektoralna Street. It had two bedrooms, high ceilings, and a view of the St. Karol Boromeusz Church on Chłodna Street. It felt like a palace.

He yawned a long yawn and mumbled, “The stonemason made a granite plinth for the head and chipped into it the words *Beware the marauders from the East.*”

On the top bunk beside him, Wes breathed deep and even. Back in Texas, he hardly ever fell asleep on a story, but the strangeness of this new world seemed to wear him out. He slept on his back, with his arms above his head, the way he had ever since he was a baby. Later in the night he liked to throw the bedclothes on the floor. Many times, during his sleepless nights in Van Horn, Nation had

returned from the truck stop to put the blankets back on Wes. He raised himself and peered down over the side of the bunk at Dean. He was a squared-away sleeper: slept on one side or the other and the blankets stayed on.

His father told him the “Well of Forgetfulness” just once, in an apartment in Muranow, not far from here, on March 8, 1988. The night he and his mother left Warsaw. His name wasn’t Adam back then; it was Karol, like the Pope. His father told him a story every night. He could make up stories on the spot, just like he could figure any sum in his head, but his mother wasn’t usually in the room to listen. She was that night because it was an important night. Something happened that night that made it time to leave, and that was the last time he saw his father.

Over the years after they left Poland, his mother had repeated the story so many bedtimes that he still remembered it word-for-word. His mother’s words; language he wouldn’t ordinarily use.

He wondered where she was. Ramirez’s witness protection friends had hidden her. Whether CIA or FBI he didn’t know. One thing was sure, she was sealed away from contact for three months. Ramirez said even he couldn’t contact her. When he and his momma and Ramirez had made the plan, around the time she moved to Houston, they’d agreed to do it this way. They’d never actually spoken the reason out loud: they’d done it this way so one of them would survive, even if the other one was tortured.

His mind returned to Grace. There were a lot of tears in Galveston when she didn’t show up. In the end, he had to tell the boys the truth, more or less: their mother was with Ramon’s people, because she thought she would be safe there.

Dean said, “Is she safe there?”

“I’m gonna fix it so we’ll all be safe.”

They took it hard. On the third day Wes started crying, then Dean took it up and nothing he said could make them quit.



The remaining days of waiting they spent swimming in the Gulf and making sandcastles in the long sundown till the Pleasure Pier Ferris wheel switched on its lights. The boys had gone to bed too tired to cry much.

True to his word, Ramirez organized the new passports within a fortnight. Nation was now a Canadian of Polish birth, name of Jan Kowalski. He wasn't sure if Ramirez knew that Jan Kowalski in Polish is like "John Smith" in English. Ramirez would be in Moscow now, with bigger things to worry about.

As he stared at Wes's sleeping face, his own breathing slowed. He hadn't slept well since getting to Warsaw. Being homeless hadn't bothered him too much; after nearly two decades in the military and a lifetime in hiding, that was his normal condition. More worrisome was the task that faced him now their accommodation problem was solved: to find out who it was made his father disappear on that night in 1988.

His lids closed and the *beep láara* boy's face under its brown Afghan *pakol* flickered in a changeable light, old then young. Nation ran after him through the maze of Kandahar's streets, through the smoke of burning rubbish, his heart jumping at every flash of a dirty white *salwar kameez* glimpsed down an alley, or far away across the rubble heaps of villages. Finding him was urgent because orphaned kids in Kandahar can end up as 'tea boys' – sex slaves to a fighter or policeman. Eyelids flickering, he searched now for the kid behind broken compound walls, but he couldn't find him, and no one knew anything. Then he was at the scene of a car bombing: tire rubber and human fat dripping from the trees.

## CHAPTER 18

The *prikup* shrank and the successful defense pile grew.

The Director tumbled a card across his knuckles and prestidigitated it onto the table. He sat back, smiling.

The Russian FSB chief, Mitkin, who had been hunched forward in certainty of victory, exclaimed, “Gah! Damn you!”

Maga was next to rid himself of cards, staring at Mitkin as he laid down his last card. When the young judge Kuba Dorn was out, only Candidate Lipiński was left with cards in his hand. The future prime minister of Poland groaned.

Mitkin gripped his shoulder. “Never mind, my friend! You might be the fool, but you’re our fool!”

The Director said, “Better than being the smartest man on the other team!”

Lipiński shook his head. “Note to self: never play cards with old Cold Warriors.”

Mitkin chuckled.

Young Judge Dorn said, “My father always said we’ve had it too good. Never had to develop the killer instinct.”

The Director wondered if that was resentment glittering in young Dorn’s eyes. His father, SB chief Jakub Dorn, had exercised his own killer instinct many times.

Candidate Lipiński rose, yawning. “My father said that sort of thing, too. Is there a bed for me Cyprian? Well, goodnight all. I think we did very well tonight, don’t you? The *maskarada* was a brilliant idea, Director. Half of them wouldn’t have showed up if they’d had to show their faces!”

The Director said, “The donations are flooding in. I think we chose the right candidate.”

They all drank to that, then Dorn announced that he too was done in.

When Lipiński and Dorn were gone, the Director turned to little Roman Novak and said, “Did you bring them?”

Novak got up and fetched the briefcase from beside the table where he’d laid his cuckoo mask. It looked heavy. He put it down carefully on the Director’s walnut desk and unlocked it, but left the lid closed.

He said, “It’s lined with lead.”

Maga crossed to the desk.

Little Novak took a step back. “We’d better not open it.”

Maga said, “You forget, I’m radio-resistant. Isn’t that what your people told us, Comrade Mitkin?”

The *silovik* Mitkin lowered his eyes. “We did wrong, I don’t deny it. The Polygon was a mistake from the moment Beria declared the place uninhabited.”

“The place is called Kazakhstan now, remember?”

“No argument from me.”

Maga said something under his breath beginning with “Inshallah.”

The Director and Mitkin glanced at each other.

Only since his mother’s slide towards death began a year ago had Maga begun to talk this way. In the past he had kept a lid on both his religion and his bitterness.

Seeing that Maga really was about to open the briefcase, Novak took another couple of steps back from the table.

Maga lifted the lid. "Iodine-131?"

Novak said, "Medical grade."

Maga hefted a white plastic canister, around twenty centimeters in diameter and fifteen centimeters deep. Both faces were cut with concentric slots like those on a water filter. He shook it and there was a susurration of something like sand inside.

Novak said, "They'll fit into the pipes beside the submersible pumps."

Maga fit the canister back into a molded slot in the briefcase and prized a vial of silver sand from its slot. "Which door will be left open?"

Mitkin said, "The mess hall."

"It'd better be. I won't be able to knock."

He closed the lid and shook hands with little Novak, then hefted the case.

The Director said, "That's not all."

Maga set the case down again. "What do you want now?"

The Director told him the story of Texas in broad strokes.

He concluded, "I want them alive. Her husband stole something important from me. I want it back."

Maga said, "The trail is cold. Why didn't you use me in the first place?"

"Your mother had just passed. We found the son's wife in Texas. Nosek has an idea for flushing out the son. Once you've got him, we'll have his mother."

Maga hefted the case again.

"Before I deliver this?"

"No. Do that first."

## CHAPTER 19

After a night of bad dreams and bad waking, the chill morning air made Nation feel a little sharper. In the park across the road the gray trees were starting to push out leaves. As they walked down a canyon of communist flat blocks in Wola, Wes was dragging his feet.

Nation checked his watch: 07:58.

He called, "Hurry up, Piotr! What's the matter with you?"

Wes said nothing.

When they got to the school, kids in the playground stared at his kids, then him, then at his kids again, smelling foreign-ness. Wes was reluctant to let go his hand.

Nation squatted down. "What is it, Piotr?" He glanced up to check there were no kids or moms around, then whispered in the boy's ear, "Wes?"

"I want to come with you."

Dean said, "He's scared of Konrad Guz."

Nation glanced at the group of kids Dean was staring at. One beefy kid, a size bigger than Wes, was surrounded by a gaggle of smaller kids. He was staring at them.

"He giving you trouble?"

Wes mumbled something into his shoulder he couldn't understand.

Dean said, “He’s got an army.”

“What do you mean? Look at me. What do you mean? Those little kids?”

Dean nodded, “He promised to buy them all a box of *chocolates* at the end of term if they throw things at us.”

The electronic bell sounded.

“Chocolates? How do you know?”

“Tomek told me.”

“He in the army?”

Dean nodded, still staring at the kids, bumping his backside rhythmically against his father’s knee. He pointed. “The little one with white hair.”

“Did you tell a teacher, Wes?”

“She didn’t believe me.”

Dean said, “Konrad called us *terroryści*. He said Poland’s for the Poles.”

“You’re half-Polish.”

“He called us blackamoors.”

His kids had black hair, but so did plenty of Polish kids. True, not so many had his boys’ olive skin. He stared at Konrad, wanting to squeeze the kid’s head. Konrad stared back, mouth a little open. He had the jarhead-goes-metrosexual haircut a lot of fashion-conscious Polish males had: hair shaved off the sides of his head, leaving longer hair on top, which was gelled and combed over to one side. Konrad had put work into his hair.

It had to be Wes. Of the two kids, he was the less tough, the one taking his mother’s absence hardest.

A teacher was yelling at the kids to hurry up. She turned to yell, “Piotr! Marek!”

At first Wes and Dean didn’t turn.

Nation hissed, “Hey, wake up! That’s *you*.”

They turned and the teacher beckoned fit to bust her wrist.

Wes moaned into his shoulder, “Why do I have to be called Pee-yot?”

He took the boy’s chin in his hand, and turned his head, so he was forced to meet his eyes. He said, “Because that’s what it says on your passport. You don’t have a choice. OK?”

Wes nodded, tears welling.

Nation said, “Hey, what are you complaining about? My parents gave me a girl’s name!”

Dean laughed and Wes cracked a smile.

“What is it?”

“One day I’ll tell you. He calls you names...” He thought *Hit him with everything you got, as many places as you can*. But he said, “Call him names back. But if they throw things or hit you, go tell a teacher, OK? You better go. Remember your names.” He pulled them in for a hug. “Go on, now. Try to keep it verbal.”

“OK.”

He stood and watched them till the teacher had shepherded them inside, his diaphragm tight. He couldn’t fight Konrad Guz for his boy; all he could do was find the people who were trying to kill his boy’s daddy.

He toggled up the stopwatch function on his wrist watch, pressed start, and set off jogging. He had to resume his stakeout at 09:30.

## CHAPTER 20

After dropping the kids off, Nation worked out at a no-frills gym in inner Wola. His thigh had stopped oozing pus and Chunmei's stitches had dissolved and healed over. He was getting some strength back into the leg. More of a problem was the tunnel of scar tissue the Cossack's round had drilled through the muscle. It stiffened up when cold or when the weather changed, making him walk with a limp.

From the gym, he jogged three kilometers towards the Old Town. He slowed to a walk outside the Chinese Embassy, half a block before he reached the Florianska Milk Bar.

A quick survey of the milk bar's clientele told him his quarry hadn't yet arrived. His usual small table in the window was free. He paid for a coffee, sat down and took his new laptop from his day pack. He glanced at his watch, then at the side entrance to the Supreme Court building opposite. There were security cameras mounted on its corners and over a single toughened-glass door. A plaque next to the door said *INR: Institute for National Remembrance*.

Inside the INR, according to the Internet, were ninety kilometers of communist secret police files standing side-by-side in manila folders. One of them was his father's.

He opened up a couple of Polish employment websites, in preparation for the arrival of his quarry. Then he opened the *Rzeczpospolita* newspaper site. Chairman Kaczyński's Law and Justice party was still rooting former communists out of



government positions and putting in its own people. All the usual suspects were outraged and the new Democratic Defense League candidate, Lipiński, was also outraged. Putin was still smirking.

He went looking for more headlines about Kaczyński and on a website with a lot of ads called *Fakty* he found the best one yet: “Kaczyński opposes cure for cancer.” On the same website was a story about a man in Krakow who found a human nose in his jar of pickled herring.

He looked out the window. Still no one.

On the home page of the *Gazeta Wyborcza* newspaper was a picture of men in hard hats looking like ants beside super-sized storage tanks with ladders bolted to the sides. The kind of LNG terminal you saw at a Galveston or Port Arthur. Over the photograph was the headline “Poland signs LNG deal with US.” The energy minister said Poland would stop buying gas from Russia after the contract with Gazprom ended in 2022. He encouraged other countries to stop buying Russian gas, too.

Nation stroked his new beard, thinking idly, *Them’s fighting words.*

The Minister went on:

As soon as the Nordstream II gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea links Russia to Germany, we in Eastern Europe become energy hostages to Russia. Gazprom will be able to shut off the supply to Poland without affecting their customers in Western Europe. That’s why this government is committed to American LNG and to our own Baltic Sea pipeline, which will bring the first gas from Norway to Poland in 2023.

He glanced out the window. No activity yet. He sipped. Sighed. Truly awful. There were two reasons he’d adopted the Florianska for breakfast over the more upmarket places nearby, and neither of them was the coffee. The first was nostalgia: the place reminded him of his communist childhood, right down to the thick white plates, the three different kinds of pickled cabbage salad under a glass counter, the two sour women behind the counter, who looked as if they’d been standing there since communist times, and the pine paneling on the walls, as if you were inside a Russian sauna – which they pretty much had been back then. In those days, “milk bars” like this had been the only places to eat out. There was

only ever one meal on the menu, but he had good memories of his excitement as a little kid coming to one of these places with his parents for a Sunday *bygos* with prunes and Polish sausage.

The second and most important reason was just leaving the building across the street. At 09:45, right on schedule, the Institute's door swung open and six cleaners exited. The logo on the breast of their jackets said: "Warsaw Consolidated Services." The Internet told him WCS was a big cleaning and property maintenance company. Its satisfied customers were numerous and included major corporations, government departments, and half the government hospitals in Poland.

The four men and two women crossed the road, tired but still laughing at each other's jokes. They entered the café and ordered breakfast from the *bainmarie*. They took their trays and made for their usual table by the window, the one next to Nation's.

He'd been eavesdropping on the cleaners for nine days now. Sometimes it was five people, sometimes six, most often four. The four guys seemed to be the core group; the women, Jolla and Danuta, tagged along sometimes. The leader was Jerzy, a handsome gray-haired pessimist, aged fifty-nine. Nation knew his age because when the others had sung "A hundred years" on Jerzy's birthday, he'd suffered it with head bowed, then enquired, "You really wish me another forty-one years of disappointment?"

Jerzy pulled out chairs for the women, bowing from the waist as they seated themselves. They settled over their papers and breakfasts and the men started talking football. Olek, a scar-faced little scrapper who always seemed to be nursing a hangover, and the guy with the accent, Maksym, were soon arguing with their mouths full about the talents of the Legia striker. Olek snapped, "What the hell would a Ukrainian know about it, anyway?" and fell to brooding over his paper. Olek was in one of the Citizens' Militias that had formed since Russia started invading its neighbours again, but Nation couldn't see how a man could get so many scars on his face from playing weekend warrior. Maybe he was a

fighting drunk. Maybe he was born with scars. The women sipped tea and kept up a continuous murmur of conversation between themselves.

Olek stifled a burp, slapped his newspaper. “Finally! We’re getting off the Russian nipple!”

Jerzy glanced at the article, snorted, “What planet are you living on? Gazprom supplies seventy percent of our gas. It owns the damn *pipeline* all the way to Germany! You think Putin’ll take this lying down?”

“He can take it over his pipeline, for all I care.” Olek glanced at the women, muttered, “Excuse me, ladies. In a couple years we’ll have our own pipeline: under the sea – from Norway.”

Jerzy threw his hands up, looked to the others for help. “Under the sea from Norway! Listen: there’s a fairy-tale about an old woman who asks a golden fish to turn her into a Sea Empress, but in the end she finds herself sitting in her hovel again with her broken washtub in front of her.”

“Your point?”

“Kaczyński is the old woman.”

“And the Sea Empress?”

“Is the color of a goldfish. Calls herself Trump.”

At Trump’s name, the big goofball, Marcin, blew an imaginary trumpet salvo that ended in a raspberry and asked, “What’s the broken washtub?”

Jerzy looked annoyed. “I don’t know – Polish resistance.”

Olek slapped his paper again. “Exactly. You think its dangerous to piss Putin off, but when they finish Nordstream II the Hun and the Ivans have their own special pipeline and Putin can cut off our gas anytime he likes. And have a look at the timing: he’s doubled military spending and moved Iskander missiles into Kaliningrad. Their last war games started with a tactical nuke on Warsaw! *We need America, and not just for gas!*”

‘Bah!’ Jerzy waved a hand, turned his shoulder to Olek and began to massage his arthritic elbow.

Olek glanced at the others in challenge. When they ignored him, he rose, glowering, and made for the bathroom.

Nation made sure that whenever one of the cleaners went to the bathroom, he was looking at an employment website. In fact, there was only one job offer he would consider, and that was with Warsaw Consolidated Services, so between their trips to the bathroom he read the papers.

On page three of *Rzeczpospolita* was yet another picture of the smoking wreckage of the “Smolensk plane” that in 2010 had killed Polish President Kaczyński, his wife, the heads of all the armed forces and ninety-odd other dignitaries. The article said three out of five Poles thought the crash was the biggest event in postwar Polish history.

He leaned over to Marcin and said in formal Polish, “Tell me something, *Pan*: the president killed on that plane was Lech Kaczyński, right?”

Using the formal *Pan* and *Pani* – “mister” and “madam” – was the only way to address Poles unless you knew them very well. After twenty years in Texas, it seemed to Nation his native language put a lot of distance between the people who spoke it.

“*Tak.*”

“So, who’s this Jarosław Kaczyński?”

“His twin brother.”

“No kidding?”

“No kidding. *Identical* twins. Bam! Bam! From the same woman, like a pump-action shotgun!” He raised an eyebrow at Jolla’s disgusted noise. “He runs the country. Doesn’t matter who the president and prime minister are: PiS – Law and Justice – is the Kaczyński brothers’ party. Jarosław is chairman and he’s the one pulling the strings. First thing he did when they got back into government was start another investigation into the Smolensk crash.”

“How come?”

“Because the first two failed to find that the Russians killed his brother.”

“That’s how come we’re still reading about it in the paper every day, huh?”

“And it’s on the bloody TV every night. Where do you come from?”

“Canada mainly. I was born here but my folks got out under Martial Law. I was living in the States the last little while.”

Marcin laughed, “Why the hell did you come back?”

“To find my roots.”

Marcin said, “How is it over there?”

“You’ve never been? It’s beautiful. Every kind of terrain you can imagine. I was in the south of America for the last few years, in the desert. When you see your first Arizona sunset, you know there is a God.”

Marcin said, “You went south for work?”

“A woman.” He shrugged. “She’s still there. We had a good time.”

Jerzy said, “What work did you do?”

“Lotta things. Janitor. Welder. Roughneck.”

The phone pinged in his pocket. He forced himself to ignore it.

Jerzy said, “Janitor? You know what we do?”

“I figured. You guys ever want to go, there’s work. My boss was a good guy. You want, I can put you in touch with him.”

Marcin made a mouh and raised his eyebrows, as if it wasn’t out of the question.

He turned to Jerzy, “What do you say, *Pan*?”

“Bah! Why go to America when America is coming here?”

On their way out, the cleaners wished him good luck with the job hunt. Nation shrugged and indicated the screen disgustedly to suggest things were tough all over. Jolla muttered something to Jerzy, who stared at Nation speculatively.

## CHAPTER 21

The National Library's newspaper archive contained a number of articles that referred to Nation's father, Ryszard Okula. In the hangar-sized reading room, he scrolled down the list of articles on the computer screen to late 1986, when his father was interviewed by the communist daily *Trybuna Ludu*. He stared at the grainy image next to the article. His father wore eyeglasses and a mustache. His expression was neutral, but the eyes smiled. Good-looking man.

His father was a cancer specialist at the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Institute. He was also in charge of dosing school-age children in Poland with iodine to stop them getting childhood papillary thyroid cancer after the Chernobyl reactor meltdown over the border in the USSR.

"Every child in Poland has had the first dose," he told the reporter. "In two weeks, they'll all get another one."

On the Chernobyl fallout, the Science Minister said in the same article, "It's nothing to worry about."

There were a few articles like this, post-Chernobyl. The communist newspapers liked to take Ryszard Okula's picture, even if there was nothing much he could say, even though he hadn't been in the Party. A photogenic man. Nation took photographs of every screen with his phone.

They were short articles and it didn't take him long to get through '86 and '87. At the end of '87, he noticed himself slowing down. Because now he was coming to the stuff he'd been dreading: the point where his father lost respect.

The next article was dated March 1, 1988. His father was interviewed by the *Gazeta Olsztynska*. He talked about the training he was running for oncology staff at the upgraded cancer ward in Olstyn, a city north of Warsaw. He was in town for two weeks. In his first week he'd been made very welcome. He was impressed by the willingness and professionalism of the trainees.

Nation sat back in the polished wooden seat. He opened his mouth to stretch his jaw, wagged his chin, cracked his neck. Then, reluctantly, he clicked on the next article.

The next article was dated Friday, March 11, 1988, a couple of days after his father became a wanted man. A picture of the ruins of a castle at the end of a rocky spine of ridge rising out of a pine forest. Below the ruins, on the bare hillside above the dark forest, was a white bath tub on a checkerboard-tiled floor. All that remained of a burnt-out house. The headline was "Surgeon Okula wanted for questioning over Deputy Minister Bosko death."



## CHAPTER 22

At 2200 hours on April 30, six men with blackened faces left the private hunting lodge in the Polish part of the Romincka Forest northeast of Goldap. They followed the Director's gray-bearded gamekeeper, Rusak, through open birch wood. They carried no more than fifteen kilograms each. Minimal armor. HK416 assault rifles in tactical slings and lighter weapons according to each man's preference. They were not planning for things to go kinetic, but they were ready if things did.

The lion-headed Major Durgan Maga had last seen Rusak wearing an old tuxedo and smoking cigars at the Director's maskarada a month ago. Rusak looked more comfortable now in his sweat-stained Militaria fatigues, and he still moved with the woodsman's stealth Maga remembered from bygone hunting excursions. From a few things Rusak and the Director had said on those outings, he understood they had been in the secret police together, back in the days when the SB was the unofficial government of Poland.

Though the ground was wet, it was covered in dry branches and twigs. They made far more noise than Maga was happy about. One of their number, Skowronneck, led the local company of the Territorial Defense Force and he had made sure there would be no night maneuvers in the forest this Sunday night. Still, they avoided the made trails.

They reached a wide, graded track. A sign warned walkers that this was the national border. In fact, Rusak said, the road and the signs were a hundred meters

inside the actual border, a government precaution to protect Polish ramblers from trigger-happy Russian border guards. There was no barrier or even marker at the actual border between Poland and Russia's Baltic oblast, Kaliningrad.

In the buffer zone between the road that marked the fake border and the Russian fence, which ran a kilometer or more inside Russian territory, the undergrowth was almost impenetrable. There were places where they had to crawl along boar paths through densely packed saplings. Boar crashed away through the undergrowth at their approach. It seemed to Maga the boar had made their own nation in this zone where walkers and hunters were forbidden. Perhaps the Director was right about the intelligence of pigs.

They emerged from this undergrowth at the edge of a swamp. Rusak waded in first, leaving a wake of moonlight where his passage cleared the surface scum. As they waded, Maga looked up at the moon through a break in the canopy. It was a phase past full and wore a halo of mosquitoes. Beyond was the two-meter barb-topped border fence, but Rusak showed them a rusted-out hole where it skirted the swamp. Here, Rusak turned back.

They crossed into Kaliningrad and made a fireless camp before dawn, in the northernmost finger of the protected forest, ten kilometers inside the border.

Skowronnek took the first watch while the other five slept. He was 198 centimeters tall and had played under-23 basketball for Poland, but he stood so still amid the ferns it took Maga a few moments to spot him. He was from Goldap and knew the Romincka Forest almost as well as Rusak. Six months after leaving the Polish military in disgust, he was still fighting fit and he still wore the full black beard he'd grown when he and Maga had served together in Afghanistan. A few months back Skowronneck had joined the fight against the Russian invaders in the Ukraine, along with the two Lithuanians in their group, Ramanauskas and Karvelis. The Lithuanians were from Vištytis, which was in this same forest but a different country. They still served in the Lithuanian army reserve.

They all had one thing in common: they hated Russians.

The weak link, the one who worried Maga, was the only other Muslim in the group, a Lipka Tatar from Bialystok called Malinowski. Serving under Maga in Afghanistan, Malinowski had been tough and capable, but also boastful and quick to anger. Since coming back from his last tour, he looked to have been doing a lot of steroids, which wasn't likely to improve a man's temper or his judgment.

Maga lay in the shade of a birch with dappled sun on his face, sleeping little, enjoying the silence and the soft green light. He did lazy one-arm flies with his small rucksack, which contained a pipe wrench and one of the heavy filters little cuckoo-masked Roman Novak had brought to the Director's maskarada. His mind replayed their conversation on the edge of the group in the drawing room, before the game of *durak*. Novak had sidled up to him to mutter, "My condolences, your mother was a remarkable woman."

"Thank you, Roman. She's with God, now."

"I'm sorry I couldn't get back for the funeral."

"I was only allowed to be there myself because the army kicked me out."

"I thought you were on leave?"

"They forced me to take leave while they investigate me. I don't think they'll clear me. It's getting harder to be a Muslim in the Polish army. But I want to thank you: you did a lot for her over the years. All those expensive treatments. I'm grateful."

"I just made the arrangements. You really think they'll kick you out? With your record?"

He'd shrugged again. "I feel kicked. The number of times I've almost died for this country. You heard about those hostages we rescued from the Taliban in Helmand?"

"They gave you the *Virtuti Militari*!"

"After that raid I had four new holes in me. Every plate in my body armor was shattered and the surgeon spent most of the night picking the pieces out. You

know me, Roman, I don't cry like a woman, but I feel kicked. Kicked as a Degeley dog."

The memory of his mother and the injustice of his suspension were further fuel now to the fire in his belly. He wondered if he might need to cut Malinowski's throat this coming night and how he would hide the body. He was an excellent contingency planner. His preparedness was the reason he was still alive after nine years with the elite Polish GROM special force in Afghanistan and Iraq. The reason many Taliban and their sympathizers were not. A Muslim in the Polish military has to work harder to prove himself, when ninety-five percent of his brothers-in-arms are Roman Catholic. And how did he feel now about killing those Talib jihadis? He didn't regret it: their ideas were medieval. He was not one of them. And yet he was on his own jihad, against Russia.

Another contingency he considered was that he and his platoon were being set up. The Director said Mitkin was on their side, but you could never trust the FSB. Many of the people running the FSB had worked there when it was still called the KGB. Mitkin's precursor as FSB chief, Vladimir Putin, had come into the presidency after ordering his agents to bomb Russian apartment blocks and blaming it on Muslim Chechen separatists, and then he'd used that false flag attack to launch another war on Chechnya. In 1999, when he was still a teenager, Maga had left school in Kurchatov City, Kazakhstan, to help his Chechen brothers repel the Russian invasion. He'd barely escaped with his life, slipping out by night when the Russian army stormed Grozny behind pulverizing artillery fire. Most of his Chechen brothers had died.

Lenin. Stalin. Putin. Now Mitkin.

He used a chemical heater to warm a meal and ate it out of the bag, chewing slowly. Whatever the spook Mitkin was up to, Maga owed the Director too much to refuse this mission, and any mission that hurt Russians was a mission he could not refuse.

They began to move after dark, when they could no longer hear cars on the nearby road. They reached the edge of the forest and set out across Kaliningrad

under a big moon, moving between strips of commercial forest separated by dairy pasture and fields of wheat and potatoes. They passed a shed the size of an aircraft hangar and held their breath against the stench of mink shit. They crossed small roads but saw no vehicles.

At midnight, April turned to May. Every year in the secret city of Kurchatov, Durgan and his classmates, some of them deformed like him, had been part of the First of May Parade, to celebrate all the Soviet Union had done for them. Tonight, he would give the Russian military a May Day gift.

At 01:30, Maga checked the GPS on his wrist. They had covered almost twenty kilometers, much of it through spongy fields.

Within sight of the first houses of Gusev, they entered a birch grove and slid into the Krasnaya River. They swam on their backs with the current, against the cold, and didn't break water with their strokes. They could have used chemical heat packs against their chests to keep their core temperatures up, but Maga wanted them to stay as cold as possible.

They kept to the cover of the willow-draped north bank and came ashore a kilometer downstream at the brick pump shed that served the army base. The base's chain-link perimeter fence had been extended in a narrow loop to take in the pump shed. The trees had been cleared around it and the cleared ground was floodlit and covered by a thermal camera mounted on the nearest guard tower.

If all went to plan, the guard in that tower was a man of Maga's blood, and the infrared camera would record no heat.

Maga covered his face and neck with cold mud, then broke the cover of the trees and moved upslope across twenty meters of open ground to the perimeter fence. He searched for the erosion gully he'd been told to look for and found it. He turned to beckon the others out of the trees.

Where the fence crossed the gully, the steel pegs that pinned it to the earth had been pulled, partly by erosion, but with a little human help. Maga crouched and cut a few links either side of the gully, then held the flap up while his men crawled

on their bellies into the territory of the Russian army's Seventy-ninth Guards Motor Rifle Brigade.

The parade ground was flanked on two sides by barracks where the soldiers ate and slept. Maga's men moved silently towards the two round steel manhole covers that covered the 50,000-liter underground water tanks. Maga and Skowronnek set their packs down. There were two hinged rings set flush into each of the covers, large enough for a man to get a hand through. Each shivering man took hold of a ring. Maga held up a hand and folded fingers one by one in a silent countdown. On five, they lifted. The steel covers came off without much noise.

The other three men withdrew to stand guard on opposite sides of the quadrangle, while from their packs Maga and the giant Skowronnek extracted little Roman Novak's plastic filters. Each weighed around five kilograms. Maga extracted the twenty-five-centimeter pipe wrench sticking out of his pack and hung it from a loop on his belt. He slung a tiny SCUBA tank onto his back and fitted the mouthpiece. Clutching a filter, he climbed down into the first tank. He switched on his headlamp, took a deep breath and descended the ladder into the cold water. Two meters below the surface, he crouched beside the submersible pump. He decoupled the pump with the pipe wrench, removed the filter, and fit the iodine-131 filter snugly into the discharge pipe in its place. He reconnected the pump and climbed back up the ladder.

Above ground, shivering hard, he picked up the other filter and repeated the process in the other tank. Skowronnek helped him replace the manhole covers, then donned his rucksack and went to stand sentry in the shadow of the barracks.

Maga checked his watch. Ten minutes until the next patrol passed through the quadrangle. From the back pocket of his ruck, he extracted the vial of silver sand and fitted it into a pocket on his plate carrier. He donned the pack and jogged, stiff-legged, towards the double door in the western wing of the barracks. According to the building plan he had memorized, this would be the entrance to the mess hall.

He didn't notice the parted curtains in the third-floor window of the western wing, or the lens of the infrared camera that recorded the scene on the parade ground below.

When he turned the handle, the door opened, just as Mitkin had promised. Four large samovars stood on a laminated bench at the south end of the hall. Testing for squeaky floorboards as he went, he made his way to these, and lifted the tops off. From the pocket on his plate carrier he pulled the vial of iodine-131. He shook a rough quarter of the heavy sand into each of the samovars. He replaced the lids and shut the door of the mess quietly behind him.

As he made his way back towards the hole in the fence, he glimpsed a white face looking out of the guard tower window.

The face was too pale. It must be the wrong guard.

Without taking his eyes off the face, he drew the pistol from his plate carrier and moved swiftly towards the fence, praying in his heart, "O Lord of the worlds, I ask you for good on this day, your help and your light and your blessing."

The face immediately turned to look out over God's dark fields.

He exhaled a long breath at this sign of favor, dropped down and crawled through the hole in the chainlink fence. He found his men waiting in the willows by the pump shed.

The swim out of town was upriver and much slower, but this time they used the chemical heat packs against their chests to maintain core temperature. They dragged themselves out in the birch grove. Maga hauled Malinowski to his feet when he slipped on the bank. He patted him on the back. His muscle-bound Muslim brother had been OK. He would keep a close eye on him though. He would use him on the next job: finding the Americans.

## CHAPTER 23

Nation stared at the picture of the bath on the chessboard tiles on the hillside below the ruined castle. Found dead in his bath tub “near Suwalki,” the article said, on the morning of Wednesday, March 9, 1988. It was not clear to the Civil Militia whether Pawel Bosko had been alive or dead before the fire consumed his house. Just that the former deputy chief of the Interior Ministry died sometime between 02:00 and the arrival of the fire brigade at his house at 07:45.

Ryszard Okula’s fingerprints were found on the bath tub and the safe. The article said Bosko had once been Okula’s patient. Civil Militia chief Massalski said Okula and Bosko were rumored to have quarreled in the days prior to the murder.

Nation skimmed ahead through the next few articles to satisfy himself that his father hadn’t been found. He was believed to have skipped the country with his family. He looked for pictures of Bosko. On the front page of the communist daily *Trybuna Ludu* of March 10, 1988, Bosko looked like an old cowboy movie star whose name Nation couldn’t remember. A guy with a jaw like that shouldn’t die in his bathtub; he should die in a gunfight. He stared at the image till the dots separated and then crowded back together. Memory began to clear, like snow melting out from the middle of a window pane. With his eyes closed, he could hear Pawel Bosko’s deep voice saying his mother’s name and his own: Krysia and Karol.

Karol peered out at Warsaw’s winter streets: big bare trees and tall, skinny buildings lit by street lamps. He was wearing pajamas because he’d been in bed,



but then his mother had woken him up. They were in Pan Pawel Bosko's big car. Pan Pawel was in the front passenger seat and his driver, Grzegorz, was driving. Whenever he rode in a car, he always sat in the middle of the back seat so he could see ahead. In the back seat with him were his mother and a skinny, smiley woman.

The car's heater melted the snow crystals on the windows from the center outwards. Words had been painted on the university walls: "Solidarity," "Democracy," and "Red Army out." He could write neater and he was only seven. As they passed, he saw a black beret, a shoe, broken banners and placards, half buried by fresh snowfall. Hardly any lights in the apartment buildings across the street, and all the curtains were closed.

He turned to ask his mother what had happened, but she put a finger to her lips and shushed him. Then Pan Pawel turned in the front seat to look at his mother and the other woman. He had a big jaw, shaggy eyebrows, and hair growing out of his ears. His face blocked Karol's view.

He said, "The timing couldn't be worse."

When Pan Pawel rolled back into his seat, Karol saw between the front seats a soldier in an overcoat standing in the road with his hand raised.

Karol's heart beat faster.

Grzegorz stopped the vehicle and Pan Pawel wound down his window. The soldier said, "Don't you know there's a curfew tonight, sir?" He asked for their papers and Pan Pawel took them from the glove compartment and handed them over. The soldier took his time checking them.

Pan Pawel stuck out his big jaw and asked, "No more trouble, I hope?"

The soldier said, "It's just a few rabble rousers, sir. Anniversary of March '68. We cleared them out of the way this afternoon. Not so good at the fighting, these students. Ought to stick to the thinking." Before he handed the papers back, he said, "We have orders to log everyone out after eleven hundred. Can I just ask your destination, sir?"

And what had Pan Pawel told him?

Nation's elbows were on the library desk, the heels of his hands pressed into his eyes, trying to squeeze the name of the place out of his brain. He had a picture of a house at night, somewhere on a hillside in the country. But for the life of him he couldn't remember the name of the place.

No good. He blinked at the screen. Police believed the cancer surgeon Okula had prepared his escape from Poland with his wife and child before murdering Bosko.

Except that his father hadn't been with them that night they got out, and the guy his father was accused of murdering was the guy who got him and his mother out of Poland in the hours before his murder.

To check his memory of the abandoned placards and banners outside the university, he went back to the issue of the *Trybuna Ludu* of March 9, 1988 and found a small article which said small groups of students "incited by foreign agents" had demonstrated in Warsaw and a couple of other cities on March 8. These had been efficiently dispersed by the Civil Militia. Nineteen students faced expulsion from their universities.

So, he hadn't imagined the scene. He photographed each page of yellowed newsprint as it appeared on the screen.

The next mention of his father was in an article published in 1998 in *Rzeczpospolita*. It was titled "The Sinking Ship." The author was Szymon Dolinski. It began:

As the film *Titanic* continues to break all box office records in Polish cinemas it is timely to remember another sinking ship. Ten years ago, it became obvious to those in charge of the economy that the ship of socialism was sinking.

There are doubtless many lifeboats whose names we do not know, boats that slipped away by night. But one boat was noticed as it sailed away by some left aboard the sinking ship. That boat was called "FOZZ": the Fund for Foreign Debt Servicing. This billion-dollar fund was set up in 1985 inside the communist government's Finance Ministry. Its official purpose was to service Poland's national debt.

First to point out the departing lifeboat was public prosecutor Lew Dolinski. In January 1988, he noticed that two of the foreign companies through which FOZZ money was passing used the same nominee director in Luxembourg.

Nation skimmed the following paragraphs describing Suspicious Activity Reports, Mutual Legal Assistance Treaties, hundreds of millions deposited into the accounts of phony companies in tax havens – companies that didn't make anything or provide any service. He found his father's name in the last paragraph:

Within months of launching his investigation into the FOZZ, on March 1, 1988, Dolinski was the victim of a freak accident at Marie Skłodowska-Curie Cancer Hospital in Warsaw. The coroner found the beam filter in the betatron used to treat Dolinski had fallen out of its bracket, exposing him to the unattenuated electron beam. He died of acute radiation sickness within a fortnight, by which time oncologist Ryszard Okula had reportedly fled the country. Okula was later charged with murder, but not the murder of Dolinski. He was charged with killing pro-reform ex-Deputy Interior Minister Pawel Bosko.

What sort of crap was this? To drop an accusation like that into an article about something else? The communists might not have charged his father with Dolinski's murder, but this opinion columnist sure as hell was. He checked the end of the article. It told him Szymon Dolinski was a Professor of History at the University of Warsaw.

He returned to the article:

The FOZZ investigation was reopened after the transition to democratic government. In July 1991, Chief Investigator Michal Falzmann of the Supreme Chamber of Control alleged that the US\$1bn FOZZ fund had become a slush fund for the private use of senior members of the secret services.

Nation's eyes glazed over. He got the picture. He'd read similar stuff about how Putin and his KGB buddies started their private fortunes.

Something was bugging him. He went back and checked the date of the brief interview in *Gazeta Olsztynska*. On Tuesday, March 1, 1988, the date Prosecutor Dolinski had received his lethal dose of radiation, his father was in Olsztyn, training oncologists. He'd been interviewed after the first week of his three-week stint there. If his father had tampered with the betatron before he left, then everyone else treated with that betatron in the week of his father's absence would

have died as well. If that had happened, the papers would surely have mentioned it.

He skipped ahead. No mention of other deaths by betatron, but a few articles saying his father hadn't been found.

The last article to mention his father was from 2018. Same paper; different reporter: her name was Bronia Dolinska – Szymon's daughter, according to Wikipedia. The article was an obituary for the Prosecutor's widow, Maria Dolinska, her grandmother. Bronia Dolinska reported, "Prosecutor Dolinski was officially found to have died as a result of an accident with a 'badly maintained' betatron." He found his father's name in the second last paragraph:

Before she died, Maria Dolinska alleged that her husband's death was no accident. The surgeon in charge of his treatment, Ryszard Okula, fled the country a week before Dolinski's death, charged with the murder of former Deputy Interior Minister Pawel Bosko. Consequently, he was never questioned in relation to Dolinski's death.

He killed the window. His jaw ached from clenching. He opened his mouth and wagged his chin to ease the muscles. Why was the byline "Bronia Dolinska" ringing bells? He took out his laptop and returned to the article in this morning's *Rzeczpospolita*. Sure enough, the byline of the reporter who wrote the Smolensk plane crash article was Bronia Dolinska. He wanted to talk to Bronia fucking Dolinska. He googled a number for *Rzeczpospolita* and was about to go outside to make the call when a man's voice said, "Out of a clear, blue Texas sky, a chilling glimpse of the future."

His blood jumped. It was coming from his computer. A smooth, male, American newsreader's voice. Somewhere off-screen a video had started playing. He scrolled down fast to find it.

"...An attack on the headquarters of an outlaw biker gang."

A few other researchers glanced up sharply. Someone said, "Sssh!" He toggled down the volume. The librarian at the desk who had showed him how to work the newspaper database reproached him with her sad, brown eyes. He held up a hand in apology.

He fished his earphones from his daypack and plugged them in.

“...cell phone footage of the attack on the Bandidos motorcycle clubhouse in San Angelo...”

He found the video several screens down. He made it bigger and peered at it, trying to work out what he was seeing. It looked and sounded like a cloud of mosquitoes. Then a two-story building came into the picture, putting some scale behind the insects: they were much too big for mosquitoes. They were drones. Only they were behaving like a swarm.

A drone detached itself from the swarm and swooped at the building. Shock of gunfire through his headphones. Muzzle flashes in the barred upstairs windows of the building. He lowered the volume. The drone got through unscathed and hit the side of the building about halfway up. There was an explosion. Bricks rained down on the street, and a cloud of dust and smoke billowed outwards from the ground floor. Whoever was holding the cell phone shouted something that had been beeped out.

The tinny soundtrack of shouts, explosions, and the rattling rain of bricks got those fuel injectors of adrenalin going in his belly, and now the old mouse in his chest was running its wheel. In war he'd seen the same kind of weather many times, downrange through a scope or coming down on his head. But he had never before seen this weapon.

The next drone broke off from the swarm and swooped. Another explosion. Chunks of brick rained around the cell phone cameraman, who unleashed a string of beeps. The recording ended.

Grace.

She'd left him for Ramon Vasquez. Ramon Vasquez was Sergeant at Arms of the Bandidos' San Angelo chapter.

Since he took on his new identity, he hadn't checked his old email account. Ramirez had advised him against it. But Ramirez had also said that the Virtual Private Network installed on his new laptop was CIA-grade and, so far, un-

crackable. He logged on to the account where Grace had sent him her email wanting the boys back. The inbox was full of unread messages: fitness industry stuff, oil industry stuff, diving stuff, climbing stuff, posts and newsletters from all his veteran and PTS mailing lists, the Professional Rodeo Association newsletter, crap from the Van Horn Eagles, the Dallas Cowboys, and the NRA.

He scanned this clutter from the life he had unsubscribed from and spotted a new email from Grace. The subject line was “Keep our kids safe!!!” It had been sent at 3 p.m. Texas time. He did the conversion: 14 hours ago. He clicked on it and read:

Tell my boys mama loves them with all her heart. I don't know if you are still in the US or if you went looking for your daddy or the Afgan kid but you were right about these cocksuckers. We called the cops. The Bandidos calling the cops who would have thought it. Stay away from me. Watch this and you will see why. Keep my kids safe!!! I don't know what you want to find there. I hope he is still alive. I hope he is not a killer. Wes, my little papi, be brave. And be kind to your brother. Dean, you are too brave already. Please be careful *pequeño león*.

Under the message was a link. He plugged in his earphones and clicked on it. It was a video of the same cloud of hovering drones, only this time shot from a window of the building under attack. Again, the clatter of gunfire, but much closer this time. Whenever there was a pause in the gunfire, he could hear the same high-pitched whining he'd heard on the news video. His hands clenched.

One of the drones detached itself from the cloud and swooped towards the camera. Grace's voice screeched, “Fuck!” The camera tracked the drone unsteadily. A window frame came into the edge of the picture as she took a step back. An explosion rumbled. The camera shook. Grace screamed. Men shouted. Dust billowed upwards into the frame and swamped the picture.

Through the boiling dust, the camera searched the buildings nearby. A woman with a stroller was running out of shot on the opposite pavement, across a wide Texas street. The camera searched the street and windows of nearby buildings, looking for the pilots of the drones. The only people it found were shouting and

pointing. A guy taking cover behind the corner of a building opposite was filming the clubhouse with his cell phone.

Nation's chest was tight, his breathing ragged. A couple of the gray-haired researchers at nearby tables kept glancing at him.

The camera refocused on the drones. Two more broke free of the cloud and swooped. Burned once already, Grace took another step back from the barred window. The camera panned sideways. It adjusted to the dimness of the interior and bikers with rifles materialized. They were crouched at the other windows shooting through the bars. A guy with a civilian version of an M16 rifle got up from the middle window and charged towards the camera. Mexican-looking, long hair in a plait, Bandido patches, leathers coated in white dust.

He yelled, "Out the way, baby!"

Was that Ramon Vasquez?

The camera tracked him as he crouched at the window and fired through the bars.

Another explosion shook the picture. Brick and drywall exploded inside the room this time. A sheet of ceiling came down and plaster dust filled the air. The camera tumbled sideways.

Grace sobbed, "*Ah, chingado!*"

Heavy breathing as the camera righted itself, crawled to the window, refocused on the drone cloud beyond the shooting biker.

Another drone detached itself from the cloud, then another: drones were coming in now like cotton off a spool.

The shouting and fire from the defenders intensified.

A shotgun boomed and brought down one drone, but the next one got through and the next, and then there was a string of explosions as the swarm unspooled itself completely.

A man yelled, "Move, baby! Let's go!"

Dust whited out the picture, but Nation could hear clear as day the familiar sounds of people dying. He closed his eyes tight and echoes from several Forward Operating Bases overlaid the sounds in his headphones: soldiers screaming for medics, for air support, for information, for Jesus Christ.

Then Grace yelled, “Where are you? I can’t get out!”

The camera no longer moved. It stared at the ceiling. The explosions had stopped.

Police sirens in the distance. In the last few seconds of footage, a couple of red targeting lasers swung about in the dust.

The video rattled and clucked and went black.

Nation groaned aloud and gripped the edge of the desk. This was a trigger. This was a big trigger. Though he could see the timber paneling and the gray-haired scholars staring at him, his body didn’t know it was in a library; it knew it was in the field. Those twin fuel injectors were squirting, making him quake like a vehicle being revved while the clutch is held in.



## CHAPTER 24

Nation found the phone numbers Grace had sent him in San Antonio and jotted them down. He stowed his laptop in his bag and walked fast to the exit. Outside, he took out the new cell phone Ramirez had given him. He stared at the numbers on the slip of library notepaper. Stared at the cell phone. CIA-grade encryption should make the calls untraceable.

And this was exactly what he was not supposed to do.

He stared unseeing at the traffic swishing by. Ramirez was in Moscow now. He could call and ask Ramirez to call his buddy in the FBI in El Paso, but what good would that do? San Angelo would already be crawling with county sheriff deputies, FBI, ATF, and God knew what all.

He hesitated a moment, then slid the phone back into his pocket.

The cold stones of the library wall at his back sucked the heat from his body. A few years ago, the news was always showing pictures of polar bears caught on pieces of ice that had split from the Arctic icepack, sending the bear out on a long journey to starvation. That was how he felt: he'd gone out hunting too far on the ice and the unexpected shift in geography had gone and made the separation permanent. He was adrift out here, numb, cold and without a paddle. Worse, he was out here with his cubs.

The sun came out. He crossed to the sunny side of the street and started walking. Without knowing how he got there, he found himself standing in front

of a big church. It was a long time since he'd been into one. He passed the font and remembered to dip his finger in the holy water. He blessed himself. The church seemed even bigger on the inside. Tall stained-glass windows. A massive wooden carving of Bible scenes behind the altar.

Just a couple of old people on their knees at the front. He took a seat on a pew near the back. Its creaking echoed. He folded the laptop into a tablet, turned the sound off so it wouldn't disturb anyone, and pecked at the screen to bring up his email. He sat with his forehead in one hand like the sinner he was, reading the tablet on his lap.

Nothing more from Grace.

He brought up the latest news reports. Turned out there were four agencies on the scene at San Angelo: the county sheriff, the ATF, the FBI, and CASA, the Civil Aviation Safety Authority. In news videos, lawmen swaggered outside the ruined building, arms held wide to clear the arsenals on their belts, actors in their own movies. The news reports agreed the target of the attack was the Bandidos clubhouse. Beyond that they were confused. Confused even about what kind of attack had taken place. One blamed the Cossacks. Another blamed the Mexican cartels. One even blamed Hell's Angels armed with shoulder-fired missiles. The only thing they more-or-less agreed on was that six bodies had been pulled out of the rubble so far. Two of the dead were women. No names yet. He peered at the footage of bodies being stretchered to waiting ambulances, but they were bagged.

He texted Ramirez a heads-up, then put phone and tablet aside. He knelt and rested his head on his forearms on the back of the pew in front. The video played on his eyelids. A cloud of drones with a kamikaze mind of its own. No controllers anywhere in sight. Who had access to that kind of technology? And if it was the same hunters who burned his house down, why go after his wife in a way that would attract international attention?

He saw again the play of targeting lasers through the smoke.

He was ashamed because if he hadn't started digging in the first place, none of this would have happened. But what he felt worst about was feeling so little. He

looked up at the domed ceiling. The scene was stained dark by candle smoke but he could make out the damned writhing down near the rim, the not-so-damned draped on top of them, the cherubs and angels tangled on them. It reminded him of a gas chamber. God blocked the airhole at the top. His chest was tight but there were no tears to clear his eyes. He wondered again if he'd worn out his mechanism for grieving, or whether the numbness was a brake his mind had learned to apply.

*Keep my kids safe.* That was her last prayer.

He prayed for her. He prayed for his kids. If they were motherless now, they needed all the prayers they could get. He prayed they weren't motherless. After a while, he found himself staring at the face of an ugly critter carved into the top of a stone column, hearing that whine of the drone swarm. His teeth were on edge; his leg jiggled.

It was probably a consequence of his poor record of church attendance, but he'd never had good results from prayer. He got up. Until he knew who had raised that swarm, he would always be reacting to their attacks. The information he needed wouldn't come to him on his knees; the best way to get God involved was to help himself.

## CHAPTER 25

Outside the church, he called the *Rzeczpospolita* newspaper and asked for Bronia Dolinska.

The switchboard woman demanded, “Why are you calling?”

“I have some information for her.”

“She’s on deadline.”

“She’ll be mighty pissed at you if she gets my information too late.”

The woman hitched her spit. “Wait.”

He waited.

Soon another woman’s voice said, “Bronia Dolinska.”

“Pani Dolinska? I’d like to talk to you about Ryszard Okula.”

A pause, then, “You have some information?”

“I don’t want to discuss it on the phone.”

“I’m on deadline.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Is that an American accent?”

“What difference does that make?”

She said, “I can’t get away till tomorrow morning. I’ll file by eleven, then I have to go straight to the Old Town to photograph the Constitution Day Parade. I could meet you there?”

“OK.”

She named a landmark in the Old Town. He knew it. They exchanged cell numbers.

He hung up without saying goodbye.

Probably just as well he’d have time to cool down before he talked to her. Bronia Dolinska might be a crap journalist, but even a crap journalist might have useful information.

He went back to the library to print the offending articles by she and her father, in case her memory wasn’t so good. When he woke the screen, it was still showing her father’s article “The sinking ship.” His attention was caught by the name of the dead president, Lech Kaczyński. He read:

In July 1991, Chief Investigator Falzmann was rushed from a meeting between prosecutors and the managers of the FOZZ Fund, complaining of violent chest pains. Within hours he was dead of a heart attack. He had no history of heart trouble.

Three months later, Walerian Panko, head of the Supreme Chamber of Control, who was deeply involved in the FOZZ investigation, died in a car crash on a straight stretch of road. Experts were unable to explain why the car had crashed.

In January 1992, *Gazeta Wyborcza* reported that the FOZZ investigation was paralyzed by fear. No one could be found to fill the vacant posts.

Not until February 1992 was a candidate found to fill the Supreme Chamber’s presidency: Lech Kaczyński, the Solidarity politician. Kaczyński was unable to find expert witnesses to testify, and the new SLD government of former communists strangled his budget. He was forced to put the investigation on hold, where it remains.

Dolinski’s article was from 1998. Lech Kaczyński became President of Poland in 2005. Had he tried to take on the dirty old Reds again before his death in the Smolensk plane crash in 2010? He couldn’t look into it now; he had an appointment to keep.

## CHAPTER 26

The archivist of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Historical Society was fifty-something and beautiful in a UV-ravaged way. She was a new type of Polish woman that hadn't existed when he was last in-country: surgically enhanced, solarium tanned, a pile of hair on top of her head, and long fake lashes that pulled you like tentacles into her dark blue eyes.

Nation explained that he was writing a history of radiotherapy machines.

She looked him up and down, raised a sculpted eyebrow.

He had managed to get soaked by a spring squall between the tram stop and the hospital and water from his mop of wet hair was running down his face into his mop of new beard. The low pressure had aggravated the scar tissue in his groin adductor, and he'd come in limping.

She said formally, "*Pan* enjoys radiotherapy machines?"

"Yes, I do."

She shrugged. "I prefer Latin dancing, myself."

She led him up a chipped terrazzo staircase with windows on each landing. It overlooked a courtyard between the nineteenth-century wings of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Oncology and Cancer Research Institute. As he limped up the stairs behind her, he realized he'd been here before. On the next landing there would be doorways marked Day Chemotherapy on one side and Chapel on the other, and another flight would lead them to a door marked Staff Only.

Sure enough, the doors were new, but the layout was the same as he remembered. And when she led him through the door marked Staff Only, the corridor behind it was the one he remembered. Somewhere off it was the room where he saw his first photocopier, and, further on, the office his father had shared with two other oncologists.

The archivist sat him at a conference table and brought him a towel. She proceeded to mother him with biscuits and herbal tea, pouting when he protested, and again when he was vague about what exactly was wrong with his leg. He sipped obligingly while she sashayed back and forth between him and some filing cabinets, at times practicing her Latin dance steps – unconsciously, it seemed to Nation.

As she piled big envelopes at his elbow, she said, “People leave them when they retire, but we don’t have the budget to digitize them yet. We depend on donations, you see.”

He emptied the first envelope and shuffled through photographs. Pictures of the old oncology wing being torn down in the 1960s, the new oncology wing going up, an international conference on oncology. For almost an hour he sipped and shuffled, sipped and shuffled, while the archivist rummaged and danced.

In an envelope full of pictures from the 1980s he struck the jackpot. A shot of six people in a treatment room, and one of them was his father. Being the tallest, his father was up the back. He leaned against a white Linac – linear accelerator – the size of an SUV. Off to one side was a bench with other medical equipment. Nation flipped the picture. It was captioned “Dr. Jan Ostrowski, Dr. Ryszard Okula, Dr. Patrycja Januszczyk, Prof. Antoni Rozanski (Director), Dr. Aldo Iskra, and Mr. Roman Kijek (at Linac port) 9.23.1987.” He flipped it over again. Three of them stood, two sat on stools in front of the other two. Mr. Roman Kijek was crouched by an open hatch of the Linac, screwdriver in hand, looking up at the camera with a grimace, mouth like a slot in an old-fashioned screw. Something familiar about Aldo Iskra, both the name and the face. Apart from Kijek, they looked as if they’d been laughing about something before they composed their faces for the photograph.

He peered at Iskra. He was certain this man had been his father's friend.

He took a picture of the photograph with his phone. The archivist looked over his shoulder at the picture, then examined him with narrowed eyes. "It's a pity *Pan* is only interested in the machines; someone should write a book about that bunch." She tapped Kijek with a long blue nail. "He went to prison for negligence after someone died under the betatron."

"Is the betatron still here?"

"No one ever gets rid of much around here. It's in the men's cloakroom, down in the basement." She tapped his father, "And he disappeared in 1988, accused of murdering a big Party man." She tapped Antoni Rozanski: "He was the Director of the Institute when I started here in 1989. He somehow got us millions of zlotys in government funding and used it to buy a lot of very expensive things that never arrived. Cobalt power sources, expensive equipment, and bee venom! My friend in accounts had to make payments to accounts in Cyprus, Luxembourg. Places like that."

"Bee venom?"

"For treating cancer. From Cyprus." The eyebrow went up again. "It must be the stings of Cypriot bees."

"Does it work?"

"Who knows? It never arrived."

He stood and the scar tissue in his groin fired lightning through his leg and side. He winced and handed her a hundred zloty for the Society. She told him he should see a doctor for his leg. He told her he was allergic to medics.

"*Pan* could go lame."

"Lame's the name."

She pouted.

He smiled tolerantly as she dished out advice to the tune of "*Pan* should do this" or "*Pan* might develop that." Her advice stretched into a lecture and he was



thinking, “You can take a Pole out of communism, but you can’t take communism out of the Pole,” when her teeth suddenly flashed white in her tanned face.

She snapped her hips and fingers, *bachata*-style. “Doesn’t *Pan* want to dance?”

“I can samba.”

She raised an eyebrow.

He said, “Show me the betatron and I’ll show you.”

She laughed and led him down to the basement men’s cloakroom in the basement. The betatron, an older-style radiotherapy machine that had accelerated the electrons round a spiral racetrack, was lime green and the size of a small car, with pressed steel paneling like a car, but oval in shape.

While he took pictures, she said, “It weighs three tons, I believe. Of course, it used to be attached to massive steel girders. The ceilings in the treatment rooms are five meters high. The steel bed was under it, bolted to the floor. The electron beam came out through that aperture.”

“Is this the machine Kijek used?”

“Who?”

“Roman Kijek. You said he accidentally killed someone.”

She shrugged, her gaze on his face, unblinking.

While he looked the machine over, she found some music on her phone. She was really going to make him dance. Well, a deal was a deal. He tried to remember the steps. It seemed a hundred years since he and Grace would leave the baby with his mother on Tuesday nights and go Latin dancing in El Paso, back when he was stationed at Fort Bliss.

Grace.

The eyes before him now were dark blue, not black. They were narrowed, intense, as if seeing his loss, pulling him in with those tentacle lashes. But the mind behind them was not on dancing. The archivist leaned in close

and murmured under the jangling tango track, “If *Pan* is thinking of asking those people about the radiotherapy machines, I’d avoid the rich ones.”

“Why?”

“Rich people in Poland don’t want to be reminded about their first million.” She lowered her voice and he had to strain to hear her over the music, “The first million was always stolen.”

She reached over and turned off the music.

He stared at her for a beat, not quite believing that after all these years she was still behaving as if the walls had ears. He nodded and thanked her. Before he left, she gave him her card and said, “Call me when the leg is better. *Pan* should dance more.”

As he walked to the tram stop, he thought maybe she was right. Maybe it was what he needed. He checked his watch and cursed himself. He was late to collect the kids from school.

## CHAPTER 27

Losing a parent was a frequency Nation's brain had long been tuned to, and the idea that his kids were now motherless made the tightness in his chest return like heartburn as he lay down for the bedtime story.

Because he was in Wes's bed tonight, it was Wes's turn to choose the story. He wanted "The Well of Forgetfulness" again. Nation groaned, because it was long and tragic, and because they wouldn't let him skip a single word. But Wes was bruised and angry after a run-in with Konrad Guz and his army, so he gave in.

"And you have to tell the climbing part."

Nation sighed. He was in for a long one.

"OK?"

"OK."

He eased the edge of Wes's pillow out from under his neck and began. "Once upon a time on the plain of Semey, not far from the great road that connected Krakow and the land of the Khans, there was a village where the people lived an awful long time, and they remembered everything. They remembered because of their epics, which told of all the terrible things that invaders had done to them.

"The first epic was the epic of Attila the Hun, which told how a shepherd boy saw the dust cloud on the horizon but took it for a herd of goats and didn't warn the village. The Huns killed all the men and took away all the women and children except for a few people who hid in caves.

“It was after Attila that the surviving adults appointed a village bard to compose the epic, and he was in charge of teaching the children so the village would be ready next time. And they started the tradition of presenting a shepherd boy with a horn to carry with him on his first journey with his flock, and all journeys after.

“Of all the boys in the village, Karok the Shepherd had the best memory. All winter long he sat at the feet of the great blind bard Sipek and repeated the lines of the epics as Sipek chanted them. Sipek’s memory was so vast that if he were to narrate all the epics he knew one after the other, he would have to chant from one full moon to the next. More than anything, Karok loved the epics.”

It was the story his father told him the night he disappeared, but the words he told it in were mostly his mother’s, because she’d repeated it to him throughout his childhood. One autumn night camping by Red Cliff, Kentucky, the first time he took the boys rock climbing, he’d added a climbing episode to stretch it out. Now that episode had become part of the story. The story had become so long Dean was usually asleep before he got to the end of it.

He’d gotten no further than the start of the climbing part when he noticed Dean’s breathing was deep and even. He pressed on to finish on a cliffhanger.

“Karok hung by his fingertips from the ledge. Looking for a foothold, he saw the bottom of the chasm fifty yards below. He panicked, and his fingers slipped off the rock. As he fell, he thought, ‘And I wished for danger!’”

Nation stopped talking. He missed climbing. When you’re climbing a rock face, you can’t think about anything but the next hand- or foot-hold. In recent years that was as close as he’d come to peace.

“Go on!”

Wes never fell asleep on a story.

He said, “Dean’s asleep. I’ll finish it tomorrow night.”

“You never finish it!”

“You know he’ll be mad if he misses out.”

“No! Finish it!”

“It’s late, Wes. You need to sleep too.”

He extracted his shoulder from under Wes’s head. “Want to tell me about Konrad?”

A pause, then Wes mumbled into his shoulder. “He told me to call him sir and I said no, so he pushed me up against the wall of the gym and said, “Time to die, bitch!””

“In English?”

“Yeah.”

“What’d you do?”

“You told me to keep it verbal.”

“What’d you say?”

Wes mumbled something into his pillow.

“What’s that?”

“I told him you were in the real army and you’d kick his dad’s ass.”

*Damn.* Military service did not figure on Jan Kowalski’s CV.

He said, “In English?”

“In Polish.”

“He understand you?”

“I don’t know.”

“So he hit you?”

“Yeah. And his army were yelling, *‘Terrorista! Terrorista!’*”

“What’d you do?”

“I pushed him like this and ran away.”

It pained him to hear it, but he just said, “Sometimes it’s smarter to run away.”

“Yeah.”

“You run faster than him, huh?”

“Yessir.”

“You’re smarter, too.”

“Yeah.”

“But if someone hits you, you can hit ’em back. Otherwise they’ll keep doing it.”

“We lose marks for fighting.”

“You don’t have to keep it verbal if someone hits you. Hit fast. Both fists. A lot of times. Hit him with everything you got.”

“Mm. I’m glad there’s no school tomorrow.”

“Huh? How come?”

“It’s Constitution Day.”

Damn. He’d have to leave them home alone while he met Bronia Dolinska.

Wes was silent awhile, then said, “Why are we here?”

“I have to find who’s hunting us. All our lives, Grandma and I had to hide from the bad men. I can’t let that happen to you and Dean.”

“I want to go back.”

Nation swallowed, stroked the boy’s head. “Me too.”

He lay there till Wes fell asleep, his boy’s words glowing in his mind like five lights on a distant hill.

## CHAPTER 28

Nation didn't like to leave the kids alone, because they hadn't been left alone much in their lives, and this was still a strange place to them. At the same time, it was something that would need to happen from time to time, the way things had turned out. He resolved to make this meeting quick.

The meeting place was St. Ania's Bell Tower. It was on Krakovian Way, a street of narrow old four-story stone buildings connecting the Old Town with the Presidential Palace and, beyond that, the high-rise downtown district in the distance. There were a lot of people on Krakovian Way. Not just the usual tourists, but a whole lot of Varsovians as well.

The tower was square and ten stories tall, with a copper-clad pavilion on top to shelter the bells. He entered and paid his twenty zloty at the desk and climbed the winding stone staircase. The top two floors were a museum. The first of them showed a 360-degree panorama photograph of the heap of rubble the Germans had made of Warsaw in 1944, to punish Varsovians for their uprising. A caption said *86% of the city's buildings were destroyed, an annihilation far worse than Dresden or Hamburg.*

He climbed the stairs to the next floor. It showed another panorama: the rebuilding of the city after the war. He checked his watch: he was a little early. He pulled his ball cap down and hoped it and the beard were disguise enough. Dolinska must have seen pictures of his father, after all.

He climbed the steel spiral staircase up to the bell terrace. The first thing that struck him as he took in the view was that there were almost as many cranes at work on Warsaw now as during the postwar rebuild. People were packed onto the viewing terrace like cattle in a drafting yard. They pressed to peer over the iron balustrades in the direction of the Presidential Palace.

He sat on the stone bench under the two enormous bells and checked his phone for messages and emails. Nearly twenty-four hours had passed and still nothing from Grace. The attack on the Bandidos' fortress still didn't make sense. If this was done by the guys who were after him, as he figured, why the big show? Why attract so much attention? And if they wanted to find him or his mother, why collapse a building on Grace's head without interrogating her first? Just maybe the attack was nothing to do with him or Grace.

A few of the news sites were still blaming the Cossacks, which was based on nothing more than the fact that the two gangs hated each other. But most had realized that the story of a Cossack attack didn't agree with the footage of a sophisticated demolition by drone swarm. Someone had shared DARPA footage of an experimental military drone swarm from a couple of years back. That article blamed China or Russia, both of which had hacked the Department of Defense in recent years. It didn't ask what China or Russia stood to gain from attacking the San Angelo Bandidos. *The Houston Chronicle* was outraged, *The Austin Statesman* was outraged, and Texas governor Jeff Abbott was outraged all over again. The *Chronicle* had thrown in a photograph of Putin smirking.

The drone footage was still viral. It started playing automatically on one news site and he closed it fast, not wanting to hear that insect whining again.

He could hear the crowd building on the street below. He tore his mind away from Grace, shouldered his daypack and pushed his way to the railing. Below, people were packed seven-deep on both footpaths. Officers of the Polycja stood five yards apart on the edge of the cobble roadbed, facing the crowd. On a couple of rooftops opposite, armed spotters in army fatigues and ski masks scanned the crowd with binoculars. When he looked over his shoulder, he saw there were a couple of them on the bell tower behind him.



A brass band rounded the bend that hid the Presidential Palace. Behind the band was a group of armored knights with long lances, and behind them the mounted Hussars with feathered angel wings strapped to their backs. His brain threw up a fact from Polish grade school: in 1683, the Hussars turned back the Ottomans at the gates of Vienna and saved Europe from falling to Islam. To judge by the papers, the government was still trying to keep out the infidel, only this time Europe was pissed about it. He thought of Wes's bully Konrad Guz, fighting to keep the infidel out of his grade school.

His phone chimed. An email. It was from Grace.

He stopped hearing the parade.

The subject line was "Urgent!" In the body of the email there was nothing but the message "Watch this." He stuffed his earbuds in. After a moment's hesitation, he clicked on the link. Later he would wonder why he had gone ahead in spite of that warning bell, but at the time, knowing it could be life or death for Grace, there hadn't really been a choice.

This time the camera was following a Harley tearing down a highway. Neither the rider nor the woman holding onto him wore a helmet. The woman's black hair streamed behind her in the wind. The rider's plait whipped her face. The camera zoomed in slowly on the motorcycle. This didn't seem to be due to any zoom function on the camera, because the image wasn't losing sharpness. No, he realized, it was because the airborne camera was getting closer to the motorcycle.

Because the camera was mounted on a drone.

His hand gripped the phone. What speed must that thing be flying?

As the drone closed, the woman clinging to the rider looked back and up. Open mouth, wide black eyes. A look of horror. Her skin and leathers were white with plaster dust and a cut on her forehead bled upwards. Even from this distance he could tell it was Grace.

The drone was headed for her face.

*Jesus God.* People nearby turned their heads and Nation realized he had spoken aloud.

The drone closed till her face filled the screen, then in a blur it was past her, zooming ahead of the motorcycle. The blacktop reared up and the screen went black.

He shut his eyes.

If the drone was packed with explosive like the others, then it had just made a crater in front of the motorcycle. He opened his eyes, as if there might be something more to see. The screen stayed black. Onto it his imagination projected chunks of blacktop flying on the kind of pressure wave that blows out eardrums and makes the brain tissue of PTS suicides look all wrong under the coroner's microscope.

He imagined the bike stopping in the hole while the passengers traveled on with the meteor storm of blacktop, first through the air, then skidding down the road. It would be a shallow crater, because explosives like C4 only make deep craters if you bury the charge in the road like the Taliban. The blast would exert most of its force on the still spring air, the shockwave chasing traffic at 17,000 miles per hour, flushing out cottontails for a mile around.

The image switched to regular video footage with sound. A little wobbly. Probably another cell phone, but this one was held by a steady hand.

The scene was inside some kind of peckerwood shed. An old truck chassis and a drum of diesel collected dust. A greenhide rope dried itself tight between steel rafters. Grace was kneeling on an oil-stained concrete floor behind the still body of a biker, hands seemingly tied behind her back, skin off one side of her face, jacket torn. Blood leaked from the visible ear. Her face was wet with tears. The look on her face matched the patch on her jacket: Proud Bandidos Ole Lady.

That man on the floor in front of her must be her Ole Man, Ramon Vasquez. Not so proud: his head was twisted sideways at an odd angle, the plait pointing outwards. Dead.

Standing behind her, with her hair wrapped around his fist, was a guy with a bandanna over his face. By his Humvee build and the shape of a goatee, Nation thought he recognized the blond Cossack who had attacked him in Van Horn.

Grace gasped, "If they send this to you, Adam, I told them I don't know where you are! They won't believe me!"

Her voice in Nation's ears was tinny and distorted, as if reaching him across a string stretched between tin cans.

The biker punched her in the side of the head without letting go of her hair. He shoved her forward across the body of Ramon Vasquez.

The camera walked towards her.

She screamed, "Keep my kids safe!"

The biker pulled a box cutter from his jacket pocket. The camera stopped. Grace tried to squirm onto her back so she could kick. A hand reached past the camera into the frame and shoved her face into the concrete floor. The blond guy knelt on the backs of her legs. The camera focused on the box cutter. It cut down through the waistband of her leather pants, continued down the ass seam.

She moaned, "I won't talk...Just stay away..."

She repeated it over and over.

It was as if Nation was sitting there in that shed, bound hand and foot, helpless to do anything at all to save his kids' mother from what this piece of shit was doing: ripping stitching apart, mounting her, chuckling as she bit down on a scream.

Nation stopped the video. He sat with his face in his hands, chest tight. His body was ready to respond to the threat, but the threat was 5000 miles away. Should have killed that bastard when he had the chance. He should go back. He could reach Dallas or Houston in...maybe twenty hours. It was a long time, but they might torture her a long time, and if there was any chance at all...

And the kids?

He rubbed his forehead and stood. He found himself standing at the rail again, this time clutching it. As his mind searched for a realistic course of action, he stared at the scene on the street below. There was a brass band marching by down there, but he couldn't hear it over Grace's voice echoing in his head. He turned. People nearby looked at him in alarm and then they looked to the other side of the viewing terrace. The two ski-masked spotters with rifles on tactical slings and pistols holstered in their Kevlar vests were not there to watch the parade; they were there to watch the people on the viewing terrace.

Now they were watching him.

## CHAPTER 29

Nation ducked his head. He didn't know what to do with his face. A normal person would be watching the parade. He leaned his elbows on the balustrade like the people either side, keeping his hands in plain sight. He stared down without seeing anything. Maybe now he could understand why the hunters had pulled the drone stunt. They didn't know where his mother was and they didn't know where he was, so they'd put on a big show to make international headlines. What kind of people had the resources to do that? Just to get his attention, to show him his wife was in danger, to make him check his old email account.

They hadn't killed her yesterday, so they would have demands. Did they think he'd trade his mother for Grace? They must know she'd left him for an outlaw biker. What reason did they have to think her husband would even give a damn what happened to her? He tried to follow their reasoning: they thought his mother had something that belonged to them, or else she had seen something they didn't want getting out. Logically, whatever she had seen or taken she had seen or taken before she left Poland.

He glanced towards the soldiers. They'd moved closer. Not to talk to him – not yet – just to let him know they were ready for any shit he might try to pull.

He had to watch the end of the video to find out what they were demanding. He couldn't meet Bronia Dolinska now. He extracted the phone from his jacket, found her number and dialed it. He cleared his throat. Cleared it again. A burst of a familiar rock anthem from the stairhead. The top half of a beautiful woman was

emerging at a jog from the mouth of the spiral staircase, clutching a camera to her chest. She was tall and athletic, with a Roman nose, big green eyes, and dirty blonde hair. She swept it aside and put her phone to her ear.

She said, “Halo?” A little out of breath.

He heard the word through the phone at the same time as she spoke it. Their eyes met. Hers were creased at the corners with wit or wisdom or too much sun. The irises seeming luminous in their green against the duller green of oxidized bellmetal.

He lowered his phone, cleared his throat again. “Pani Dolinska?”

The woman mounted the last step and held out a long arm. The skin of her right palm and wrist had been badly burned at some time: it looked melted.

She put her head on one side and laughed as they shook. She had a firm grip, a big laugh. Good teeth.

Her laugh died.

He said, “I’m sorry, *Pani*. I had some bad news. I was calling to...” He was going to say “cancel.” Instead, he said, “I just have to do something. It will take five minutes. Can you wait?”

“*Dobrze*.” She stretched the word out, narrowing her eyes. “I’ll take some pictures while I wait.”

He descended the stairs. There were a couple of people looking at the Warsaw rebuild panorama. He went down another flight. No one was looking at the panorama of Warsaw in ruins. He put the earphones in and listened to the last minutes of the video without looking at the screen. He listened to the grunting and panting and sobbing and waited to hear their demands. He stood in the middle of the room and turned a circle, stopping to read a quote from the Jewish pianist Szpilman: *A city of rubble and ashes under which the centuries-old culture of my people and the bodies of hundreds of thousands of murdered victims lay buried, rotting in the warmth of those late autumn days and filling the air with a dreadful stench.*

He closed his eyes. He had smelled that stench in various theaters of war and didn't want reminding of it.

He looked at the screen again when the grunting stopped. The rapist lay on top of Grace, blond goatee over her forehead. He closed his eyes, gave a final explosive sigh, and went still.

She was sobbing, "Tell the boys Momma loves them..."

The Cossack climbed off his kids' mother and the camera changed hands. Nation looked away as a skinny biker, his face also covered by a bandanna, took the first guy's place. Nation looked at the ruins again, waited to hear their demands.

Not long after that, the audio cut out. He opened his eyes. The video had returned to the first scene.

No demands.

A man emerged from a door he hadn't noticed before. It was marked WC. Nation went in. In the mirror over the sinks his face was white, his eyes red. Diaphragm so tight it was hard to breathe. There was no one to fight and he didn't know how to relieve the tightness. He headbutted his reflection, breaking it. He gripped the taps on the sink and tensed the muscles in his back and arms. He stayed clenched and rocked on his heels until the trembling subsided. He sluiced his face repeatedly, as if to wash those scenes from his eyes.

Much of their marriage she'd tried to help him deal with his demons. She wasn't good at it, but marriage and its responsibilities had probably saved him from becoming another drunken vagrant veteran. But now something had happened to her that was worse than anything that ever happened to him. Something that would divide a woman's life into before and after. He'd seen the divide many times in the faces of women in Kosovo. And he couldn't help Grace any more than he'd helped them.

But if it took him the rest of his life, he would hunt those motherfuckers down and kill them.

On the stairs, he fished sunglasses from his daypack and put them on to hide his eyes. Dolinska was taking photographs of the parade below. She took her eye from the viewfinder and stared at the mark on his forehead, then face a long time, seeing something new there.

She said something.

“What?”

She jerked her chin at something below, repeated herself: “You know what that is?”

Was she testing him on Polish history?

The Hussars were passing below them. The next troop looked like Kosciusko’s insurgents, who had tried and failed to kick the Russians out in 1795. But she was pointing her camera at something back near the Presidential Palace. He looked. A bunch of World War II officers were led by a big cross labelled “Katyn Martyrs 1940.” For the twenty thousand Polish officers executed by Stalin’s NKVD – the organization that would become the KGB.

Next there was a float labelled “Cursed Soldiers 1946–1953” with Polish partisans hanging by their necks inside a Soviet prison made of painted Styrofoam. That would be for the Home Army, who fought the invading Nazis and Russians and survived to wage an insurgency against Stalin after the war, until the NKVD hunted them down and executed them. Except for the few they never caught, his own grandmother among them.

But, no: he saw what she meant. Behind a troupe of Polka dancers whirling each other all over a flatbed truck was the biggest float yet. It was a full-scale replica of the intact rear fuselage of the presidential Tupolev jet that had crashed at Smolensk airport in 2010. It was nested in broken-off trees. Dry ice oozed a cloud of fake smoke around the wreckage. Where the front half of the plane should be, a stylized boarding ramp led up out of the gaping rear section like a stairway to heaven. The truck’s cab was hidden inside the ramp. Nation figured there must be two flat-top B-double trailers supporting the scene.



A middle-aged woman further along the balustrade in designer sunglasses and designer everything else complained, “O *Boże!* When will he let his brother rest in peace?”

Dolinska’s smile vanished.

Nation said, “You’re writing about the Smolensk crash? Is there anything left to say?”

Dolinska kept snapping as she said, loud enough for the complaining woman to hear, “Oh, nothing at all, unless the Russians assassinated half our government.”

“It wasn’t an accident?”

She lowered her voice. “My friend Krzysztof Zalewski didn’t think so. He was an aviation journalist poking holes in the investigation reports.”

“Didn’t?”

The muscles in her jaw tensed. “He was stabbed to death back in 2012. The coroner said it was a random attack. His wife disagreed.” She went on matter-of-factly, the clicking of her camera punctuating her words: “There were half-a-dozen strange deaths like that. Random attacks and suicides. Witnesses and investigators, Polish and Russian. The relatives never agreed with the coroner.”

He nodded. The scene below went out of focus. For all he knew, right now, the San Angelo coroner was doing an autopsy on Grace.

She said, “I don’t know if it was an assassination or just pilot error. I think the only people who do know are the Russians, because the wash-off tests for explosives were either done by the Russians or done by us on the three-hundred pieces of wreckage they returned to us. Who knows what they sent us? Even if it was an accident, it’s still newsworthy, because Kaczyński’s government got into power on the back of his brother’s plane. Where are you from? America?”

He ignored the question. This woman had pronounced his father guilty without trial. He watched the spotters on the rooftop opposite. He could sense the despair in their vigilance as they strained to cover the crowd with their binoculars, the plane wreck reminding them that disaster can strike at any moment.

Dolinska muttered, “Perfect”, and snapped rapid-fire. “A few more shots, then we’ll talk.”

Without looking at her, he said, “Ryszard Okula didn’t kill your granddaddy.”

She peered at him sidelong. “OK.” She dragged out the last syllable.

On the rooftop of the building opposite, a spotter seemed to be looking right at him. The back of his neck itched. He turned, expecting to see the bell tower spotters eyeballing him.

From the spiral stair emerged another spotter in military fatigues, ski mask, sunglasses, and Kevlar body armor. A short, powerful man. Two more followed, dressed the same. They stood side by side at the stairhead, as if letting their eyes adjust to the spring sunshine. They had just climbed ten stories of steep, winding stairs but none of them was out of breath. The tallest of them carried a HK416 assault rifle on a two-point tactical sling. The others had pistols in pockets on their torso armor. They wore ski-masks, sunglasses and desert cammo, but, unlike the spotters already on the bell tower, they had no binoculars.

They were spotters without binoculars.

The two spotters with binoculars looked at each other, puzzled by the arrival of the newcomers.

The shortest newcomer swung his cell phone in front of him, the way a water diviner is swung by his rods. He glanced at the screen, then up, then down at the screen, then up. The phone swung its man around through sixty degrees before it found a lock. On Nation.

## CHAPTER 30

Something told Nation these three guys were not here to watch the parade. Or the crowd.

Then it hit him: to play the movie of his wife's rape, he'd had to click on a link. He stared at the short guy's homing cell phone and knew for certain he'd downloaded something, and that whatever he'd downloaded had turned his phone into a beacon. And now at last it came clear why the rapists had made no demands: the purpose of the video had not been demands, but to make him download the beacon, and to make him keep his phone online long enough for these hunters to home in on it.

The short guy pocketed his cell. His body and stance suggested the coiled power of a cage fighter. Under the ski-mask he had a high, bulging forehead and his shades had the widest nose bridge Nation had ever seen. The skin not covered by the ski mask was darker than Polish skin. He turned to the man beside him, who was built like an NBA basketballer, with a black beard sticking out the bottom of his ski mask. The cage fighter said something, then moved to the left, putting the bells between himself and the two spotters already in place.

The basketballer stayed where he was, muscles tense under the bones of his cheeks, the only visible part of his face. There was no way of reaching the stairs without going through him, and he had both hands on his rifle.

The third of the new arrivals was almost as wide as he was tall. Enormous chest and arms. His traps had colonized his neck, leaving no neck to speak of. Small

head, small hands. Crop out the body and he could make good money as a hamburger model.

Like speed, steroids were rife among the roughnecks on the Texas oilfields. At his roughneck gym in Pecos, Nation had seen guys work out for months or years to put on a few pounds, and then Cesar Zapata the powerlifter would hook them up with some horse testosterone and within a couple of weeks they'd explode in zits and muscles, a distended abdominal wall of gorilla muscle, a barely bottled pig-eyed rage. Cesar was proud of every Zapatista he led out of muscular poverty. This spotter looked like a Zapatista.

He locked eyes with Nation and took a step towards him.

Nation glanced at Dolinska. The Smolensk float was close now and she was snapping again. Without taking his eyes off the new arrivals, Nation gripped her arm.

She turned, scowling, then followed his gaze.

To his surprise, she raised the camera and started snapping the newcomers.

The Zapatista pulled a pistol from the pocket on his plate carrier. He swung it between Dolinska's head and Nation's and yelled in unaccented Polish, "No pictures!" And to Nation, "Hands on your head! Drop down!"

The people at the railing turned in panic. Several people put their hands on their heads and dropped to their faces. Others pushed and shoved to put some distance between themselves and Nation.

One of the spotters with binoculars obediently brought his rifle to bear on Nation.

But his buddy shouted, "Identify yourself! Unit, rank and number!"

The Zapatista glanced over his shoulder, snapped, "We're responding to a credible threat! This man is a terrorist!" He took a step towards Nation, "I said on your face, bitch!"

The soldier who had challenged the Zapatista muttered into his throat mike, listened, set his jaw.

He called, "We're on overwatch here. Show me some ID and we can help."

The Zapatista cursed and turned to look over his shoulder.

Nation saw the slip as if in slow motion. As the Zapatista turned, the front sight of his Glock slipped out of alignment with the rear notch. Heart in his mouth, Nation shoved off the balustrade with one foot, launching himself like a linebacker at the Zapatista. The man caught the movement. His visible eye widened. He swung back and fired twice. Good reflexes, but the shots went high and wide.

From Nation's right, the cage fighter got off four shots. Beyond the bells, the two genuine spotters slumped, shot clean through the head. One round had hit a bell. It rang, low and sonorous. He could see it vibrating.

Nation hit the Zapatista in the midriff with head and right shoulder and wrapped him up. The belly his shoulder hit was as muscular as it looked, but it was also a bag of wind. He heard the explosion of breath, and an instant later the explosion of the Zapatista's pistol. Behind him, a woman screamed. His right ear started ringing.

As they fell together it occurred to him that the cage fighter could easily have drilled him instead of the real spotters. They wanted him alive. That was good, because he was in a killing mood.

Shouts and yelps from people scrambling out of the way as the Zapatista toppled backwards.

As they fell together, Nation's head was twisted right. He could see the cage fighter now, shoving people aside to help out his sacked buddy.

The Zapatista landed on his back under Nation, which made him drop his gun and knocked more wind out of him.

Nation lay on the heaving chest and belly and pinned the man's gun arm with both hands. Reflected in the Zapatista's sunglasses, the basketballer at the stairhead towered ten feet tall from his size fifteen combat boots to the top of his ski mask. The bore of his rifle, which was pointed at the tangle of Nation and his

buddy, looked big enough to shove your head inside. But the basketballer's job was evidently to guard the stairhead, to stop people going down or coming up. He wasn't budging. Not yet. He was waiting for the cage fighter to get there.

The Zapatista shoved off the ground with his powerful glutes and humped himself towards the pistol like a bull seal, carrying Nation on top of him. He did it again, managing to hump them both a foot closer.

Nation snarled, "Come on, man, I hardly know you."

The guy had upper arms like watermelons. He punched Nation's head with his free left arm and stretched for the pistol with the right, which was the arm Nation was holding. He punched again, then humped. Punched and humped. Stunned by the blows, right ear ringing, Nation dragged at the stretching arm, but the man's strength was irresistible. Stubby black-haired fingers spider-crawled towards the pistol, hooked the butt, drew it into the hand.

The Zapatista had the gun in his fist now. The big artery in his neck pumped with effort and rage. He curled his arm up to point the pistol at Nation's head and even with both hands Nation couldn't hold it down. The man's finger slipped inside the trigger guard.

This was it, then.

Desperate, Nation kept shoving at the arm and twisted his neck to look for a weapon or any other hopeful thing. At the foot of the stone bench there was an empty soda bottle. He turned his head back to see the gun, then suddenly let go of the Zapatista's arm with his right hand and groped along the bench. The Zapatista curled the gun to bear on his head. Nation's left hand grabbed the barrel and forced it aside, the right still groping blindly. The Zapatista used his own right hand to tear Nation's fingers from the weapon.

Nation knocked the bottle over. It rolled away. He stretched and trapped it just before it rolled out of reach. He grabbed the neck and dashed the bottle against the stone bench.

The Zapatista ripped the gun free and his right hand locked fingers with Nation's interfering left hand.

But as he was doing it the jagged bottle neck loomed in his sunglasses. Before the Zapatista could aim, Nation stabbed the gun hand aside, then stabbed fast at the shades and the bulging artery in the man's neck. Blood spurted.

The Zapatista roared. He let go the gun to close his throat.

Nation stabbed at his face and neck, smashing the lenses, driving them into eyeballs, stabbed with a savage need, feeling some release of the fury in his chest. He wanted to mince the Zapatista.

But he couldn't give in to that urge. He had to stay in control. He remembered the basketballer and looked up, mouth open.

The rifle's bore no longer stared back. Now he was staring at the butt as the basketballer strode forward with rifle lifted high to smash his skull.

At that moment, a yell echoed in the stairwell and a little guy in a red and white Polska cap erupted from the stairhead, grabbed the rifle barrel, and dragged it down. Three rounds on semi-auto zinged off the stones of the terrace.

Nation blinked, then scrambled on hands and knees for the Zapatista's pistol.

The basketballer was trying to jerk his weapon free, but the brave little tourist clung on. With impressive presence-of-mind, the basketballer reached out with his long boot and hooked the Zapatista's pistol towards him, out of Nation's reach. With a flick of the foot, he sent it down the stairwell behind him.

Fuck.

Nation twisted his neck to look for the cage fighter, glimpsed him through the panicked crowd. He was trying to force his way through the press of panicked people. He had to bounce up to get a look at Nation because he was too short to keep him in sight.

Dolinska was open-mouthed, wide eyes switching from Nation to someone slumped next to her, to the bouncing cage fighter, to the shattered camera

hanging from her own neck. One of the Zapatista's shots must have hit her camera. She swallowed, cursed, set her jaw, slung the camera to her back.

Then, to Nation's horror, she climbed onto the balustrade and jumped.

He climbed to his feet and saw, slumped against the balustrade, the designer-dressed young woman who had complained about Kaczyński. She was clutching her belly, moaning prayers. Her mouth stayed open between exclamations, in horror that this could happen to someone in her tax bracket.

The little tourist was still hanging on to the rifle. A gargling at Nation's feet: blood spurted from between the Zapatista's fingers. And spurted. And spurted again, less forcefully. Overhead the bell's sonorous chime went on, attenuating.

Then he realized: Dolinska had jumped for the Smolensk plane float.

The cage fighter was coming. He'd be on him in seconds.

Before anyone else could shoot at him, Nation scrambled to his feet and sprinted for the balustrade.

The cage fighter was caught off guard. He tried to aim the pistol at Nation, but people milled between them. He changed his mind and surged to intercept instead. With bared teeth and gun up he shoved people aside, thrusting with his left arm, then his right. Those who saw him coming tripped over themselves in their haste to get out of his way. The problem for the cage fighter was there were too many panicked people on the bell tower, and with the stairway blocked no one knew which way to flee. And the cage fighter was no 300-pound offensive lineman; he didn't have the mass to plough through. He was two yards short of his prey, just a couple of bodies between them, when Nation grabbed the balustrade with both hands and vaulted over.

Mouth open, eyes wide, he plummeted towards the crowd below.



## CHAPTER 31

At the time, he was aware of nothing but the fear, like cartridge brass in his mouth. Later he would recall every detail of how, from his bird's-eye view ten stories above, the competing rumors that swept the crowd were visible as surges within it.

Most people had no idea where the shots had come from. Some wanted to escape to Zamkowy Place, the big cobbled plaza in front of the Royal Castle. Others wanted to find the nearest cover and they were prepared to trample other people to get to a wall or store. And now everyone who had seen the woman jump was getting clear of both the Smolensk float and St. Ania's Bell Tower. The exceptions were a few brave men who ran to help the woman embedded in the plane's crumpled fuselage. The police grabbed their legs and pulled them off the float, fearful these good Samaritans would be targeted by the shooter or shooters above.

Mouths opened as people looked up and saw Nation falling towards them.

In the dent she'd made in the fuselage, Dolinska was moving. Her head rolled and she turned her bleeding face to the sky. She saw him falling towards her and struggled to haul her body out of the dent.

No need, he thought. He was going to fall short. He was going to land in the crowd.

Terrified faces filled his eyes; his two boys filled his heart. He muttered, “*Adios, mi amigos.*”

He closed his eyes.

Then his bones slammed together. The thump and screech of his 200 pounds hitting a sheet of braced aluminum was deafening.

As darkness closed out the sky, he wondered if he’d just heard the last noise President Lech Kaczyński heard.

Some time later, something warm dripped on his face. He lay on his side, curled up in his dent. Dolinska’s face above him, her head wrapped in misty clouds. Wide green eyes. Blood dripped from a cut on her nose. He tried to take a breath, but the intercostal muscles of his diaphragm were in spasm, unable to hitch up and pull breath into his lungs. The sky dimmed again. The brass bands had fallen silent. The Smolensk float’s soundtrack of ninety-six forever-ringing cell phones was multiplied as relatives watching on TV saw the chaos and called people in the crowd. People screamed into their phones, or just screamed.

Dolinska shouted. She slapped his face.

Beside her head, a small figure climbed onto the balustrade of the bell tower terrace. It hesitated a moment, as if deciding where to land, then jumped. It fell with arms and legs spread, like a cat.

It was the sight of the falling cage fighter, not the shouts and slaps, that made Nation’s chest heave in air. The first breath cleared some of the fog.

The cage fighter didn’t flail or tumble. He curled himself up as he fell. Nation took another breath.

Dolinska hauled on his arm, shouting.

The cage fighter fell out of his arc of vision. The rapid buckling of metal told him the man had landed on the cab of the float behind.

He took another breath. He lifted onto his elbows and turned his head. The driver of the float behind hung out through his broken windscreen. The cage

fighter lay curled on his side on top of the crumpled cab, still clutching his pistol. A leg moved.

Nation moved his limbs to check for broken bones. Finding none, he got to his knees. A mule was trying to kick its way out of his head. His neck tingled. He crawled out of the dent. Dolinska stood. He hauled on her hand and got to his feet. He swayed as a wave of dizziness almost made him fall down again. When his vision cleared, he surveyed the scene.

To the right, a crush of people tried to force itself around the bell tower to the narrow staircase that led down from Krakovian Way towards the river. To the left, the crowd was crushed between buildings and the temporary steel fence. Most people were pushing north in the direction of King Zygmunt III on his marble column, where the street broadened out into Castle Place.

Ahead of the Smolensk float they were riding on, the Polish Home Army, played by a bunch of guys in period costume, had turned into a rabble, just as they had when the Germans slaughtered them in these same streets in 1944. The rout accelerated when the driver of the Smolensk float that he and Dolinska were riding suddenly put his foot down, evidently panicked by the shooting. A Home Army soldier went under the wheels, with a grunt of shock.

The roar of voices rose in the canyon of Krakovian Way like a flash flood.

He heard Dolinska wail, "*O cholera!*"

In front of the Home Army marched Marshall Pilsudski's heroes, who had driven the Russians out of Warsaw in 1920, and Kosciusko's insurgents, slaughtered by the Russians in 1795. Both groups were looking over their shoulders now and shoving to get out of the path of the Smolensk juggernaut. Muskets and carbines clattered to the cobbles as their owners tumbled over the temporary steel fence and climbed over each other's backs in their haste to join the crush of spectators on the pavement.

Nation looked back. The cage fighter's head rolled towards them. He raised himself on one elbow.

Dolinska dropped to her knees. He saw she meant to slither down to the road. Too many panicked people down there. He tapped her shoulder, shook his head and waved in the direction of the stairway to Heaven that led out of the fuselage they'd landed on. They limped up the stairs. At the top he saw, as he'd guessed they would, that the Smolensk driver's panic had cleared a path through the soldiers and brought them within jumping distance of the float ahead. It was a flat-topped eighteen-wheeler truck-trailer with a cargo of male and female Polka dancers in traditional costume – women in huge skirts, men in baggy trousers and tall, polished boots. One pair, oblivious to all but each other, continued to dance to the polka blaring from the speakers mounted behind the cab.

Nation's ribs and left hip felt as if someone had been working on them with a twenty-pound hammer. He turned to Dolinska to see if she would jump. She nodded. He leapt and sprawled on his hands on the truck bed. The shock of landing woke the pins and needles in his spine.

A male polka dancer helped him up. In a lull in the music he heard the polka float's driver shouting about the crazy Smolensk driver behind him. The drivers must be in radio contact.

He turned to look at Dolinska. It was a long jump for a woman from a standing start. She glanced over her shoulder, and the blood drained from her face. A shot rang out.

The cage fighter was back in action.

She tossed her head, set her jaw, backed up as far as she could, and jumped.

Her front foot made it and she grunted with pain at the impact. Nation grabbed her arms and hauled her onto the float before she fell back under the wheels of the Smolensk float.

The remaining polka dancers had jumped ship at the sound of the shot. Nation and Dolinska jumped to the ground after them.

They were out of the bottleneck of Krakovian Way now and there was more room to move. Dolinska pointed downslope to St. Jan's Street, a narrow, cobbled

lane leading to the market square. Before they entered it, Nation glanced back upslope towards the bell tower.

The cage fighter had seen them. He limped after them, the crowd around Zygmunt's column parting at the sight of the pistol in his hand.

They hobbled down St. Jan's and into Market Square. The ruckus by the Castle hadn't yet penetrated the square, which was walled on four sides by tall, narrow, stone buildings. It echoed instead to the violins and accordions of buskers and the babble of a thousand tourists taking pictures, browsing the stalls for paintings and carvings, queuing for waffles and *zapiekanki*.

Dolinska waved towards the main street leading out of the square.

A short way down it, she yelled, "Right!"

They turned down a narrow canyon between stone buildings. From the screams back there, he judged the cage fighter had entered Market Square.

Twenty yards into the alley, he remembered the phone. It was still connected to the Internet, which meant it was still a beacon.

She saw him tug it from his jacket pocket. "What are you doing?"

"I think they used it to trace me."

He stopped to hold the power key down and remove the battery.

"*Are* you a terrorist? Were you planning to do something?"

Her nose was bleeding from a nostril as well as the cut on the bridge. Green eyes narrowed.

"No."

She nodded, set her jaw, said, "Let's go. There's a police station two minutes away."

"No police."

Her bad leg buckled, and he reached out to steady her.

She said, "Why on earth not?"

“No cops. Come on, we gotta get out of the Old Town before they seal the exits.”

\*

Nation had no idea where he was; he followed her blindly. At one point in the ancient maze of streets they approached a gate in the old city wall, but the police had set up a checkpoint there. A cop looked over the head of the tourist whose passport he was checking and saw the panting Dolinska.

Dolinska stared at the cop above the handkerchief clamped to her nose.

Nation snapped, “I said no fucking cops. Get us out of here.”

She shook her head, turned into another alley, broke into a hobbling jog. A little further on she was about to turn down a narrow side alley when she stopped dead. Nation caught up with her and followed her gaze.

Down the alley, framed by four-story stone walls, not fifteen yards away, the cage fighter stood in the middle of a stone courtyard. He was turning a slow circle, gun in his right hand, staring at the phone in his left to see if the lost beacon would reappear. He swung towards them and Nation was overwhelmed by a sense of *déjà vu*.

Dolinska ducked out of sight. At the last moment, he jerked himself out of his paralysis and followed.

A shout of “*Zatrzymać się! Policja!*” from the cops, followed by the sound of the cage fighter hobbling away.

He followed the sound of Dolinska’s hopalong footsteps. When he saw her again, she was halfway down a long stone staircase between high walls of houses, handkerchief clamped to her nose, camera swinging on her back.

At the bottom of the flight, she turned right, then left down another stone flight even longer than the last. There were doors and barred windows in the walls

on either side, pots of red geraniums outside the high windows. Through the archway at the bottom of this flight he glimpsed tall trees, sunlight glittering on water.

They came out through a gap in the Old Town's wall the cops hadn't yet blocked. Around the bend, an approaching police siren cut out. A vehicle kept coming at speed, rumbling over cobbles.

They crossed the road and made for the trees. Seconds later, tires squealed to a stop. Car doors thudded.

Nation said, "Slow down."

They were among the trees now. In a playground off to the right, kids played in the dappled light. On the path beside it a woman pushed a stroller. Dolinska lifted her hair to air the nape of her neck. He'd worked up a good sweat himself. He glanced back through the trees and saw a police vehicle with lights flashing blocking the bottom of the stairs they had just used.

In the tunnel under the riverside freeway they looked at each other and she blew a long sigh and let her shoulders slump. The cops had blocked the exits of Old Town. The cage fighter was trapped somewhere inside. She mopped her brow with the shoulder of her shirt. He grimaced, nodded.

They emerged onto the path for pedestrians and bicycles beside the Vistula, stopped at a railing on the embankment above the broad khaki river.

What if the cage fighter had slipped the net? He looked over his shoulder, then back down at the river. If they jumped in, it would carry them far from here in no time. But that would be a good way to draw attention to themselves. Better to merge with the river of people on the embankment and act normal. He gripped the rail to stop his hands shaking and gazed across at the glistening figures in swimsuits playing beach volleyball or stretched out on the sand in the spring sunshine.

She said, "Is there blood on my face?"

He nodded.

She spat on her handkerchief and gave it to him. Her nose had stopped bleeding. He cleaned up the dried blood under it and cleaned the cut on the bridge.

As he cleaned, he muttered, "I think I killed that guy back on the bell tower."

She managed to be incredulous and keep her voice low: "Is *that* what you're worried about? You killed him in self-defense!"

He shrugged. "Still means cops."

A giggle from nearby. He looked over the railing. Below, on a ledge just above the water, two teenagers were wrapped around each other in the spring sunshine.

He checked their six o'clock and said, "Let's keep moving."

As they headed north along the embankment, she muttered, "I get the feeling it's not the first time you killed someone."

He said nothing.

She waited for a group of sunburned teenagers to pass in the other direction, then said, "Who were those soldiers?"

"I don't know."

She glanced down at her camera, wrecked by the Zapatista's bullet. He took out his phone, turned his back to the sun to create some shade and checked for calls from the kids. He'd been gone over an hour. There were none. None from Ramirez either.

When he turned back, he found Dolinska had crossed her arms.

In a low voice strained tight as fence wire, she said, "I don't enjoy getting shot at. And those guys are still on the streets. If you don't want *me* to go to the cops, you better tell your story. And it'd better be good. And while you're at it, you can tell me what information you have about Ryszard Okula."



## CHAPTER 32

His adrenalin was still up, and Nation knew from long experience how liable he was to fly off the handle in that condition. Her eyes flashed like Grace's. Dolinska had guts – more than Grace. But that didn't mean he could trust her with the truth. And he couldn't forget the lies she'd spread about his old man, either.

He took a deep breath and sighed it out through his nose. "I have no idea who they were or what they want from me. Why do you believe Ryszard Okula killed Prosecutor Lew Dolinski?"

She stared at him, eyes narrowed, head on one side.

She nodded once. "Alright. I never wrote that. But do I believe it? Prosecutor Dolinski was my grandfather. My grandmother always said his death was no accident. He died of a massive radiation overdose. Probably a lot of people wanted him dead, but Ryszard Okula was the treating oncologist. And Okula was clever enough to kill ex-Deputy Interior Minister Pawel Bosko and get away."

"If you believe the communist papers. Why'd people want your grandfather dead?"

"They say he was a fearless public prosecutor. My father said that, and he specializes in the history of communist Poland. I don't know..." She turned to squint against the glare off the water. To the river she said, "Under communism you don't get to be Chief Prosecutor of the Warsaw Procuracy if you're too

fearless. But I know he'd started the first investigation into the FOZZ Affair just before he died."

"FOZZ? Laundromat for the secret police, right?"

"Yes, for the SB, but also for the WSI – military intelligence. You've been doing your homework."

"I read an article by Professor Szymon Dolinski. That's your father, huh?"

She nodded.

"I read a couple by you, too. You should do a little homework yourself."

She raised an eyebrow, waited.

He said, "Finish your story, first."

"I don't have evidence that Okula killed my grandfather, and my grandmother never accused him directly. That's why I never made the claim directly. But I do know that his death was a very strange accident and it started a trend of accidental deaths. You read the article: after FOZZ, half a dozen investigators and key witnesses had mysterious accidents. Lech Kaczyński had to shut the whole thing down when the ex-communists got back into power. Since then, no one has had the balls to reopen it. Kaczyński was calling for it to be reopened in late 2009, but he never had a chance to push it any further."

"Because he died in that plane crash?"

"Right."

"Another strange one."

"Yes."

Was that the conspiracy theory? President Lech Kaczyński had the dope on the biggest money-laundering scandal in Polish history, so he had to die. Just like her grandfather. And, like a true Pole, Nation was half-convinced already the conspiracy theory was true. He pushed it out of his head. True or false, it was irrelevant to him.

She said, "Now you."

Lying in bed last night, he had prepared a story. It wasn't much of a story, but as long as she didn't have his new name, it would do. He checked six o'clock for the cage fighter, checked his watch, then waved at a bench by the river. They sat. He stared at the sunbathers on the Praga-side beach.

He said, "Ryszard Okula was my father's best friend. I knew him and his wife well when I was a kid, before we left Poland. I was best friends with his son. They were good people. His wife and son still are."

He turned and held her eyes a moment. Hers were narrowed.

She said, "His wife and son disappeared."

"Not with him. They never saw him again. They're still using fake identities, nearly thirty years later. Not in Poland. Anyway, around the time Ryszard Okula disappeared, in the late eighties, my own father disappeared. Maybe it was connected to what happened to Okula. I don't know. They were both active in Solidarity." His gaze returned to the water. "We never saw my dad again. After that, the SB watched my mother twenty-four hours a day. Every couple hours, different vehicle, different pair of guys. Mom said there was an echo on the phone line. If we went to a milk bar, there was an Esbek at a nearby table, not looking at us. They liked to wear brown suits."

He checked the path again and his eyes settled on some house barges moored by a short jetty. In a boat like that, he and the kids could just float out of here and keep floating into Western Europe. They could live on the canals and rivers of the Schengen zone, no passport required.

He collected his thoughts. "We got out of Poland in '88. Never came back. I was seven years old when we got to Canada. Mom always told me my father was dead. She refused to ever come back – said the only thing that changed after communism fell was the suits: the Esbeks stopped wearing their old brown suits and bought Italian ones."

"How did she know? Was she still in touch with people here?"

"Through the Polish community over there."

Dolinska said, “The expensive suits I know. Some of the senior secret police and military intelligence officers became big businessmen overnight. In the media, petroleum, banking, pharmaceuticals – all the businesses that used to be state-owned enterprises. Like in Russia. Like everywhere in the Eastern Bloc. Unlike the old Party bosses, the secret police didn’t have to hide their faces. And they had dirt on everyone – the old *nomenklatura* and the new democrats. They’d spent decades collecting dirt on everyone who threatened the regime. They were in on all the money-laundering schemes because no one dared leave them out. Less senior ones got jobs with the regular police or started private security companies and leveraged their contacts with their friends in the regular police. There were thousands of private security companies. Some of them branched out into protection rackets, drug and people trafficking, and so on. In Russia the mafia came from the gulag; in Poland they were Esbeks. Turned out secret police training is the perfect training for a mafioso. And the chaos of transition suited them. Your mother was right to stay in Canada. She was absolutely right. Wise woman.”

“I guess I didn’t inherit that.”

“Why come back now?”

“To find out what happened to my dad. I emailed the Institute for National Remembrance from Canada to ask for his file. That was five weeks ago. Since then, strangers have been trying to kill me and my kids.”

“They came after you in Canada?”

He nodded.

“And you came to *Poland*? Are you crazy?”

“Depends who you talk to. But if the secret police who killed your daddy came after you and your family, what would you do?”

“Tell the fucking police! You don’t have police in Canada?”

He shook his head. “It was what you might call a false-flag attack. They used hired killers. I need to find out who did the hiring.”

She narrowed her eyes, put her head on one side, as if it gave her a different angle on his story. She pushed her lips out.

To avoid looking at her lips, he looked at her eyes. He glanced away, wondering if any country produced more beautiful women per capita than Poland.

“Where are your kids?”

“At school.”

“In Poland?”

He nodded.

She nodded slowly, speechless at his stupidity. A mannerism the Poles had learned from the Jews, or maybe it was the other way around, back in the days when a lot of Jews were also Poles.

“Wife?”

He nodded. “But she left us.”

He thought for a wild couple of seconds of telling her about the video of Grace but thought better of it.

“So, they found you in Canada, and now they found you here. What will you do?”

He found his throat had constricted. He cleared it. “That’s what I have to work out.”

Her phone chimed. She checked it and said, “Damn! My editor. I have to cut down my story by 14:30.”

Was it communism that had conditioned Poles to the 24-hour clock? Whatever; it went well with that other military habit they had of letting you know all about it when you’d fucked up.

They rose and headed for the pedestrian crossing.

She said, “So what was your information about Ryszard Okula?”

“Ryszard Okula didn’t give your grandfather a lethal dose of anything.”

“You have some evidence?”

“Your granddaddy died on March 15th, 1988, after getting a lethal dose from a betatron on March 1st. Between Monday, February 22nd and Monday, March 8th, Ryszard Okula was training oncologists up in Olsztyn. You can read an interview with him in *Gazeta Olsztynska* March 1st, 1988, the day your granddaddy got his last dose. Did you check the regional newspapers?”

“No. Just Warsaw.”

“Here.” He took the printout of the article from his jacket pocket and gave it to her. “Looks like you missed this one. The National Library’s got a new database: all the regional newspapers and all the metropolitan ones in one database. Someone else gave him that dose.”

She skimmed the scanned pages he’d printed out.

The green man chirped his invitation to cross the riverside highway. Clearly, she didn’t know much that was useful to him. He should get back to the kids.

He said, “I gotta go.”

But she had to go the same way. She was silent as they walked up a winding street through New Town. The buildings in New Town looked centuries old, like the ones in Old Town, but not one building in either town was older than the late 1940s.

She hailed the first cab she saw. As it pulled into the curb, she said, “How did they trace your phone?”

“I opened an email I shouldn’t have.”

With her hand on the door handle, she didn’t have time to pursue it.

She said, “What’s your name, anyway?”

“Michal.”

She said, “OK, I’ll let you know if I find anything. And I guess you’ll let me know if you find anything, *Michal?*”

He was already turning away, but he checked himself at the irony in her voice and turned back. Her eyes were hooded. She stared at his beard, mouth, eyes.

The cab driver drummed his fingers on the roof of his cab.

She put a hand on his shoulder and leaned to murmur in his ear, “I don’t believe the sins of the fathers should be visited on the sons, so cut the crap, OK? Even in the beard and cap, you have your father’s eyes. And mouth.”

He watched the cab rumble away over the cobbles, chilled and aroused by the thunder of her whisper in his ear.

Fuck. Someone he didn’t trust suspected Okula’s son was back in Poland. Worse, a journalist. *Fuck*. It was suddenly very important to stay on the right side of Bronia fucking Dolinska.

## CHAPTER 33

Of all places, the son had showed up in Warsaw. Karol Okula might know what it was the Director wanted, or he might not. It didn't matter: once they had the son, they had his mother. And she would give up what her husband had stolen from him thirty years ago.

The Director and FSB chief Artyom Mitkin sat in the dark on stools in a pine-log hunting hide, either side of a low table made from a wheel of spruce. On the table stood a half-empty bottle of vodka and two glasses. The hide was in the Romincka, the forest that straddles the tri-point border between Poland, Lithuania, and Russia's Kaliningrad oblast. Outside the long shooting window, Cyprian scattered corn by moonlight. Now and then the wind brought the baying of dogs. Gamekeeper Rusak was out there somewhere, driving wild boar towards the hide.

Both men wore camouflage hunting fatigues and heavy jackets to ward off the May chill. Vodka was also helping. The Director shifted the crosshairs of his AK-74's night scope onto Cyprian's head, imagining it was Karol Okula's. He couldn't keep it in the crosshairs: his heart rate was too high, and his hands trembled.

What if Durgan had failed to capture him?

He propped the gun, lest in his tremulous state he shoot his old secretary's head off. Where would he find another one who was so good at keeping his mouth shut?



He tugged his vaporizer from his hunting vest and sucked at it. Maga had called this afternoon from a car racing towards St. Ania's Bell Tower and the Director had been waiting seven hours now for a second call to say they had Karol Okula.

"Beliefs?" Mitkin peered through the scope of his own rifle and rumbled, "Putin's a short man. From the time he's a little boy, a short man believes in two things: protecting himself from the larger boys and poking them in the eye any chance he gets. I'm six years younger than him, but I grew up in a neighborhood near the one that spawned him. They say he was the dirtiest fighter in the playground: he would scratch you, bite you, gouge your eyes, kick you in the eggs. Nothing's changed: he believes in self-protection and revenge. That is the limit of his vision."

The Director dragged his attention back to what his friend was saying.

He said, "I don't know. He's always drumming up the Russian World and the Eurasian Civilization. Aren't those beliefs?"

Mitkin snorted.

The Director took up his glass and sipped.

Mitkin opened his other eye and took in the Director's trembling hand. "Stop twitching. If he's in Poland, we'll find him. Where can he go? I have agents watching every port."

"That ammunition box in the wrong hands...What if Little Kaczyński got hold of it?"

"Why the hell did you keep all that?"

The Director put his glass down and sucked at his vaporizer. As the cloud enveloped him, he said, "We were trained to keep records, to retain evidence."

Mitkin said, "We were trained to keep secrets, too. No, you kept it as insurance." Mitkin raised his head from the scope and winked. "In case the Martial Law boys ever forgot about Prosecutor Dolinski and the other favors you did them." He didn't expect a response and the Director didn't offer one, but

only regarded him archly through the vapor. Mitkin said, “What perturbs me is you don’t even know if the wife took your box out of Poland.”

“No, I don’t know. But Bosko didn’t have it: we searched and did a good job of it. Then Gajos missed them by hours in ’95. In the middle of Australia! As far as a person can run! She knows someone is hunting her, or why go there? But not who. I didn’t find them again until five weeks ago. You know what she was calling herself in Texas? Krissie Nation. Her maiden name was ‘Krysia Narodowski’ – ‘nation’, with the suffix for nobility. Taunting me! You’re right, I don’t know, but I have to rule her out.”

Mitkin sighed through his nose. “Well, that’s always the best way. Put a line through them.” He propped the rifle, picked up his glass between a huge thumb and forefinger, put his bulging blue eye to it and examined the moonlit clearing through it. Moonlight gleamed off the dome of his forehead. “What I don’t understand is why the son came to Poland now. They could have sent the documents to Kaczyński or anyone else without coming here.”

“The only reason I found him was that he asked for his father’s Institute for National Remembrance file.”

“Your mole in the archive told you?”

The Director nodded. “My guess is nothing in the ammunition box tells him what happened to his father. I think he’s here to find out.”

“But he won’t get the Institute file.”

“I’ll know if he tries.”

They drank, and waited, and Mitkin gradually fell into silent gloom.

Finally, the Director said, “Is it Putin?”

“He’s worried about me.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Not think, I know so. I collect intelligence, remember?”

“He suspects you over the Gusev raid?”

“No. Not yet.”

“How well hidden is your interest in the Skłodowska Oncology Group?”

“I have no trouble keeping secrets.”

“It’s easier in Russia. Especially for the head of the FSB.” The Director sighed out a cloud of vapor. “Well, I’ve always said you’re the only man he fears.”

“No, he fears everyone. But next month he’ll introduce legislation to make the National Guard answer to the Ministry of Defense – meaning to him. Then he’ll have his own praetorian guard.”

The Director shrugged, said slowly, “The Guard are good at kicking down doors. So long as someone tells them which doors to kick.”

“There are 200,000 of them, and another 200,000 reservists.”

The Director said, “They collect no intelligence. They rely on yours.”

Mitkin shrugged. He stood and paced the hide. The Director was not a small man, but his spare hunting coat was tight across Mitkin’s shoulders.

“And the intelligence I’m collecting is bad: he’s going to set up a unit inside the Guard that will collect its own intelligence. The way Hitler created the SD to direct the SS. Why would he do that unless he wanted to bypass the FSB? No, he’s worried about me.”

“Why now?”

“For one thing, he knows what I think of his Eurasianist bullshit. The Russian World I can accept. But the ‘Eurasian civilization’? To hell with that. Muslims are the *enemies* of civilization. What Christian Russian gives a damn about Chechnya, or Azerbaijan or the ‘Stans? Unless you have Stalin at the helm, you can’t control them. Look at Western Europe: a Muslim bomb goes off every other month.” He took a swallow of vodka. “No, leave those animals alone. Now that religion is allowed again, the gulf between us is wider every day. The Russians are a Christian people; our natural allies are the other Slavic peoples. Pan-Slavism: now there’s an idea the Russian soul can love. *Has* loved. A Pan-Slavic union of *Christian* peoples, like under Tsar Nicholas.”

The Director smiled, said, “Of course, Russia would be the natural center of any such union.”

Mitkin grimaced, wagged a huge finger, said with a smile in his eyes, “Now, now: the other states would have a high degree of autonomy.”

“And you would be a natural leader.”

The smile reached Mitkin’s mouth.

The Director refilled their glasses.

He reached up and tapped Mitkin’s glass carefully with his own. “To the Pan-Slavic union.”

Mitkin echoed the toast and took a reflective sip. “But we’ll have to release the film of the raid sooner than planned. Putin’s opening Nordstream II in a fortnight. They’re dropping like flies at Gusev, anyway.”

The Director looked up with sharp interest: “What does Putin know?”

“The military inspection team from the Kirov found the iodine-131 in the samovars, but only after twelve hundred men got sick. They haven’t found it in the water tanks yet. They can’t understand why soldiers are still falling ill. What’s happening at our clinics?”

“We’ve signed up 140 already for the Thyroglan trial at clinics in Kaliningrad and Moscow. The military hospitals are begging for Thyroglan.”

“And?”

The Director shrugged. “WarPharm had to tell them we’re not allowed to sell it. Pending the decision on our appeal to the Polish Pharmaceutical Inspectorate.”

Mitkin smiled.

The Director said, “How will Putin react?”

“To the film of the raid? It doesn’t matter how he reacts. If he invades Poland, so much the better. If he closes the Suwalki Gap and takes back the Baltics, I’ll settle for that. He’ll be my stalking horse.”

“What if he just cuts off the gas to Poland?”

“This is the most likely scenario. We’ll come to some arrangement with Trump that will prevent a war. But if all he does is cut off the gas, it’ll be bad for your Kaczyński. He dragged Polish–Russian relations into the swamp. And look what crawled out of it: a Russian-hating militia. Polish and Lithuanian soldiers invading a Russian army base! Soldiers’ children with birth defects! Couldn’t be worse for the little prick if he’d sneaked into Kaliningrad and poisoned two thousand Russian soldiers himself! It should be enough to get our useful idiot, Lipiński, elected. After that, we might not need to invade Poland: we’ll control it the way we control Belarus. But it will be the beginning of the end for Putin: if he cuts a deal with Trump it will make him look weak. Every poll since ’92 has showed most Russians want the Soviet empire back.”

“What if he does nothing at all?”

“He’ll look even weaker. But he won’t do nothing. He’s a brawler, and he’s not stupid. He knows *looking* tough is all that keeps him in the Kremlin. But perhaps he doesn’t yet know that the Russian people will throw him over for a leader who used to destroy little brawlers like him.” Mitkin’s knuckles whitened on the glass momentarily. His grip relaxed and he poked his glass at the Director. “Can Lipiński sell a Pan-Slavic union?”

“He’ll sell anything I tell him to sell. It must be done gradually, of course.”

Mitkin nodded. “*Durak* is a game of patience.”

The Director’s phone rang.

He tapped to accept the call, barked, “I’ve been waiting all day! What happened?”

As he listened, he walked to the door and stared at his dark reflection, doubled in the double-glazed porthole. He watched his refined eyebrows draw together, the brutal jowls drag the mouth down, his fingers whitened on the phone.

He snapped, “Lie low!” and killed the call.

To his reflection, he said, “Okula’s son escaped.”

Mitkin grunted. “Temporarily.”

Movement outside. Cyprian was on his way back to the hide. He saw the Director and waved towards the clearing.

The Director spun on his heel. In two strides he crossed to the shooting window and snatched up his rifle. He switched it to full-automatic and stuck the rifle out the window. A low dark shape had emerged from the forest to snuffle at the edge of the moonlit clearing. He fired until the clip was empty, and the hide was full of smoke.

## CHAPTER 34

Lying in Dean's bed for the bedtime story, Nation struggled to stay awake.

"Karok rested a long time and drank till he'd emptied his water skin before he tried to climb again. He reached the top just after noon. The flock bleated to welcome him back. He lunged at Attila to cuff his head, but he missed, and the black sheep scampered off, bleating.

"His eyes tracked the horizon. To the northwest, not a dozen *li* off, was a cloud of dust. Inside the dust, sun flashed off steel. At the front of the column of riders trotted an armored warrior with a head on a pikestaff, a hideous carved head with a gaping mouth and a bristly chin.

"Only the Mongol-Tatar horde moved so fast. It took a long time for the main horde to pass. Trailing behind it were wagons loaded high with treasure. Other wagons carried women with golden hair and blue eyes. They were Polish women, the most beautiful in Europe. They were bound for slavery in Karakoram, the city the Mongols built on the steppe near China in imitation of Kraków, to hold the beautiful things stolen from Kraków. As the horde passed, it grew dark, and the slaves beside the pitch wagons lit torches and passed them to the riders. The horde was on the road to Karok's village.

"He had to warn his people. But to get there ahead of the horde, he would have to run across hills, and he was already exhausted from his climb."

Dean was breathing deep and even. Asleep again.

Nation said, “Then...” and breathed in and out. And a second time, in and out, more slowly. He tried to rouse himself, repeated, “Then...”



## CHAPTER 35

The next day dawned warm. In the bathroom of the apartment on Elektoralna Street, Nation shaved off his short-lived beard while the transistor radio transmitted rising panic about the Russian buildup. Nuclear capable Iskander missiles moving into Kaliningrad. The joint-forces Russian–Belarusian Western Storm military exercises started in a fortnight. Russian reports said the war games would use 15,000 troops, but NATO said there were already 70,000 troops either side of the Suwalki Gap, making it the biggest war games since the end of the Cold War. It was looking uncannily like 2014, when Russia had moved troops and armor to the Ukrainian border for ‘war games’, then kept right on rolling across it. The Polish Defence Minister said Putin wouldn’t dare invade Poland or the Baltics, because according to the NATO Treaty that would trigger war with NATO. The American Commander of NATO’s Land Forces sounded more worried.

Nation watched himself grimly in the mirror. Echoing along with the radio were those childhood terrors of columns of tanks and nuclear shelters. Another echo was that with just the moustache left he really looked like his father, now. But it couldn’t be helped: there would be pictures in the paper and online of the bearded guy who jumped off St Ania’s Bell Tower.

He got the kids off to school and lit out for breakfast in weak sunshine. The breeze carried a floating snow of *kwiat dmuchowca* – ‘blown flower’. It lay in white drifts against the buildings and in the gutters. As he limped through Wola, the air

chill on his naked face, he tried to think what to call blown flower in English. It helped to distract him from whatever was twisted or torn in his left hip.

At his usual table in the Florianska, he checked his phone. On the way home from meeting Dolinska, he'd switched it on at the Arsenal transport hub and restored the factory default settings. It *should* be clean of beacons now. Ramirez still hadn't replied to his message about Grace so he opened his laptop and checked his email. Nothing from Ramirez or Grace.

He opened the *Rzeczpospolita* newspaper site. There he was on the home page: a bearded guy in a baseball cap on St. Ania's Bell Tower, shot from the side, staring into a ski-masked spotter's pistol. The image was a little out of focus. The fuzziness was good for him but good for the bad guys too. There was a still of the cage fighter, but you couldn't even see the unusual spacing of his eyes.

The two surviving gunmen remained at large.

A small article beside it was headlined "*Rzeczpospolita* reporter Bronia Dolinska escapes with minor injuries."

The cleaners entered and he looked up.

Marcin pointed at Nation's shaved face. "A serious job-seeker!"

Jerzy said, "Soon as I sack one of you loafers, I'll give him a job myself."

A couple of the cleaners had newspapers, but they didn't connect him with the fuzzy pictures of the bearded hero of St. Ania's Bell Tower.

\*

Nation laid the photograph from the Marie Sklodowska hospital on the dining table of the apartment. He stared at the faces awhile, then turned it over to read the names on the back again. He went online to check the Warsaw phone directory but found no Aldo Iskras. As a test, he checked "Kowalski" and found there were few people of that name in Warsaw, which was ridiculous. Evidently,

Poles had given up on the old fixed-line phone company. He called cell-phone companies and ISPs. They required an address for Aldo Iskra before they'd even do a search for phone numbers under that name.

He sat back in frustration. Who did he know who could find out where Aldo Iskra lived?

Without much hope, he tried Ramirez's cell again. No answer. Cursing under his breath, he called the one other person he could think of.

Dolinska sounded tired. "Your face is in the papers, you know that? You should shave that beard off."

"I already did."

He made his request. She was silent a few moments, then said yes, she could get phone numbers and addresses – did it all the time. But first she wanted to know who Iskra was. He hesitated, then told her.

She said, "Send me the picture." She yawned. "I guess you want me to get up now, *Michał*?"

"You're kidding. What time do you get up?"

He put her on speaker and thumbed keys to send her the picture.

"I didn't sleep well..." Then, lazily, "Guess what I'm wearing?"

His thumb froze. "OK...Pajamas?"

"No. I'm wearing the same clothes as yesterday."

Guessing already that he wasn't going to like the answer, he said, "How come?"

"I had to sleep in my car last night. I was on the way home yesterday when my editor called to say the paper was getting calls to see if I was OK. He put something on the website to say, 'Bronia Dolinska escaped with minor injuries.' But, you see, that animal who lost us in the Old Town can probably read too: he didn't know my name yesterday, but he does now."

"Did you go home?"

“Just long enough to get my car and computer and some clothes. The old lady next door is a friend of mine. I asked her to keep an eye out today, to call me if I had any visitors. She called me after midnight to say there are people hanging around outside the building entrance. One after another. She said one of them reminded her of an Esbek.”

“Damn. I’m sorry.”

“Means a lot to me. Listen, I’ll help you find this Aldo Iskra if I can come with you when you talk to him.”

It was a catch-22: he’d wanted to talk to Iskra alone; but without her, he couldn’t even find Iskra.

“OK. Sure.”

“And there’s something else you can do for me.”

“What?”

“Do you have a couch, *Michal*?”

## CHAPTER 36

The Director lay in the sauna of his hunting lodge. Cyprian stood over him, flopping at his back with a nettle broom. On a bench above him lay FSB Chief Artyom Mitkin, his body inert but for the massive ribcage that swelled slowly, paused a long time, then deflated.

Major Durgan Maga, still on enforced leave from the Polish army, lay on the top bench at the dark far end of the sauna.

Gritting his teeth against the sting, the Director said, "I've always looked after you, haven't I?"

Maga was silent.

"Eh?"

Silence.

The Director felt the vein above his left eye start to tap the wood under his face.

He muttered, "Yes, I have. Paid you many times what the army pays you."

Maga turned his face to the wall.

As the nettle poison penetrated, the Director's back throbbed like Christ's on Calvary Hill. His eyes throbbed against their sockets.

With fury, he enunciated, "An eloquent silence."

Cyprian moved over and started flogging Maga's back with the nettle broom, swinging harder. Maga slapped the broom aside, swung his legs off the bench and got up. Cyprian flattened himself against the wall.

Mitkin let his arm flop down in front of the Director's face and wagged a huge forefinger. Warning him not to go too far, because they still needed Maga. The Director breathed into the throb in his back as if it were his anger, waiting for endorphins to flood his system and counter the pain.

Eventually he sighed. "You're a proud man, as you should be. You've been under pressure. This insulting investigation, eh? I know what it's like to have to answer to children. But you can't let it interfere with your work for me. This is a critical time. I need to rely on you, as I always have. But more than ever now."

Maga limped towards the door. He picked up the wooden ladle and threw water on the stones. In the fogged light through the door's glass porthole, the muscles of his torso were so clearly separated that he might have been a man without skin, but for the old bullet wounds and new bruises. In the steam that erupted from the box of stones, he turned and began to pace the sauna. A caged beast.

The Director said, half to himself, "But what else could you do? We flush him out with a few firecrackers in Texas, a movie from his wife, and it turns out he's here! Of all places in the world! Roosting like a stork on top of St. Ania's Bell Tower! No. We did what we could with very little notice. You did what you could. Eh?"

Maga snorted and rolled his injured shoulder, as if to remind the Director he'd done more than might be expected.

"The woman on the bell tower took pictures of us – the one who jumped."

Cyprian sat down. "That might be a problem..."

"Who is she?"

Cyprian exhaled heavily a couple of times. "A journalist. Bronia Dolinska."

The Director looked up sharply. "Dolinska?"

“Yes. Her camera was destroyed, though. There was an article about it in *Rzeczpospolita*. Minor injuries...”

“You say her name’s Dolinska?”

“Yes.”

He remembered seeing the name in the paper, but the name was common, so he’d never registered that she might be related to the dead prosecutor.

He sat up and closed his eyes to think. It might be a coincidence, but he never assumed that. He sensed Mitkin’s questions but knew the hung-over spymaster’s sauna habit was to lie still and economize even on the movement of his lips.

For Mitkin’s benefit he asked, “What do we know about her?”

“Big nose. Financial investigations. And Smolensk. She writes about Smolensk a lot.”

“Financial investigations?”

“Polish privatization deals of the 1990s. Finances of the Russian so-called kleptocracy.”

The kleptocrat Mitkin rumbled, “*That* bitch?”

Cyprian added, “She was reporting from Chechnya...”

Mitkin said, “We ran her out of there in 2007. She’s still got a chip on her shoulder.”

The Director’s brain and body throbbed with one heavy pulse. The heat was becoming insufferable.

With effort, he said, “Do we know where she is now?”

Cyprian seemed to be suffering too. “She must have gone home last night but she didn’t sleep there...She took her computer and backups...”

Mitkin said, “Have you got a trace on her phone?”

Cyprian slurred, “We have someone in ABW working on it...sir.”

The Director snapped, “Go out, Cyprian, before you pass out.”

“Thank you, Director.” Cyprian got up and staggered to the door.

They were silent a long time, each man weighing the new information, then the Director said, “Well, we learned one useful thing: Karol Okula’s children are not with their mother.”

Mitkin said, “With their grandmother?”

“No, Nosek said the wife begged Okula to keep the children safe.”

“In Poland? I don’t think he’s crazy. He must have left them with someone.”

The Director smiled bleakly. “What was it you told me about the Taliban, Durgan? In the hills you can sometimes find them, but they’re hardest to find when they hide in plain sight.”

“It’s true.”

“Our friend was in Afghanistan, too. Maybe he learned the same lesson.”



## CHAPTER 37

Dolinska picked Nation up on the corner of Solidarnosci and Zelazna. She had a plaster on her nose. Her vehicle certainly smelled like it had been slept in. There was a note of lanolin in the sourness that reminded him of his mother. He liked Dolinska's smell.

As they drove east in a storm of blown flower, Dolinska said, "My camera's SD card survived. It's in my phone."

He took her phone from its hands-free mount. The first shot of their attackers on the bell tower showed three ski-masked spotters with sunglasses locked on a point just to the right of the photographer. He swiped through the pictures. The last few images she'd had the camera shooting rapid-fire: it showed the Zapatista with his pistol coming up in a stop-motion arc.

He swiped backwards to a picture that showed the cage fighter following his phone as if it was a dog on a leash. He wore a ball cap in desert camouflage, a black ski mask under it, and wraparound shades, but the picture captured well the unnatural width of the nose bridge.

Now Nation had time to examine them, he saw the three soldiers were wearing some sophisticated gear. Their FLiCs – Fighting Load Carriers – looked like the kind of plate carriers some of the NATO special forces had worn as torso armor in Afghanistan. They wore them over T-shirts, the way he used to himself, the pockets stuffed with magazines.

The shooters could have done a better job of disguising themselves as spotters – binoculars would have been a good start – but considering they couldn't have known in advance where he was going to show up, they'd done OK. For all they'd known, the beacon would go off in a nudist colony in Alaska. The last place they'd have expected him to show up was Poland. They must have picked up the signal from his phone and got there with all speed.

In several pictures, the basketballer had an arm out to block a tourist from descending the stairs. The tattooed double hook of an anchor was visible on his shoulder.

He pointed it out to Dolinska. "Either he's a sailor, or that's the symbol I've seen on Polish military uniforms."

She shrugged. "Half the football hooligans in Warsaw have that tattoo. The top half is a letter P, the bottom half is W. PW for *Polska Walcząca*."

*Fighting Poland.*

He said, "That's the one."

"It made a big comeback after communism."

She saw him zooming in on the basketballer's rifle. "So, you were in the military? Where?"

He didn't answer. He flicked his fingers apart on the screen to zoom in on parts of the Heckler and Koch rifle. It had been upgraded with a red-dot reflex sight mounted high and one of the new octagonal suppressors that was just coming in when he left the military. He'd lay odds it had a doctored trigger system, too. Some of the SOG and Delta operators he'd served with over there had carried similarly personalized H&K carbines.

He thumbed a message to Cody Ramirez, embedded Dolinska's pictures and a link to news footage of him and Dolinska jumping from the bell tower. He read it through before he hit send:

Buddy, I know it's a little premature to be getting in touch, but I guess you heard about San Angelo. Hostiles have Grace. They sent me a movie. Also, they found me here

yesterday on St. Ania's Bell Tower: I'm in the news.  
Pictures of bad guys attached. Think I killed the gorilla  
in the middle. Please reply ASAP and advise your location.

## CHAPTER 38

Fifty meters behind Dolinska's car, a beefy man with a block head and an expensive black suit sat behind the wheel of a new BMW and drummed his fingers on the leather. The stereo played Judas Priest at low volume. Back when he'd had hair and his suit was brown, he and the man beside him had spent a lot of years driving around Warsaw posing as normal people. Both men had been lieutenants in the SB, Poland's secret police, when it was dissolved in 1990. In that year there was a nervous wait of six months while over five thousand uniformed police were fired to make room for their secret cousins. All over the Eastern Bloc that year you could hear the rustle of coats being turned, but at the end of it both he and Czyzewsky remained unemployed.

Freelancing had turned out to be far more lucrative for both of them than a career in the post-communist security services could ever be. Except, thought Anton Gajos for the thousandth time since March, that freelancing was a dangerous business. You had to be careful who you worked for, and who you picked to work for you.

Czyzewsky broke in, as if reading his mind: "How did you lose your hair, anyway?"

Gajos blinked at him in surprise. Before he could think about it, his thoughts were coming out of his mouth: "I screwed up on the American job. Should've used the Brighton Beach *vory*, but I used my nephew instead. He owed me a favor. He went over there to fight in the Donbass in 2014. He came back after a few

months, in a big hurry: the Ukrainian police had charged him with raping a fifteen-year-old girl. I got him fake papers to get into the States, before Ukraine could extradite him. He owes me big-time and he can keep his mouth shut, and he's senior in this motorcycle gang now, the Cossacks. That movie we sent Okula of his wife being fucked?"

Czyzewsky nodded.

"That's my cousin fucking her." He chuckled. "The beetroot says once you've had unwilling pussy, it's hard to go back. But he messed it up from start to finish – they missed the woman and her son."

Czyzewsky stared at the tablet on his lap while he mulled this over. "So how did you lose your hair?"

Gajos's eyes had drained of focus. He turned his head and blinked at Czyzewsky's short, Dutch-looking beard, his bare top lip. As Judas Priest screamed for vengeance, he followed the beard up to the head of graying hair that had been buzzed off at ten millimeters. Now that he had no hair of his own, it seemed to Gajos a waste for a man to mow his head like that. Then down over the furrowed forehead and monobrow to Czyzewsky's puzzled brown eyes.

He told Czyzewsky how the stomach cramps had felled him on the turret, how the Director had studied him before offering the antidote, as if he were an experiment.

Czyzewsky's eyes widened. "*Jesus Christus.*"

"So, I have to crawl down the stairs with my guts tying itself in knots. Had to fight with the pigs to pick those little blue pills out of the slops and mud and shit. He comes down to the sty to watch me."

Czyzewsky had gone white.

He muttered, "*Jesus Christus.* So, your hair fell out?"

Gajos nodded. "And I still have problems with my guts. Thallium's a radioactive heavy metal." He sighed through his nose. "Heavy fucking metal."

Czyzewsky shouted, "Go left!"

Gajos swung the wheel hard, making the tires squeal.

He glared at Czyzewsky. “OK, let’s not lose this bitch.”

At the next lights, Dolinska’s car got through just before it changed. Gajos stopped, not wanting to draw further attention to himself. He thumped the dash.

Czyzewsky followed the pulsing red dot on the screen of his tablet. A minute later, it came to a stop in Wola, a little south of Gorczewska Avenue. At this distance, the map only showed main roads. He was trying to figure out exactly where in the sea of housing blocks she had stopped, when the dot disappeared.

“We lost her! She must’ve switched her phone off.”

“Where?”

“Looks like the big estate on Borowej Góry.”

Gajos thumped the wheel. “There must be twenty blocks in there!”

Czyzewsky shook his head. The mustacheless beard was new and with his brow puckered above his single eyebrow, he looked to Gajos like a bulldog peeping out of a bear’s arse. Czyzewsky was a psycho, though. In the old days, once he started beating an opponent of the People, he had to be dragged off.

Czyzewsky switched to Google Maps and zoomed in.

He said, “Only a dozen flatblocks. One vehicle entrance. We’ll just have to wait there till she comes out.”

## CHAPTER 39

Beside main roads all over west-bank Warsaw stood cookie-cut Soviet apartment blocks, around a dozen stories high, unpainted, stuccoed to collect the pollution. Butt ugly. As if the communists had figured making all the buildings equally ugly would make everyone more equal.

The block in Wola where “A&I Iskra” lived had an upgraded security system. Nation had come prepared. He pinned a name badge to his shirt and extracted a parcel from his day pack and put his face in front of the camera. He was about to punch the apartment number into the keypad when Dolinska’s phone pinged.

The back of his neck itched. He scratched it, then turned to face her. “Y’know, I’m glad you answered your phone this morning and all, but it strikes me if these guys found your house, they can probably trace your cell, maybe your vehicle. I was you, I’d turn it off and take out the battery.”

“That will make life very difficult: I’m a journalist.”

“Life being the operative word.”

She did as he suggested.

Nation punched the apartment number into the keypad.

The speaker clucked and a man’s voice said, “Who is it?”

“Pan Aldo Iskra? It’s FedEx. Parcel for you.” He held the parcel up next to his face. It was a box of cookies inside an envelope he’d bought at the post office.

A tinny voice said, "Show me your name badge."

He avoided glancing at Dolinska, who was leaning against the wall out of sight of the camera. Would Iskra be able to tell his name badge was a fake? After what seemed a long time, the lock buzzed and clicked open.

Nation climbed the stairs to the seventh floor and knocked on the door of apartment 78. Dolinska trailed him up and hung back in the stairwell.

Aldo Iskra was the guy in the photo plus seventy pounds and thirty years. Not happy years. He was a big, round-shouldered man, an inch shorter than Nation. Full boof of combed-back European hair. Brown eyes surrounded by areas of darkened skin. Not the temporary darkness caused by a few sleepless nights. It was as if sleeplessness had worked a change in his pigmentation, giving him the eyes of a panda. Deep frown lines between them. The eyes widened when they shifted to his face.

"Pan Aldo Iskra?"

Aldo stared at his face a moment longer, blinked, rubbed his brow, then put his hand out for the clipboard in Nation's hand. When the FedEx man offered no parcel and no clipboard, his eyebrows shot up. With a good humor Nation hadn't expected he said, "Does *Pan* want to see my passport?"

Nation smiled and handed Aldo the clipboard. He didn't give Aldo a pen because on the clipboard there was nothing to sign. On the clipboard was the 1987 photograph of Aldo, his father, and the three other employees standing by the Linac at the Marie Skłodowska Institute.

Aldo took the clipboard and stared at it, then stepped back fast and reached to shut the door. Before it slammed in his face, Nation got a foot in.

He talked fast and low: "You knew my father, Ryszard Okula. You know me: I'm Karol."

The only time he'd used his birth name since he was seven years old was in bedtime conversations with his mother, as a kid. For years at a stretch he'd almost forgotten his real name.



He glanced at the fake FedEx nametag, which said Marek. "I'm expecting a book. I thought you were the man with my book."

Nation explained: "I don't think it's safe for me in Poland."

Aldo stared at him, then muttered, "No, you might be right about that." He stood aside. "You look so much like him...it's like seeing a ghost. Come in, your father was a good friend of mine."

Nation waved to Dolinska on the stairs.

He reassured Aldo, "This is Bronia Dolinska, a reporter with *Rzeczpospolita*. She helped me find you."

Aldo came to attention as Dolinska joined them. "I saw the paper, *Pani*. So glad you're alright. Shocking! Terrorists in Warsaw now!"

He ushered them in, looked left and right to see if anyone else was lurking in the corridor, then closed the door behind them.

He slipped the chain into its slot: "Or was it the Russians? Is it true you jumped off the bell tower to escape them? The paper said you were hurt. You're hurt?"

She touched her nose plaster. "Occupational hazard. Comes of sticking my nose where it's not wanted. I don't know who they were, *Pan*, but we're going to find out."

"And the man who jumped with you? Was he hurt?"

Dolinska pointed at Nation.

Aldo looked at him, astonished.

"Well, that's remarkable, isn't it? Okula's son!" He turned, eyes sparkling, "Did you hear that, Ilona?"

A familiar-looking woman emerged from the kitchen, smoothing her dress. She was alert and attractive in a classy way, the tightness of her hair bun ironing out some wrinkles and arching her eyebrows. A little blonde left amid the gray hair.

She stared, then came at him with her arms wide crying, "O *Boże!*"

She pulled him to her and kissed him inaccurately, landing one on his nose and one on his eye. She stepped back to look at him through welling tears.

Now Nation remembered how he knew their faces. In the one photograph album his mother had brought with them from Poland, Ilona was laughing, raising her glass in a toast. A dinner party in someone's apartment. In the thirty years since, she'd changed a lot less than her husband.

“And your mother?”

“Mom's doing good.”

Where was that album now? His momma had escaped through the window, so chances were it had been found by the hunters. And were the names of Aldo Iskra and his wife on the back of that photograph?

They swapped their shoes for slippers and Aldo ushered them into a living room cluttered with folk art and religious knickknacks – a ceramic Jesus exposing his beating heart and a framed picture of Pope John Paul II. There was a framed Solidarity Medal behind glass, showing Aldo had been active in the anti-communist opposition, and also some tribal masks from Africa or somewhere.

Aldo rested a hand lightly on the small of Dolinska's back to steer her to her seat, then steered Nation to his. Not something you did to a guy in the Toro Rojo Saloon in Van Horn. It took him back to the Poland of his childhood.

Ilona said, “Is that an American accent?”

He hesitated, glanced at Dolinska. But he had to trust these people, and if Dolinska was going to sleep on his couch, she might as well hear the truth, too.

“Yes, ma'am, it is.”

Aldo said, “Where on earth have you been all these years?”

## CHAPTER 40

Nation told them the truth: how making that Afghan boy fatherless had haunted him and his growing need to find out what happened to his own father; about his email to the Institute for National Remembrance, their escape from the bikers and Grace leaving. He told about the videos sent from Grace's account and how the hunters had found him in Poland. He left out the rape.

Feeling like a weight had been lifted from him, he said, "Do you know what happened to my father, Pan Iskra?"

Aldo stared at him. It took some time for attention to surface in his dark eyes. When it did, he looked towards the bookcase in the corner. Nation followed his gaze. The bookcase reached all the way up to the apartment's high ceiling. Most of the books were travel books. Old guides in Polish to East European countries and Cuba and newer guides to places like Cambodia, New Zealand, and the USA. Travelogues, too. In front of the books were photographs of the freckled grandkids, taken around the same age as Wes and Dean.

Aldo put down his tea and dry-washed his face with both hands. He stared at Nation over his fingertips, then dropped his hands, as if there were no hiding behind them.

He sank back into his seat and said, "One day he didn't come to work. A couple of days later the newspapers informed us he was charged with the murder of Pawel Bosko, a big man in the Party. A falling out between friends. They said he'd fled the country. Well, you couldn't believe the newspapers, could you? We

used the official papers for wiping our backsides. Excuse me, *Pani*. The Party mouthpiece, *Trybuna Ludu*, was sought-after because the paper was a bit softer. No, not even the Party members believed the communist papers. But you can't just choose to believe the opposite either, because you don't *know anything*. Just that you and your mother were also gone. So, we thought maybe the papers were telling the truth about that part, didn't we?" He glanced at Ilona. "We *wanted* to believe he got out ahead of the police and took you both with him."

Ilona said, "We knew something terrible must've happened, and we feared the worst. But you started your story too late: how on earth did you get out of Poland?"

She opened her hands and eyes wide with a gesture of exasperation that reminded him of his momma.

"Through Czech, then over the Austrian border. Pawel Bosko got the fake Czech passports for us. Mom, me, and another woman."

Aldo said, "*Bosko?* Are you sure?"

"Yessir."

Aldo nodded, slowly. "So. We were suspicious when the paper said they'd quarreled – your father fixed his cancer! But you didn't leave the country with your father?"

"No."

Ilona said, "Who was the other woman? Can't you remember?"

Nation tried again to remember the name of the woman who sat beside him as they drove through the snow in Pan Pawel's car. He gave up and shook his head.

Ilona said, "Well, where did you *go?*"

So he told them in broad strokes the story of his life after Poland, before the military. As he spoke, he glanced from one to the other of his audience. Aldo's expression was mournful, the eyes sometimes dreamy, sometimes bored, as if he looked out at this familiar stranger from between the bars of a jail cell. His wife's blue eyes were alert. She nodded often, urging him on. Dolinska was still, as if she

might miss some faint sound by moving. Her gaze had been hooded at first, but not now. It did not leave his face.

The passports Pan Pawel had given them were Czech: Benedict and Maria Novacek. He got used to his new name at a refugee hostel in Austria where his mother and the other woman and Halina, the woman who ran the hostel, had become friends.

His mother wanted to get as far from Poland as possible. They took a ship to Sydney, Australia, then buses inland, and stopped somewhere in the middle of the country, on the edge of the great central deserts, in a town called Hawker.

Suddenly excited, Aldo got up and fetched from the bookcase a homemade magazine with a hand-stenciled cover saying "Australia." It seemed to be a stitched-together collection of pages cut from European magazines.

Ilona said, "He's been collecting pictures all his life. We were never allowed to travel outside Poland, you see."

Aldo flipped to a marked page. He seemed to know where all his favorite pictures were. He held up a double-page underwater picture of the Great Barrier Reef.

Nation said, "Nope, never been, I'm sorry to say. All I know is the desert."

Aldo looked disappointed. "When we get the money, that's the first place we'll go. Won't we, dear?"

Ilona nodded, sadly.

Nation glanced at the bookcase. "You've been to a lot of places, though, Pan Aldo?"

Ilona glanced at her husband. "Only in his head."

Aldo chuckled, embarrassed. He put his picture book on the table, got up and shuffled to the window, as if the talk of travel had given him itchy feet.

He said, "It's a sunny day. A good day for ice cream, I think."

Ilona looked alarmed.

She said, “Better to stay in, under the circumstances. Don’t you think?”

Aldo looked annoyed, hitched his shoulders. “If you say so.”

“Oh, I say so. I say more than that. You know I do!”

Aldo sighed, irritated.

He pulled the curtain aside and peered down.

He said, “Well, perhaps you’re right,” as if he’d just noticed predators down there.

“You know I am.” She urged Nation, “But go on, dear.”

Nation went on. “I went to school, and momma got a job through the Catholic Church, running the thrift shop. She made friends. Got used to it. Even learned to tolerate the heat. Then in 1997 someone called and told us to get out. Momma hung up the phone and we left. Didn’t even pack. There was one box of stuff she kept in the trunk of the car: photographs and precious stuff. She said they caught my daddy because he tried to pack, so we just got in the vehicle with our one box and hit the road.”

He sneaked a look at his wristwatch, then glanced at Dolinska. She was still staring at him, completely motionless. If she believed him now, then that was the only useful thing to come out of this visit so far, because he hadn’t learned a damn thing that would help.

He tried to put finality into his words. “This time we washed up in Mexico. A *coyote* made up our new American passports in Juarez. Momma was a little rushed to come up with a new name for us. She used her maiden name, Narodowska, which in English is Nation.”

“Is Nation a surname in English?”

“Yes, ma’am, it is. We always thought we might have to change it, but that ol’ *coyote* did such a good job, we never had to.”

Ilona urged him to go on, so he sketched their life in Texas. They’d rented in Odessa at first, then when he was fifteen his mother bought a place in Van Horn,

where houses were cheaper. He loved Van Horn, but his mother was a little scared because being on the Interstate there were always a lot of strangers in town. When Grace came on the scene, that clinched it: his momma and Grace never did get along. To keep the peace, his mother moved to Houston a few years back, though she still called every night to talk Polish with the boys.

Ilona said, “Why didn’t you go to the city too?”

He shrugged, “I don’t like cities. Grace wanted to move to a city – Austin, Dallas, San Antonio, she didn’t care. She was from Juarez. A city girl, like Momma.” He shook his head, “But I don’t like cities. That’s just the way it is.” He looked at Aldo. “Maybe because I lost my father in one.”

The light died in Aldo’s eyes again. He closed his picture book. “And now what? You hope to find him? I’m afraid you won’t.”

Finally, they were getting back to it.

Nation said, “What happened? Did he mess with the wrong people?”

“Oh, yes. He certainly did.”

## CHAPTER 41

Aldo returned his picture books to the shelf, then shuffled out of the living room.

While he was gone, Ilona said, “He can’t cross streets. He freezes up at pedestrian crossings.”

Dolinska shook her head. “Does he ever go outside?”

“He sticks to the estate, mainly. Small streets he’ll cross if I’m with him. But anything larger and it’s like coaxing someone to climb down a cliff.”

The toilet flushed.

Aldo shuffled back to his seat.

He studied their faces, smiled bleakly. “I see my wife has told you about my affliction. A few years after your father disappeared, another man I knew, an opposition activist, was killed by a hit-and-run gravel truck. Death by gravel truck was quite common back then. Afterwards people would remember men in brown suits with walkie-talkies lurking near the scene. The SB had to coordinate your accident, you see. These days everyone walks around talking on bloody walkie-talkies, so what chance does a man have?”

He sipped his tea, frowned, tapped the photograph on the clipboard.

He said, “Antoni Rozanski took over the Oncology Directorship at the Marie Sklodowska in mid-1986. None of us had ever heard of him. Your father was angry. He thought the Party had parachuted him in to make sure we all kept quiet



about the fallout from Chernobyl. Chernobyl was April '86. Rozanski took over in July.”

Ilona said, “Well you can’t blame Ryszard, can you? You can’t blame an ambitious young man for feeling thwarted. I can’t.”

Aldo said, “No, Ryszard had no illusions about that.” He told Nation, “Your father wouldn’t join the Party. Did you know? They wanted him to, so they could promote him, but he joined Solidarity, instead! In a fair world he would have got the directorship. He had a better research publication record than the rest of us, and he was very popular. But he knew he wasn’t living in a fair world. Anyway, the point is, out of the blue, here’s Rozanski, who wasn’t one of us, insisting no one talks to anyone about the thyroid spike.”

“Why?”

“The truth always had to be ‘wrapped in cotton’ if it was likely to embarrass ‘the Neighbors’ – the Russians. Nobody’s heard of Rozanski before, but when we look him up we find he’s had a dozen publications on thyroid cancer. Big studies. Important work. Most of them in foreign journals us run-of-the-mill Polish oncologists are lucky to even read, let alone publish in. One thing that makes your father suspicious is they’re co-publications with Soviet scientists. Another is they’re using big samples – hundreds of patients – but it’s never specified where the patients came from. Presumably the Soviet Union, since we would have heard if they were Polish trials. But it was the Dolinski thing that brought matters to a head between your father and Rozanski.” Aldo glanced at Dolinska. “Your grandfather?”

She nodded.

Nation said, “You’re talking about how Prosecutor Dolinski died?”

“He wasn’t dead yet. Not quite. Ryszard came back from Olsztyn a week before he died. When he’d left for Olsztyn, Dolinski was well, going into remission. Ryszard was delighted because when he started treating him the tumor was the size of a tennis ball. And it had metastasized out of the bowel and attached itself to his spine and bottom rib. Unimaginably painful. The man still

had a sharp mind but he lived in a fog of pethidine. Your father cut out the tumor and then gave him chemo, and radiotherapy on the spine, because you couldn't cut there in those days. After the last radiotherapy treatment his red and white cell counts were healthy. He was going into remission. Your father reduced the pethidine. Then Rozanski sends Ryszard north saying, "Don't worry, I'll look after your patients."

Dolinska said, "Why?"

"I don't know, but I know Ryszard suspected Rozanski of holding down another job besides Director of Oncology." Aldo took a forkful of Ilona's poppy-seed cake, chewed, washed it down with tea. "With the SB."

Dolinska nodded slowly.

She explained to Nation, "As a guardian angel. It was the guardian angel's job to recruit and control informers within the organization and to carry out secret Party instructions. Usually the guardian angel was a ranking SB officer as well as the manager or second-in-charge of an institution – bank, telephone exchange, hospital, whatever."

Aldo nodded. "But I don't know why the SB would have wanted your grandfather dead."

"Did you suspect him?"

"Rozanski? Oh yes. I suspected a few people. Him I suspected because of his years in Russia. Under a communist system you don't go to Russia as a free man unless you're well-connected, do you? I believe he went there as a student in the seventies, but he seems to have stayed on for years, doing research. And he had a way of standing too close to you and looking at you as if you were a wall and he was trying to find the door..."

He smiled mechanically, sipped his tea. Then the smile broadened, and he prodded his cup at Nation. "Your father and I used to smoke in the stairwell outside our offices. Smoking was banned in the hospital, but of course you don't want to smoke outside in winter, do you? We were so busy after Chernobyl, those

conversations kept us both sane. Anyway, the point is this window on the landing between levels two and three looked across the courtyard to the south wing, where they put everyone who was important enough to get his own office.”

Nation realized he was talking about the view from the black terrazzo stair he had climbed two days ago behind the Skłodowska-Curie Society’s Latin-dancing archivist.

Aldo was saying, “You could look into Rozanski’s window and see everything on his desk. He was always scribbling away in a notebook. We used to joke about what kind of rubbish he must be recording about us.”

“You suspected a few people? Who else?”

“Jan Dutko in accounts. Thought he was a snitch for years. Little Roman Kijek, the radiotherapist. Always muttering with Rozanski in his office – and he was part of the Dolinski thing, too. That’s him in your picture, crouching by the Linac next to Rozanski.”

Nation pointed out to Dolinska the little man with the screwdriver in his hand and the screw-slot mouth.

He said, “But my father was up in Olsztyn, right?”

Aldo nodded. “Rozanski sent him up there in the last week of February to run some training for the oncologists. Your father called me at the end of his first week and said the staff up in Olsztyn didn’t need training. After Chernobyl, they were treating even more thyroids than us. Further from the meltdown than Warsaw but it rained up there the day after, you see. Brought the fallout to earth. They still have a big thyroid cancer cluster up there. Anyway, Ryszard called it a ‘fucking fool’s errand.’” Aldo chuckled. “I was shocked because you didn’t say that kind of thing *near* a telephone, let alone into it. And certainly not about someone who might be one of Them. If your father had a flaw, it was talking out of school. No, Ryszard was up there all the last week of February and the start of March. He drove back to Warsaw on Monday, March 7th. I remember the date because next day, the 8th, was the last time I ever saw him.”

Nation said, “So what happened?”

Boredom seemed to weigh on Aldo again. “The coroner kept referring to Dolinski as Ryszard Okula’s patient, I’m told. Glossed over the fact that it was Rozanski who was the treating oncologist that day the betatron went wrong. But your father was acquitted because it wasn’t the oncologist’s job to ensure the betatron was in proper working order. That was the physics department’s job. Forys – Kijek’s boss in the physics department – was sentenced to seven years for gross criminal negligence. You see, Forys was the one who signed off on the last inspection of the betatron. He swore blind that everything had been in working order but couldn’t produce the service logbook to support his story. Roman Kijek the radiotherapist was also convicted, because he was supposed to check the radiation levels pre-treatment. If he’d checked the levels properly, that would have indicated something wrong inside the machine. But I believe he served less than a year in jail.”

Dolinska said, “My grandmother never mentioned my grandfather getting radiotherapy from anyone else.”

Aldo said morosely, “I wonder if she ever knew about it? She was only there in visiting hours. Your grandfather couldn’t have told her because after that treatment he was on a respirator.”

“You said my father argued with Rozanski?”

“Oh, yes. He was furious,” said Aldo direly, getting interested in the story again. “He wanted to know why the extra radiotherapy treatment had been scheduled, because when he left for Olsztyn Dolinski was clearly in remission. Rozanski said in his opinion they hadn’t killed all of the cancer on his spine yet. Said his sudden relapse was nothing to do with the last radiotherapy treatment. This was Ryszard’s boss, remember, and a big expert in the cancer field. Your father pointed to the burn on Dolinski’s abdomen. A perfect circle, it was. He said, ‘What do you take that for, a saint’s stigmata?’ Radiotherapy shouldn’t leave a burn. Rozanski just shrugged it off. Later the coroner found there was a perfect cylinder of smashed atoms where the unfiltered electron beam had gone through him.”

Aldo shook his head, smiled, “But your father’s blood was up, and in that mood he didn’t know when to shut up. By then a lot of us had found excuses to hang around in the corridor. Rozanski got piggy and said your father’s uncooperative behavior had been noted. Didn’t seem to give a damn. As if he knew he was untouchable. And the inquiry cleared him of blame. But Rozanski’s affability was gone after that. His lips were always wiping each other, as if he was worried about cake crumbs. Your father hurt him somehow.”

Nation glanced at Dolinska. She was lost in thought.

He said, “These people, do you know where they are now?”

Aldo shrugged. “Forys is dead. Killed himself in prison, the story goes. The others, I don’t know.” He got up and went to the window again, opened the curtain a little and peered out. Over his shoulder, he said, “This woman in Bosko’s car, was she skinny and lively? Pretty face?”

Nation thought about it, then nodded. “I think so.”

Aldo half-turned from the window. “Bosko had a private nurse called Agata Zielińska. She used to be an oncology nurse at the Marie Skłodowska. She was my colleague for several years before she left to work for him. After that, I used to see her when she brought Bosko in for treatment.”

“You know where she is now?”

“What’s that?” Aldo was staring at something outside.

Nation repeated the question.

“No, I don’t.” He twitched the gauze curtain back into place, turned to look at Dolinska. “I suppose you were too young to know your grandfather?”

“I was three when he died.”

“He was everything good about Poland. Fearless man. Big Pilsudski mustache, fierce blue eyes. You could see his contempt for the government, but he was driven to serve the Polish people. Everybody respected him because he was in the Free Polish Army that fought Rommel at Tobruk, and they say he fought like a lion. Stalin killed most of our heroes after the war. It was too dangerous, wasn’t it,

leaving people like that alive in your puppet state? But somehow a few slipped through. I suppose now and then the comrades needed an attack dog in the procuracy to send after their enemies. But I think they found out they couldn't control him, so they put him down, in the end."

There were tears in Dolinska's eyes. "Thank you."

Aldo gazed out the window again, swallowing. After a minute he cleared his throat and said, "There are two men down there in a car at the vehicle entrance. A new black BMW. They arrived shortly after you did, and they haven't gotten out."

Nation went to the window. By the time he eased the curtain aside one of the men had gotten out: a bruiser in a business suit, sun gleaming off his bald head. He was talking on a cell and scanning the buildings, window by window. Nation saw him turn as a crew-cab pickup bearing the Warsaw Gas Web logo entered the estate. It might have been his imagination, but he thought the bald head gave a nod to the driver of the vehicle as it passed. That old mouse in his chest got going on its wheel. He let the curtain fall back into place.

Had he just led the hunters to the Iskras?

## CHAPTER 42

Nation didn't want to leave in Dolinska's car, which had probably been followed here, and the Iskras had no car. The little yellow Skoda he and Dolinska were pinning their hopes on belonged to a man in block two of the Borowej Gory estate. Ilona said the owner didn't drive it to work, so it should be there. He had a drinking problem and he kept his keys under the rear passenger wheel arch.

Nation and Dolinska clattered down the fourteen flights of stairs, their haste resounding in the stairwell. Ilona's parting words echoed bleakly in Nation's head: "Listen, I'd love to meet your boys, Karol, but perhaps it would be better if you don't come back to our home. We'll think of something. Be careful."

They slipped out of the Iskra's apartment block – block six – and made their way to block two behind cover of the buildings and the cars parked between them. When Nation eased his head around the corner of block two he saw a pair of men in green Warsaw Gas Web overalls standing in front of the entrance, waiting to be buzzed in. He withdrew his head slowly and waited half a minute for the door to click open and slam shut, then he stepped out and examined the double row of vehicles parked between blocks one and two. He spotted the Skoda. They strolled up to it as if they had a right to it. Nation crouched and felt under the wheel arch. His fingers found the keys. When he fished them out, Dolinska puffed out her cheeks with relief.

\*

At the entrance to the Borowej Góry housing estate, Gajos climbed back into the BMW.

Czyzewsky nodded after the Gas Web pickup and said, “Is it Glagolev?”

Gajos nodded. “And three of his Pruszkow finger cutters. They’ll work the estate door-to-door to isolate a gas leak. He’ll have two other vehicles here inside ten minutes. Another eight men.”

“They have pictures?”

“I sent them pictures of the opponent and the reporter. Heads up!”

Czyzewsky looked up from his tablet, monobrow furrowed.

But the approaching car was not the reporter’s Yaris, just an old Skoda. Just one person in the vehicle: a plump middle-aged woman in a knit cap. They stared hard at her as she passed. She frowned at them. They dropped their eyes to their phones.

\*

In the far reaches of the parking lot of the Wola Park shopping center, Dolinska parked the Skoda in an empty space between two vans. She checked the rearview mirror and said, “OK, you can get out.”

Nation eased himself out of his cramped position in the rear footwell. She twisted to look at him and he grimaced up at her. She pulled wads of cotton wool out of her cheeks, took off Ilona’s old-ladyish knit cap and shook her hair out. Her cheeks were flushed with circles of rouge. They would abandon the Skoda here and take public transport, in case someone reported it stolen.



As he climbed out of a rear door, an unmarked van pulled in tight behind the Skoda. He glanced up, figuring the driver was waiting for someone to pull out so he could park.

The driver was looking at him. His eyes couldn't have been deader if they had been shot through his head. Nation saw his shoulder move. Reaching for the gear stick? Or –

The man's hand appeared holding a suppressed handgun.

He spoke in a voice as dead as his eyes. "Put your hands on the car."

In two seconds, Nation's heart went from slow to a hundred. His brain went to warp speed. He raised his hands hesitantly, and cocked his head in confusion.

The driver left the van's engine running, flung his door open and slid out, the gun on Nation. He moved fast and gracefully for a man who seemed to have been thrown together from spare parts: he had big shoulders, a pot belly, flat nose, a mean mouth and busted ears that stuck out at different heights. His legs were short, but he was over six feet tall, meaning the torso of his green Gas Web overalls were stretched tight between shoulders and crotch. As his feet hit the ground, the overall's crotch garrotted his nuts, which looked to be different sizes. Not a flicker of discomfort crossed his face.

Movement left. Nation turned his head to see a second guy slip between parked cars and step in front of the Skoda. He too wore Gas Web overalls. He had the lean face and build of a natural athlete, hair in dreadlocks, teeth that had also been left to nature, and a chin like the man in the moon. His gun was aimed lazily at Dolinska. He stood, grinning, on the concrete divider between opposing rows of parked cars and made a turning gesture with the thumb and forefinger of his free hand, to show her she should turn off the engine.

Nation had seen plenty of cherries in the military: this kid was bursting to prove himself and he was trying not to let his excitement show.

The handgun yelped as the man with iron balls fired a round into the asphalt next to Nation's right foot.

The dead voice repeated, “Hands on the car,” and Nation heard the trace of a Russian accent.

He was lowering his hands towards the car when an air raid siren started up. It rumbled like a dog’s warning before climbing in pitch to a 140 decibel howl, drowning the noise of four lanes of heavy traffic on Gorcewska, drowning everything.

Were the Russians here already? Was he looking at one of the Little Green Men the GRU sent in before the main invasion?

His hands descended slowly towards the car. At the last instant, he slammed them down on the roof and yelled, “Go!”

He could hardly hear himself over the siren, but Dolinska must have had the same idea, because the little car lurched forward and smashed into the young guy’s legs. She drove him forward over the concrete divider and into the front of the vehicle parked opposite. His body swayed forwards as his legs were crushed between the vehicles. He threw his hands out to push the car back and the gun fell, inaudibly. But his screams could be heard over the siren. Then his eyes rolled back in his head and searched the sky for fighter planes as he passed out from shock. He hung forwards for a moment at a Michael Jackson angle, the dreadlocks hiding his face but for the chin, then folded at the waist onto the Skoda’s hood.

The car lurched into reverse. Nation didn’t wait to see what happened next. He took a long step sideways as Ironballs leapt out of the way and drove a jumping back kick at the man’s midriff. Ironballs was in the air when the kick caught him in the hip.

The Skoda slammed into the van, missing Ironballs.

Ironballs landed and had to throw a hand down to steady himself. Unfortunately for him it was his gun hand. His fingers splayed reflexively and the gun spilled. Ironballs snatched it up again. Nation ran at him and stretched a leg out to kick. He only just had the distance: the toe of his hiker caught Ironballs’ wrist and the gun flew out of the man’s fingers and skittered under the van. As

Nation's right foot landed, Ironballs fell onto his extended leg, wrenching the knee joint. Nation cried out. Ironballs tried to wrap himself round the leg to twist it, jiu jitsu style. Nation grabbed hold of the Skoda for balance and jerked his leg free.

Ironballs shot to his feet. He danced two short steps like a trained fighter and swung a left hook that would have dropped a Mexican fighting bull. As he pushed off the car to regain his balance, Nation managed to deflect it with his left forearm, but the man's follow up left jab banged him on the cheekbone, opening it up.

He swayed back instinctively and Ironballs' right roundhouse grazed his nose and smashed the rear window on the van parked next to the Skoda.

Nation threw a straight right that connected with the man's ear, but that ear was used to it. They grappled. Ironballs was only a little heavier than Nation, but he felt muscles sliding like steel cables under the man's shirt. The big hand on the back of Nation's neck was dragging his head down, bending him double, and he couldn't resist. Ironballs was like a freakshow strongman. Nation breathed hard and sweat trickled down his ribs as he strained to stay upright. He jerked a knee up. This time, the guy grunted. He let go of Nation, but didn't even drop his guard.

Nation took a big step back, guard up. He sucked in a couple of deep breaths. Behind him somewhere was the handgun Ironballs' dreadlocked buddy had dropped. Ironballs eyes flicked towards his buddy. He knew what Nation was thinking.

Nation was thinking this guy was lightning fast and he had a reach like a sick dog and he must have anesthetic for breakfast. Unless the gun was on the hood of the vehicle, in easy grabbing distance, the guy would be all over him before he got a hand on it. He was thinking Dolinska could get the gun, though, and what the hell was she doing?

Another jab: it bust through Nation's guard and hit him on the forehead like a shot put.

As the siren continued to wail, Nation remembered something a Delta martial arts instructor had said about the value of angular momentum in confined-spaces combat. Ironballs threw punches like iron balls, and the only possible way to beat him was to fight scientific.

He took another step back. Now he was level with the windscreen. He glanced left, looking for the gun. No gun. Ironballs stepped forward in his boxer's crouch, guard up.

He would get just one shot at this. If he failed, Ironballs would probably put him to sleep.

At that moment, the Skoda door opened and Dolinska's head popped up in his peripheral vision.

It was the right moment.

As Ironballs eyes flicked right, Nation took a short step forward with his right foot and feinted a right jab. When Ironballs' guard closed he propped and spun 270 degrees on the heel of his right foot, left elbow up and out at the height of his chin. Ironballs jabbed late. Nation's upper arm deflected the punch. It glanced off the back of his head on the way through. Then the back and point of his elbow hit Ironballs in the temple with a thousand pounds of force. The siren could not drown out the crack of bone.

Dolinska stepped out of the vehicle, in time to see the guy's hands drop. His eyes rolled up and he too searched the sky for fighters. Blood spilled from the cauliflower of his ear. He swayed back on the heels of his steel-capped boots, then toppled like a tree.

Nation looked around. All over the parking lot, concerned people were prairie-dogging over their vehicles, some of them staring at each other, asking silently what it meant and where they were meant to go. Some of them were staring in his direction. Several were on cellphones. A couple of men made their way hesitantly towards the violence.

He met Dolinska's eyes. He didn't need to say anything. She was already moving.

\*

Nation and Dolinska walked down the canyons of inner-Wola apartment blocks in a snowstorm of blown flower.

Dolinska was on Nation's phone, talking to her editor: "You're not getting it, Brodowski: I'm on the run!...No, I can't go to the police...Can't tell you why...You want to fire me, go ahead!"

Nation held a tissue to his bleeding cheekbone and checked their six o'clock constantly. From the shopping center parking lot, they'd run across Gorcewska's four lanes of traffic and then taken a tangled route back to the 'hood, by foot, public transport and now foot again, to confuse the trail and throw any tail. There was no sign of pursuit.

He was thinking, If I were trying to kill me and I'd just yesterday located me on a bell tower in Warsaw, how would I go about finding my new name and address?

And the answer he kept coming back to was: "I'd find my kids."

The hunters knew he had two kids, and now they knew that the kids weren't with the mother. They'd probably killed the mother. And after the media hype following their Van Horn raid, they certainly have pictures of his kids. Till yesterday, Warsaw was the last place they'd have thought to look for him, but now they knew he was here. Today they'd probably traced Dolinska's phone, but that wouldn't work for them again. It wouldn't take a genius to figure the kids would be going to school, probably in Warsaw. They'd be looking for two boys who had recently come to Poland from America or Canada. He hoped there had been a flood of American and Canadian kids starting school in Warsaw in the past month, but he doubted it. If they could access arrivals data and cross-check with schools' enrollment data, they could get a shortlist. Then the logical thing for them to do would be to stake out the schools.

At the end of the week he'd pull little 'Piotr' and 'Marek' out of School 535 and consider his options. All three of them needed new identities. If only he could get hold of Ramirez.

Dolinska told her editor, "OK. You do something for me, and I'll consider it. I need to find out where some people are now."

She gave him the names of Antoni Rozanski, Roman Kijek, Jan Dutko, and Agata Zielińska, listened a while, then said bye and handed Nation his phone.

She said, “He’s heard of Rozanski, but he can’t remember where.”

“Is he gonna fire you?”

She stared at him, still a little dazed, then smiled ruefully and shook her head. “He wanted me to come in to the office. No way am I going in there; if they’re watching my apartment, they’ll be watching my office. No, the government’s just released the third Smolensk report. He wants me to write a big feature, comparing it with the first two. I guess I’ll do it. What else am I going to do while I’m hiding from these friends of yours?”

He pressed his lips together, nodded.

He said, “Why so many investigations?”

“Into Smolensk? Well, the first one was led by Vladimir Putin. Instead of following the usual rules and leaving the wreckage on the ground till the investigators were done, he ordered bulldozers to make a pile of all the wreckage. It’s still rusting there by the runway a decade later and he won’t give it back. Tusk was PM at the time and he just let Russia go ahead and run the investigation. The Russian report put all the blame on the Polish pilots, said they ignored the tower’s warnings and then misjudged their landing in the fog.”

“The second one?”

“A lot of Poles weren’t happy with Putin’s investigation, as you can imagine. The Russians gave some pieces of wreckage back so we could test for explosive residues. Turned out there were bits of a few different planes in the pile! The second report put most of the blame on the Russian air traffic controllers, but they found no evidence of foul play.”

“The third one?”

“The third one – Kaczyński’s – concludes it was an explosion.”

It sounded to Nation like a foregone conclusion.

As they turned into Chłodna Street, his phone chimed.

He read aloud the text message from her editor: “‘Jan Dutko died 2003. Agata Zielińska (born 23 October ’56) lives in Vienna.’ There’s a phone number.”

He asked her to wait outside the school gate and keep watch for guys in black BMWs. She put a hand on his arm to stop him. She locked eyes with him. She didn’t need fake lashes to pull you into those green pools.

“Listen, Karol, I think maybe I owe your father an apology. I hope he’s alive so I can tell him one day.”

“He’s not alive. He would have found us by now.”

She thought about this, then nodded.

She said, “Well, please accept my apology on behalf of your father, and my condolences for your loss.”

“Accepted. And thanks for saving our asses back there.”

She winced, as if the memory caused her physical pain. “Lovely people, your new friends.”

To change the subject, he pointed at a drift of blown flower. “What would you call this stuff in English?”

“*Kwiat dmuchowca?* Dandelion blossom.”

“Right.”

She smirked. “Say it, tough guy.”

He regarded her levelly. “I’m not afraid to say it: dandelion blossom.”

“Beautiful. You remind me of a dandelion blossom, you know. Blown loose from your roots, always drifting.”

She laughed at his bemusement. It made her wince and her hand went to her ribs. He liked it when Dolinska laughed, even when there was an edge of hysteria to it, like now. They were both still buzzed with adrenalin, and it wasn’t just the “gas men” in the carpark; it was that siren. She’d told him on the bus that the last time Warsaw had tested its civil defence sirens was 2014, after Russia invaded the

Ukraine. The official reason for today's test was preparedness for a terrorist incident, but she said the real reason was Russia's impending war games. A lot of people were afraid that this time, as in 2014, Putin would forget the "games" part.

Dolinska's eyes were still shining when he brought Wes and Dean out of the school gate. He was proud that both boys stuck their hands out and introduced themselves. He liked that she didn't change her tone of voice to talk to them, just treated them as adults.



## CHAPTER 43

Next day dawned like yesterday on fast forward, with clouds scudding across a blue sky and a blizzard of dandelion blossom that had men brushing at their dark suits as they filed from the Arsenal metro station to the Supreme Court. Before he entered the Florianska Milk Bar, Nation tried Agata Zielińska's Vienna number for the dozenth time. It rang out.

At his usual seat by the window, he texted to ask Dolinska if she could get a cell number for Agata. He opened up the employment websites as usual, for the benefit of the cleaners, then opened the papers. Russia and Germany expected to finish the Nordstream II pipeline under the Baltic within weeks. Poland was outraged. There were headlines about the third Smolensk Investigation findings, but not much detail because no one had properly read the report yet. The tabloids that supported the Law and Justice government accepted the finding that an explosion had brought the Presidential plane down in 2010. The rest of the world's media was skeptical.

At 9:15 a.m., five cleaners crossed from the Institute for National Remembrance. The Ukrainian cleaner, Maksym, was absent for the first time Nation could remember, leaving Olek with no one to argue about football with.

Olek had a new haircut, the jarhead-goes-metrosexual, but his strip of hair was slicked back rather than over to one side. It made him look meaner. He tried to pick a football argument with Jerzy. The Krakow striker was injured and Olek was happy as a dead pig in the sunshine. Jerzy didn't bite.

Nation cleaned up the last of his omelet, then leaned back in his chair in contentment, hands on his head, and beamed on the world and his Polish brothers.

Olek said, “What do you think, Pan Kowalski?”

Nation was completely out of his depth in football matters.

He reflected for a moment, eyes on the ceiling, then drawled, “Striker, no striker, what’s the difference? American football, Rugby football: you can call them brutal if you want, but the fact is if you do things right, you can score. Soccer, you can do everything right and still not score. It’s just too hard to score. Guys have to practice taking dives, just to get a chance to kick a goddamn goal! No wonder the fans start killing each other. You got to change the rules. Change the offside rule. Make the goal bigger. Do *something*.”

Olek scowled.

Nation tapped his screen, said benignly, “What would I know? The big question on my mind, as kind of a newcomer, is, Did Putin blow up that plane or didn’t he?”

He folded his computer into a tablet and held it up to show them the picture of the wrecked Smolensk plane on the *Gazeta Wyborcza* website.

“Of course the fucker blew it up,” said Olek. “Excuse me, ladies.”

Jerzy groaned. “*Jesus Christus*. Smolensk, Smolensk, Smolensk. Just one day, that’s all I ask, I just want to get through one day without hearing about Smolensk!”

Olek snorted. “Of *course* he blew it up.”

Jerzy groaned again, “Yes, and the moon landings were faked by the CIA.”

“It’s stupid to compare these cases, but even in a case like that, how do you prove they weren’t? Where does your information come from?”

Jerzy looked to the others, palms upturned.

Olek flushed. “Oh, you were there, were you? On the moon?”

Big Marcin said, “I was, actually. The Russians got there first.” He stifled a belch, regarded Olek levelly. “But they kept it quiet.”

Olek ignored the bait.

Danuta took it: “Why?”

“The cosmonauts refused to come back!”

The ladies laughed.

Olek said grimly, “And when are you coming back?”

Jerzy turned to Nation. “Were you here in 2015, when Law and Justice got in?”

“No.”

“Kaczyński used the assassination conspiracy theory to get his party elected. Now he’s in power he has to prove it was an assassination or he loses a lot of votes. Simple as that. This new investigation was an election promise: he practically promised to prove the Russians did it.”

“How come so many people voted for a conspiracy theory?”

Olek said, “Because this is the country where the conspiracy theories are true.”

Jerzy groaned, “Give me strength.”

“What? Russia’s occupied us 250 out of the last 300 years! They think they own us.”

Marcin said with a straight face, “They’re our neighbors. They’re neighborly! They see we have a nice country here, so they look after it for us while we’re away.”

“Away?”

“In Siberia.”

Danuta cackled. “They even pay for our holidays!”

Olek repeated, “They think they *own* us. Wait till they finish Nordstream II. Then you’ll see. Lech Kaczyński stood up to Putin when he invaded Georgia.

Putin didn't like it. He got even with Kaczyński just like he got even with Hilary Clinton. Putin's idea of even."

Jerzy waved a hand. "Ah, go roll in the mud with your militia!" To Nation he said, "What happened to your face?"

Nation touched the lump on his forehead. "American football." He winked at Olek.

Jerzy raised an eyebrow. "Still looking for a job?"

Nation raised an own eyebrow back at him.

Jerzy said, "Maksym has left us. Maybe he couldn't cope with our conspiracist. Trial basis only, you understand?"

Bullseye.

Nation accepted Jerzy's hand. "You know I don't have any better offers."

Jerzy scribbled an address on a piece of paper. "See you Monday morning in Mokotow. Four thirty."

"Mokotow?"

"The archive."

Nation looked out at the building across the road. "That's not the archive?"

"No. That's some offices and a reading room. The files and most of the staff are out by the airport."

"Huh."

Nation's phone rang. He fished it out and glanced at the screen. Ramirez, at last.

"I'm sorry, I gotta take this. Seeya Monday, bright and early."

## CHAPTER 44

On the pavement outside the Florianska, Agent Cody Ramirez's voice over the encrypted phone was loud and clear, "Sorry, buddy, the Moscow station chief confiscates our phones for delousing. The FSB is hounding us like you wouldn't believe. There's something brewing. Listen, I'm real sorry about Grace. I talked to my buddy in the Bureau: the FBI is looking high and low for those motherfuckers. If she's in the States, they'll find her. How'd they find you on the bell tower?"

Nation told him, then said, "Heard from my mom?"

"No. That's as it should be."

That, at least, was something.

Ramirez said, "That was quite a leap, bird man. You OK?"

"A little hitch in my gitalong, but yeah. You?"

"Busy as hell at the moment. There's a whisper that Mitkin, the FSB Chief, is after Putin's job."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Bad. This guy's another old KGB man – used to be a KGB scientist doing secret stuff in First Directorate. He's nastier than Putin. He wants the old empire back, starting with the Baltic states. Says '91 was unconstitutional and Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are still part of the Russian Federation. Putin hasn't showed much appetite for that fight, but he's ordered the Prosecutor General to look into

it, to keep Mitkin and his hawks on side. That's why we're so worried about these rumors of militia activity in the Suwalki Gap – reports of illegal border crossings into Kaliningrad. The Chief thinks Russia's fixin' another 'provocation.' Kind of shit they pulled before they invaded the Ukraine. The timing ain't good: in a couple of weeks they kick off their biggest war games ever."

"The news won't shut up about it. Poles are worried."

"They should be. Any provocation in that area could start World War Three. Here's the strange coincidence: the guy with the muscles you took down on the bell tower? He might be involved."

"I thought he was dead?"

"That's where we fooled y'all. The Poles played it smart and told the media he died, so as not to scare the chickens."

"He's alive?"

"He can't swallow or see so good, but yeah. The Poles are pretty keen to have the US on board right now, so I'll be helping debrief him."

"Come visit."

"I will."

"It'll be good to see you."

"Damn straight. So, what's your next trick?"

Nation glanced up and down the footpath. "I'm gonna get my daddy's SB file."

He summarized for Ramirez his short association with Bronia Dolinska and what he'd learned from the talk with Aldo Iskra about his father's disappearance.

He concluded, "That picture I sent you? The one taken at the hospital in 1987? All those people I mentioned are in it – my dad, Rozanski, Iskra, and Kijek. Everyone except Agata Zielińska and Dolinska's granddaddy."

"I got it. I'll look them up when I get a chance and I'll put the bell-tower pictures through face recognition, just in case. Be careful: you know what happened last time you tried to get a look at that file."

“I will. Call me if they find Grace, OK?” He cleared his throat. “Call me whatever they find.”

## CHAPTER 45

Monday morning, he rolled out of bed at 3:30 a.m. The 4:30 start was cruel, but the military had taught him not to be too precious about sleep. He remembered to leave the kids' breakfast oats soaking before he left and managed not to wake Dolinska on the foldout couch on his way out. It was a relief having her around to take the kids to school. Last night he'd told her to call him at the slightest sign: someone loitering outside, a mailman with a parcel, something weird on her computer – anything. Now he'd been traced to Warsaw, their hideout was shrinking by the hour.

The Institute for National Remembrance at Mokotow was a number of long, new, single-story buildings inside a wire-fenced and floodlit compound. Beside the vehicle entrance was a guardhouse labeled Building A. As he rounded the compound looking for a place to walk in, he noted the cameras mounted on the buildings. The two biggest buildings were B and C, each of them longer than a football field.

Halfway down building B he found another security office. Jerzy was waiting there to introduce him to the guard, a mellow, sentimental-eyed gentleman in his fifties labelled Milan Starosta.

When Nation handed over his national identity card, Starosta said, "Jan Kowalski? What are you, CIA or KGB?"



They chuckled at his little joke. If Nation's chuckle sounded forced to Starosta, he probably supposed it was because Jan Kowalski had heard the joke a thousand times before.

As he prepared Nation's HID access card, he crooned *Where is your heart?*, making his voice sound like a gramophone, and whistling the whistled bits. Starosta had a whistle from the Golden Age of Hollywood.

They had two hours to clean the place before they had to pile into a minibus and get to the Institute branch on Krasieński Place, the building opposite the Florianska Milk Bar. By the time they got there they'd have under two hours to clean the offices of the archivists, prosecutors, administrative staff, and the scholars' reading room before 9.30 a.m.

Jerzy paired Nation with Olek. Olek, a slow waker, grumpily introduced Nation to his vacuum cleaner and cleaning trolley. The trolley had shelves for cleaning gear and a big bin for tipping the wastepaper baskets into.

As they made for the staff offices, Nation said, "I thought the place would be full of files."

"We don't go in there."

"Where?"

"The *Magazyn*." Olek pointed to a door at the rear of the lobby. "It's over in Building C. They don't want us to clean it."

Fuck.

As they passed the door labelled *Magazyn*, Nation saw it had its own HID chip reader. He didn't need to test his new access card on it to know it wouldn't work. He cursed inwardly in English, Polish, Spanish, and Pashto. It occurred to him that *magazyn*, the Polish word for archive, was the same as the Polish word for the clip you slot into your gun. Evidently it wasn't going to be easy to get his hands on the ammunition he needed.

\*

Nation's job was to vacuum the archivists' offices and empty their waste bins while Olek cleaned the bathrooms. Whoever finished first would help the other. He was surprised that he didn't land the toilet-cleaning job, being new, but maybe Olek shared his phobia about offices.

It wasn't the kind of low-ceilinged maze of partitions Nation saw in nightmares about an office job, but the stink of carpet and instant coffee and sameness renewed his conviction that if man was meant to spend his days inside, he'd get born with a fluffy tail.

Before he left Mokotow the first morning he'd swiped his access card across the Magazyn card reader and heard the refusing beeps. Checking in-trays the following day told him most requests for files came from scholars. He could borrow some professor's identity to fill out a request for his father's file, then take the file off the trolley when it was delivered to the Krasinski reading room. The only problem was, if he stole a scholar's identity to make the request, he might just be signing that person's death warrant. He had to assume the tripwire that had almost got him killed back in Van Horn was still active: someone was keeping an eye out for any request to see the file of Ryszard Okula.

As he vacuumed offices, he examined the family photographs some of the archivists kept on their desks, of themselves with spouses and sausage dogs and gap-toothed kids like his own. One of these people was dirty – dirtier than the carpet ever was.

No, there was only one way to do it, and that was to get into the Magazyn.

## CHAPTER 46

The army nurse led National Clandestine Service Agent Cody Ramirez of Moscow CIA Station and Agent Zygmunt Pawlak from Poland's domestic intelligence agency, the ABW, down a long, bleach-smelling hospital corridor. The hospital was the Third Military Field Hospital at Stare Kiejkuty Army Base. Ramirez knew the CIA no longer renditioned Middle Eastern terrorists to Kiejkuty for waterboarding and refrained from asking Pawlak what they did with the dungeons nowadays. They were probably full of generals who hadn't voted for Jaroslaw Kaczyński's party.

Agent Pawlak said, "He hasn't been able to talk because of his throat wounds, but we've identified him from his prints. He's a serving GROM Operator: Sergeant Kamil Malinowski."

Ramirez's eyebrows went up: "GROM? Polish Special Forces, right?"

"Right. It means *thunder*. GROM is the elite – like your Delta Force."

What the hell did GROM have against Adam Nation?

Two big military policemen stood aside to let them enter the patient's room. The room was spartan, but it had a window with a view of trees and low hills beyond a parade ground. The room's only occupant couldn't appreciate it, though, since his eyes were bandaged.

The nurse murmured in English, "He's lost his left eye: the glass severed the optic nerve. But we think he'll have most of the sight in the other. We'll take the

patch off tomorrow. His throat is still swollen but its healing well. He mustn't talk for long."

Ramirez thanked her and asked her to close the door on her way out. He approached the bed. But for the little round head, the guy was a gorilla.

Ramirez spoke in a low voice in English and waited for Agent Pawlak to translate: "How's the pain?"

The man cleared his throat. His voice was hoarse. Ramirez had the feeling he was glad to talk to someone.

"It hurts. Who are you?"

"Cody Fraser. I'm an anesthesiologist."

"You're in the wrong country."

"I'm with the American NATO force rotation at Elk. Do you speak English?"

"Not with this fucking throat."

"Has anyone been to visit you?"

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"I understand your friends left you for dead. How's that feel?"

Pawlak translated the reply: "You a doctor or a shrink?"

Ramirez chuckled.

Malinowski shot his arm out and grabbed the flap of Ramirez's coat. He felt the fabric between thumb and forefinger, then let it go, evidently satisfied it was some kind of medical coat.

Ramirez said, "Nice view from this room. Maybe tomorrow you'll get to see it."

"They said with one eye I won't have any depth perception. Is that right? The world will look like a fucking kid's painting?"

Agent Pawlak translated.

Ramirez said, "You won't be able to drive, I'm afraid. Shooting? I guess you'll still be able to shoot."

Agent Pawlak said, “May I?”

Ramirez nodded.

Pawlak asked questions in Polish about St. Ania’s Bell Tower.

Malinowski said nothing.

Ramirez didn’t have time for Malinowski to play hard to get. He moved to the IV stand. From the pocket of his white coat he fished a syringe of sodium thiopental, equally effective as a truth drug as it is as an anesthetic. Too much, though, would stop Malinowski’s breathing. He took a needle from its protective case and fitted it to the syringe, then stuck it in the top of the drip bag and pushed the plunger halfway home. He squeezed the drip bag a little, to mix the shot in, glanced at his watch and checked his phone while he waited.

There was a message from Nation. He’d sent a picture of what looked like a HID card scanner next to a door, and the message, “How would you open one of these?”

Soon Malinowski was having trouble holding his head up. He lay back on the pillows, breathing hard. He moaned some complaint.

Pawlak translated, “No depth perception...That’s the end of that, then.”

Ramirez said, “They left you behind, huh? I thought you GROM guys had some sort of code of honor.”

“Yeah.” Malinowski shook his head on the pillows. “And they fucking left me.”

“Tell me: Who were you looking for on St. Ania’s Bell Tower?”

“Don’t know his name, just his face...”

“Why were you looking for him?”

“I don’t ask questions...Durgan Maga might know...”

“The guy with the weird head? Maga wanted him dead?”

He shrugged. “He was getting paid, too.”

“How much?”

“100,000 zloty. That’s what Maga gave me...I don’t know what he gets.”

“Good money.”

“Fucking good.”

“Who’s paying?”

“I don’t know. Maga knows...”

“You do this kind of job often?”

“Sometimes.”

“Is that your biggest paycheck?”

“No, we got more for Kaliningrad...”

Ramirez glanced at Pawlak.

He said, “You went into Kaliningrad? With the militia?”

“Just a few of us...” He jerked, like someone nodding off who has dreamt of falling. The little head came up and he tried to stare at Pawlak through the bandage. “What are you – cops?”

Pawlak raised an eyebrow at Ramirez. “No.”

“Who’s this Yankee Doodle? He gonna waterboard me?”

Pawlak translated.

Ramirez said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Tell me: you went in to Kaliningrad with the same guys who left you behind on the bell tower?”

They held their breath and waited to see if the slow train of Malinowski’s mind would get back on track.

After a pause he said, “Fucking bitches left me...See that tattoo?” He lifted his left arm in an attempt to pull the gown off his massive right shoulder, but the hand flopped back to his belly before it got there. Agent Pawlak pulled up his sleeve to reveal the PW woven into the shape of an anchor.

Malinowski nodded. “*Fighting Poland*. That’s our fucking code...Bitches didn’t even check if I was alive...”

“Tell me about Kaliningrad.”

Malinowski was silent awhile, breathing heavily. Ramirez began to fear he’d given him too much thiopental. Just when it seemed he’d passed out, he said, “I don’t know what they’re trying to do...Start a fucking war with Russia? Good luck...” He paused for a while to catch his breath. “Maga doesn’t care...Just hates Russians...It’s jihad for him.”

With a little coaxing, Malinowski told them then about his night-time excursions into Kaliningrad from a hunting lodge in the Polish part of the Romincka Forest. One night in the no-man’s-land between the border and the Russian fence, Durgan Maga cut the throat of a Russian border guard and left him for the boar to feed on. Then a couple of weeks back they went right through the Russian part of the forest and across farmland to the Gusev army base. Pawlak pressed him patiently. Malinowski provided precise details about the layout of the Gusev base, and how they got inside the fence.

Pawlak asked what they’d put in the water tank.

“How would I know?...But it was heavy as lead. It was in filters – like pool filters. Maga fitted them into the outlet pipes.”

Pawlak and Ramirez looked at each other a long moment. Ramirez muttered his suggestion for a change of tack.

Pawlak asked, “Is Maga your friend?”

“He was my CO in Ghazni. I don’t think he trusts me...Thinks I’m a talker.” He thrust his jaw out, tried to sit up, collapsed back onto the pillows, groaned deep in his chest and rolled his head side to side again. “And now he leaves me behind...” His voice cracked, “Like a blind fucking dog.”

Ramirez said: “Tell me about Ghazni.”

## CHAPTER 47

It was good to see Cody Ramirez and to talk Texan again. At a table on an upper deck of a restaurant boat moored on the Vistula, over beers and a mixed grill, Ramirez filled him in on Malinowski's chemically assisted confession.

Ramirez said, "You seem a little agitated."

"They know I'm in Warsaw." He didn't mention the kids. Ramirez would want to take them somewhere safe, but he didn't want to leave his kids with strangers. He just needed a few more days.

He said, "Listen, there's one thing I need to get straight: you're here as CIA liaison, right?"

"Right."

"At the invitation of Polish intelligence?"

Ramirez nodded. "The ABW is domestic intel. Poland's FBI."

"Kinda like the new secret police, then, huh? Probably run by old Esbeks. You trust those bastards?"

"They're not the guys who killed your daddy."

"Who knows?"

Ramirez shook his head and his eyes strayed to the spit of sand in the Vistula where three young women were sunbaking.



Nation said, “This Maga, you say he served in Ghazni? I was there a couple of months, but I think I’d remember if I’d pissed in his *pierogi* – guy with a head like that. Hell, I just don’t think it’s connected to Afghanistan. People started trying to kill me the minute I asked for my daddy’s file. Those GROM operators showed up because someone sent a beacon to my phone from Grace’s email. It’s got to be about the file.”

Ramirez nodded. “Well, Malinowski’s story about Major Maga checks out. April last year Maga led a joint Polish–Afghan mission in Helmand to rescue seven hostages. Talibs had ’em four months before he busted them out. He’s got a chestful of medals and his men worship him. Anyways, he’s been stood down pending investigation. Why? Near as I can tell because he left the FOB to pray in a mosque in Ghazni. During Ramadan. The day he found out his mother was dead.”

“Harsh.”

“Damn right it’s harsh. And Malinowski says he’s gotten a lot *more* religious since then.”

“Doesn’t sound like he’s working for the Russians.”

“Malinowski says Maga hates Russians: he’s from Kazakhstan.”

“Hell’s he doing in Poland?”

“He went to Chechnya at sixteen, to kill Russians. He was fighting with the rebels in the mountains till his band was betrayed to the Yamadayevtsi – a rebel militia Putin bought. Of thirty fighters, only him and two others escaped Tazan Kala. Maga got into Belarus, then Poland, as an asylum seeker.”

“When?”

“Somewhere round 2005, Malinowski thinks.”

“So, these guys on the bell tower. You think they’re – what? Pissed-off Polish operators freelancing?”

“I dunno. The Polish military is a mess since Kaczyński’s gang politicized it. They got battle-seasoned veterans of the Middle East leaving in droves while guys

who never fired a shot in anger get promoted to the senior ranks. The big mercenary contractors and the Foreign Legion are getting flooded with Polish CVs. If history is any kind of teacher, others'll end up in organized crime. And in this part of the world, where there's organized crime, the FSB has a finger in the pie."

"FSB? Used to be the KGB, right?"

"Right. After communism, the KGB split into the FSB and the SVR. The FSB is internal security. Spies on Russia and its near-abroad, and outsources dirty work to the Russian *vory* – the mafia. The SVR does the rest of the world."

"You think Gusev was a false-flag attack?"

"Malinowski says he doesn't know who he's working for, but two of the other guys were Lithuanian. Soon as he gets the patch off his good eye, we'll take him for a walk in the woods, see if we can't find this hunting lodge they set out from. This is all for your ears only, understand?"

"I figured."

"If any journalist was to print anything, it'd be my chopper on the block."

"She won't."

"You trust her?"

"Nine in ten. We don't have much choice but to trust each other. She's sleeping on my couch because she can't go home, and that's kinda my fault."

He caught Ramirez's look. "Man, do you ever think about anything else?"

Ramirez grinned. "Come on, what's she look like?"

"She's ugly as a hatful of catfish."

"Don't lie to me."

Nation shook his head soberly. "I'm serious."

"Well, she's got guts, I'll say that for her – jumping off a ten-story rooftop."

Nation shook his head in a silent Amen to that.

Ramirez said, “Now, show me your access card.”

Nation extracted the lanyard from his daypack.

Ramirez looked at the card. “How much you know about HID cards?”

“Precious little.”

“OK, it’s got your picture on it, but apart from that an HID access card is a lot dumber than your bank card. The password to your bank card is stored in your head. This thing stores the password on the card. The card reader on the wall just reads the magnetic password and opens the door.”

Cody took a folded envelope from his jacket and shook out two small black rectangular objects like bricks of flat Lego. He held one up between thumb and forefinger.

“It fits inside the card reader. It can store the passwords from a couple thousand cards. You don’t have to take it out, just leave it in the reader and download the passwords to your phone with Bluetooth. I texted you a link that shows you how to install it.”

While Nation was checking his messages, Ramirez tapped at the screen of his own cell.

Nation looked up when he read out: “Bronia Dolinska, investigative reporter with *Rzeczpospolita*.”

He turned the phone around to show Nation.

The screen showed a smiling Dolinska accepting some award for journalism.

Ramirez said, “Ugly, huh?”

“Comes down to taste.”

## CHAPTER 48

The following Monday morning, when Nation entered the Institute's security control room to vacuum, Milan Starosta the security guard was absorbed in some old Polish movie on his laptop. He looked up in mock horror, raised his hands and set his jaw like a partisan hero.

He cried, "Aim at my heart, Agent Kowalski!"

Nation pretended to shoot him with his vacuum cleaner. Starosta chuckled, glanced once at the bank of twenty monitors he was paid to look at, and got up to go make a cup of coffee.

As he vacuumed the control room, Nation watched the monitors. On monitor three, he saw Starosta swipe himself into the staff corridor and disappear into the coffee room, which wasn't covered by any monitor. Nation set his stopwatch the moment Starosta was inside. Starosta emerged from the staff kitchen three minutes after going in and walked to the bathroom. Five minutes later he emerged from the bathroom doing a soft-shoe shuffle and returned to the kitchen. In another minute and a half, he emerged, sipping a mug of coffee, and walked back towards the camera in the corridor. Another half minute and he swiped into the control room. Nine minutes all up. Nation switched off the vacuum cleaner and pulled the plug.

The following day, he timed Starosta again. This time it took Starosta twelve minutes to take a crap and make a coffee. The next day, as soon as he saw Starosta leave the kitchen and disappear into the bathroom, he left the vacuum

cleaner running in the guard room, shut the door, and jogged to the door marked Magazyn.

He was standing right in front of the glass door to the office corridor Starosta had just entered. If Starosta took less than a few minutes to crap, he was in trouble. He fished a small screwdriver from his pants pocket and prized the screw cover off the HID card reader. It took him two minutes to install one of Ramirez's password interceptors.

He glanced right: the corridor was empty. He thanked God that Starosta was such a regular guy.

Later that same morning, in the deserted Institute reading room at Krasiński Square, he kept the vacuum cleaner running while he switched on a computer. The username and password for each day were inside a plastic sleeve stuck to the bench on which the computers sat. The password would be changed when staff arrived in a couple of hours, but for now yesterday's login details were still good.

With one hand, he kept the head of the vacuum cleaner moving. With the other, he logged in and searched the catalogue for files on his father, Agata Zielińska, Antoni Rozanski, and Roman Kijek. As an afterthought he typed in the name Aldo Iskra. There were no files on Rozanski, Kijek, or Iskra. He recorded the file numbers for his father and Agata.

\*

“After eight days and twenty-eight minutes the people of the village woke up and they could remember everything. They remembered how the shepherd boy Karok had sounded his horn and warned them just in time for most of the villagers to flee to the caves.”

Nation had to raise his voice for Wes in the bottom bunk to hear the story, which was probably loud enough for his voice to reach Bronia Dolinska at the

dining room table. He noticed she'd stopped tapping her laptop. She sat very still, the way she had at the Iskras' apartment.

He checked Dean was still awake beside him. Self-conscious, he went on: "The villagers remembered then how they had come back from the caves and drunk from the well.

"They lowered a man down into the well with a lamp. He shouted up that he could see something under the water. It took four strong men to haul the thing up. It was a carved head, with a gaping mouth and a bristly chin. Karok recognized it and told them it had been carried by one small Tatar bannerman on a pikestaff. Whatever it had been carved from before, it was now made of solid lead.

"The blind bard Sipek felt the head and said it must have been transmuted to the heavy metal by absorbing the memories of all who had drunk from the well. Eight days and twenty-eight minutes of memories of men and birds were in the head."

When the kids were asleep, he went into the kitchen where Dolinska was sitting in front of the latest Smolensk crash report.

She said, "That was a strange story."

"Last bedtime story my father told me."

He told her what he remembered of that night and she pondered in silence. He looked out the window for watchers. In the apartment blocks across Elektoralna, a dozen apartments had the curtains open, but no one was looking his way.

He said, "I remember people used to keep their curtains closed at night. You could look out like this and you wouldn't see into a single apartment."

"We did. You never knew which neighbor might be spying for Them. Someone might report you for looking too happy or something."

## CHAPTER 49

In his office in the baroque wing of Castle Gratka, the Director leaned back in his chair, with a noisy creaking of leather. He looked out the French window over the Augustów Forest and directed his voice towards the speakerphone on his mahogany desk.

“Who?”

Gajos’s voice over the speakerphone said, “Aldo Iskra. He was an oncologist at the Marie Skłodowska Hospital with the father, Ryszard Okula.”

He knew the name. As Gajos told him the details, his gaze moved from the window to the lead statuette on his desk. It had once been a paperweight, but now that his office was almost paperless it was just a memento of his time in Central Asia. It was a Tatar warrior of the Golden Horde, clad in eastern scale armor and a helmet that left the face exposed. There was a short sword at his hip and across his back the small recurved bow that in the thirteenth century had swept away the Christian armies of the East European plains. The warrior’s right hand held a long staff, which was fitted into a mount attached to the pommel of his saddle. The top of the staff had broken off.

The warrior’s staff had once supported a monstrous head with wide, staring eyes and a gaping mouth. In the Kazakh market where he’d bought the statuette in the mid-eighties, the blue-eyed Kazakh half-breed who sold it to him had explained in Russian that the head was the secret weapon of the Tatars against the Polish cavalry at the Battle of Legnica. The head had been filled with hot coals

and a concoction that released a smell so foul that when the Tatars attacked from upwind it carried across the battlefield ahead of them and made the Polish and Moravian horses rear and wheel. The Tatars pursued on horseback, cutting the Christians down with their arrows.

The head had been broken off the day Ryszard Okula picked the lock on his office at the Marie Skłodowska Cancer Institute, took the key from his desk drawer, then opened the locked drawer in the bottom of his filing cabinet. He'd searched every inch of institutional carpet for the head, to no avail. But, over three decades later, he remembered its features well.

He told the speakerphone, "Well, flush him out."



## CHAPTER 50

On monitor three, Starosta entered the bathroom. Nation left the vacuum cleaner on in the guardroom and jogged to the Magazyn door. He held his phone a couple of inches from the HID card reader and downloaded the passwords from the interceptor, then tapped the last password. Bluetooth beamed it back at the card reader. The reader beeped three times and the LED changed from red to green. The lock clacked open.

In front of him was a short corridor connecting Building B to Building C. This opened onto an aisle a yard wide between ten-foot-high shelves of slotted-together steel. Each shelf was packed with cardboard file boxes. The rows stretched away for the length of a football field in either direction. This was it: the ninety-linear-kilometers of files left of the SB archive.

He stood inside the door, breathing in the smell of cardboard, and checked the numbers on the ends of the rows. He headed left until he found row 0002709/2 – 0002709/6.

In the section labelled 0002709/4, he searched the shelf at face level first, then the one above it. The box labelled 0002709/2/48\_756 was higher yet. He pushed a couple of boxes back on the second shelf and got his boot on it. The shelf gave a little too much for comfort under his weight. He craned higher, hooked his finger into the steel eyelet in the box and pulled it down. The shelf groaned as he lowered his weight, but held.

He couldn't just walk out of here with the whole box under his arm. He opened the top and lifted out files until he found the one labelled 0002709/2/48\_756\_4. It was a roneo file with a cloth ribbon on either leaf to tie it shut, labelled with his father's name in faded black marker.

He checked his watch. Three minutes and twenty-five seconds had passed.

It seemed to take him hours to find the next box. He fumbled as he pulled it down from a shelf above his head, caught it, heart racing. Agata Zielińska's file. His stopwatch said seven minutes forty-three seconds. His mouth was dry as feathers. If Starosta stayed true to form, he was near done shitting by now. He'd be out of the kitchen with his coffee any minute. If Nation walked out of here when Starosta was coming back from the kitchen, he was screwed.

He listened a few moments, then eased the door open a crack and peered out. He heard his vacuum cleaner still running behind the closed door of the guard room. He was about to push the Magazyn door wide when the door leading to the archivists' offices snicked open. Starosta's whistle spilled into the lobby. Starosta backed into the lobby, coffee cup in one hand, peering at the phone in his other.

Nation froze. The Magazyn door was only open an inch, but if he closed it now Starosta would notice.

He kept still and tried not to blink as Starosta walked by.

Starosta's hard soles crossed the linoleum. Nation waited for the triple beep of Starosta re-entering the security control room. He had just a few seconds to get out of the Magazyn before Starosta got around his desk, set his coffee mug down, and looked at the monitors.

The fingers resting on the door handle were slick with sweat. He wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his free hand to keep the sweat out of his eyes.

The footsteps slowed, then stopped, the card scanner on the guard room beeped. The door snicked open, clunked shut. Nation slipped out.

His runners made hardly a sound on the linoleum as he crossed to the guard room. He dropped the files into the garbage sack on his trolley before he entered. Starosta stood staring at the screaming vacuum cleaner in the middle of the floor. Now he blinked at Nation.

Nation wiped the sweat from his brow, patted his midriff. "Sorry about that, *Pan*. A little belly trouble."

Starosta examined his face, figuring Nation must have run for the closer public toilet rather than the staff one he'd just used. He waved the apology away, a man refreshed by coffee and a crap. Nation's hand trembled as he unplugged the vacuum cleaner. As he passed the guard room window to get on the minivan ten minutes later, Starosta looked at him longer than usual.

\*

In the minibus to Krasiński Square, dawn breaking over the Warsaw skyline, he tried not to think about Starosta rewinding the security camera recordings. He turned to Olek, who was slumped in the seat beside him.

"Know if they have a file on you?"

"We can't get in. That's the trouble with this country, we can't get in there."

"Figure they got a file on you though?"

"I'm too young."

A smile started in Olek's eyes, then spread to his lips as a smirk. He lifted his head off the headrest to look across the aisle at Jerzy. "They'd have one on Pan Jerzy, though. Eh, *Pan*? I bet it's a fat one, too."

Jerzy roused himself from a doze. "What's that? No. I don't want to know what those bastards had on me. There are two kinds of people in Poland: the ones who want to dig up the past, and the ones who want to move on. I'm the second kind. Have a look: I'm even bringing in Americans to lift our productivity."

Nation said, “Canadian.”

“What’s the difference?”

Glowering out the window, Olek said, “You forget the third kind: the ones who want to bring it back.”

Nation followed his gaze. On a billboard by the highway was the enormous slogan “Building bridges” and the huge, open, smiling face of Stanislaw Lipiński, candidate for the Democratic Defense League in the coming national election.

Olek said, “He buys more TV advertising time than the fucking government – even during Legia games! Who’s paying for that, do you think?”

Jerzy told Nation: “Don’t ask!”

Later, at breakfast at the Florianska, Marcin tapped his tabloid and said, “Talk about digging up the past: this old bastard knew where the bodies were buried.”

Nation and the others leaned over to look at a grainy 1980s headshot of a brutal-looking thug in a uniform collar that was too tight for him.

The headline was “Dorn dies at 86.”

Nation said, “Who was he?”

“SB Chief Jakub Dorn: head of the secret police from the start of Martial Law till the system died in the arse. He just died in the arse from bowel cancer.”

Olek said, “I hope it was fucking painful.”

## CHAPTER 51

The Director went to the floor-to-ceiling bookcases by the French window, which were packed with volumes of cancer journals. He removed the volumes of the *International Journal of Cancer* from a section of the bottom shelf and folded up the hinged shelf to uncover a safe hidden in the floor underneath. Inside were boxes of roneo files he had liberated from the SB archive on Rakowiecka Street in the last days of communism.

The files reminded him of the bonfire of SB files he'd stumbled on while hunting in the Bolimowski Forest in December 1989. There, in the middle of a clearing, sipping from a liter bottle of vodka and staring with flame-glazed eyes into the heart of an inferno of paper was Captain Zbigniew Rusak. On a forestry track at the edge of the clearing stood an SB "laundry van." Evidently, Rusak had used it to bring the files. The two men hadn't seen each other in the year or more since Rusak's investigation of the Dolinski accident had absolved the Director of blame. He'd since heard on the grapevine that Rusak would not be among the 10,000 SB officers to get a job with the post-communist security services. The Dolinski case had tainted him.

Rusak had not seemed pleased to see him. The Director had often wondered if the reason Rusak looked so morose there in the clearing was that he hadn't found in the SB archive the case files he had most wanted to burn – the several journal boxes full of deductions, analyses, records of interview, and "consent to inform" statements that Rusak had collected as chief investigator in the Dolinski case.

He had not found them because the Director had taken them. And here they were, under his bookcase, thirty years later. Men like Rusak hadn't realized that in the decades to come the files would be more useful unburned.

The Director selected a slim file and drew it out. He moved into the French window to unwrap the ribbon. The cryptonym printed on the cover in faded marker was "Hiker," and under it was the name "ISKRA, Aldo."

\*

Aldo Iskra dreamed of hiking in the Tatry Mountains along the Slovakian border. Over thirty years now since he saw those peaks – almost half his life. He wondered if he would ever see them again before he died. He woke around three and sat on the edge of his bed, head in hands. He thought of Karol Okula coming back to Poland to face the past, in spite of all his childhood terrors, all his mother's warnings. They had learned to fear the same conspiracy of faceless men, but Karol had come back to face his fear.

He decided that once and for all he had to beat his own fear. It had held him prisoner too long.

When he checked his mailbox in the building's lobby late that morning, there was a card alerting him to a parcel awaiting collection at the Gorcewska Street Post Office. That must be Kapuściński's book on Ethiopia, at last. He stood in front of the door, looking out through the security grille, clutching the parcel alert. He was eager to get his hands on the book. The post office was only five minutes by foot. His hand was on the doorknob. It grew sweaty as his head turned left, right, left, right, examining the parking lot outside.

It upset Ilona if he went out alone. He would wait till she came back, and she could go collect it for him this afternoon.

He trudged back up the stairs, hating himself.

## CHAPTER 52

When he returned to the apartment on Elektoralna Street, Nation found Dolinska at the dining table, using voice recognition to talk an article into her laptop.

She waved, glanced at the scribbled notes in the notebook on the table beside her and continued her narration: “Grzegorz Przemysk, the son of a dissident poet, was detained on his way home from school and beaten at the Jesuit Street Militia station. He collapsed and was taken to Mercy Hospital. The physician who examined him found only minor bruises and passed him on to the hospital psychiatrist who, on the SB’s instructions, declared him insane and committed him to a mental hospital. Within a day he was dead.”

Nation pulled the three files from his backpack and slapped them on the table.

Her eyes widened.

She gave him a thumbs-up, then hit the pause key. “Let me get on with this before I lose my train of thought – Brodowski wants it for the website by three. Tea? Make melissa, you look wired.”

He put the electric jug on and checked the street and the apartments opposite for watchers. Wired was right. If Starosta rewound the tapes, he was screwed. Sure as hell didn’t need any more coffee. While the jug boiled, he crossed to the table and untied the ribbon on Agata Zielińska’s file. Stapled to the title page was a small black-and-white photograph of a young woman. It was the woman who had been with him and his momma in the back of Pawel Bosko’s car the night

they got out of Warsaw. She wasn't smiling, but she seemed to be holding back a smile.

"The incident was not unusual, but, unfortunately for the SB, the international media got hold of the story. SB Chief Dorn took charge of damage control. All officers of the Civil Militia who had been involved in the incident were drilled until their stories were consistent with the official version of events." Dolinska paused the software and leaned over to look at the photograph. "Is it her?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She nodded with satisfaction and resumed her narration. "The official version of events was that Przemyski had sustained his injuries when he was beaten up by the two ambulance officers in the back of the ambulance on the way to Emergency."

Nation filled the glass teapot and glanced up to check the windows of nearby apartments. A woman leaned out of a sixth-floor window on the other side of the street to shake a dishcloth. Signaling someone? She withdrew without looking his way and twitched the curtain back into place. He didn't scold himself for having paranoid thoughts. He approved.

Dolinska dictated, "On Dorn's orders, the SB staged a number of other beatings by ambulance attendants, in order to convince the public and the international media that this was not an unusual occurrence. For good measure, a doctor, Barbara Makowska-Witkowska, was sentenced to a year in prison on a fabricated charge of assaulting a patient.

"The two ambulance attendants were threatened into accusing each other of beating up the patient Grzegorz Przemyski. They were convicted and served sentences of two years in prison. The Emergency Department doctor who had examined Przemyski was convicted of criminal negligence. The two Militia officers accused by the Prosecutor of beating Przemyski to death were acquitted.

"SB Chief Dorn and several other functionaries prominent in the cover-up operation later received official commendations from Interior Minister Kiszczak.



“Dorn is survived by one son, Jakub Jr, who was recently appointed a judge in the Warsaw District Court.

“If past experience is anything to go by, the funeral of General Jakub Dorn will be well attended, though perhaps not as well attended as Grzegorz Przemyk’s.”

She put the computer to sleep, took off her microphone headset and added, “And he’s invited me to the funeral.”

Nation set the pot of tea on the table. He said, “Come again?”

“It’s on Thursday. I was at university with Jakub Jr. A very good-looking young man. Every bit as ambitious as his father, but with a sense of fair play.”

## CHAPTER 53

Dolinska said melissa tea relaxes you, but Nation's heart rate accelerated as he untied the ribbon on his father's SB file. He took a sip and flipped through the several dozen pages of forms and reports, some loose, some stapled together. Most of the original documents had been torn into eight or ten pieces, but the pieces had been salvaged and stuck together with pieces of Scotch tape. Then each of these jigsaw puzzles had been glued onto a fresh page. The tape was yellow with age. He turned the pages slowly. On some pages, a piece or two of the puzzle was missing.

He showed Dolinska.

She said, "The secret police destroyed as many files as they could in the last days. There were whole rooms full of torn and shredded paper in Rakowiecka Street headquarters. The unforgivable thing is the archive kept on shrinking in the nineties."

"How come?"

"Some of the former Esbeks got themselves jobs as archivists."

"Jesus God, didn't anyone do background checks?"

"No. Polish law forbade it."

The classification level on the top right-hand corner of each page was Secret. The first document in the file was headed Questionnaire. It gave his father's full name, ID number and date of birth, and listed his military service as "none." He

checked the date: May 6, 1968. His father had been fifteen years old. Height: 177 cm. Hair: blond. Eyes: blue. No distinguishing marks or characteristics. Under "Travel abroad and contact with capitalist countries" it said: "No travel. One German pen-friend."

The Personal Character item described "a friendly and intelligent boy" who "excels in mathematics and the sciences, according to his teachers", but who "frankly expresses opinions which are against the status quo, and which might have an influence on others." It also noted that he "collects advertising brochures on automobiles of foreign manufacture mailed by his pen-friend in Germany, Jurgen Buhlmann of Koblenz." It was signed by Senior Inspector Captain S. Kulakowski of Inspectorate II.

The questionnaire was followed by a report by Kulakowski also dated May 6, 1968. It began with a quarter page of fuzzy typewriting:

Still among students of Wola Lyceum Number 42. In discussions with secret co-workers as to how to proceed with thorough examination of the psychological environment of the youth - especially those known for hooligan antics - with a view to singling out possible bandits guilty of committing act of hostile writing on May 1 this year.

What kind of "hostile writing" could a schoolkid commit that would have an SB Captain investigating for nearly a week?

After a few more pages, the nature of the "hostile writing" was revealed. On May Day, 1968, during a small demonstration that might or might not have happened, on the wall of a brick electrical transformer hut opposite the school, a painted slogan had appeared: "Down with USSR friendship."

According to the thorough Kulakowski, the slogan was in green oil paint and the letters were approximately fifty centimeters high. There followed half a dozen pages documenting the search for the brush and tin of green paint.

His father's statement was in a confident script that hadn't yet been ruined by medical school. It said:

I hereby state that on Wednesday, May 1, 1968, between the hours of 14:30 and 16:05, I went to the cinema. I was

there with Bernardem Krawczyk, Antoni Scheffs, and Jakub Biedny to see a film called *The Phantom*. We left the cinema at 16:10 and I caught a tram to the home of Maryla Bulska. We did our physics homework together. I left at 18:20 and went home.

At this point a note in the margin in Kulakowski's hand said, "A neighbor, Mrs. Krupka, reports that Ryszard Okula did not leave by the front door, but by a small balcony door. Seconds after Maryla Bulska's mother entered the building, Okula dropped from the balcony onto rubbish bins. He left on foot, limping."

After statements from Maryla Bulska and the three boys he'd gone to the cinema with, all of which supported his father's alibi, there was a polygraph test printout. The alibi had checked out, but the SB had given him a lie detector test anyway. Maybe to scare the shit out of him for expressing opinions against the status quo.

Dolinska's laptop chimed as an email arrived.

She read it and said, "You know why Agata Zielińska isn't answering her phone in Austria?"

"No."

"She's in Poland. She's been using her credit card in Gdansk for the past three weeks."

"How did you get her credit-card records?"

"My editor – Brodowski."

"Address?"

"No, but Aldo said she was from Gdansk originally."

He reached for Agata Zielińska's file. The first document after the photograph page was the "questionnaire," as in his father's file. It told him that Agata Zielińska was born on October 23, 1956 in Gdansk to Agnieszka Zielińska and Hubert Zieliński, a welder at the Gdansk shipyards.

He showed Dolinska the names.

She said, "It's a common surname. I'll tell Brodowski."

Nation skimmed the file. Agata had moved to Warsaw as a young nurse fresh out of college to start work at the Marie Skłodowska Institute. Besides the Solidarity trade union, she'd belonged to KPN, the Confederation for an Independent Poland, and the Liberation Political Movement (WRP). In February 1988, she was a founding member of SSZKS, the Public Association for the Abolition of the Death Penalty. She was also in the WRPZS, the SZSS, and the UPZW. He scanned the rest of the file till the acronyms started to blur together. The SB officer also suspected she was a member of the illegal and dangerous Fighting Solidarity, but he had no hard evidence of this yet.

Agata Zielińska was a person who had opposed the system. And, unlike most Poles, she gave enough of a shit to try to bring it down.

Near the end of the file was a pink form titled Karta Homoseksualisty (Card of a Homosexual). Attached to the form was a signed statement: "I Agata Zielińska have been a homosexual since birth. I have had multiple partners in my life. I am not interested in minors."

A two-sentence report by a Major Matuszak bearing the same date as the Karta Homoseksualisty recorded that Zielińska, a nurse at the Marie Skłodowska Hospital, had refused to be a "secret co-worker." He mentioned that in refusing she'd expressed "opinions hostile to the status quo." Under it was a Record of Interview where they'd tried to get her to talk about her lovers and the positions she liked. She'd told them to go fuck themselves.

\*

When they returned to the Borowej Gory apartment blocks where they'd lost the target, Gajos and Czezewsky opted for a white commercial rental van instead of the black BMW. Once they had a list of all inhabitants of the blocks, it had taken only a couple of hours to determine that just one name matched the 1988 Marie Skłodowska Institute staff list the Director had provided: Aldo Iskra.

As he drove, Gajos asked his cell phone, “Which school?” He listened, then said, “Two kids? Canadian. Roger that.” He checked his watch and said, “We’ll collect Iskra first.”

## CHAPTER 54

Nation rubbed his eyes and checked the time. An hour till he had to get the kids from school. Dolinska was out on the balcony rattling away on her laptop. He turned to the next document in his father's file. It also recorded an act of "hostile writing." This time it was a letter sent from a postbox in Olsztyn.

The report was dated March 6, 1988. It was in the same fuzzy typewriting. Fuzzy, he realized, because these were the carbon copies.

A Sergeant Szadny had typed:

### I. ANALYSIS OF THE OPERATIONAL SITUATION

On Tues, March 2 Department W intercepted a letter addressed to Pan Aldo Iskra of 78/6 Borowej Góry Court, Wola. Iskra is an oncologist at Marie Skłodowska Cancer Institute and a member of Solidarity. The letter had been placed in a post box in the Olsztyn University area. It was removed from circulation because of the contained content. The author of the letter criticizes Prof. Antoni Rozanski, Director of the Oncology Department at Marie Skłodowska Oncology Institute, for sending the writer on what he terms a 'fool's errand.'

The opponent mentions he has been reading Dir. Prof. Rozanski's articles on tumor "angiogenesis," published during Dir. Prof. Rozanski's time in the USSR. The opponent suggests that Dir. Prof. Rozanski might himself be an "angiogenic factor."

Nation looked the term up, then rang Aldo Iskra.

After a pause, Aldo said, "Did you call before? I was having a nap. What is it?"

"Is your wife home?"

“No.”

“Is there a payphone near you?”

A pause, then, “There’s one at the shopping center.”

“Can you go there and call me back? It’s important.”

A long pause, then Aldo said, “Alright.”

While he was waiting, Nation read more of Officer Szadny’s report. His eyes kept glazing over and it seemed an age before his phone rang. He swiped to accept the call and heard a voice over a PA system announcing that the 14:34 train to Pruszków had been delayed.

Then Aldo’s voice, excited, out of breath: “The payphone at the shopping center has disappeared. I had to come all the way to the railway station! What is it?”

“Sorry. I’m looking at a letter Dad wrote you that was intercepted in early March 1988. He used the term “angiogenic factor.” That mean anything to you?”

A pause, then Aldo began to chuckle.

He said, “The only time I remember him saying that was on the phone. He was up in Olsztyn and he called to ask if I’d got his letter, which I hadn’t. A Sunday night, I recall, because it was the conversation where I told him about Prosecutor Dolinski’s deterioration. He drove back to Warsaw the next day and came to work on Tuesday. ‘Angiogenic factor’? A tumor sends out agents – factors – which trick nearby blood vessels into sprouting new vessels to feed it. I suppose he thought our friend Rozanski was an agent sent out by the tumor to help feed it. I don’t know if the tumor was the Polish Worker’s Party or the USSR. If there was any difference. As I say, if he had one flaw, it was talking out of school.”

“You remember anything else he said?”

A pause, then, “Another time when we were smoking and watching our friend write in his big notebook, he said, “If cancer was a man, it would be Rozanski.”



It must have cost Aldo a lot to walk all the way to the railway station. Nation felt like he owed him something, but he had nothing to give that Aldo needed, so he offered the information that he'd traced Agata Zielińska to Gdansk.

Aldo wasn't surprised. "Yes, I remember now: her father worked in the shipyard. He was one of the Solidarity strikers there in 1980. Those ship workers were our heroes. When they rose up against the workers' state, it was the beginning of the end for communism."

After talking to Aldo, Nation flipped ahead through the rest of his father's file. Brief character reports on his father in the army, at university. Always smart and popular but always "frankly expressing opinions against the status quo." The last document was titled "Interrogation Report." It was dated March 9, 1988. After skimming it for ten seconds, his heart dropped into his guts.

## CHAPTER 55

On his way home, the excitement wore off and Aldo Iskra hesitated on the curb. His breathing was fast and shallow: just one small street left to cross. It led off Gorczewska Avenue up the low hill towards the cemetery. Safety on the other side of the zebra crossing, but Aldo kept looking left and right, unable to step off the curb.

For so many years he'd lived with a crippling fear. Days were bad enough, but the nights were even worse. Even now, three decades later, there were nights when 03:00 would find him sitting on the edge of the bed, beating his thighs with his fists. It all began with that night in 1988 when the SB called him in to Rakowiecka Street after the Dolinski overdose.

He'd talked. He'd been too frightened not to tell the SB captain what his friend and colleague Ryszard Okula used to say about the Party and Rozanski in their stairwell conversations. Captain Rusak seemed to know a lot of it already. After Ryszard disappeared, he'd continued to function, but he never again bounded up the basement stairs after retrieving a file from the X-ray archive. Even his favorite mountain hikes were walked with a heavier tread.

Then, in 1994, his friend, the lawyer Filip Dąbrowski, was run over by a gravel truck, the day before he was to testify about the crooked privatization of the government pharmaceutical monopoly. When Aldo heard the news about Dąbrowski, it was as if a switch flipped in his brain. He quit his job. For the past

quarter of a century he'd lived indoors, in fear of the gravel truck that would one day take his life.

If he felt annoyance now at Karol Okula for making him go outside, he had to admit that the punishment was much less than he deserved, and at least he had picked up the parcel on his way home. It was the Kapuściński book he'd been waiting for. Soon he would be sitting down with a cup of tea to read it.

He took a deep breath and stepped off the curb.

A gray-bearded man in sunglasses who had been talking into his cell phone suddenly looked up and yelled out to him from the opposite footpath. He was dressed like a woodsman and pointing to something on the other side of Gorcewska Street. Aldo's attention was diverted at the critical moment. A big white commercial van swung out from its park without starting its engine and rolled down the hill towards him. Aldo didn't see it until it was too late.

## CHAPTER 56

The three-page document in front of Nation was a report on the interrogation of Ryszard Okula at Rakowiecka Street headquarters of the Służba Bezpieczeństwa on Wednesday, March 9, 1988. Printed under the signature at the bottom was "General J. Dorn." What was it about his father's case that had interested the devil himself?

He skimmed the preamble, then slowed to read:

The opponent confessed that after Dir. Rozanski left at 1645, he stayed at work till the other staff left. At 1815 he opened Dir. Rozanski's office by inserting a steel ruler inside the door stop and pushing the springlatch out of the strike plate.

He found the key to the filing cabinet in Dir. Rozanski's desk and stole a military ammunition box containing certain documents from the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet. He also confessed to stealing an ornament from the Director's desk. He was in the photocopier room copying certain documents when he heard the stairwell door slam. He then heard Dir. Rozanski re-enter his office unexpectedly. He exited via the fire escape at the other end of the corridor, undetected by Dir. Rozanski.

The opponent said he stole the box in order to ascertain whether the Director had kept notes on the recent treatment of Prosecutor Dolinski of the Warsaw Procuracy. The opponent said any such notes would be helpful to an inquiry in the event of the Prosecutor's death.

The opponent claimed the sudden deterioration in Prosecutor Dolinski's condition was due to the last radiotherapy treatment he received at the Marie Skłodowska Institute Oncology Dept., which was ordered by

Dir. Rozanski. The opponent claimed the final treatment was against his own advice.

The opponent could not explain why he stole the ornament.

Under enhanced interrogation, the opponent was asked again as to the whereabouts of the stolen documents. He did not respond. Under chemically enhanced interrogation the opponent was asked repeatedly if he had told anyone about the documents. Each time he responded by chanting a child's schoolyard rhyme:

Palec pod budkę,  
Bo za minutkę  
Budka się zamyka  
Na czarnego byka,  
Bum cyc cyc!  
Pajacyk!

The chanting of nonsense is a known strategy for resisting chemically enhanced interrogation that the opponent might have learned during his army service.

Nation chanted the old schoolyard rhyme to himself. General Dorn, or whoever the typist was, had transcribed the second-last line as "Bum tits tits!" Even Nation knew it was supposed to be "Buh cyk cyk!" – "Boom tick tick!" The meaning, which he had never thought about when they chanted it to see who was in for football, was:

Put your finger in the trap  
because in a minute  
the trap is closing.  
On to a black bull.  
Boom tick tick!  
Pup-pet clown!

He read on.

Coded significance in the chant cannot be ruled out but none was detected. The opponent's chanting was treated as another uncooperative attempt by the opponent to interfere with the correct progress of the investigation.

The opponent began a story he called "The well of forgetfulness," but he soon forgot what came next. When asked where he had heard this story, he stated, "I made it up."

When asked whether he had told anyone else this story, the opponent answered that he had told the story to his son. He confessed he had told the story in his wife's hearing. It was suggested that the story contained disguised and perhaps enciphered information about certain highly sensitive activities of the Neighbors.

“The Neighbors” referred to the Russians. But it wasn’t clear who had done the suggesting. How many people were in that interrogation room? Was Rozanski there?

Nation found the picture of the oncology staff posed with their Linac. Under its thick 1980s mustache, Rozanski’s mouth was amused. The eyebrows were peaked, like chevrons. He read on:

The opponent confessed that he had given the documents to his wife and that he had told Pawel Bosko about them on the telephone. He confirmed that he was referring to the former Deputy Minister of the Interior. When asked how he knew ex-Deputy Minister Bosko, he replied, “He is a friend.”

The opponent said his wife had not read Dir. Rozanski’s documents. It is not known if Pawel Bosko has read the documents.

The interrogation was terminated at approximately 01:37 and the opponent was then taken by Dr. Dir. Antoni Rozanski to the clinic for medical examination, pending release.

*Dr. Dir. Rozanski.* If Doctor Director Rozanski took his father to the clinic, then he had probably been there for the interrogation. Maybe asking questions, maybe even injecting the truth drugs. But what happened next? Why do a medical examination just when his father was starting to talk?

*Pending release.* The picture of the SB letting his father stagger out onto Rakowiecka Street, his blood flush with truth drugs, didn’t make sense to Nation. He mulled over the meanings that word “release” might have besides the usual one. The tightness in his chest was back.

## CHAPTER 57

He found Dolinska on the balcony reading one of the Smolensk reports in her shades. Her feet were up on the plastic table. Her legs were bare. They were still white from the long winter, but they were long and lean and muscled. Athletic. Unlike a lot of women, she had proper toes that looked capable of bending.

She caught him looking.

He said, “Your feet have done some miles, huh?”

“I was a pole vaulter till I finished university.”

“Explains a few things. Why’d you quit?”

“I started at the paper.”

His phone pinged.

The message from Ramirez read: “Remember Malinowski’s raid on Gusev Russian army base? Check this out.”

Nation clicked on the link. It took him to a news clip on the Russia Today website. He crouched by Dolinska’s chair and propped the phone on the arm so she could see.

The footage was night vision. There was no sound. The caption at the bottom of the screen said “79th Mechanized Division, Gusev Base, Kaliningrad, May 1, 02:15.” The footage switched from light-enhancing night vision to infrared. It

showed a cyclone-mesh fence topped with razor wire. To judge by the high angle, it had been shot from a guard tower.

The IR camera focused on the fringe of nearby trees that looked in silhouette like willows. The faint heat blobs of a man emerged from the trees. Plate carrier protecting his torso. No helmet. He moved fast and in a crouch to the perimeter fence, glancing up once towards the camera. He did something on his hands and knees for thirty seconds at the base of the perimeter fence. Cutting the wire, maybe. Something attached to the man's back was giving off more heat than he was. Nation puzzled over this, but he couldn't work out why.

Then the camera zoomed out and caught three more men emerging from the trees. Each man in turn looked up straight into the camera lens, eyes bright. Nation had seen plenty of infrared: these men had cooled their faces with something like mud. As they crawled through the hole in the fence, he saw that a second man had a blob of heat attached to his back like the first guy. The scene ended.

The next footage was also shot from a high angle. The camera looked down on a vacant quadrangle between wings of a barracks building. The faces of the four men glowed brighter now. Was the cameraman shooting from a window of the barracks? The men paired off and each pair squatted and lifted something heavy. The time at the bottom of the screen scrolled past 02:21.

Then two of the men slung the blobs of heat off their backs. They squatted and lifted the heat out of their packs. The blobs glowed whiter than anything else in the frame. Three of the men stood sentry by the barracks while the remaining man picked up one of the blobs of heat and disappeared step-by-step into the ground.

The footage jumped ahead a few minutes. The man emerged from the ground, no longer carrying the heat. He picked up the other blob of heat and disappeared into a different hole in the ground.

The timecode at the bottom of the screen jumped ahead to 02:35.



The man shouldered a ruck and moved fast towards the camera. His face and body cold again now. Barely visible. Then the angle shifted, and the footage changed from thermal to light-enhanced night vision. The man's figure got sharp and clear and green. His face was unnaturally broad.

Nation and Dolinska caught their breath at the same time and looked at each other.

Nation's phone pinged again. He paused the film and checked his messages. It was an image from Ramirez. On one side of the screen was the lion-faced man who had tried to kill him on St. Ania's Bell Tower. On the other side of the screen was a still from the night-vision footage he'd just watched. Ramirez's message said: "The FACE 2.0 software says 95% it's Major Durgan Maga. Your buddy from the bell tower Malinowski also identifiable. If I can match faces, so can the Russians."

He went inside and switched on the TV. Another ad for the Democratic Defense League – Stanislaw Lipiński oozing charm and talking about Building Bridges. He found the Russia Today channel. A big, handsome, skull-defined head filled the screen. The man was talking Russian in a rumbling voice, and it was dubbed over with a Polish translation. The bottom of the screen told them this was "FSB Director Artyom Mitkin."

Nation remembered Ramirez's words, *There's a whisper Mitkin is after Putin's job*. Mitkin's head was thrust towards the camera from between his hunched traps. The powerful lights reflected off the dome of the forehead. His enormous hands gripped the lectern, and his pale hyperthyroidal eyes stared pure will at the camera. They did not blink as he said, "The findings of the chief prosecutor's report are clear: the 1991 decision to recognize Baltic independence was taken by an unconstitutional body. The Duma must revoke its garbled recognition of the independent statehood of Russia's Baltic provinces of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania."

As Mitkin spoke, the footage cut to the reporter who had asked the question.

Dolinska said with distaste, “That’s Vasily Glebnikov: he only asks questions the government tells him to ask.”

Other Russian reporters shouted questions about the Gusev raid.

Mitkin said, “We’ve found radioactive material in the samovars in the mess hall, and now in filters inserted between the submersible pumps and the outlet pipes of the underground tanks. The same material in both places: seventy percent radioactive iodine-131, which attacks the thyroid gland, and thirty percent other radioactive materials including radium and plutonium.”

He cocked his ear and listened to another question, then said, “It’s true that many ISIS fighters have returned to Chechnya in the years following the failure of their Caliphate, and we think ISIS collected radiological materials from hospitals and universities in Mosul, but iodine-131 has a half-life of only eight days, so at the moment we just don’t know.” He rubbed his eyes. “But don’t worry, I didn’t sleep last night, and I won’t be sleeping till we do know.”

A few chuckles from the ass-licking remnants of the Russian press.

For the first time in his life, Nation felt he was seeing the workings of history before history happened. He felt sure Mitkin already knew damn well what he and Ramirez knew: the Gusev raiders were Poles and Lithuanians.

The feed crossed to the RT anchor, who added, “A Kazakh soldier on guard duty at the time of the raid has been arrested.”

Nation checked his watch. Time to get the kids.

While he was putting on his shoes, Dolinska checked her email. She said, “Brodowski tracked down Agata Zielińska’s father in Gdansk. I have an address.”

“Let’s go.”

“To Gdansk? We don’t have a car.”

“Train?”

She thought a moment, shook her head. “My cousin never uses her car; she’ll lend it to me.”

“We’ll have to take the kids. Road trip with my kids, you might regret it.”

“They’re great kids. No kids, no road trip.”

## CHAPTER 58

Over the weeks Nation had been picking the kids up from school, he'd started to recognize other parents and elder siblings who picked up their kids at the same time. Today, they were all familiar, including one cocky teen with the jarhead-goes-metrosexual haircut who was swearing and flicking his lighter non-stop, doing his usual best to piss the parents off.

Nation checked the cars ranked at the curb. Most of them were empty, many were familiar. But the new white Renault commercial van parked twenty yards from the gate was neither familiar nor empty.

Despite its newness, the vehicle had a crumpled nose and in it were two men in suits and shades. From what he could see, they looked like big men. You don't often see two men in suits in a commercial van picking up a kid from school. They looked at the kids coming out, then down. Out, then down, as if checking faces against photographs. Nation was wearing shades. As he entered the gate, he looked down so the brim of his ball cap hid his face, chest tightening as if he'd just breathed bitter cold air.

He found Wes and Dean in the basement cloak room. While they changed their shoes and packed their bags, he slid his hand into the side pocket of a pink gym bag and transferred a can of girl's deodorant to his shorts pocket. Ignoring their questions, he led them out the rear exit, which opened onto a little kids' playground sheltered from the road out front by the length of the gymnasium. Beyond that was a rubber soccer pitch. The men in the van were parked out front

of the soccer pitch. The back fence was six-foot steel pickets with no footholds, but against the fence, in the back corner of the little kids' playground, was a shed.

Nation said, "Give me your bags."

He tossed the bags onto the shed roof. "You're leaving this way, today."

Wes said, "We can't go over the fence!" He was looking up at the window of a classroom on the first floor.

"No choice, buddy."

"Why?"

"Just trust me."

A rap on the window. Nation turned and a female teacher wagged her finger at him. He grinned up at her as Wes stepped into the cradle of his hands and hoisted himself onto the shed, grunting, "That's Pani Zboralska. We're gonna be in so much trouble!"

"You're not, because you won't be back."

When Dean was up, he told them, "Now, I need you to count 100 Mississippis, then get over the fence and run for that tram stop. OK? I'll meet you there in a few minutes. OK?"

Wes's neck went red and his eyes filled.

Nation repeated, "Don't be scared. Just do what I say, and we'll be fine."

Wes swallowed, nodded.

"Dean?"

Dean's pretty little face was blank and pale. He nodded automatically. "How many minutes?"

"Five at the most."

"When do we start counting?"

"Now."

## CHAPTER 59

Nation patted his pockets in the school hallway. The deodorant can was there and so was the ceramic knife in its sheath.

Eighteen Mississippi.

When he stepped outside, three of the teenagers were still smoking by the school gate. He took his shades from his ball cap and put them on.

Thirty-one Mississippi.

He approached the kid with the haircut and asked for a light. The kid handed over his lighter and took a nervous step back. Still counting in his head, Nation put a finger to his lips and turned his back on the waiting parents, keeping the gate pillar between himself and the van.

At 44 Mississippi, he held the can of deodorant in front of his chest and held the lighter's flame under the base of it. The flame seemed to slow in its waving motion and his subvocal counting also seemed to slow.

He was at 90 Mississippi when the can started to burn his hand. Sweat broke out on his brow. He held on, gritting his teeth, as deodorant started to hiss from the can's nozzle.

At 105 Mississippi he heard two vehicle doors open at once. Sound of heavy metal on a car stereo.

He ground out, "Back in a minute."

The teenagers looked scared as Nation thrust his hands in his pockets, can in one hand, lighter in the other, and stepped out of the school gate onto the pavement. Nation was scared himself, with the kind of fear that comes from bringing a can of girl's deodorant to a gunfight.

The guys in suits were no longer watching the school gate as they had been when he arrived; they were climbing out of their vehicle. Maybe it was just coincidence. They weren't looking at him, not at first. They were looking across the soccer pitch. Behind the pitch was the vacant lot. At 100 Mississippi Wes and Dean should have jumped from the shed and made a break across the lot. The guys were staring that way. Maybe just a natural concern. Maybe staring at something else entirely. They were twenty-five yards away. He strolled in their direction. It was hard to stroll: his body was tight from lips to asshole.

And then the mouse in his chest started cranking its wheel as both men reached inside their jackets and tugged pistols from shoulder holsters. That was no way to show concern. Not for his kids. Not for anyone's. He took his hands from his pockets and charged. In his Van Horn Eagles days, no one in the West Texas Conference was faster over the first ten steps than Adam Nation, and only a couple were faster over the first hundred, but his speed seemed way too slow as the nearest guy turned. He was small and graying, with an Abraham Lincoln beard and a single eyebrow. The single eyebrow lifted. The gun lifted with the eyebrow. Nation's arms swung up, as if in synchrony with the man raising his pistol. A motion they had both practiced many times, though never together till this moment.

The time between heartbeats was long. The man's left eyelid seemed to take a long time to close as he sighted.

Nation was ten yards short and closing way too slow when the gun's suppressor released wisps of gas. At that moment his left thumb was grinding the wheel on the lighter and his right forefinger pushing down on the can's nozzle.

A subsonic round whispered past his ear.

The gout of flame unfurled in the man's dark eyes. Then the man was screaming and beating himself, and his beard and eyebrow were on fire.

The other guy was behind the long nose of the van. He was solid, block-headed, and completely bald. His lack of eyebrows made him look even more alarmed than the first guy.

He swung his gun up. He had more time to aim. Nation flinched.

The guy fired two shots, but he was shooting into an expanding cloud of fire.

He threw his forearms across his face and ducked behind the van. Nation dived right across the van's hood behind ten feet of pressurized flame. Then the can was empty and the guy was screaming and rolling on the ground, beating at his flaming clothes. Nation hit the ground beside him, hands first, and rolled clear.

He picked up the man's fallen gun and turned. Through the steel pickets of two man-high fences, one at this end of the soccer pitch, and one at the other, he could see Dean running across the vacant lot. But he was running *back towards* the school. Nation jogged along the footpath to where he could see the shed. Wes was in the process of getting dragged off the shed roof: Konrad Guz had hold of one leg and three of Guz's first-grade army were hanging onto the other. As Nation watched, Dean yelled something at them through the fence. Wes jerked one leg free and the little kids tumbled back, squealing. Konrad tugged. Wes's ass slid closer to the edge of the roof. Konrad tried to grab Wes's free leg, but Wes jerked it free. He cocked it and unloaded a heel strike into the middle of Konrad's face. Konrad fell on his back, clutching his face and howling. Wes stood and hurled his bagful of textbooks on top of Konrad, who clutched his belly and curled up like a caterpillar.

Nation looked down at the man rolling and beating at his flaming clothes. He reached into the vehicle and pulled the keys from the ignition. In the back of the van, there was a fire extinguisher attached to the inside wall. He unclipped it and used it to douse the burning man with foam. Sirens approached. He left the fire extinguisher on the pavement for somebody to douse the other guy, then he dragged the big man to the back of the van and hauled him in. He locked the



doors. Before he climbed into the driver's seat, he tossed the kid's lighter back towards the school gate. The kid's punk head peered round the gatepost, eyes wide. Everyone else had disappeared.

He drove around the block and stopped outside the maternity hospital on Zelazna Street, parked by the curb and climbed into the back of the van. He found a switch for the interior light. Pieces of blackened shirt were stuck to the guy's melted chest skin. His face and hands were red and weeping lymph, like dozens of people Nation had left to the medics when he went fishing in the wreckage left by an IED.

Nation pulled the gun from his waistband. "Who sent you?"

The man blinked up at him, breath wheezing.

He racked the slide. "I'll count to five."

The man tried to talk, but his voice was the barest wheeze. The way it gets after you've breathed in fire.

He coughed, tried again, wheezed, "I don't know his name...He calls himself the Director."

Nation pressed the pistol to the man's forehead. He tugged the ceramic knife from his back pocket. He clamped the scabbard in his teeth, jerked the knife free, leaned down and cut a tendon behind the man's knee. There was hardly any resistance to the diamond-hard blade.

"What's your name?"

The man grabbed the back of his knee. "*Jesus Christus!*" Crazy eyes now. He stuttered, "Gajos! Anton Gajos!"

"What were your orders?"

"He wanted us to find two little kids."

"Find them or take them?"

The man was still stunned, but his eyes flicked up and right. He was going to lie.

He said. "Find! I swear!"

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Why were you armed?"

"I always am."

"What were their names?"

"Kowalski. Brothers."

"I've seen you before. You followed me to Borowej Gory."

"No!"

"You were in a black BMW."

"No, I swear!"

Nation checked his watch. No time to sweat this motherfucker. The kids would be getting on the tram any second now.

He wanted to cut Anton Gajos's throat, but that would only bring a whole lot of police onto his trail.

He said, "I see you again, I'll kill you."

He dumped Gajos on the pavement outside the maternity hospital. He hoped they were out of painkillers inside.

## CHAPTER 60

As Dolinska drove them north to Gdansk in her cousin's little Opel hatch, Nation tried again to call Ramirez. It rang out three times. He thumbed a long text message explaining what had happened at the school and how the Kowalski identities were blown.

Then he slumped into the passenger seat and tried to cool his adrenalin by counting the Stomatologia they passed. He'd counted fifteen before they cleared the outskirts of Warsaw. You never saw a place so obsessed with dentistry.

The fields were more familiar: fields of rape, wheat, barley, young corn. Not the boom-irrigated bullseyes of American fields, but strips of European agriculture interspersed with strips of forest. A village every few miles, but the unpainted clapboard *ferdydurke* houses of his childhood with their steep-pitched roofs had been replaced with new brick ones that might have been teleported in from any suburb in America, or else the timber walls had been clad with five-inch slabs of Styrofoam, rendered over and painted. It could be anywhere in Central Europe.

In the back seat, Wes and Dean played with their football cards and carried on a football conversation at the tops of their voices, showing off their knowledge. They seemed much more worried about impressing Dolinska than leaving their lives behind again. He'd gotten them out of the apartment on Elektoralna in minutes, because the bad guys now knew for sure they were looking for the Kowalski kids, and they could probably get the Kowalski address from the school. Once again, they'd brought nothing but their pre-packed rucks.

Wes told Dolinska, “Lionel Messi built himself a house shaped like a soccer ball!”

Dolinska said, “How does he stop it rolling away?”

Wes explained earnestly.

She said, “Do you know Lewandowski? Plays for Bayern?”

They let her know it was a stupid question.

“OK, well, I interviewed him in his apartment. Did you know he has a swimming pool inside his apartment?”

If the boys had been impressed by Dolinska before, they were in awe of her now.

She said, “And did you know he lives near you?”

Wes said, “Where do we live?”

“Mm.” Dolinska glanced at Nation. “Yes.”

“The road is our home, son.”

The boys liked that.

His phone pinged. A message from Ramirez: “Get out of Dodge. Will organize new IDs. FBI has scaled back search for Grace.”

The last sentence was like a punch in the eye. Ramirez was preparing him for the worst. He looked out the window at the passing fields. Wheat, barley, young corn, rape. He pinched the bridge of his nose. His hand smelled like girl’s deodorant.

The kids chattered on at Dolinska, oblivious of their mother’s fate. Nation let their voices wash over him as he looked out the window and a region of small lakes and marshes smeared together in his vision. He would not assume she was dead. The Cossacks knew he would not trade his mother for Grace, but he had shown them she could be used as bait, and, for that reason, they might just keep her alive.

He clasped his hands to try to stop the tremor of rage. He badly needed a shed and a pile of bottles to break.

Dolinska was talking to him. He swallowed and blinked a few times before he turned his head to show her he was listening. She said something about “rolled edges.”

“Huh?”

“On the big sections of fuselage. And on some of the small fragments.”

He stared at her blankly, then realized she was talking about the goddamn Smolensk plane crash again. She pointed at the Smolensk reports in the map pocket by his leg. He pulled them out and flipped through till he found the pictures she was talking about. One showed a large section of dirty-looking red and white fuselage in a birch forest that was losing its leaves. It lay amid the wreckage of smashed trees. Another was a closeup showing that where the metal had torn it was sharp and curled outwards. Could have been steel from any of a dozen Afghan civilian vehicles he’d photographed while looking for the circuit boards of IEDs.

“What’d the report say about rolled edges?”

“The first two – the Russian one and the Polish one – said nothing.”

He looked for scorch marks, saw none. Still, a thermobaric charge wouldn’t necessarily leave any scorch marks. Or they might have been washed off.

“Any explosions after the plane hit the ground?”

“Tell me what you think, first.”

He said, “What is this, a piece of wing?”

“Yes.”

“Looks like explosion damage. On this piece, anyways. A vehicle that crashed into trees and didn’t explode would have compression damage. Compression damage looks nothing like this. I guess the only question is, how do we know this came from Kaczyński’s plane?”

She shrugged. “Look at the next one. What do you think?”

He said. “Same thing. Explosion damage.”

“But not the same plane. That one is from Malaysian Airlines flight MH17. The one the Russians shot down over Ukraine in 2014.”

“Tell me: How many pieces of wreckage did they find at Smolensk?”

She nodded, as if it was the question she’d hoped he’d ask. “Twenty thousand pieces at last count. Remember the Lockerbie bombing?”

“Remind me.”

“When Libyan terrorists blew up a plane over Scotland in 1988 it produced only ten thousand pieces of wreckage.”

“You’re kidding. And the first two reports said there was no explosion?”

“Right.”

“How fast was the plane going?”

“Not very. Two-hundred-and-seventy kilometers an hour at wheels down.”

“What’d the reports say about the fragmentation?”

“Hitting the trees and the ground did it.”

“You think the second report covered up for Russia?”

“If I was charitable, I’d say it relied too much on Russia’s evidence. But I also think President Kaczyński had more enemies here than he did in Russia.”

He told Dolinska what Jerzy had said about the two kinds of Pole, the ones who want to move on, and the ones who want to dig up the past.

She said, “I know one thing: the dirty ones always want to move on. Show me a rich man in this country who is over sixty and I’ll lay odds he’s all for moving on. In the early nineties we used to say about anyone rich, ‘His first million was stolen.’ There *was* no clean way to get rich.”

The Latin dancing archivist at the Marie Skłodowska had told him the same thing.

She said, “One thing the Red Web did in the nineties was buy a lot of media, so the media was always saying, ‘Let’s just move on.’ The priests didn’t argue because most of them had been forced to snitch. It isn’t hard to convince young people to ‘just move on’ – they’re young! And all that communism stuff is boring.” Her knuckles were white on the wheel as she muttered, “It suits those old bastards just fine.”

They were silent. Into the silence the radio spoke in Russian. It was Putin’s speech, the newsreader said, at the opening ceremony for the new Nordstream II pipeline connecting Russia to Germany, under the sea. After turning the stopcock to let the first gas flow, Putin had revealed that the men who had poisoned two thousand Russian soldiers at Gusev were not Muslim terrorists, but a Polish–Lithuanian militia. He called the raid on Gusev Base an act of war.

Dolinska’s face set hard.

## CHAPTER 61

Aldo Iskra came to on the floor of a cabin with unpainted pine walls. He tried to move and realized his hands were fastened together behind his back. His head throbbed abominably, and he remembered why: it had hit the road after the white van hit him. The skin had been stripped from his left cheekbone and the side of his chin. His right hip was almost certainly smashed. It hurt when he breathed, suggesting he had broken one or more ribs.

Aldo turned his head further to see where the light was coming from. There was a round window in the door and a long, low sliding window set in the wall at about hip-height. A hunting hide.

A man came into focus. His face was hidden by a full gray beard and mustache. He cradled a hunting rifle and smoked a narrow cigar. He was dressed like a woodsman in forest camo pants and a sweat-stained gabardine shirt, his camouflage cap low over his eyes.

After the van hit him, Aldo lay in the road feeling like the deer on a wildlife documentary that looks up to see the big cat floating down from a tree in slow motion, its limbs splayed, claws extended. He'd known immediately what the men climbing out of the van were. Having distracted Aldo at the crucial moment, the gray-bearded man ran over from his position on Gorcewska Street and Aldo realized that he was the same breed.

He had curled up in surrender. The small man with the single eyebrow cuffed him, hauled him up by the armpits, and then the big, bald driver had hauled him



into the back. In a garage somewhere in Warsaw they'd taken him from the back of the white van and moved him to a dark gray van, driven by this bearded woodsman with alcohol seeping from his pores. With his face to the floor of the moving van his chest had swelled with a fluttering terror. He had begun to hyperventilate, became dizzy, then passed out.

The strange thing was that now the worst was actually happening, he wasn't afraid any more.

The bearded woodsman propped his hunting rifle against the wall. His mustache was nicotine-stained. Above the beard, his skin was cured by sun and cigarettes, like the skin on a shrunken head.

He said, "Remember me, 'Hiker'?"

Aldo looked into his eyes, which were patient as a pack dog's on the scent of prey, and he knew them. It was the SB officer who had questioned him at SB headquarters on Rakowiecka Street the day after Ryszard Okula disappeared, over thirty years ago: Captain Zbigniew Rusak.

Rusak said, "You remember. Now, where's Okula's son?"

## CHAPTER 62

In a rental apartment near the Gdansk waterfront, Dolinska watched RT in Russian while the kids slid on the floorboards and Nation fixed dinner. People were being interviewed on Moscow streets. He understood enough to know they were angry. Dolinska translated, “A Gusev soldier’s wife just gave birth to a kid with leukemia. At least seven other women conceived after their husbands were exposed. They’re predicting more birth defects.”

“They’re blaming the water supply?”

She nodded. “Russians want blood. Even if it turns out the poisoners were Russian agents, I’m afraid they’re post-proof now. It’d be like trying to convince Kaczyński’s gang the Smolensk crash was just bad luck.”

When he put the kids to bed, both boys prayed they’d hear from their mother soon. He prayed for the same thing, but silently he was also praying Russia wouldn’t start a war.

Dolinska was at her computer at the dining table, drinking a beer and making notes for her feature article comparing the Smolensk crash reports. He got himself a beer from the fridge and sat to check out the first report.

The rolled edges had got him curious. From what she’d said, she was looking for a motive for the crime. Seemed to him that road could only lead to speculation. What interested him was opportunity. If the plane had exploded in the fog, after the landing gear came down, when and where had the explosives

been placed? How were they detonated? And at what point in the plane's descent? Was it on a timer? Was it triggered by a cell phone call? Was the device hooked up to the altimeter?

The first report was from the Putin-led Russian MAK investigation commission. It had been printed by the Russians in January 2011, nine months after the crash. Nation scanned the contents, looking for something like a Service Engineer's report. There was nothing in the contents but as he flipped through, he found references to the December 2009 overhaul of the plane by Aviakor.

He asked Dolinska if she'd seen the Aviakor report. She fished from a plastic wallet a document in Polish dated December 23, 2009, nearly five months before the crash.

She said, "This was the last major service before the crash."

He ran his eye down the columns of systems Aviakor had checked at its plant in Samara, Russia, not understanding much. At the end of the eleven-page form, the chief engineer had written his summary notes on the job, beginning, "From June 2, 2009 to December 23, 2009 Tupolev PLF 101 completely overhauled." Nation scanned the paragraph. At one point it said, "Structural radiography report appended (Appendix VII)."

He turned to Appendix VII. The structural radiography report was in Russian. Why not translated into Polish? He would have to accept the chief engineer's say-so that the X-rays had found no cracks or metal fatigue that warranted concern. But something on the page of incomprehensible figures, units, and Cyrillic text caught Nation's attention. He scanned it again, trying to work out what. Then it clicked: the name printed under the structural radiographer's signature was Роман Кижек.

## CHAPTER 63

Nation couldn't read much Russian, but he did remember the alphabet from his couple of years in Polish elementary school, in those days when they all had to learn their Soviet master's tongue.

He remembered that "P" was pronounced like an "R" in English or Polish, and that "H" was pronounced "N." So POMAH would be "Roman."

He pointed at the name. "You read Russian?"

Dolinska was cranking the tops off two more beers.

"Yes."

She set a bottle beside him and squinted at the name.

The swell of her left breast was close to his face. He smelled lanolin again, soured by her day in the vehicle. He swigged his beer to relieve the sudden need to swallow. Gorgeous women and good beer: why did this country not feel like paradise?

He said, "What's that name?"

She stopped breathing and turned to stare right into his face. The ceiling light behind her head made a halo of her hair.

She said, "Roman Kijek."

"The radiotherapist?"

She said slowly, "Aldo thought he was a snitch. If it is him."

She pulled over a kitchen chair and straddled it backwards, dangling her beer. She rested her chin on her forearms on the chair back and stared through him.

It was staggering. Nation frowned at the floor, trying to make sense of it. Till now he'd been looking into an historical mystery: in March 1988, a communist prosecutor got poisoned by betatron, a former communist minister was murdered in his bath, and his own father had disappeared. The last fact was the only reason he was playing detective now. Obviously, what happened back then was still important to someone other than him, or they wouldn't be hunting him and his mother over thirty years later. If they weren't hunting him now, he could just go home to Texas.

But if Roman Kijek, the betatron operator of 1988, had also been involved in assassinating half the Polish government in 2010, it led him to the edge of a minefield of present-day politics. And he took a mental step back, because that was a minefield he had no tools for.

He dry-washed his face, then met her eyes and said, "So...He gives your granddaddy a lethal dose of rays in February '88. Serves a year in jail for negligence. Left Poland...when?"

"Brodowski says he went to Russia in '92."

"December 2009 he's doing industrial radiography at – what's that say?"

She read the Cyrillic letterhead of the radiography report: "Samara Industrial Radiography."

"And he signed off on the report, so I guess he was the guy in charge of X-raying the plane. You have to pull the whole thing apart to do industrial radiography. Yessir, I'd say he had an opportunity to screw with something on that plane."

She said, "The engineer's report wasn't attached to the public version of the report. I had to get this from a Russian source...Everyone agrees the plane's electrics shut down at fifteen meters altitude, so any explosion that happened below fifteen meters wouldn't have been recorded by any electrical system."

“And it happened inside the fog, so no one saw.” He shook his head. “Jesus God, if this report is the real deal and this is the same Roman Kijek, then the guy who accidentally killed your granddaddy also had the opportunity to accidentally kill Kaczyński. And what did those two have in common, Byline Bronia Dolinska?”

“You mean they both investigated the FOZZ Scandal?” She made a mouh, allowing it might be so, then she said, “On the other hand, there’s a guy who still swears he delivered the briefcase containing millions of zlotys of FOZZ money to the Kaczyńskis so they could start their party.”

Nation sat back, exasperated. “Jesus God! Is anyone clean?”

She smiled, prodded her bottle at him. “Now you see what a mess you left behind, Karol Okula!”

“If only I had.”

She laughed, swigged, rested her chin on her forearms and stared at him. He was caught in her green stare. Like a cat’s. It dried his throat.

He swigged. “So, what’s your theory?”

She blinked, shrugged. “The Kaczyńskis were never charged with anything. And they always pushed for decommunization, you can’t take that away from them. Maybe the generous donors of the briefcase considered this ungrateful. No, yours is as a good a theory as any.” She glanced at the report in Russian. “That was good spotting!”

“A commie elementary education isn’t a total waste.”

He stood and went to the window to check for watchers. Nothing in the cobbled street four stories below. People strolling and eating at restaurants as they had for centuries. As they had in Mosul or Kandahar before war destroyed all that. And it seemed to him he wasn’t the only one feeling dread. It was in the air. He checked the stove was off. He drew some water in the sink and washed the bagful of apples he’d bought earlier, set them on the draining rack to dry. The

kids ate way too much junk. When he turned Dolinska was watching him, biting her lip.

She set her bottle down and stretched and yawned. Her shirt rode up to show him her taut belly. It was tight across her breasts.

Their eyes locked. He thought, don't make those eyes at me.

He rasped, "I'm gonna take a shower and turn in."

She nodded, watched him walk out.

As he undressed, he wondered what the hell was wrong with him. She'd woken a hunger in him that was only going to be satisfied one way, and he sensed the hunger in her. She was beautiful and educated and he couldn't work out why she'd waste her time on damaged goods like him. Maybe for the same reason a lonely professional woman will get herself a three-legged dog from the pound. More likely just needed her ashes hauled. And he was playing hard to get? He leaned his head against the tiles and shook it, tried to tell himself it was for the best.

The bathroom door clicked open, then shut.

He turned. The lock clacked. He watched her undress in blurred silhouette and walk towards him. A pair of athletic women's feet stepped into view below where the glass was steamed up.

He pushed the glass door open. She was tall, high-breasted and broad-shouldered. Legs long and strong. Eyes wide and green. Her left side from ribs to knee was a purple bruise that was starting to yellow out.

He looked into her eyes and said, "I'm a little messed up in the head. That's just the way it is."

She looked him up and down, taking in his bruises, taking him all in.

She locked eyes with him and said, "*Idiota*. You're a Pole. We're born with trauma."

She reached out and put her finger to his lips, then she stepped across the threshold. She pressed against him and they kissed, slow and deep. After a while she pulled back to pout and tell him petulantly, “You just have to keep busy, *misin.*”

Pretty soon, Nation was harder than post-communist Polish politics.



## CHAPTER 64

Lying on the floor of the hunting hide, Aldo looked out the narrow shooting window at the white trunks of the birch grove, against the dark fir forest behind. Dusk now and the robins were wittering in chorus.

The gray-bearded Rusak said, “Last chance: we know you met him. What did you tell him?”

They knew he had talked with Karol Okula, but he would not say what they’d talked about. Not this time.

Rusak bared his teeth in what might have been a grin. He kicked Aldo in his smashed hip. Repeated the question, then the kick. Not malicious, just methodical. The pain made Aldo hyperventilate. Rusak drew back his boot to kick again.

The pine door opened. The man who entered was thirty years older than when Aldo had last seen him, but he knew him immediately. In three decades, he’d aged a lot less than Aldo. He wore an expensive suit and his body looked strong as a bull’s. His hair was almost gray, but the peaked eyebrows were still black, the hair only a little thinner than it had been. The eyes glittered like those of an older Stalin and the skin under them was dark with swollen blood vessels like his own sleep-starved eyes. Aldo recalled how, after Ryszard Okula disappeared, Rozanski’s lips had constantly checked each other for cake crumbs. The mouth was firmer now. Money could firm a man’s mouth like that.

In Rozanski's hand was a file. It was an old file, bound with a cloth ribbon. The institutional olive drab dated it as communist-era. The man held it up for Aldo to read his own name on the cover.

Rozanski said, "You used to enjoy talking to Ryszard Okula, I recall. We recorded some of your conversations in the stairwell." The same light, amiable voice, pronounced in the sibilants. "Ever wonder why I never tried to recruit you? There was no need: you were informing for me every day!" The Director glanced up at the bearded woodsman, waggled the file. "But Rusak here recruited you, eh Rusak? After the Dolinski Affair. Did you remember him, Rusak?"

Rusak looked agitated. He was staring at the file with a glittering intensity.

Rozanski said, "Was Rusak heavy-handed, Pan Aldo? What do you expect of a Rakowiecka Street thug, eh? Heel, Rusak! Enough of that! I prefer softer methods."

Aldo stared at Rozanski. "I knew you were an Esbek."

"A colonel."

Rozanski opened the file and read aloud:

"I here undersigned commit to grant the Służba Bezpieczeństwa all information on the topic of activities targeting the interests of the Polish People's Republic. Information will be handed over in written form. Reports will be objective, thorough, and comprehensive. Reports will be signed with the cryptonym 'Hiker.' I commit myself to keep top-secret topics and discussions with functionaries of the Służba Bezpieczeństwa as well as the fact of signing this agreement from my family." He pointed to the bottom of a page, "That's your signature, isn't it? And we're the SB – what's left of it. I don't have much time: you must report what you told Karol Okula."

Aldo looked out the window. "Go back to hell, you devil."

Rozanski sighed. "We're not going to spend days on this, Aldo. You have a wife. You have grandchildren. They attend School 523 in Kolo. Eh?"

Aldo's eyes were fixed on the window now in the way the eyes of a man tied to a railway track fix on the headlamp of the oncoming train.

Rozanski said, "Eh? What would Karol Okula think if he found out you snitched on his father?"

The robins wittered. Aldo's throat had swollen like the breast of a bird about to sing.

He closed his eyes, but the tears leaked out anyway. He cleared his throat and said, "I told him about Dolinski's death. The investigation."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know."

"Who was he going to visit next?"

"I don't know?"

"I don't have time for this; I have work to do." Rozanski took a syringe from his jacket pocket and said, "Let's get on with it, shall we? Take one of his shoes off."

Rusak bent with cracking knees and removed the shoe and sock from Aldo's damaged leg, then pointed the rifle at his head while Rozanski stooped and jabbed the syringe into a crack in his heel. He shoved the plunger home.

## CHAPTER 65

Next morning, before he'd properly woken, Nation rolled over to spoon a warm Dolinska. For a while he drifted in the recollection of being ridden and gripped, the strong muscles rolling under the skin of her back and ass. Of leaning on her hips and wading in the silk heart of her till she pulled a pillow to her face to quiet herself and clenched, clenched, clenched. And her clenching tipped him over and he spasmed out in slow waves. They talked some and then started again. It was wet and hot, but eventually he fell beside her, trembling like a man who has been shot.

She asked him about EOD and in his dopey, grateful, uninhibited state he opened up to her. He told her how it is to creep up on a buried device that might be booby trapped, when you're out on patrol in the green belt or on the barren *dasht*. The Taliban don't just plant them on roads, not in places like Helmand or the Mirabad; they plant them on overwatch positions beside a road, and in patches of shade where a patrol might rest.

"On a three-day patrol you're already carrying 120 pounds. You can't carry a robot, and you can't carry a suit, so it's just you, stripping off your ruck. You and the bomb, on a road or a hill, with your fanny pack of nylon prodders and cutters, ceramic knife, chisel, your det cord, your e-tool and your brushes, and nothing between the metal and the meat. You work on your belly at arm's length. I always worked with one arm and kept the other one underneath me – I was a little selfish that way."

“Selfish?”

“I wanted to keep one arm so I could still wipe my own ass if it went off. You prize up the earth gently, one quadrant at a time, brushing and blowing gently, like going down on a woman. Now and then you have to lift your head to risk a look, knowing if it blows it’ll take your head off. Even if you’ve found the link between batteries and switch, even if you cut that wire, it might be a loop circuit, or there might still be a pressure switch taped to the charge, just underneath it where you can’t see, or a recycled Soviet jumping jack landmine with a pressure plate buried two inches below the main charge, and there are 500 other traps they can set to kill you.”

“Why disarm them? Can’t you just blow them up?”

“Because there’s hair in them. There’s prints on the tape they wrap the batteries with. Every man has his own soldering style, so every circuit board can be read like handwriting. Every component has a serial number: it can be traced back to manufacturer, shipment, maybe shop. Everything can be traced.”

He rubbed his fingers over the skin that had run like wax on the inside of her wrist and the heel of her hand.

He said, “So you gonna tell me how this happened?”

She told him how the FSB spooks and the Russian military had showed her that she would interview no more Chechen freedom fighters in the Caucasus mountains in 2007.

“They showed up at the house where I was staying in the village one night. They were in military uniforms, but they were FSB agents. Two of them. They told me I needed to report to the military base. Took me to an army colonel with a dark face. Eyes bulging out of his head. You get these bug-eyed types in the Russian forces. It’s probably just hyperthyroidism from whatever radioactive dump spilled them out, but I always think their eyes bulge from all the evil they’ve seen. He told a couple of young officers to beat me, which they did very skillfully. Then he said ‘Come outside. I’m going to shoot you.’ He led me out of the tent and the darkness was so heavy I couldn’t see a meter in front of my face. He told

me to walk. I could hear footsteps behind me and either side of me, but I couldn't see them anymore. After we walked for a while, he said, 'Ready or not, here I come!' Then the night ripped open and there was fire behind it. The roar went on for maybe twenty heartbeats – fast ones. When it finished, I was crouching on the ground. He pulled my fingers out of my ears. They turned on a floodlight. He was very happy. He was pointing and laughing and shouting but I couldn't hear him. They'd led me right under a truck-mounted rocket launcher, just before they fired a salvo up at the rebels in the hills. He held his hand out to help me up, but when I was up, he didn't let go of my hand: he pressed it to a tube of the launcher. It seared my hand like a steak. He said, 'So you'll remember the next time you write something about crying Muslims in my motherland.'

"My hand blistered up to the size of a baseball glove. I was lucky I didn't need skin grafts."

Nation mumbled, "We're a fun fucking pair, huh?"

She laughed. "We'll need some new topics for pillow talk."

\*

Next morning, they caught the tram to Nowy Port, a suburb of rundown communist tenements with the stucco falling off, and tenants' washing suspended from window sills on rectangular clotheslines. He tried calling Ramirez but couldn't get through. He texted the news that a Roman Kijek had signed off on the industrial radiography report of the Smolensk Tupolev and asked if Ramirez could find out if it was *the* Roman Kijek, the radiographer who had drilled Prosecutor Dolinski with that beam of electrons in 1988.

When they got off the tram the boys' mouths fell open at the sight of an enormous container ship cruising by at the end of the street.

Dolinska laughed. "Didn't you know you're on the Baltic?"

She followed her phone into a side street. Away from the high-street tenements, tucked in between the Port Authority building and the tram depot, was a suburb of actual houses. Honest-to-God, one-family houses with steep-pitched tiled roofs. They even had yards. Behind fake wrought-iron fences were carports, lawns, outdoor furniture, barbecue grills, trampolines. But for the cobbled street, it might have been a pocket of American suburbia.

Dolinska stopped in front of a place that looked no more than thirty years old, its yard choked with tall grass and weeds. No trampoline.

They were approaching the gate when a woman in her sixties opened the door. She locked it behind her and put the keys in her tote bag. She wore a summer dress, and some sort of goddess holding a brace of snakes was inked on her bare, tanned shoulder. She had a good-humored face, blue eyes creased at the corners, like Dolinska's, with wit or wisdom or too much sun, but creased deeper. Gray-blond hair pulled back into a ponytail. She noticed Nation and Dolinska and the kids by the gate. Her eyes narrowed. She called out "*dzień dobry!*", and waited, hands on hips, pelvis thrust forward, toes in sandals pointing towards each other, her head moving in birdlike jerks of speed between them.

It was her alright, the woman who sat beside him that night in the back of Pawel Bosko's big black car.

She fixed her attention on Dean, who looked so much like his father at the same age, then her eyes flicked to the father.

Recognition struck Agata Zielińska and she clapped her hands over her mouth.

Nation stepped through the gateway and she ran out to him and pulled him to her by the shoulders. She caught his look and understood it. She hugged him tightly, and muttered in his ear, "*Boże*, Karol! How did you find me?" Then, stepped back and said to all of them. "I was on my way out. Walk with me. I have to pick up my father from the Veteran's. I'm bringing him home today. He had a stroke a couple of weeks ago. Well, he is 92. That's why I'm here."

She led them through a park and Nation made the introductions as they walked. She said, "Are you good walkers, boys? You look like good walkers. Take

your exercise where you can, I say, then you won't have strokes." They passed the tram depot and emerged on the waterfront. The sky was big and bristling with cranes and gantries. A solid bank of cloud to the east looked as if it had rolled out of a volcano.

When the boys had run off chasing their soccer ball, she turned to Nation and said, "So, tell me."

As they walked, he filled her in on how they'd found her, and on the past thirty years.



## CHAPTER 66

When Nation was done with his life story, Agata said, “I smell pigs – Red fucking pigs! You deserved better, Karol. After your childhood.” Her eyes flashed with anger. She waved at the kids. “They deserve better.”

A tug sounded its horn and they turned to watch it tow a ship out to sea.

Nation took a deep breath of salt air and said, “Why did we have to get out that night?”

Agata shook her head. When she replied he wondered if she was going to answer him. “They were great company, your dad and Aldo. Always joking and laughing. Outdoors man, Aldo: every weekend he and his wife were off hiking or kayaking or climbing in some corner of Poland. Your father was more of an intellectual. Sharp wit. Great storyteller. Very popular, he was, and very good-looking; a few of the nurses had crushes on him. But actually I didn’t really get to know him well till I quit work there.”

“Why’d you quit?”

“Pawel Bosko made me a better offer. He got the boot from the Interior Ministry early on in the Martial Law when our Generalissimo, Jaruzelski, was replacing the moderates with hardliners Moscow approved of. Sort of the opposite to what’s happening in Poland now, really. Anyway, within a year of his ‘retirement’ Pan Pawel developed cancer.

“He offered me a big pay rise to quit my job and be his private nurse. His wife was a couple of years gone and I was a bit worried he might be looking to replace her, which wouldn’t have interested me at all. But it was nothing like that; he was always a gentleman.”

Her face lit up as the boys pounded across the dock towards her, “You boys aren’t walkers: you’re runners!” She took a few quick steps and kicked their soccer ball across the grass of the waterfront park. The boys chased it, pushing and shoving.

Agata watched them go with narrowed eyes.

She shook her head, smiling, “Do they ever stop running, Karol? You were the same – always chasing balls. A lot of kids nowadays look as if they’ve never run in their lives.”

Dolinska said, “They make me feel like running. I was such a tomboy at that age.”

Agata said, “Don’t you wish you were that age again?”

Nation butted in: “Tell your story!”

Agata cackled, squeezed his arm, told Dolinska, “He hasn’t changed. So: Pan Pawel and your father and me became friends over the course of his treatment. Pan Pawel’s cancer went into remission, in the spring of ’86, I think.”

They entered the grounds of the hospital and Agata led them to an outbuilding that looked like a pair of gymnasiums with a low building connecting them. The basketball court in one of the gymnasiums had been covered with rubber mats. Under a big skylight, a nurse was teaching an old man to crawl.

Agata said, “It’s what they do with a lot of the stroke patients these days. Before you learn to walk again, you have to learn to crawl.”

Nation said, “Worked for me.”

Her father was a frail old man and he moved slowly. When he looked up, Nation saw a face so lined with optimism that nothing would change it now.

The old man crawled towards them. He was bellowing a story and interrupting it with frequent cackles: “The Hun stopped up the sewer under Jerusalem Alley with concrete and rubble. It was the one street in all of central Warsaw you had to cross above ground. So, every night the Home Army brigade on the south side and the one on the north side would find a quiet spot on Jerusalem and build an alley of sandbags so we could bring supplies across.

“You had to crawl out onto the road with a sandbag on your back and if the Hun found us – and they usually did – they’d shoot at us. So, you crawled like a scalded cat! Head down, arse in the air. Luckily, we all had skinny arsens in those days!”

Agata called out, “That’s right, *tatus*, show ’em your arse!”

Her father stopped to listen, “What’s that, dear?”

“Show ’em your arse!”

He cackled. Agata cackled till she had to wipe her eyes.

The nurse smiled uncertainly.

Agata turned to Nation. “Where was I? A couple of years after he went into remission, on March 8th, 1988, Pan Pawel got a call from your father. It was around 18:30, when I was about to go home. He asked me if I could work late. I had no plans, so I said yes. He said he had to make some calls and when he comes out of his office, he tells me to go home and come right back. I said, ‘Make up your mind, will you? Do you want me to go or stay?’ He said, ‘Make sure someone sees you go in. Ask a neighbor for some sugar or something. Then come back here, but don’t let anyone see you leave.’ I asked why and he said, ‘This is your chance: we’re going to get you out. Just make sure no one sees you leave.’

“Well, after all the trouble I’d had with the Esbeks, I wasn’t going to throw away my chance, so I did as he asked.

“I went home, and it was snowing lightly and there was fresh snow everywhere and everything was clean, and my heart was thumping at the thought that I was finally getting out. Obviously, he was trying to make it deniable. If anyone

charged him later with helping me. He could just say, ‘No, she left my place at 18:30 and that was the last time I saw her.’”

Nation said, “I get it.”

“I asked my neighbor when the block meeting was supposed to be held and then slammed my apartment door so all the neighbors would hear me come home. Half an hour later I sneaked out through the coal hatch next to the boiler room. Nobody saw me because everyone kept their curtains closed after dark in those days. I was back at Pan Pawel’s when Grzegorz – that was his driver – brought you and your mother. Around 22:30.”

Nation said, “Not my father?”

She shook her head. “Your father had things to pack. His mother’s Home Army medals, and photo albums and things like that. Precious things. But he wanted you and your mother out right away. So, I suppose he sort of knew the risk he was running. Anyway, your mother gave Pan Pawel a Russian military ammunition box taped up in a trash sack. She said it was from your father and he’d told her not to look inside. Pan Pawel went into his office with this ammunition box. When he came out, he looked sick. As sick as he’d looked before he went into remission.

“He sent Grzegorz right back to collect your father. But at 23:30 Grzegorz came back alone. He said there was a laundry van parked at the curb and two men in brown suits were pushing someone into the back. That’s what the SB used: laundry vans or fishmonger’s vans. So Grzegorz drove right on by. Pan Pawel rang your home to check. He hung up when someone else answered. He said, ‘They’ve got him. We have to leave now.’” She stared at Nation. “Didn’t your mother tell you all this?”

He shook his head, “I know she thought it was the SB took my daddy. It used to scare the shit out of me. I guess that’s why she stopped talking about it: it gave me nightmares.”

She set her jaw. “It’s given me a few, too. In the car you were asking a lot of questions, and your mother kept telling you to be quiet and go to sleep. Outside

the university on New World Street there was a checkpoint. Earlier in the day, the police had broken up a demonstration there.”

“It was snowing, right? And there were banners on the ground?”

“You remember! Yes, it was the twentieth anniversary of the March ’68 uprising, you see, so the government was paranoid. Pawel had to give the guard his address and tell him where we were going. I wonder whether that was how they tracked us down so quickly. It was after midnight by this time, and we were the only car on the road.”

“Where’d we go?”

“A village called Źródła in Warmia. Pan Pawel had a farmhouse on the hill above the village. Hobby farm, really. The farmer next door kept a couple of horses in the stable and grazed his sheep on Pan Pawel’s land. Pan Pawel went there on weekends, but after his cancer went into remission, he was gradually settling there. Anyway, it snowed all the way there. When we got there, he was on the phone again right away. Then Grzegorz took passport photographs of the three of us and drove back to Warsaw in the snow to get our passports. Pan Pawel went into his study with that ammunition box.

“Every now and then it would hit me that I was actually getting out. They’d never let me have a passport before – and believe me I’d applied. But I wasn’t happy because your mother was so devastated. She looked like a ghost: she was getting out but leaving her husband.

“At some point, Pan Pawel came out of his study wearing his big coat. He said he was going to light the donkey boiler so he could have a bath. But he was gone a long time and when he came back he had snow on his shoulders and his boots and trouser legs were covered in mud.

“I told him he was an old fool. I said, ‘Come and drink some tea while your bathwater heats.’ He said there wasn’t time. He told me to take you and your mother down to the woodcutter’s hut. It was inside the edge of the forest, half a kilometer from the farmhouse, around the bend in the road. He said Grzegorz would pick us up there. If the car didn’t take the turn to the hut, it wasn’t

Grzegorz and we must stay out of sight, whatever happened. He said, 'Promise me, Agata. Whatever happens.' I promised him. He didn't need to tell me it was the SB he was afraid of."

She fell silent, stared without focus at her father crawling on the other side of the gym.

Dolinska said, "What happened?"

She said hollowly, "We got to the hut and held our breath and waited to see if the car would turn down the track. It did. It was Grzegorz, in a different car, a yellow Polonez. It must have been his own car.

"We were climbing in when we heard another car coming up the road. We shut the doors so the interior lights wouldn't show. I rubbed a hole in the fog on the back window to see. It was a big, black Chaika. There were at least two heads in it.

"I remember how we all breathed out at the same time when it passed without turning. They found Pan Pawel dead the next morning, in his bathtub, in the burnt-out farmhouse. If it was your father who killed him, then he somehow managed to find himself a government Chaika saloon, and at least one friend to help him."

Nation mulled this a few moments, then said, "Grzegorz still alive?"

"No. His heart killed him in the early nineties."

## CHAPTER 67

Aldo Iskra lay on his side against the wall of the hunting hide with his hands cuffed behind him. Breathing was difficult, but he felt no alarm. He looked out at the pine trees beyond the shooting window without blinking.

Rozanski said, “Come, *Pan*, don’t keep me waiting: what did you tell Okula’s son?”

“What have you...given me?”

“The same thing I gave Okula: SP-17. The best ‘soft remedy’ the KGB ever made.”

Aldo had read about it: a dangerous psychotropic that encourages you to talk a lot, leaves almost no trace in your body, and no trace in your mind of what you said.

Rozanski smiled with his teeth, but the vein in his temple swelled. He seemed to quiver, and Aldo was seeing him now in super slow motion. Between one heartbeat and the next Aldo saw the vein in the man’s temple slowly balloon with blood. Then his eyes seemed to zoom in. Rozanski blurred, then came into sharp focus. He pullulated, like things Aldo had viewed through a microscope. In that space between heartbeats, military-uniformed torsos erupted, then they throttled and dismantled each other into teeth, organs, heads, and bones, which were sucked back into the corrupted mass of tissue. It reacquired the shape of the familiar torso, and the face with its sharply peaked eyebrows. He knew he was

hallucinating, but at the same time he was convinced that he had seen the man's true nature.

Rozanski's single pair of eyes blinked. The blink took a long time.

He heard himself say, "You're letting them back in."

"What did you tell Karol Okula?"

"I told him what Ryszard said about you."

"What did he say?"

"If cancer was a man it would be Rozanski."

Rozanski chuckled a slow chuckle. "What else?"



## CHAPTER 68

Nation, Dolinska, and Agata sat on stools at Hubert Zieliński's kitchen bench, drinking tea. Hubert was at the dining table reading the paper with a magnifying glass. The boys played soccer in the backyard. Every now and then the ball slammed the shed's boards and a kid cheered his goal. It made the old man cackle.

Nation said, "So, you came over the border with us? Into Austria?"

Agata said, "No, I was so worried for Pan Pawel I decided to stay, in case I could do something useful for him. Grzegorz dropped me home before dawn and the militia came around a few hours later. That's when I found out Pan Pawel was dead. I told them I'd finished work at 18:30 as usual and gone home. The neighbor I'd talked to the night before backed me up.

"I had my new fake passport, though. Five weeks later I used it to cross into Czech, then Austria. I joined you and your mother at the refugee hostel in Vienna. And do you know I'm still there?"

"How come?"

"I met the love of my life there. Halina Krajewska, the woman who runs the hostel. We're still there."

It was coming back to Nation, now. "Someone called to warn us in Australia..."

She nodded. "August 1997, three men came to the hostel's office just on closing time. One was an Austrian police officer and he did the talking. He said

the other two were Polish police detectives. They were acting on an Interpol Red Notice and they had a search warrant in relation to the Bosko murder investigation. Said it had been reopened due to new information. They had photographs of you and Krysia. Halina looked at the pictures and she recognized you right away.

“She always kept the records of people who came to the hostel, because someday their relatives might come looking for them. Some of the more sensitive ones, like yours, she kept hidden under a floorboard. But they found them and matched the photographs they had to the photocopies of your passports. That’s how they got your new names. Halina called your mother from a payphone. It was lucky Krysia had kept in touch. Lucky break for me, too: if they’d realized Pawel Bosko’s nurse was one of the staff at the hostel they’d have been very suspicious. But they didn’t, thank God.”

“So how come you go by your real name now?”

“I used that fake passport for the first fifteen years or so, then around 2007 when the Kaczyński twins became Prime Minister and President we finally had some sort of lustration in Poland. I thought ‘I’m not going to hide from those red pigs anymore; let them hide now!’ I like being Agata Zielińska.”

Dolinska said, “Lucky for us! Or we never would have found you.”

Agata chuckled. She collected cups and took them to the sink. Dolinska checked her email and told Nation, “Brodowski’s screaming at me for the article. Says he’s not looking for Kijek or anyone else for me till I send him something. But he did send me some stuff about Rozanski.”

“What is it?”

“Antoni Rozanski is CEO and the major shareholder in WarPharm – Warsaw Pharmaceuticals. One half of a former state-owned enterprise. Market cap around five billion.” She read on. “He’s also got 51% of the Marie Skłodowska Group, which has a chain of oncology clinics across Eastern Europe. Half of them in the former Soviet Union. Brodowski says a few weeks ago we printed an article about how an application by WarPharm to sell its new thyroid cancer drug was rejected.

WarPharm spent a fortune on research and development and got it to stage-four trials – human trials. Then the Polish regulator raised concerns that the early trials of the drug on Russian patients hadn't followed Polish and EU recruitment rules for clinical trials. He can't find a Warsaw address, but he says Rozanski commutes by helicopter from his castle in Warmia."

"He flies?"

"Probably has a pilot."

"Where's the castle?"

"Just north of the Augustów Forest, near a tripoint – corner of Poland, Lithuania, and Belarus. Castle Gratka. It's above Źródła village."

Agata turned from the sink. She looked stunned.

Nation said, "What is it?"

"That's it. That was Pan Pawel's farm. He lived in the old caretaker's cottage, under the ruins of the castle. It must have been rebuilt."

Nation couldn't get a question out past the pile-up of questions.

He put down the dishcloth and dry-washed his face with his hands. It was like the point in a disposal where you've uncovered a wire that seems to lead to the main charge, but you can't rule out a loop circuit yet, or some other kind of deception. And the main charge might be forty yards digging away.

Agata said, "You're not going there, are you?"

He considered the question. "There? I don't know. But I have to talk to him. He's our only lead, and everything leads to him."

"You're not thinking of taking the boys with you?" She stared at his face, got her answer. She shook her head, "No, you're not taking them with you. No, Karol. Leave them with me."

## CHAPTER 69

In the hunting hide in the Romincka Forest, the Director sat on a low stool and studied Aldo Iskra through the cloud from his bone vaporizer.

Aldo stared at him, eyes glazed, then his brow furrowed in confusion.

Rozanski had decided to let Aldo sleep for an hour before waking him. He was curious to see if the man would remember any of their heart-to-heart after the shot of SP-17.

Rusak leaned against the wall, rifle in hand, brooding. Outside, the forest grew dark.

Cyprian finished a phone call. “We have an address for Agata Zielińska’s father; they’re on their way to Gdansk.”

The Director glanced at Aldo. Fear stared back at him. Perhaps Aldo remembered mentioning Agata Zielińska, and Gdansk.

The Director waved at the small samovar on the bench. “Cups and saucers, Cyprian. Let’s have tea before we drive back. Tea, Aldo? No? Let’s get on with it, then.”

While Cyprian was organizing the tea he took the glass vial and syringe from a shelf on the wall. He drew up the remaining 4.5cc of SP-17 and nodded at Rusak. Aldo blinked rapid-fire as Rusak held his legs, but he was still too drugged to struggle.

The Director squatted beside him and injected him again through the crack in his heel.

He knew from experience that even a 1cc dose would suffocate the patient within ten minutes. Only a coroner who was looking for it would detect the almost untraceable chemical residue of SP-17 in his system, and the coroner would not be looking for it.

The Director looked up at Rusak, who had seen all this before, and was surprised that Rusak had broken out in a sweat. The man's sweat smelled of alcohol.

\*

The big gray commercial van with tinted windows stopped on the road where the big white van had collected him. No watchers in windows, no walkers on the street. One of the rear doors opened from within and Aldo's body fell out onto the road. The door was hauled shut and the van descended the hill and swung left into the traffic on Gorczewska Avenue.

## CHAPTER 70

The volcanic cloud hadn't budged from the east. Sunset flowed across the sky like lava. Nation walked beside Hubert Zieliński in his electric wheelchair to the shed at the back of the yard.

As he watched the old man fumble to unlock the padlock on the shed door, Nation felt a pain in his heart. Awe, and love and pride in his people were all part of it. He hoped that at Hubert's age he would be such an old lion, a hero of his people.

Inside, Hubert hit a light switch and revealed a concrete aisle leading to a workbench at the back. The shelves either side were stacked with power tools in their original cardboard boxes. Orderly.

Hubert stopped halfway along the aisle. He pointed up to the rafters. "Reach that down."

Next to an old canoe with a canvas apron were lengths of various kinds of pipe. Nation took down a length of five-inch PVC drainpipe, capped at both ends. There was something heavy inside. The old man motioned for Nation to unscrew a cap. Nation pulled out a rag that smelled of gun oil, then tipped the pipe and allowed a rifle to slide out.

It was a vintage weapon. Bolt action. Bayonet lug near the business end. A magazine that looked like it held half a dozen rounds at most. But the wood was

well-preserved and there was no rust on the metal. He worked the bolt. Well-oiled.

Nation said, “You take good care of it, huh?”

Hubert chuckled, “You never know when the Ivans or the Hun will be back.”

“What is it? Mauser?”

“No! It’s Polish! The Karabinek WZ-29. Service rifle of the Polish army 1930 to 1945. It shoots straight, don’t worry about that. Shot three *wehrmacht*, a Gestapo, and an NKVD with this girl. Open that drawer, will you?”

From the drawer of the tool chest Nation took two boxes of .57 mm ammunition.

It wasn’t much of an armament to throw against the walls of a stone castle, but he couldn’t buy a weapon in Poland without going through EU-grade red tape. With a good digital scope, it would do.

Nation’s phone rang and he slid the rifle back into its pipe.

The screen said “Aldo Iskra,” but the voice was Ilona’s.

She said, “He went to the post office, Karol. Alone.”

He frowned at Hubert. “Yeah?”

“He’s dead. He went alone to the post office.” She sniffed, then sighed. “They found him on the road. Hit by a large vehicle. Hit and run, apparently.”

\*

Nation lay beside Dolinska in Hubert Zieliński’s spare bedroom, moonlight rivering the white gauze curtain. It reminded him of a thousand nights behind mosquito nets in containerized hooches. He and Dolinska were naked and in the same bed, but cocooned off from each other, it seemed to him, in their separate capsules of worry.

First Grace, now Aldo, and it was all his fault. The night he'd emailed the Institute for National Remembrance seemed to him now like a ridge between cover and heavy fire. Crossing it had been a mistake and now one by one his platoon of family and friends was being picked off by the enemy. Behind the ridge was no longer safe, because the enemy knew he was here now. It was past time to shoot back.

What worried Dolinska was the idea that he had a rifle.

To break the silence, he said, "You know what really riles me? We can't even go to his funeral. How many friends does a man like that have left? An old man who can't go outside? How many people are gonna go to his funeral? She'll be standing by his grave with her daughter, her two grandkids, and the goddamn priest."

"Why can't we go?"

"You know as well as I do there'll be goons hiding behind every headstone just waiting for us to show up."

She sighed. "You know what's worse? Old Dorn's funeral is tomorrow, and they've hired the Balcony Room at the Hilton for the wake. They must be expecting a lot of people."

After a while he said, "Maybe we should go."

She propped on her elbow to look at his face. She saw he wasn't joking.



## CHAPTER 71

Early next morning they crossed the Vistula beside the medieval fortress of Malbork, massive and red and doubled in the calm river against a deep blue sky. He wished the kids were there to see the size of it.

Dolinska said, "You know Rozanski might be at the funeral, don't you?"

"We're not going to the funeral, just the wake."

"If he's at the funeral, he'll be at the wake."

"Then I'll get to talk to him."

At a gun shop on the outskirts of Warsaw, he bought a \$4000 digital scope. They rented funeral clothes from a place on Jana Pawla Avenue. In a conservative black dress that fit her like a glove, and jade earrings from her glove compartment, Dolinska's green eyes were luminous. He found himself staring at her at every stoplight on the way to the Hilton, just to get her to look at him again.

Opposite the Hilton on Grzybowska Street, a whole city block had been levelled to make way for a new suburb of fancy apartments. At 5:45 p.m. Dolinska backed the vehicle into a muddy temporary parking lot against the hoarding of the building site.

On the pavement outside the hotel stood a group of protestors with placards shouting *Traitor!*, *Good riddance!*, and *Better late lustration than none at all*.

One placard had a photograph of a good-looking youth and Dolinska said, "That's the boy I wrote about: Grzegorz Przemysk."

"Beaten to death by paramedics?"

She nodded. "Old Dorn was in charge of the cover-up."

"Maybe those paramedics killed my daddy, too."

The ground floor displayed well-dressed people eating dinner under chandeliers three-stories high. Behind the chandeliers was a mezzanine floor with a glass and brass balustrade. It projected like a balcony over the lobby. On it was a crowd of people dressed in somber colors, talking, nibbling, and drinking.

Dolinska followed his gaze, nodded: "That's it."

"If it comes to the worst, we jump onto the chandelier, then drop onto the tables in the restaurant."

"Not in this dress."

They took the lift up one floor and emerged into a lobby echoing with a roar of subdued conversation. Two security guards nodded and waved them through the entrance labelled Balcony Room. There were a lot more people here at Dorn's wake than protesting on the pavement below. A sorry state of affairs. The jewelry on the women looked expensive. There were a lot of old men in good suits, but there were young men, too. Nation's eyes scanned the crowd for one aging man in particular.

He grabbed two glasses from the first passing waitress and handed one to Dolinska. He downed the wine in one swallow and grabbed another.

Dolinska said, "Steady. That's Kuba Dorn over there."

She was looking at a man by the balustrade, backlit against the chandelier behind him. Unlike his lug-headed father, young Dorn had movie-star looks. He was talking to a man with his back to Nation.

Nation muttered, "His old lady must have looked a damn sight better than his daddy."

“She did.”

“Bronia! You’re alive!”

They turned. A woman was teetering towards Dolinska with her arms outstretched, a wine glass in one hand. Her lips and cleavage and lashes were cartoonish. The plastic surgeon had made her hot enough to shake her ass on MTV.

Dolinska smiled.

The woman screeched with excitement.

Dolinska groaned in her throat and went to meet the woman’s embrace. Young Dorn looked over to see what the commotion was. His eyes found Dolinska, then he saw Nation looking at him.

Nation moseyed over. He shook Jakub Dorn’s hand.

He drawled, “Karol Okula. Bronia asked me along. I’m sorry for your loss. Lost my own daddy back in ’88.”

Dorn’s hand was as soft as his shake.

The man talking to Dorn had turned away to eat something, but he turned back now. He was sixty or a little older. Built thick-necked and pit-bullish. He held the remainder of the *hors d’oeuvre* close to his chest and his eyes glittered, like a dog guarding its food.

Antoni Rozanski had lost the mustache, but Nation knew him.

Dorn’s big baby browns were watchful. “How do you know Bronia?”

“We met base-jumping.”

Dorn blinked. “Base-jumping?”

“Jumpin’ off buildings.”

“That’s what I thought...”

Nation grinned and held his eyes.

Dorn cleared his throat. “Okula? That’s not a common name.”

“No, sir, it isn’t. I guess not many folks like to label themselves ‘lame.’”

“I suppose not.” Dorn forced a smile. “This is Antoni Rozanski.”

“The hell you say! Maybe you remember my father? Ryszard Okula?”

Nation stuck out his hand. Rozanski studied it. He looked at Nation’s shoes, trousers, jacket, chin, nose. He turned and laid the *hors d’oeuvre* on a table behind him. His muscular jowls worked, then he swallowed hard. His hands brushed each other. His lips wiped each other.

As they shook, he said to Nation’s forehead, “How could I forget?”

“That’s right, y’all worked together. You and him and Aldo Iskra.”

At mention of Aldo’s name, the muscle over Rozanski’s right cheekbone twitched.

Nation said, “Ever see Aldo?”

Rozanski glanced down at their hands, wincing. Nation let go his hand.

Rozanski said, “We weren’t close, particularly. How’s your mother?”

“She’s great – still running.”

“What do you do, Mr. Okula?”

“Well, I do a lot of things. I like to hunt. Workwise? I have kind of a janitorial role at the present time. Before that I did sweet-fuck-all for a few months after a short career in the oil business: laying pipeline, pigging pipeline, welding underwater pipeline. But most of my life I guess you could say I killed for a living. Yeah, that’d be a fair. I was in the military. Sometimes I miss it.”

Dorn glanced towards the security guards across the room. Rozanski’s hand slipped inside his lapel.

Eyes on the hand, Nation said, “What is it you do?”

“I’m in the pharmaceutical business.”

“Uh huh.”

Nation grinned and allowed a little silence to breed.

Rozanski's hand emerged with a phone. "Excuse me," he said.

Nation turned to Dorn. "Bronia told me they made you a judge. Congratulations." He switched languages to drawl in Texan, "Juurdge Doorn – sounds good. Did you know your daddy was the last-but-one person to see my daddy alive? March 9th, 1988, after one in the morning. My guess is the last one to see him alive was old Antoni Rozanski here."

Rozanski looked up from the phone's screen. "Are you insinuating something?"

The teeth were visible, the voice still conversational, the eyebrows raised: perfect black chevrons you could stitch on a private's sleeves. But he didn't look comfortable.

"Eh?" The eyes glittered, "Your father fled the country after the Bosko murder – as I'm sure you know. I don't like your insinuation."

Dorn said, "Neither do I. And I don't see why you'd come to my father's wake to make it."

From the inside pocket of his jacket Nation pulled a rolled photocopy of the report on his father's interrogation.

"You don't see, huh?" He poked the file into Dorn's sternum, grinning. Dorn grabbed it to stop him pressing any harder. "Here's a telescope. Maybe you'll spot some other files lying around the place when y'all settle your daddy's affairs. You know these old Esbeks: like fucking squirrels."

Nation heard someone answer Rozanski's phone. His hand shot out, snatched the phone and flipped it over the balustrade. It landed in an upturned crystal bulb of the chandelier.

In the silence that settled on the balcony room, Old Dorn's favorite 1960s Warsaw street singer sorrowed along with his accordion and the crystal tulip said, "Halo?"

“You were talking to me, remember?” Nation nodded at the file in Dorn’s hand. “Says my daddy stole something from y’all. What was it, Rozanski? Must’ve been pretty important to get Dorn involved.”

Rozanski reddened, raised his voice for the benefit of the stunned crowd: “Young man, I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

Dorn recovered from his shock to holler, “Security!”

A couple of men in the crowd took up the cry. The two big guys left their post by the lifts and the crowd parted ahead of them.

Rozanski tried to step around Nation. Nation stepped in front of him and stared into his eyes, chest tight, fingers curling.

Rozanski looked him up and down again, but this time he blinked a lot while he was doing it. Nation remembered what Aldo Iskra said: *As if you were a wall and he was looking for the door.*

There was sweat on the man’s top lip and the squiggly vein at his temple jumped.

He was agitated, but was he a killer?

Rozanski hissed, “If you don’t know, perhaps you should ask your mother.”

A hand clapped down on Nation’s shoulder and a voice growled in his ear, “Would *Pan* come with me?”

## CHAPTER 72

Nation spun on his heel, blood roaring like wind in his ears, ready to punch the guard into next week.

Dolinska called, "It's alright! He's leaving now!"

She pushed through the mourners and stretched to grab his arm. She put her face in front of his. Hers was flushed, which only made those green eyes more luminous.

She grabbed his hand and tugged. "Come on, you've had way too much to drink. Sorry, Kuba." She tugged again, "Come *on!*"

Dorn nodded at the guard, who took a step back.

Nation let Dolinska pull him towards the lifts, but he called over his shoulder, "We're not done talkin'! Come clean now, Rozanski, and you won't look like such an asshole when you're dead!"

Once they were around the corner, Dolinska took off her heels and ran for the door to the fire stairs. Instead of going down, she charged up to the second floor. He followed her past the café outside the gym and crossed to another lift core. She put her heels on as the lift descended to the basement level of the Warsaw Casino.

As they strolled between the roulette tables, she hissed, "And how did that help us?"

"The guy was sweating."

A minute later, they made an unhurried exit from the shopping mall on the ground floor of the casino building. They crossed the road to the muddy parking lot.

They were climbing into the vehicle when three guys in suits ran around the corner of Wronia Street, onto Grzybowska. They were not the security guys from upstairs; these guys had swiveling heads and guns in their fists. Nation hunkered down in the passenger seat. As she pulled into the traffic, Dolinska switched her eyes between the rearview mirror and the road, her brow furrowed.

“They see us?”

She shook her head and released a long breath.

\*

In a Greek joint in a back street near the Palace of Culture, wearing street clothes again, Nation swigged a beer to wash the bad taste of Rozanski out of his mouth.

A text message from Ramirez had arrived sometime in the last hour.

He relayed it to Dolinska: “Ramirez’s friend Agent Pawlak has a contact in the Russian Militsiya – the police over there. This guy says, “The industrial radiographer Roman Kijek died in a plane crash near Omsk in January 2010.””

He turned the phone to show her the message.

She said, “So he died within a month of X-raying the Smolensk plane. Three months before the Smolensk crash.”

“I guess guys who die in plane crashes can’t tell stories about plane crashes.”

“Listen to the Polish conspiracy theorist! Russian planes are crashing all the time.”

He smiled mirthlessly. If Kijek *had* tampered with the Smolensk plane on behalf of the Red Web or the Kremlin, it made sense that they would rub him out to ensure his silence. Another door closed in his face.



He said, “Rozanski told me I should ask my mother what my father stole from him. It’s Momma he wants.”

“Are you so sure it’s him?”

“It is.”

“How can you be sure? Agata said your mother didn’t know what was in the box.”

“I don’t think she *does* know what was in the box. But I guess Rozanski has to assume she knows. My father confessed that he gave the ammunition box to my mother and that she took me to ex-Minister Pawel Bosko’s. I figure Dorn’s boys went looking for it at Bosko’s place in the city, then his place in the country. They didn’t find it, so they figure Okula’s wife took it – or else Bosko told them she did. Maybe figure she took it as some kind of insurance. Remember, these guys were Esbeks; they think like Esbeks.” He swiped up some hummus with a piece of flatbread, chewed thoughtfully, washed it down. “Whatever was in the box, it must be something that would ruin him if it ever came to light. It’s been over thirty years.” He shook his head. “And then the stupid son requests his daddy’s file. The alarm goes off: Okula’s kid is living in Van Horn, Texas. They hack my email, or whatever, and find out Momma’s living in Houston. They come for her, but she gets out through the window. So, they come for me in Van Horn, thinking if they get me, they get her.”

The lamb shashliks and whitebait arrived, and they ate in silence for a while.

He wiped his fingers on a napkin. “Brodowski said Rozanski commutes from his castle?”

“Yes, by helicopter.”

“So, he’ll go there tonight.”

“I suppose so. Don’t forget your children, Karol.”

He snapped, “Why do you think I came to Poland? I’m doing this so they won’t be hunted like Momma and me.”

“Doing *what*?”

“He’s gonna tell me what happened that night.”

After dinner they drove to a parking lot opposite the WarPharm building on Chmielna Street and nosed into a park that gave them a good view of it. The twenty-five-story tower of steel and glass stood apart from the other high-rise clusters round Centrum. It rose, smooth and black, from a suburb of low-rise offices and apartments, like a dark reflection of the Palace of Culture. Nation watched the lobby while Dolinska checked her email on a spare phone Agata had lent her.

As the daylight faded, the building’s black glass reflected the red clouds. He could see more clearly now into the bright-lit lobby through the glass curtain wall. There were four guards, and people entering the lobby had to swipe HID cards to make the turnstiles let them through to the lifts. Hardly anyone was going through at 18:45 on a Friday.

Too much security.

Nation didn’t want to wait till Monday. “Better to catch him at home.”

“His home is a fortress.”

“Still.”

Nation used his laptop and Google Earth to zoom in on Castle Gratka and its grounds. Its walls formed the sides of a square and there was a tower at each corner. The grounds were enclosed by a high fence topped with razor wire.

The clatter of a helo’s rotor made him start. From the top of the building rose a sleek black Sikorsky commercial, red light winking on its tail.

For Nation, that noise always had pucker factor these days.

Dolinska said, “There he goes.”

He took a deep breath and watched it disappear against the red clouds in the east. “See you real soon, partner.”

Dolinska used her phone to email Brodowski, to reassure him she was on the Smolensk case. She drove north in bumper-to-bumper traffic. There were only

two northbound lanes on the arterial and one of them was closed. An hour later, stuck at a light in the outer suburb of Marki, she checked her phone.

She stared at Nation a moment before she said, “I just got an email from Kuba Dorn. He’s got something for me.”

## CHAPTER 73

At 20:30, in a nameless Styrofoam village on the Vistula north of Warsaw, Dolinska stopped the vehicle next to a well-kept villa. Nation sat and listened to the news as she went to the letterbox. The government admitted rogue Polish soldiers had been part of the Gusev poisoning raid. NATO said the number of Russian and Belarusian troops massing either side of the Suwalki gap had swelled to over 150,000. Russia's Western Storm war games were due to start on Monday.

He thought of Mitkin on Russian state TV. The timing of it. With the mobilization done, the forces in position, it would be a small step from war games into war. When Dolinska climbed back into the vehicle and handed him a large envelope, he realized his hands were sweating.

“What’s this?”

She fastened her seatbelt and started the engine. “This is where politeness gets you.”

“I’ve been polite?”

“You haven’t. But I have. This is where my politeness gets you.”

He turned on the overhead light and slid two files out of the envelope. One was a cloth-ribboned SB file. It was labelled “ROZANSKI, Antoni Krzysztof.” He remembered what Dolinska had said about the SB stealing each other’s files to ensure everyone kept his mouth shut.

The other file was a blank manila folder. He opened it. He recognized the document inside: the report on his father's interrogation at Rakowiecka Street headquarters of the SB on March 9, 1988. And yet it wasn't. The typing was a lot sharper. This, he realized, was the top copy rather than a carbon copy. And this top copy had notes in the margin that had been added after the carbons were torn off.

He glanced up at her. "What do you mean, 'polite'?"

"After your little outburst at the wake, I felt I owed Kuba Dorn an apology."

"Godammit Bronia, you *apologized* to him?"

"I sent a text. It was his father's funeral, Karol. Funerals are a big deal here. And we can't choose our fathers. He's not a bad person. Ambitious, but not bad. He told me just once that his father was a hard man, but he would never talk about it. I don't think he discussed it with anyone. He said after the wake he went home and started looking through his father's files. Quite a few cabinets full of them, apparently. But these two he found locked away in a safe. He's given them to me on condition of anonymity."

Nation indicated the letterbox with his chin. "Whose house is this?"

"I've no idea. He told me I'd find it here."

Nation's head swiveled, expecting the jaws of some ambush to snap shut.

She said, "Kuba wouldn't set me up. We were close."

He eyed her a moment, decided he didn't want to know how close.

He said, "Why didn't he just meet with you?"

"Maybe he thinks he's being watched."

"Do me a favor: get us out of here."

As she drove, he read the report on his father's interrogation again. In the sentence "He found the key to the filing cabinet in Dir Rozanski's desk and stole a military ammunition box containing certain documents from the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet," the word "documents" was circled in pen. He had to bring

the file up closer to the interior light to read the margin note written in small, tight cursive script. It said “including betatron service log.” In the next sentence the word “ornament” was circled, and a note said, “lead statue of Tatar warrior on horseback.”

Was this why he and his mother had lived like hunted animals?

The last typed sentence was “The interrogation was terminated at approximately 01:30 and the opponent was then taken by Dr. Dir. Antoni Rozanski to the clinic for medical examination, pending release.” Dorn had added a handwritten paragraph below it:

At 10:15 on Mar 9, 1988 asked Cpt Rusak to explain mileage on odometer of Chaika vehicle signed out from motor pool by him at 02:15. Rusak admitted he and Rozanski drove to apartment of former Deputy Interior Minister Pawel Bosko and found him gone. They next drove to his country home outside Źródła. Rozanski interrogated Bosko re whereabouts of missing ammunition box. During interrogation Bosko began to convulse and foamed at mouth. Rozanski detected a potassium cyanide odor. Thorough search of house and surrounds conducted but box not found. They then burned house.

He'd known. His mother had known. And now it was plain that old Dorn had known all along that Nation's father hadn't killed Bosko. Nation stared at it, rubbed his tired eyes, then reread the notes. They'd framed Ryszard Okula to cover-up for Rozanski and his sidekick Rusak.

He stared again at the words “pending release.”

He said, “Too bad you already printed your obituary for Dorn.”

“Why?”

He switched off the overhead light and told her.

She said, “It tells us Bosko suicided; it doesn't tell us Rozanski killed your father.”

They drove in silence down the dirt forest track, trees in the headlights crowding the road like cell bars.

At length, Dolinska said, “So what do you think happened?”

He didn't need her to explain what she meant. His thoughts had been running along the same track.

"I've got a theory." He closed his eyes to get it straight in his head. After a minute, he said, "My father's in Rozanski's office, maybe looking for the betatron service log, maybe for other stuff. He notices the statue on the desk, and it strikes him that stealing it will help prove he found the evidence in Rozanski's office, because other staff would've seen the statue on Rozanski's desk before. So, he leaves with the ammunition box and the statue. But he doesn't go to the police because he suspects Rozanski *is* the police. If Rozanski killed Dolinski on orders from his SB superiors, then going to the police is dangerous. My daddy has no way of knowing how big the man's umbrella is, so the first thing he does when he gets clear of the hospital is call Bosko. He knows Bosko can find out about Rozanski, because he used to be Deputy Interior Minister, meaning he was second-in-charge of the whole internal security apparatus, including the secret police.

"He called Bosko just before 18:30. Agata remembers the time because she was about to clock off when Bosko took the call. Bosko's never heard of Rozanski because Bosko was pushed out in '82 when the generals took over the Ministry, and Rozanski only got back from Russia in '86. He tells my daddy he'll make some calls and then call him back at home.

"Maybe my father was reading the documents on the tram home. Gets home after seven. Late, for him. Bedtime, he tucks me in and tells me a story, 'The well of forgetfulness,' a story he's never told me before. A long one. He's killing time, see? Waiting for Bosko to call back and tell him something. Maybe hoping Bosko can give him the name of a good cop or prosecutor who can take the evidence off his hands. Momma listens to the bedtime story. Then at some point Bosko rings back and the news is bad: he says he's gonna get us the hell out. My daddy wants to pack our precious stuff first. He doesn't take any chances with me and Momma, though. He tells her to go with Bosko's driver, Gzregorz, with me and the ammunition box.

“Meanwhile I guess Rozanski went back to the hospital to collect something. Maybe after arguing with my dad that day he’s decided it’s time to get that damn betatron service log out of his office.”

“Because they’ll be looking for it when my grandfather dies?”

“Exactly. Aldo said they sent Forys to the big house for seven years because he couldn’t produce the logbook to back up his story that the betatron was in working order. He couldn’t find it because Rozanski had stolen it from the physics department.”

“But by the time of the inquiry Rozanski didn’t have it either.”

“No.”

“So, who did?”

“I don’t know. I’m pretty damn sure it wasn’t Momma.”

She looked tired. He felt like he’d been to hell and back himself.

He said, “This’ll do.”

She pulled over and they made camp by the side of the road. Dolinska unzipped one of the sleeping bags Agata had given them and put the driver’s seat back all the way. She went to sleep fast. Nation read Rozanski’s file by the interior light till her soft snoring lulled him to sleep, too.



## CHAPTER 74

Two hours falling asleep in the car, Nation woke up in a panic, thinking, “I just left my kids with a goddamn stranger.”

After that he slept fitfully and woke before dawn from a dream of looking for the *beepláara* boy.

Next morning, he rang Agata at the first civilized minute and asked if the kids were behaving themselves. She sang their praises, and he felt stupid for worrying. He told her to expect Dolinska later on. She needed a place to write: she’d hardly begun her big Smolensk story and her editor was demanding it.

Agata was pleased. “She’s so lovely, Karol.”

“Yes, ma’am, she is.”

Dolinska said he could take the car to Rozanski’s castle and she’d take a train to Gdansk. She didn’t want to catch it from Warsaw, though, figuring the stations might be watched. As she drove them north to the station at Nowy Dwór, he started Rozanski’s file from the beginning. On top was a passport. It was dark green and bore the words “Service Passport,” the Polish eagle crest and “Polish People’s Republic.”

The black-and-white picture inside was a younger version of the man he’d met yesterday.

Nation flipped through the pages. His full name was Antoni Krzystof Rozanski. He was born on June 7, 1952. Birthplace: *Wrocław*. Place of residence:

Warsaw. Eye color: brown. No distinguishing marks. Rozanski had only travelled to one country, but its stamp appeared twelve times: CCCP, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Nation studied the dates on the stamps. The first exit was in December 1976; the last return in June 1986.

He told Dolinska, "For ten years he leaves in the winter and comes back around eleven months later, the following winter. Stays for a month, then leaves again. Sometimes he stays over there a couple of years."

She shrugged. "Aldo was right: he worked in the USSR. What else is there?"

The first document under the passport was a discharge form from the WSI, the Military Intelligence and Counter-intelligence agency of the People's Republic of Poland. The form was dated 1972. The discharging colonel wrote:

Ensign Rozanski is a soldier of large intelligence and observational powers. His contribution to the Signals Analysis division of the Electronic Counter-intelligence Regiment over the past 21 months has been significant. He has applied for a three-month reduction on his national service in order to attend university to study medicine. This has been granted.

He shuffled ahead to a 1976 application to join the SB. There were thirty-five questions on the application questionnaire. Nation skimmed it. Languages spoken: Polish and Russian. Joined the Party in 1970. Beliefs: Materialist. Rozanski was single and owned no property. On page two he listed his parents as "Unknown" and his siblings as "0." That meant he could write "not applicable" next to the eighteen questions that followed, which wanted to know if his family had belonged to any hostile organization, if relatives now lived abroad, and what they did there.

Following the form was a handwritten half-page headed Autobiography:

I was born in Wrocław in 1952 and left outside the Sisters of Boromeus Orphanage. In the course of that year, the orphanage changed its name to the Lavrentiy Beria Children's Home, one of the experimental orphanages run entirely on socialist principles. At age 11, I was fostered out to a Katowice family, but I returned to the Children's Home at the age of 13 after my foster father died and my foster mother said she could no longer care for me. At the lyceum I was urged by my chemistry teacher to try to study chemistry at university. After completing

my national service with Division II of the General Staff, I attended Warsaw University. I graduated with a Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery and a Master of Science (Pharmacology). Before my final university exams, I met Col. Jakub Dorn of MSW and told him of my ambition to undertake my doctoral research in pharmacology in Russia. He suggested I apply to join MSW Department I to take advantage of the scholarship bursary program.

MSW was the Interior Ministry. Department I was the secret police. The next document was a Character Report dated July 17, 1977 and signed by a Colonel J. Dorn.

Ensign ROZANSKI, Antoni is on an above-average level politically and intellectually. In lower-level political training he demonstrated a high level of activity and understanding. He also shows good activity at Party meetings. He has a serious attitude to resolutions taken, attempting to introduce them into his daily life.

In his professional work, taking into account his short six-month stay in our apparatus, he performs his tasks in an exemplary manner and, in general, of the younger workers in our department, is considered one of the outstanding ones. He has demonstrated the ability to work independently in the important areas of training scholarship students under Operation "Biopol" (which has already earned Department I an official letter of commendation from Col. Prof. A. Mitkin of KGB Directorate I).

*A. Mitkin.* He stared at the name. Nation thought about the FSB Director on Russian state television yesterday. Huge hands. Hands that looked ready to reach out and grab the Gusev raiders, and the Baltic countries too.

He googled Operation Biopol and found that it was part of a wider operation orchestrated by Moscow in the 1970s to use doctoral research students from Poland and other Soviet satellites to infiltrate Swiss and German pharmaceutical companies in order to steal the formulas for modern antibiotics and other drugs. Another website told him Biopol was a KGB First Directorate initiative.

For old Beelzebub Dorn, Rozanski's shit was odorless:

His exemplary record augurs a serious hope of putting him forward for a more serious position in the near future.

But soon after that, Rozanski applied for permission to start his doctorate in pharmacology at the S. M. Kirov Military Medical Academy in Leningrad. A letter

of invitation and an offer of a Russian stipend was attached to his application form. The letter was signed by Col. Prof. A. Mitkin and stamped “Approved” by the KGB’s First Directorate.

He brought up the Wikipedia article on FSB Director Artyom Mitkin and found that, sure enough, he had worked as a research scientist at the S.M. Kirov Military Medical Academy from 1972 till 1979.

It was him. *The Mitkin*. The most powerful man in Russia next to Putin himself.

Were the two men still in touch?

He told Dolinska. She reacted as if he’d just given her a terminal prognosis: her eyes darted, her nostrils flared. He hadn’t seen her look so scared since the Zapatista’s bullet smashed her camera on the bell tower.

He tried calling Ramirez. No answer. He texted him what he’d found out.

\*

At Nowy Dwor station, Dolinska handed him the keys to her cousin’s car and pressed herself against him. They held each other a long time.

When the train came, she put her head on one side and said, “Don’t go. Why go to his castle? Just hand all this to the police. You don’t even know if it was Dorn who wrote those notes. Or what if he made that stuff to cover his arse? The man was a professional liar.”

“You think Kuba Dorn doesn’t know his own daddy’s handwriting? And why would his daddy hide the file all these years? He knew Rozanski was a killer. He wanted insurance in case Rozanski ever turned on him.”

“So, what? You’re going to kill Rozanski?”

“All my life and half of Momma’s we lived like hunted animals. And I grew up without a father, all because of something my daddy never did – all because of Rozanski. Christ, he killed your granddaddy, too. You don’t want him dead?”

“I want the truth. The whole truth. He can’t tell it if he’s dead.”

Then the Warsaw–Gdansk train pulled in and she rubbed his stubble and said,  
“I’ll miss you.”

“You won’t miss me long.”

She shook her head and said, “*Idiota.*”

She slung her tote bag over her shoulder and climbed aboard without looking  
back.

## CHAPTER 75

National Clandestine Service Agent Cody Ramirez was travelling northeast from Poland's Stary Kiejkuty army base in the passenger seat of an unmarked black Mercedes van. The driver was ABW Agent Zygmunt Pawlak. Its one other passenger was in a cell built into the windowless payload: the 250-pound Lipka Tatar gorilla Adam Nation had stabbed with a bottle on St. Ania's Bell Tower, Sergeant Kamil Malinowski of Poland's elite GROM Unit 2305. The military hospital had cleared them to take him on a day trip, so they were on their way to find the forest hunting lodge from which he and the other Gusev raiders had set out on the eve of May Day, to see what he could see with his remaining eye.

They passed over a long causeway in the great Mazurian Lakes district. Water stretched as far as Ramirez could see to left and right, reflecting a blue sky. Lazy afternoon clouds and sailboats crossed it at the same speed.

At Elk, Pawlak swung them onto a B road that followed a chain of lakes northeast through green hills covered with patches of crop, forest and spring sunshine. They'd been on the B road five minutes when Ramirez caught the flash of something flying low to the north. A couple of seconds later the sonic boom cracked the day open and he flinched.

He and Pawlak looked at each other in disbelief as it registered.

Pawlak said, "MiG 35s. Oh, *Jesus Christus*," and turned on the radio.

Agent Ramirez called Moscow CIA Station.

## CHAPTER 76

Nation drove northwest towards Kaliningrad on two-lane blacktop through rolling hills. Half an hour down the road a gas pipeline a meter wide reared out of the weeds. It entered a compressor station, then dove back into the earth outside a small town, as if preferring not to be seen by the townspeople. Maybe to hide the darker purpose of Russia's international pipelines: sucking political will out of other nations.

Two hours later he was winding through the Augustów Forest on Highway 16 when his ears pricked up at the name "WarPharm" on the news. It seemed Rozanski's cancer drug could help prevent the Gusev soldiers developing thyroid cancer after their exposure to radioactive iodine-131. Another coincidence to add to the fact that Rozanski and Mitkin had known each other well. Nation's head was buzzing, like when he'd watched Mitkin's press conference, with the sense that he was seeing the conspiratorial workings of history, but not fully understanding what he was seeing.

The newsreader's voice gave way to opposition candidate Lipiński's. It sounded like he was addressing a crowd: "Here we have a cure for a type of thyroid cancer that also works as a vaccine, a drug that has passed rigorous EU clinical trials. Opposed by the Polish regulator, a Kaczyński appointee. Why? We don't know. But now would be a good time for the government to remove the ban on Thyroglan and offer this drug to the suffering Russian people, as a gesture of Poland's goodwill. In apology."

At that moment the radio was drowned out by a roar overhead. Two waves of low-flying fighters crossed the strip of sky between the forest on either side. The sonic boom shook him. He took a hand off the wheel to rub his brow but didn't pull over. Such was the ironic fate of generations of soldiers since the invention of gunpowder: you joined the military to blow shit up and wound up with shellshock.

Then it registered: the planes were MiGs. Russian MiGs flying low at supersonic speed weren't on any Sunday outing.

He picked up his cell from the drink holder and called Ramirez. Ramirez was engaged. He waited a minute, then tried again. This time the phone was answered. Ramirez's phone was in a moving car with the radio on.

Ramirez said, "They went over us a minute ago. I just told Moscow Station. Where are you?"

"Just southwest of the Suwalki Gap."

"We're at the top of it. We're about to take Malinowski for a walk in the woods. What's happening?"

He filled Ramirez in on recent developments, including Rozanski's file and his little talk with the man himself at Dorn's wake.

Ramirez said, "So this guy was a colonel of the secret police in 1988 and now he's a billionaire? Sounds familiar."

"I know – sounds a lot like the guy owns those MiGs. Over there they call them the *siloviki*. Here they call them *czzerwona pajeczyna* – 'the Red Spiderweb'. I don't know if Rozanski knows Putin, but he sure as hell knows FSB Director Mitkin."

"And you're going to his castle. Which happens to also be in the Suwalki Gap. I worry about you."

"C'mon, buddy, the borderlands don't scare us."

"Call me if you need exfil."



“My first problem is infil, but I will.”

“Well, make sure you do.”

Twenty-five minutes later a stunned female newsreader announced that Russian fighters had just destroyed the LNG regasification plants at Klaipeda in Lithuania and Świnoujście in Poland. The only facilities in the region for converting ship-borne liquid natural gas into usable household gas had gone up in two explosions that blew out windows in nearby towns.

As Nation entered the village of Żródła, she said Putin had ordered the Yamal-Europe pipeline closed at the last compressor station in western Belarus. With the turning of a single stopcock, Poland had just lost seventy percent of its gas supply. And with the regasification plants gone, American LNG was as useful as so much seawater. She quoted the Gazprom chief, who said despite the closure of the Yamal–Europe pipe, gas supply to Western Europe would not be interrupted, thanks to the new Nordstream II pipeline linking Russia direct to Germany under the Baltic Sea.

As if that weren't enough, she added that an estimated 170,000 troops were massed either side of the Suwalki Gap. The Russian Defence Minister said the simulation to be gamed out by the Russian–Belarusian military exercises was a defence of Kaliningrad against a NATO invasion.

No, not a good time to be driving towards the Suwalki Gap.

## CHAPTER 77

On Saturday afternoon, Agata made peppermint tea for herself, *tatus*, and the kids. She set tea and a plate with two slices of poppy-seed roll on the coffee table beside *tatus*'s armchair, then joined Karol's kids at the dining table where they were playing with their Pokémon cards.

She couldn't make any sense of the cards, so her attention drifted to the television. Stanek Lipiński, leader of the new Democratic Defense League, was making a speech from the steps of the Warsaw Uprising monument in Krasieński Square. Behind him was a big banner with the "Building Bridges" slogan. She watched his face on the television closely as he addressed his supporters. It was round, open, and it filled the screen. He had built a tsunami of support in a short time and he was rapidly closing on Kaczyński in the polls. He was for Europe and gay rights, like her, and unlike Kaczyński. But she didn't quite trust him. At least with Kaczyński you knew where he'd come from: she'd been to Solidarity meetings with him in the eighties where they'd plotted the overthrow of communism. Kaczyński was still fighting that fight.

The camera panned over the huge crowd. A high shot showed that Lipiński's supporters filled the square and jammed the streets leading off it. When it returned to Lipiński, his expression was troubled. He bowed his head to the microphone as if collecting his thoughts, and when the cheers had quieted, began to speak.

“The story of Poland over the first twenty-five years of the post-communist era was a story of steady growth and progress in our democratic institutions. But since Kaczyński’s Law and Justice party took power in 2015, it has systematically dismantled Polish democracy and the rule of law. Like Hitler’s National Socialists or Putin’s United Russia, Law and Justice has seized control of all those institutions that should be independent.”

*Tatus* cried, “Like Putin? Like *Hitler*? Who is this little bastard?”

Lipiński said, “Judges and journalists and generals and policemen paid by us, the taxpayers of Poland, are now appointees chosen by a ruling party which does not represent Poland, but only itself. A party that cares neither for law nor justice but only for power and the settling of old scores. Lech Kaczyński would be horrified to see what his party has become!”

Karol’s eldest boy said, “Is Kaczyński good or bad?”

*Tatus* bellowed, “Good enough! He stands up to the Hun and the Ivans, anyway!”

Lipiński said, “Ladies and gentlemen, Poland has lost the world’s respect. Our position within the EU is now marginal. This government has burnt our bridges to East and West. We see daily what happens when the demon of aggressive nationalism is unleashed. Since taking office, Law and Justice has picked fights with Germany, the Ukraine, and Israel. And now it has picked the fight we all fear most: Russia.”

There was some truth in Lipiński’s exaggeration, thought Agata. And yet she’d seen a couple of suspiciously pro-Moscow stories amid the tabloid rubbish on his news website, *Fakty*. She shook her head: things had been a lot simpler when you knew the good people were the ones fighting the Red pigs.

## CHAPTER 78

Wes Nation was playing Pokémon cards at the table with his brother Dean and it wasn't easy because Dean was cheating like hell. He was saying a sludge wave attack from a Tentacruel, which only carries fifty damage points, can beat a Regigigas, which is so big it can tow an entire continent. It was bullshit. Dean was such a cheat and he couldn't even count. And after he cheated, he said stupid stuff to piss him off like "Hocus pocus alacazam, turn my butt into ham."

He wanted to quit and watch TV but *Dziadek* Zieliński was watching some boring politician going blah blah blah about who Poland has picked fights with.

He said, "This sucks. Let's go play football."

Someone knocked at the front door.

Agata said, "It must be Bronia."

He heard her open the front door on the chain and she said something, but the person knocking didn't say anything.

A crash. He jumped. It was the door smashing the wall. Agata screamed. *Dziadek* Zieliński tried to get up out of his chair. He fell back. Wes got up to go help the old man up or to go see what the ruckus was. He wasn't sure what to do first. The front door slammed shut. A man shouted, "Turn around! Hands on your head!" Then there was a slap and Agata grunted.

The man shouted, "Hands on your *head*, bitch! Where are the kids? Where? Where?"

Wes's belly churned like he was really hungry, even though they'd just eaten.

Then Agata yelled, "Children! Run! Out the back!"

Then she made a noise like he'd made when Konrad Guz punched him in the guts.

Dean's eyes were big, but he jumped up and they both ran for the back door. The back door was in line with the front door, so when he reached it he looked back down the hall. Agata stood with her hands on her head in front of a big, tall man. He had a gun in his hand and army pants and a big beard. With the beard and the pants, he looked like pictures of Wes's dad in the military, but he was even taller than his dad. Wes knew right off he was one of the bad men.

The man saw him and Dean.

Agata took her hands off her head and turned and tried to block the man. The man punched her in the neck and she fell sideways and put her hands out so she wouldn't hit her head on the wall.

*Dziadek* Zieliński was standing up all by himself. He took a step. Another one. His face was red. He looked angry.

Wes pulled the door open, looking over his shoulder to see what the tall soldier would do.

The soldier just watched.

Wes turned back to the door to run and at the same time Dean made a funny sound. Wes looked up. Another man blocked the back door. He had a head like Incineroar.

## CHAPTER 79

Durgan Maga let Skowronneck herd the woman and children to the van and paused to watch Candidate Lipiński on the old man's television.

The Director's useful idiot was a good orator. "Under this government," the TV boomed, "we saw the dismissal, demotion and disgusted resignation of dozens of senior officers, and hundreds of experienced fighting men, veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, many of them becoming soldiers of fortune. And now we reap the whirlwind: we see what happens when our best soldiers are cast aside and treated with contempt. Thirteen hundred Russian soldiers with radiation sickness! Innocent Russian women giving birth to deformed children! Kaczyński, of course, has another conspiracy theory: a theory that the Polish and Lithuanian soldiers responsible were traitors paid by the FSB! Who knows? One thing is sure: whether the poisoners were traitors or misguided Polish patriots, this terrible crime is a direct consequence of the hostility Law and Justice has directed at Russia since the Smolensk plane crashed in 2010."

He had it wrong, Maga thought. He was neither traitor nor patriot; just an avenger.

On the TV, Lipiński pressed the earbud into his ear to listen. Then he gripped the rostrum, leaned forward, and spoke in a much quieter voice, "I've just heard that Russian fighter planes have destroyed the Świnoujście Regasification Terminal in retaliation for Gusev." He paused as fear and anger gusted through the crowd, then his voice rang out operatically: "It's time for the people of Poland

to tell Kaczyński, 'We don't want your war!' Tell him now and tell him at the ballot box: 'We don't want your war!'"

The crowd took up the chant.

Before he left, Durgan Maga glanced at the old man in his armchair. He neither agreed nor disagreed with Candidate Lipiński. His chin was slumped on his chest, which was wet with blood.

## CHAPTER 80

The Director was in his office watching Lipiński lead the chant of “We don’t want your war!” on a television embedded in the walnut paneling. Things were going to plan. He didn’t think Putin would actually invade Poland. The Baltics, maybe, but not Poland. But it was looking like the end of Kaczyński, and the beginning of Lipiński, which would satisfy both him and Mitkin. As the radioactive iodine-131 destroyed their thyroid glands, soldiers from the Gusev base were signing up in droves for the Thyroglan trial. He felt sure the ban on Thyroglan would soon be lifted. All his investments, business and political, would start to generate returns again.

His phone pinged. A text message from Durgan telling him the phone number for “Karol” that Durgan had found on Agata Zielińska’s phone.

Better and better.

Under it a photograph of three people in the back of a van. The two children were olive-skinned, handsome boys. What would a father not sacrifice to get back such a handsome pair of sons? He forwarded the photograph to Karol Okula’s number.



## CHAPTER 81

Twenty kilometers short of the Tri-point, the intersection of the Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian borders, ABW Agent Pawlak took a dirt track into the Romincka Forest.

CIA Agent Ramirez said, “Ever heard of Castle Gratka?”

Agent Pawlak nodded. “Some billionaire owns it. Big Pharma. Why?”

Ramirez wondered whether to tell him. It was a complicated story and it seemed to him Nation still didn’t know for sure that Rozanski *was* the man he wanted.

He said, “Tell you later. How far is it?”

Pawlak jerked a thumb over his shoulder, “Maybe eighty kilometers south of here.”

The road was lined with ancient oaks. Beyond this avenue the forest was mixed plantation pine, wild beech and birch, and swamp. The narrow forestry track was so well hidden, Pawlak drove right past the turnoff. They doubled back and followed the two overgrown wheel ruts through birch forest and an undergrowth of nettles, thistles, and other plants strange to Ramirez. Fifty yards down the track was a sign Ramirez translated as “No Entry: Trespassers Prosecuted,” the Polish being close enough to the Russian. They crawled down this track and emerged into a clearing occupied by a number of log cabins.

They got out and walked around, peering into windows. In a cage just inside the forest, a number of dogs went crazy. There were two sleeping cabins, a sauna with a changing room, and, further into the forest where birch gave way to fir trees, a hunting hide. A cammo-painted Jeep, maybe ten years old, parked in front of the largest hut. Cody and Pawlak knocked on the doors of the buildings. Not a sound from any of them.

Pawlak unlocked the cell in the rear of the van. Malinowski got out, hands cuffed behind his back, and Pawlak peeled the gauze patch from the man's remaining eye.

Malinowski's throat worked. He said something that might have been, "Praise God!"

Pawlak asked him a question. Malinowski pointed and spoke a few sentences.

Pawlak translated: "He says this is where they slept the night before the Gusev mission. The Kaliningrad border is four kilometers that way. The guy who lives here guided them to the border and showed them where to cross."

"Name?"

"Says he doesn't know."

A stick cracked in the wood to the east. Ramirez whipped his pistol from his shoulder holster and turned. Fifty yards off, a figure broke into a run. He wore forest camouflage and carried a rifle.

Pawlak shouted, "*Zatrzymac sie!* ABW!"

The man crashed on through ferns and saplings. He had a full gray beard and his face was shaded by a hunter's camouflaged cap.

Pawlak shouted again, "ABW!" and Ramirez fired a warning shot.

The figure stopped and turned. On the edge of the dense pine forest beyond the birchwood, he raised the rifle and fired a burst on full-auto. Ramirez and the cuffed Malinowski dropped to their bellies. Pawlak was only a little slower.

Malinowski said something. He sounded excited. Pawlak translated for Ramirez: “That’s the guy who showed them how to enter Kaliningrad!”

When they lifted their heads again, the man had disappeared into the pine plantation beyond.

Ramirez snapped at Pawlak, “Stay with the prisoner!”

He jumped to his feet and ran after the graybeard.

\*

Dolinska pressed the doorbell and knocked again at the door of Hubert Zieliński’s house in Nowy Port, Gdansk. She could hear the television. Maybe Agata had taken the kids to the park. And the old man was pretty deaf. She went around the back.

Agata’s spare phone chimed in her pocket. An email from Brodowski. The message was telegraphic, as if written in great haste. He put her big Smolensk article on hold: “Too hot in light of Świnoujście.”

Through the back door she heard the TV say something about NATO. And what, she thought, was NATO going to do about Russia’s destruction of Świnoujście LNG terminal? Discuss how to respond? Article Five of the Mutual Defense clause of the NATO Treaty says that if one member country is attacked, then the other 28 countries are automatically at war with the aggressor. But she had always suspected that the first time Russia attacked a NATO country, Germany, France, and Britain would immediately make excuses, as they had when Hitler began invading neighbors in 1936. She knocked again, then put her head against the back door to listen. It swung open. She stumbled in just as the TV segued to Donald Trump’s press conference. She took in the Pokémon cards on the table, dominoes abandoned on the floor, the steam still coming from the cup of tea by the armchair. No one home.

Her eyes came to rest on the TV as she moved to check Hubert's armchair. Maybe the strongman US president would help NATO find its mojo. But, no, Trump called for calm on both sides. He called the destruction of Swinouscie LNG terminal a "response to a heinous act of murder and provocation on the Polish side", which had cast a "horrible, *horrible* radioactive pall over the lives of thousands of fine young Russian soldiers and their families."

Then, rounding the high back of the recliner she saw Hubert Zieliński. He sat slumped with chin on chest, hands in his lap, two bullet holes in his bloody shirt.

She put her hand to her mouth.

The reporters at Trump's press conference gasped and exclaimed.

\*

The fleeing man made little noise on the carpet of pine needles. He was over fifty yards ahead of Ramirez when he turned and fired again. The muzzle flash was bright in the gloom. Ramirez got behind a tree. When he heard a stick crack, he ducked out and resumed chase. The man was seventy yards away and running into sunlight. At first Ramirez thought it was a clearing, then he saw it was another vehicle track. There was an SUV parked there.

Ramirez cursed. He moved sideways and found a shooting alley between the plantation pines. He stopped and took a knee and tried to steady his arms against the heaving of his chest. He squeezed off nine rounds from seventy yards. Before the guy got behind his vehicle, he cursed and clutched his right arm. Seconds later, the vehicle roared to life. When Ramirez reached the edge of the forest, the vehicle was a hundred yards away, making a cloud of dust. There was a rag tied over the license plate. He emptied the magazine after it and cursed when the pin clicked.

He jogged back to the hunting lodge and found Pawlak locking Malinowski into his cell in the back of the van, ready to give chase.

Ramirez shook his head when Pawlak looked up. “There’s a belt of fir forest between us and him. It’d take us half an hour to get around it. Put out an APB on the vehicle. The plate was covered, but it’s a late model Jeep, painted in forest-cammo. There might be a couple of 9 mm holes in the rear doors.”

## CHAPTER 82

The road climbed from the village of Gukle and soon Nation saw, rising from the forest ahead, a church steeple shrouded in steam. Steam, he figured, from the geothermal baths Źródła was known for.

On the crag above the village, at the high end of a long spine of rocky ridge that ran away on the north edge of the forest towards Belarus, stood a square-walled castle. He passed through Źródła and followed the switchbacks uphill, the little Opel's four cylinders straining. Agata's story replayed itself in his head: "After the Chaika went past, Grzegorz let the car roll down the hill from the wood cutter's hut. He didn't switch the engine on till we got to Źródła village. If anyone had been outside at that moment, they might have seen our car rolling away. But I guess they were inside. With Pan Pawel."

Rozanski had killed Dolinski and as-good-as killed Bosko and his reaction at old Dorn's wake told Nation he had probably helped kill his father, too. He wasn't planning to drive up to the man's gate and ask to have a word. He would find high ground and do some recon with the rifle's scope before he decided how he was going to get in. An fence topped with razor wire told him he'd reached the castle grounds. A few hundred yards short of the gate, he turned right onto a narrow track signposted "Trailhead." It ran straight for thirty yards and ended in a small clearing. He parked near a big board that mapped hiking trails in different colors. No other cars in the parking lot this evening. He got out and slung Hubert

Zieliński's rifle across his back. Before he locked the vehicle, he took Gajos's Glock and his ceramic knife from the glove compartment and pocketed them.

Behind the board showing hiking trails was a dilapidated clapboard hikers' hut. It was familiar and it felt dangerous. Then it struck him that this was the woodcutter's hut. This was the clearing where he and his mother and Agata and Grzegorz hid that night in Grzegorz's yellow Polonez and watched the big black Chaika pass. Back here thirty years later, it struck him that nothing in your past is ever finished. Not until the moment you die.

As he made his way uphill, the Scot's pine and spruce gave way to beech and birch. The serrated ferns sawed at his clothes, but it was open enough here on the fringe of the Augustów Forest to move without a trail. Through the trees he glimpsed the stone outer fence that was the castle's outer defense.

In the low surrounding countryside, the castle sat on top of the highest rocky outcrop on a ridge that ran away southeast through the forest like a dragon's tail, scrubby saddles connecting scaly crags of diminishing height. He low-crawled out of the trees to the vertebra of ridge below the castle and got himself comfortable in among the rocks, propping the rifle in the cleft between two boulders. The boulders piled behind him would prevent him being skylined.

He put his eye to the scope. According to the Internet, the castle had been rebuilt faithfully in the 1990s. Three of the four wings were stone and gothic, but the eastern face was brick and newer – baroque, according to one site. That side was approached by a semicircular white gravel drive.

There was a guard hut at the gate in the stone wall, a miked-up guard by the front entrance with a sub-machine gun on a tac sling. Another one on the south tower. He trained the scope on the French windows of the baroque wing, but the reflections made it hard to see in.

The fence around the grounds was stone along the road and steel pickets elsewhere. The razor wire on top of it leaned out at a forty-five-degree angle. Security cameras mounted at regular intervals, doubtless with infrared. The easiest

way in was the main driveway, and that wasn't easy because there was a heavy steel roller gate, cameras, and a guard hut.

The best thing to do was bide his time here awhile. If he couldn't think of a way in, well, the man had to come out sometime.

His phone buzzed in his jacket pocket. He propped the rifle and fished it out. A number came up, but no name. He stared at it, suspicious: who the hell had this number whose name he didn't know? Then he remembered Dolinska had Agata's spare phone. He tapped to accept the call.

Dolinska's voice sounded hollow. She said, "They're not here. Hubert is..." Nation felt himself go still. All his body's resources focused on his right ear. "...He's dead, Karol. Shot."

When he tried to speak, he found his mouth dry as feathers.

He swallowed, managed to croak, "The kids?"

"They're not here." A string of firecrackers exploded next to his ear as she sniffed into the phone, "Someone broke in. The TV is still on."

He closed his eyes, gripped the rifle with one hand and the rock with the other. How had they tracked him to Gdansk? Who had given him away? He'd told no one but...Aldo.

He'd told Aldo.

Well, it didn't matter now: Aldo was dead, and his worst fear had come true.

Echoes of a drill sergeant yelling in his head: *The worst thing you can do is lose your shit when it's all going to shit, because no one wants to work with you after that.*

He forced from his mind images of his kids' panic, of their bloody lifeless bodies. They wouldn't hurt the kids yet. They needed the kids to make a trade.

He took a deep breath. "OK. OK. I have Agata's number. I'll call you back, OK?"

"OK."

He was bringing up Agata's number when his phone pinged.



A message from an unfamiliar number. He opened it. It was a picture of Agata, Wes, and Dean in the back of a van. It gave him an encrypted voice-call app to use.

Shaking with adrenalin, he searched the castle windows and battlements with the scope, desperate for a target. There were two guards he could pick off now and neither of them would know what hit him. But the shots would alert Rozanski.

He propped the rifle to dial the number.

## CHAPTER 83

It was hard driving the Jeep at speed along a forest track with just one hand. The ABW agent's bullet seemed to have gone through Gamekeeper Rusak's shoulder blade and out through the top of his chest. Something had snapped and his left shoulder was up next to his left ear. Hurt like confession, but it seemed to have missed his heart and lungs. And he was still free. Some people would rather have no hole through them. That was the thing about being an old Esbek: when you've kept humans in captivity, you don't plan to get caught yourself. You know it's better to bleed and flee and stay the fuck free. For that reason, he'd always kept a second vehicle for a quick getaway. Just one of his little insurance policies.

Near sunset, he reached Źródła and ascended the zigzag road towards Castle Gratka. But he was not going to the castle today. He took the turnoff to the old woodcutter's hut. Just one vehicle in the trailhead parking lot, an Opel hatchback. Hikers, no doubt. He parked beside the hut, burying his front license plate in the undergrowth. It was sunset, so the hikers should fuck off soon.

He tugged the medical kit from under the passenger seat, stuck gauze pads over entry and exit wounds and rigged himself a sling from a triangular bandage. He gulped a couple more codeine tablets.

He got the AK from the back seat and slung it across his back, fished a thin cigarillo from his breast pocket, lit up, and puffed it to life. He opened the back doors of the vehicle, slid out a shovel, and shut the doors.

In the undergrowth opposite the hut, he rummaged amid the ferns for a few minutes before he spotted the mound that concealed a small concrete bunker. The kind built between the wars to hold a few men pointing a machine gun at Russia. Bunkers like this all along the eastern border. After Poland repelled Stalin's Workers and Peasants Red Army in 1920, it had been obvious they would return.

He stood by the bunker, aimed himself at the door of the hut and strode eleven paces, pulling up in the ferns and leaf mulch at the edge of the parking lot. He held his breath and stood still, turning slowly to listen. Satisfied there was no one coming, he hefted the shovel, drove it down with one hand like an ancient hunter putting his wounded prey to death. He stamped on its shoulder with his army surplus boot.

With one hand, the digging was slow, and every jolt woke up his shoulder wound. He would be at it after nightfall, he realized. But former SB Captain Zbigniew Rusak was a patient man.

## CHAPTER 84

Nation dialed the number with a shaky hand. The phone rang half a dozen times before a man's voice said, "Halo?"

Nation said, "What do you want?"

With the calm of someone working a phone helpline, the guy said, "Good. We can talk freely, now. The call is encrypted. General Dorn's wake wasn't really the appropriate place, was it?"

"Let me talk to my kids, Rozanski."

"Eh? A little insensitive to his memory."

"Let me talk to my kids."

"They're unharmed. After we've talked, they'll call you. Provided you have something to exchange for them."

"You're kind of a public figure to be kidnapping people."

"We'd better make sure it doesn't reach the public, then."

"What do you want?"

"For everyone's sake. Not a word. Eh?"

"OK."

"I want what your father stole from me. What your mother smuggled out of Poland."

Nation didn't know what ex-Minister Bosko had told Rozanski that night. Had he lied before he bit the cyanide capsule? Or was Rozanski just eliminating all options? The man couldn't *know* if his ammunition box had left the country with Ryszard Okula's wife and son or if Bosko had hidden it in some hollow tree. Nation was pretty sure his mother didn't have the ammunition box or whatever had been in it. There was only one box he remembered: the box of photographs and stuff that was in the trunk of the car. He remembered that for sure. But it was no good telling Rozanski that, not when his kids' lives depended on the man thinking he had something to trade.

"That's it? You hunt me and my mother like animals, burn my house down, kidnap my kids..." He couldn't continue. This wasn't the old pitter-patter of a PTS sufferer's badly regulated adrenalin response; there was a lion inside his ribcage, busting to get out. He took a few deep breaths to ease the tightness, then said, "Whatever it was, why didn't you just ask my mother to give it back to you?"

"She kept running away."

"You found out where we lived. Twice. Why not write a fucking letter?"

A pause, then, "How did it feel to be hunted?"

Nation had the feeling you get when a leech tries to attach itself to your eyeball. He wondered if the guy was crazy.

"Eh? Like a partisan in the woods? Your grandfather was a partisan, wasn't he?"

"No, and it's none of your fucken' business."

Rozanski gave what sounded like a snort of amusement. "My mistake. My memory isn't what it used to be! Your grandmother was the partisan. Your grandfather was rejected by the Home Army because he talked too much! Your father had the same problem! Eh? What about you? I suppose you couldn't talk too much? Living on the run? And now you stand to lose your children." He paused to let that sink in, as if Nation might have forgotten, then added, "And

they stand to lose their mother.” Another pause, in which Nation processed the news that Grace was alive.

Rozanski said, “You say you don’t know what your father stole from me?”

Nation thought, *Something to exchange.*

He said, “Was it an ammunition box?”

“So. You did see it.”

“She took it out with us. I just figured it was ours.”

Silence on the other end, then the man said, “I have no family, myself. My mother dumped me on the Sisters of Boromeus before my eyes were open. This was the early fifties when the state started to run some model children’s homes on Soviet lines. I got Stalinism with my powdered milk. The Party loved orphans: we were raw material they could mold into the New Soviet Man, away from the polluting influence of family. *Homo Sovieticus*. You’ve probably never heard the term.” He went on as if talking to himself: “I wasn’t hunted, but I know what it is to be prey. If you angered Pani Chimczak, you’d wind up in the office of Comrade Dusza, bent over a desk full of *samizdat* pamphlets on the correct education of children under socialism.”

The world the man described was alien to Nation, and it didn’t seem to fit with the slick-suited businessman he’d met at the Hilton, but he got the picture.

He said, “I sure as hell am sorry for you, but if y’all want a titty to suck, you’ve got the wrong person.”

Rozanski’s voice became icy. Still light, still conversational, but minus twenty now. “I wasn’t one of those children. For a clever boy, the sight of one boy’s blood in the shower is warning enough. No, it taught me a most valuable lesson: if you don’t want to be the plaything of the Comrade Duszases of this world, you find a powerful ally.”

This conversation had gone way off track. Nation didn’t like the new track.

He just said, “Sure. People forget that.”

Bloody water swirled across the western sky. The light came on in the guard hut at the castle's gate.

He said, "Listen: I have no idea what y'all want, but I guess my momma knows. I'll contact her."

Rozanski seemed to come back from somewhere. "Hm? Good. We understand each other. Where are you now?"

"Warsaw," he lied.

"You have half an hour to call back."

"No, I need more time. We separated in Texas. I don't —"

"You have till 2100."

The call beeped out.

He checked his watch: 2026.

He gritted his teeth. Half an hour left him with few options.

## CHAPTER 85

One lucky thing was the ground was softer tonight than the last time Gamekeeper Rusak dug here, that night over thirty years ago. That was about the only thing in his favor this time, because back when he buried the box, he'd had two young arms instead of one old one, and a mattock to break the earth with.

He got into a rhythm of plunge, stamp, lever, getting his knee under the shovel to help lift the earth out. Surely it was only half a meter down. His memory was a drunk, but how far could he have dug in frozen ground? If he could double the depth of the hole, he would hit metal.

After hearing what Rozanski did to Gajos, and seeing how casually he'd killed Iskra, he'd begun to worry again. And Iskra's "Hiker" file in Rozanski's hand had probably been a message to him as well as Iskra. He'd got the message: if Rozanski had Iskra's file then he probably had the rest of the Dolinski case files as well. And those files showed how Captain Zbigniew Rusak had carefully bungled an SB murder investigation in 1988. They were the files Rusak had wanted most to burn in his bonfire in the Bolimowski Forest in December '89, but when he went to steal them, they were missing from the archive.

The ABW showing up at Rozanski's hunting lodge had only confirmed his suspicion that Rozanski's web was beginning to unravel. One of the ABW's main roles was domestic counterintelligence, and their spy hunters had been trained by America's FBI. There was nothing for it but to dig up his own little insurance policy. He'd begun to wonder if he might die without ever digging it up again.



He'd dug out another fifteen centimeters when a twig snapped close by. His head jerked up. A human shape loomed in the undergrowth.

Too late to hide.

A big, blond man with a mustache strode out of the woods beside the hut. He held a bolt action rifle at the ready across his chest. How had he moved through the forest so quietly? His eyes seemed to be everywhere at once and they were on fire like Lenin's at Finland Station, on fire like Sorgrisel's in Ezekiel. Rusak stood there clutching his shovel and stared. The AK lay forgotten in the undergrowth behind him. For every man there's a guardian Gabriel and for every man a Sorgrisel, wings folded, incoming, with wheels of fire for eyes.

But the man only nodded at Rusak. He saw that this avenging angel was not aimed at him. Aimed at someone, but not him. He shook his head. It was just a man with a two-day growth, hunting on the sly in a conservation park. Come back for his car?

Familiar face; that's why he'd reacted. But there is a limited number of Polish faces, and Rusak was always getting echoes. Over the years he'd drowned a lot of faces in vodka, and names too. Some mornings he had trouble remembering he was Rusak. *Jesus Christus*, the man had looked as if he'd emerged from his mother with a rifle in his hands. The rifle was old, but it had an expensive-looking scope. Rusak tried to remember who the man had reminded him of.

He saw the man notice the Jeep with its bullet holes. Saw him notice the fresh hole at Rusak's feet. Saw the eyes narrow.

## CHAPTER 86

Damned antisocial place to take a crap, thought Nation, as he strode away from the parking lot, but he had bigger things to worry about than a wild-eyed prepper with bullet holes in his camo-painted Jeep. He was almost a hundred yards away from the parking lot, leaving the dappled light of birch and entering the darker, quieter forest of Scots Pine, when he heard the shovel begin to bite the earth again.

Then the phone buzzed in his pocket and all thought of the bearded digger vanished from his mind.

Wes's voice said, "Dad?"

He slowed some, so he wouldn't breathe so heavy. Sounded like they had the phone on speaker so that the kidnappers could hear. Unless Agata had spilled the beans, which he doubted, the kidnappers thought he was in Warsaw. Better if he didn't sound like a man running through a forest.

"You OK, little man?"

Wes whimpered, "No."

He said, "I know, you're scared. I guess there's some scary men there, huh?"

"There's three."

"Nothing bad's gonna happen to you. When you were born, I made a vow that I'd always protect you, and I'm gonna protect you."

“But you don’t know where we are! We don’t even know where we are!”

“It’s OK. I just have to give something back to these people. Something your granddaddy took, then they’ll give you back to me.”

“Grandpa took it?”

“That’s right.”

“But he’s dead.”

“He left it with Grandma. You just have to wait a little while and be brave for Dean. Is Dean there?”

“Yessir.”

“Let me talk to him.”

He continued to stride fast downslope. The lower branches had been shorn from the pine trees to make the trunks grow thicker and every so often through the scraggly red trunks he caught a glimpse of the castle looming on its outcrop.

He checked his watch: 2035.

Dean breathed in and out into the phone, then said, “Hi, Dad.”

“You OK?”

“I want you.”

“You got me.”

“I want you here.”

“Soon, little man.”

“He’s got a face like Incineroar.”

“Huh?”

“Incineroar, he’s a Pokémon.”

He realized Dean must be talking about Major Durgan Maga, the sharp-shooting cage fighter from the bell tower.

A man’s voice snapped, “*Dosyc!*”

“It’s OK, Dean. Don’t talk about them. Just forget ’em; they’re not gonna hurt you.”

“They won’t let me sing.”

“What did you sing?”

“A mi burro.”

“In Spanish? Did you forget?”

“No. They know who we are.”

Nation closed his eyes. “You sing whatever you want, *mi amigo*, but do me a favor, sing it in your head. Just till you see me.”

“OK.”

“OK?”

“I’ll try.”

“Is Agata there?”

“Yeah.”

The phone changed hands again.

He heard, “I’m here, Karol.”

“I’m so sorry about your father. About everything.”

“Don’t be sorry. Neither of us has anything to be sorry about. He always said, ‘It’s better to do the right thing even if you don’t always win. Doing the wrong thing helps you win, but it’s not worth it.’”

He thought of the old man in his wheelchair handing him the rifle. One of the few truly brave Polish males of his generation to reach old age. And now, when the freedom he fought for his whole life was won, when he should have been free to die in peace...

Agata said, “We’re ruled by bastards who spend their lives trying to hide their deeds. But he died with nothing to be ashamed of.”

He couldn't take any more of this. He had to clear his mind, or he'd surely get them all killed.

"You don't either: I read your SB file. God bless him, Agata, and God bless you. I gotta go. Love you, boys. See you real soon."

He killed the call and checked his watch. 2039.

At the edge of the forest, below the crag on which the castle stood, he dropped to his belly and crawled between the long shadows of bushes till he reached the base of the cliff.

\*

Rusak's good hand shook. He thought for a minute about picking up the AK behind him and going after the hunter. But the man had already disappeared into the birch forest, and Rusak only had one arm to shoot with, and he begrudged the time it would take. He listened for the man returning. A minute later he heard him talking on a cell phone. Couldn't hear what he said. He didn't give a fuck what he said, so long as the voice kept moving away. When after a few minutes there was no sound of the man coming back, his hackles went down. His tremors subsided. He picked up the shovel. Another twenty centimeters, then a little prizing to get the box loose, then he'd be out of here. He fell back into his rhythm: plunge, stamp, lever.

\*

Nation low-crawled through the undergrowth into the shadow at the foot of the cliff. This was the one part of the fortress not enclosed by the security fence.

His hands and feet began to ache and sweat as they always did before a solo climb. Atop the cliff was the round west tower. It was made of the same stone as

the cliff, so it was only the beginning of blockwork fifty feet up that showed where cliff ended and wall began. The fence enclosing the grounds ended either side of the tower and both fences were buttressed with vertical coils of razor wire where they met the tower.

One camera was mounted on the fence where it ran up a thirty-degree rock slope and met the south side of the tower. It was pointed down the cliff face to look for anyone stupid enough to attempt the climb. He centered the crosshairs of Hubert's rifle on the camera and shot the universal joint at the top of the mount. The camera turned ninety degrees and its head drooped. It was now pointed at the wall of the west tower right in front of its nose.

The cliff was maybe fifty feet of steep slab. The wall of the tower another sixty or seventy vertical feet. He examined the granite cliff face, recording in his mind the cracks, pockets, and projections.

Since he first learned to climb in the army, he'd been hooked. In his Kosovo days, before Grace, he'd spent long weekends and sometimes whole weeks of leave with four other KFOR soldiers on some of the best cliffs in Europe, the two Americans tagging along wherever the Norwegian and Italian suggested. When they saw Nation was a natural, they took a little trouble to teach him good technique. Rasmussen and Lattanzi: he loved those guys like brothers.

Though it was more vertical, the tower looked easier to climb than the cliff, because every eight feet or so there was a row of fist-sized sub-floor ventilation holes. There was a barred window pretty low and above that he could zigzag up to two arrow slits shaped like inverted keyholes. Apart from these holes there were a few cracks where the mortar had come out that would take fingers and toes. At the top was an overhang where the crenellated battlement projected a little out over the shaft of the tower, like a hillbilly's undershot jaw, with every second tooth missing. That looked like the crux, the hardest part of the climb. The worst place to find the crux is right at the end, when you're tired. But if he could conserve enough strength on the way up it looked do-able.

There wouldn't be time to overthink it. Every second he hung about deciding which way to go, he'd be burning out his forearms and calves. He had no rope to rest on, so he would have to keep moving. As long as no one leaned out and started firing arrows down at him, there was a good chance he could make it.

He texted Dolinska that he would call in half an hour, cinched the rifle strap across his chest and started up.

## CHAPTER 87

In the guard hut at the entrance gate to Castle Gratka, a bespectacled guard in the blue uniform of a private security company checked the bank of monitors and saw that Nine was down.

He got on the radio to Skolimowski, “It’s Dupak. Where are you?”

“Near the pigs.”

“Check camera nine when you’re around there. It’s pointed the wrong way.”

“Bird strike?”

“Maybe.”

“Roger. I’ll be there in five.”

\*

The soles of Nation’s hikers were stiffer than runners, but they had some flex, and flex was good for a less-than-vertical granite slab. On a granite slab you can “smear” your way up, not so much by standing on rock ledges as by planting the balls of your feet on the rock, sticking your ass out, and using friction, and hoping to find enough knobs and pockets as finger holds.

He climbed steadily, using his fingers in the first diagonal line of cracking while he smeared with his feet, then using the end of the crack for footholds until he



was able to get high enough to reach another diagonal line of erosion pockets that zagged back the other way. He followed this with his hands, smearing with his feet again.

There was hardly any wind. He climbed in silence broken only by the distant sound of a shovel. Was the bearded prepper still digging? Such a hole seemed overkill to take a dump in. Then what the hell was he digging for?

As visibility shrank to a few feet, touch took over. Feeling the sharpness of quartz crystals under his fingers, and the friction against his soles, he might have been on any granite cliff in the world, from the Norwegian fjords to Mount Rushmore. And the knowledge that there was no rope to catch him was a little easier to bear when he could no longer see the ground. Leaning back, he saw the rectangular shadow of the barred window six feet above. A little below that there should be a subfloor ventilation hole.

Suddenly a rush of radio static broke the silence. Nation's butt puckered and his body clenched to make itself smaller.

The noise was below him, inside the fence.

A voice said, "It's damaged. It's sagging on its mount. I'll need a ladder."

LED light washed the cliff.

Nation craned his neck to see around the curve of the tower. Someone was shining a light on the camera he'd shot. One of the guards had climbed up the bare rock ridge inside the fence line. He was at the point where the fence met the tower, five yards below Nation, examining the camera Nation had shot. If he looked up now, it was all over.

A voice over the radio said, "Bird damage?"

"I can't see. There's feathers and shit on the rocks. Always is around here though. They lay their eggs in the arrow slits."

Nation held still. Then his right leg began to jig with fatigue, like a sewing machine. It was getting harder to keep his breathing quiet. The tendons in his forearms hurt from gripping tiny knobs of granite.

The shush of static was interrupted when the man below him said, “I’ll go get a ladder.”

The light fanned across the cliff towards Nation. It was a head lamp. The guy was looking up. He watched it sweep towards him. The edge of the beam washed across his boot. His left boot, thank God. Just above that, his right leg jiggled, and he couldn’t stop it.

His wrist tendons felt ready to give. The light dipped as the guy looked down.

Nation waited till he saw it start to pick a path down the rocky ridge. He released his breath and, with trembling limbs, started up again.

In the last five feet of cliff before the blockwork began, the thin seam he’d been working petered out: the face became almost vertical and almost smooth. The shadow of the window above told him he was fifty feet off the ground.

He was stuck, unable to see or feel a handhold above, and his calves and forearms, already tired from hanging in one position while he waited for the guard, were now almost cooked.

Just an eight-story fall, then. If he didn’t hit his head, he might even live.

No scenes from his life flashed before his eyes. The third last thought he was conscious of having was, “Well, go ahead and fall then.”

The second last thought was, “If I can hit the slab with my feet before I hit the ground, I might not break my back.”

The last one was, “But he’ll kill the kids.” He swallowed round a live coal in his throat and concluded the thought: “Better to die.”

Then a red rage boiled up. His body took over and he stopped thinking.

\*

In the guard hut, the bespectacled guard called Dupak shifted his wide ass in his seat to ease his aching back. He brought up the video feeds from the Director’s

hunting lodge in the Romincka Forest, an hour to the north. He did this on the hour, as a normal part of his night shift. Normally there was nothing to see on the six monitors arrayed in front of him but light-enhanced night-vision footage of the forest, the log cabins and, occasionally, Rusak, the bearded gamekeeper, passing in front of one or other of the cameras, often unsteady on his feet by this hour. But this time the guard's frameless spectacles reflected an unexpected scene: a big van parked outside the office hut. Beside the big van, a big man was talking on a cell phone. A smaller man was carrying a computer hard drive out of the lodge's office and loading it into the front of the van.

Dupak picked up the phone by his elbow and punched a button to dial the Director in the castle.

\*

The Director sat at his desk, eyes flicking between the Tatar warrior and the minute hand crawling round the clockface.

The phone rang and he snatched it up.

It was not Karol Okula. He listened to the guard, then tapped keys to wake his computer monitor and bring up the CCTV feed the guard was looking at down in the guard hut. Two men were removing documents from the office of his hunting lodge in the Romincka. No sign of Rusak.

The Director cursed. He cursed in Polish and Russian and slammed the phone into its cradle. He pounded the desk, the vein beating at his temple. To be thwarted again when he was so close made his blood boil.

But they wouldn't find much to damn him in the gamekeeper's hut, and he still had Okula's children.

The border with Belarus was just ten kilometers south. He could be across it in a few minutes, setting down at Grodno, where his Marie Skłodowska Group had a clinic, in a couple of hours. He could ask Mitkin to clear a Kaliningrad landing,

but with Russia on a war footing he didn't want to risk being shot down over the Suwalki Gap by mistake. Russian troops were also massing at the Lithuanian border inside Belarus, at the bottom of the Gap, but he could skirt round them.

He took a deep breath and stood. Belarus, then. Almost as safe as Russian soil. In Grodno he would contact Mitkin and discuss his options.

## CHAPTER 88

Adam Nation had disposed of 63 improvised explosive devices without a robot and whenever anyone asked about the fear, he said you always *feel* fear, but there's never any room to let it into your thoughts. Disposing of a device is like playing chess against a bombmaker, and there is just too much to think about already.

This was different: there was no room for thinking. Later he would remember little of it and recognize it for what it was: the trance-like berserker rage. The moment his mind gave up the climb, his body took over. Breath hoarse, spit boiling on its lips, it cranked and smeared another two meters on nothing but fingernails and the friction of granite under bootsoles.

And now in the dark its eyes found another thin shadow of crack in the blockwork two courses higher. Not as wide as the edge of his hand, but at the top it was wide enough to take his pinky and ring finger. And then he was swinging with his weight hanging off the two weakest fingers of his left hand, boots scrabbling to get some friction, whining with pain. The soft gold of his wedding ring was wedging into the crack.

Then his left foot found purchase on a little knob of granite. He pushed on it and now his right hand could reach the arrow slit above and to the right. His left arm jerked a few times to free its hand, but it wasn't coming out because of the ring. The arm jerked harder.

It wouldn't budge.

Strength failing, he tried hauling up with his right arm to take all the weight off his left hand, then easing the ring off. But the knuckle above the ring was too swollen. His arm jerked a couple more times, but with no conviction.

He had a flash of his body hanging from the ring when day broke, crows circling.

For a moment he hesitated, staring at the ring gleaming dully in the crack, panting. Then he let go with his right hand and used it to fish Gajos's Glock from his pocket.

His bootsoles were taking a little of his weight, but most of it was now hanging again from the two weakest fingers on his left hand. The tendons in his wrist stretched to breaking point. The pain was excruciating.

When he took out the gun, he had intended to shoot the finger off, drop the gun and hope he could clutch the crack and the arrow slit before he fell. But as he brought the muzzle to bear it struck him there was something else to try first. He flagged his weight to the right as best he could, ready to grip the arrow slit if the finger came loose, pushed the muzzle into the crack right next to the ring, turned his face away, and pulled the trigger.

Rock shattered. Pain like a hammer blow rang his nerves. His ring finger popped out.

His fingertips caught the edge of the crack. As his body fell to the right, he dropped the gun and reached for the arrow slit with his right hand. He caught it.

The pistol clattered down the cliff. He hung there, breathing hard, ears ringing from the shot.

If they hadn't heard him coming yet, they sure as hell had now.

Then his feet surged on up towards the battlement looming out over the wall above him.

An alarm began to whoop.

## CHAPTER 89

Director Rozanski closed the cockpit door, belted in, fit his headset, checked the switches.

A shot rang out nearby.

His head swiveled. Were they here already?

Nothing moved beyond the cockpit bubble. Echoes crackled away over the hills.

He fumbled to start the engine. The whine rose in pitch and then the engine was drowned by the clatter of the rotor resounding in the castle's stone keep.

Above the battlements, he scanned the roads and the horizon in the directions of Suwalki and Warsaw. No convoy of vehicles. No swarm of helicopters. Not yet.

He swung the nose towards Grodno.

## CHAPTER 90

A bloody left hand spidered over the edge of the battlement of Castle Gratka's west tower and the finger palps and knuckles whitened. A right hand joined it. Two sets of biceps bunched and hauled. Further down, two bootsoles smeared up the wall and the left heel hooked into a ventilation slit under the parapet wall. The right leg swung up over the tooth of the battlement. The right biceps femoris and the arms bunched, performing a pull-up with one leg above the two hands. The left leg now dangled in space. In the right leg, the biceps shook and cramped, and the body twisted and shoved and snarled until its center of gravity was over the lip and then it tumbled over the parapet.

When thought resumed, Nation was lying on cool stone behind the parapet wall. Each breath growled in his chest. His throat was parched. He trembled all over. He couldn't remember how he got there. Down below, the alarm whooped.

He spread his hands against the stars. His ring finger was stripped of skin on one side and the ring was bent painfully out of shape. The pinky next to it was dislocated and stuck out at an angle. His trousers were torn at the knees, his knees bloody.

He shoved his jacket collar between his teeth to bite on and shoved on the dislocated finger, grunting as it popped back in.

He thought at first the stuttering noise was his sewing machine leg, then realized it was the sound of a distant helicopter.



He tugged his phone out to check the time and saw Ramirez had tried to ring twice in the past five minutes. He hadn't heard a thing.

The time was 8:57 p.m. In three minutes, his time was up. Three minutes to find Rozanski.

He rolled over and pushed to all fours.

Suddenly a turbine engine whined to life close by. As the engine spooled up from zero RPM to a couple of thousand, the whine became a whistle, the whistle a scream, and this was drowned by the echoing clatter of rotor blades.

Maybe his time was up already. He doubted the chopper went anywhere without Rozanski.

The rotor's clatter resounded from the enclosing walls of the castle courtyard below. It battered his eardrums. It triggered a rush of bad memories that made his chest tight.

He'd had a rifle. He cast about and saw it lying two yards away, against the parapet wall. He retrieved it and peered down at the courtyard through a gap in the battlement. The helo on the glass pad below was a Sikorsky commercial, a smaller, sleeker version of the Black Hawk. It lifted off its pad and rose towards him. Nation worked the rifle's bolt, flipped the safety off, and rested the stock on a tooth of the turret. The helo's bubble glass was tinted, so at first he couldn't make out the pilot. Only when the bubble was skylined against the stars could he see the silhouette of a man.

He toggled the digital scope from visible to infrared.

The helo's engine and exhaust blazed with white heat that fogged out most of the picture, but he could just make out the core heat of the pilot in the cockpit. Any people in the back seats were either fogged out by engine heat or obscured by the padded front seats. Maybe Rozanski was in a back seat. Maybe the piece of shit was curled up on the rear floor.

A shout from his left. He spun on his knees. Two figures with weapons projecting from their shoulders were skylined on the south tower.

Muzzle flashes. Chips of stone sprayed his face and the clatter of full-auto fire joined the assault of the blades. He ducked below the parapet, breathing fast.

Only one way for them to get close and that was along the curtain wall of the castle, the only side of the square without a steep-pitched roof. It was three yards thick and its top was a wall-walk protected from arrows by a parapet wall.

One man was on the wall walk now, weapon up, stalking towards him. Nation fired, the stalker hit the deck and sprayed Nation's turret from a prone position. At the same time, the man's buddy on the south turret opened up on full-auto. Nation hunkered down, worked the bolt, breathing fast. The way the guards moved and covered each other told him they knew what they were doing.

He bobbed up and fired again, to give them something to worry about.

He worked the bolt again and turned. The helo loomed over him now. He propped his elbow between teeth of the battlement and drew a bead on it.

There are just two ways to bring down a helo with small arms fire: try to cripple the tail rotor, or shoot the pilot. With a bolt-action rifle of pre-war vintage, it would take a lucky shot to knock out the tail rotor.

\*

Night fell as Ramirez and Pawlak searched the cabin in which the bearded woodsman lived. Just one picture on the wall: Jesus baring his sacred heart. The day's trapped heat seeped out through the cracks and the plummeting temperature made their fingers clumsy, but on the plus side the cold suppressed the sour tang of socks and underpants worn too long, the fug of cigarette smoke and spilled alcohol. Under a worn rosary and a well-thumbed Bible in the top drawer of a pine bureau, Pawlak found a Polish passport that had expired two years previously. The man in the picture was a younger version of the graybeard who had just shot at them. His name was Zbigniew Rusak. Pawlak called ABW headquarters.

They carried two computers and a filing cabinet out of the office hut to the van and searched for other evidence. Within half an hour, Warsaw called back to say Rusak had three bank accounts and just one source of regular income: Bolimowski Hunters Mutual Solidarity Assistance Fund. The sole director was Antoni Rozanski.

Ramirez said, “That’s the guy at Castle Gratka. We need to hit that place *now*, before he starts wiping hard drives.”

“What makes you think Rozanski knows anything about the raid on Gusev?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I know he’s an old buddy of the FSB Director.”

Pawlak was shocked. “*Mitkin?* How? How do you know?”

“I have a reliable source.”

Pawlak rubbed his broad forehead hard, then got on his phone and called the wrath of the ABW down on the WarPharm building, Castle Gratka, and every other property in the name of Antoni Rozanski. Almost as an afterthought, he put out a BOLO and an Interpol Red Notice for Rozanski’s employee, Zbigniew Rusak.

\*

Another burst from the right. Nation’s head was against the stone tooth and he could feel the impact of rounds through it. If the guy on the curtain wall was any good, he’d take advantage of the covering fire to low-crawl fast towards Nation’s position.

He took a couple deep breaths, kept the scope trained on the helo. It took all his resolution not to look behind him.

As far as he knew, the pilot had never done him any harm. There was also a chance the pilot was Rozanski himself. If he killed Rozanski, he killed his only link to the kids. In the second he had to think it over, he decided not to aim for

the white smear of face. He lowered the crosshairs and settled them on the greenish white cloud of the body. The heat became thinner as the bird swung round and the pilot's seat started to eclipse it.

He would only get one shot. It wasn't a long shot – maybe eighty yards, at an elevation of thirty degrees – but it was a moving target. And at least four lives depended on him not missing.

The old mouse in his chest cranked on its wheel. He steadied the crosshairs on the last sliver of the man's chest heat. Rounds snapped the air overhead and then one zinged and stone chips rained on him. He flinched. Blinked. Swallowed. Heaved air into the tightness. Breathed out slow and caressed the trigger.

Nothing happened.

The bird continued to come around and started moving south. Sound of running boots on the curtain wall. The air snapped by his right ear, which began to sing and burn. Snapped again and his scalp burned.

The drill sergeant in his head said, *You fucked up! Try again.*

He worked the bolt, took aim.

The helo was over the south turret when the nose dipped. The main rotor clipped the parapet wall. The tail flipped up as a blade snapped off. The machine rolled sideways. The cockpit bubble smashed down onto the teeth of the north turret. The engine screamed as it died.

Another spray of automatic fire from close by, and accurate semi-auto covering fire snapping close overhead. The wall runner was storming his position now.

Nation worked the bolt.

## CHAPTER 91

Director Antoni Rozanski hung upside down inside the helo's cockpit. Only the crash webbing stopped him falling through the remnants of the bubble onto the turret below. Blood dripped from his chin past his face.

He made to claw off his headset, but a blunted wrongness in the behavior of his muscles told him his right arm was useless. His pectoral muscle seemed to have been severed where it attached to the shoulder. Adrenalin had shut down the pain, but there could be no doubt that he'd been shot. The bullet hole was right there in the door to his right, which was in the unbroken half of the cockpit bubble, which was above him now.

Who had fired it? Had one of his guards been turned?

Or had that thief Okula's son lied about being in Warsaw?

He removed the headphones with his left hand. In the quiet after the engine cut out, the sound of agitated pigs gave way to the stutter of approaching helicopters. He knew they were coming for him, and they had raided his hunting lodge first, so it was about Gusev. There was no paper trail connecting him to the Gusev raid: he'd given Maga cash to distribute. Cyprian was inside destroying the hard drives right now, lest they try to get him on tax charges. It was Maga they needed: Maga had hired and paid the other operators.

In the direction of Warsaw, the taillights of the approaching helicopters were visible now. Two cars wove their way up the switchback from the town below.

With his left hand he groped for the phone in his hip pocket. It had almost fallen out. He brought it to his face and found Maga's number.

A machine gun chattered, and he looked up. Cruciform muzzle flashes from the south turret. On the wall walk a man sprang to his feet and he recognized the guard Skolimowski running along the curtain wall towards the west turret, firing as he ran. Firing at the intruder.

Maga answered on the second ring. He was in a moving vehicle.

The Director said, "Where are you?"

Maga said, "What the hell's going on?"

The automatic fire ceased. On the wall walk, Skolimowski stopped running. He teetered a moment, screamed, and fell over the parapet wall.

The Director said, "How far?"

"ETA twenty minutes."

"Where's Okula's son? Ask the woman."

Maga barked the question.

He heard the woman say, "Warsaw."

Rozanski closed his eyes. Would she give the same answer if Maga shot a hole in one of the children?

But the helicopters were coming closer. A flock of them. No escape now.

Maga said, "What is it? Why are you breathing like that?"

The phone gave a long interrupting beep. Another call. It was the encrypted app. Rozanski peered at the screen. The caller was "Thief's son."

He told Maga, "Wait. I need to put you on hold."

Karol Okula's voice sounded tinny, as if he had the phone on speaker. "Here I am," it drawled. "Not a minute to spare."

"Does your mother have it?"

"Have what?"

“The ammunition box!”

The voice in his ear said, “No sir, but I’ve got what I want.”

A red laser dot appeared between Rozanski’s eyes.

Rozanski closed them. He felt dizzy and sick.

Okula said, “Before those helos get here, you need to make a couple calls. First you stand down those monkeys on the south tower and your other security: I want them on their faces on the drive. Then you call your boys got my kids and tell ’em let everyone out near a police station, y’hear?”

“Yes.”

“After that you call whoever’s got my wife. I’ll wait for her call on this number. Till I’m satisfied they’re all safe, you’re not safe.”

His head felt swollen to bursting point with blood. His eyes were hot. When he spoke, his tongue was thick.

“How do I know you won’t shoot me anyway?”

“You don’t. I’d say you got five minutes, tops, before the cavalry gets here.”

With his eyes closed, Rozanski could feel the laser dot burning into his skin. A trick of the mind.

The black helicopters were descending towards the castle grounds, searchlights on. He could see the white ABW markings now. A searchlight swept across his face, blinding him. The first chopper touched down in front of the baroque wing. Its belly slid open and operators in kevlar vests marked ABW swarmed out, automatic weapons swiveling towards the castle.

The blood beat heavily, dizzily, in his head.

He said, “Let me call.”

Before the line went dead, Okula’s tinny voice said, “How does it feel to be hunted, motherfucker?”

## CHAPTER 92

After just thirty-five minutes of interrupted digging at the edge of the parking lot Rusak's good arm was nearly as weak as the wounded one. It was dark now and he wore a head lamp with the LED lamp toggled to dim red: just enough illumination to dig by; not enough to be visible from a distance unless someone was looking for it. He used his right knee under his right elbow to help him lift each spadeful of dirt out of the hole, wincing as the joints ground together in the worn-out drivetrain of his spine.

The noise of the rotors, near and distant, beat him on. He had been expecting some kind of commotion, because the guard in the gatehouse was supposed to check the hunting lodge CCTV feed regularly. And now, he guessed, Rozanski was jumping ship.

Surely, surely, he hadn't buried it this deep. He remembered digging down no more than half a meter that night in 1988. Now, more than ever, he needed the box at the bottom of this hole. When the rotor noise suddenly got loud, he peered at the castle and saw the red flashing taillight of Rozanski's chopper rise above the battlements.

Fly as far as you can, you cunt; it won't do you any good.

He doubled down on his lopsided stroke.

Clunk: metal hit metal. He dropped to his knees at the edge of the parking lot and cleared dirt away with his hand, his back and arm suddenly hurting a lot less.



He uncovered the original dent his mattock had made when he found the box thirty years ago. He cleared the dirt from it and in the dim red from his headlamp read the embossed label, which was as rusty now as his Russian: 3 x 12,7 мм Дегтярев ДШК М38 Тяжелые пулеметы. *3 x 12.7 mm Degtyarev DShK M38 machine gun belts.*

When the shooting started, he knew by instinct it was something to do with the avenging angel who had passed through the parking lot half an hour earlier. He looked up and saw muzzle flashes on the castle's towers.

\*

Nation kept the laser on Rozanski's forehead. He could see the heat of Rozanski's phone in his hand. When he switched to light-enhanced night vision he thought Rozanski's lips were moving. He was making calls. But was he calling the right people? And what was he telling them?

\*

Impelled by the thought of what Rozanski might be wiping from his hard drives, Pawlak drove the van way too fast for the narrow forestry tracks. Ramirez held on to the panic handle above his door and braced his other hand against the dash as the van smashed down on the bones of its suspension at every gully. Malinowski must be taking a beating in the back.

Then they were out of the forest and racing on a made road that ran parallel with the Lithuanian border and a few kilometers inside it. They crossed Highway 8. Signs pointed to Suwalki in Poland to the southwest and Kalvarios in Lithuania to the northeast. At the point where the highway met the horizon to the northeast, Ramirez saw helicopters flying low and in close formation. It reminded him of gunships flying close air support over American convoys in the Middle

East. Maybe it was the Portuguese NATO rotation at Kalvarios mobilizing to keep this critical end of NATO's Baltic corridor open.

Or maybe it wasn't. The Russians had just taken out the only LNG regasification facilities in the region. And Putin had turned off the gas to Poland and the Baltics just as he was about to turn on the war games. It looked to Ramirez as if he was seizing the Suwalki Gap, cutting the Baltic states off from NATO.

He tried calling Adam Nation again. This time the phone was answered.

\*

After the shooting stopped and the smashing and rending of metal stopped, Rusak lifted his head to see the silhouette of Rozanski's helicopter balanced on the teeth of the north turret with its tail in the air. More helicopters were coming from the south. A swarm of them. He finished clearing the dirt away from the webbing handle of the ammunition box. The nylon had survived thirty years in the ground. He gripped it and hauled the box out of the earth. Certainly nothing as heavy as machine-gun belts inside, now. Only paper. But how many men had died over this paper? Three that he knew of. The deaths were on him, in a way, and for that he faced the lake of burning sulfur that tortures without end, but by acting now he might stop a lot more deaths and surely that must weigh in his favor on Judgment Day. If not, it might at least keep him out of earthly prisons.

He stood with the box in his hand watching the helicopters come. Their searchlights came on. Still he stood, like a fucking idiot, transfixed by the apprehension of Armageddon. At the last moment before a searchlight swept across him, he threw himself into the ferns. As the birds began to settle on the grounds of Castle Gratka, he shook off his trembling paralysis. He threw ammunition box, shovel and AK into the Jeep and got in.

The ABW would be looking for a cammo Jeep. Their vehicles would come by road from the southwest; so he would go east, across the Lithuanian border, then south through the forest into Belarus.

The only thing he could trade now against a treason conviction was this ammunition box.

## CHAPTER 93

Nation watched through the scope as Rozanski's arms flopped down and dangled below his head. The phone fell out of his hand and skied down the inside of the cockpit bubble. It fell out through the hole onto the turret.

*Fuck.* Rozanski had passed out. Or else he'd pretended to pass out.

Had he ordered Maga to release Agata and the kids?

Head buzzing like a nest of hornets, he scanned the roofline between his west tower and Rozanski's north tower. The only way across was to shuffle fifty-plus yards on his ass on the lead ridge-cap of a slate-tiled roof pitched at forty-five degrees. Way too slow.

Five of the seven ABW helos had landed, surrounding the castle. Down below on the gravel drive, an ABW officer with a megaphone commanded everyone inside the building to exit rooms with hands high.

The drill sergeant in Nation's head bellowed: *You only have to fuck up one time. You don't get to fuck up twice!*

The remaining two helos did not land. One swung in to hover over the south turret.

He killed the laser sight as the other bird moved to the wreck on the north turret. But he settled the rifle butt into his shoulder and centered the glowing crosshairs on a dangling hand.

Try to sleep through this, asshole.

Too late. A shape descended and blocked his shot. He took his eye from the scope and watched armed ABW operators in body armor and head lamps fast-rope from the bird's belly onto the turret. They smashed out the rest of the cockpit bubble and started cutting Rozanski down from his crash webbing.

*Fuck.*

Now the bird's searchlight swung towards him. He slumped below the parapet wall where it would not spot him. Lay the rifle beside him. His left hand and scalp throbbed like hell. They were leaking blood. That, along with the ebb of adrenalin and the buildup of lactic acid and his overwhelming sense of failure, was making him weak and tired. His brain played a litany of "if only's" on loop.

His kids were hostages and he was powerless to act.

He took off a shoe and sock. Over the rotor clatter, the ABW operator below shouted further megaphone instructions and questions. As he bound the sock around his bleeding ring finger, he saw the shooter on the south turret get to his feet, hands on his head, as the other hovering helo's searchlight found him.

His cell rang. Ramirez. He turned the volume up all the way, pressed the phone to his ear, and blocked the other ear against the racket. Ramirez was in a moving vehicle. He talked too loud, demanding information.

It took an effort to focus. It hardly seemed to matter. He assured Ramirez that Rozanski wasn't doing any disk wiping. "The ABW is heading upstairs now, clearing rooms."

He filled Ramirez in on his trade with Rozanski. Ramirez promised to find out if Agata and the boys had appeared at any police stations.

Nation said, "What'd you find in the forest?"

Ramirez told him about some gray-bearded peckerwood who sprayed them with an AK and escaped in a camouflaged vehicle. The fingers of Nation's intact right hand had been idly peeling apart the caked hair where the bullet had creased his scalp. The hand went still.

"*What* kind of vehicle?"

“Jeep.”

“A camo-painted jeep?”

“Roger.”

He thought of the shaggy-bearded prepper digging a hole at the edge of the trailhead parking lot. “Any chance you put a couple rounds in the ass of this Jeep?”

“Ninety-five percent chance. Why?”

Nation was silent a moment, then said, “Any idea who he was?”

“We found a passport in his cabin. The name’s Rusak. Zbigniew Rusak. Seems to take care of Rozanski’s hunting lodge. His ‘gamekeeper’, Pawlak says.”

Nation’s mind was racing back through minutes, days, thirty years, then forward thirty years again. Something Agata had said about Bosko replayed itself in his head: *He said he was going to light the donkey boiler so he could have a bath. But he was gone a long time and when he came back, he had snow on his shoulders and his boots and trouser legs were covered in mud.*

Ramirez shouted, “Are you still there?”

Nation picked up his rifle and scuttled to the southwest side of the turret.

He put Ramirez on speaker and propped the phone against a tooth of the turret. He rested the rifle in the gap between teeth and found the woodcutter’s hut with the scope.

He told Ramirez the SB captain in charge of the investigation into Dolinski’s death in 1988 was Zbigniew Rusak. According to Dorn’s notes on his father’s interrogation report, Dorn had left the heavily drugged Ryszard Okula in the hands of Rusak and Rozanski when he left the SB headquarters on Rakowiecka Street after midnight on March 9, 1988.

Then, right next to the hut, a pair of red taillights flared briefly, then went out. He toggled the scope to infrared. Inside the ghostly white shape of a Jeep, the engine glowed hot. Then the vehicle was moving.

No headlights.

It backed and filled, then swung onto the track from the trailhead parking lot to the road. It paused at the intersection and he waited to see which way it would go. It turned east. There was nothing east of here but former parts of the USSR.

The phone said, “Hey! Are you still there?”

“I have eyes on Rusak now. He’s headed east in his Jeep. Repeat, he’s headed *east* from Rozanski’s castle. I think the road becomes a dirt four-wheel-drive track up yonder where it enters the forest. My guess: he’s less than five miles from the Lithuanian border. Most of that road is through thick forest. Once he’s in Lithuania he can go five miles south through the forest and he’s in Belarus.”

“*Madre!* We can’t extradite from there. Can’t you stop him?”

“If I start shooting, those ABW Feds will be all over me. It’s too far, anyway. You’re with your secret police buddy?”

“Affirm. Agent Pawlak.”

“OK, tell him to get hold of whoever is flying that helo over castle Gratka – the one that’s still in the air. Tell him to come pick me up on the west turret. No need for a ladder; I can step onto the runner. If there’s a shooter in that bird, we could use him.”

## CHAPTER 94

Ramirez relayed to Nation the information that an ABW shooter and spotter would be in the belly of the bird that picked him up.

He said, “Pawlak told them you’re CIA: they’re supposed to listen to you. Good hunting.”

Then there was nothing to do but drive. Pawlak turned up the Polish news on the radio and drove in a grim trance. At one point, he pounded the wheel three times in anger and shouted, “Because gas matters more than Slavs!” At length, he told Ramirez the salient details. Radio Polska was using an old analog transmitter because of a cyber attack. Poland’s communication networks were down. Russia had denied the cyber attacks and announced it was starting its war games ahead of schedule. NATO wasn’t buying it. The NATO bases in the Baltics had scrambled fighters. Planes had been lost on the NATO and Russian sides in dogfights over Lithuania and Estonia. Unconfirmed reports said key pieces of infrastructure in Vilnius and Kaunas had been seized by “Little Green Men,” elite Spetnatz forces in civilian clothing who had been in place in the target cities, awaiting activation. The Russians were using their Ukraine playbook, thought Ramirez. Columns of Russian armor had entered Lithuania from Kaliningrad and Belarus. It was not known how many NATO fighters were still capable of taking off from Ämari airbase in Estonia but reports from Russia were that the new MiGs had decimated the NATO squadron, which had included a dozen of the latest American Joint Strike Fighters. NATO’s Very Quick Reaction Force had been scrambled, but it



would take at least thirty-six hours to arrive from Italy. Poland was mobilizing its armed forces and Territorial Defense League battalions to defend the homeland. The more substantial NATO reaction now depended on bringing tanks and other armor through Germany.

But Germany had not yet invoked Article Five of the NATO Treaty. That was why Pawlak had pounded the wheel.

In fact, so far in Europe only Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, and a few other small countries had invoked Article Five in defense of the Baltics. Britain had said it would not tolerate Russian tanks crossing the Polish border.

President Trump had invoked Article Five and he urged Putin to withdraw his tanks from the Baltics. In the same sentence he spoke of his sorrow over the “horrible” poisoning attack by a Polish–Lithuanian militia on the Gusev base. He said Putin had told him the victims of Gusev must have justice. Earlier, Trump had taken a call from the Polish DDL Party leader, Lipiński, about the drug Thyroglan. Trump supported Lipiński’s call for the Polish government to remove the ban on the drug and allow a shipment to Russia for the poisoned Gusev soldiers.

Ramirez’s phone rang. He listened for a while and assented tersely a few times. He uttered a final “Yes, sir” and killed the call.

He put the phone back in his pocket, pursing his lips, and said, “Trump’s recalled the US embassy staff from Moscow.”

Pawlak said bitterly, “That will show them. He must have got the OK from Putin first. What will you do?”

Ramirez didn’t hear him. He was craning forward, peering east. The glow of someplace burning beyond the low hills of the Lithuanian borderlands lit a dome of sky above the horizon.

West of the dome of firelight, three winking red lights drifted west from Lithuanian airspace.

He snapped, “Kill the lights and pull over.”

Pawlak obliged.

The lights moved like choppers. When Ramirez wound down his window to listen, he heard the rotors. Big birds of war. As he watched and listened, he separated out a higher-pitched whine. Eventually, he realised it was the noise of infrared scouting drones.

The choppers crossed the road a quarter mile ahead of their vehicle.

Pawlak was staring at him.

Ramirez shrugged. "I don't know whose they are. Better safe than sorry."

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Inside the helo, one of the two ABW operators gave Nation a plate carrier marked "ABW" and a comms headset, used cutters to remove the bent wedding ring that was crushing his finger, taped the wounded finger and told him the scalp wound had stopped bleeding. He pointed to a plastic footlocker. Nation detached it from under the bench seat. The operator gave him a thumbs-up and lay down on his belly to peer out the open door through his spotting scope.

Nation rummaged in the footlocker and found a helmet with thermal vision goggles, a wrist GPS, leather fast-rope gloves, a pistol and spare magazines. He ejected the magazine and checked it was full. He shoved the pistol and spare magazines into pockets on the front of his plate carrier. He fitted the goggles and peered out the bubble between the pilot's and copilot's seats and spotted the heat of the escaping Jeep.

In his headset, the copilot said, "We've got air traffic to the north."

Through his comms headsets, Nation heard the copilot scan across the UHF spectrum. The scanning stopped: there was a burst of static, then a voice demanded something in a foreign language. Russian.

The copilot said, "We run out of Polish air in less than a kilometer."

The pilot said, “The Russians own the air over there now. We need to go around immediately.”

Looking through the bubble between the pilots’ heads Nation saw three small flying heat blobs above the eastern horizon.

The copilot spoke Russian into his comms mike, then listened. More Russian over the headset, then the copilot translated. “They’re Flying Tanks – Hind 24s. They say turn back now.”

Nation said, “Get us a hundred yards closer.”

The pilot said, “No, I’m turning back now.”

“Negative: our mission is to intercept. The man in that vehicle down there has vital information.”

The pilot’s jaw worked.

The copilot shouted, “He’s turning south!”

The vehicle had swung right onto a side track. The pilot jerked the stick to follow, muttered something Nation didn’t catch. He was evidently relieved to be moving away from the Russians.

Nation looked at the digital map on the cockpit instrument panel. There was a thin track running for a mile or two south, parallel with the border. It connected with a blue line running east–west, straight as a shot, connecting Poland with Belarus.

The copilot said, “He’s on a forestry track.”

Nation said, “What’s that blue line?”

“The Augustów Canal. Maybe he saw the choppers. Maybe he’s going to try to take the tow path into Belarus.”

The Jeep drove on without lights, below and fifty yards ahead of them. The forestry track was so overhung by boughs it was only visible intermittently in the chopper’s spotlight.

Nation detached himself from the airframe and peered out the door over the heads of spotter and sniper. Into the throat mike he said, “You need to get right over that vehicle, pilot.”

The pilot brought the chopper in low. In night vision, Rusak’s engine flickered white under the canopy below the skids.

Nation said, “Sniper, stop that vehicle.”

Crouched in the doorway, the sniper settled his shoulder to the fifty cal on its webbing sling. A dull clank sounded in Nation’s headset.

The Jeep kept moving.

The spotter said, “Try a hundred millimeters to the right.”

At the end of the forestry track the Jeep swung left onto the canal tow path. The pilot swung the stick and kept flying right alongside it.

The copilot said, “Three-hundred meters to the border. The Russians are headed this way, now.”

The pilot shouted, “Fuck! What the fuck are you doing back there? I’m going around!”

Nation said, “Negative, pilot. Hold steady.”

Another clank. Through the goggles, Nation saw heat spurt through the hole in the vehicle’s hood as the fifty cal round went through the engine block. Pressurized oil spraying out. Precisely machined parts were thrown a few microns out of alignment. The engine jammed up. The vehicle stopped.

The pilot said, “I’m going around!”

But Nation was already climbing out past the operators and onto the skid. His arms and hands felt attached by fish hooks. His muscles were fatigued, but one thing Ranger training teaches you that you never forget is how long you can go on in that condition.

He twined his legs with the fast rope and said, “Negative, pilot. Take me lower.”

Then he handed up the comms headset, drew his pistol, and slid down the rope, braking with boots and gloved left hand to stop himself popping off the end.

The bird hovered over the still water of the canal, twenty meters above, then fifteen.

White heat flecks appeared in the crown of the stalled Jeep. Rusak was shooting through the roof. Then the driver's door swung open and the cruciform muzzle flash lit up Nation's night vision like the coming Rapture.

## CHAPTER 95

Rusak climbed out of the vehicle, firing on full-auto. All that saved Nation was the fact that Rusak was holding his rifle with one hand.

Nation let go the rope. He fired at Rusak as he fell. Rusak snatched something from the vehicle, then turned and ran.

He crashed into the canal. For a few seconds he was under the cold water looking up and everything was black through the goggles, because of the cold. He kicked off the bottom and surfaced, bringing the gun up, sucking in air, scanning for heat.

The glowing barrel of Rusak's rifle danced away down the towpath. The rifle was on Rusak's back. He was probably crossing the border about now.

Overhead, the ABW chopper rose and swung around. The pilot was bailing. The Russian choppers were still coming, getting louder.

Nation crawled overarm towards the bank.

His feet found purchase on the bottom. He braced one foot in front of the other. He dropped the front sight to Rusak's legs. He fired till Rusak's heat went down and rolled into the reeds.

He jerked out another magazine and slammed it home.

A monstrous gasp. He looked up. A pair of rockets streaked from the lead Russian chopper. The ABW chopper exploded and whited out Nation's screens.

Dazzled, he squeezed his eyes shut and said a prayer for the four men aboard. He let the heat of the fireball burn his upturned face like a judgment.

He was becoming the kind of Jonah no one wants in his squad.

The second Russian chopper switched on its searchlight. The beam swept across the canal and Nation dropped to his belly and slithered up the bank into the reeds.

The chopper hovered thoughtfully overhead, examining the abandoned vehicle in its searchlight. It swept the towpath, casting a hard cammo net of leaf shadows over Nation, lying there with his face in the mud.

The other two choppers hung back, probably watching their over-the-horizon radar.

His heart thudded as he waited to see if they would drop troops.

After a minute, the rotor wallop dopplered and he lifted his head to see the birds turning back towards Belarus. He dropped his face into the mud and exhaled.

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As he approached Rusak's prone body, gun up, Nation patted the pockets of his plate carrier with his left hand and found two sets of flex cuffs and a meds kit. The GPS on his left wrist told him that he'd brought Rusak down thirty meters over the Belarusian border. He didn't mention that to the groaning Rusak. He switched his phone to flight mode so he and Rusak wouldn't be traced or disturbed.

Rusak couldn't walk, but he could crawl. Nation slung Rusak's AK across his back and searched the man for other weapons. Finding none, he ordered him to remove his belt and fix it around his neck.

Rusak whined and muttered prayers, but he complied.

Nation picked up the ammunition box Rusak had dropped and led him into the forest away from the canal, like a whining dog on a leash. When they'd crossed a couple of hundred yards of Polish soil, he ordered Rusak to lie on his face so he could cuff his wrists behind him. Then he took a knee on Rusak's legs and zipped cuffs around his ankles.

He used the LED lamp on his helmet to examine the man's wounds: a through-and-through in his right thigh that had missed the femoral artery and a round in his hip that had tumbled and exited through his flank below the ribcage. Probably not life-threatening.

Rusak alternated between whining and muttering prayers as Nation hauled him up to sit against a fir tree, tore open his shirt and injected a FAST infusion tube below the sternal notch. He taped it down, then nailed a saline drip bag to the tree above Rusak's head with a syringe. He screwed the IV bag line to the FAST tube projecting from Rusak's sternum. He took a fat injector full of pill-sized sponges and injected sponges into the bullet holes he'd made. He ripped off Rusak's dressings and did the same to the holes Cody had made earlier. He dressed all six wounds. Rusak whimpered continuously.

Nation said, "Stick out your tongue."

Rusak closed his eyes against the glare of the headlamp and stuck out his tongue. In the brilliant white light, Nation could see every broken vessel in the skin of Rusak's nose and cheeks, the white coating on his tongue. He pressed two pills out of their foil onto the tongue. He didn't want Rusak passing out from the pain. He almost passed out himself at the smell of Rusak's breath.

Rusak groaned, "Get a fucking doctor."

"First you need to explain a few things. Then we'll see. Maybe you won't need a doctor after that."

He tugged the pistol from his plate carrier and slapped in a fresh magazine. He held it in front of his face to examine it. The manufacturer's stamp said *Łucznik*, which was Polish for "archer." He'd never heard of it. Nice piece. It fired after



immersion. Most modern military weapons were supposed to, but not all of them were reliable when wet.

Rusak's eyes followed the gun. "You're his son, aren't you? Okula's. You look like him."

"That's right: you killed my daddy back in '88."

Rusak shook his head fast, rasped, "I didn't kill him."

"No?"

"It was Rozanski. Look in the box and see what he tried to hide. I dug it up to take it in."

"In?"

"To the police."

"The police in Belarus?"

Rusak didn't answer.

Most likely he had planned to buy himself a sentence reduction by dropping a load of shit on Rozanski.

"We'll go to the police. First things first, though."

Nation emptied the documents from the ammunition box onto the carpet of pine needles, then closed the box, set it next to the pile and sat on it with his legs crossed in front of him. He transferred documents one-by-one from the pile on his left to the circle of light in front of his face to the ground in front of him. He photographed every page with his phone, then stacked them by his other foot. He ignored Rusak's groans and whimpers.

There were invoices for millions of zlotys worth of medical supplies that had been supplied to the Skłodowska-Curie Memorial Institute for Oncology Research. Shipments of bee venom from the Cyprus Apiology Institute. Cobalt 60 power sources for linear accelerators from a company called SwissIon headquartered in Zurich. Chemotherapy drugs from five different medical supply firms, all headquartered in Luxembourg. There were a couple of documents like

oversized bank checks with elaborate borders. These were headed “Promissory note.” One promised the Skłodowska-Curie Institute would pay a sum of 3,700,000 zloty to a medical equipment company headquartered in the Channel Islands and another one promised the same to a firm headquartered in Panama.

There were also carbon copies of interviews Rozanski had conducted with the four Secret Co-workers he’d handled at the Skłodowska. One of them was Roman Kijek from the physics department. A snitch, as Iskra had suspected. And, as Nation now knew, the industrial radiographer who was the last person to handle the innards of the Presidential Tupolev before it crashed at Smolensk.

There was a document that looked like an SB file, only it was all in Russian, and a photocopy of the same document. He couldn’t read it, but Dolinska could. He photographed it, then folded it and shoved it into a pocket of his plate carrier. A bundle of pages were photocopies of a notebook labelled “10 MeV betatron.” And at the bottom of the pile was the betatron service logbook itself. He leafed through it, snapping every page. As he snapped, he wondered, *Why the photocopies?* Then he realized: they were the copies his father had made in the copy room opposite his office, just before Rozanski’s return had interrupted him, around 6 p.m. on 8 March, 1988.

## CHAPTER 96

When Nation was done reading and photographing, he turned on the voice recorder on his phone. He didn't trust the Polish police and he wasn't going to hand Rusak over to them until he knew what Rusak had to say.

"What's your name?" He pointed the phone at Rusak.

Rusak hesitated. Nation showed him the pistol's muzzle.

"Zbigniew Rusak."

"And you were in charge of the SB investigation into Prosecutor Lew Dolinski's death in 1988?"

"Yes."

"Why did the SB investigate a medical accident? Why not the Civil Militia? Non-political crime was their jurisdiction."

"Because it was high profile. Interior Minister Kiszczak told us to rule out a political crime before the Militia took over. Dolinski was head of the Warsaw Procuracy. Rozanski was the Director of Oncology, and he was a guardian angel – an SB officer as well as a physician. And there was a secret co-worker involved: Kijek in the physics department. He'd operated the machine and he was an informant handled by Rozanski."

Nation laid the gun on the ground. He opened the betatron service log to the last page and read:

Thursday, February 25, 1988

Beam filter had fallen out of support bracket. How?  
Drilled holes in corners and screwed filter into bracket  
to prevent future accidental displacement.

Forys, the head of the Physics Department, had even stapled under his report a Polaroid photograph of the bracket fixed with shiny new screws. The photograph had not faded much.

Nation described the log book for the record and read the last entry aloud. He held the page up in front of Rusak's face. He pointed the phone at the last entry.

He said, "I guess you were looking for this betatron service logbook, Zbigniew Rusak?"

The man blinked in the reflected glare of the headlamp as he tried to focus on the pages. Nation toggled his headlamp down to red-light mode.

Rusak said, "I was looking for it, but not as hard as Rozanski."

Nation set the logbook down. Rusak's black eyes shifted to his face. The red light was doubled in them.

As if they were two guys on the front porch, Nation said conversationally, "Tell me, how you figure that filter fell out of the support bracket again after he screwed it in on February 25th?"

"It didn't fall out."

"I fucking know that, Rusak. You think Rozanski took it out again?"

"You think he confessed to me? I polygraphed Forys. Dorn told me not to flutter Forys, Rozanski, or Kijek, but I fluttered Forys on the quiet. He was telling the truth, as I suspected. When he serviced the machine on the Thursday, he found the beam filter out. Couldn't understand how it fell out of its bracket. He screwed it in to make sure it didn't happen again. Took a picture. He told Rozanski about the repair and also Kijek. But somehow, between the Thursday and Prosecutor Dolinski's treatment on the Monday, the filter fell out again, so Dolinski got the unfiltered beam at full power. Went right through him."

“Rozanski just told me we had to get the ammunition box back because there were important SB documents. That’s all he told me, I swear before God and all his angels. He never said the logbook was in the box. It was supposed to be kept in the physics department in a locked filing cabinet. Maybe he didn’t take out the filter himself. Maybe he blackmailed someone to do it – maybe Kijek, our Secret Co-worker in Physics. I don’t know. Kijek had access to the filing cabinet, that’s for sure. But, either way, we’re talking about a probable murder, and there’s no statute of limitations on murder.”

“So, my father broke into Rozanski’s office and stole his ammunition box?”

“He confessed to it.”

“A guy walking down Wawelska Street with his umbrella in one hand swinging a Russian ammunition box in the other is liable to attract attention.”

“Those boxes fit inside a briefcase. We checked.”

Nation nodded. He’d figured as much. “What time did you arrest him?”

“Just before eleven.”

“But by then he didn’t have the box.”

“No.”

“And you took him to Rakowiecka Street for interrogation?”

“Yes.”

“Who was in the interrogation room?”

“Me, Rozanski, and Chief Commissioner Dorn.”

“What did my father tell you?”

“He gave the box to your mother to give to Pawel Bosko. Bosko used to be Deputy Interior Minister.”

“Then what?”

“Dorn went home sometime after midnight, before the interview was terminated. After he’s gone, Rozanski orders me to get a car from the motor pool.

We went to Bosko's apartment in Muranow. He wasn't home. We searched it but we didn't find anything. Then Rozanski orders me to drive him out to Bosko's farm, in the early hours of the morning in the middle of a snowstorm. We found him in his bath. Rozanski asks him where the box is and of course he says he has no idea what we're talking about. Rozanski's slapping his face and shouting, 'Where is it? We know she brought you the box!'

"Bosko says, 'Who?'

"'Okula's wife!'

"'Ask Pani Okula!'

"Then Rozanski's pulling his hair and jerking his head around. But Bosko sticks to his story. Rozanski tells me to punch him in the face, so I hit him a few times while Rozanski holds his hair. Bosko keeps his mouth shut. Rozanski tells me there's a vial and a syringe of SP-17 truth serum in the glove compartment of the car, so I go get it, but when I come back Bosko is foaming at the mouth and I smell almonds. Cyanide capsule. He had it in his mouth. Maybe he meant to bite down or maybe it burst when I punched him. There's nothing we can do for him, so we leave him in the bath. Then we go looking for the fucking box."

In the red light from Nation's head torch Rusak's face was a mask of bitterness as he described being ordered by Rozanski to go out into the falling snow in minus ten degrees to look for signs of digging.

"And you found it."

"Really, there weren't many places the ground would be soft enough for an old man to dig in March, on a night like that. I dug in the stable first because it was built against the chimney, so it got some warmth. Bosko must have buried it there after your mother gave it to him."

"But you didn't tell Rozanski you found it."

Rusak shook his head.

"What's your answer?" Nation prodded the recorder at him.

## CHAPTER 97

Rusak said, “No. I didn’t tell the bastard I’d found his box.”

Question by question, Nation dragged the story out of him.

Rusak hid the box in the trunk of the vehicle, then he went inside to find Rozanski. Rozanski was looking for it up in the ceiling. Rusak called up through the manhole that he was going to drive down to check out the hut where they’d seen the fresh tire tracks on the way up to the castle.

Sure enough, when he got there, he saw two sets of vehicle tracks instead of one: the same small car had gone in, then out. Footprints of several people in the snow around the hut. He paced a line between hut and pillbox and reburied the box halfway along it.

“It was hard digging, I can tell you.”

As he drove back up to the farmhouse, it started snowing again. Rozanski had almost dismantled the interior of Bosko’s house – he was using a pry bar to rip up the floorboards. Rozanski asked him where he’d been so long. Rusak said he’d made a careful search in the forest around the hut after he found vehicle tracks and footprints of three adults and one child.

Rusak met Nation’s eyes briefly. “I think the child was *Pan*? And one of the adults was *Pan*’s mother?”

“Keep talking.”

Rozanski ordered him to burn the house. On the way downhill he demanded Rusak show him the tire tracks and footprints. Then Rusak had to chauffeur him back to Warsaw. Rozanski kept pounding the dash in fury because the box had obviously left with Okula's wife.

Rusak said, "I was just trying to keep my eyes open and not crash the car. Knowing I had the thing he wanted most in the world was the only good part. By then I hated the prick. Dorn's made it clear that my Dolinski investigation is going to acquit Rozanski, though I've barely started: my job is to cover up Rozanski's crime and tell a lot of lies for both of them. You think I joined the SB to do that? I joined to be a sword and shield against enemy infiltration, like in the TV show *Miecz i tarcza*? No, you're too young. Back then I still wanted to be the sword and shield: a wolfhound tracking enemies of the people. Not chauffeur an idiot with a big umbrella into the countryside at two o'clock in the morning in the middle of a snowstorm. Not dig holes looking for the papers he should've destroyed. Then he orders me to burn Bosko's house down. He says it's alright, because old Dorn will look after us. So on top of being an accessory to this and that, I'm an arsonist now as well."

"So how come you never gave his box to the police after '89?"

"By the end of that night, my hands were almost as dirty as his."

"How come you work for him now?"

He shrugged. "The new police wouldn't hire me, because of the Dolinski cover-up. I didn't have stolen millions to start me off in business like he did. But who wants to be a fucking businessman? What options did I have? Before, the Department was my life. When they took that away, I hit the piss hard for eighteen months. Then in '93 he offered me a job when I had no job. I was on the point of blowing my head off, if you want to know. And that was the year he really cashed in: the SLD government put him in charge of the Polfa privatization – the state-owned pharmaceutical enterprise. He bought himself a castle and thirty square kilometers of Romincka Forest to hunt in. Gamekeeper suited me. It got



me away from the city. From people. But I never planned to go down with the cunt. The box was my insurance policy.”

Nation cocked his head at the sound of a distant vehicle. He wondered if the ABW would send out a search party or if they were all fleeing west ahead of the Russians.

He said, “So Dorn was protecting Rozanski?”

“Protecting Rozanski. Protecting himself. Protecting people bigger than himself. My guess is most of the money that went through that hospital was for other people, not Rozanski. I don’t think Dorn was Rozanski’s biggest umbrella.”

“Who was?”

“Back then? I don’t know. But you saw how much money went through the accounts department.” He nodded at Nation’s pile of documents.

Nation shoved the recorder closer to Rusak’s face. “Let’s take it slow. Who did the laundering?”

“The Nomenklatura. Their spies. Their police. They used spooks based in our embassies and consulates in tax havens to set up the foreign accounts. The security services were shifting money from every pot in the state coffers. The FOZZ fund was their biggest pot. You must have heard of the FOZZ.”

“Remind me.”

“By 1988, Poland owed forty billion US dollars to foreign banks and everyone had stopped lending to us. The FOZZ was a billion-dollar fund to buy back the debt on secondary markets. Illegal, but what did those bastards care? If the foreign banks knew, they turned a blind eye. It was clear to the world by then that Poland was fucked, so, if you’re a New York or London bank, getting pennies on the dollar from debt buyers is better than getting nothing. Trouble was, most of the FOZZ board members were senior esbeks and military intelligence officers and they were stealing it for themselves. What Prosecutor Dolinski’d found before he was hospitalized was a few invoices like those right there: invoices from a seller who isn’t selling anything to a buyer who isn’t buying anything, because

he's the same person as the seller. It wouldn't have taken him long to find out that the FOZZ fund wasn't buying many bonds."

"You think Rozanski was laundering FOZZ money through the Sklodowska-Curie accounts department?"

"A lot of money went out of that hospital, but not much equipment came in. I never found any bottles of bee venom. Bee venom to treat cancer! They had a sense of humor, anyway."

Nation had stopped listening. He was trying to settle the sequence of events in his mind.

He said, "Dorn called you in when you got back to Warsaw?"

Rusak nodded. "It was broad daylight when we got back. Planned to go to work without sleeping, but I was so exhausted I went to sleep drinking coffee at my kitchen table. A couple of my colleagues banged on the door at 0930. Dorn wanted to see me. I had to explain the mileage on the Chaika. Then he got it out of me how Bosko had died. He said it was an unfortunate accident and I was still in charge of the Dolinski investigation. He told me to stay out of the accounts department. Said as soon as Dolinski died it would be a routine homicide investigation and I just had to make sure the Militia hunted that boar and didn't start chasing financial rabbits. We both hunted, you see? Why he liked me, he said. He invited me hunting a few times after that. He had me over a barrel: he could charge me with Bosko's manslaughter or murder any time he liked and we both knew it."

"You think Dorn was in on the money laundering?"

"If Colonel Rozanski was getting a cut, then General Dorn was."

"What was your rank?"

"Captain."

Rusak had not been in on it. Maybe he'd felt left out.

"You say you don't know who Rozanski's biggest umbrella was back then. Who is it now?"

“Now? Fuck does he need an umbrella now?” But Rusak’s eyes were darting.

“Is it Artyom Mitkin? He went to Russia to study under Mitkin. Is he still in contact with Mitkin?”

Rusak didn’t answer.

“The ship is sinking, Rusak. Again.”

Rusak’s eyes reflected red.

Nation said, “Mitkin had Rozanski organize that raid on Gusev Army Base, huh? The militiamen who poisoned the water left from your hunting lodge. You help out with that?”

Rusak said, “I want to talk to the police.”

“You want to cut a deal?” He shook his head, “Malinowski, the bodybuilder, he already talked. The cops know you guided those raiders over the border.”

“He’s lying.”

Nation said, “Know the legal definition of treason? ‘Giving aid and comfort to the enemy.’ You aided the FSB in a false-flag attack to frame your nation, to put your people in the line of fire. You just saw four good Poles burn up in that helicopter. You did that, Rusak.”

“I didn’t!”

“Zbigniew Rusak, sword and fucking shield. What’s the sentence for treason in Poland? I know they don’t have the death penalty.” Nation picked up the pistol and racked the slide. “But this court right here does.”

Rusak looked into the muzzle. His red-reflecting eyes blinked rapid-fire. He swallowed.

Nation said, “Rozanski thought my mother took his box out of Poland. Because you left that box buried, we were hunted all over the world for thirty years. A few days ago, he took my wife, and sent me a movie of two guys raping her. And now he’s got my kids. I want revenge, Rusak. Don’t make me start with you. What you just told me was like the communist version of history: you cherry-

picked the bits you wanted to talk about. Now you're gonna tell me the whole story."

## CHAPTER 98

On the main square of Żródła, the van came to a stop and the rear doors opened. The man with the disfigured face gestured for them to get out. Head up, jaw set, Agata shepherded the kids out, but she couldn't stop her body trembling. She turned, half expecting to be shot. The kids stood behind her, holding her dress. The man with the malformed cranium looked at her levelly with his wide-spaced eyes, then at the children.

Dean sang softly, "A mi burro, a mi burro. Le duele la cabeza."

The man's eyes narrowed, seeming to smile. Then he turned without a word. He climbed into the front of the van. It took off, tires squealing, before his door was closed.

The senior sergeant of Żródła police lived behind the police station. When Agata bashed on his door at 21:30 he was already in his pajamas. At first, he blinked at her and the kids as if he was struggling to keep his eyes open. When he realized he was dealing with a kidnapping case, his eyelids stopped drooping. He shut the door and emerged in his uniform five minutes later. He drove them to a big spa hotel near the steam on the edge of town. The hotelier put them in a room on the top floor with a double and a single bed. The kids crawled into the double bed and fell asleep within minutes. The senior sergeant settled himself in an armchair at the end of the hall and placed his service pistol on the coffee table beside him. Agata asked the night porter to bring him up a thermos of strong coffee, then crawled into the single bed.

\*

Rusak talked. He poured it all out as if Nation were his confessor.

When he was satisfied he had as much of the story as Rusak knew, Nation extracted his phone to call Cody Ramirez and tell him their location. The moment he switched his phone off flight mode it pinged.

The message from Ramirez said: “They’re safe. They’re asleep in Źródła.”

Nation closed his eyes. He swallowed hard. He turned off the headlamp so Rusak wouldn’t see his tears.

## CHAPTER 99

Ramirez led Nation through the grand baroque entrance of Castle Gratka and across a ballroom with big oil paintings on the walls and a blazing chandelier the size of an automobile. Past the grand curve of a marble staircase, a door in the stone blockwork opened onto a much older stone staircase that spiraled up steeply. Nation stood and watched Ramirez climb. The kids and Agata were safe. Ramirez's FBI buddy said Grace was safe at a police station in Tiler, Texas. Rozanski and Rusak were in custody. And Nation's body was about ready to go on strike. He didn't want to go up; he wanted to go down that hill and see his kids. He shook his head and started up.

The only light was the moon through the arrow slits of the north tower. At the top of this stair was the turret wearing Rozanski's smashed Sikorsky.

He said, "They clear this place of vampires?"

Ramirez said, "I believe they found one trying to destroy files – Rozanski's personal assistant, Cyprian Tarnowski. Financial records going way back. Tarnowski used to be SB, too. They think they can get back most of what he deleted. Durgan Maga's number was on Rozanski's cell. Skowronnek's too – the long streak of pelican shit from the Bell Tower."

Ramirez stopped to let Nation catch up.

In a low voice, he said, “Pawlak’s a little pissed that you decided to interrogate Rusak first.”

“I’m the only reason he *has* Rusak.”

“True, but just appreciate that the Bosko murder and your father’s disappearance aren’t his first priorities right now. His job is to collect evidence on the poisoning at Gusev army base.”

Nation mastered his anger. “What did he say?”

“He said he doesn’t have time to reopen cold missing persons cases when Poland’s facing a war with Russia.”

“Is there any sign of that?”

“Less and less,” Ramirez conceded. “Looks like Putin might settle for the Baltics.”

“What the fuck is NATO doing?”

“The Internet’s down: news is scarce. Preparing to fight a liberation campaign, I guess. Discussing it, anyway.”

If NATO let the Baltics go, Poland would be next. Anger bubbled up again. Evidently, his anger was not yet spent tonight, even if his strength was.

A little higher up, he shook his head. “Reopen? When was it ever open? That case was born cold.”

Ramirez stopped at a low timber door with steel bands holding it together.

He said, “He’s giving us some of his precious time, so just don’t start on about the fucking police, OK?”

Ramirez pushed the door open onto Director Antoni Rozanski’s study. It was high in the baroque wing, with a French window giving a view across the dark Augustów Forest towards Lithuania. There were ikons on the wall and whole shelves full of cancer journals in identical bound volumes, including one called *Angiogenesis*.



On the monumental timber desk Nation spotted a little metal statuette. He picked it up and examined it. Made of lead, by the weight. A warrior with slanted eyes, a bow slung across his back. The warrior held a staff that might have been a spear or pike, but the top had broken off. It stirred something in his memory.

Agent Zygmunt Pawlak entered through another door. He was big, buzzcut and strong in the chest and cheeks like a police band trombonist. His face wore the usual Polish neutral expression, but it was smug on Pawlak, and he somehow managed to make his charcoal suit look like a uniform. People tried to tell Nation police and soldiers weren't so different, but he'd never been able to see much similarity: soldiers defend civilians; police police them and look smug about it.

Pawlak slapped a document on Rozanski's desk to draw their attention to it. "The tender process was rigged. He bought this place in '93 for a tenth of the market value."

Nation saw the document was headed "Deed of Absolute Sale."

Pawlak wanted someone to ask, so he obliged: "How was it rigged?"

"His was the only tender."

"So Rozanski knew someone?"

Pawlak grunted affirmation.

"You secret police guys always know someone, huh?"

Pawlak looked up from the document. Nation stared at him. Pawlak flushed and glanced at Ramirez. Ramirez was by the window, looking out at the Augustów, shaking his head.

Pawlak used a big arm to sweep away keyboard, mouse, and files, and rolled out a plan of the castle and its outbuildings. He pinned the corners with a brass anglepoise lamp, an engraved crystal pen stand, and Rozanski's mouse.

He looked up at Nation expectantly and Nation eventually obliged him by setting the lead statue down on the fourth corner of the plan. Ramirez came over to look.

To Ramirez, Pawlak said, “This is the plan from 1837. It’s a Prussian map. This was East Prussia back then. This is the castle and outbuildings the Russians destroyed in 1939. It was in ruins till Rozanski rebuilt it in the 1990s. When Minister Pawel Bosko owned the castle, it was a pile of stones. Bosko lived here.”

He stabbed the building labelled *Hausmeisterhaus* with a thick finger.

Ramirez said, “The caretaker’s house?”

“Yes.”

As Pawlak rolled up the plan and turned from the desk, Nation dropped the statue of the Tatar warrior into his jacket pocket.

\*

Descending the spiral stone stair with Ramirez, Nation said, “Are we noticing the elephant in the room here?”

“What’s that?”

“I texted you what Rozanski’s file said: In 1977, a Colonel Professor A. Mitkin of the KGB’s First Directorate signed a letter of invitation for Ensign Antoni Rozanski to come study under him at the S.M. Kirov Military Medical Academy in Leningrad. Mitkin wants the Baltics. Is it just a coincidence that his former colleague launches the false-flag attack that gives Russia an excuse to *take* the Baltics?”

Ramirez said, “I looked into it, but you can’t look far: it’s not like Russia has opened its archives. They did cancer research together, published a number of articles. That’s all we know. We haven’t found anything to show there’s any kind of relationship now.”

As they emerged into the ballroom, he saw the skepticism on Nation’s face and nodded. “You don’t need to tell me the whole thing stinks. Another thing:

evidently Rozanski held a big fundraiser here in May. A masquerade ball to launch Lipiński in politics. Turns out Rozanski has been a big donor to his campaign.”

## CHAPTER 100

In the general location predicted by the Prussian plan, an ABW technician with a metal detector and an LED headlamp found a house-sized rectangle of old nails and charcoal.

When he heard the news, Pawlak sent over the chief of the ABW's forensic team, a short, energetic guy in his fifties by the name of Sobczak. Sobczak had a pencil neck and a big head containing a PhD in forensic archaeology. While Nation watched, a team of eight technicians rigged floodlights and started digging up the ruins of a brick chimney.

Dolinska arrived around 02:00. After calling police to the Hubert Zieliński murder scene, she'd left before they got there and rented a vehicle from Gdansk airport. Nation held her a while, but he couldn't keep his eyes off the hole for long. As they watched the hole get broader and deeper, he filled her in on the night's events.

Within a couple of hours, Sobczak and his techs had revealed the corpse of a man. It lay on a low earth pedestal in brown slacks and a shirt with a collar, neither of which had rotted much. A pair of hands, severed from the arms, lay crossed on his breast. The worms and microbes had cleaned the bones inside the clothes.

Ramirez came over. The three of them watched as Sobczak and an assistant brushed dirt away from the skull. It still had tufts of blond hair. Ramirez put a hand on Nation's shoulder.

Dolinska's arm was around his waist. She murmured, "Is it him?"

He cleared his throat. "This is where Rusak said we'd find him."

Rusak had returned to Bosko's farmhouse and found Rozanski tearing up the floorboards in search of the box he'd just buried by the woodcutter's hut. Rozanski ordered him to take Okula's body from the trunk of the Chaika and cut his hands off. Rusak backed the vehicle up to the chopping block by the woodpile and hauled the body halfway out of the trunk, then cut the hands off with Bosko's axe. They used the hands to fingerprint the safe and bath tub, knowing the oil of the prints would be baked on by the fire, then rolled the chopping block inside to be burnt. Then Rusak went back to the stable where he'd found the box. He'd filled the hole and covered it with hay, but now he dug the loose earth out again and started making the hole into a grave. As he dug, Rozanski chopped holes in the clapboard lining of the farmhouse with the axe, still searching for his ammunition box.

After a while Rozanski gave up and came out to help him dig. When the hole was big enough, Rusak backed the Chaika up to the stable door and they lugged Okula to the hole and put him in. They were about to start throwing in dirt when Rozanski remembered the hands they'd left inside. Rozanski threw the hands on top of the corpse, but Rusak leaned down and crossed them on the man's chest, like a saint's. As he told this part, Rusak's voice became a whine that Nation could hardly understand. It regained strength and anger as he told how, after they filled the hole, Rozanski had ordered him to take a jerry can of gasoline from the trunk and douse the clapboard walls and floor of the house. He made Rusak light the matches, implicating him in one more crime.

The cold was making Nation's wounded ring finger throb like hell. He put his jacket on. In one pocket his right hand found the head lamp and the codeine tablets from the ABW meds kit. He popped a codeine and put his hands back in his pockets. The left pocket held the two halves of his wedding ring and the lead statue of the Tatar warrior.

Ramirez approached, holding his cell phone in front of his face and talking to someone on the screen.

Ramirez said, "It's around one in the morning, ma'am. Anyways, here he is."

He handed Nation the phone. His mother looked old and worried, but when she saw him her face lit up.

When he'd satisfied her that he was OK and the kids were fine, he said, "We found a body, Momma. At Pawel Bosko's farm."

She became so still he thought the call had frozen.

He said, "You there, Momma?"

Her voice was frail and thin over the phone's speaker. "Show me."

He turned the phone around and showed her the corpse on its pedestal, walked around it slowly, holding his breath. It was half a minute before she sniffed sharply. He turned the phone around and saw her eyes were red and wet.

"That's what he was wearing."

He tried to connect this body with the man whose lap he used to crawl into, who told him after his football games he'd play for Poland one day, who told him a bedtime story the night he disappeared, though his mind must have been all over the place and his heart as heavy as lead.

His mother remembered. "After he told you that strange story, he said he had to do some reading. He went into his study with his briefcase and shut the door. After a while I heard him on the phone and then I heard screeching. Packing tape. He came out and told me we were getting out. He gave me something heavy in a garbage bag, wrapped up in packing tape. Told me not to open it, just give it to Bosko. It was that ammunition box, only I didn't know that till later, when I saw Bosko put it in the car."

Nation couldn't take his eyes off those eye sockets staring up at the night sky. In that shallow grave lay his father, like a victim of the Katyn Massacre, his resting place now known, the answer to the question that had defined their lives.

Sobczak cut away his father's shirt and jumper to expose the rib cage, peered into it with his head torch. Something in there seemed to interest him. He beckoned the other techs to take a look.

Nation said, "I'm gonna call you back, Momma."

"Let me see him again before you go."

He moved closer to show her the corpse. Sobczak was fishing in his father's ribcage with a pair of tweezers. They emerged gripping what looked like a large-caliber bullet, but as Nation drew closer, he saw that the bullet had a face.

## CHAPTER 101

Half an hour out of Astana it rained, clearing the dust from the atmosphere and after the rain Major Durgan Maga could see a long way across the green and treeless Kazakh steppe. He lay on his top bunk with his head propped on a folded pillow, enjoying the rocking of the train and drinking in the view. He was made to live under a big sky. The big sky was in his blood.

He checked his watch. Fourteen hours since he left the woman Agata Zielińska and Karol Okula's children in the main street of Źródła village. Three hours ago, at Nursultan Nazarbayev International Airport in Astana he was half expecting to be arrested as an international fugitive, but the immigration officer had stamped his Kazakh passport without looking at his face too long. Nobody looked at his face long.

The ancient diesel train trundled across the steppe, in no hurry, its shadow lengthening out towards the Irtysh River and Russia's southern border a hundred kilometers north. He checked his phone periodically. When it found the Pavlodar tower, the Interpol site suddenly refreshed and showed him there was now a Red Notice out for his arrest. He lost coverage again before he could bring up the screen detailing the charges against him. As the sun sank, they crossed a watershed onto his home steppe. Not as lush, but still sprinkled with grazing sheep. The air was so clear as they crossed the northern edge of the Polygon that he could see in the distance the outermost of the concrete "geese" and fake apartment blocks the Russians had built to house measuring equipment at staggered intervals from ground zero.



The train trundled into Kurchatov City at sunset. More ruins every time Maga returned. Soviet apartment blocks stripped to bare concrete, birch trees growing from windows and roofs. Beyond the listing chain-link fence of what was once the amusement park for scientists' children, dodgem cars perished on a cracked asphalt oval, their bright colors faded. Beyond that, the remains of a small Ferris wheel listed on its struts. The metal scavengers had been at work here, too. Everything was overgrown with weeds and birch.

The station had once been a big logistical hub from which nuclear bombs could be unloaded but was now no more than a concrete siding, presided over by the twin monuments of a rusting freight gantry and a water tower. The scavengers had removed most of the former station building.

Maga pulled the hood of his hoodie over his head and rolled off the bunk twenty seconds before he got off the train. He had no luggage. Kurchatov was still officially a closed city. When he'd last lived here, you needed a Kurchatov address on your ID card to be allowed to get off at the station, but no one was checking cards anymore. Besides him, only a man and his child got off. The man was dark and bowlegged, a descendent of Genghis Khan's Golden Horde, like him. He wore the Muslim *tubeteika* on his head. The child was blond and blue-eyed. Such incongruous sights were not surprising in Kazakhstan.

A small man got up from a bench on the platform and his long shadow walked towards Maga. The ripped clouds in the west were red-soaked and glowing behind him. It wasn't until he was close that Maga could make out the frowning features of Roman Novak, the little cuckoo-masked man he had last seen at the Director's *maskarada* over a briefcase full of iodine-131.

Maga had been fascinated his whole life by what makes a normal face. Novak's lips were unusual in their thinness, but not abnormal. Not like his own leonine head.

They shook hands and Maga said, "Hello, Roman." Because Roman was the man's real name, even if Roman Novak was not.

## CHAPTER 102

Kryisia Okula's voice over the phone said, "What's that?"

Nation stared at the object between Sobczak's tweezers. It was made of lead, but it wasn't a bullet. It was the head of some sort of demon, attached to a short stem. Without conscious decision, Nation pulled the lead statue from his pocket and extended it towards Sobczak so that it was also visible to his mother. Sobczak glanced up, blinding Nation and his mother with a brilliant LED beam. He muttered an apology, tilted his headlamp down and lowered the head between the tweezers onto the broken staff in the Tatar warrior's hand. The pieces fitted together perfectly.

His mother's voice said, "He brought it home from work with the ammunition box."

"Did you give it to Bosko?"

"The Tatar? No. Your father put it on the desk in the study. The SB must have found it there when they came to get him. Where was the head? In his pocket?"

Nation said, "No, his belly."

"His *belly*?"

They fell silent, wondering.

He said, "Reminds me of 'The well of forgetfulness.'"

"Yes."

He thought of the Tatars' secret weapon, the carved heads on pikes that had released clouds of foul-smelling gas. One head had polluted the well, and when the villagers hauled it out, it was solid lead. Was the statue in his father's pocket when he told the story that night? Was it in his pocket when he heard the banging on the door, and looked through the fisheye and saw the SB? Bosko had the documents but having Rozanski's knick-knack was some sort of proof he'd found them in Rozanski's office. He couldn't swallow the whole thing. Did he break off the head and swallow it to send a message from under the ground?

His mother said, "He didn't usually tell you such violent stories, or such long ones. You were only seven. I listened because I could tell there was something big that he wasn't telling me. And I wondered why he was telling you such a gruesome story."

They said goodbye. It took a long time, reminding him of many PX conversations with her from Iraq and Afghanistan, when he thought she'd never hang up. She asked about Grace and he told her Grace was OK and in Tiler, Texas, which was all the news Cody's FBI buddy had so far transmitted. Finally, she said, "Take care of those boys, *kochanie*," and killed the call.

He handed the statue to Sobczak who put it in a plastic Ziploc bag with the head, then stowed the bag in the pocket of his ABW jacket.

Dolinska said, "Why would he swallow that?"

Sobczak said, "Probably not because he was hungry. I need to eat. You coming?"

Nation shook his head. He was too tired to eat. Drunk now with fatigue. His eyes felt as if someone had rubbed hot sand into them.

Sobczak walked up the slope to the chow trailer parked on the horseshoe of white-graveled driveway. A bunch of ABW guys were talking and eating a pre-dawn breakfast in the spill of light from the service hatch. Pawlak and Ramirez were on the fringe of the group, deep in conversation.

He thought of his kids down in Żródła and the bedtime ritual he'd missed the past two nights. "The well of forgetfulness" started telling itself in his head. *The blind bard Sipek felt the head and said it must have been transmuted to the heavy metal by absorbing the memories of all who had drunk from the well. Eight days and twenty-eight minutes of memories of men and birds were in the head.*

He suddenly remembered the document in Russian. He slapped his pockets for his phone and scrolled through the photographs till he found his pictures of the file's pages.

He handed it to Dolinska. "This was in the ammunition box too. I forgot about it."

Dolinska took the phone and read in silence, shifting back and forth across the photographed pages with a forefinger, pinching to zoom in when the writing was too small or hard to read.

She said, "It's a KGB file."

## CHAPTER 103

Dolinska said, “The case cryptonym is ‘Sleepy Hollow.’ It’s a report by a KGB lieutenant major. There’s a village in Northeast Kazakhstan called Degeley. From the spring of 1985 children in the village started to fall asleep mysteriously. They would be playing one minute and the next minute they would be fast asleep on the ground and nobody could wake them. The KGB was called in because the militia had received a complaint about a KGB scientist, Artyom Mitkin. A Degeley villager said he’d seen Mitkin and his colleague put something in the village well. He knew Mitkin because Mitkin was one of the military-uniformed doctors who came around to test the villagers living just outside the perimeter of the STS nuclear testing area. The villager didn’t know the name of the colleague, just that he worked with Mitkin at the Kurchatov Medical Institute in Kurchatov City, and that he was a Pole. The scientists with the KGB-led investigation team found radon gas was escaping from the well and when the wind blew from the west it carried across the village. Radon gas is a decay product of a number of nuclear materials that were mined and exploded in the region: uranium, plutonium, and radium 226. All of those isotopes eventually decay to lead. It doesn’t say which one they found in the well.” She glanced at the final pages of the report again. “The KGB investigator concludes that the villager was mistaken, that the contamination was probably through the groundwater leaching out of the STS following underground nuclear tests. He says that would also account for well contaminations at two other nearby villages on the edge of the Polygon,

Chagalan and Arkalyka, where the contaminant was iodine-131, another byproduct of plutonium and uranium fission.”

“And it attacks the thyroid.”

“Yes.”

Aldo Iskra’s words came back to Nation: *Big studies. Important work... One thing that made your father suspicious was that they were co-publications with Soviet scientists. Another was they used big samples — hundreds of patients — but never specified where the patients came from.*

Dolinska was saying, “The Lieutenant Major recommends Degeley be evacuated and closed, that the well be filled with concrete. He recommends that Artyom Mitkin and his Polish colleague Antoni Rozanski be transferred away from Kurchatov City for fear of Kazakh reprisals.”

“What’s the date on it?”

“June 5, 1986.”

He nodded. “Rozanski started work at the Marie Skłodowska in July 1986.”

He took the phone from her and scrolled into the appendices of the KGB file until he found the one that he was looking for.

He said, “What are these figures?”

She read out “Half-lives of radioactive contaminants.”

His finger stopped on йод-131.

“What’s that one?”

“Iodine-131.”

The figure next to the element was 8.0197 days. It took him under a minute on the phone’s calculator to work out that 8.0197 days is eight days and twenty-eight minutes. *After eight days and twenty-eight minutes the people of the village woke up and they could remember everything.*

His father could do sums like that in his head, and his father had read Russian well. There was no doubt in Nation’s mind that just before Ryszard Okula lay

down beside his son and invented that bedtime story on March 9, 1988, he had been reading this KGB report on a series of well contaminations in Kazakhstan. Well contaminations dismissed by the KGB Lieutenant Major as accidental, but which had conveniently created a large thyroid cancer cluster close to the Kurchatov Medical Institute where Mitkin and Rozanski were researching thyroid cancer angiogenesis.

He met Dolinska's eyes and her thoughts must have been running along the same track because she said, "I think I'll have to put that Smolensk story on hold a bit longer."

"What are you thinking?"

"That here's our chance to bury Mitkin along with Rozanski. Meantime, we need to find a way of getting this file to someone who can talk to Putin before the Russians start to feel too comfortable in Lithuania. Trump, for example."

Nation turned to look for Ramirez.

## CHAPTER 104

In a low voice, Roman filled Maga in on the news as they walked towards his vehicle. The big powers of Western Europe had not invoked Article Five in defense of the Baltic States, realizing that the stopcock on the Nordstream II gas pipeline, which Putin had so recently opened, could just as easily be turned off again. If they challenged Putin, he would cut off the gas and cripple their economies.

America had invoked Article Five with the support of two-thirds of NATO. The game had seemed to change when Trump said if the Baltics had to be liberated, there was a high risk that tactical nukes would be used. Putin had blinked. Perhaps, thought Maga, it was FSB Director Mitkin who had caused Russia's man in the White House to mention nukes. Whatever the truth behind the theater, Putin and Trump were now negotiating a Russian withdrawal from Lithuania in exchange for a shipment of Thyroglan and Kaczyński's promise to deliver the Gusev raiders up to Russian justice. Four of the five raiders were already in custody. An Interpol Red Notice had been posted for Maga, the only raider still free.

As a sweetener, Trump would recognize the new border in Georgia and Russia's 2014 annexation of the Crimea. When the deal was clinched, Trump would probably be a hero in America, and Lipiński, who had come up with the Thyroglan plan, would certainly be a hero in Poland. Trump and Lipiński were praising each other for keeping cool in a crisis. The international media was



ignoring Kaczyński and Law and Justice altogether. Lipiński was looking a lot like the next Prime Minister of Poland.

For Maga, the whole thing stank of Mitkin's FSB.

"So," he said. Then, after a pause, "A first term for the Director's man Lipiński, and a second term for Mitkin's man Trump."

Roman looked at him keenly from under his bushy brows. He nodded once.

Maga had learned little Roman's real name by accident when he was on leave from the Polish army and visiting his sick mother in Kurchatov City back in January 2010. He'd learned it thanks to a small photograph in the Semey paper, one of 194 photographs showing the victims of the Tupolev 154 crash near Omsk on January 6, 2010. The article said the crew and all passengers had been killed. Including the tight-lipped man standing before him now.

It was Putin's and Trump's negotiation over the Baltics that made him remember that epiphany now, because it, too, had smelled to Maga like an FSB operation. Little Roman showing up in a cuckoo mask at the Director's *maskarada* with FSB Director Mitkin and a briefcase full of iodine-131 had only compounded this suspicion.

He didn't know what Roman was hiding from, or where exactly he came from originally, but Roman wasn't the only white man in Kazakhstan's radioactive lands who was hiding from something. When you grew up here you learned with your mother's milk not to ask questions or speculate aloud about what might be under the mule's skin. And Roman had been good to Durgan's mother, paying for expensive chemotherapy drugs. None of them had been successful, but he could not blame Roman for that.

He blamed the Russians for that. The Russian doctors used to drive into his home village of Degeley and the other villages on the rim of the Polygon and encourage the people to stand outside and watch the next test. They themselves never stayed to watch the test. Before she died of cancer at the age of forty-nine his grandmother told him you felt the wind of the explosion on your face and then there was a smell of burnt hair that hung in the air for many hours, from the

deer and marmots, goats and sheep and maybe the odd stray shepherd who had just gone up in smoke. His mother had been exposed in the womb and had been born with the face whose broad features he had inherited. The Russian doctors who came to the villages of the Polygon rim in the hours and days after each blast to take blood samples from the villagers told his mother and the other children that as a result of their exposure their genes had mutated to make them radio-resistant. If the warmongering Americans started a nuclear war and everyone else in the Soviet Union died from the fallout, the children of the Polygon would survive to start again.

Maybe the Soviet doctors had believed it.

Roman led him towards a Toyota Landcruiser bearing the decal “Kurchatov and Karagandy Industrial Radiation and Pipeline Inspection Services.” In that newspaper article, the name under the little photograph was not Roman Novak, but Roman Kijek. As Maga followed him now, he wondered if Mrs. Kijek had greeted her newborn son with the same thin-lipped grimace.

## CHAPTER 105

The ABW put Nation and Dolinska in the hotel room next to Agata and the kids. Before they turned in shortly after 05:00, the policeman sitting guard in the hall with his thermos and pistol let them look in at the kids' sleeping faces.

Within minutes of lying down beside Dolinska he was running down a long, snowy slope in the Afghan Hindu Kush. When he looked across, he saw the *beepláara* boy plunging along beside him. There was a peaceable silence between them as they ploughed downhill through light and shadow of forest into the Green Zone of sleep. And this time, when he got there, there was no sign of the enemy.



## **Conspiracy theory: an exegesis on the novel**



## Removable glossary

**Accentuation effect:** A perceptual distortion arising from the process of categorisation whereby we see ingroup members as more similar to us than they are, and outgroup members as more different from us than they are.

**Accessibility:** One of two major reasons a social category becomes salient (along with 'fit').

**Assimilation:** A form of social learning that allows stereotypes to be transmitted within an ingroup.

**Entitativity:** The property of a group, resting on clear boundaries, internal homogeneity, clear internal structure, and common fate, which makes it seem like a distinct social entity – which makes a group appear 'groupy'.

**CWCT:** Cold War conspiracy thriller.

**Depersonalisation:** The process by which personal beliefs are replaced with social beliefs, as, for example, when an outgroup threatens.

**Fit:** One of two major reasons a social category becomes salient (along with accessibility).

**Ingroup:** The group to which one belongs.

**LN:** Literary novel.

**Lustration:** The transitional justice process of vetting those occupying or applying for public office, in order to keep those who collaborated too willingly with the former totalitarian regime out of post-totalitarian institutions.

**LWG:** Literary writers' group.

**Norm:** An attitude or behaviour that is common to a social group and that helps characterise it.

**Outgroup:** any group one does not belong to.

**PiS:** Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (*Law and Justice*), the ruling political party in Poland.

**Prototype:** A cognitive construct embodying the norms of the ingroup, often based on an individual group member.

**PSCT:** Post-Soviet conspiracy thriller.

**PSCTWG:** Post-Soviet conspiracy thriller writers' group.

**RII:** Referent informational influence: the process of seeking information about group norms and internalising those norms.

**Salience:** Relevance or necessity.

**SB:** Służba *Bezpieczeństwa* (Polish communist secret police).

**SCT:** Self-categorisation theory (an SIA theory).

**Sejm:** Polish parliament.

**SIA:** The social identity approach.

**SIT:** Social identity theory (the first of the SIA theories).

**UIT:** Uncertainty-identity theory (an SIA theory).





## 1. Introduction

In line with Swinburne University of Technology's guidelines for research conducted using the artefact-exegesis model, the second part of this PhD thesis is a scholarly exegesis which 'documents the provenance (history and context) of the work, and the praxis (theory and process)' used to produce the novel presented in part A. The exegesis is intended to provide 'insights into the [novel] which a reading or viewing of the work cannot provide' (Swinburne 2019, p. 2). It relies heavily on a reflective journal I kept on the writing process, which acts as a 'bridge between the two [examinable] elements of the PhD' (Arnold 2007, p. 8). In line with Biggs and Büchler's (2009) recommendations for the conduct of PhD-level practice-led research (PLR), the exegesis presents an argument based on the findings generated by the writing process. This argument addresses a single research question and seeks to make a significant, original contribution to scholarly knowledge about the production and social functioning of fictional genres.

### 1.1 Background to the project

I began *The red web*, my first thriller, with the idea that the villain would be Russia and its agents, and, soon after that, decided that the mystery of the 2010 Smolensk plane crash would be central to the plot. My idea was that the resolution of that plot would provide a plausible fictional 'proof' of the popular conspiracy theory, within the world of the novel. The conspiracy theory contends that the crash, which killed Polish president Lech Kaczyński, his wife, and 94 other Polish dignitaries, was not an accident but an assassination orchestrated by Russia, and that this was subsequently covered up with the help of traitorous Poles. Though there are many different versions of Smolensk, these are not nearly so heterogeneous as, say, the explanations for US President Kennedy's assassination, since to my knowledge all versions blame Russia or Polish traitors working clandestinely for Russia. For my purposes, the variations are generally inconsequential, so I usually speak of 'Smolensk' as if it were a monolithic conspiracy theory.

Culturally, the simultaneous deaths of the president, along with the heads of all four armed forces and other national institutions, had no less impact on Poland than Kennedy's assassination had on America<sup>1</sup>, and it seemed to me as a distant observer in 2010 that the impact would probably be even greater, given the historical resentment many Poles feel towards Russia and the legacy of cultural trauma left by Soviet communism (Sztompka 2000). I am married to a refugee from communist Poland, and I had seen this legacy up close in my interactions with Melbourne's Polish community, many of whom fled Poland following persecution by the communist state.

As it turned out, the impact of Smolensk was bigger than most people expected, but it was a slow burn. Over the years following Smolensk, Lech Kaczyński's identical twin brother, Jarosław, built a right-wing nationalist movement around monthly memorial marches commemorating the Smolensk dead and the Smolensk conspiracy theory. In 2015, Kaczyński's Law and Justice (PiS) government swept to power in a landslide. Poland's democracy and its relationships with Europe and Russia have suffered greatly as a consequence of PiS policies including 'late lustration', a campaign to weed the post-communist military, courts, state media and the bureaucracy of former communists suspected of past crimes and/or continuing loyalty to Moscow.

Early in my planning of the novel, soon after I decided that my protagonist would be male and American, and not female or Australian, I decided that he would go back to Poland to find out what happened to his father in the 1980s, and that those responsible for his father's disappearance would be connected with Poland's former communist regime. My protagonist and I went to Poland, then, to find out what happened to his father, and with the idea that the communists were somehow responsible. Unlike my protagonist, I went to Poland with the idea that the people responsible for his father's disappearance would also turn out to be responsible for the Smolensk assassination and cover-up.

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<sup>1</sup> To illustrate, in a 2012 poll conducted for the *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily newspaper, 40 per cent of Poles surveyed said the Smolensk disaster was the most important event in recent Polish history (Radio Poland 2012).

My intention, then, was to become a transmitter of a new version of the Smolensk conspiracy theory. To describe a plausible (if speculative) conspiracy behind Smolensk was challenging, since the major explanations that might have proven Russian culpability are less parsimonious than the explanation that the crash was caused by a combination of fog and bad communication between the pilot and air-traffic control. In 2017, when I saw Krauze's 2016 film *Smolenske*, which evidently shared my intention of 'proving' Russia's guilt (within the world created by the film), it demonstrated the dangers of this approach: in the absence of novel or hard-to-disprove evidence of one particular kind of sabotage or other, the film seemed little more than a collection of cinematic nods and winks.

But by the time the film came out I had already relegated the transmission of Smolensk to a subplot and come to realise that the real challenge, relevance and interest lay not in representing the Smolensk conspiracy theory, but in the investigation of the conspiracist culture that produced Smolensk. In particular, the experience of living in Poland for 18 months in 2017 and 2018 showed me that Smolensk was just one aspect of PiS's channelling of anti-Russian and otherwise xenophobic historical master narratives. The challenge became how to represent this conspiracist culture within the constraints imposed by my chosen medium, the geopolitical conspiracy thriller novel? Like an eyeballed pencil sketch, the thriller is full of action and movement, is usually executed quickly, and the overriding imperatives are to provide a fast-moving plot and regular thrills, not a subtle examination of history. A social-historical memoir incorporating elements of gonzo journalism like Funder's *Stasiland* (2002) might be a more fitting form for such content.

## **1.2 Theoretical lens**

My discovery of social identity theory (SIT), and the branch of social psychology called the social identity approach (SIA), to which it belongs, suggested a way of reconciling my novel's form and content. From an SIT point of view, there seemed to be similarities in the social production and functioning of conspiracy theories and conspiracy thriller novels.

The SIT is a branch of social psychology. Social psychology is similar to sociology in that it also studies 'the group in the individual', but it belongs to the field of psychology (e.g. Hogg & Abrams 1998). Prior to the 1960s, social psychologists tended to view group behaviour as individual psychology 'writ large'. For example, in 1924, Floyd Allport proclaimed that psychology occurs in the mind of the individual and consequently 'there is no psychology of groups which is not essentially and entirely a psychology of individuals' (cited in Hogg & Abrams 1998, p. 11). This can be paraphrased as: 'Individuals behave differently in groups because the usual interpersonal factors which affect individuals' behaviour are present in greater number and/or greater strength. In short, there is nothing qualitatively different about groups' (Hogg & Abrams 1998, p. 11). In this tradition, Freud's (1922) account of crowd psychology supposes that 'the crowd releases id impulses', and this became the basis for his psychodynamic analysis of the social group, and for Dollard's and Adorno's theories of collective behaviour (Hogg & Abrams 1998). In describing their own program to develop a 'more social' social psychology, Tajfel and Turner (1986) challenge the social psychology of intergroup relations that has focused on patterns of individual prejudices and discrimination and on 'the motivational sequences of interpersonal interaction':

Outstanding examples of these approaches can be found, respectively, in the theory of authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 1950) and in the various versions and modifications of the theory of frustration, aggression and displacement (such as Berkowitz, 1962, 1969, 1974). The common denominator of most of this work has been the stress on the intraindividual or interpersonal psychological processes leading to prejudiced attitudes or discriminatory behaviour (p. 7).

Tajfel and colleagues' social identity theory (SIT) gave cognitive specificity to the idea that there *is* something qualitatively different about the behaviour of social groups, and of individuals when they identify with groups, placing SIT in a hitherto marginal contrarian tradition along with McDougall's 1921 'group mind' theory, Sherif's 1936 study of norms and Asch's 1950s conformity experiments (Hogg & Abrams 1998).

Henri Tajfel was born Jewish in Wroclawek, Poland, in 1919, at the beginning of the Second Republic, the brief window of independent Polish statehood

between the wars. He was one of that generation of Poles – unique in the past 300 years – that grew up and reached adulthood in a free Poland. He was an undergraduate at the Sorbonne in September 1939 when Germany and Russia simultaneously invaded Poland (Hogg & Abrams 1998). He enlisted in the French army, but was captured by the Germans when they invaded France. Fortunately, he was categorised as French rather than Jewish and spent the war in a succession of German prisoner-of-war camps (Hogg 2016). Meanwhile, three million Polish Jews were murdered by the German invaders, including Tajfel's family and most of his friends.

Having survived the war by getting himself put in the wrong social category, and finding that 90% of his birth category had been exterminated, Tajfel left the continent and went to university in England. He was drawn to social psychology by the question 'How is genocide possible?' (Billig 2002, p. 176). At this time many scholars in the social sciences were asking the same question, including Karl Popper, who introduced the term 'the conspiracy theory of society' in 1945 to account for the kind of theories that had guided Nazism and that had transmogrified Marxism into Stalinism, making whole national groups see the world differently.

Tajfel approached the question at a more fundamental level than Popper. He was not satisfied with existing accounts of human perception and his early research addressed the still-unresolved question of whether our motivations affect our perception. In the 1950s and 1960s he and his colleagues performed experiments testing the perception of magnitude. For example, in a classic experiment he and Wilkes (1963) found that people's judgment of the length of individual lines in a series of eight different-length lines was altered when four of the lines were labelled 'A' and four labelled 'B'. As a consequence of labelling, people saw the A lines as more similar in length (more different from the B lines), and vice versa.

The results of this and other experiments strongly supported the view that, in order to manage the 'infinite variability of stimuli', humans categorise (Tajfel 1957, 1959; Tajfel & Wilkes 1963), and that categorisation 'brings into sharp focus

a nebulous world, *by accentuating similarities between objects within the same category and differences between stimuli in different categories*. That is, the process of categorization produces an accentuation effect' (Hogg & Abrams 1998, p. 18; my italics).

Numerous later experiments confirmed this accentuation effect in our perception of people from different groups. So, for example, the focal dimension tested might be another continuous variable such as IQ rather than line length, and the correlated binary categorisation might be black people/white people rather than A/B. The accentuation effect was demonstrated in our classification of different races or ethnicities (e.g. Secord 1959; Tajfel, Sheikh, and Gardner 1964; Doise, Deschamps, and Meyer 1978). As with line length, it was shown to affect only 'dimensions with which the categorisation is believed to be correlated' (Hogg & Abrams 1998, p. 64), and the effect was found to be stronger when the categorisation was more relevant and important (e.g. Marchand 1970). These findings indicated the cognitive basis of stereotyping: stereotypes are not personal but social representations (representations of what other groups are like, and what our group is like) and they arise from a hardwired fault in our processing of stimuli: if we identify with any group, we have no choice but to see, hear, feel and taste the world in stereotypes.

In the 1970s, Tajfel shifted his attention to intra-group processes. He and his colleagues' 'minimal group experiments' demonstrated that even if an individual is categorised into an invented and obviously meaningless social group, he or she will still tend to identify with that group and to favour the ingroup over the outgroup (e.g. Tajfel 1978, 1982; Tajfel et al. 1971; Tajfel & Turner 1979). One way this favour expressed itself was that individuals will tend to sacrifice absolute levels of ingroup award (e.g. of fake money) in order to ensure that the ingroup gets more than the outgroup, indicating that the crucial impulse is to differentiate 'us' from 'them', whatever the cost.

According to Social Identity Theory (SIT), the accentuation error coupled with the bias pattern identified by the minimal group experiments, tends to translate in natural settings into favourable ingroup stereotypes and disparaging outgroup stereotypes, particularly where there is realistic conflict between ingroup and

outgroup (Tajfel & Turner 1986), but also in many cases of merely ‘social’ competition. SIT treats stereotypes as misperceptions (judged against objective reality) which are broadly agreed upon by an ingroup, but, at the same time, writers in the SIT tradition typically argue that stereotypes also perform a useful social function in explaining the social world and legitimising the past and current actions of the ingroup (Hornsey 2008). Unlike much humanities research, which tends to view stereotypes as ‘bad’ – as a synonym for prejudice – the SIA regards them more neutrally, recognising that we have about as much choice about stereotyping as we do about breathing.

Though it must be acknowledged that initially most of the empirical evidence supporting the SIA was derived from small-group experiments (Reicher & Hopkins 2001), which was deemed problematic (e.g. Hornsey 2008; Huddy 2001), the SIA has frequently been used in recent years to measure and describe groups as big and dispersed as ‘the nation’ (see e.g. Billig 1995; Pehrson, Brown & Zagefka 2009; Reicher & Hopkins 2001).

Tajfel and Turner’s SIT was followed by self-categorisation theory (SCT) and uncertainty-identity theory (UIT). Together, these three related theories, which were all useful to me, became central to the SIA. The SIA has examined how stereotypes are transmitted by political rhetoric (see e.g. Billig 1995; Reicher & Hopkins 2001) and one interview-based political psychology study (Sapountzis & Condor 2013) has looked from an SIT viewpoint at how political conspiracy theories are mobilised in political discussion, but the SIA has not previously been used to study narrative genres or forms, to my knowledge. It seemed to me that the conspiracy thriller novel and the popular conspiracy theory might be viewed as two channels for transmitting conformity-relevant information, which facilitate depersonalisation and the assemblage of social groups against external threats. Reading SIA theory provided me with a research question: ‘Do social identity processes work similarly in the production and functioning of popular conspiracy theories and conspiracy thriller novels?’

My social-cognitive approach contrasts with the approach taken by sociologist Luc Boltanski to essentially the same subject matter – in his case, ‘spy novels’ and

conspiracy theories – though he explores these narratives mainly in the service of a critical examination of the field of sociology. He follows the dominant social science tradition in conspiracy theory research by exploring the psychiatric concept of ‘paranoia’, to help explain the historically proximate emergence of detective fiction, spy fiction, the proliferation of popular conspiracy theories in the twentieth century and the disciplinary formation of sociology. He relies not on Freud’s description of paranoia as a mental illness suffered by an individual but on the earlier, more ‘social’, descriptions of paranoia by pre-Freudian psychiatrists who theorised that the paranoid was a ‘social type’ characterized by a set of psychological traits, including ‘pride, suspicion, psychic rigidity, falsity of judgement, inadaptability’ (p. 175-76).

Taking the symptoms of an individual pathology and applying them to a group in this way is exactly the kind of ‘individual psychology writ large’ that the SIA challenges. Boltanski is mainly concerned to show that a paranoid style of inquiry and a ‘paranoia trope’ in popular culture became fashionable from the late nineteenth century and that it characterises the detective novel, the spy novel, and the emerging discipline of sociology. He claims that underlying this compulsion to question is a ‘profound anxiety’ about ‘*the reality of reality*’ (p. 15; his emphasis), specifically, about the nation state’s ability to ‘underwrite’ the bureaucratised reality it had so recently created. Paranoia, then, is replaced with another individual pathology: anxiety. Boltanski does not mention recent psychological studies that show neither state nor trait ‘anxiety’ predict conspiracy theorising (Swami et al 2016). Nor does he mention Kramer and Messick’s more recent, experimentally-derived (and far less extreme) description of ‘collective paranoia’ (1998), which builds on SIA research into intergroup distrust, but which has not yet been tested as a predictor of conspiracy theorising, to my knowledge.

Among those who study twentieth century conspiracism, Boltanski is not unique in his neglect of recent experimental social psychology; non-social, non-empirical, pseudo-psychiatric descriptions of paranoia have been used extensively by literary scholars and scholars of conspiracy theories since the publication of historian Richard Hofstadter’s influential essay ‘The paranoid style in American



politics'. Hofstadter's use of the term 'paranoid style' was an analogical way of describing a pattern of political witch-hunts in American history. His choice of the term was influenced by the sociologist Karl Mannheim's (1936) 'styles of thought'. As Hofstadter makes clear at the beginning of the essay, 'In using the term paranoid style, I am not speaking in a clinical sense, but borrowing a clinical term for other purposes...When I speak of the paranoid style I use the term much as a historian of art might speak of the baroque or the mannerist style' (p. 3–4). More than any other scholar, Hofstadter is responsible for the continued tendency to link paranoia, which describes '*unjustified doubts*' and '*unwarranted fear*' (American Psychiatric Association 2013, p. 650), and conspiracy theorising.

My SIA perspective does not view the conspiracy thrillers and conspiracy theories I study as arising from individual personality traits writ large (paranoia or anxiety) or from epistemological vertigo ('a profound anxiety' about '*the reality of reality*'). The novels and theories I analyse are viewed as group-generated narratives which express distrust of an outgroup that is not unwarranted or unreasonable.

### **1.3 The role of practice**

While writing the first draft of *The red web*, and thinking as I was in SIA terms, it occurred to me that I identified with two of the groups I was writing about: Pole and Smolensk transmitter. Next, I began to notice correspondences between my own behaviour as a writer trying to follow thriller-genre conventions and the norm-guided behaviour of the various groups I was describing in my novel. When I read Tajfel's (1978) argument that ingroup affiliation 'need not be related, either in principle or in reality, to any requirement of face-to-face interaction between all, or most, members of the group' (p. 30), it occurred to me that the writers in a fictional genre might behave as a social group, and that the conventions of a genre might be regarded as norms of ingroup behaviour. In fact, some writers of a fictional genre, such as those in communities of practice (e.g. thriller writing groups or fan fiction writing communities) or associations like the International Thriller Writers, *are* in contact and providing each other directly with information about group norms, but many – perhaps most – writers of a fictional genre have

little or no interaction with other members. I added another clause to the research question in the previous paragraph, ‘and what does this reveal about the process of writing genre fiction?’, though it might be redundant, in order to test the hypothesis that the writers in a fictional genre behave as a social group in ways predicted by the SIA.

It seemed to me that such an approach might turn my inexperience as a thriller writer into a virtue. As a writer new to the ingroup of thriller-genre writers who was writing the first draft of his first thriller, I would be in a good position to notice things about the processes of self-categorisation, norm-internalisation and other SIA processes that a long-term member of the group might no longer be aware of. PLR would be the ideal method to explore such processes, since it forces you to notice and record your writerly behaviour. In my case, the same critical apparatus could also be used to examine my role as a conspiracy theory transmitter (of Smolensk and of the Trump–Russia conspiracy theory).

Hence, this exegesis explores the similarities not only between the operation of social identity processes in my novel’s subject matter (conspiracy theories), and my novel’s form (conspiracy thriller), but also in my own writing process. It argues that much of the creative behaviour of writers in a thriller subgenre like the one I wrote in is predicted by the SIA account of group processes. The main audiences for this research are: those who study thriller fiction; those engaged in thriller-based PLR; and, secondarily, scholars who study popular conspiracy theories.

#### **1.4 Overview**

Section two outlines my research methodology. It describes my approach to PLR, which uses the artistic process to generate original insights and supporting evidence for the argument of this exegesis.

Sections three to eight make the argument, interpolating reviews of the literature and information from other sources at relevant points. Section 3 reviews the literature on genre fiction production with a focus on the spy novel. Section 4 claims that a social identity perspective addresses a gap in the literature by

highlighting the role of social psychology in genre authorship. It observes that some conspiracy-thriller subgenres are produced in response to a perceived threat from an outgroup to the nation or to 'the West'. It identifies a lineage of threat-generated fictional subgenres in which the villain is a conspiracy, including the post-Soviet conspiracy thriller (PSCT), a subgenre that became apparent to me only in the process of writing one. It argues that a group of writers in this genre is a social group that behaves in conformity with behavioural norms that include, but are not limited to, the genre's conventions. Section 5 reviews the literature on popular conspiracy theories and finds that little past research treats conspiracy theories as narratives, and almost none looks at formal properties of those narratives that might aid their transmission. Section 6 identifies a characteristic process of distortion in the transmission of rumours and conspiracy theories, which corresponds with a particular tropological pattern. Section 7 discerns the same hyperbolising pattern in novels in the post-Soviet Conspiracy Thriller (PSCT) subgenre. Section 8 turns to a different set of stereotypes my novel transmits: *Polish* anti-Russian stereotypes. These stereotypes echo the stereotypes transmitted by the Cold War Conspiracy Thriller (CWCT) and make *The red web* somewhat idiosyncratic in PSCT terms. Section 9 summarises my findings and concludes.

## 2. Method

Practice-led research (PLR) or practice-based research (PBR) is a research methodology that seeks to generate new scholarly knowledge via the process of artistic creation. The exegesis discusses the provenance (history and context) and praxis (theory and production process) of the novel, and what original knowledge was generated through the writing process.

This project uses both kinds of creative writing research identified by Webb (2015) as capable of generating original scholarly knowledge: ‘research *through* writing’, which involves the writer-researcher in ‘a process of making pieces of creative writing, and reflecting consciously on an element of technical expertise: say, the work of plotting, or the use of language, or the construction of a character’; and ‘research *into* writing’, which ‘is usually understood as a mode of academic work that involves investigating the history, traditions and theoretical frameworks of the field of art, or of particular forms of art practice’ (pp. 13–14; her emphasis).

Biggs and Büchler (2007) argue that the test of a method is whether it can answer a research question, and that, ‘[i]t is essential, in order to design a research project that is grounded in the candidate’s own work, that a case is made for the instrumentality of that work in the research’ (Biggs & Büchler 2009, p. 10). My justification for choosing PLR is that the research method of writing fiction answers my research question as well as or better than other academic methods could answer my research question. As a writer new to the ingroup of thriller-genre writers, writing the first draft of his first thriller, I can offer an insider’s perspective on social identity processes that are relatively inaccessible to literary scholars who do not produce works in the genre, and which are no longer as noticeable to experienced writers in the genre.

At Swinburne University of Technology, all PhD theses must ‘make an original contribution to knowledge in terms of the originality of the approach and/or findings’ (Swinburne 2019, p. 2) and, according to the guidelines for examiners, the PhD by artefact and exegesis ‘explicitates the creative process and indicates its significance to a practice community’ (Swinburne 2018, p. 1). PhD creative

writing candidates using the artefact and exegesis model are required to produce an artefact of ‘publishable’ standard (Swinburne 2018), but the artefact itself is not required to make a contribution to scholarly knowledge. The job of the exegesis is to provide ‘insights into the work which a reading or viewing of the work cannot provide’ (Swinburne 2018). While some PLR researchers (e.g. Arnold 2012; Hopkins 2013; Whitting 2012) go further and speak of the ‘artefact-as-knowledge’ (Arnold 2012, p. 11), arguing that the artefact itself is a significant contribution to knowledge as well as the exegesis, I side with those researchers (e.g. Biggs & Büchler 2011; Rocco, Biggs & Büchler 2009) who argue that an artefact (a work of art or entertainment) is not in itself a contribution to cumulative scholarly knowledge because an artefact cannot easily communicate academic research findings to the relevant academic community in an unambiguous way. I argue that the artefact is, instead, a key part of the evidence supporting the scholarly conclusions (and/or the argument) in the exegesis, and that the process of making the artefact is the method by which hypothesis, research problems, and, to a large extent, scholarly findings, are generated. I recorded this process in a reflective journal which acts as ‘a bridge between the two [examinable] elements of the PhD’ (Arnold 2007, p. 8).

The fact that there is no standard model for PLR creates uncertainty for PhD candidates (Brien et al., 2017; Candlin 2000; Jenner 2017), and the fundamental incompatibility of the two elements has been discussed at length (Biggs and Büchler 2009, 2011; Candlin 2000; Kroll 1999; Magee 2012). In order to reduce my uncertainty (and in line with the discussion of uncertainty reduction in my exegesis), I was guided by Biggs and Büchler’s (2008, 2009) ‘criterion-based’ model for PLR research. This model is offered to PLR practitioners in all art forms and it assumes that there are minimal criteria research must meet, whether it is conducted using PLR or some other method (see also West 2016). Broadly, these criteria are: ‘question, answer, method and audience’, that is, a research question, an answer, a method that meaningfully connects the question to the answer, and ‘an audience for whom all this would have significance’ (Biggs & Büchler 2009, p. 8).

## 2.1 My PLR model

I found useful the 2000 PhD project of artist Daro Montag, which is recommended as a model example by Biggs and Büchler (2009), but I found the most compelling model example of PLR in the work of artist David Hockney (2001). PLR researcher Barbara Bolt (2006) uses Hockney's research as an example to illustrate how the 'special kind of sight' practitioners bring to scholarship can produce original insights into art that are significant to both practitioners and non-practitioners who study that artform.

Hockney treats the process of drawing as an experimental method which tests a hypothesis. His research question is 'related to debates in the field', in line with Milech and Schilo (2004, p. 10) and addresses a single 'thematic issue', in line with Biggs and Büchler (2009, p. 10). His artistic experiments using the camera lucida and camera obscura generate results in the form of drawings, which he then interprets and discusses in the light of theory, as a scientist writing up his results would. He uses optical science, art history scholarship and case studies of other artists' methods to test the findings generated by the case study of his own work. Findings from the earlier experiments inform later experiments, and the exegesis provides commentary on this. His discussion generates conclusions, which, it turns out, support his hypothesis that optical devices were used by painters much earlier and much more widely than previously thought. His conclusions were deemed original and significant not just by other artists but by art scholars, many of whom are, after all, studying the same artistic processes (see e.g. Bolt 2006; Gorman 2003).

Unlike many creative writing PhDs by artefact and exegesis, Hockney's work does not view the production of an artefact as 'the whole point' of the project; rather, it sees the point of the project as doing research. For me, it offers a number of advantages over many creative writing exegeses I have read: it identifies a gap in existing scholarly knowledge; its reflections are not scattered across a range of unrelated topics but are channelled into a coherent, sustained argument that addresses that single gap in our knowledge; it does not depend on the claim that works of art can communicate original scholarly knowledge; it

triangulates the findings generated by the single case study of the artist's own work with findings from other artists' cases and other branches of scholarly knowledge; it meets the criteria advanced in Biggs and Büchler's model for PLR, 'question, answer, method and audience' (2009, p. 8); and it makes an original contribution to knowledge that is comprehensible across disciplines (art practice and art history).

## **2.2 Research question**

The research question to be answered by this project is: Do social identity processes work similarly in the production and functioning of popular conspiracy theories and conspiracy thriller novels, and what does this reveal about the process of writing genre fiction?

## **2.3 Audience**

This research is potentially significant to scholars interested in the social production and functioning of both types of narrative, including practitioner-researchers.

## **2.4 Hypothesis**

I test the hypothesis that there are similarities between the social production and functioning of conspiracy theories and conspiracy thrillers, in SIA terms. I have not found a creative writing exegesis that begins with a hypothesis, but Webb (2008) concurs with Hockney about the benefit of testing a hypothesis, and Brien et al. (2017) report that it is becoming more common for PLR exegeses to do this. Further, my main theoretical lens is a branch of psychology, a field which relies on the hypothesis-testing research paradigm, so although I present the results as an argument, as literary critics and many social scientists do, I collected data to test a hypothesis, as psychology does.

## **2.5 Choice of genre**

As in all PLR, practice leads research, so I wrote a conspiracy thriller and transmitted a conspiracy theory to answer my research question. An advantage of writing a thriller is that the investigative method employed by the 'detectives' in

thrillers (including police detectives, spies, private investigators and lay investigators) parallels their authors' investigations into history (see e.g. Hall 2012 on the detective as historian and vice versa). This methodological congruence is particularly relevant in the case of a novel like *The red web* which investigates a crime that took place in a radically different sociopolitical environment (communist Poland, 30 years ago). Nation's investigation into his father's fate parallels my own ethnographic and archival research into Poland. Both of us, for good or ill, are engaged in the same historical excavations as the Smolensk conspiracists.

There is little scholarship on the post-Cold War spy novel, so most of my data on this subgenre came from a comparative analysis of 36 PSCTs. I also read 26 CWCTs, in order to see how the genre has evolved out of its Cold War predecessor, and I read or revisited 42 thrillers that are not PSCTs, to see how the PSCT differs from other contemporary thrillers. My criteria for selecting Cold War thrillers were that they had to be set between 1947 and 1991, focus on the conflict between the Soviet-led Communist Bloc and the Democratic West, and have a group villain (a conspiracy). My criteria for selecting PSCTs were that they had to be set after 1991, focus on the conflict between Russia (or a post-Soviet splinter conspiracy) and the Democratic West, and have a group villain.



### 3. Perspectives on spy novel production

This section reviews the literature on the production of popular fiction and the spy novel in particular, since that genre accounts for most novels in my subgenre, the post-Soviet conspiracy thriller. It argues that an SIA perspective on fictional genre authorship represents a gap in the literature on popular fiction production.

Recent critical writing about popular fiction genres tends to ignore the social psychology of authors. Marxist accounts and the ‘ideological’ theories that grew out of Marxist accounts (e.g. Althusser 1968/2004; Balibar & Macherey 1978/2001; Fiske 1987; Jameson 1981; Jameson 1991; Feuer 1992) tend to view genres as the products of ideology, ‘the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’ (Althusser 1968, p. 693). In this tradition, the *text*, not the individual author, is the object of study and authors are marginalised in the way that Marxist political systems marginalised individuals. For example, Jameson’s (1981) study of the emergence of realism in the nineteenth century asserts that:

The strategic value of generic concepts for Marxism clearly lies in the mandatory function of the notion of a genre, which allows the coordination of immanent formal analysis of the individual text with the twin diachronic perspective of the history of forms and the evolution of social life [...] So generic affiliations, and the systematic deviation from them, provide clues which lead us back to the concrete historical situation of the individual text itself, and allow us to read its structure as ideology, as a socially symbolic act, as a protopolitical response to a historical dilemma (p. 105).

The generic clues lead us back not to the individual author but to the ‘individual text’ and the ‘social life’ which produced it. The authors Jameson discusses (e.g. Balzac) are treated as composite biographical texts to be read alongside their novels for evidence of class conflict. The author is treated like History, a narrative which is only of interest insofar as it reveals the economic struggle between classes; the psychology of the real person who held the pen is an ‘absent cause’. Like history, the author can only be accessed in textual form.

Essentially, Jameson’s explanation of fiction production sees economics producing ideology which produces novels, and these transmit and reify ideology, which is encoded in ‘ideologemes’. His account does not take advantage of recent

work in experimental social psychology indicating how collective beliefs are shared within social groups, which has generated an empirically robust model of the group beliefs (stereotypes and norms), from which ‘ideologies’ are built, and which has specified the transhistorical processes by which these historically contingent beliefs put themselves into the heads of individuals (see e.g. Hogg & Abrams 1998). That said, Jameson’s invented tool for the Marxist analysis of texts seems to be a kind of stereotype:

The ideologeme is an amphibious formation, whose essential structural characteristic may be described as its possibility to manifest itself either as a pseudoidea – a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice – or as a protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the ‘collective characters’ which are the classes in opposition. (p. 73)

Jameson’s ideologeme is restricted to narratives and to category content related to social class, but this idea, arrived at through keen observation rather than rigorous empiricism, is essentially the same as the SIA’s understanding of a stereotype. Any stereotype treats an individual as a ‘collective character’, and the SIA’s stereotype is by nature dialectical since it is produced by a misperception – the ‘accentuation effect’ – arising from identification with one group opposed to another (see Section 1.2). And the polarising tendency of stereotypes fuels the need of ingroups to differentiate themselves from outgroups. Thus, like the ideologeme, the SIA’s concept of the stereotype is useful for the diachronic analysis of genre fiction as well as synchronic analysis. But, unlike the ideologeme or older versions of the concept of a stereotype, the SIA theory of a stereotype has been subjected to rigorous empirical testing and it underpins a robust and falsifiable theory of social cognition, whereas the ideologeme is grounded in Marxist theory, an unfalsifiable theory whose predictions are only partially supported by history.

An example of Marxist analysis of the spy novel is provided by Bloom (1990). In the introduction to *Spy thrillers*, he argues that the spy thriller is ‘*the* genre tied to *international* political and social tensions’ which reveals ‘*covert* activity by state organizations’ (p. 1; his emphasis), and that it is ‘one of the least attenuated forms of fiction [which can be] read as a historical record as well as a “mere” form of

entertainment' (p. 1). The spy thriller arose in England in the early twentieth century and consequently the threat in these novels was to nation and empire from imperial rivals Germany and Russia, and, at the same time, from transnational actors such as the anarchists and communists who were stirring up trouble between the British classes. The 'internationalised unrest' that resulted was 'the consequence of both a heightened class antagonism and a heightened yet contradictory cohesive national identity based on xenophobia.' (p. 2) He also notes that it was at this time when the foreign and foreign-instigated threats to Britain were rising that the nation-state took charge of regulating the lives of citizens:

At this moment the bourgeois state came into being, armed with the legislative and cultural power to regulate all forms of expression (including dissent), either through governmental interference (bureaucratised secret police forces at one end) or through cultural control of the mass circulation of printed material (novels, newspapers and journals)...Nation states, through the development of crude propaganda machines and the ownership of the most widely disseminated literature could play off their own disquiet about class division against the rising fear of foreignness. (p. 2)

He contends that the spy novel arose in this period as 'a useful propaganda machine to feed paranoia about foreignness' (p. 2), but also to express paranoia about 'state control over the *indigenous* people' (p. 2; his emphasis). Other critics have also employed the individual psychiatric diagnosis of 'paranoia', which is characterised by 'unjustified' and 'unwarranted' doubts and fears (American Psychiatric Association 2013, p. 650), when trying to understand the social climate that produces spy fiction (e.g. Boltanski 2014; Hepburn 2005; Seed 2003). According to Bloom, the 'paranoia' fomented by the propagandist authors of these texts suggests 'both an obsession with violation by *outside* agencies and as violation of individual autonomy by *internal* agencies who are seemingly behind government and beyond its control' (p. 2; his emphasis). Since his analysis focuses on texts rather than authors, he does not specify whether the state does anything to motivate writers to produce these propagandistic spy novels. If spy novelists are propagandists, then the paranoia exhibited by a text would seem to suppose

intentionality on the part of an author, whether or not the author shares the fear his text is crafted to elicit, but authors' intentions are not discussed.

Like other scholars (e.g. Boltanski 2014; Palmer 1978), Bloom suggests that the difference between the detective novel and spy novel is that in the spy novel the villain is a group, whereas the protagonist is an individual:

The confrontation between the individual and the state delineated in spy novels differentiates them from detective novels where the individual is confronted by other individuals and aligns it with science fiction where macro sociological and technological changed superstate systems confront each other through individual 'future' people. (p. 4)

Thus, the source of conflict is not viewed as state versus state, with both villain *and* hero representing competing nations, but individual versus state.

Palmer's (1978) structuralist/sociological account of the 'thriller' (a category which in his conception comprises spy novels and hard-boiled detective fiction) makes a similar argument to Bloom. He goes so far as to claim that there are just two criteria a novel must meet to be considered a 'thriller': first, a conspiracy that threatens society, and, second, a protagonist who embodies the 'competitive individualism' which must overcome this evil collective. He traces this ideological confrontation between the individual and collectivism across 150 years of British and American culture, and sees the climactic destruction of the conspiracy in a spy novel as a triumph of the individual over sinister collective forces within the proletariat. Hence, like Bloom, he argues that the protagonist's victory is not just a victory for individualism, it is also a victory for conservatism. In both Bloom's and Palmer's analyses, then, the struggle of interest is not the conflict between nations the plot enacts, but two domestic ideological struggles: between individual and collective, and between conservatism on the one hand and revolutionary forces on the other.

Besides Bloom and Palmer, a number of other critics have argued that spy novel conventions serve a conservative ideology (e.g. Hepburn 2005; Holloway 2009), echoing Balibar and Macherey's argument in 'Literature as an ideological form' that '[c]lass struggle is not abolished in the literary text and the literary effects which it produces. They bring about the reproduction, as dominant, of the

ideology of the dominant class' (1978, p. 141). Bloom divides spy fiction into the 'essentially conservative', an historical force which, on the one hand, produces works labelled Buchan and Fleming, but also Conrad, all of which seek 'to preserve the status quo', and, on the other, the type of novel which arose during the Cold War, 'as a *direct vehicle of state propaganda*' (p. 7; his emphasis), which he illustrates using Harling's *The enormous shadow* (1955), arguing that 'This propagandistic function in the novel...makes the genre a direct intervention by the state at the level of the imagination by one of its unpaid functionaries: the Cold War Artist.' (p. 10)

Other scholars (e.g. Boltanski 2014; Cawelti & Rosenberg 1987; Denning 1987), follow Symons (1972) in allowing that there is also a non-conservative spy novelist:

It is right, I think, to see two traditions in the spy story as in the crime novel. The first is conservative, supporting authority, making the implicit assertion that agents are fighting to protect something valuable in society. The second is radical, critical of authority, claiming that agents perpetuate, and even create, false barriers between 'Us' and 'Them'. Fleming belongs to the first tradition, le Carré's early work to the second. (Symons, p. 225)

More subtly, Boltanski (2014) observes that the 'right-wing' and 'nationalist' spy novels published between 1915 and 1963 see the enemy as Capital. The transnational forces of anarchism and communism, are viewed, paradoxically, as Capital's *servants*. On the other hand, 'left-wing' spy novels, beginning with Ambler's, see the enemy as Capital and its servants, the ruling elites.

In focusing on class struggle these critics tend to marginalise the conflict between nations that characterises spy novel plots. Denning's (1987) Jamesonian take on the 'spy thriller' suggests this is because the geopolitics of spy novels is not very interesting, and that the more interesting themes of treachery and imposture are separable from the geopolitics:

[The spy thriller's] subject is global politics: the Empire, fascism, communism, the Cold War, terrorism. Yet its political subject is only a pretext to the adventure formulas and the plots of betrayal, disguise, and doubles which are at the heart of the genre and of the reader's investment. So it is important to move beyond the manifest politics of these

cover stories to their characteristic narrative structures in order to re-emerge with a sense of the ideologies of the forms themselves (p. 2).

The last sentence echoes Jameson (1981) and sums up the approach of this tradition of spy novel criticism, which perhaps assumes that allegiance to nations is a symptom of ‘false consciousness’. While these accounts acknowledge how the spy novel followed geopolitics, such that the nationality of the villain in the novel reflects the villain in the news (e.g. France, followed by Germany, followed by Russia), and generally also allow that this has some influence on forms – for example, the uncovering of Russian spies in the real world produces spy novels with ‘mole-hunting’ plots – they then argue as if the struggle of interest in the spy novel is *within* the nation, between competing ideologies, rather than between nations. Changes in genre conventions are caused by ideology. For example, the left-wing tradition of Ambler rejected the ideology of the right and consequently rejected some of the right-wing spy novel’s aesthetic forms, such as the simple, romantic plots and hero types of Buchan and Sapper, choosing instead to produce complex, realist plots and protagonists who are ‘popular front figures’ rather than clubbish conservatives (e.g. Boltanski 2014; Denning 1987).

Though only Bloom explicitly labels the spy novelist a ‘state functionary’, the implied motivations of spy novelists are ideological and financial and the Marxist critic’s job is generally seen as trying to identify the author’s ‘real’ agenda and the ‘real’ (economic) power relations the geopolitical surface narrative hides (because ‘it is important’ not to be distracted by the ‘manifest politics’). It is worth noting that these critical moves resemble not only those of Marx but also those employed by the conspiracy theorists<sup>2</sup> I discuss later.

Turning from Marxist accounts to structuralist accounts, Merry’s (1977) Russian-formalist-influenced analysis of the spy novel gives a little more importance to intergroup processes when describing how ‘the spy thriller assembles an elemental theology of right and wrong’, such that ‘[t]he non-Anglophone enemy represents the dark side of the Iron Curtain’ and ‘[t]he primal

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<sup>2</sup> A point Latour (2004) also makes about the whole enterprise of ‘critique’. Indeed, Latour lays some of the blame for the current proliferation of conspiracy theories at the feet of poststructuralism, whose critical moves the conspiracists have adopted.

struggle of Bond vs. Blofeld becomes an analogue of the Cold War' (p.4), with the implied struggle 'group versus group', rather than 'group versus individual'. Eco's structuralist analysis (1987) notes the same Manichean ideology in Fleming. Whereas Bond is portrayed as 'beautiful' and 'virile', the villains from behind the Iron Curtain are 'monstrous' and 'sexually impotent or homosexual' (p. 148 – 153). He notes an amelioration in Fleming's tendency to cast horrifying Soviets as villains in the 1960s, but does not – and is perhaps not in a position to – comment on what motivated this change. For example, was it because Fleming feared the Russians less? Or because he thought readers feared them less? Or both? But Eco's main concern is to treat Fleming's novels as pastiches constructed from eclectic literary borrowings stacked into moralistic narrative structures derived from fairy tales. Similarly, Merry finds '[t]he fit between the standard pattern of the folktale and the modern spy thriller is a strikingly precise one' (p. 204), but he does not examine these archetypes in terms of psychology. Other critics (e.g. Denning 1987) have observed that a description of the spy novel that finds spy stories in folktales or Homer becomes too abstract to be useful.

Like structuralist accounts, poststructuralist accounts tend to view genres as groups of texts that relate to and generate each other (e.g. Barthes 1975; Belsey 1980; Hepburn 2005) and consequently they also tend to ignore author psychology. In fact, many accounts of fiction production in this tradition deny or ignore the relation between authorial intention and a text's meaning (see e.g. Barthes 1967/1989; de Man 1979; Knapp & Michaels 1982).

A limitation of most accounts of the spy novel I consulted is that they reference only a small sample of canonical spy novelists to support their claims about the character of the genre. Boltanski (2014) mentions just 12 novelists in his history of the spy novel from 1915 to 1963, and argues, further, that all spy novels are mere 'transformations' of Buchan's *The thirty-nine steps* (1915). Bloom's (1990) introduction to *Spy thrillers from Buchan to le Carré* mentions just eight writers, all but one canonical. The next 12 chapters in that book are largely devoted to canonical writers and Buchan and le Carré get two chapters each. The bulk of Cawelti and

Rosenberg's (1987) book on the spy novel comprises chapters on Buchan, Ambler, Greene, Fleming and le Carré, and Denning (1987), Hepburn (2005) and Woods (2008) cover more-or-less the same authors. This 'best of' approach focuses on innovative writers in the spy novel's history (e.g. Ambler, Greene, le Carré), who tend to be relatively sophisticated and literary novelists trying to avoid genre clichés, rather than statistically 'normal' spy novelists cheerfully reproducing clichés, so the canon is skewed towards more sophisticated and unrepresentative literary writers. This canon almost always includes Conrad, Buchan, 'Sapper' (FC McNeile), Ambler, Maugham, Fleming, le Carré and Greene. Denning sees a problem with applying a canonical approach borrowed from literary criticism to popular fiction, but only because it confuses 'the best' with the 'best-selling', and he devotes most of his 1987 book to the same group of canonical writers. It was only when I read the narrative reviews of the spy novel's history by Symons (1972), and, even moreso, by Merry (1977) and Palmer (1978), that I realised the canonical approach ignores dozens of non-canonical spy novelists.

It is the canonical approach's apparent overgeneralisation from a limited and unrepresentative sample that the quantitative study of genres used by critics like Moretti challenges (see e.g. Moretti 2003, 2004a, 2004b; see also Bode 2008, Bode & Dixon 2009). Moretti (2003) attempts 'a more rational literary history' (p. 68) of novel production between 1700 and 2000, arguing that: 'a field this large cannot be understood by stitching together separate bits of knowledge about individual cases' (p. 68). Instead of characterising fictional genres using a small sample of just a few familiar texts, he and his colleagues based their findings on large samples, and, where possible, the entire corpus of a genre. But by using samples which sometimes number in the thousands of novels, particularity is lost and topics such as author psychology are disregarded in favour of noticing patterns in text production.



Like Moretti, Rafferty's (2008) quantitative and semiotic analysis of the Troubles Thriller<sup>3</sup> subgenre rejects the usual 'intuitive' and 'impressionistic' approach to popular fiction criticism. She zooms in on one subgenre and generates statistical inferences from a sample of 30 novels about the conventions of the subgenre and how they changed over the period in which it flourished (1969–1998). This allows her to detect changes in the genre's history that the canonical approach missed. Her approach is responsive to history, but her main focus is social-semiotic, and author psychology is reduced to the abstract idea that authors have a choice to accept, modify or challenge genre conventions (borrowed from Stuart Hall).

Attempting to read the psychology of authors through reading their fictional works was out of fashion even before Barthes' influential essay, 'The death of the author' (Barthes 1967/1989). Psychiatric perspectives have continued to be used in Freudian and Lacanian analyses of texts, usually of characters rather than writers, as in Hepburn's 2005 book on the spy novel, though in *The political unconscious* Jameson turns to these theories to analyse his early 'realist genre' novelist Balzac (who is knowable only in textual form), in an attempt to connect author psychology to ideology. Individual psychology theories have also informed studies of writers' creativity (e.g. Groeben 2001), reader reception studies (e.g. Graesser et al. 2001; Holland 1973, 2003) and studies of the cognitive benefits associated with reading fiction (e.g. Kidd & Castano 2013; Mar & Oatley 2008). A reflexive individual psychology lens is used in at least one practice-led research exegesis accompanying a novel (Todd 2012). Accounts of the spy novel often draw on authors' biographies, but usually only in terms of an author's ideology and thoughts about fiction and writing. For example, Boltanski (2014) argues that spy novels emerged out of social 'paranoia' and 'anxiety', but stops short of attempting to engage with the psyche of John Buchan, his Ur-spy novelist:

Can one say of John Buchan...that he was paranoid? [...] In the absence of any information about John Buchan's psychic life, his family background or his sexual cathexes, I shall be careful not to establish the slightest parallel between the description of

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<sup>3</sup>The Troubles Thriller flourished in Britain between 1969 and 1998 and typically villainised the terrorist Irish Republican Army (IRA).

this mental illness ...and the author's life and work. Still, we can note that, if he was actually paranoid, the affliction did not prevent him...from being perfectly integrated into the respectable society of his time (p. 171-174).

He goes on to argue that Buchan's work, and spy novels in general, exhibit a tendency to extend an inquiry 'beyond what was reasonable in the ordinary circumstances of life' (Boltanski 2014, pp. 175-6), a symptom, along with 'falsity of judgement', 'delirium of interpretation', and 'a delusion of grandeur' exhibited by Kraepelin's (1899) 'social type' of paranoid. He does not stop at suggesting that interest in this paranoid-like penchant for obsessive inquiry influenced the conventions of the emerging detective and spy novel genres, but goes further and argues that some sub-clinical version of 'social paranoia' *motivated production of these novels* (even if writers like Buchan were not clinically paranoid). He argues that the spy novel, the diagnosis of paranoia and the pattern of paranoiac inquiry that came to be called conspiracy theorising on the one hand and 'sociology' on the other emerged at around the same time out of a 'profound anxiety' about the nation-state's ability to 'underwrite' or protect the norms and institutions that constituted 'stable reality'.

Taking the symptoms of an individual pathology such as anxiety or paranoia and applying them to a group or society as Boltanski does is exactly the kind of 'individual psychology writ large' that the SIA challenges. Like most experimental social psychology, the SIA contends that, '[i]n general, sociology and early non-experimental social psychology leave unanswered the question of precisely how, through what psychological process, society or the group actually installs itself in the mind of the individual and thereby shapes behaviour' (Hogg & Abrams, p. 14). This gap is evident in Boltanski's study of spy novels: he avoids commenting on his prototypical spy novelist's individual psychology, but then uses concepts from early psychiatry to comment on the social psychology of the British culture that produced Buchan and other spy novelists.

Literary criticism that does take advantage of more recent social psychology perspectives typically focuses on the psychology of individual characters in the novel as expressions of social stereotypes (e.g. Neale 1980/1993; Schweinitz

2010), or the responses of reading communities to popular fiction (e.g. Birdi & Syed 2011; Taylor 2015). When I reviewed the scholarly literature on popular (a.k.a. ‘category’ or ‘genre’) fiction production (not reception) I found no previous studies that used a recent social psychology lens, let alone an SIA perspective<sup>4</sup>.

To my knowledge, nobody has previously looked at a group of genre writers as a social group from a social psychology perspective. Writers are often treated as members of broader (usually ideological or national) groups, but not as a distinct psychological subgroup. I interpret my subgenre, the post-Soviet conspiracy thriller (PSCT) in terms of social cognition, such that spy novels are seen as the norm-guided ‘writing behaviour’ of a social group. They transmit normative beliefs to an ingroup, and are motivated not by paranoia or anxiety but by rational distrust of a hostile national outgroup.

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<sup>4</sup> I found one doctoral dissertation in Library and Information Science (Rebaza 2009) which makes some use of SIT to examine female writers producing fan fiction on Live Journal weblog sites, but while this community of practice is treated as a social group, the writers in particular genres are not treated as distinct social groups.

#### **4. The PSCT: a narrative vector for norm transmission**

The hypothesis tested by this project was that there are similarities in the social production and functioning of conspiracy theories and conspiracy thrillers that are predicted by the social identity approach (SIA) to social psychology. Testing this hypothesis through practice and the other methods of writerly research outlined in Section 3 generated results: drafts, reflective journal entries and statistics. The discussion of these results is structured as an argument, in line with Biggs and Büchler's (2009) recommendation that the exegesis should make an argument. Sections four to eight defend the contention that the SIA reveals similarities in the social production and functioning of conspiracy thrillers and popular conspiracy theories, using my own practice as a case study. Each subsection begins not by describing my practice, as in some PLR exegeses, but by making a new step in the argument and then supporting that claim with evidence from my practice and other sources.

##### **4.1 Ephemeral novels of fear for the nation**

Sales of the Cold War spy novel declined sharply after 1991 and major publishers became reluctant to publish spy novels (Carvajal 1998). Ken Follett explained the collapse of the market and his own reasons for no longer writing spy novels concisely: 'We're not afraid of the Russians anymore. You need someone to be afraid of' (quoted in Carvajal 1998, para 29). I interpret this as a comment on author psychology as well as reader psychology. Follett reports here a strong and obvious motive other than (or in addition to) the ideological and financial. His comment does not suggest paranoia or anxiety, because in both those conditions fear would tend to persist irrationally after the real-world threat had disappeared (DSM-5, 2013). He suggests he wrote novels with Soviet villains (e.g. *Lie down with lions*) because he was afraid of the Russians, and that when that threat disappeared he lost the motivation to write spy novels. He probably uses 'we' to describe the Western ingroup, but the 'we' might just as easily describe a group of writers who used to write against Russia. His comment resonates with me because it was my renewed perception of Russia as a credible threat to the West that caused me to start *The red web* and sustained my interest in it over the several years it took to write.

Like Follett, this section treats the spy novel, along with other geopolitical conspiracy thriller subgenres, as a response to the reasonable perception of threat from an outgroup. I support the argument with evidence from my own practice as well as from contextual analysis of the subgenre whose norms I had to learn.

Subgenres expressing fear about a foreign threat to the nation predate the spy novel and recent corpus analysis shows just how many of these subgenres there have been. Moretti's (2003) analysis of the corpus of novels published in English and other languages between 1700 and 2000 reveals a lineage of relatively short-lived fictional genres that document some political upheaval. These genres (and/or subgenres) last around three decades on average and include the Jacobin Novel of 1789 to 1805, the anti-Jacobin novel of 1791 to 1805, the Military Novel of 1826 to 1850, and Invasion Literature of 1871 to 1914. As to why these 'political' subgenres die after a few decades, Moretti says 'if what most attracts readers is the drama of the day, then, once the day is over, so is the novel' (p. 84).

We can identify a similar lineage of subgenres and label it 'Novels of Fear for the Nation'. It would include British fiction of a German Invasion (1871–1913) described by Meisel (1990) and Matin (1997), which overlaps with the pre-WWI Spy Novel and I.F. Clarke's 'Invasion Literature'; the Troubles Thriller (1969–1998; Rafferty 2008), in which the Irish Republican Army threatened Britain; the Cold War Spy Novel (1947–1991); the War on Terror Thriller (2001–the present; Holloway 2009), and the genre I wrote in, the post-Soviet conspiracy thriller (PSCT; 1992–the present). In the last three genres listed, the threat can be either national or to the transnational group called 'the West', or, more often, both.

I use the term 'conspiracy thriller' for my subgenre because it allows me to incorporate in my sample some books that were not marketed as spy fiction, but which function similarly. The term is more popular among film scholars than among literary scholars, and it generated 8598 hits in the ProQuest database on 15 November 2019. In the context of my research, which focuses on group psychology, it is not too obvious to point out that in the conspiracy thriller the threat comes from a group rather than an individual, echoing the distinction a number of scholars of the spy novel (e.g. Bloom 1990; Palmer 1978) make

between ‘detective novels’ (individual villains) and ‘spy novels’ (collective villains)<sup>5</sup>. However, novels such as Lee Child’s *One shot* (2005), Zygmunt Milosewski’s *Entanglement* (2007), and the last two books in Stieg Larsson’s Millenium trilogy, though usually categorised as ‘crime’, or ‘detective’ fiction, are all conspiracy thrillers which feature post-Soviet conspiracies, and so I include them in my sample along with the spy novels. I exclude novels from other crime and thriller subgenres which have individual protagonists, including whodunnits and serial-killer thrillers.

Since there is little published scholarly writing about the post–Cold War spy novel, and no taxonomy that I have been able to find, I have had to collect my own data on the PSCT in order to contextualise my novel. Most of the spy novels and thrillers in my sample are the kind of novel Mark Fenster, a critic of conspiracy fiction, calls ‘latter-day pulp’ (2008, p. 119), such as novels in the Ludlum and Clancy franchises, along with a few more cerebral novels, for example, by John le Carré. In its concern to provide regular visceral thrills, this subgenre seems closer to the ‘spy thriller’ or ‘adventure romance’ tradition of Buchan, Sapper and Fleming than the more cerebral spy fiction of Ambler, Greene and le Carré.

## **4.2 Forming the post-Soviet conspiracy thriller**

My decision to write a geopolitical conspiracy thriller was triggered by a singular convergence of history and Tom Clancy. In January 2014 I read Tom Clancy and Mark Greaney’s spy/techno-thriller novel *Command authority*, first published in December 2013, which describes a fictional Russian annexation of the Crimea and invasion of the Donbas region of Ukraine. This might have remained a ‘paranoid’ spy novel scenario, except that a few months after its publication, in late February and early March 2014, Russia annexed the Crimea and invaded the Donbas region of Ukraine.

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<sup>5</sup> Though Palmer’s (1978) *The thriller* argues that all thrillers have a conspiracy for a villain, I have not found this to be the case. Many thrilling whodunnits and serial-killer thrillers have individual villains. Admittedly, there are various definitions of the term ‘thriller’. It might even be argued that every popular genre – romance, science fiction, fantasy etc – has a ‘thriller’ end of the spectrum.

Russia had reappeared as only a vague and intermittent threat on my geopolitical radar in 2000 (the rape of Grozny) and 2008 (the invasion of Georgia), but now I was struck by the feeling that our Cold War adversary was back. I followed the progress of the 2014 invasion with fascination, because it was as if Putin was using *Command authority* as a script, not just in terms of the physical invasion, which, in both book and reality was led by Russian *spetnaz* (special forces) soldiers posing as Ukrainian separatists (Appelbaum 2018; Ostrovsky 2015), but in the mechanisms of ‘hybrid warfare’ by which Ukraine had evidently been ‘softened up’ prior to the invasion. These included agents provocateurs staging false-flag attacks (Hughes 2014), Gazprom turning off the gas supply (Grigas 2017), manufactured conspiracy theories (Karlsen 2016) and the ‘laundrying’ of manufactured ‘news’<sup>6</sup> (Frau-Meigs 2018), cyber attacks (Karlsen 2016), and ‘passportisation’<sup>7</sup> (Grigas 2016).

The experience of reading *Command authority* and seeing its key events play out in reality within months of its publication started me thinking I might like to write about the Russian threat, and this became a firm plan in 2015.

#### **4.1.1 Salience: revival of two anti-Russian categories**

The Russian threat made salient two social groups: ‘imperialist Russians’ and ‘anti-Russian thriller writers’. An account of the SIA concept of salience is the first step in showing that intergroup competition alone can produce a spy novel subgenre without recourse to explanations which depend on the profit motive or any sub-clinical psychiatric diagnosis. According to self-categorisation theory (SCT), the second theory to emerge under the SIA umbrella, we categorise ourselves in the same way we categorise other people and things, and we categorise ourselves as more personal or more social, depending on the situation (Tajfel & Turner 1986). SCT has showed experimentally that individual self-perception becomes depersonalised as shared social identity becomes salient, meaning people come to see themselves less as unique individuals and more as ‘interchangeable

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<sup>6</sup> Filtering Russian government disinformation through a number of innocent-looking third-party websites until it is picked up by mainstream news media.

<sup>7</sup> The issuing of Russian passports to Ukrainians of Russian ethnicity to create the impression of a persecuted Russian minority inside Ukraine (Grigas 2016).

representatives of some shared social category membership' (Turner et al. 1994, p. 455). To put it another way, depersonalisation is the process by which individuals are transformed into groups.

Turner and colleagues (e.g. Turner et al. 1987, 1994) proposed three levels of 'inclusiveness' in self-categorisation: individual identity, which is the level of self-categorisations based on interpersonal comparisons; the more inclusive level of social identity (I belong to this group but those people are excluded from our group); and the yet more inclusive level of human identity (we're all humans). For SCT theorists, this classification replaced Tajfel and Turner's (1986) bi-polar spectrum of behaviour: at one end 'purely interpersonal' behaviour (e.g. talking to a close friend), at the other 'purely social' behaviour (e.g. opposing armies in a battle). However, SCT retained the same principle of 'functional antagonism', meaning the more one level (human, social, or individual) becomes salient, the less salient the other levels become (Hornsey 2008).

As mentioned, Tajfel and colleagues' minimal group experiments showed that just assigning a social category to someone, even when the category is meaningless, tends to promote identification with that category and bias towards the ingroup. In natural settings identification tends to be stronger, since people tend to get something out of identifying with particular categories, such as a sense of belonging, financial benefit or self-esteem. Identification is likely to be even stronger and more widespread when an external threat from an outgroup is perceived. For example, the threat from Russia to Western Europe tends to trigger in the individuals living in those territories a shift away from personal identity and a stronger level of social identification with a cognitive category or categories that have been latent but are now salient (e.g. Poland, Europe, NATO, the West). In this process of depersonalisation, the content of the 'self' category changes, such that those individuals begin to think of themselves less as 'I' and more, for instance, as 'we Ukrainians' or 'we in Europe'. Self-categorisation leads to self-stereotyping, and this happens on all dimensions correlated with the categorisation, including personality traits, behaviour, attitudes, beliefs, needs, norms of conduct, emotional reactions, evaluative status or prestige relative to



other groups, and physical appearance (Turner 1982). Thus, the ‘accentuation effect’ which SIT described in relation to categories of things and other people also governs self-perception (Hogg & Abrams 1998).

The salience of a social category with which we might identify depends on two factors: ‘accessibility’ and ‘fit’ (Oakes 1987). These concepts explain well how individuals, including writers, assemble or reassemble themselves into groups in response to the threat from ‘imperialist Russia’.

### **Accessibility**

‘Relative accessibility’ (Oakes, Turner & Haslam 1991) refers to the cognitive ‘readiness’ of a social category to be activated in an individual’s mind. Which mental category I assign the other person or myself to depends on which category seems most relevant, useful, and best supported by evidence from the real world at the time, which in turn depends to some extent on my ‘present expectations, and current motives, values, goals, and needs’ (Turner et al. 1994, p. 455). To illustrate, few, if any, contemporary novelists categorise themselves as ‘Jacobin novel writers’, ‘Newgate novel writers’ or ‘evangelical novel writers’ because these categories, though they were popular genres once, are less cognitively accessible nowadays than, say, ‘science fiction novel writer’ or ‘spy novel writer’. I identified with the category ‘thriller writer’ largely because it was cognitively accessible.

While the ‘front story’ of *The red web* was accessible because it was in the news at the time I began to write the novel, following Russia’s 2014 invasion and continued occupation of Ukraine, the ‘back story’ – the 1980s story – invokes my childhood stereotypes of Russian imperialism. In my childhood, our group, ‘the West’, was opposed to an outgroup called ‘the Communist Bloc’. Much of the communist bloc comprised an empire occupied by Russian forces and controlled by Moscow known as the Eastern Bloc or the Warsaw Pact, the core territories of which belonged to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In contrast, the USSR’s ‘satellites’ or ‘allies’ in the Eastern Bloc were nominally sovereign nations, but in reality they too were territories controlled by the USSR: uprisings in East Germany (1953), Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968) were crushed by Russian tanks and the map of Eastern Europe was red all the way to the Elbe.

In childhood, I was frightened of this ‘Evil Empire’, as US President Reagan called it in 1983. I can remember where I was standing in the primary school yard when I was struck by fear of a nuclear war that ‘they’ would start. I was 14 when Western scientists noticed the Chernobyl reactor meltdown, forcing Russia to admit to the disaster, but only after the enormous cloud of radioactive fallout had already reached Sweden (Radio Sweden 2011). Chernobyl made a strong impression on me because we had long been conditioned by our news, art and political rhetoric to expect just such a cloud of fallout. When Putin took office as Acting President of the Russian Federation in late 1999 and immediately began to destroy Grozny, the capital of separatist Chechnya, it was less than eight years since the fall of the USSR. For someone of my age who had identified with ‘the free world’ during the Cold War, the category ‘imperialist Russia’ was still relatively accessible, and the stereotypes that category contained were still ‘front of mind’.

In 2015, when I started brainstorming for *The red web*, I found that when I unpacked my cognitive category ‘Russia’ it contained many old stereotypes from my Cold War categorisation of Russia – the last time a threat from Russia caused me to define myself in opposition to it. I had met some very nice Russians since the Cold War and I had even identified as a Marxist for several years at university, but the stereotypes about imperialist Russia that emerged included the stereotypes of Russia as a secretive, conspiratorial menace, a threat of nuclear annihilation and a source of accidental radioactive contamination – a carcinogenic nation.

The motifs of radioactive poison and communism-as-cancer run through *The red web*. I am convinced they are childhood stereotypes because I have not noticed such a preoccupation with cancer in any other PSCT novel, nor any CWCT novel. I did notice ‘red cancer’ imagery in a couple of places in the post-communist Sejm’s (parliament’s) 1992 debates about how far Poland should pursue decommunization (see Łoś 1995), but only after I was well into the first draft of the novel. Nation’s father is an oncologist, a man who kills cancer. Nation’s task is to find the ‘cancer’ that swallowed his father, and the particular angiogenic agents inside the Polish body who are trying to let Russian imperialism

metastasise into Poland again. Ryszard Okula's oncologist colleague Antoni Rozanski became for me a metonym for the corrupt remains of communist regimes. What *Nation's* detective work uncovers is that Rozanski and Mitkin are metaphors for the communist project: the men who use nuclear medicine to kill resemble those Soviet economic physicians who set out to heal the world by ending poverty and inequality, but only succeeded in making it sicker. The Director's eyes, which get hot when he's angry and Mitkin's bulging, hyperthyroidal eyes are equated with post-Soviet evil by Dolinska as she describes the officer who mock-executed her in Chechnya:

You get these bug-eyed types in the Russian forces. It's probably just hyperthyroidism from whatever radioactive dump spilled them out, but I always think their eyes bulge from all the evil they've seen. (p. 302)

The behaviour of the school bully, Konrad Guz (a Polish surname meaning 'bump', 'lump' or 'tumour'), who makes empty promises to an army of little people (grade one students), in order to bind them to his service, reflects the reality behind twentieth-century totalitarian regimes' rhetoric. *Nation's* encouragement of Wes to 'Hit him with everything you got' (p. 92) partly reflects his recognition that every generation spawns new 'lumps' that might grow into Stalins.

The imagery of angiogenesis – the process by which a tumour uses chemical agents to trick the body into sprouting new blood vessels to feed the tumour – also draws on my Cold War childhood association of Russia with cancer. The image of a branching circulatory system of influence complemented the idea of a red network of treachery. It also served as a metaphor for contemporary gas politics. European policy on Russia is shaped as much by Europe's dependence on Russian natural gas as by its fear of Russia's nuclear arsenal (Grigas 2017; Raszewski 2012). A map of Russia's international gas pipelines looks like a map of blood vessels: they run thick across borders, then divide and divide again, penetrating nations down to the household level. But the pipelines do not just supply gas; they also suck power from Europe into Russia, the way angiogenesis

siphons blood into a tumour. The Yamal–Europe international gas pipeline prompts just such thoughts in Nation:

Half an hour down the road a gas pipeline a meter wide reared out of the weeds. It entered a compressor station, then dove back into the earth outside a small town, as if preferring not to be seen by the townspeople. Maybe to hide the darker purpose of Russia's international pipelines: sucking political will out of other nations. (p. 343)

Neutral stereotypes which have a cognitive function but no evaluative function such as 'Russians are tall' are easily disconfirmed, for example, by meeting a few short Russians (Hogg & Abrams 1998), but strongly evaluative stereotypes like those in my no-longer-dormant 'imperialist Russia' category, are notoriously difficult to abolish (Hogg & Abrams 1998), the more so if inter-group competition is not merely social but realistic.

In the way that my current identification with an anti-Russian version of 'the free world' or 'the West' entails a view of Russia that draws on accessible Cold War stereotypes defining 'them' and 'us', so identification with thriller writers writing about Russia seemed to activate the still-accessible stereotypes of the cold war conspiracy thriller (CWCT). I discuss this further in Section 8.

### **Fit**

Besides 'relative accessibility', the other factor that makes a cognitive category salient is 'fit'. Fit describes the degree to which mental categories seem to describe real-world differences between groups of people. There are two kinds of fit: comparative and normative. Comparative fit is based on the 'meta-contrast principle': groups emerge in our perception 'against a contrasting background' (Turner et al. 1994) when the differences between certain individuals are perceived as smaller on average than the differences between them and other people (p. 455) within a given context. For example, people of various darker skin colours are categorised as 'black Americans', because most Americans are comparatively 'white'.

For a category to have 'normative fit', the similarities and differences of people in that group 'must be consistent with our normative beliefs and theories about the substantive social meaning of the social category' (Turner et al. 1994, p. 455).

That is, besides exhibiting comparative fit, their social behaviour must be consistent with our stereotypical beliefs about that group. For example, it would be hard to categorise a group of Euro-sceptical Poles as Polish nationalists if they didn't like waving the Polish flag or singing the national anthem.

That 'imperialist Russia' was a good normative fit with observed behaviour is clear enough: a government that orders invasions of neighbouring nations and then occupies them seems imperialist. The more so because those states were so recently part of Russia's Soviet empire, and yet more so because Putin is a former KGB lieutenant colonel, part of the former imperialist Russian government's repressive apparatus. Indeed, Russia's behaviour bore normative resemblance to other hostile Soviet-era behaviour, aside from the invasions. In *Command authority* I first read about the Russian policy of 'hybrid warfare' (*gibridnaya voyna*), which is essentially the Soviet-era policy of 'active measures' (Karlsen 2014). Hybrid warfare includes *maskarovka*, familiar to me from Cold War spy novels, a term used to describe the kind of false flag attack used by Putin in the Ukraine, by Stalin to trigger war with Finland in 1939 and by Tom Clancy to trigger World War Three in *Red storm rising* (1986). As I began to research Russia in 2015, the West was beginning to grasp the extent of Russian hybrid warfare. Methods included the familiar Cold War-style economic coercion of neighbouring states, and the weaponisation of energy. For example, on Putin's orders, Gazprom has cut off or limited gas supply to Poland on at least three occasions in the past decade and has cut off supply to Ukraine permanently (Grigas 2017). By 2006 it was evident that, as in the Soviet era, the Kremlin would assassinate its enemies at home and abroad (Knight 2017). By 2016 the extent of Russia's Cold War-style *dezinformatsiya* (disinformation) campaign against the West was evident. Another Soviet-style active measure became big news in 2017 when it emerged that the FSB might have collected KGB-style *kompromat* (compromising material) on the US Republican candidate Donald Trump (Steele 2016; also, Isikoff & Corn 2017), prompting a FBI counterintelligence investigation (Barrett & Nakashima 2019).

Putin's strong popularity among Russians, which seems to wax with every invasion, is another reason the category 'imperialist Russians' has normative fit.

Such stereotypes frequently distort reality, but in this case support for the stereotype is provided not only by polls gauging Putin's popularity, but also an annual Levada poll that has shown since 1992 that the majority of Russians still regret the demise of the Soviet Union (Moscow Times 2018). The 2018 figure of 66 per cent is down from the 2000 high of 75 per cent, registered shortly after Putin turned the Chechen capital of Grozny into 'the most destroyed city on earth' at great civilian cost (Wingfield-Hayes 2007), but it is still a durable majority. This is not to suggest that social judgment sets a scholarly or legal standard of evidence; stereotypes, rumours and conspiracy theories spread *because* groups do not require legal proof or peer-reviewed support for social judgments. I offer the above statistics as a personal post-rationalisation for identifying with a particular social judgment, and also to suggest that, in the Putin era, Soviet-era stereotypes have not just been reactivated for me, but for many Russians. Russians, however, would probably label the category not imperialist or revanchist but something like '*Rossiiskii*', which Galeotti and Bowen describe as a political ideology that views ethnic Russianness as providing the foundations for the wider 'Russian civilisation' (2014).

In 2015, the Soviet-era cap still seemed to fit Russia well enough, and the Tom Clancy-esque thriller consequently seemed a comfortable genre for me to write in.

#### **4.1.2 The villain in the thriller is the villain in the news**

History, then, made an anti-Russian social category salient. The category 'thriller writer' was accessible because I was already a (literary) writer, and because a thriller alerted me to the real-world threat to the West from Russia. This section focuses on stereotypes about that outgroup transmitted by a group of recent thrillers, and the process of learning those stereotypes.

I had read plenty of thrillers, but not with any purpose in mind. Now I started reading more spy novels and geopolitical thrillers to get a better sense of recent trends. Though I had decided that Russia would be the villain (and that its villainy would also account in some way for the Smolensk plane crash), I did not at first seek out thrillers about Russia, but, rather, recent geopolitical thriller writers I had not read before.

As I read to learn the conventions of the genre, I found more and more novels with post-Soviet villains and eventually realised I was reading a subgenre – my subgenre. Realising that, I subsequently avoided thrillers that did not deal with Russia. So far, I have read 36 recent thrillers with a post-Soviet villain, and there are plenty of others I have not had time to read (Appendix 1). Since I was motivated to write in this subgenre by the Russian threat, it would not surprise me if other writers were too. And it does not surprise me that the authors of these 36 post-Soviet conspiracy thrillers are all from Western countries, though nationality was not a (conscious) criterion in selecting novels to read, since Putin’s Russia opposes itself to the West, and directs its ‘malign influence’ (e.g. Polyakova 2019) against ‘us’. Of the novels in my PSCT sample, 28 were by Britons or Americans; the remaining seven were by Australians, a Swede and a Pole.

My sense of the subgenre’s history is as follows. The PSCT began to emerge in the 1990s, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union into a mafia state (Galeotti 2004; 2018). During the Yeltsin presidency (1991–1999), the Russian state was not regarded as a threat to the West, and the nineties only produced a trickle of works, supporting Ken Follett’s argument that ‘we need someone to be afraid of’ (Carvajal 1998). In 1997, NATO and Russia even signed a peace treaty, the *Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security* (NATO 1997). The few spy novelists who wrote about contemporary Russia in the 1990s wrote about threats emerging from the ex-Soviet lands *in spite of* the Russian state. In Forsyth’s 1996 *Icon*, a cast of non-state splinter conspiracies emerged that would become stereotypical in the Putin-era PSCT: the mafia, the *siloviki* and far-right nationalists. To this list, le Carré’s 1995 *Our game* adds Chechen (Muslim) separatists. The *siloviki* is an informal network of corrupt former Soviet intelligence and military officials which later absorbed other officials and businessmen. It is the most powerful of the factions within the Kremlin (Bremmer & Charap 2007). Ex-KGB Lieutenant Colonel Vladimir Putin is at once a member of this group, and above it. Novels about *siloviki* conspiracies include le Carré’s 2009 *A most wanted man*, Clancy and Greaney’s 2013 *Command authority* and van Lustbader’s 2017 *The Bourne initiative*. Other splinter conspiracies

feature the vory, the mafia born in the Soviet gulag that became central to the Russian economy in the 1990s, as in le Carré's 2010 *Our kind of traitor* or Child's 2005 *One shot*, and 'oligarchs' (businessmen who privatised previously state-owned assets), as in le Carré's 2010 *Our kind of traitor* and Phelan's 2010 *Red ice*. Another type of group villain is a band of radicalised Muslims from the ex-Soviet Muslim lands who get hold of ex-Soviet nuclear, biological or chemical weapons, as in Berntsen and Pezzullo's 2008 *The walk-in* and Berenson's 2009 *The silent man*, or terrorists who get hold of hitherto secret Soviet 'super weapons', as in Reilly's 2011 *Scarecrow and the army of thieves* or Phelan's 2006 *Fox hunt*. Many PSCT novels feature a conspiracy that unites some combination of these groups (e.g. Greaney's 2016 *True faith and allegiance* or van Lustbader's 2017 *The Bourne initiative*).

Boltanski's observations about the pre-WWII spy novel would apply equally to the PSCT insofar as the realist, left-critical spy novels like le Carré's and the adventure-romance spy novels of the right, like Clancy's and Greaney's, are united in their critique of a perfidious international banking system that has collaborated with Russian elites in money laundering.

The volume of works in the subgenre increased somewhat with the rise to power of the *siloviki* Vladimir Putin in 1999. Following President Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, widely interpreted as a challenge to NATO, the Russian Federation invaded the sovereign nation of Georgia in 2008, and the Ukraine in 2014. These events triggered an increase in PSCT production: 28 of the 36 novels in my sample were published in 2008 or later. In post-2008 PSCTs, and even more so in post-2014 PSCTs, the bellicose Russian state is often a threat in itself, as in Boyd's 2011 *Last chance to die* and Matthews' 'Red Sparrow' trilogy (2013; 2015; 2018), though the monolithic state villain still frequently mobilises some of the nefarious (and overlapping) conspiratorial elites named above, as in novels by Clancy and Greaney (2013), Greaney (2015) and le Carré (2009, 2010).

Putin has become the prototypical member of the imperialist Russian outgroup in Western scholarly and journalistic analysis. The Russian President has been variously described as: anti-democratic (e.g. Gessen 2013; Politkovskaya 2008);



autocratic (e.g. Galeotti & Bowen 2014; Gessen 2013; Politkovskaya 2008); crafty (Galeotti & Bowen 2014), deceitful, ruthless and brutally repressive (Gessen 2013; Politkovskaya 2008); secretive and kleptocratic (Gessen 2013); and engaged in a sort of guerrilla war with America and Europe. Peter Pomerantsev described him as the ‘Che Guevara of the right’ (2016), but he lacks Che’s gravitas; rather, he is a smirking (Glasser 2018) source of inspiration and euros for far-right movements including France’s Front Nationale (Pomerantsev 2016). Consequently, the arch villain in many PSCTs printed after 2008 is a Putin analogue. This is discussed at some length in Section 7.

Whereas just one of my 26 CWCTs posited an invasion by Russia (Clancy’s 1986 *Red storm rising*), five of 36 PSCTs thwart an invasion plot and another five thwart catastrophic acts of terrorism, which is more reminiscent of the early spy novel, in which such plots were common. But, with Russia stuck in a ‘frozen war’ in the Ukraine and pressing no further for territory since 2014, it might be that physical invasion has become less important. Globalisation of finance and new technology allows Russia to reach out and attack other nations without invading physically, without much fear of reprisal, and without the burdensome (Soviet-era) responsibility of making life better for the poor. In this connection, thirteen plots in my sample of 36 PSCTs give a prominent role to money laundering as a means of fuelling nefarious post-Soviet activities. From early in the life of the subgenre ‘following the money’ was a way for protagonists to find and defeat these conspiracies. And a number of novels, including Lagercrantz’s 2015 *The girl in the spider’s web*, Greaney’s 2016 *True faith and allegiance*, van Lustbader’s 2017 *The Bourne initiative* focus on the post-Soviet ‘cyber’ threat.

The great CWCT theme of counterintelligence operations against the spies of a rival state (or ‘mole hunting’), which was central to the plots of 17 of the 26 CWCTs in my sample (and of 14 of the 16 British CWCTs), is central to the plots of only seven of the 36 PSCTs in my sample, and none of these were published earlier than 2006, which roughly corresponds with the resurgence of Russian intelligence as a perceived threat to the West (e.g. 2006 was the year Alexander Litvinenko was poisoned with polonium in London by FSB agents). Perhaps

more of these novels will emerge now that Russia and the West are locked in a new cold war.

I did not set out to write a PSCT; rather, I set out to write a ‘thriller’, and read other thrillers to collect information about genre *conventions* (as I still thought of them, then). I later narrowed my subgenre down to ‘geopolitical thriller’, ‘geopolitical conspiracy thriller’, then ‘post–Cold War conspiracy thriller’, then post-Soviet conspiracy thriller. As Borges wrote, ‘Every writer creates his own precursors’ (1964, p. 224), and I doubt I would have noticed that there was such a subgenre as the PSCT if I had not written one. It was only by doing it that I discovered that many other thriller writers were writing about post-Soviet conspiracies, that I had joined a subgenre, and a subgenre that has gone unnoticed by critics, as far as I can tell. It was also the writing and research process that revealed the similarity of this subgenre to the other ‘threat-generated’ subgenres mentioned above. It is difficult to count, but my impression is that the PSCT is one of the two largest subgenres of geopolitical-threat-generated conspiracy thriller published this century, along with the ‘War on Terror espionage thriller’ (Holloway 2009).

#### **4.1.3 The sense of an entity**

The post-Soviet conspiracy thrillers I read to learn subgenre conventions were recommended variously by good reviews on the Internet, prominent positions on bookstore shelves and spinners, and by the ‘screamers’ on the backs of book or on authors’ and publishers’ websites. In hindsight the sense of a group of writers also emerged as I read reviews identifying authors’ work as similar, such that Jon Stock’s novel is ‘in the style of John le Carré’ (Goodreads 2011), and ‘Fans of Clive Cussler, Tom Clancy and Michael Crichton will love Matthew Reilly’ (Pan Macmillan Australia 2016). Alex Berenson writes ‘A thriller worthy of le Carré’ (*Kirkus Reviews*) and is ‘on a par with Daniel Silva’ (*The Washington Post*). Further, expressions of mutual admiration between writers and inter-generational sponsorship contribute to the sense of a group with a Cold War lineage, such that Ken Follett says Lee Child’s Jack Reacher is ‘the new James Bond’, Lee Child recommends James Phelan, and so on. In fact, some authors in this subgenre

inherit the characters of dead authors, in the same way that other authors wrote James Bond novels after Ian Fleming's death. For example, Tom Clancy has 'fathered' at least four other novelists whose books use his characters and are set in 'the Jack Ryan universe'. David Lagerkrantz carries on the Stieg Larsson brand, Kyle Mills carries on the Vince Flynn brand, and a dozen novelists have written Ludlum-franchise novels since his death, many of whom also publish thriller and spy novels under their own names (e.g. Gayle Lynds and James H. Cobb). Such ties imbue this disparate group of writers with entitativity ('groupiness'), even though most of them might not know each well or at all.

The penny dropped that a genre's writers might be studied as a social group, using social psychology, when I read Tajfel's (1978) observation that ingroup affiliation 'need not be related, either in principle or in reality, to any requirement of face-to-face interaction between all, or most, members of the group' (p. 30). Perceptions of 'similarity' are behind reviewer's comparisons of author with author. At the cognitive level these perceptions arise from the meta-contrast principle: categories emerge 'against a contrasting background' when 'the differences between certain individuals are smaller on average than the differences between them and others' (Turner et al. 1994, p. 455). If we substitute the word 'texts' for 'individuals' this description gives cognitive specificity to the 'family resemblance' idea of how we perceive fictional genres (e.g. Chandler 1997; Swales 1990). But perhaps we can also talk about the PSCT writers' group without substituting any words.

Unlike earlier social psychology theories which generated person-to-person models of the transmission of ingroup norms, the SIA provided an empirically derived explanation that did not find interpersonal interaction necessary for a group to install its norms in the heads of individuals like me. It explains at the social cognitive level how the people of a region can imagine themselves Galicians one century, Poles the next, or how thousands of scattered writers, most of whom don't even know each other's names (since most have never had their novels published) can conform with the same norms of ingroup behaviour, and how

these norms impose a subjective sense of both positive distinctness and constraint on the genre writer.

#### **4.1.4 Referent informational influence**

The SIA account of conformity helps address a gap in the Marxist and sociological accounts of fiction production discussed in Section 3. It explains how the same ideology and set of popular fiction conventions are internalised by a geographically scattered multiplicity of individual writers, without recourse to non-social psychological concepts borrowed from psychiatry. This section argues that the process of reading other thrillers to discover genre norms is described by the process of referent informational influence (RII), which improves on earlier accounts of conformity processes within social groups.

Writing from a social identity perspective, Hogg and Reid (2006) define norms as ‘regularities in attitudes and behavior that characterise a social group and differentiate it from other social groups’ (p. 7). Norms function to ‘*describe* and *evaluate* the typical behavior of a typical member of a particular group or social category’, and to ‘constrain behavior by dictating that as a member of a particular group you ought to behave in a particular circumscribed manner’ (Hogg & Abrams 1998, p. 140; their emphasis).

Hogg and Abrams (1998) contrast sociology’s approach to the study of norms with the social psychology approach. For ‘consensus structuralist’ sociology (in the tradition of Durkheim, Parsons and Merton), which views society as relatively homogeneous, norms are Durkheim’s ‘social facts’, which are ‘transmitted to individual members through socialization enforced, to varying degrees, by agents of social control (e.g. parents, teachers, police) who have the power to ensure normative (socialized) behaviour’ (p. 14). In contrast, ‘conflict structuralist’ sociology (in the tradition of Marx and Weber), which sees society as composed of competing groups, argues that different groups have different norms. In general, though, sociology views the individual’s adoption or embodiment of the norms as a consequence of *socialisation* – meaning socialisation to ‘society as a whole’ (p. 140). Social psychology, in contrast, studies *conformity*, and this is seen as an intragroup process.

In the SIA account, norms ‘simplify, render predictable, and regulate social interaction’ and without them ‘the individual would collapse beneath the tremendous cognitive overload involved in interaction’ (Hogg & Abrams 1998, p. 140). This description of the useful and important social function of norms recalls a similar description of the role of stereotypes by SIT. In fact, though stereotypes have traditionally been regarded as less prescriptive than norms and applicable to a narrower range of group behaviours, the SIA – unlike sociology and earlier social psychology – tends to treat norms and stereotypes as two different names for the same thing (Hogg & Abrams 1998; Turner 1982). Hogg and Abrams (1998) suggest that ideologies, orthodoxies, social belief structures and social representations also share an underlying commonality and might be addressed via the study of norms since ‘they all deal with socially patterned social phenomena that define the contours of social groups’ (Hogg & Abrams 1998, p. 152).

The SIA’s account of social influence depends on internalisation of norms – on influence rather than compliance. Briefly, the process is as follows. We expect to agree with those who are ‘identical’ to us, since shared category membership usually leads us to agree about the nature of real-world stimuli, and, further, to believe that our consensual response to a stimulus makes it ‘objectively appropriate’ (Hogg & Abrams 1998, p. 150). When we disagree with those with whom we expect to agree, we feel uncertain (Hogg 2000). The urge to resolve this uncertainty leaves an individual with a choice between two remedies: either I account for the discrepancy between my judgment and others’ by looking for salient differences between myself and them, or I change my opinion and conform to the group norm. The latter remedy constitutes social influence, and it is experienced subjectively as an urge to behave like the group prototype (Hogg & Abrams 1998). The prototype is a cognitive construct in the mind of the individual group member built from attributes of an individual member or subgroup (Turner 1985; Turner et al. 1987). The group can permit a ‘relatively wide range of behaviors’ (Hogg & Abrams 1998, p. 153), but highly prototypical

individuals or subgroups provide most information about the group norm (Turner 1985; Turner et al. 1987).

According to SCT, the internalisation or assimilation of a norm which produces social conformity occurs via a process of referent informational influence (RII; Hogg & Turner 1987). RII involves three stages (Levine & Hogg 2010), which break down into five steps (Hogg & Abrams 1998, p. 151):

1. I self-categorise into a group.
2. I seek information about ingroup norms from those who provide information about such norms.
3. I cognitively represent the ingroup norms.
4. I assign cognitive representations of ingroup norms to myself (self-stereotyping).
5. I behave in a way that conforms to these ingroup norms.

Viewed in this way, reading novels and other sources to collect information about genre conventions is a step in the conformity process that begins with self-categorisation. Those conventions might themselves be recast as ‘norms of writing behaviour’ that new members of the writers’ group have to learn. And reading other works in the genre is itself a *normal* step in the process for a genre writer, in the same way that observing the behaviour of other group members produces conformity in other groups. It is hard to imagine a writer producing a genre novel without first reading other works in the genre. This is supported by author interviews in which genre authors discuss their influences. It is also supported by Rafferty’s (2008) quantitative/semiotic analysis of 30 Troubles Thrillers, which traces such ‘representational’ influences across the lifespan of a subgenre, though she allows that it might be possible for someone to pick up from the zeitgeist sufficient knowledge of thriller conventions to become a thriller ‘producer’. Other genre-based PLR documents a similar process to mine of genre reading to orient practice (e.g. Beasley 2009; Denner 2016; Franks 2011).

My information-collection process is perhaps ‘abnormal’ outside the academy in that I was collecting information about norms from scholarly accounts more than most thriller writers might, but a major difference between the SIA account of how we seek information about norms and earlier accounts is that the RII model recognises that group members seek information about norms not just from similar others, but also from sources outside the group who have knowledge of ingroup norms (Hogg & Abrams 1998; Levine & Hogg 2010).

#### **4.1.5 Content norms**

This section re-examines the anti-Russian stereotypes discussed in Section 4.1.2 in light of the idea that genre conventions might be treated as norms of PSCTWG ingroup behaviour.

The content transmitted by PSCTWG members is shaped by the attitude and belief norms of the broader group we belong to, ‘the liberal West’. These norms arise from the need to differentiate ‘us’ in the West from ‘them’ in Russia and include such self-stereotypes as ‘our’ love of democracy, the separation of powers, strong institutions, and tolerance, as well as ‘our’ loyalty to the enlightenment project (Kirchick 2017) – stereotypes that are so often repeated within our Western ingroup that they become as natural as the air we breathe (see e.g. Billig 1995; Kirchick 2017). Le Carré’s famous CWCT protagonist George Smiley adds to the list as he delivers a kind of eulogy on the Cold War: ‘We concealed the very things that made us right. Our respect for the individual, our love of variety and argument’ (*The secret pilgrim*, 1991). Thus, ‘we’ in the West are ‘right’, for all our faults, and, importantly, we are seen as positively distinct *with respect to a competitor outgroup*, the Soviet communists. More of ‘our’ values were articulated by Donald Trump in a speech in Warsaw’s Krasinski Square in 2017:

We write symphonies. We pursue innovation...and always seek to explore and discover brand-new frontiers. We reward brilliance. We strive for excellence...We treasure the rule of law and protect the right to free speech and free expression...We empower women as pillars of our society and of our success...And we debate everything. We challenge everything...And above all, we value the dignity of every human life, protect the rights of every person (Trump 2017, para 45–48).

These values were rehearsed by Trump to contrast us with Russia, in a speech intended to reassure Europe that the US will in fact uphold Article 5 of the NATO Treaty (the mutual defence clause) if Russia invades, and to express ‘our’ Western opposition to Russia’s hybrid warfare:

To meet new forms of aggression, including propaganda, financial crimes, and cyberwarfare, we must adapt our alliance to compete effectively in new ways and on all new battlefields. We urge Russia to cease its destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere, and its support for hostile regimes – including Syria and Iran – and to instead join the community of responsible nations in our fight against common enemies and in defense of civilization itself (para 40–41).

The phrase ‘the community of responsible nations’ might refer to the broader West, but ‘our alliance’ refers to NATO (the mutual-defense alliance between the US, Canada, Turkey and 26 European countries). In other situations the salient version of Western identity has opposed the West to ‘the Orient’, say, or ‘radical Islam’ (as in the War on Terror and the War on Terror thriller), but the salient version of Western identity transmitted by Trump’s speech (and the PSCT) is ‘Atlanticist’, an adjective indicating support for the NATO alliance. Atlanticist norms are at root anti-Russian, since Russia has always been the reason for that defensive alliance.

PSCTs are behavioural expressions of this anti-Russian attitudinal norm, motivated by the rational perception of an existential threat, and opposition to Russia predicts much of the content of PSCTs. They function socially to communicate to Western information seekers ‘our’ evaluative status and prestige relative to the derogated Russian outgroup, in the same way that the wartime rumours I look at in Section 6 functioned socially. For the new group member in any social group, self-categorisation leads to self-stereotyping, and this happens on all dimensions correlated with the categorisation, including ‘evaluative status or prestige relative to other groups’ (Turner 1982), so joining the PSCTWG entails conformity with this anti-Russian evaluative norm. In all of the 26 CWCTs and 36 PSCTs I read for this project, a Soviet or post-Soviet conspiracy is the villain, with only two exceptions: in Tom Clancy’s *The bear and the dragon* (2000), the United States sides with Russia to defeat a Chinese invasion of Russia; and in McEwan



and Koloniar's *The sniper and the wolf* (2015), the series protagonist, a US Navy Seal assassin, sides with a group of *spetnaz* soldiers to hunt down a band of Chechen separatists who have been assassinating both American and Russian targets. It might be argued that the latter novel is not really an exception to the rule, since the group villain is still a post-Soviet conspiracy (a group of Muslim ex-Russian soldiers) or that the novel belongs more properly to the War on Terror thriller subgenre.

Similarly, within the CWCT writers' group, even le Carré's left-critical spy novels (for all their moral complexity) ultimately tended to support the view that 'we must combat communism, very decisively' (le Carré, quoted in Gross 1980, p. 33). For instance, George Smiley's summation of the Cold War is that: 'The right side lost [even if] the wrong side won [i.e. corporate capitalism]' (le Carré, *The secret pilgrim*, 1991). And in an earlier subgenre of the spy novel, as Matin has observed, the British spy novels about German invasion tended to portray Britishness as civilised, freedom-loving, and legitimately imperial, whereas Germany is hostile, scheming, 'jealous', 'pestilential' and covetous of Britain's Empire (Matin 1997). Holloway (2009) finds the same pro-Western moral homogeneity in the War on Terror Thriller, though he examines only a handful of novels. Interestingly, Rafferty (2008) finds less moral homogeneity in the Troubles Thriller subgenre, in which Irish and even British authors sometimes challenged villain conventions in quieter periods of the conflict, though the majority of writers replicated the norm of having an IRA villain or modified it only somewhat.

### ***The red web's* transmission of PSCT content norms**

When it came to reproducing the content norms of the PSCT, I wanted my plot to reflect the geopolitical situation now as opposed to five years ago, when Russia invaded the Ukraine. Russia has not invaded another country since 2014, perhaps because, compared with the Soviet Union, post-Cold War Russia is more constrained ideologically. Going in to rescue the proletariat in the name of equality and fraternity licenses invasions of other nations, particularly when a fraction of the target nation's population is already communist fellow-travellers.

But the philosophy of *Rossiskii*, which was an important pretext for the invasion of Ukraine, only allows Russia to invade if there is a sizeable Russian minority in the target country. Thus, *Rossiskii* might provide a pretext for invading nations like Estonia and Latvia, but would not allow it to reassemble the USSR. Putin might be the Che Guevara of the right (Pomerantsev 2016), but right wing *nationalist* movements, like that in Hungary, for example, would not welcome a Russian invasion. Hence, another ideology might be needed to licence wider territorial gains. Putin has shown signs of seeking this in Aleksander Dugin's (2014) idea of 'spheres of influence' (Clover 2016), familiar from the Cold War, which sees Russia as entitled to the Eurasian sphere of influence, while the other great powers (America and China) get their own spheres (Dugin 2014). A modified version of this ideology provides the invasion pretext in my novel.

*The red web's* conspiracy involves a splinter of the Russian *siloviki* that has never come to terms with Russia's loss of empire, led by a prototypical Russian imperialist, FSB Director Artyom Mitkin. Mitkin owes something in his appearance to the real FSB Director, Alexander Bortnikov, and also in his attitudes: Bortnikov is an apologist for Stalin (Parkhomenko 2018). Mitkin's huge, grasping hands and bulging eyes come not from Bortnikov, however, but from my own imagination.

In the hunting hide, Mitkin rejects the Duginist Eurasianism Putin favours, which envisions a restoration of the post-Yalta 'spheres of influence'. Mitkin outlines his aggressive vision of a more 'modest' Pan-Slavism, echoing the Pan-Slavism of Tsar Nicholas II, which would encompass the 1947–1991 Eastern Bloc's Slavic lands but leave out the Muslim lands. This Russian conspiracy acts in collusion with the Polish version of the *siloviki*, the gang of ex-communist secret service agents known in Poland as *czerwona pajęczyna*, 'the red spiderweb'.

Though *The red web* uses the 'imperialist Russia' and 'scheming *siloviki*' villain stereotypes, the villainy is not triggered by Putin; rather, the Russo–Polish conspiracy seeks to wedge Putin from the right and force him into more adventurous imperialism, reflecting the actual machinations of the hard right Izborsky Club, some of whose members believe Europe should be a Russian

protectorate (Bluth 2017). In this, my novel resembles Phelan's 2010 *Red ice* and Clancy and Greaney's 2013 *Command authority*.

*The red web's* conspiracy is stereotypically dire in its geopolitical predictions. It envisions a near-future invasion of the Baltic States and Poland by Russia, which should, under Article Five of the NATO Treaty (1949), provoke a declaration of war on Russia by the other 27 NATO countries, but does not. Familiar PSCT hybrid warfare strategies, including the use of stolen radiological material (a variation on the 'loose nukes' plot), a false-flag attack, and the strategic withholding of natural gas, are employed by the villains, along with the familiar CWCT strategy of trying to put their own puppet politician in office (also a favourite strategy of Russia in the PSCT era).

A similar but even more hyperbolic scenario is explored by Van Lustbader's *The Bourne initiative* (2017), in which an invasion of the Baltic States, Sweden and Finland by Russia is narrowly averted, and by Greaney's Clancy-franchise novel *Commander in chief* (2015), in which an invasion of the Baltics by Russia is repelled by the locals and the Americans, while NATO sits on its hands.

In *Commander in chief*, a false-flag attack is used by Russia as a pretext to block the Suwalki Gap, cutting off the Baltic States from their NATO allies. I did not read this novel until I had completed the first draft of *The red web*. That my thunder has been partially stolen in terms of a false-flag attack being used by Russia to block the Suwalki Gap does not bother me much, since the Suwalki Gap is to current NATO war planners what the Fulda Gap was to the NATO alliance during the Cold War: a strategic obsession (see e.g. Hodges, Bugajski & Doran 2018). Further, the convention of a 'barely attenuated' relationship between a threat-generated subgenre and real-world politics means such genres will tend to repeat plotlines; it is not science fiction, so there is only one reality to base your novel on.

In terms of social functioning, plotlines in the PSCT are also stereotypes or 'ideologemes' that need to be repeated in order to transmit the necessary admonition to the ingroup, just as fairy tales and other forms of admonition rely on repetition. Similarly, the Cold War produced many CWCTs that repeated the

‘mole hunt’ and the ‘red sleeper agent’ plot (see Section 8), reflecting a period of history punctuated by the unmasking of Soviet moles including Maclean, Burgess, Philby, Hanssen and the Rosenbergs, and repeating the admonition: ‘watch out for traitors in our midst’.

In any case, apart from that one element of the plot, *The red web*'s plot is quite different from that of Greaney's techno thriller. The *siloviki* conspiracy is dramatised in the raid on Gusev army base and the scenes involving Mitkin, but it hovers in the background for much of *The red web*. The main focus, as in the CWCT, is on the threat of traitors in our (Polish) midst, in line with the original narrative thrusts: for Nation to find out what happened to his father and who is hunting him now, on the one hand, and, on the other, to provide a fictional but plausible version of the Smolensk conspiracy theory. The focus on Poland's ‘red spiderweb’ is also justified by my assumption that genre writers need to offer something new within the constraints imposed by the genre: *The red web* is novel in extending the ‘scheming *siloviki*’ stereotype westwards.

#### **4.1.6 Style norms**

In terms of conformity with the style norms of PSCTWG writing behaviour, I wrote the first draft of *The red web* in keeping with thriller genre norms, as far as I knew them, and sometimes I had to rewrite after learning a norm I had previously been unaware of. My protagonist is hunted (Bloom 1990), and ‘there is no knowing who is the enemy’, leading to paranoia (Bloom 1990, p. 4), or some subclinical version of that irrational condition. My protagonist is in ‘terrible trouble’ from the outset (Frey 2010), and I make things worse for him as the narrative progresses (Glover 2003; Stein 1995). Unlike the ‘whodunnit’ branch of detective fiction, in which the investigator is in no danger, here the investigator is in danger (Todorov 1977), and for most of the story (Frey 2010). There is a ‘struggle for power played out at the level of thrills (adventurous chases, etc.)’ (Bloom 1990, p. 3; see also Glover 2003). The hero is clever and resourceful, and the villain is at least his match (Frey 2010). My hero is on the side of right; the villain is on the side of wrong (Eco 1987; Frey 2010; Merry 1977). The stakes are high (Frey 2010). As in spy fiction, the drama is ‘tied to *international* political and

social tensions' (Bloom 1990, p. 1, his emphasis; see also Seed 2003). That is, the villain in the novel is the villain threatening the nation (e.g. Bloom 1990; Symons 1972) and in the case of the PSCT subgenre this is Russia. There is a 'hurried journey' (Buchan, cited in Parrinder, p. 205), to find the hunters before the protagonist or his children are found, and, later, a 'ticking clock' (Frey 2010) counting down the minutes before they are killed. My word count of around 114,000 was admittedly a little short of normal for this airport-novel subgenre<sup>8</sup>, but, then, I was constrained by a conflicting norm: the PhD word limit. I discuss the ways in which my novel was abnormal or non-conformist in Section 8.

As Reid and Ng (2006) show, in any group, members whose utterances are prototypical are more likely to get to speak (to be published) than those whose utterances are less prototypical, which creates pressure to conform with the prototype. I sometimes experienced the process of norm-learning as having a highly prototypical PSCT writer as my mental audience. I tried to keep my target reader (young, male, American, uneducated, non-writer) in mind as I wrote, but writers would often intrude. Which writer I had in mind depended on what I was reading. If I was reading Lee Child, I would start trying to write like him. I would be conscious of trying to write something he might think worth reading and of the need to avoid repeating him, because he might read it. I sometimes imagined le Carre giving up on page 1. Similarly, after realising that my plot was similar to Greaney's, I found that he was watching me.

For most of the project, my fear was that I was not being thrilling enough to get the attention of highly prototypical group members (or of the publishers that publish them, or of the readers who read their books). I was also concerned that I wasn't being innovative enough (within genre constraints), in terms of unusual plot twists and characterisation. The group I identify with, unlike a group of factory workers, must produce novels which are novel, within normative limits. That is, within overall social conformity to PSCTWG norms a level of personalisation is desirable, though this social pressure to personalise is not as extreme as the pressure Harold Bloom describes in his 1973 *The anxiety of influence*

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<sup>8</sup> The average word count of 18 precursor novels (PSCTs and CWCTs) was 138,418 words. When I took out the three fattest Tom Clancy novels the average was still 124,125 words.

(1997), which examines poetry, not genre fiction, and is based on a psychoanalytic model, not on social psychology.

Another example from my practice illuminates the conformity process within the PSCTWG, and exposes the distance between steps one (self-categorisation) and five (behavioural conformity). The most useful feedback I got on the first draft of *The red web* was that I had not conformed with the important genre convention of resolving all subplots by the end of the narrative. I had justified this to myself with the example of Lee Child's conspiracy thriller *61 hours* (2010), which leaves major loose ends untied at the end, including the question of whether the series protagonist has survived a seemingly un-survivable explosion. However, reflecting on my supervisor's feedback, I realised that while unresolved endings are not unusual in novels produced by my former writers' group, the LWG, or in episodes of a thrilling TV series, such an ending is abnormal in a thriller novel – even one that is part of a series, as mine is intended to be. The fact that a perennially bestselling author like Lee Child got away with an inconclusive conclusion does not mean I would. More likely, my manuscript would be rejected by an agent or publisher.

Reflecting from an SIA perspective, I had taken the first two steps – self-categorisation, followed by information-seeking about ingroup norms – but I had not taken the last three steps:

3. I cognitively represent the ingroup norms.
4. I self-stereotype in terms of those norms.
5. I behave in a way that conforms to the norms.

In the second draft of *The red web*, recognising now that I had not followed an important thriller norm, I set out to tie up all the main plotlines as neatly as I could.

Feedback-seeking is formalised in the PhD in creative writing, but is also normal outside the academy, in keeping with the idea that members know, or strive to know, how well they match the prototype and how prototypical other members think they are (see Haslam et. al. 1995), and this time I sought feedback

from a friend who used to write pulp thrillers. He read the second draft and said that in tying up loose ends it went on too long after the climactic violence. He sent me the following advice from Dean Koontz's manual, *Writing popular fiction* (1972):

Do not resolve the main plot problem on page 200 and continue to page 220 before typing "The End." When the reader knows what happened, he doesn't want to read on while the characters gab about how awful it was. If your plot contains an element of mystery, *the explanations should be given throughout the climactic scene and not as an afterthought when all the action strings have been tied and cut.* (p. 99; my emphasis)

Considered advice about norms from a highly prototypical thriller writer who has sold over 450 million books in his lifetime (*Publishers Weekly* 2012) is valuable and relevant, so in the third draft I cut as many words as possible between the climactic violence and the end.

My journal records other such belated recognitions of genre norms and also blind alleys I took following the wrong prototype. I don't have space to revisit them here; but, to summarise, my practice-led findings as a writer new to the thriller genre support the SIA account of the stepwise internalisation of norms.

### ***Norms of opposition to the LWG***

The Russian outgroup is not the only outgroup the thriller writers' group seeks to differentiate itself from. Another set of norms circulates within the PSCTWG which contrasts us with another group of writers: the literary writer's group (LWG). The PSCTWG's polarisation away from the LWG predicts my preoccupation with the 'thrilling' and 'accessible' social norms of the PSCTWG.

Phelan's spy novel *Kill Switch* indicated to me an attitude to literary fiction among thriller writers that I encountered a number of times:

Military service taught Walker how to kill a man with nothing but his bare hands, and that's all he had at his disposal right now, having just passed through airport security at LAX. *Well, that's not exactly true*, he thought [...] watching the two men approach. He had a change of clothes and toiletries. A few items would do. A toothbrush through the eye socket into the brain. The straps of the backpack could be used to choke a man. He had a paperback novel in there with an orange cover [a Penguin literary classic] that he'd found

in his hotel room that morning – and from the few pages he'd read during the cab ride to the airport, it could probably bore them to death (2015, p. 12).

In a similar vein, in the introduction to the 2010 edition of his 1983 spy novel, *Berlin Game*, Len Deighton also expresses an antipathy to literary fiction when he discusses the dilemma he faced setting out to write a series of spy novels in which the domestic as well as professional lives of his main characters are depicted:

Did giving them a domestic dimension mean pressing the pause button in order to relate the dull routines of mortgages, electric bills, children's ailments and traffic jams? No, that is not the way to treat your readers unless you just don't care about them; and in that case you should be writing literary novels (p. 4).

The suggestion is Deighton's spy thriller genre is positively distinct in comparison with literary fiction because it does not bore readers with too many mundane details. In fact, I found the first four of Deighton's Bernard Samson novels overburdened with mundane detail and lacking in thrills, compared with his earlier work. Tajfel (1981) *The SIA* sheds light on this contradiction when he suggests that 'individuals have to provide social meaning through social identity to the intergroup situation' and that 'this need is fulfilled through the creation of intergroup differences when such differences do not in fact exist, or the attribution of value to, and the enhancement of, whatever differences that do exist' (1981, p. 276). A large body of later research shows that 'differentiation occurs on valued dimensions of comparison' (Reicher & Hopkins 2001, p. 33); that is, both superior and subordinate groups compare themselves with competitor outgroups on dimensions that flatter the ingroup (e.g. Tajfel & Turner 1979; Turner 1982; Turner et al 1987). Protesting too much, as I feel Deighton does in that preface is what the SIA would predict: the perceptual shift associated with group membership causes us to exaggerate the objective differences between members of the ingroup and members of the competitor outgroup, and to exaggerate intra-group similarities on a valued dimension of comparison. We do this not as a rhetorical strategy but because ingroup membership makes members *perceive the world differently*<sup>9</sup>. His over-generalisation about what characterises a

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<sup>9</sup> This does not exclude the possibility that Deighton also worried, at the personal level of identification, that his Bernard Samson novels were scarcely more thrilling than the literary novels he disparaged.



literary novelist is also predicted by the SIA finding that we see ‘them’ as more identical than ‘we’ are identical (e.g. Park & Rothbart 1982; Wilder 1984).

Another thriller writer, Scott Turow, reports that he initially set out to write like James Joyce after reading *A portrait of the artist as a young man*, but he could not help noticing that his college library’s copy of Joyce’s *Ulysses* – supposedly Joyce’s masterpiece – had hardly ever been borrowed: ‘Was *Ulysses* really a great work of literature if almost no one read it for leisure, and if the few who dared found it so taxing? What did writers owe their audience? How easy were we supposed to make things for them?’ (cited in Gelder 2004, p. 22). Whereas Deighton and Phelan see a ‘boring versus thrilling’ dichotomy, writers like Turow and me who once tried to emulate James Joyce now seek to distance ourselves from ‘difficult’ prose. Personally, identification as a thriller writer swung me so far from Joyce-like writing that I used Word’s inbuilt readability software to ensure *The red web*’s Flesch-Kincaid ‘reading ease’ level did not exceed grade five – a level comprehensible to a ten-year-old (Kincaid et al. 1975).

As a writer new to the PSCTWG, the norm I inferred from such disparaging comments about literary writers is an attitudinal norm, like the anti-Russian attitude. But whereas ‘anti-Russian’ also describes the *content* of the PSCTWG category, ‘anti-literary’ predicts the style norms ‘thrilling’ and ‘accessible’, and speaks to the positive distinctness of our group compared with the competitor LWG on those dimensions that flatter us.

‘Bankable’ might be another norm for thriller writers which has a trickle-down influence – even on thriller writers like me who have never sold a single copy – in terms of non-writing behaviour. Analyses of cultural production by Bourdieu (1983) and of popular fiction by Gelder (2004) point to an emphasis on profit rather than prestige at the mass market end of an artform and in the course of research and norm-seeking I read interviews with thriller writers Tom Clancy (Carlson 1993), Ken Follett (Fabrikant 2001) and John Grisham (cited in Gelder 2004) that reveal a preoccupation with money I have not encountered in interviews with literary writers. A website was not something I had ever thought of having as a literary writer, but making efforts to be more marketable seemed to

be normal among the thriller writers I was reading, so I followed suit, though I am aware the likelihood of making a living – let alone a fortune – from writing fiction is very low<sup>10</sup>. I got my wife to take some photographs of me to put up on my new (home-made) author website. While picking one from the dozen or so photographs she took, I was thinking of the photographs of other thriller writers I had seen on book jackets and websites, and one of Lee Child in particular, and I must admit that I selected one which most resembled that unsmiling photograph of the steely-gazed thriller writer<sup>11</sup>. This is predicted by Turner and colleagues' self-categorisation experiments, which revealed that self-perception is altered by social identification even on the dimension of physical appearance (Turner 1982).

Self-enhancement through identification with a group that is positively distinct is seen as a fundamental motivation for social identification (Hogg 2016), even if attempts to translate self-enhancement into another psychological measure, 'self-esteem', have been plagued by definitional confusion and mixed results (Hornsey 2008; Rubin & Hewstone 1998). In following the 'accessible, thrilling, bankable and anti-Russian' norms described above I did feel a sense of positive distinctness, in terms of the strength and rightness of our Western group as opposed to Russia, and, simultaneously, an exaggerated sense of the self-indulgence of literary writing compared with what the PSCTWG offers readers. In terms of the thrilling norm, specifically, attempting to write a PSCT gave me a new respect for the skill of PSCTWG writers in manipulating pace and tension, two areas in which I had for some years felt a need to improve. Another source of positive distinctness for me is our contemporary relevance: we PSCTWG writers are more likely to engage with the messy present than LWG novelists, who tend to focus on the past. For example, in my target US market, just 15 of 48 Pulitzer Prize finalist novels between 2000 and 2018 were set in the contemporary world (The Pulitzer Prizes 2018). Of the remainder, 32 of these literary novels were set

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<sup>10</sup> In 2014, the median income reported by 1433 *published* authors was US\$0 from traditional publishing and US\$1000 from self-publishing (Author Earnings 2014). The survey is still open, so I deleted all figures from the spreadsheet entered later than 2014 and took the median from the 1433 responses entered in that year. These figures should be treated with caution, since Author Earnings does not select the respondents or vet the responses.

<sup>11</sup> See the 'About' page of [www.tomcoverdale.com](http://www.tomcoverdale.com).

in the past (multiple decades or centuries before the date of publication) and one was set in the post-apocalyptic future. There is nothing wrong with novels set in the past, and they are often analogically relevant to present events, but we PSCT authors are more likely to react to and try to interpret the events of our own time, and even sometimes to predict the very near future, as *Command authority* did.

But self-enhancement was not my chief motivation for joining the PSCTWG. The SIA has isolated three motivations for joining a group: self-enhancement, the search for coherence and uncertainty reduction. The second motivation, the search for coherence in a changing social world (e.g. Tajfel 1969), has recently been recast in terms of the third motivation, uncertainty reduction, and this was probably the main reason I switched my identification from the LWG to the PSCTWG.

Reducing uncertainty, Hogg (2000) suggests, is a more fundamental motivation for joining a group than self-enhancement, since uncertainty reduction is adaptive. The experimental work of Hogg and colleagues testing the ‘uncertainty reduction hypothesis’ (e.g. Grieve & Hogg 1999; Hogg 1996, 2000; Mullin & Hogg 1999) provided empirical support for the claims that uncertainty reduction is a ‘fundamental human motivation’ (Hogg 2000, p. 247), and that the need to reduce uncertainty underpins the processes of self-categorisation, which generated a branch of the SIA called ‘uncertainty-identity theory’ (UIT; e.g. Hogg 2007).

The need to reduce the unwelcome uncertainty I experienced as a member of the LWG is at least partly responsible for my joining the PSCTWG, and during the writing of *The red web* it motivated much of my writing behavior, as my reflective journal records. As Gelder (2004) points out, there *are* ‘genres’ of literary fiction – naturalism, or the early realist novel analysed by Jameson, for instance – but I would argue these are often more easily recognised in hindsight, and consequently there are few norms to guide a writer setting out to produce a new work of literary fiction, apart from very general ones like the need to avoid writing clichés. As a poet, I welcomed the limits imposed by poetic forms. As a literary writer, I frequently found myself polishing scenes because I could not decide what to write next. I welcomed the constraints of thriller genre conventions because

they place tighter limits than literary fiction on what you can and cannot write. In UIT terms, my choice of the PSCT subgenre and not some other genre was predicted by the fact that I was less uncertain about the conventions of that subgenre than about other popular fiction genres.

Before turning to the other kind of threat-generated narrative this study addresses, conspiracy theories, it is worth pausing to compare my findings about conformity processes within a group of genre writers with the literature on spy novel production reviewed in Section 3. Marxist (like other) critics of the spy novel allow that villain and plot types follow the news, such that more Russian mole-hunt plots will follow the uncovering of real-world Russian moles, and so on, but Marxist critics tend to move on quickly to examining *intra*-national class conflict. Bloom (1990) characterises spy novels as propaganda intended to manipulate the citizens of a nation, which might suggest spy novelists are cynical, and argues that their social function is to generate paranoia (see e.g. Bloom, Seed). He also argues (perhaps paradoxically) that their production is motivated *by* paranoia (see also Boltanski 2014), which implies spy novelists are paranoid. Attributing spy novel authorship to paranoia suggests the apprehended threat is not real, that the perception of a threat is irrational. I do not see my self-categorisation as a member of this group of anti-Russian thriller writers as motivated by paranoia about Russia, nor by a cynical desire to write propaganda in order to induce paranoia in others. I argue that the writers' group I identify with is a subgroup of the West that assembled out of reasonable fear of a rival outgroup that is not a class but a nation (revanchist Russia), via self-categorisation, *for the social purpose* of providing ingroup members, especially in the Atlanticist West, with (stereotyped) information about the newly salient outgroup category, to differentiate 'us' from 'the threatening Russians'. This interpretation of a spy novel subgenre's formation challenges the usual Marxist casting of external threat as a phantom used to frighten and thereby manipulate the lower classes.

*Intra*-group class warfare of the kind Marxist critics prefer to study (e.g. Bloom 1990; Boltanski 2014; Denning 1987; Palmer 1978) is evident in my PSCT writers' group's competition with another Western subgroup, the LWG. If asked to respond to my claim that the PSCTWG's need to differentiate itself from the LWG predicts some broad aesthetic features of the thriller, a Marxist critic might argue that this intergroup competition is ideological and that it has an economic basis<sup>12</sup>. I would agree that it is more than possible that thriller writers developed the 'thrilling' and 'accessible' ingroup norms to rationalise stealing readers and profits from the LWG, building an inverted snobbery around a 'bankability' norm in response to incoming derogation from the 'highbrow' writers group, whose living was threatened by 'lowbrow' fiction. Such an interpretation is predicted by the many studies that find groups choose to differentiate themselves from outgroups on dimensions that flatter the ingroup, and also by the 'social justification' function of stereotyping, which has produced such rationalisations for plunder as 'the white man's burden' (Tajfel 1981), 'the infidel' and the 'imaginary resolution' whereby a character who gets 'above her station' in a nineteenth century realist or naturalist text always meets a nasty end (Jameson 1981). But it is worth repeating that, as Tajfel et al's minimal group experiments showed, while the category content might be shaped by economics, the *process* of social competition does not depend on economics. Social competition is based on the act of self-categorisation, which can happen *even in the absence of any kind of incentive*, because our brains are wired for ingroup bias. Further, a person will act *against* the group's absolute economic interests and forego a large economic advantage to the ingroup in order to ensure a small comparative advantage over the rival group (or class), because at the psychological level the crucial thing is to paint ourselves as positively distinct, at whatever cost.

In terms of analytical tools, the SIA's stereotype/norm is essentially the same thing as Jameson's 'ideologeme', and it also allows for both the synchronic and diachronic analysis of narrative conventions. Whereas Jameson attempts to articulate the ideological and psychological by writing of an 'ideological

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<sup>12</sup> Bourdieusian perspectives have also emphasised this. See, for example, Bourdieu 1983 and Milner 2012.

unconscious' in which ideologemes circulate (a melding of Althusserian ideology with a neo-Lacanian idea of Freud's psychological unconscious), the stereotype is better-founded in empiricism<sup>13</sup> and so are the SIA's mechanisms for articulating the psychological with the ideological: shared beliefs are adopted through the processes of self-categorisation and RII. The ideological analysis of texts might also be enhanced by considering that genre conventions/norms/stereotypes are adopted and departed from by an author in ways that depend on the shifts between the three functionally antagonistic levels of identification: human, social and personal.

Another practice-led (and research-supported) finding about style norms came from researching the Smolensk conspiracy theory, which is central to *The red web's* plot and milieu. It was in seeking information about conspiracy theory transmission that I realised there was a similar tropological pattern in conspiracy theories and the novel I was writing and that this related to these narratives' transmissibility. I pursue this analysis in Section 6 after reviewing the literature on popular conspiracy theories in Section 5.

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<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Notturmo and McHugh's (1987) 'Is Freudian psychoanalytic theory really falsifiable?'

## 5. Perspectives on popular conspiracy theories

*The red web* is unusual in the subgenre in that it transmits two geopolitical conspiracy theories: the Smolensk plane crash conspiracy theory, and the Trump–Russia conspiracy theory. The first, Smolensk, was a focus throughout the project; the latter became part of the plot later. In researching Smolensk it occurred to me that the conspiracy theory had at least two things in common with the novel I was writing. For one thing, it was not just a theory or explanation but also a narrative, and a narrative that invoked older narratives. For another, its persistence in the public realm depended on its being selected for transmission. Not selected in the way that a thriller novel is selected by an agent or publisher from a slush pile of thousands of unsolicited manuscripts, but selected by a particular group of believers from among many such narratives which failed to be transmitted further and quickly perished, in a process more akin to Darwin’s natural selection. I wondered if there was anything about this narrative that made it ‘fitter’ than other less successful conspiracy theories. In particular, were there any formal features successful conspiracy narratives had in common with successful conspiracy thriller novels, and could I take advantage of them as a novelist seeking transmission?

This section reviews the literature on conspiracy theories and indicates that little work has been done on two aspects of popular conspiracy theories (outside novels and films) that are key to my thesis: 1. they depend on being transmitted; and 2. they are narratives.

The view that popular conspiracy theories like the Smolensk cluster or ‘subgenre’ are generated by groups in response to an external threat was implicit in Popper’s first description of the term ‘conspiracy theory’ in 1945: ‘whatever happens in society – including things which people as a rule dislike, such as war, poverty, shortages – are the results of direct design by some powerful individuals or groups.’ (2011, p. 974). Popper went on to suggest that ‘[t]his view is very widespread ... and in its modern form, it is the typical result of the secularization of religious superstitions ... [T]he place of the gods on Homer’s Olympus is now taken by the Learned Elders of Zion, or the monopolists, or the capitalists, or the

imperialists’ (p. 974). Indeed, ‘the (Russian) imperialists’ are one major target of blame in the Smolensk conspiracy theory subgenre. More recently, Coady (2006) argued that ‘a conspiracy theory is simply a conspiratorial explanation’, and that ‘an explanation is conspiratorial if it postulates a group of agents working together in secret, often, though perhaps not always, for sinister purpose’ (p. 2). The definition offered by Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) basically agrees with this but adds that the agents tend to be ‘powerful’ and that ‘in secret’ means they ‘attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished)’ (p. 4).

Since Popper’s 1945 lecture, a vast literature on conspiracy theories has emerged, most of it published in the last few decades. Nefes (2010) divides this literature into philosophical and sociopolitical approaches which he labels, respectively, the ‘internalist’ and ‘externalist’ perspectives. He observes rightly that the work on conspiracy theories by philosophers tends to focus on the methodological aspects and epistemological warrant of these theories. Sociopolitical (externalist) approaches, in contrast, tend to view conspiracy theorising as a reaction to social and historical forces. Like Boltanski and many other scholars in both these camps, he neglects the burgeoning psychology literature on conspiracy theories.

### **5.1 Philosophical perspectives**

The perspectives of philosophers range from seeing conspiracy theories as a dangerous pathology to seeing them as warranted and normal. Keeley (1999) started a long debate by making a distinction between warranted (e.g. Watergate) and unwarranted conspiracy theories (e.g. alien abductions). He acknowledges that it is often not easy to tell the difference between the two, but describes unwarranted conspiracy theories (UCTs) in the following terms:

1. ‘A UCT is an explanation that runs counter to some received, official, or “obvious” account.’
2. ‘The true intentions behind the conspiracy are invariably nefarious.’
3. ‘UCTs typically seek to tie together seemingly unrelated events.’



4. '[T]he truths behind events explained by conspiracy theories are typically well-guarded secrets, even if the ultimate perpetrators are sometimes well-known public figures.'
5. 'The chief tool of the conspiracy theorist is...*errant data*.'<sup>14</sup> (Keeley 1999, p. 116–117)

He argues that a conspiracy theory cannot necessarily be rejected just because it is unfalsifiable; the problem is, rather, that such explanations require a 'more and more pervasive skepticism about people and public institutions' (p. 112; see also Levy 2007).

His second reason for rejecting conspiracy theories is that, 'By supposing that current events are under the control of nefarious agents, conspiracy theories entail that such events are *capable of being controlled*' (p. 123; his emphasis), a proposition also rejected by Sunstein and Vermeule (2009). Similarly, Mandik (2006) notes the lack of parsimony in vast conspiratorial attributions (an argument first made by Popper), observing pithily: '[i]n any choice between a conspiracy theory and a declaration of "shit happens" we are no worse off for choosing the latter' (p. 206).

Keeley's claims have been contested by later researchers who argue that the unwarranted/warranted distinction is untenable (e.g. Nefes 2010; Boltanski 2014), because it is too hard to prove most conspiracy theories either true or false. Goodenough (2000) contends that there are many conspiracy theories that *are* official accounts, such as the ones that brought Hitler and Stalin to power, and, indeed, those theories were Popper's target.

Basham (2003) also rejects the idea that official accounts can be assumed to be trustworthy, because public institutions and corporations are constantly engaged in conspiracies that they try to keep secret (forms of espionage, for example). He accepts Keeley's argument that we cannot reject conspiracy theories on the basis that they are unfalsifiable, but rejects the idea that conspiracy theorists are paranoid, quoting from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual's* (DSM-4; 1994) description of clinical paranoia:

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<sup>14</sup> 'Errant data' comprises both 'unaccounted-for data' and 'contradictory data'.

The essential feature of Paranoid Personality Disorder is a pattern of pervasive distrust and suspiciousness of others[.] Individuals...assume that other people will exploit, harm or deceive them, even if there is no evidence to support this expectation. They suspect on the basis of little or no evidence that others are plotting against them.

He argues that while paranoia comes in degrees, it always describes an unreasonable fear, and that it is not unreasonable, and therefore not paranoid, to suspect conspiracies exist.

Clarke (2002) concedes that conspiracy theories resemble ‘degenerating research programmes’ (p. 8). In Lakatos’ (1970) conception a ‘progressive research program’ is characterised by ‘novel predictions and retrodictions...that are generally successful’ (p. 8–9) whereas in a ‘degenerating research program’ the theory is made more complex to account for contrary evidence, rather than change the theory. He associates conspiracy theories with the ‘fundamental attribution error’, which emphasises dispositional over situational explanations for an event. He points out that this error might have been selected for by evolution, putting himself in the position of a tribal person encountering a group of strangers:

If I commit the error of mistaking their hostile dispositions for a situational factor then I potentially expose myself to much danger by continuing to interact with them. In general it may be better to ‘err on the side of caution’, and mistake situational factors for dispositional factors, rather than take the chance of misreading people’s possibly hostile dispositions. (p. 25).

He concludes that conspiracy theories are relatively harmless and might even help to ‘maintain openness in society’. He suggests:

Although we would not wish to fall victim to the fundamental attribution error, it can sometimes be to our advantage that others do. Perhaps we should thank the conspiracy theorist for remaining vigilant on our behalf. (p. 26)

Pigden (2007) goes further and labels ‘conspiracy theory’ a ‘term of abuse’. He sees naïveté or ‘conspiracy skepticism’ as more pathological than conspiracy theorising, since it ignores the truth about how history works. Like Raikka (2008), he argues that history advances not only through actual conspiracies but through conspiracy theories, showing how the UK foreign policy after 2001 was based for

many years on two theories that were later debunked: that ‘Saddam Hussein was in cahoots with Al Qaeda, making him in some sense an accessory to the events of 9/11’ and that ‘the regime of Saddam Hussein had...acquired (or retained) weapons of mass destruction’ (p. 228).

Clarke’s claim that conspiracy theories are harmless is undermined by that last example of Pigden’s, and also by Nazi and Stalinist ideology (see also Goodenough 2000; Nefes 2010; Popper 1945). But Clarke’s idea that the fundamental attribution error is adaptive and that the conspiracy theorist remains ‘vigilant on our behalf’ is central to my project. Summing up the philosophical literature, Nefes (2010) argues that: ‘[T]he internalist perspective by itself is not capable of deciding whether conspiracy theories are warranted or unwarranted, as its discussion misses the social significance and the historical background of the subject’ (p. 44–45). Though I don’t agree that the philosophical literature misses those things, Nefes is right to broaden the use of the term ‘warranted’ beyond its strictly logical connotations. My own project makes use of the argument that the Smolensk conspiracy theory is warranted, even if it is not true.

## **5.2 Socio-cultural perspectives**

The socio-cultural literature, which Nefes (2010) characterises as ‘externalist’, tends to de-emphasise the question of warrant and ignore the methodological debates that concern philosophers, and to treat conspiracy theories as symptoms of social processes. In this literature, opinion also ranges between those who see conspiracy theories as paranoid and pathological at one end, and, at the other, those who see them as a response to the modern world which reveals deeper truths about it.

Historian Richard Hofstadter’s influential 1965 essay ‘The paranoid style in American politics’, does not use the term conspiracy theory, but it discusses a chronic pathology in American politics of resorting to conspiracy theories as explanations of political behaviour. He does not use the term paranoia in its

clinical psychiatric sense, but as a metaphor to describe a type of collective behaviour:

[A]lthough they both tend to be overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression, the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically against him; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others (p. 34).

Pipes' (1997) book *Conspiracy: how the paranoid style flourishes and where it comes from* is more scathing about popular conspiracy theories than Hofstadter, arguing that they obstruct analysis of history and promote hatred. Post and Robins (1997) also go further than Hofstadter in pathologising conspiracy theories, diagnosing not just 'paranoia', but also 'denial' and 'schizophrenia'. Similarly Showalter (1997) associates conspiracy theories with 'hysteria'.

As in the philosophy literature, a number of cultural analysts have treated conspiracy theories not as pathological but as a rational response to social change. American Studies academic Peter Knight (2001) criticises writers like Hofstadter, Pipes and Post and Robins for treating conspiracy theories as inherently paranoid, and finds they 'end up replicating the very mode of paranoid thinking they seek to condemn.' (p. 7) He argues that 'contemporary conspiracy thinking can...be a necessary and sometimes even a creative response to the rapidly changing condition of America since the 1960s' and that 'The task is therefore not to condemn but to understand why the logic of conspiracy has become attractive...and how it is reshaping how people think about the questions of causality, agency, responsibility, and identity' (p. 8). By 2003, however, Knight seemed to have come around to the paranoid explanation, arguing that in American conspiracy theories 'Secure paranoia has in effect given way to insecure paranoia, as the clear-cut them-and-us political tensions of the cold war have given way to [a] more confusing geopolitics' (p. 23) And, further, that

[w]hereas conspiracy theories once offered a paradoxically comforting sense of identity (only by knowing who your enemy is can you really know who you are, the theory goes), they now are unable to clearly identify a specific enemy or manageable threat and so no longer serve to bolster national or group coherence in the way they once did (2003, p. 23).

This latter claim might be true of some American conspiracy theories, but it does not reflect the findings of most of the social psychology literature on conspiracy theories described below, or of my own research.

Literary critic Timothy Melley (2000) provides an alternative perspective based on analysis of ‘literature of paranoia’ novels including Delillo’s and Pynchon’s and non-fiction tracts including a McCarthyist memo by J. Edgar Hoover and the Unabomber’s manifesto. He argues that ‘[w]hile paranoia and conspiracy theory are often seen as marginal forms – the implausible visions of a lunatic fringe – their ubiquity in contemporary American culture suggests that they are symptoms of a more pervasive anxiety about social control’ (p. vii).

He calls this shared anxiety ‘agency panic’ (his coinage), which he defines as ‘intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy, the conviction that one’s actions are being controlled by someone else or that one has been “constructed” by powerful external agents’ (p. vii). He suggests that:

[A]gency panic manifests many of the classic attributes of paranoia; yet, in most cases, it cannot simply be dismissed as mere paranoia, in the sense of pathological or deluded behavior. Instead, agency panic is often a logical, if extreme, response to modern systems of mass control [...] (1995, p. 5)

Most cultural studies scholars study conspiracy theories in narratives rather than as narratives. Fenster (2008) abstracts a few broad formal properties, but his analysis is based on discussion of fictional works such as *The X-Files* and Stone’s film *JFK*, which leads him to generalise that ‘[v]irtually every conspiracy narrative turns on a particular moment in which the central character, through investigative skill or by sheer luck, uncovers convincing evidence of a conspiracy’ (p. 124). The philosophical and psychology research on *popular* conspiracy theories does not support this view: most conspiracy narratives do not have a protagonist.

In the socio-cultural literature I reviewed, only Boltanski (2014) mentions the idea that formal properties of conspiracy narratives (outside books and films) might aid their transmission. He uses a model borrowed from grammatology to analyse letters of denunciation sent to a Paris newspaper. (He classes these as conspiracy narratives, not as conspiracy theories, which in his conception are vast

and global). He finds a 'rise in generality' is characteristic of these narratives such that the victim is cast as only one of many victims of the same conspiracy, that they are more persuasive if the letter is written by someone other than the victim, suggesting a depersonalised focalisation helps (though he does not use narratological terms), and, lastly, that the letters are more believable if the 'villain' persecuting the letter writer is not enormously more powerful than the insignificant writer. But he does not go further than this in his analysis of formal properties.

### **5.3 Psychological perspectives**

The psychological literature on conspiracy theories sets aside judgments about cultural trends and epistemological warrant and occupies itself with finding correlations between belief in conspiracy theories and psychological states. On the face of it, psychologists are better placed to diagnose conditions such as 'paranoia', 'anxiety', 'hysteria' or 'panic' than literary studies or cultural studies scholars, and social psychologists are better able to test for conditions such as 'collective paranoia' and 'pervasive anxiety'. Further, their studies are generally more empirically rigorous in that they tend to specify the population tested, the particular conspiracy theories tested, and to test falsifiable hypotheses.

Most psychological research into conspiracy theories has used individual psychology approaches, testing whether psychological states or dispositions predict belief in particular conspiracy theories or in conspiracy theories in general. Though the recent trend has been for philosophers and cultural studies scholars to reject 'paranoia' as an explanation for the post-War proliferation of conspiracy theories, at least two individual psychology studies did find that 'paranoia' and 'paranoid ideation' (measured with different instruments), respectively, predicted belief in conspiracy theories (Grzesiak-Feldman & Ejsmont 2008; Darwin et al 2011). Non-clinical paranoid cognition of the kind measured by Darwin et al is treated as a personality trait rather than a pathology and is characterised by 'subclinical levels of suspicion of others' motives and self-referent interpretation of other people's intentions and behaviour' (Brotherton & Eser 2015, p. 2).

Darwin et al (2011) observe that such ‘paranoid ideation’ might have been selected for by evolution: ‘It is easy to see that a low level of paranoid ideation could have helped an individual’s survival chances as they would more easily detect potential social threats’ (p. 1292). This echoes Clarke’s comment about the fundamental attribution error. Interesting for my purposes was Grzesiak-Feldman and Ejsmont’s (2008) finding that conspiracy stereotypes for Jews, Russians, Arabs and Germans were highly positively correlated with paranoia and with each other in a sample of 50 Poles.

As to the idea that forms of ‘anxiety’ are responsible for conspiracy theories, Swami et al (2016) found that in a sample of 420 Americans ‘perceived stress’ predicted belief in conspiracy theories, which is consistent with my prediction that fear triggers conspiracy narratives like the PSCT and Smolensk, but neither trait nor state anxiety was a significant predictor, which undermines the intuitions of literary critic Timothy Melley (2000) and sociologist Luc Boltanski (2014). In a clinical sense, anxiety can be triggered by stress but it is distinguished from stress in that it persists (irrationally) after the threat disappears.

Other relevant findings in the recent experimental literature on individual psychology include the finding that feelings of ‘relative deprivation’ (Bilewicz, Winiewski, Kofta, & Wojcik 2013) predicted belief in Jewish conspiracism in a sample of 979 Poles. A sense of powerlessness and ‘negative attitudes’ towards ‘high-power groups’ predicted belief in conspiracy theories about Jews, Americans and capitalists in five large studies by Imhoff and Bruder (2014), and these attitudes arose from a broad perception ‘of those in power as threatening’. All of which lends support to the arguments of Hofstadter (1965), Knight (2000) and others that conspiracy theories give a sense of power to the marginalised.

In the growing body of *social* psychology literature on conspiracy theories, conspiracy theories are studied as intergroup phenomena: the ingroup is the group of believers and the outgroup is the group villified by the theory. The attribution of harmful intentions to an outgroup by an ingroup has been found by a number of studies to predict belief in conspiracy theories (e.g. van Prooijen & van Lange, 2014; Mashuri & Zadaqisti 2014). Kofta and Sedek (2005) unpack

1992 Polish National Social Survey (Supplement) data – a massive sample – which shows 15.9% of Poles agreed that Russians were openly striving to rule the world, while more than that (20.2%) thought Russians were *secretly* striving to rule the world, even in 1992, when Russia was a threat to nobody. In terms of the conspiratorial attribution this placed Russians third behind Jews (14.5% openly; 29.7% secretly) and Germans (25.2% openly; 28.4% secretly). The conspiracist nature of these attributions is evident when contrasted with the figures for the United States: 42.5% openly; 14.5% secretly.

This and other studies lead Kofta and Sedek (2005) to suggest that there is a class of ‘permanent’ conspiracy theory about the intentions of particular social groups which they call ‘conspiracy stereotypes’. A conspiracy stereotype ‘frames an outgroup as a dangerous, potent, and deceptive enemy’ with a secret collective goal and secretive collective behaviour patterns. Their finding that belief in a Jewish conspiracy directed at world domination ‘appeared to color the [Polish ingroup member’s] whole picture of the social world with suspicion’ (p.57) agrees with Swami et al’s 2010 finding that ‘belief in other conspiracy theories’ predicts belief in 9/11 conspiracy theories, and supports the idea that a ‘conspiracy mentality’ predicts belief in specific conspiracy theories (Grzesiak-Feldman 2015).

Kofta and Sedek’s naturalistic experiments conducted before and after the 1991 Polish parliamentary elections showed that ‘the [anti-Semitic] conspiracy stereotype – as a factor in information seeking, social perception, and attitudes – grossly increases before the parliamentary elections and decreases afterward’, suggesting that the conspiracy stereotype can be latent, but that when salient it represents a detector of ‘collective threats to an ingroup’s power’ and possibly plays an important role in ‘preparing the collective action of the ingroup against those threats’ (p. 51). This chimes with Ken Follett’s suggestion and my own finding that perception of outgroup threat motivates production of another conspiracy narrative, the spy novel.

A disproportionate amount of the social psychology research into conspiracy theories has been conducted in Poland. Besides those studies mentioned, Cichocka et al (2015) found that a form of positive identification with the Polish



in-group called ‘collective narcissism’ is associated with conspiracy beliefs about Russia. Collective narcissism is ‘a belief in ingroup greatness contingent on others’ recognition’ (p. 556), and Bilewicz, Winiewski, Kofta, and Wójcik’s (2013) study of 979 Poles links a tendency to hold conspiracy beliefs to a ‘victimhood-based identity’. Unsurprisingly, ingroup prejudice towards Russians has been shown experimentally to predict belief in the Smolensk conspiracy theory (Grzesiak-Feldman & Haska, 2012).

Within the field of social psychology, three previous studies took a social identity approach to the study of conspiracy theories. The SIA measures not just attitudes towards outgroups but strength of identification with the ingroup, by gauging agreement with statements like “The fact that I am a Moslem is an important part of my identity”. Mashuri and Zadaqisti (2014; n=201) study an Indonesian conspiracy theory that the Islamic terrorist attacks including the 2002 Bali bombings were orchestrated by the CIA and/or Israel’s Mossad to undermine Islam. Those who identified more strongly as Muslim were more likely to believe this conspiracy theory, and ‘the effect of social identification on both out-group derogation and belief in [the] conspiracy theory was contingent on the degree of perceived intergroup threat’ (p. 44). Mashuri and Zadaqisti’s (2015) follow-up study found that the perception of a high level of intergroup threat triggered greater belief in conspiracy theories, but that this was mediated by another measure, ‘collective angst’. Sapountzis and Condor (2013) interviewed 100 Greek citizens and found that ‘ordinary [Greek] social actors’ who are ‘politically engaged’ routinely use ‘conspiracy accounting’ to suggest that the contemporary actions of a weak neighbouring state are part of a long-term conspiracy with some powerful ally (e.g. Russia, the US or a ‘pan-Slavic union’) to invade Greece at some future time, thus positioning their Greek ingroup as the threatened underdog.

These three SIA studies and many other social psychology studies undermine American studies scholar Peter Knight’s 2003 generalisation that ‘Whereas conspiracy theories once offered a paradoxically comforting sense of identity...they now are unable to clearly identify a specific enemy or manageable

threat and so no longer serve to bolster national or group coherence in the way they once did.’ (p. 203)

While the psychology literature is generally more precise and moderate in its claims than the socio-cultural literature, it is primarily concerned with ‘conspiracy beliefs’, like the philosophy literature. It is not concerned with their ‘representation’ in cultural objects, nor with the transmission of conspiracy theories, nor with any formal properties of these narratives that might make them more believable or transmissible.

In the field of cultural and literary criticism, to which my exegesis belongs, Melley’s sequence of critical moves is typical of the literature that de-pathologises conspiracy theories. First, he problematises the idea that conspiracy theories are paranoid, because he finds no qualitative difference between the supposedly irrational interpretive strategies of the paranoid and the supposedly rational interpretive strategies of the psychiatrist diagnosing paranoia. His next move is to claim that conspiracy theories are a subset of a larger set of narratives (including ‘the literature of paranoia’ and alarmist nonfiction texts) that express a generalised social anxiety.

This same line of reasoning is followed by sociologist Luc Boltanski (2014), whose book *Mysteries and conspiracies: detective stories, spy novels and the making of modern societies* covers the same territory as my project (and a lot of additional territory). First he problematises the idea that conspiracy theories are necessarily paranoid, because he sees no qualitative difference between the interpretive strategies of the paranoid and those of the sociologist. He then argues that conspiracy theories belong to a larger group of narratives (detective novels, spy novels and texts produced by the field of sociology) that express a broader anxiety. Whereas in Melley’s case the anxiety shared by the wider group of texts is anxiety about loss of individual agency in the face of vast collectivising forces (e.g. communism or consumerism), the shared anxiety Boltanski identifies as generating the twentieth century ‘thematics of conspiracy’ is a ‘profound anxiety’ about ‘*the reality of reality*’ (p. 15; his emphasis) from the late nineteenth century onwards. He notes that

conspiracy theories are narratives that rely on transmission and that there are formal features that might aid their transmission.

In contrast, I accept that conspiracy theorising is correlated with individual paranoid ideation (and note that Kramer and Messick's 1998 theory of 'collective paranoia' has not been tested as a predictor of conspiracy theorizing), but argue (like Melley and Boltanski) that we cannot automatically dismiss conspiracy theories as irrational, because in terms of epistemological warrant most of them lie in a grey area between the highly improbable (e.g. the US government is hiding the bodies of aliens) and those that proved true (e.g. Iran-Contra). As in Melley and Boltanski, the political conspiracy theories my study focuses on are seen as belonging to a larger group of narratives (that in my case includes PSCT novels and a sub-group of rumours). But, unlike Melley and Boltanski, I do not see conspiracy theories as arising from a previously unrecognised form of 'anxiety'; the type of conspiracy theories that concern me are viewed as social psychological responses to the reasonable perception of a threat posed by a hostile outgroup. My line of reasoning can be justified in part by the fact that the psychology literature finds 'anxiety' does not predict conspiracy theorising, but also by the fact that I am not generalising about all conspiracy theories. For example, I do not consider the kind of *vast* theories Boltanski describes:

The boundaries of this category are fuzzy...but its centre is occupied by two good examples ...: (1) a conspiracy between capitalism and Jews and anarchocommunists, denounced by fascists; and (2) a conspiracy between capitalism and the ruling classes and the intellectual elites, denounced by self-styled orthodox Marxists. (p. 195)

I focus instead on a subgroup of 'national threat' conspiracy theories, and one in particular. My analysis is similar to Boltanski's (2014) in that it treats conspiracy theories as socially produced narratives that rely on transmission. Boltanski does not observe that the same is true of spy novels and uses one set of interpretive strategies (from psychiatry, sociology and political science) to analyse spy novels and a completely different set (borrowed from linguistics) to analyse the formal properties of conspiracy narratives (letters of denunciation) that might aid their transmission. In contrast, I find that both conspiracy thrillers and conspiracy theories are narratives seeking transmission and that social psychological theory

reveals a number of key formal features that foster the transmission of both kinds of narrative. The pattern I discern can be traced back to the 1930s and 1940s when social psychology researchers studied not ‘conspiracy theories’ but rumours.

## 6. Transmission of conspiracy narratives

Though Popper did not use the term in 1945, many theorists since have written of ‘popular conspiracy theories’ and from early in the project it was the popular nature of the Smolensk conspiracy theory that interested me: what made so many Polish people adopt these conspiracist explanations of Smolensk? How are they transmitted from person to person? Are there any formal features that make some spread widely while others die out? And are these features similar to those that aid the transmission of the PSCT? It was to explore the popular transmission of conspiracy theories that I decided against making the protagonist a spy – which I strongly considered – and chose instead to make him a lay detective<sup>15</sup> who must gather his information from ordinary Poles, the source of local stereotypes and conspiracy theories, rather than from police or intelligence sources<sup>16</sup>. The novel treats conspiracy theorising both as a normal form of political reasoning arising from threat and uncertainty in the same way as stereotypes and as a form of communication which communicates admonitory information about the threat. Similarly, this exegesis argues that like the PSCT itself, the conspiracy theories *The red web* transmits, the Smolensk conspiracy theory and the Trump–Russia conspiracy theory, are ‘narratives of national threat’.

This section focuses on my transmission of Smolensk and on what the social psychological study of rumour transmission can teach us about formal features that make such geopolitical conspiracy theories more transmissible. Little work has been done on the formal features of conspiracy theories that foster their transmission, but social psychology work on rumour transmission reveals a pattern of rhetorical transformation that, I argue, is also discernable in the transmission of popular conspiracy theories, and a similar pattern is observable in thrillers like those in my subgenre.

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<sup>15</sup> To hedge my bets, I did make him an ex-CIA paramilitary, which gives him a useful source and ally in Agent Cody Ramirez, and which might enable him to work for the CIA or Polish intelligence in future novels in the series.

<sup>16</sup> In its reliance on demotic sources, *The red web* is closer to detective fiction that uses lay detectives, such as Lee Child’s Jack Reacher series or some of John Grisham’s thrillers (e.g. *The pelican brief*, 1992; *The rainmaker*, 1995), than it is to mainstream spy fiction, which tends to concern itself with spy versus spy and president versus president.

## 6.1 Rumour transmission

Before Popper's term 'conspiracy theory' caught on, many such explanations were lumped into the larger category of 'rumours'. Allport and Postman (1947) define a rumour as 'A proposition for belief of topical reference, without secure standards of evidence being present' (p. 148). Not all rumours are conspiracy theories – for example, rumours about individuals – but many are. Any other differences between the two categories are inconsequential for my purposes<sup>17</sup>.

Allport and Postman's influential 1947 *The psychology of rumor*, which reports the findings of numerous experiments in rumour transmission, begins by examining the WWII data collected by Robert Knapp of the Massachusetts Committee for Public Safety. Knapp analysed a thousand rumours that spread across the United States in the summer of 1942 and divided them into three main categories (and numerous subcategories). He found that just two per cent of rumours could be categorised as 'Pipe Dream' (optimistic or wishful) rumours (e.g. victory or peace is imminent), while 25.4 per cent of rumours were 'fear rumours', prompted by imagined 'plagues and epidemics', 'fifth column activities', 'unrevealed enemy action' and so on. But fear also seems to me to inform his biggest category, 'Wedge-Driving rumors', which accounted for 65.9 per cent of the total. Among the groups most commonly targeted by these rumours were 'Jews', 'Negroes' and 'Labor', as well as 'the government'. Allport and Postman illustrate the last type with this rumour:

In August 1945, a rumor spread to the effect that Russia declared war on Japan only because Russia received in exchange the secret of the atomic bomb. Those who believed in and spread this tale were people who disliked the Russians and, perhaps to only a slightly lesser extent, disliked the administration in Washington. (p. 36)

Such a rumour would nowadays be called a conspiracy theory.

Of the wartime rumours Knapp described as 'Fear Rumors', comprising a quarter of the total, over two thirds are clearly motivated by the external geopolitical threats confronting America ('Fifth column activities', 'Atrocities' and 'Unrevealed enemy action'). Of the two-thirds of rumours in the 'Wedge-Driving'

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<sup>17</sup> But I note in passing that Dentith's (2013) attempt to distinguish rumours from conspiracy theories seems to me to rely on an unwarrantedly narrow definition of the term 'rumour'.

category, many might be described as responding to a fear of ‘enemy sympathisers and/or shirkers in our midst’ (e.g. ‘The Catholics/Jews are trying to evade the draft’). In the same way that many novelistic conspiracy narratives can be sorted by threat, including post-Soviet threats (the PSCT) and Muslim terrorist threats (the War on Terror Thriller), it is evident that rumours can also be sorted into subgenres such as ‘the Japanese traitor threat’ or the ‘Russian threat’.

Allport and Postman’s analysis of Knapp’s sample and their own rumour transmission experiments found that rumours are progressively modified in transmission by a kind of Chinese Whispers. This modification partly involves outright exaggeration. Common forms of exaggeration include the magnification of numbers, and the exaggeration of emotions, ‘to a point where the leading character is a creature of passion’ (Allport & Postman 1947, p. 152). It also involves three features that Allport and Postman label ‘levelling’, ‘sharpening’ and ‘assimilation’. In levelling, details are omitted because ‘if told they would tend to negate the preferred interpretation’ of the rumour (p. 138). Sharpening is a consequence of levelling: ‘When some details are dropped, those that are preserved necessarily gain in emphasis and importance’ (p. 135). Assimilation is the most important of the three processes. It describes how the rumour is distorted as we map it onto our ‘past experience, linguistic habit, cultural forms of thought, and personal motives and attitude’ (p. 136). Allport and Postman illustrate this pattern with, among others, a rumour that arose in Maine in 1945:

A Chinese teacher on a solitary vacation drove his car into the community and asked his way to a hilltop from which he could obtain the pleasant view pictured in a tourist guide issued by the Chamber of Commerce in a neighboring town. Someone showed him the way, but within an hour the community was buzzing with the story that *a Japanese spy had ascended the hill to take pictures of the region.* (p. 134; their emphasis)

‘Chinese academic’ was not an accessible category to Maine locals in 1945, so that information was levelled out, and in rapid transmission the rumour was modified to conform with the preferred interpretation and the readily accessible category of a Japanese spy with a camera, though the first report made no mention of a camera. This category was accessible because it was being constantly transmitted

in another kind of conspiracy narrative: government propaganda warnings to be on the lookout for Japanese spies (p. 137).

Looking at Allport and Postman's findings retrospectively through the lens of a more developed experimental social psychology, the exaggerating tendency of this distortion seems analogous to the 'accentuation effect', though this effect would not be discovered until Tajfel and colleagues conducted their perception experiments in the late 1950s and 1960s. Allport and Postman could not have known in 1947 that their findings reflect a hardwired error in our perception which produces stereotypes in the first place. The 'sharpening' of claims evident here is exacerbated by an ingroup's need to differentiate itself from a competitor outgroup. In situations of realistic competition between two groups, identification with the ingroup tends to predict outgroup derogation (e.g. Tajfel 1981), and outgroup derogation has been shown experimentally to mediate between identification with an ingroup and belief in conspiracy theories (Mashuri & Zaduqisti 2014). Further, the transmogrifying effect of 'assimilation' identified by Allport and Postman would seem to be a specific case of Tajfel's (1969) broader definition of assimilation as a form of 'social learning' whereby stereotypes are transmitted within the ingroup.

In Allport and Postman's sample of rumours, what we might call the 'direction' of transmogrification is towards the 'fundamental attribution error', which underpins most conspiracy theories and most wartime propaganda: it is safer (and generally more adaptive) to err on the side of caution and attribute a hostile disposition to the outgroup (or stranger), especially if that outgroup has proven hostile before (cf Clarke 2002).

Other recent work on rumours shows that rumours and conspiracy theories tend to converge on historical master narratives. For instance, anti-American rumours that arose in Iraq (2003–2011) have been shown to map closely on to the ancient 'return of the Christian Crusaders' master narrative (Bernardi & Ruston 2013; US Army and Marine Corps 2007). As a number of researchers have argued (e.g. Allport & Postman 1947; Sunstein & Vermeule 2009), such rumour 'rationalizes while it relieves' (Allport & Postman 1947, p. 37). It serves to explain



confusing events, while at the same time relieving or justifying a pre-existing emotion, most often fear or hatred. The SIA has done a good deal of work on the ‘rationalize’ part of this summation, which Tajfel (1969) explained in terms of the ‘search for coherence’, the desire to make sense of the world that underpins stereotyping and motivates categorisation. This has recently been recast as ‘the need to reduce uncertainty’ (see e.g. Hogg 2007), and in fact Bordia & Difonzo’s (2004) study of rumour transmission in a natural setting found that rumours serve to reduce uncertainty.

Shibutani (1966) and Boltanski (2014) argue that the version of a rumour or conspiracy theory (respectively) that is ultimately transmitted is selected for its ‘plausibility’, but Allport and Postman’s data suggest that what is plausible to our ingroup is limited by what we can readily assimilate, which depends on what cognitive categories are accessible to us, and, as Tajfel (1969, 1978) found, stereotypes are more readily assimilated. Nevertheless, Shibutani’s observation that, as in natural selection, some rumours survive and flourish while most die out is valuable (see also Sunstein & Vermeule 2009), and I would argue that it is the readily assimilable narratives that are selected for, in the case of rumours, conspiracy theories, and conspiracy thriller novels<sup>18</sup>. In the latter case, fewer than one in a thousand novels are selected for publication (Whitton & Hollingworth 2003, p. 9), and most of those that are do not become bestsellers.

Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) note a similar pattern of transmogrification in the transmission of conspiracy theories within conspiracist social networks (including online communities), observing that within these ‘echo chambers’, opinions tend to polarise away from those of outgroups perceived to be hostile to the ingroup. Dissenters and doubters abandon these groups, leaving behind a ‘crippled epistemology’ (Hardin’s 2002 term), in the sense that those who remain look at few sources of information and consequently ‘they know very few things, and what they know is wrong’ (Sunstein & Vermeule 2009, p. 211).

## 6.2 ‘Levelling’ and ‘sharpening’ of Smolensk claims

One such online echo chamber was my main source of information about the original subject matter of *The red web*, the Smolensk conspiracy theory. Something like Allport and Postman’s ‘levelling’ is evident in the large Internet archive of Smolensk conspiracy theory materials on the ‘Smolensk Crash News Digest’ (SCND) website (Doomed Soldiers 2019). Like other ‘truther’ websites, this one delivers its ‘facts’ in the language of journalism, with a po-faced pretence of objectivity that avoids hyperbole at the sentence level. At the same time, exaggeration arises at the level of argument because any fact or opinion that does not support the tenets of the Smolensk conspiracy theory subgenre is elided or explained away. These fundamental tenets are:

1. the crash was an assassination orchestrated by Russia; and
2. it was covered up with the help of Polish traitors.

Everything is preserved in this vast and chaotic archive, and much of this material might be regarded as ‘embroidery’ of the basic rumour, but, as Allport and Postman found, the embroidery – the adding of concrete details – always supports the ‘preferred interpretation’ (e.g. giving the Chinese academic a camera).

Over several years seeking out the norms of this conspiracy theory subgenre on the Smolensk Crash News site, I identified, among the many versions and sub-narratives housed there, some recurrent types of claim, stripped of ambiguity: the plane was blown up or else disabled by an electromagnetic pulse while in the air, but inside the ground fog; the Russians shot the survivors (in an echo of the Katyn Massacre); the Russians ‘desecrated our dead’, throwing body parts indiscriminately into steel coffins which they welded shut; the Russians refused to give any wreckage back and/or tampered with the wreckage they did give back; the sheer number of fragments and the rolled edges on some fragments is consistent with hyperbaric explosion damage; explosive residues were later found on plane fragments, though both official reports (Committee for Investigation of National Aviation Accidents 2011; MAK 2010) claimed to have found none;

independent international experts confirm all of the technical claims above; Polish traitors, led by Prime Minister Tusk, facilitated the cover-up of the assassination and the desecration; and a dozen witnesses who challenged the official reports were murdered in ways that looked like accidents or suicides. Putin's putative motive was that Lech Kaczyński had challenged him over the invasion of Georgia in 2008, and had led the region in opposing Russian imperialism. The Tusk government's motive is not specified, but it is implied that it helped Putin because it was riddled with ex-Communists 'loyal to Moscow'.

### **6.3 *The red web's* transmission of Smolensk**

*The red web* transmits the Smolensk conspiracy theory, and thus constitutes an act of identification with the other transmitters – with the 'truthers' – a group that includes my co-conspiracists at Smolensk Crash News, as well as 8 per cent (*The Economist* 2011) or 25 per cent (CBOS 2012) of Poles, depending on which opinion poll you believe. But I am a conflicted transmitter, because I would not call myself a 'believer', just someone who thinks the probability that Smolensk was an assassination is not negligible, and that the conspiracy theory's warning to beware Russia is warranted. I tend to accept the claims about the coffins and about the splitting, fragmentation and rolled edges of the fuselage, as *The red web* suggests, while dismissing many of my co-conspiracists' other claims.

In terms of attributing a motive for the Smolensk assassination, *The red web* suggests that Lech Kaczyński was the target, and that he was assassinated by a conspiracy of traitorous Poles with the help of Russia's FSB because he was planning to reopen the FOZZ investigation. The novel accurately reports that as NIK chairman in the early 1990s Kaczyński's investigation of the US\$1bn FOZZ fraud was strangled by an ex-communist-dominated parliament, and then paralysed by the mysterious deaths of key witnesses and investigators (Łoś & Zybortowicz 2000). I have no basis for *The red web's* claim that Kaczyński was planning to reopen the FOZZ investigation when he died, but PiS's Justice Minister indicated a desire to reopen it (Radio Poland 2018b) after one of the main culprits was found hiding in Florida in late 2017 (VOA 2018).

In terms of opportunity for the Russians to plant a bomb or otherwise tamper with the plane, *The red web* accurately reports that the Polish presidential Tupolev did undergo a major service in the Russian city of Samara in December 2009, less than five months before the crash, and that it did undergo industrial radiography (MAK 2010), which involves pulling the plane apart, x-raying the components, and putting it back together. In *The red web*, it is suggested Roman Kijek took advantage of this historical opportunity to plant a small explosive device. I have not previously encountered the claim that ‘the industrial radiographer did it’ – popular conspiracy theories are seldom that explicit – so for what it’s worth this is a novel version of the conspiracy theory, as far as I know.

My intention was not, of course, to ‘prove’ anything about the real world Smolensk crash, just to provide a plausible solution within the world of the novel. My own conclusion about the plausibility of the Smolensk assassination conspiracy theory is expressed by Dolinska in her first conversation with Nation:

I don’t know if it was an assassination or just pilot error. I think the only people who do know are the Russians, because the wash-off tests for explosives were either done by the Russians or done by us on the three-hundred pieces of wreckage they returned to us. Who knows what they sent us? (p. 153)

Since I cannot contribute to this argument, I bracket the veridicality of the Smolensk claims and focus on their transmission and social functioning.

#### **6.4 Polarisation**

The hyperbolising operations of the accentuation effect at the level of individual cognition, as well as the outright exaggeration practised by individual transmitters and the subsequent sharpening in serial transmission by transmitters seeking to differentiate ingroup from outgroup plays into the related phenomenon of intergroup polarisation. To illustrate, while the sharpening of claims evident in the Smolensk Crash News website is predicted by the SIA, which finds that ingroups strive to differentiate themselves from outgroups (e.g. Reicher & Hopkins 2001), its refusal to concede *any* merit to opposing theories goes beyond mere ‘differentiation’ and suggests polarisation away from the outgroup of disbelievers

of the kind Sunstein and Vermeule observe in other online ‘echo chambers’. This resembles the polarisation that can arise in verbal arguments between sceptics and believers. The most famous example of this was during a heated Sejm (parliamentary) debate in 2017 in which Jarosław Kaczyński shouted at the doubters, spittle flying, ‘I know that you are afraid of the truth, but don’t wipe your traitorous faces with the name of my brother’s blessed memory. You destroyed him, you murdered him, you are scum!’ (Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 2017, p. 165). Similarly, I myself have argued vehemently, when challenged by scoffers, that there is a good chance the crash was an assassination, though in sobriety I think it improbable. In *The red web*, this kind of polarisation of conspiracists and sceptics found its way into arguments between Olek and Jerzy and into the bell tower scene, in which Dolinska angrily defends the assassination theory because a woman nearby challenges it, though she is sceptical of the theory herself. Such polarisation of believers and sceptics within a nation echoes the polarisation between sub-national groups demonstrated in Knapp’s collection of WWII rumours, in which draft dodgers and shirkers are villified along with perceived ‘traitors’, as a consequence of the larger-scale polarisation between nations.

*The red web’s* portrayal of a divided Polish society is veridical. For the past decade, Smolensk has polarised the nation into sceptics and believers. Jarosław Kaczyński is the prototype of the Smolensk believer/transmitter’s group, and between 2010 and 2018 he built a political movement around monthly memorial marches commemorating the crash that killed his identical twin, President Lech Kaczyński. On the tenth of each month, these candelit marches began in Warsaw’s arch-cathedral with an evening mass and a sermon commemorating the dead. They finished 700 metres down the Krakovian Way outside the Presidential Palace, where Kaczyński would address the marchers. These speeches, like the archbishop’s sermons, routinely commemorated not just the dead but also the Smolensk conspiracy theory (see e.g. the transcripts provided by Fotyga.pl 2013 and PolskieRadio24 2017), and the stereotypes transmitted by the speakers reinforced the repurposed master narrative of Poland as a Catholic fortress,

besieged now by imperialist Russia on the one side and secular EU political correctness on the other.

I participated in several of these marches and found that the ritual acts of praying, marching with candles, chanting Hail Marys and singing the national anthem outside the enormous Presidential Palace fuelled depersonalisation and reinforced an identity between strangers. For me, the clamour of Kaczyński's speeches echoing over loudspeakers and bouncing off ancient stone walls reminded me too much of totalitarian demagoguery, and caused me to de-identify with PiS. But Kaczyński's speeches, broadcast nationally by state and religious radio and television channels, had the intended effect on PiS's electoral base. Though no more than a quarter of Poles ever professed belief in Smolensk (CBOS 2012), 60 per cent of PiS supporters believed the crash was an assassination in 2012, as opposed to just 5 per cent of the opposition Civic Platform's supporters (Grzesiak-Feldman & Haska 2012). Far from being a hobby for crackpots in an online echo chamber, Smolensk has become sacred to the new version of Polish nationalism, a marker of political identity (Krastev 2015). In a calendar heavy with solemn rituals – for the failed Warsaw Uprising, the futile Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the Katyn Massacre, the Stations of the Cross at Easter, Corpus Christi, and so on – the monthly memorial marches in towns and cities all over Poland created a channel into which those identifying with PiS's victimised version of Poland could pour (cf Klandermans 2003). The Constitution Day Parade in *The red web*, in which every float memorialises a crime against Poles, satirises this narrative.

As in Knapp's wartime rumours, this intra-national polarisation is at least partly a consequence of polarisation at the international level. This is evident in the annual poll data collected by Poland's Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS). In January 2010, during the thaw in Polish–Russian relations that occurred in the four-year Medvedev interregnum (before it became certain that Putin would resume the Russian presidency in 2013), a CBOS survey of 1052 Poles found that, for the first time since the survey started in 1993, more Poles liked Russians than disliked them: 34 per cent of Poles liked Russians, 31 per cent

disliked them, and 35 per cent expressed indifference (CBOS 2010). Furthermore, 12 nationalities and groups on the list of 25 (including Serbs, Chinese, Romany and Arabs) were less liked than Russians. Liking for Russians began to fall again after Putin resumed the presidency in 2013. In October 2014, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, 78 per cent of Poles felt the invasion of Ukraine threatened Poland's security (CBOS 2014), and liking for Russians had fallen to 22 per cent by January 2015. By February 2018 Poles' liking for Russians had dropped back to 1993 levels – the year the last Soviet tanks withdrew from Poland (Zamoyski 2009) – with just 18 per cent liking and 49 per cent disliking Russians (CBOS 2018). Further, of all groups on the 2018 survey, only the Romany and the Arabs were more disliked than Russians (CBOS 2018). PiS both fuelled and rode this wave of anti-Russian sentiment. The crash was on 10 April 2010. Between May 2010 and April 2018, the 96 processions (one for each victim of the crash) marched the party out of the political wilderness. It won the 2015 election in a landslide and still enjoys an unassailable lead in the polls.

While Poland and Russia are not currently at war in the 'hot' sense, in the current cold war Smolensk variants and other anti-Russian conspiracy theories might be regarded as weapons of 'hybrid war' wielded by the Polish ingroup against Russia. But in this war of narratives Poles are outgunned, and so is the West: the water pistol squirts aimed at Russia by me and my Smolensk co-transmitters are insignificant compared with the 'firehose of falsehood' (Paul & Matthews 2016) Russia uses against its neighbours and the West. The large-scale production and dissemination of disinformation by Russia includes deliberately designed conspiracy theories (Robinson et al. 2018). State-produced conspiracy theories are spread by state-owned media and Russia's Kremlin-compliant private media (see e.g. Karlsen 2016; Matlary & Heier 2016), as well as the state's 'army' of professional social media trolls at 'troll farms' such as the Russian government's 'Internet Research Centre'<sup>19</sup> (Karlsen 2016; Paul & Matthews 2016;

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<sup>19</sup> In 2016, the US and the UK began to take seriously the threat from these troll farms that countries in the region had been warning about for years (Linkevičius 2019) amid fears they had influenced the votes for Brexit and for Donald Trump (Bastos & Mercea 2018).

Volchek & Sindelar 2015). Their strategy of keeping up a high volume of disinformation through multiple channels is designed to drown out competing voices. It takes expertise in *dezinformatsiya* honed by the Soviet Union (Paul & Matthews 2016; Robinson et al. 2018), and enhances it with the latest psychological research (Paul & Matthews 2016) which shows that: oft-repeated statements are more likely to be accepted as true (Lewandowsky et al 2012), and so are previously encountered statements (the ‘illusory truth effect’; Henkel & Mattson 2011); repetition is more likely to persuade those who are less interested in a topic (Claypool et al 2004); familiar-sounding statements are processed in a less discriminating way (Garcia-Marques & Mackie 2001); and even preposterous stories become more believable if they are repeated often (Tree & Eldon 2007). Post-Soviet Russia has reminded the West that conspiracy theories do not necessarily arise spontaneously as a popular explanation of puzzling events; they can also be manufactured, and repeated broadcast transmission can be substituted for spontaneous transmission.

Russian-made conspiracy theories are often disguised as journalistic reports, usually in a more sophisticated way than on the Smolensk Crash News website. These ‘reports’ are sometimes ‘laundered’ into seemingly credible news, for example, by being mixed with genuine news reports or passed through layers of social media and other third-party websites, then picked up by more respectable media outlets that do not take care to verify the reports’ provenance (Paul & Matthews 2016; Frau-Meigs 2018).

This ‘firehose of falsehood’ was used liberally in the ‘softening-up’ of Ukraine prior to the 2014 invasion. As well as continuing to saturate Ukraine, Russia is currently directing its disinformation at the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, in which fear of invasion is chronic (Graham-Harrison & Boffey 2017; Karlsen 2016). For example, in 2015 Lithuania reintroduced conscription and compulsory military service (which the other Baltic states already had) and issued all citizens with a manual advising what to do in the event of invasion (Kirchick 2017).



Russia also issues strategic disinformation about Poland (Radio Poland 2016; Khaldarova & Pantti 2016; Wierzejski 2016), such as the conspiracy theory that demonstrators who gathered in Kiev's Euromaidan (European Square) in November 2013 to call for Ukraine to sign an 'Association Agreement' with the EU – the event that likely triggered Russia's invasion of Ukraine – were agitators trained in Poland and Lithuania (Khaldarova & Pantti 2016). There are a number of Polish NGOs devoted to debunking this incoming narrative fire (Wenerski & Damarad 2018).

My study of Smolensk and other conspiracist 'narratives of national threat' (including wartime rumours) reveals a pattern of escalating hyperbolisation across scales, from the microscopic electrical mistake of the accentuation effect, to outright exaggeration in transmission and exaggeration-via-ellipsis (sharpening), to intergroup differentiation and international polarisation. Something similar is also evident in the PSCT, and I return to that other type of threat-generated conspiracy narrative in the next section.

## 7. Levelling and sharpening in conspiracy thrillers

As Allport and Postman note, the distortion process they call ‘levelling’ resembles the rhetorical device called ellipsis, ‘the omission of some matter from a text’ (Baldick 1990), and ‘sharpening’ resembles hyperbole (‘overstatement’, from the Greek for ‘over-casting’). The PSCT resembles the Smolensk Crash News echo chamber and the monthly Smolensk marches in the way it repeats and amplifies stereotypes about the Russian outgroup. Transmitting Smolensk through the thriller novel medium, I found a similar hyperbolisation across narrative scales in the PSCT.

### 7.1 Sharpening the villain and hero

My identification as a PSCT writer entailed social pressure to use ellipsis to ‘level out’ details that might promote moral ambiguity, making the villain hyperbolically evil, and the protagonist heroic (Frey 2010). For example, initially I had Rozanski telling Nation more about his traumatic childhood in the Lavrentiy Beria children’s home, but I deleted most of this back story, in case dwelling too long on Rozanski’s unfortunate orphanhood made him too sympathetic. This elision might be at odds with advice from a number of writers’ manuals (e.g. Bell 2012; Renner 2013) that villains should be multi-dimensional, complex and not wholly evil, but in line with advice from thriller writer James Frey’s 2010 writers’ manual that the crucial thing is to make the villain evil; making him rounded is only acceptable insofar as it does not compromise his evilness. Having a villain who embodies evil chimes with the Manichean tendencies of conspiracy narratives first noted by Hofstadter (1965). In other novels in my subgenre, the same tendency is evident in the exaggeration of scholarly and journalistic versions of Vladimir Putin in many post-2008 PSCTs. For example, Eric Van Lustbader’s Putin analogue is referred to throughout his 2017 Ludlum-franchise novel *The Bourne initiative* not as the President but as ‘the Sovereign’, and his ambitions are suitably imperial. For example:

The Sovereign [...] still dreamt his dreams of a reconstituted Soviet Union without any thought of how his regime could govern such a far-flung empire when previous regimes had been unable to manage it before. (p. 150)

In *The deceivers* (2018), Alex Berenson's Russian President, Sergei Fedin, is (like Putin) an ex-FSB kleptocrat. He thinks to himself:

Just as long as they didn't go after the money Fedin and his men had made. Millions, yes. Even billions. So? The average Ivan wanted his leaders to be rich. He gloried in their hundred-meter yachts and London mansions. Even if he never saw them, even if he was never allowed anywhere near them, even if he would have his face smashed in if he looked too long at them, their mere existence gladdened him. But the reporters and the other troublemakers didn't understand. They bleated about theft and corruption... A year or two in jail wouldn't do for those. Ten years. Or a beating, the kind that put the recipient in a coma. If those warnings didn't do the trick, a few grams of lead, strategically inserted into the cerebellum. (p. 211)

In Berenson's novels, geopolitical settings are veridical and derive in part from his former job as a *New York Times* correspondent in the Middle East, but, as in the *The silent man* (2009) the villain here is described in melodramatic terms. The insistent repetition of 'even if' in the first half builds like self-justificatory rage to the cynical oxymoron: 'face smashed...gladdened him'. The use of sentence fragments and clinically detached language to describe violence and murder suggest casual brutality. And Fedin's FSB chief is portrayed as even more violent and sadistic than his President.

Similarly, Mark Greaney's 2015 Clancy-franchise *Commander in chief* opens with President Valeri Volodin, another ex-KGB kleptocrat, mentally rubbing his hands together as he inspects his latest nuclear-armed submarine, capable of turning the United States into 'a smoking hole the size of a continent' (p. 6), which is melodramatic. But a former FSB chief later gives an account of Putin's Russia that scarcely exaggerates scholarly and journalistic accounts:

What is happening in Russia is not about government. It is about crime. Volodin and his cronies have billions of dollars of interests in Gazprom, the government natural-gas concern, and Rosneft, the oil concern, as well as minority ownership and total control over banks and shipping and timber concerns [...] The social contract in Russia is very simple. The population is willing to give up liberty and turn a blind eye to government corruption in exchange for security and prosperity. (p. 54)

The series of Red Sparrow novels by ex-CIA agent Jason Matthews, replete with meticulous detail about settings and tradecraft, does not even provide Putin

with the fig leaf of a pseudonym and portrays him as an obsessively imperialist and self-obsessed Napoleon, even in the bedroom, where these attributes manifest in brutally technocratic sexual performances.

In other PSCTs, Putin, or a Putin-like President, is deplored without being dramatised (e.g. Phelan's *Red ice*). In *The red web*, Putin is not dramatised, but is still criticised. He is represented (by Mitkin) as a dangerous 'small man'. Though timid compared to the Putin analogues described above, he proves dangerous enough when his hand is forced by the conspiracy in *The red web*. I have not yet encountered a PSCT that describes Putin as a loyal servant who, early in his career, forsook self-interest and never betrayed his political masters, though journalist Masha Gessen gives him his due in her otherwise scathing 2013 biography, or as a dog lover, though Politkovskaya dwells on this in her *Russian diary* (2008). Unlike these journalists, PSCT writers tend to elide details that would render moral ambiguity to the villain's characterisation.

Like Allport and Postman's rumour transmitters and the Smolensk transmitters, we PSCT writers camouflage our use of hyperbole. In the way that hyperbolic nature of claims about the malign intent of Russians on Smolensk Crash News are supported and disguised by the hundreds of thousands of words of technical detail and 'expert' opinion that lend them credibility, in the way that Russian news launderers hide fake stories among genuine ones, so the villain in a PSCT is a caricature of evil in a realist landscape. We provide for the receiver's willing suspension of disbelief (Coleridge 1817) by using the rhetorical trick of couching our exaggerated claims about the outgroup in a mass of verifiable detail.

My characterisation of the hero is less melodramatic than my villains'; it is hyperbolic in that I gave Nation the usual lethal skillset, but decidedly downbeat in other ways. He is not a glamorous spy in the James Bond tradition, but an amateur who happens to be a trained killer. Whereas only a few protagonists in my sample of CWCTs are not spies or counterintelligence agents, just 14 of the protagonists in my sample of 36 PSCTs are professional spies<sup>20</sup>, though three novels feature off-the-books government operatives and another six feature ex-

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<sup>20</sup> These spies work for various national agencies, most often the CIA or MI6.

CIA or ex-military protagonists (like Nation). The PSCT uses more such ‘soldier-spies’ than the CWCT, and more amateurs, which echoes the early spy novel’s use of protagonists who were soldiers but are now amateur spies, most notably Buchan’s Richard Hannay. Nation’s relatively unglamorous characterisation is influenced by Lee Child’s Jack Reacher, an ex-military policeman, now unemployed knight-errant drifter, who helps people and solves crimes, and by Berenson’s John Wells, a soldier-spy who started out as a US Army Ranger and became a CIA deep-cover operative.

Though most of these protagonists are loners, Clancy’s Jack Ryan, Abbott’s Sam Capra, Berenson’s John Wells and Berntsen and Pezzulo’s Matt Freed have wives and children they seldom see. Nation is unusual in the amount of time he spends with his family. He is abnormal, too, in having a realistic case of PTSD. This reflects the fact that I had not yet internalized certain norms about PSCT spy thriller protagonists (such as the ‘loner spy’ norm) when I first conceived his character. It was also prompted by advice from thriller manuals to make the hero multi-dimensional (e.g. Frey 2010; Bell 2011; Renner 2013), and in order to reflect an aspect of post-conflict psychology that has been neglected by the thriller genre. In this regard, I fear I might have compromised Nation’s heroism by rendering an unsympathetic aspect of this condition a little too veridically for some readers. While other thriller protagonists, including Morrell’s John Rambo (1972/2000), Ludlum’s Jason Bourne (1980) and Berenson’s John Wells (e.g. 2006, 2009, 2018) probably suffer PTSD, it generally only makes them cold, violent and mistrustful to the point of paranoia, which are useful attributes in a thriller protagonist. I followed these norms, but also attempted to render more accurately the finding that post-conflict hostility and mistrust are frequently directed against families. This finding was gleaned from Iraq and Afghanistan veterans’ biographies (e.g. Kyle, McEwan & DeFlice 2012; O’Neill 2017) and many hours of first-person oral history recorded on YouTube and podcasts including *This is war* (see e.g. Russo 2018a; 2018b).

My conclusion is that while ‘in’ (the military) these men learn to react immediately to threats with violence, and to value the brotherhood above all else,

and these behaviours persist for some time after they are ‘out’, such that families tend to suffer collateral damage even in cases where the veteran has not been diagnosed with PTSD. Once you are aware of a phenomenon, it becomes hard to ignore it, especially if the genre has. It is the traumatised veteran’s hair-trigger aggression and his sense that Grace has betrayed both him and her children that prompts Nation to shout, ‘I’ll kill her!’ His anger at her betrayal of the Nation family thus echoes the novel’s (and the genre’s) hostility towards those who betray the nation. This use of personal betrayal to echo the larger betrayal of the ingroup comes from the CWCT subgenre, which frequently uses that trope, for example, in le Carré’s *Tinker, tailor, soldier, spy* (1974) and *A perfect spy* (1986), and Deighton’s Bernard Samson novels. Whether Nation is likeable or not, Frey’s (2010) thriller writers’ manual argues, using the example of *Dirty Harry* (1971), that the crucial attribute in a hero is not likeability. For Frey, the crucial attributes are: ‘courageous’, ‘resourceful’, ‘interesting’ and ‘wounded’.

## 7.2 Structural sharpening

Returning to the pressure to level and sharpen: at the level of plot, conformity with PSCTWG style norms entails differentiation from the competitor LWG on the ‘thrilling’ dimension. Information about this norm which dictates regular thrills on a geopolitically significant scale came partly from the formal prescriptions in thriller writers’ manuals (e.g. Frey 2010; Renner 2013), partly from the formal analyses of literary critics (e.g. Bloom 1990; Glover 2003) and largely from reading the novels of other PSCTWG members. Social influence is experienced subjectively as pressure to behave like the group prototype and, according to the SIA, this construct might represent the ‘mean’ (average) of the range of group behaviours and opinions, as in earlier theories of conformity based on ‘informational influence’, but RII allows that the prototype might be displaced from the mean in some cases due to intergroup differentiation (Hogg & Abrams 1998). Hence, the group prototype in a left-wing political party will tend to be further left than most members of the party, and the group prototype in a right-wing political party will be further right than most members of the party. Similarly, the prototype for the post-Soviet conspiracy *thriller* is probably not an

author of middling thrills such as Alex Berenson or Tom Clancy, whose viscerally thrilling scenes are balanced or outweighed by non-violent scenes, but, rather, ‘someone’ (some collection of attributes) who devotes more words to thrills and violence than those authors – a construct who sits somewhere between the authors of middling violence and the relentlessly violent end of the spectrum (e.g. Scott McEwan, Matthew Riley, Eric van Lustbader). Whether he sits at the top of the bell curve or is polarised away from the mean, the PSCTWG prototype sits a long way from the non-violent end of the thriller spectrum where more literary writers such as John le Carré sit, though le Carré tends to be treated as a highly prototypical spy novelist in any history of the spy thriller. Whereas in le Carré, ‘[t]he description is ample and colorful, unhurried by considerations of suspense or calculations of climax [and] characters owe more to the world of Evelyn Waugh than to thriller writing’ (Merry 1977, p. 213), at the industrial end of the PSCT spectrum the plot is hurried and hyperbolically violent, and it is seldom put on hold for what I think of as ‘literary’ descriptions of place or character. That most critics (who are not members of the thriller writers’ group) point to less thrilling writers such as Greene, le Carré and Deighton as highly prototypical spy novelists highlights the problem of applying a qualitative approach (non-statistical, intuitive, impressionistic, canonical) borrowed from the study of Literature – and applying it to criticism of popular fiction. As a member of the PSCTWG, I was guided more by ‘thrilling’ writers, and less by those literary spy novelists.

Looking at one part of the spy thriller’s plot, the beginning, might help illustrate how I sought information about plot norms, and how statistics might lend support to my practice-led finding that the canonical approach to spy novel criticism can be misleading about criterial genre norms of the thriller. Taking the putatively prototypical John le Carré as an example again, none of the three le Carré novels in my PSCT sample begins with violence or a chase, and nor do the three le Carré novels in my CWCT sample (though there is menace in some opening chapters, and the opening chapter of *The spy who came in from the cold* ends with a shooting death). Instead, le Carré tends to concern himself with characterisation in his opening chapters, as recommended by many writers’

manuals. But many other recent thrillers start with violence or pursuit, which sometimes extends across a number of chapters. Most first sections I checked were labelled 'Prologue' (whereas le Carré doesn't have prologues). Some prologues are neither analeptic nor proleptic, but essentially function like 'Chapter One'. Others recount a violent inciting (proleptic) incident in the past or an incident torn from the later narrative chronology and slapped on at the front, analeptically (Genette 1980), as a promise of thrills. To put some empiricism behind my feeling that it was becoming almost as normal to deliver a chase or shootout in the first chapter of a thriller as it is to deliver a corpse in the first chapter of a murder mystery, I looked for the 'mean' and found that whereas just 32% of novels in my CWCT selection have violence, pursuit or a character in physical danger in the opening chapter (or prologue), 62% of the PSCTs do, which suggests le Carré's relatively quiet first chapters might be abnormal in the PSCT. The first chapter is only a small part of the plot, but if le Carré is statistically non-prototypical in this respect then he might be in others.

To my knowledge, no critics have commented on this structural 'norm' (if such it be) in recent thrillers, though many have observed that murder mysteries begin with a corpse. Further, while the many writers' manuals I consulted for advice about beginning often recommend starting *in medias res*, the only one that notices that it is common for thrillers to begin with danger and violence is Frey's *How to write a damn good thriller* (2010), though he does not suggest it is the norm.

The above example illustrates that sharpening at the plot level might not just be a synchronic pattern, but that there might be a diachronic trend of 'plot sharpening' in post-war spy and thriller fiction. The SIA account of norms, which are practically indistinguishable from stereotypes, suggests that they are constantly changing, like Jameson's ideologemes. Although my samples are small, it would not be surprising if the percentages above indicated a formal change in the spy novel between its Cold War and post-Cold War iterations. Perhaps the formal shift towards being thrilling early is a response to the ubiquity of competing forms of thrilling entertainment that did not exist during the Cold War. As many writers' manuals argue (see e.g. Frey 2010; Renner 2013; Stein 1995), the first chapter is



the most important chapter in the book, because it is the chapter that hooks or fails to hook agents, publishers and readers, and because it is where the writer indicates to the reader what kind of book follows. If you are writing a thriller, it makes sense to let the reader know up front that thrills will follow.

Thus, *The red web*, which opens with 1800 words hinting at physical danger to the protagonist, and then segues into 7000 words of violence and pursuit across four chapters, is relatively 'normal' in the PSCTWG. Having started to write thrillingly in the early chapters, I felt compelled to deliver on that promise. Thus, for example, I brought forward the scenes in which Nation and Dolinska jump from Saint Ania's Bell Tower and are pursued through the Old Town, because it had been too long between thrills. When Nation's children are first found by the bad guys, I originally had Nation and his kids simply escaping over the back fence of the school, but on re-reading it didn't seem thrilling enough, so I made it a much more violent scene.

Besides PSCT novels, writers' manuals and critical accounts, published interviews with writers provided useful information and reminders about the formal norms of the thriller at various stages of the writing process. For example, while editing the second draft I read an interview with fellow conspiracy thriller writer Lee Child who said that the only writing rule he has come up with after writing more than twenty thrillers is 'write the slow stuff fast and the fast stuff slow' (Martin 2015). Attempting to follow this rule while editing made me cut down sociocultural exposition and backstory and incorporate it into action scenes where possible, and telescope dull periods of narrative time, such that the violent clashes between moral opposites became hyperbolic (sharpened) in their frequency and duration.

I am conscious that there are periods where the novel is less viscerally thrilling, as in those chapters concerning Nation's reading of secret police files but, having gotten access as a scholar to these difficult-to-access files<sup>21</sup>, I could not ignore them. This, too, reflects times in the writing process when I was probably

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<sup>21</sup> In the Institute of National Remembrance archive in Warsaw, which in the last few years, under PiS, has been largely opened to journalists and scholars.

following the (statistically) ‘wrong’ prototype, that is, the example of more literary spy novelists who make great use of faux official documents including le Carré (see e.g. his 1974 *Tinker, tailor, soldier, spy*) and Deighton (see e.g. his 1962 *The IPCRESS file*).

### 7.3 Sentence sharpening

At the sentence level, it was partly the effort to elide (level) slow stuff that led me to write in sentence fragments and omit conjunctions and sentence connectors. Partly, too, I was imitating the spare style of Alex Berenson (e.g. 2006, 2009) and the use of sentence fragments and asyndeton by Lee Child. For example, in the opening scene Nation thinks:

He wasn’t in the best shape to meet a threat or be one. Hadn’t taken his sleeping pills in three nights and he’d hardly slept in four. He watched them climb off their hogs and fill their tanks. Their patches said Cossacks. He didn’t know much about them, except they were newer. A one-percenter gang for white guys. (p. 11)

This terse style suits the genre and it fitted scenes focalised through Nation, a laconic and relatively humble man. However, I wanted to give Rozanski a voice that suited his personality, which is neither laconic nor humble, and it was likely my imitation of highly prototypical subgenre writers like those quoted above that made him internally loquacious. In scenes focalised through him I more often use longer sentences, melodramatising his hubris and amorality. For example:

Hearts and voices were lifted not only by the company and the good wine and food, but also, the Director was pleased to think, by the splendor of the vaulted ceiling and the chandeliers, the pianist playing Chopin, the marble staircase, the hundred-million-zlotys worth of artwork, sacred and secular, which anchored their cause in history: the magnificent life-size portrait above the great fireplace of Albertus, Margrave of Brandenburg and Duke of Prussia, in full beard, sword and heavy black furs, at the height of his power in 1599, and likenesses of other men who’d ruled here – Swedes, Muscovites, Lithuanian magnates. Men who hadn’t felt the least bit guilty about taking the spoils of history and changing allegiances when it suited them. (p. 80)

But I was uncomfortable writing these Rozanski scenes, partly because his evil seemed excessive, but also because the excessive language was at odds with the tersely recounted chapters focalised through Nation. It also felt as if I was following competing norms at the sentence level: the melodrama norm seemed to

conflict with the fast-pace norm. I feared the more difficult language would slow the reader as it slowed me as a writer, and that I would lose poorer readers. After all, I wrote the novel for an audience of young American men (say, 17–35) without a college education, a cohort that is probably reading less than ever. Whereas the average Flesch Reading Ease (FRE) level of *The red web* is 78 and the average Flesch-Kincaid (reading) Grade Level is 5.1 (readable for a fifth grader), the sentence quoted above scores an FRE of 0 and a grade level of 42.9.

Lee Child's thoughts on orality raised another objection to long sentences. Child argues,

We have a prehistory of around seven million years. We have been recognizably modern for only thirty thousand years ... [F]or every year we've been modern we've been premodern for five hundred [sic]... [I]hink what this does for storytelling [...] When most writers talk about 'voice' they mean something rather obscure; when I say it I'm really thinking about talking to somebody, for me the voice is really a voice, it's oral.  
(Martin 2015, p. 89)

In fact, Marwick (2003) suggests Pleistocene exchange networks point to a date of around a million years ago for the emergence of proto-human languages. Oral storytelling, then, might well have emerged hundreds of thousands of years ago, whereas stories in printed form have been popular for only a few hundred years. Nowadays, sales of printed fiction (including e-books) are declining, while audio books are growing in popularity. According to Publishers Weekly, fiction sales dropped by 16 per cent between 2013 and 2017 (Milliot & Deahl 2018), while audiobook sales jumped 22.7 per cent in 2018 (Maher 2018). I listen to audiobooks often, and I wanted to write a book that would make the hours on the road pass faster for a long-haul truck driver. For this reason, I chose from the outset to identify the speaker before the utterance, as people do when telling a story orally, since on some audio books you have to wait for the narrator to say 'said so-and-so' to find out which character was just talking. And for this reason, too, I subsequently broke up some of Rozanski's longer sentences – long, complex sentences are even more difficult to process aurally, because you cannot easily go back and remind yourself how the sentence began.

What Child does is point not to the current prototype of the subgenre but to the archetypal storyteller. The songman who told stories of battles by the tribal campfire would have ended up in the fire if he lost his audience in long sentences of difficult-to-assimilate moral nuance. While I found the PSCTWG prototype varied for me depending on who I was reading, Child's archetype came to mind often during the writing process.

The hyperbolising pattern evident in the refinement of rumors and conspiracy theories in serial transmission discussed in Section 6 does not apply to an individual novel; the words in the book stay the same in subsequent editions. But across the life of a *genre*, as Moretti (2004b) argues, we can see an evolutionary pattern of certain tropes and structures being selected for while most die out. Thus the norms that I follow are the norms that have been transmitted. And, as Darwin wrote, 'Only those variations that are in some way profitable will be preserved or naturally selected' (1859/2008, p. 110). The trend towards hyperbolisation evident in opening chapters in conspiracy thrillers since the Cold War suggests that it is 'more thrilling' tropes and structures that have been preserved as norms for my group of writers.

## 8. Polish stereotypes and master narratives

A group does not install itself into the brain of an individual in the way that a program is installed in a computer. Identification with a social group like ‘The West’, ‘us Poles’ or the PSCT writers’ group (PSCTWG) is a process, and identification is usually partial, intermittent and labile (Turner et al. 1987), such that at some stages of the writing process a writer identifies more strongly with a social self-category, and at other times with a personal one. So far I have talked about what makes *The red web* conformist in terms of PSCTWG norms, but in this section I talk about one thing that makes it idiosyncratic within those constraints: its Polishness. I argue that on this point my approach is often not personal; it is still social, but conformist with the different set of anti-Russian stereotypes and master narratives that arose in Poland.

The category content – the particular set of stereotypes advanced by a CWCT or PSCT – varies somewhat with the subgroup of the West the author belongs to, and this is a consequence of ‘relative accessibility’. For example, in my small sample, the English CWCT is more preoccupied with ‘mole hunts’ than the American CWCT. This reflects the devastating impact of the Cambridge Spy Ring on the British intelligence community. From the early 1950s till the end of the Cold War, the stereotype of the ‘mole’ – the undiscovered traitor in our midst – was often in the news and therefore cognitively accessible to British CWCT writers.

While *The red web* subscribes to the American PSCT stereotypes mentioned in section 4, and to Anglo-American CWCT stereotypes to a lesser degree, its stereotyping of Russia also has a distinctive Polish accent. In the way that Joseph Conrad (Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski), the son of a Pole jailed for resisting the Russian occupiers, transposed his Polish nationalism onto his spy novels in English (Matin 1997), the Russian group villain in *The red web* is viewed through a Polish lens.

Whereas Anglo-American stereotypes about Russia in the early spy novel, the CWCT and the PSCT emerge from a sense of strategic threat, Polish anti-Russian stereotypes come from lived subjugation. Though I am not Polish, my use of

Polish anti-Russian stereotypes and Polish self-stereotypes indicates that I identified with my wife's Polish ingroup while writing the novel. My wife arrived in Australia having emigrated illegally with her parents from Poland's puppet Soviet state in 1978, and I know other members of the Polish diaspora who were imprisoned or otherwise persecuted by that regime. I tend to agree with their view that their persecutors were generally never held to account. Further, I wrote most of the novel during 18 months living in Warsaw with my wife and our two children.

### **8.1 From *liberum veto* to *linia gruba***

Historically, the threat from Russia to Poland has been existential rather than strategic, and it is consequently more bitter. Russia has invaded Poland, by my count, seven times in the past three centuries, and the Russian army has occupied Polish territory and dictated its political decision-making for around 250 of the last 300 years (Davies 2005a, 2005b; Lukowski & Zawadzki 2007; Zamoyski 2009). Together, Russia, Prussia and Austria erased Poland from the map for the 123 years between 1795 and 1918. In this period, in which even the speaking of Polish was officially banned, Poles like Conrad nonetheless preserved both their language and an image of their martyred Poland as the 'Christ of Nations' (Mickiewicz 1832/1975), a homeland awaiting resurrection.

This 'perennial invader' stereotype about Russia is often paired with another stereotype grounded in recent history: 'they invade with the help of Polish traitors' (Davies 2005a, 2005b). For much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was one of the great powers of Europe, but by the end of the eighteenth century it had disappeared from the map. A major reason for this was that throughout those centuries, foreign powers would bribe Polish magnates (big landholders) to vote the right way or to veto legislation in the Sejm (Davies 2005a; Zamoyski 2009). The *liberum veto* (free veto) gave any magnate the power to veto not only the particular piece of legislation being voted on, but also every piece of legislation hitherto passed by that convocation. Consequently, there were entire decades in which the Sejm passed no legislation at all (Davies 2005a). It was an attempt to abolish the *liberum veto*

that so infuriated Catherine the Great that she conspired with Prussia to get rid of Poland altogether in the late eighteenth century (Zamoyski 2009).

The liberum veto made Poland's government the laughingstock of Europe (Zamoyski 2009), and left Poles with an enduring sense of being their own worst enemies. The long-term institutionalised treachery of the magnates culminated in the Sejm actually voting for Poland's annihilation, rubber-stamping the three partitions that divided Poland between Russia, Prussia and Austria between 1772 and 1795 (Davies 2005a; Zamoyski 2009). In 1794, when Tadeusz Kościuszko led his doomed popular uprising against the Russians, mobs of revolutionaries fired with the Jacobin spirit expressed the general popular frustration at this treachery by dragging aristocrats, bishops, and other Polish collaborators into the streets and lynching them (Davies 2005a).

No such catharsis followed the collapse of communism in 1989; rather, many of the collaborators prospered in the post-communist period. Partly this leniency was a consequence of the 'Round Table Agreement', a transitional power-sharing arrangement between the communist government and the Solidarity opposition. Also, too, many communist-era injustices were excused by the legal principle *nullem crimen sine lege* (no crime without law), which dictates that if there was no legal prohibition in place at the time an act was committed, then it cannot be punished by law (Nalepa 2017). Then, in the 1990s, the US discouraged 'lustration' ('vetting' or 'cleansing') or any form of retributive justice in the former Eastern Bloc, fearing the Balkanisation of those countries (Applebaum 1994). Whatever the cause, researchers agree that transitional justice in Poland was a case of 'too little, too late' (see e.g. Ellis 1996; Łoś & Zybortowicz 2000; Stan 2009, 2015).

Of the 300,000–400,000 Poles who collaborated with the Soviet regime, many of whom might have been held to account in 1990 for decades of universal surveillance, arbitrary imprisonment, and the torture and murder of thousands of anti-communist partisans, protestors and political prisoners, only a few were ever prosecuted (Halmai 2007; Stan 2009). At the very least, employees of the communist state might have been excluded from the post-communist institutions,

as in East Germany and the Czech Republic (Bruce 2009; Nedelsky 2009; Stan 2009), but such lustration laws were voted down repeatedly by members of the Sejm who had previously worked for the communist regime.

Further, the terms of the Round Table Agreement allowed Solidarity to begin to prepare for democratic government, while, in return, the Party and its KGB-affiliated secret services kept control of the key ministries of Defense and Interior for a full year after the 1989 democratic elections (Łoś & Zybertowicz 2000). Having been aware for months or years that the ship of communism was sinking, as *The red web* puts it, these cadres continued to rob the state coffers (Łoś & Zybertowicz 2000), and subsequently converted their communist political power into post-communist economic power (Stan 2009). Later they would parlay some of this economic power back into political power (Applebaum 1994; Łoś & Zybertowicz 2000; Zybertowicz 2002). Since 1990, this *czzerwona pajecyna* (red spiderweb) of businessmen and politicians has used its networks, power and wealth to undermine subsequent attempts at decommunisation and lustration (Łoś 1995; Łoś & Zybertowicz 2000; Stan 2009).

To use an example pertinent to *The red web*, the first 'lustration bill' was introduced to the Sejm in 1992 by the Kaczyński twins. It was rejected by the mostly ex-communist Sejm in favour of a Spanish-style amnesty model of transitional justice (Stan 2009). This *linia gruba* policy drew a 'thick line' between the past and present. It preached *amnestia, nie amnezja* (amnesty, not amnesia) but at the same time sealed the SB (secret police) archives and thereby concealed the names of both the secret policemen and the hundreds of thousands of Poles who had been their paid or unpaid informers over the decades (Stan 2009).

Only in 1997 did the Sejm pass a law giving restricted access to the archive to scholars, journalists, and those who could prove they were victims of the regime, as well as a weak lustration law which required those in public office to submit a lustration declaration (Stan 2009). Though 370,000 lustration declarations were submitted, only 530 people were subsequently dismissed from office (compared with 60,000 to 100,000 such dismissals in Germany), and few former collaborators could be charged with anything beyond lying on a lustration



statement (Bruce 2009; Nalepa 2017). Thus, the law did not prevent a large number of ex-communist generals, judges, parliamentarians and other senior office holders from keeping their positions.

## **8.2 ‘The red spiderweb’: treachery stereotypes**

In the way that my current identification with an anti-Russian version of ‘the West’ entails a view of Russia that draws on accessible Cold War stereotypes defining ‘them’ and ‘us’, so identification with the PSCTWG seems to activate the still-accessible stereotypes of the CWCT, its precursor subgenre. These CWCT norms overlapped with and were reinforced by salient Polish ingroup norms which were accessible to me as I wrote the book in Poland in 2017–18. The Polish government was (and still is, at time of writing) involved in a Cold War–style hunt for traitors.

In the CWCT, a subgenre that produced many villains based on real-world double agents, including at least eight novels dramatising Kim Philby<sup>22</sup>, traitors working for the Russians are generally portrayed as worse than the Russians. This reflects Tajfel and Turner’s argument that ‘[t]he intensity of explicit intergroup conflicts of interests is closely related in our cultures to the degree of opprobrium attached to the notion of “renegade” or “traitor”’ (1986, p. 10), and Travaglini et al.’s (2014) experimental finding that defectors (traitors) are judged more harshly than deserters, likely because defectors strengthen the outgroup. *The red web’s* attachment of opprobrium to ‘traitors in our midst’ reflects recent Polish history and the perceived influence of the ‘red spiderweb’, a network comprising former SB and intelligence officers, 24,000 of whom had to find new jobs in 1990 (Łoś & Zybortowicz 2000), as well as other members of the former security and political apparatus.

The Polish version of the ‘traitors in our midst’ stereotype invokes a worse nightmare than that of a Cold War–style Cambridge Spy Ring, since it conjures a

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<sup>22</sup> Russia’s most successful mole inside MI6 is dramatised in novels by Alan Williams (1974), Ted Allbeury (1981/2014), Frederick Forsyth (1984), Tim Powers (2001), Robert Littell (2002), William F. Buckley Jr (2004/2005), Jefferson Flanders (2013), and Daniel Silva (2018).

nation riddled with unidentified and un-hunted moles – potential former collaborators, vulnerable to blackmail – among one’s neighbours, friends and even family. The SB had 98,000 ‘secret co-workers’ on its books in 1988 (Stan 2009), and few of them have been unmasked because the archive remains closed to the public. But the fear has deeper historical roots than that: across the centuries, time and again, Poland was sold out by Poles and the nation knew it was happening but was too divided and too fearful of invasion to do anything about it (Davies 2005a, 2005b). Unlike America, which spent the Cold War fearing Russian invasion, Poland lived through Russian invasion; it now gets to live through the Cold War, but more intensely than we in the West did.

The consciousness of ‘traitors in our midst’ exhibited in *The red web* by Aldo and Ilona Iskra, Agata and Hubert Zieliński, and Szymon and Bronia Dolinska derives from conversations with Poles and my scholarly reading about the failure of transitional justice in Poland, and echoes the constant repetition of these stereotypes in Poland’s right wing media (which includes state media). The traitor Rozanski owes his prosperity to money laundered through the FOZZ scheme and to the ‘orgy of corruption’ (Zamoyski 2009, p. 391) that occurred between 1993 and 1997, when the SLD, a party of former communists, returned to power and privatised the state sector. His prosperity invokes another Polish master narrative that stretches back to the sixteenth century when the magnates were living astonishingly opulent lifestyles while openly voting in the Sejm according to the dictates of foreign paymasters: ‘Traitors prosper while honorable Poles struggle’ (Zamoyski 2009; Halmai 2007; Łoś & Zybertowicz 2000; Stan 2009, 2015).

PiS Party leader Jaroslaw Kaczyński’s anti-communist paranoia is widely mocked by the left-leaning Polish media. In this vein, Jerzy the cleaner ridicules Kaczyński’s paranoia and Candidate Lipiński lampoons it – ‘Reds under the bed! Under all the furniture!’ (p. 81) – on the night he becomes a puppet of those Reds. Here, a Cold War stereotype proved ‘accessible’ to me: Lipiński’s echo of the McCarthyist catchcry ‘Reds under the bed’ links Kaczyński’s post-Soviet paranoia to the similar American paranoia of the Cold War and to the ‘Red

sleeper agent' trope in the CWCT<sup>23</sup>. Lipiński and Rozanski see in PiS's 'late lustration' an echo of McCarthyism, an excuse for settling political scores. In fact, I don't disagree with this characterisation, and I do wonder if the fears expressed in the parliamentary debate over the Kaczyński twins' 1992 lustration bill are not being realised. Two of the anti-lustration discourses identified by Łoś's (1995) analysis of this debate were: 'witchhunts and inquisitions just breed a new kind of totalitarianism'; and 'lustration is just a political weapon' (see also Stan 2006).

In terms of the other theory the novel transmits, 'Trump–Russia', Lipiński's lampoonery connects Poland's conspiracist climate to American fears when he mocks US President Trump as a Russian agent. This conspiracy theory was accessible to me and to many readers in the West because of recent news about the FBI counterintelligence investigation into Trump and Special Counsel Mueller's probe into Russia's role in his election. Much of this reporting suggests that the wildly paranoid vision of CWCT writers like Allbeury (1977, 1980) that the Russians might actually succeed in making a sleeper agent or patsy President of the United States might not be such a wild idea. Indeed, the suggestions about how Trump was allegedly ensnared laid out in the 'Steele Dossier' (Steele 2016) and Isikoff and Corn's (2017) book *Russian roulette* are straight out of a CWCT. Like a CWCT, my PSCT advances the Trump–Russia conspiracy theory in a barely attenuated way. For their part, Poles already know the idea of a prime minister who is a Soviet agent or patsy is not a wild idea: in 1996, Prime Minister Oleksy resigned and was investigated over his close association with a Russian spy. Just seven of the 36 PSCTs in my sample use the 'mole hunt' plot, and of these just two use the 'Russian sleeper agent' plot<sup>24</sup>, but the Trump–Russia conspiracy theory has already inspired a revival of the 'sleeper agent' subplot in Berenson's 2018 PSCT, *The deceivers*.

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<sup>23</sup> For example, Condon's 1959 *The Manchurian candidate*, Deighton's 1962 *The IPCRESS file*, Allbeury's 1977 *The man with the president's mind* and his 1980 *The twentieth day of January*; Littell's 2002 *The company*.

<sup>24</sup> In Silva's 2013 *The English girl* the British Prime Minister's staffer and lover is revealed to be a lifelong Russian sleeper agent.

### 8.3 The buried files

Secret police files are central to the novel's plot and to its transmission of the chronic 'traitors in our midst' stereotype. This stereotype is expressed in two oft-repeated arguments for opening the secret police archive in parliamentary debates over the 1992 lustration bill: 'Before we can forgive, we have to know first who is asking forgiveness, and what for' and 'If we do not uncover and identify the collaborators, we are doomed to repeat the past' (Łoś 1995). Or, as the *The red web* argues, 'If we do not identify the traitors, they will sell us to Russia again'. In the novel, Olek, a PiS supporter, invokes the stereotype when he says of the Institute for National Remembrance archive, 'We can't get in. That's the trouble with this country, we can't get in there' (p. 251).

*The red web* also makes use of the related stereotype that SB case officers stole files from the archive and hid them, to 'control and manipulate' (Łoś & Zybortowicz 2000; see also Kutys 2016) and perhaps even to extort money from erstwhile informers (Lewandowski's 2011 film *Kret*). The stolen files provided an 'insurance policy for use in difficult situations' (Łoś & Zybortowicz 2000, p. 157), and perhaps, as *The red web* suggests, tended to ensure the silence of former colleagues and superiors in the security forces and the Party. According to this stereotype, the victims of blackmail or manipulation would rather keep silent and/or keep paying than be exposed as communist-era torturers or informers. The systematic destruction and widespread theft of files in the transition period by the secret police, the Communist Party and the military is well-documented (Łoś & Zybortowicz 2000; Widacki 1992), but, while there has been a steady trickle of files changing hands on the black market for sensitive information or turning up amid the effects of recently deceased former regime functionaries (BBC 2016b; Łoś & Zybortowicz 2000), University of Warsaw historian Piotr Oseka, who is currently interviewing former SB officers to compile a prosopography, told me his research has found no support so far for the idea that the blackmailing of former snitches was a widespread phenomenon (telephone conversation, 17 August 2018). Since neither blackmailed nor blackmailer would gain anything from discussing it, that perhaps proves little.

The file-stealing stereotype was made salient by events in the news that were frequently on my mind while I was writing *The red web* in Poland. In late 2016, the recently widowed wife of the last communist Interior Minister, General Czesław Kiszczak, tried to sell ex-President Lech Wałęsa's SB file to the Institute for National Remembrance (BBC 2016b), leading to a widespread belief among PiS supporters that Wałęsa, the man who won the Nobel Peace Prize for leading Eastern Europe out of communism, was being blackmailed in the post-communist period by the former minister in charge of the secret police. When US President Trump spoke in Warsaw's Krasiński Square in front of tens of thousands of people in July 2017, he welcomed 'former President Lech Wałęsa, so famous for leading the Solidarity Movement'. I was mortified when the (majority PiS) crowd around me booed and chanted 'Bo-lek!' – Wałęsa's SB cryptonym. My reading of opposition activists' files, including parts of Wałęsa's, revealed that members of the opposition were constantly being called in by the SB to provide information, often as a condition of parole, though most were not paid for it as he was (BBC 2016b). Whatever his involvement with the SB, it was Wałęsa, more than anyone, who earned Poles their freedom to stand in a public square and hail the US President (see e.g. Kemp-Welch 2008). In *The red web*, Aldo (cryptonym 'Hiker') Iskra, winner of a Solidarity medal, but also a former 'secret co-worker', appears as a compromised hero of the resistance, a sort of wan Wałęsa.

While anti-collaborator stereotypes drive *The red web* and the Smolensk conspiracy theory which is central to its milieu, I acknowledge that these stereotypes are not universally endorsed. Though most Poles do recognise the threat from Russia (CBOS 2014), as early as the late nineties 45 per cent of Poles did not advocate excluding former Communist Party officials from office (Stan 2009), indicating they did not share the PiS sense of victimhood, or its thirst for justice against former collaborators. For many Poles, the stereotypes about collaborators outlined above evidently do not exhibit 'normative fit'. For example, three people I talked to described the former SB as a threat to no one, a group of harmless and often impecunious drunks.

Thus, in the interests of balance, Nation also encounters people who want to put the past to rest. Their arguments are drawn from my collection of counter-discourses, which contain the stereotypical content of a different version of Polishness. Many of these I both heard in conversation with Poles and read in scholarly articles. They include: ‘justice means assigning blame’ (Stan 2006), and ‘we are all guilty, so it is better not to assign blame’ (Łoś 1995; Stan 2006); ‘informers were themselves victims’ (Stan 2006); ‘digging up the past just revives old traumas’; ‘the files in the archive were written by professional liars, so they cannot be trusted’ (Łoś 1995; Stan 2009); ‘digging into the past is like opening Pandora’s box and can only end in civil war’ (Łoś 1995); and, as mentioned previously, ‘witchhunts and inquisitions just breed a new kind of totalitarianism’ (Łoś 1995); and ‘lustration is just a political weapon’ (Łoś 1995; see also Stan 2006).

In *The red web* the two different attitudes to collaboration are expressed by Jerzy the cleaner: ‘There are two kinds of people in Poland: the ones who want to dig up the past, and the ones who want to move on’ (pp. 251). On balance, *The red web* expresses its author’s identification with the first category. This is because my protagonist’s quest is to dig up the past, and also because of the overlap between the anti-Russian stereotypes contained in the ‘diggers’ category and those contained in the category ‘PSCT writer’.

At the same time, the character of Aldo Iskra, a sympathetic former collaborator, is a concession to the views of those in the ‘move on’ camp. Iskra’s character might or might not tend to undermine *The red web*’s admonitory function, but it accurately reflects the secret police files I read. In these files, SB case officers’ records of interviews never report what they have threatened or bribed the informer with, but from the context of at least some files it seems more likely that an individual is agreeing to snitch because he has been threatened rather than bribed<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> For example, the SB file of the 27-year-old informer ‘Koszykarz’ (‘Basketballer’), arrested after illegal pamphlets were found in his home in 1982, contains a pathetic handwritten confession in which he claims to have joined the illegal Youth Solidarity Resistance Movement (YSRM) in Katowice only because he ‘did not have the health’ for sport: ‘I am oppressed by frequent nose

I went to Poland as an aspiring ‘digger’ and a PiS supporter: I saw it as a travesty of justice that lustration had never been carried out before. But watching Kaczyński’s undemocratic (see e.g. Nalepa 2017) reforms unfold, seeing Wałęsa tainted, and delving into the secret police files, I soon found the reality of ‘late lustration’ more troubling than I wanted it to be. Such moral complexity does not fit the normative tendency of the PSCT subgenre. Nation expresses my frustration when he complains, ‘Jesus God! Is anyone clean?’ (p. 295).

The novel answers that question with an admonition. In the way that early spy novels like Conrad’s showed that England had become complacent and vulnerable to foreign spies and foreign armies, in the way that *Command authority* (2013) showed the West the new threat from Russia three months before it was realised, *The red web* performs an admonitory function by trying to warn of what happens when Poland is divided in the face of a realistic threat from an imperialist neighbouring power; *it could happen again*. While the novel’s Polishness is unusual within the PSCT subgenre, it conforms to the subgenre’s defining norm because a threat to Poland is a threat to NATO, and a threat to NATO is a threat to the West.

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bleeds and my heart is not the best’. He then signs a ‘Commitment to inform’ (*Operacja Kokos* [Operation ‘Coconut’], 1982). At least one senior member of the YSRM (who went on to become a prominent figure after communism and died on the Smolensk plane) subsequently served a second two-year term in prison, perhaps due to information provided by his friend ‘Basketballer’. It requires little imagination to guess that the ultimatum given Basketballer by the SB might have been ‘either inform or go to prison yourself’.

## 9. Conclusion

From the beginning of the project, it seemed to me that since there is no existing scholarly audience for my work, my exegesis would stand a better chance of making a contribution to knowledge that would be of interest to some scholarly community if I focused not on how I used scholarly literature to help solve my own particular writing problems, but instead on what makes my work generic, in terms of its form, content, or production. Around six months into the PhD I settled on a research question and a hypothesis that would allow me to examine generic features of all three. As I proceeded to add another work to the PSCT subgenre, I recorded my observations about the process. Doing this is probably abnormal for a PSCTWG writer, and, it must be acknowledged, probably affected the process. Throughout the process, I continued to read SIA and other theory, which is probably also abnormal for a PSCT writer, but what this approach allowed was a documentation of the social identification processes experienced by a writer identifying with a group of subgenre writers for the first time. To my knowledge, this has not been done before in the field of practice-led research or literary studies.

While the field of literary studies has employed recent social psychological findings to help explain popular fiction reception, it has not previously applied such theories to *production*, as far as I can tell. In transmitting two different kinds of socially generated conspiracy narrative, a PSCT and another variation on the Smolensk conspiracy theory, I found considerable support for the hypothesis that there are similarities in the social production and functioning of both kinds of narrative that are predicted by the SIA. Unlike most popular conspiracy theories, a conspiracy thriller novel has a single identifiable author, but producing a novel in a threat-generated subgenre such as the PSCT is nonetheless a social act, since, as I argue, its conventions are behavioural norms for a group of writers.

To summarise the process of PSCT production as I experienced it, I began to think of Russia as a threat again when it began to crush internal separatist movements and to invade other nations after 1999. The category ‘imperialist Russia’ had become salient. My identification with an anti-Russian version of ‘the



West' entailed depersonalisation and reactivated accessible stereotypes from my Cold War childhood and my second-hand Polish experience of Russian imperialism, displacing my frequently favourable *personal* impressions of Russians with Western and Polish stereotypes about Russians. Since I was already a writer, the category 'anti-Russian thriller writer' was also salient. I decided to set aside my literary writing, and write a thriller against Putin's Russia and for Poland. In SIA terms, this recategorisation was motivated by the urge to reduce uncertainty in the face of threatening change and by the positive distinctness the new group offered. The notes on genre reading recorded in my reflective journal reveal a process of collecting information about ingroup norms that is predicted by the SIA sub-theory of RII. This reading revealed a subgenre of thrillers previously unremarked by critics which I label the post-Soviet conspiracy thriller (PSCT), and it was the group of PSCT writers I eventually self-categorised into. In the way that self-categorisation did not entail immediate knowledge of group norms, so knowledge of group norms did not immediately entail internalisation of those norms (self-stereotyping). In fact, I am still in the process of internalising the behavioural norms of the PSCTWG.

The decision to make the plot reveal that the Smolensk plane crash was an assassination (within the fictional world of the novel) entailed identification with the group of Smolensk transmitters, and conformity with this group is evident in my novel's transmission of a version of the Smolensk conspiracy theory. The experimental social psychology literature supports the view that this conspiracy theory is not a product of collective paranoia or generalised anxiety, but, rather, of the rational perception of a threat to the ingroup, and I argue that the same is true of conspiracy thrillers, using evidence from my own production process as well as fellow PSCTWG members' observable (writing) behaviour. This contrasts my research with that of Boltanski (2014), who sees both kinds of narrative as irrationally founded, as motivated by subclinical paranoia and a 'profound anxiety' about 'the reality of reality'. My social psychological approach also revealed certain formal properties that aid the transmission of these narratives unremarked by Boltanski: a tropological pattern of levelling and sharpening that was first

identified by Allport and Postman as aiding the transmission of rumours, another type of narrative that is frequently threat-generated.

An SIA perspective on genre fiction production is not reductionist, it simply shows that there are 'certain limits on the way we perceive both physical and social objects' (Hogg and Abrams 1998, p.68). Specifically, it shows that categorisation is a fundamental process that generates a unique form of perceptual distortion (i.e. accentuation) and that this underlies intergroup differentiation and polarisation. Such a perspective helps anchor essentially non-empirical but similarly dialectical concepts, such as theories of ideology derived from Marxism, in empirical research about human social cognition. Future research into fiction production might benefit from exploring this confluence more fully than space has allowed me to explore it here.

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## Appendix 1: Novels in my samples

### Cold War Conspiracy Thrillers

1. Allbeury, T 1977, *The man with the president's mind*, P. Davies, London.
2. Allbeury, T 1980, *The twentieth day of January*, Granada, London.
3. Bagley, D 1971, *The freedom trap*, William Collins, Glasgow.
4. Clancy, T 1984, *The hunt for red October*, Berkley Books, New York.
5. Clancy, T 1986, *Red storm rising*, Berkley Books, New York.
6. Clancy, T 1988, *The cardinal of the Kremlin*, Berkley Books, New York.
7. Condon, R 1959, *The Manchurian candidate*, McGraw Hill, New York.
8. Cruz Smith, M 1981 *Gorky Park*, Random House & GK Hall, New York.
9. Deighton, L 1962, *The IPCRESS file*, Hodder & Staughton, London.
10. Deighton, L 1983, *Berlin game*, Harper.
11. Deighton, L 1984, *Mexico set*, Hutchinson, UK.
12. Deighton, L 1986, *London match*, Grafton Books, London.
13. Deighton, L 1990, *Spy sinker*, Century, UK.
14. Fleming, I 1957, *From Russia with love*, Jonathon Cape, London.
15. Follett, K 1985 *Lie down with lions*, Signet, New York.
16. Forsyth, F 1979, *The devil's alternative*, Bantam, London.
17. Forsyth, F 1984, *The fourth protocol*, Hutchinson, UK.
18. Greene, G 1958, *Our man in Havana*, Heinemann, London.
19. Greene, G 1978, *The human factor*, The Bodley Head in Australia, Sydney.
20. Greene, G 1955, *The quiet American*, William Heinemann, London.
21. le Carré, J 1963, *The spy who came in from the cold*, Victor Gollancz, London.
22. le Carré, J 1974, *Tinker, tailor, soldier, spy*, Hodder & Staughton, London.
23. le Carré, J 1986, *A perfect spy*, Hodder & Staughton, London.
24. le Carré, J 1991, *The secret pilgrim*, Coronet, London.
25. Littell, R 2002, *The company*, The Overlook Press, New York.
26. O'Donnell, P 1978, *Dragon's claw*, Pan Books, Sydney.

### Post-Cold War Conspiracy Thrillers

1. Abbott, J 2010, *Adrenaline*, Hachette, New York.
2. Abbott, J 2011, *The Last Minute*, Grand Central Publishing, New York.
3. Baldacci, D 2010, *Hell's Corner*, Grand Central Publishing, New York.
4. Baldacci, D 2014, *The Target*, Grand Central Publishing, New York.

5. Battles, B 2011, *The Silenced*, Random House, New York.
6. Berenson, A 2009, *The silent man*, Putnam, New York.
7. Berenson, A 2018, *The deceivers*, Putnam, New York.
8. Berntsen, G & Pezzullo, R 2008, *The walk-in*, Random House, New York.
9. Boyd, N 2011, *Last chance to die*, HarperTorch, New York.
10. Boyd, W 2006 *Restless*, Bloomsbury, London.
11. Burke, JL 2011 *Feast day of Fools*, Simon & Schuster, New York.
12. Child, L 2005, *One shot*, Bantam Press, London.
13. Clancy, T 2000, *The bear and the dragon*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York.
14. Clancy, Tom & Greaney, Mark 2012 *Threat Vector*, Berkley Books, New York.
15. Clancy, T & Greaney, M 2013, *Command authority*, Putnam, New York.
16. Forsyth, F 1996, *Icon*, Bantam, New York.
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