

# Babushka's Children

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extract

and Dylan

# *Prologue*

Along the elegant embankment, the streetlights sparkled in their serried rows giving life to the evening and to the city. The glittering reflections added to the vivid display of colours in the timeless dusk that spread out across the Gulf of Finland that night. The majestic, neo-classical facades on the waterfront of the River Neva were tinted deep rose by the slowly changing evening light.

The sun was already low in the sky and its celestial glow reflected off the golden cupola of St. Isaac's Cathedral. Below, a constant stream of cars on their way towards the Hermitage and the cultural centre of St. Petersburg edged along the *Angliyskaya Neaberezhnaya* - the English Embankment. Evening was about to slowly merge into morning in the stylish, imperial city that was once the capital of Russia. Night would only fleetingly visit the city, and the glow in the northern sky would be a constant reminder that it was midsummer.

Next to the cathedral, the Russian Admiralty building, once a tsarist palace, overlooked a park. Leading south away from it, already cast in a long shadow, was the Nevsky Prospekt, the commercial heart of the city. In an adjacent street that ran alongside the Moyka canal, a quarter that was rich with restaurants, cafes, nightclubs and boutiques a car pulled up. Two men got out and appeared to help a third man out of the car. He appeared to be drunk. Indeed, it would not be that unusual at that time of evening at any time of year, but during the White Nights, the never ending hours of daylight of midsummer when partying was common, it was almost to be expected.

One of the men closed the car door behind him with a flick of his heel. Immediately, the car sped away leaving the ungainly trio directly in front of a nightclub. They had no need to announce their arrival; they were expected.

As they crossed the wide pavement towards the club, the door opened for them. Without a moment's hesitation, they entered, and the whole action that had been choreographed in one continuous movement, was completed when the front door of the nightclub closed behind them. The operation had taken no more than a few seconds and any passerby would think nothing of three men slightly the worse for wear going into a night club to finish off their evening's business, that of getting blind drunk. After all, it was midsummer and, traditionally it was a time to celebrate.

However, the man wasn't drunk, and neither were his companions. There was nothing to celebrate, and merriment was far from any of their private thoughts.

'He's upstairs,' the large bearded man who had opened the door for them said gruffly. 'And he's in a hell of a mood. Go carefully, comrades.'

The two men dragged their prisoner towards the bottom of a staircase. The man tried to resist again, this time more vigorously as he looked up, his eyes wide with terror. And it was a terror of the known, rather than the unknown that concerned him; he was well aware of what might be waiting for him. His sudden fierce reluctance to mount the stairs was quickly countered as one of his guards jabbed a cattle prod into his leg. He screamed in pain as the electric charge sent his thigh muscle into spasm and he collapsed, panting, in a heap on the floor. When he had half recovered, his guards lifted him on his feet again. This time, having learnt the painful lesson, he did not try to repeat his resistance and their progress up the stairs, although not rapid, was nevertheless more or less continuous.

When they reached the landing, the trio turned abruptly right into a dimly illuminated corridor. Warm light from an open door spilled welcomingly out across the floor, but the captive knew that there would be nothing of a convivial greeting waiting in the room for him. Indeed, he knew that it would be quite the reverse. Already frightened as they turned to enter the room, he made one last attempt to fight back, digging his heels into the carpet that ran along the corridor.

Alerted by the noise, the man inside the room looked up from an oversized, ornate, mahogany desk. Immediately, he stood up regarding the trio in the open door.

'Bring that miserable piece of shit over here!' The disdain in his voice for his guest could not have been clearer.

One of the guards brutally pushed the prisoner in the back. The man lurched forward into the room involuntarily, completely losing his balance. As he fell, he stumbled over a heavily stained Afghan rug that occupied the centre of the large office.

The rug, an Islamic abstract representation of a perfumed garden, had been war booty from the Soviet Union's bloody conflict in central Asia. It had once been a cherished and valued gift to the Governor of Kushka, from the Turkmen community living close to the city, near to the former soviet border in the north of the country.

Lying across the rug, the man, who was desperately trying to contain his foreboding, though with little success, was unaware that the stain on the carpet, now darkened with age, was that of blood. It had been spilt when an Afghan tribesman hacked violently at the neck of a Russian soldier before being shot, in the back, at point blank range by one of the soldier's comrades. Had the man on the carpet known its bloody history, it might possibly have worsened his already disturbed mind. On the other hand, his deranged condition could not have been much worse. His uncontrollable trembling indicated his fear of the extreme punishment that he might receive for what he had considered was really no more than a minor misdemeanour. Moreover, his agitated state was not helped by the knowledge that his boss, for whom he had worked for some years, was quite capable of cold-blooded murder. The man behind the desk advanced towards him.

'Yuri,' the man implored, looking up, remorse welling in his eyes, 'it wasn't my fault...'

He might have said more to excuse his apparent blunder if Yuri's foot hadn't suddenly made a brutal and unexpected contact with his jaw, splitting the side of his lip, breaking and dislodging part of a tooth. The man spat involuntarily to rid himself of the blood and debris in his mouth.

'You turd,' Yuri said, this time kicking the man in the ribs as his guards retreated to the safe haven of the open door. The

man groaned as he automatically felt his rib cage to examine the damage and rolled up gasping on the carpet to protect himself from further blows.

'You were supposed to be keeping an eye on her! Where the fuck is she?'

'She was in her room the last time I saw her, honest Yuri, she was.'

'Not good enough, Ilya Ilyanovic.'

Yuri kicked again at the heap on the floor this time making contact with the man's right thigh, which was still sensitive from the treatment it had received from the cattle prod. Ilya gasped again in pain.

'When did you realise that she'd disappeared?'

'After you phoned me and asked for her to be brought over here.'

'Yes, Ilya, and when the fuck was that?' Yuri demanded and he walked slowly round his victim.

'Three days ago,' the man whimpered.

'How long?' Yuri screamed, his temper getting worse, 'LOUDER!'

'Three days ago.'

Ilya closed his eyes, as he forced himself to speak louder, knowing what the result of repeating the phrase might be. He was therefore hardly surprised when the next blow came, although the shock of it to the kidneys drove the wind out of him and he gasped once again as a second kick hit the same spot driving him back down into the rug.

'So tell me what happened.'

Yuri's voice had become softer, more reasonable; some of his anger had evidently been dissipated. 'In your own words - take your time.'

Now, Yuri wanted answers to his questions. Now that he had humiliated his victim, hurting him further might defeat his objective.

Yuri was a tall muscular man who had developed early as an adolescent and learnt precisely how easy it was to bully people from quite a young age. Torture had come to him later in life, and he approached it with the same casual ease, caring nothing for the suffering that he could inflict. Having succeeded in frightening Ilya, he imagined that Ilya would be desperate to save his life and tell him everything that he needed to know.

'What happened Ilya - I want to know the details exactly and I don't want any lies.'

Ilya looked up at Yuri towering over him through eyes misty with tears and pain. He breathed in gently and winced as the sudden pain in his chest overwhelmed him. He must have at least one broken rib, he surmised.

'The last time that I saw Natasha, was on Saturday afternoon. She was on her own and she was just going into her room in the hotel. I think that she had been out shopping - nothing unusual; she did from time to time. You know, you told me that I wasn't supposed to follow her everywhere; just keep an eye on her; you said, nothing too heavy. She had a bag from one of the chemist's shops on the Nevsky Prospekt. We even spoke briefly.'

Ilya coughed and winced again as he took a tissue from his trouser pocket to wipe his mouth.

'Go on!' Yuri said impatiently.

'She told me that she had a fever and that she was going to put herself to bed. I assumed that the bag she was carrying probably contained some pills, some medication of some sort; I don't know.'

'So?'

'I thought that if she was putting herself to bed, I wouldn't need to watch her anymore that day.'

'So?' The voice was louder, more insistent, threatening again, and instinctively, Ilya wound himself back up into a defensive position.

'So I decided to amuse myself with Olga.'

Ilya's voice had become quiet again.

'I know that you decided to amuse yourself with Olga, Olga told me. Punters pay for the privilege of amusing themselves with Olga, that's part of the service we provide, but nobody is going to enjoy Olga for a week or so, are they?'

'No,' whispered Ilya.

'LOUDER!' Yuri shouted, trying hard to resist the temptation to strike Ilya again.

'No!'

'And why's that?' demanded Yuri, the tone of his voice still menacingly, framed in anger.

'Because, I hit her,' Ilya responded quietly, an element of shame in his voice, his head bowed, and his eyes lowered, looking at the floor. Suddenly, he screamed with pain as Yuri lashed out with his foot again, this time landing a blow on side of the man's head, splitting his ear. Ilya rolled over away from Yuri holding his ear, feeling the wet stickiness of the blood flowing from the open wound.

'You hit her? You did more than that you little shit – you beat her up. WHAT DID YOU DO!'

'I beat her up.'

'I'm the one here, who does the beating up! Didn't you know that?' Yuri screamed.

One of the two guards sniggered impulsively, responding to Yuri's unintentional attempt at irony, until Yuri's fierce glare silenced him.

'What happened then?'

'You phoned on Sunday afternoon and told me to bring Natasha over. I couldn't get her to answer her door, however much I banged on it, so I got the passkey and let myself in. She wasn't there.'

'I know she wasn't there – you haven't told me anything I don't know yet.' Yuri was clearly exasperated. 'So, where is she, Ilya?'

'I honestly don't know, boss.'

'Do you know why you're here?'

Ilya didn't answer.

'I'll tell you why - because you were employed to keep an eye on Natasha and the rest of the girls in the hotel, and you failed on both counts.'

Yuri paused, and then bent down to put his face next to Ilya's bleeding ear. 'So, where do you think she's gone?'

'I don't know, but I think she may have changed her appearance.' Ilya looked up hoping that this new, useful small piece of information might be appreciated.

Yuri looked astonished. 'Explain!'

'I found long blonde hair in handfuls in the bin in the bathroom and an empty packet of hair colouring.'

'What did you do with the rubbish?'

'It was in the bin – I left it there.'

Yuri looked at the man lying on the floor and gestured to one of the guards. The guard walked over, immediately handing him the cattle prod. Ilya cowered as he saw what Yuri was about to do and tried to scabble away but Yuri was quick and jabbed the two probes of the device through the man's tee

shirt and into his ribs. Ilya screamed in pain as the discharge made him twitch violently.

'So why didn't you tell me this right away, you little shitbag?'

'I panicked boss, honest, I just panicked.'

'What colour did she change her hair to?'

'I don't know, I didn't look.'

Yuri looked down at the man with utter contempt and shook his head.

'So the only useful thing you could have done, you didn't do, and then you left us chasing around looking for a dumb blond for three days who isn't blonde anymore, and isn't as dumb as we think, never mind the time we spent looking for you. Not very clever.'

'No, boss.'

'And Moscow's a particularly stupid place to try and hide, Ilya. My friends in the FSB found you very quickly didn't they, and very kindly brought you straight back here to St. Petersburg – and that's going to cost me, isn't it?'

'Yes, boss.'

'So, tell me what happened to my friend Peter'

'The Englishman?' Ilya looked up at Yuri wondering why he should ask him about this.

'Yes, the fucking Englishman - what's happened to him - he seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth as well? Did Natasha go off with him?'

'I don't know,' Ilya shrugged his shoulders defiantly. The gesture would have been better suppressed; it irritated Yuri hugely. Ilya could see it in his face and tried to defend himself. 'I haven't seen him boss, honestly. I don't know anything.'

'That's the big problem Ilya, as far as I am concerned – you don't know anything, you don't know anything useful at all. Worse, you're a very stupid, mean, irritating little man, Ilya; and you're unreliable. Some things I can forgive, but unreliability is a big failing. I would go so far as to say it's a real handicap, especially in our business. If you had come to me right away, we could have had people looking for Natasha; but now, three days later, she could be anywhere, Ilya – anywhere in the fucking world! Gregor is very displeased. He's convinced that she has stolen something very important from us and he blames you. What can I do for you, Ilya?'

'I don't know, boss.'

'Do you think that I can save you from Gregor?'

The man on the ground didn't reply, he knew the answer; he just sobbed quietly, his eyes closed tightly, trying to erase the pain from his mind. Yuri withdrew and went to sit behind the desk. He picked up the phone.

Yuri Nikolayevich Nikitin was effectively Gregor Rostov's deputy. Theirs was a large organisation, highly profitable, well organised, and utterly ruthless. It bought and sold things, it was a sort of import and export business, - drugs, people, stolen goods, and it dealt in murder, prostitution, extortion, racketeering, narcotics, and money laundering. Its markets were expanding and it had recently made an agreement with Dutch drugs dealers to expand their markets further into Western Europe. The Russian Brotherhood, as it called itself, the *Russkaya Bratva*, was not an organisation to cross.

Yuri looked down at the heap on the carpet as Ilya averted his eyes.

There was a long silence whilst Ilya waited, sobbing pathetically, wondering what horrors were being conjured up in Yuri's mind. Yuri banged the phone back down on the desk.

'Feed him to the fishes,' Yuri suddenly said decisively, looking over to one of the guards who had dragged the man in.

'No, Yuri, no!' the man screamed, before the man silenced him with another brutal kick to the head.

'Piece by tiny piece, take your time, we don't want any traces,' Yuri paused, 'and, it's up to you if you kill him first.'

Unimaginable terror seized Ilya's already fragile, disturbed mind, as he was dragged away from the abstract representation of paradise in the form of a soiled Afghan rug. Yuri ignored him and picked up the phone again.

'Gregor, it's Yuri. We need to talk to General Mishkin. We're going to need some help tracking Natasha down.'

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Later that night, when the sun had dipped below the horizon and twilight reigned, a high-powered motor launch left the quayside on the Moyka Canal. It headed quietly south, past St. Isaac's Cathedral, under the wide bridge that forms a public square in front of the Marlinsky Palace, and then on towards the estuary of the River Neva. Once there, it suddenly increased speed and headed west, towards the Gulf of Finland. It cruised past the town of Kronstadt, leaving a trail of white foaming water behind it. Then on, past the huge Russian naval base on the island of Kotlin - Rat Island, as it was once called, before finally rounding the lighthouse on the end of the breakwater, and surging forward into the waves, the open sea, and the enveloping twilight.

Somewhere there, where the horizon between the sea and the sky was indistinguishable, Ilya was slowly dismembered according to Yuri's instructions, parts of his body being jettisoned overboard in netted bags weighed down with bricks and dispersed over a wide area of sea. It was unlikely, that far away from land, that any portion of his remains would be ever washed ashore.

As the lights of the city had brought life to the evening, the moonless sombre sky brought a slow and painful death to the night, and Yuri's fearful reputation, as well as that of the *Russkaya Bratva*, would undoubtedly be enhanced as a result of it.

Stories of Ilya's unenviable and desperate fate would spread, gathering colour and horror, as if his death had not been horrible enough, to persuade others not to cross *Russkaya Bratva* and Yuri Nikitin in particular.



# Chapter 1

Of course, I knew nothing of any of this. At the time, I was well over a thousand miles away from Russia, in the south of England, licking my mental wounds in a cottage in Dorset.

However, I did know about Yuri, although I'd never met him, and I knew quite a lot about the *Russkaya Bratva*. I also knew about Natasha, and how she escaped from Russia. Indeed, I was instrumental in helping her to escape. Our initial meeting, however, if you could call it that, had happened by accident some time before, albeit very brief.

The first time that I ever set eyes on Natasha was on a bridge in Rotterdam and I will always remember the day. Apart from my meeting Natasha, I was principally engaged in a sort of rite of passage into the murky world of the secret service. If I'd been more careful, as I had been warned, I should never have been on the bridge, and Natasha and I would never have met. Nevertheless, we did meet, and so with a degree of inevitably, life changed for both of us, but hardly in ways that either of us might have then reasonably imagined. Immediately subsequent to our unplanned encounter, if matters had developed rather differently, my career with British Intelligence, as it sometimes prefers to call itself, might have finished, as quickly as it had so unexpectedly begun. Perhaps, on reflection, that might even have been better for all concerned.

However, fate, in its often dubious and mysterious manner, intervened especially for me. An impending disaster in Rotterdam was forestalled, and I, as a consequence, emerged as someone who was considered astute and highly resourceful, rather than inept and irresponsible, which would have been much closer to the truth.

Truth however, as I found, was a quality that had little commerce in my new line of business and, as I also later discovered to my dismay, I had been recruited not for my good looks so to speak, but to play the role of the fall guy, the patsy. I realised that it had taken me rather longer than it should have to realise that my superiors had set me up. Thus, apart from these initial doubtful qualities - ineptitude and irresponsibility - I was also inexperienced, extremely naïve, and particularly dim. In all, I seemed especially unqualified for the change of career that I had recently been invited to make and had so stupidly agreed to.

It wasn't so much the affair in Rotterdam, which I am referring to, which was in my case seen more as a training exercise and only a beginning, but the subsequent events for which I had been specially recruited.

I had been quite keen to visit Russia and the Baltic States, but then I was very gullible in those days and I was flattered that British Intelligence would even consider recruiting me. I suppose that I must still be gullible to a degree. I have always

tended to believe what people have told me, although I have learned since to my cost that truth actually comes in many shades of grey.

When I was sent to Russia, I was admittedly a rank amateur, completely out of my depth and without the slightest clue of what was going on around me. That I was also completely screwed up emotionally and mentally probably didn't help either. My mind was so full of rubbish that it hardly allowed me to rationally contemplate the real purpose of my mission. In my opinion, I blundered from one minor crisis to another, oblivious or confused for the most part, of what I or anyone else was actually up to. However, as it turned out, my innocence, or stupidity some might say, worked to my good fortune!

Fate, rather than careful planning on my part, mostly determined my unexpected and unwarranted success. If I hadn't gone shopping in St. Petersburg to buy a present for Shoko, I would have never inadvertently collected the information that half the secret services in Eastern Europe and Britain were not only looking for, but would have been perfectly happy to kill for without the slightest hesitation. It was a far cry from being a music teacher and a mediocre jazz pianist, but improvisation did play a crucial part in both my careers. Indeed, my finding a way of transmitting the information back to England avoiding any means of detection was not only prudent, but one which also showed that I really was quite resourceful.

After my return to England, to my surprise I was applauded for this providential deed, as well as for exposing at the same time, a suspected double agent. Nevertheless, I still felt rather like a fraud. I had done no more than what I could have done given the circumstances. And importantly, I had no idea if the information that I secretly transmitted was indeed anything more than someone's private collection of digital music.

As it transpired, it was exactly what Simon Sparrowhawk, my departmental head, had been hoping for, and it was considerably more than he, or anyone else, could have hoped for. The information confirmed exactly what Sparrowhawk had suspected – the complicity of the FSB, the Russian mafia, and certain key politicians in the Russian government to milk Russia of a fortune that would have left Bill Gates looking like a pauper. Not only that, apart from describing the big picture, it also named names – lots of names, and detailed financial transactions, which if they got into the open, would in all probability bring the Russian government down with a resounding crash, resulting in extremely dire consequences.

It was therefore considered, certainly by our political masters, that such a revelation could leave a void that might only be filled again by hard-line communists. It was decided therefore that this should be avoided at all costs. As I subsequently learnt, Sparrowhawk determined that the information should be studied with extreme care before a solid strategy could emerge, detailing how it could be used to the greatest effect. Sparrowhawk apparently already considered that it was much too precious to ignore, but warned that badly managed, it could do more harm than good.

It was, as it happened, the principal reason why Sparrowhawk wanted to talk to me again so urgently.

Well before my first ever meeting with Sparrowhawk, for what seems now to have been a relatively stable period in my life, I worked as a music teacher in a secondary school in Pimlico. I didn't enjoy the job, nor, I imagine, did I excel at it. To be perfectly honest, when I finally made the decision to leave it all behind me, it was a great relief.

I had been at the school for over twelve years and it was whilst I was there that I met Madeleine. We had ten years together and then, unexpectedly, she left me with the briefest of explanations that eventually turned out to be a downright lie.

Ours was rather more a comfortable coexistence than a whirlwind romance and was largely measured by routine. However, her leaving me was very abrupt, and left me in a state of shock and nervous depression. Of course, it's possible that I was heading in that direction any way. However, our sudden and somewhat inexplicable separation was just the cherry on the proverbial cake, I think I mean, the straw that broke the camel's back, but I wasn't thinking very clearly at that time. In a moment of hopeless panic, I decide to quit my job, and go and live in my uncle's cottage in Dorset in order to try and rebuild my life. To be fair, I was just beginning to make some real progress in this latter respect when my life was turned upside down rather dramatically once again.

One morning, one dreadful morning, I returned from the beach to find Madeleine lying dead on my kitchen floor with her throat cut. In the garden was her brother with a bullet hole in his forehead. I didn't even know that she had a brother and, as it turned out, I knew very little about Madeleine.

To start with, I soon learnt that Madeleine wasn't called Madeleine - her real name was Anna. And, I thought that she was Scottish - she wasn't at all, she was Russian; what's more she was five years older than I thought she was and she worked for SIS. Anna, or Madeleine, or whoever she was, told me that she was a lawyer! However, in those days, I would have believed what anybody told me; I had no concept that the world was so full of lies.

And then, to cap it all, the local Bill, personified by the pugnacious and selectively deaf Chief Inspector Wrigglesworth, decided to detain me as their principal suspect in a double murder case in which I played the part of the homicidal, jilted, jealous lover. When I say that my life was turned upside down, I'm sure that you will understand that I'm hardly exaggerating.

Much to my amazement however, after languishing in a dusty cell for only a day and a night, I was sprung out of police custody. It was a most curious and surprising escape that immediately brought me into contact with Simon Sparrowhawk, Departmental Director Russian Desk, SIS.

I can't say that I ever took to Sparrowhawk, although from time to time he mellowed and dropped the pretence that he generally adopted as a front. For the most part however, he was an overbearing, supercilious product of an English public school who exuded a self-confidence which seemed mostly to express itself in an undisguised disdain for lesser mortals.

At that first meeting, Sparrowhawk appeared to be extraordinarily keen to recruit me. Ostensibly, a word that he used frequently, my appointment would be to complete some unfinished business with which Anna and her brother Sergei had been involved. Apart from any other sentiments that I might have had, perhaps the sense of adventure that the job offered, although I had never been very adventurous, was

appealing. I was also flattered by his invitation to join his department and become a civil servant. Having nothing better to do, I accepted.

I have often reflected uselessly whether I made the right decision. I gave myself twenty-four hours to decide; in the end, it took me five minutes – I couldn't resist the temptation - I was intrigued. Immediately afterwards I began training and I must admit that, it was one of the most enlightening and intensive periods of my life.

Sparrowhawk described the Service as being one principally involved in collecting information and analysing it. However, of the very few fundamental questions that I did ask him before I made my decision to join the Service was if would I be expected to kill people. The simple reason being that it was something I didn't feel comfortable about. Essentially, at that time I still considered myself principally as a musician and killing people had never formed part of my curriculum.

Sparrowhawk laughed at the question and confirmed that this would certainly not be a requirement of the job. You will appreciate that I was of course much relieved. Nevertheless, and rather contradictory to this easy dismissal of my question, learning about weapons and practising on the range formed an important aspect of my training. Should I have questioned further the need for this?

It was during this initial training period that I was sent to Rotterdam to act as part of a surveillance team. It seemed that a particularly powerful branch of the Russian mafia was developing business relationships with the Dutch underworld. We were there to observe, take photos, to try and identify all the players, that sort of thing. I was the tea boy. It was there that I inadvertently bumped into Natasha, or rather Natasha intentionally bumped into me. It was no more than a fleeting moment, but there was something about her, her eyes in particular, which left a deep impression on me. It was later that I found the message that she had slipped into my pocket and, as a result, the lives of two of our operatives were saved.

As it happened, Natasha had been a friend of Sergei and was one of Anna's contacts in St. Petersburg. Natasha had supplied Anna with information concerning the links between the Mafia and the FSB. Natasha had once been Yuri Nikitin girlfriend, but whilst he had tired of her, he still wouldn't let her go. He had another use for her, she ran a collection high quality prostitutes that he kept in some of St. Petersburg's best hotels.

Natasha was desperate to escape, and in return for this information, Anna agreed to help Natasha flee from Russia. However, Anna was murdered, as was her brother, before she was able to keep her part of the deal. In addition, tragically, the information was lost. Sparrowhawk recruited me; ostensibly, as I told you, to complete the work that Anna had started. At least that was what he told me and that was what I believed. Of course, it was much more complicated than that and in my innocence I saw nothing of the counter plots and thought simply that I was being sent on a wild goose chase.

And, I have to admit, I didn't really have my eye on the ball either; a Japanese violinist called Shoko had distracted me, completely bowled me over, I was head over heels in love with her, like an adolescent with his first real girlfriend. I could hardly think of anything else. Sparrowhawk had warned me against it, but stupidly I didn't take his advice.

My cover, in going to Russia, was to travel with a television production crew making a documentary on an orchestra and choral on tour. My musical background was

thought to be useful in this respect and I was to act as the linkman, presenting the series and interviewing members of the orchestra and the like. Actually, I fell into the role rather more easily than I expected and despite some initial difficulties with Anita, the producer, that part of the trip went remarkably well. Falling in love with Shoko was however, unplanned as well as unavoidable and it transpired at times to be somewhat embarrassing. To be honest, it was an undesirable complication, but then, who wouldn't have fallen in love with her?

Without doubt, Shoko was one of the most exquisite women that I have ever met. She was extraordinarily talented and for some very bizarre reason that I never really figured out, she seemed to like me. We became lovers. I had even hoped of some kind of long-term future together. However, events in St. Petersburg rather put paid to that particular dream, but not before Shoko helped me engineer a way of getting Natasha out of Russia into Finland, and then on to Britain.

When I did eventually return to Britain, I harboured a whole variety of negative feelings. Not only did I feel that I had fundamentally failed in my role working for Her Majesty's Government, but I was also particularly depressed after Shoko and I had so suddenly broken up. Frankly, I had pretty well resolved to give everything up again and go back to giving piano lessons in Dorset for the rest of my life. Indeed, my first debriefing with Sparrowhawk largely helped me to confirm this decision. I took some leave and returned to Dorset for a short break at the cottage.

I quickly accustomed myself to the idea of giving piano lessons again between walking the beach and visiting the local pub. I had to admit that on reflection, it wasn't that bad a life – and after all, it was never too stressful. However, as it transpired, it just wasn't to be.

Within just a few days of my returning to the cottage, I had two telephone calls, one from Sparrowhawk who much to my amazement declared that he had significantly underestimated me, an unusual admittance of culpability from such a man, and the other from Anita, wanting to talk about another possible television documentary. Strange isn't it how one's life evolves unexpectedly. As my father used to say – when one door closes, another opens. How often his words ring true.

Subsequent to these two calls, I arranged to go up to London the following Friday to listen to both parties and find out what exactly was on offer. Strangely, and contrary to my rationale that a quiet life might be preferable, I was rather pleased to agree to the meetings. In all honesty, though, I hadn't really settled, I didn't actually feel that I was 'home', and the weather had turned awful - rainy and windy, although the prospect for the end of the week was better.

So, the following Thursday, I took an afternoon train from Dorchester to London and without giving it too much thought, often the way I'm afraid, I went to see Natasha. It was clear from our previous meetings, fleeting though they were that we definitely still had the 'hots' for each other.

I had become accustomed to making love with Shoko, which was akin to a musical composition in three or four distinct movements. I imagined that making love with Natasha would be simply unrestrained lust. I wasn't far wrong and I think I must have lost at least a kilo that night. Well it was summer in the city, warm and humid, but even so! We stopped about half-past three in the morning, not because we were completely satiated, but because the people in the flat below

had clearly had enough of our antics and began to hammer on the ceiling with a broom handle. We slept in one another's arms until dawn and then quietly, very quietly, we started again. This time, we neither disturbed, nor were disturbed. I left Natasha asleep in bed and crept out of the flat sometime after nine.

I found a little bistro near Bond Street where I treated myself to breakfast - I was starving. It must have had something to do with the vigorous exercise that I had been up to most of the night! I took my time; my meeting with Sparrowhawk was not until twelve thirty. Why on earth, I wondered, should he invite me to lunch with him in his club? I remember thinking that it was strange; it intrigued me immensely. Perhaps it was just another part of the act he so often projected. Perhaps there was also another reason.

Normally, I would have been summoned to his room on the fifth floor of the SIS Headquarters at Vauxhall Cross on the south bank of the Thames - 'Legoland' as we used to call it. Why didn't he arrange to meet me there? After all, I was still a member of his staff, despite our most recent conversation, which seemed to conclude that I would be leaving shortly. Clearly, he preferred otherwise, but what his motivation was, I couldn't possibly imagine. No doubt, I would soon find out. However, as I had already begun to discover, it was naive to take everything he said at face value. So to crystallise my thoughts, whilst Shoko was without any doubt the most exquisite woman I had ever known, Sparrowhawk qualified for probably being the most devious bastard I had ever met.

I mentioned the other phone call - that from Anita. Out of pure efficiency, I wasn't keen at the time on going up to London twice in one week, I had arranged to meet her later the same day at the end of the afternoon. She had an office in Channel Four's headquarters in Westminster. I couldn't imagine that Sparrowhawk would keep me all afternoon and in any event, if I was slightly late Channel Four wasn't that far away from Sparrowhawk's club, and Anita was neither the most punctual, nor the best organised person that I knew. She was also rather overweight, domineering, messy, a heavy smoker, and not the most attractive of women I have ever met, to say the least.

Whatever happened that day I knew was going to be fascinating. What decisions came out of these two meetings I was already aware would most probably have a significant effect on my life. I remember feeling more than a little anxious as I dunked what must have been one of yesterday's croissants in the *grand café au lait* that I had ordered.

Fortunately, my head was still full of sex; otherwise, I might have easily succumbed to a panic attack, a malaise that used to plague me with frequent regularity, but something that I seemed to have deftly avoided for a little while. On reflection, I had perhaps just been too busy to have time for an attack, which is an interesting observation in itself!

## Chapter 2

Sparrowhawk's club was located in one of those large Victorian brick built buildings in the centre of London, in King's Street, at the back of St. James's Palace. The entrance, a neo-gothic carved stone arched affair, backed by several recessive arches of decorated bricks, enhanced the appearance of grandeur. A broad flight of worn sandstone steps led up to two large, open heavy oak doors. On the transom of both of the doors were identical small brass plaques, which announced discreetly – *Chislehurst's - Est. 1865*.

I climbed the steps towards the doors, stopped, and looked at my watch. I was a few minutes early and whilst I hesitated, thinking about retracing my steps and taking a quick walk around the block, the inner glass panelled door in front of me was opened by a doorman dressed in splendid attire, wearing white gloves. It would have been churlish, and embarrassing, to attempt an escape, so I smiled and entered. I would have asked the doorman if my host had arrived if he hadn't half raised his white-gloved finger towards his brimmed top hat in a kind of salutation and then pointed it quickly towards reception as if to avoid any conversation.

I thanked him with a nod of my head, left him quietly closing the door behind me and walked across the highly polished, tiled Victorian floor towards an elegantly curved solid mahogany counter. I glanced back towards the doorman who shot a reproachful, wounded look at me. I wondered afterwards if I should have slipped him something. However, I had little experience of such things. How much would have been appropriate, a coin or a note? I reconciled my guilty feelings with the thought that such a gesture could have been taken as derisory, or uncommonly generous, and neither would have been particularly satisfactory.

The entrance hall was grand, wood panelled, poorly lit, and in the same gloomy gothic spirit as the rest of the building. Edgar Allen Poe and the *Fall of the House of Usher* came to mind and the image of a lunatic playing a huge reed organ invaded my consciousness. Presumably, when the gentleman's club opened, just ten years after the Crimean War, and the end of the American Civil War, it would have been lit by gaslight, rendering the ambience even more eerie. I half expected another relic of the past to greet me at reception. However, I was wrong. A smartly dressed young woman suddenly appeared and smiled at me. Her modern apparition seemed somewhat strange and rather out of place.

'Are you a member of Mr. Bradley's party?' she asked brightly, her eyebrows raised slightly.

'No,' I replied.

'Then you must be Mr. Sparrowhawk's guest, Mr Ranger.'

'Yes,' I said.

'Would you mind signing in here?' she asked, pushing a large leather-bound register towards me. 'Just your name and signature, here,' she pointed. 'I'll fill in the rest.'

I did as I was requested and passed the book and pen back towards her.

'Mr. Sparrowhawk called to say that he has been delayed slightly but he would like you to go up to the reading room on the first floor and make yourself comfortable. He will be with you as soon as he is able.'

'Fine,' I said.

'I will arrange for someone to come and direct you and take your order for an aperitif. You would like an aperitif, Mr Ranger?'

'Yes, that would be *most* acceptable.'

I regretted saying it almost immediately; I was beginning to sound like Sparrowhawk.

Picking up a delicate, polished brass bell with a cherry wood handle from the counter, the young woman rang it vigorously. Moments later, the other relic from the past that I had already anticipated, emerged from a small room on one side of the hall. He was a small, rather wizened, elderly man. After carefully closing the door to his office, he shuffled across the hall towards me. His attire was as dated as that of the colleague at the door, and his striped waistcoat and white gloves appeared to belong to an era that saw its demise with the end of the Second World War.

'Giles,' the young woman asked with a smile, a smile that Giles did not acknowledge, 'would you mind showing Mr. Ranger to the reading room.'

Giles turned slowly and looked up at the broad flight of stairs that ascended from the hall to the first floor. His gaze was not that far different from that of an exhausted mountaineer looking at the final slopes of a difficult peak – resignation and humiliation appearing to be the more predominant emotions, rather challenge and triumph. Giles grunted. Calisthenics I wondered; preparation for the assault to the first floor, or perhaps I was wrong and it was simply displeasure in being prised out of his warm cubbyhole.

'If you would like to follow me, sir,' he wheezed, leading the way. I thanked the young woman and followed my aged guide.

The ascension to the first floor was not speedy; indeed, it had an air of interminability about it. I had thought to engage Giles in light conversation, but decided against it as he seemed to be in dire need of all his forces to complete his allotted task and, because the only question I could think of, was to ask if he had been there since the inauguration of the Club, which seemed rather indelicate.

As we climbed, he fiercely gripped the ample polished banister with his gloved hand, sliding it forward with each step, before clamping it round and pulling to assist his upward movement. Dutifully I kept pace with him, not wishing to out stride him and arrive at the top, somewhat disrespectfully, before him.

Once on the landing, which was nearly as large as the entrance hall, but carpeted, we turned to the right, passing by a gallery of portraits in oils, most of which dated back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century; patron's or president's of the club, no doubt. Giles shuffled slowly in front of me and then stopped to open a door and staggered politely to one side to allow me to enter first.

Mounted on the door I noticed a brass plaque, not dissimilar to the one on the front door of the Club. This one simply stated *Reading Room*. I went in. Giles followed me and



ushered me towards a large, studded, red leather Chesterfield armchair, next to which was a Pembroke table with a white alabaster reading lamp on it. He switched the light on.

'May I get you an aperitif, sir?' he asked, bending slightly at the waist. Whether it was out of respect or a result of fatigue, I had no idea.

'A whisky?' I suggested.

'Do you have any preferences, *sir*, we *do* have a wide range of whiskies?'

There was an element of impatience and ridicule with the question and I realised immediately the inadequacy of my response. It was a rather like going into a DIY store and asking for a nail.

'A Balvenie Double Wood?'

'Yes, sir,' he said, 'a good choice, may I say, sir.' I felt pleased that he expressed some appreciation of my more considered response.

As Giles shuffled away, I walked over towards a table on which a number of newspapers were carefully laid out. I glanced casually at them and then made my way towards the window and looked out. Outside, the sun was still shining and King's Street was only partially in shade. In the distance, I could see a line of heavy clouds that appeared to be driving up the English Channel. London, it seemed, at least for the moment, was protected by the South Downs.

In the street below, there were people everywhere, some carrying shopping bags, others, briefcases, umbrellas; some were going to lunch, others to meetings and the traffic was nose to tail, with a predominance of black London taxis. What *was* I doing there I asked myself? I thought that I had already decided that this game was really not for me! And then, I don't know why, I started thinking about Peter Gibbs, and a cold shiver grabbed me and shook me.

Peter had been a bit of an odd character, ex SAS, another one of Sparrowhawk's recruits. In a way, I owed him a lot; he taught me more about self-preservation than I ever learnt at Hanslope Park or Fort Monkton. However, I didn't trust him, and I was right not to. Sparrowhawk had sent him with me to Russia to protect my back. At least that was what Sparrowhawk told me initially. More lies. Gibbs was suspected of being a double agent. In fact, as it turned out, his links were mainly with the mafia, he was corrupt and he was probably selling information through the mafia to the FSB. When he found out that part of my task was to spirit Natasha out of Russia, he went barmy.

As I told you, Natasha was Yuri Nikitin's girl, and Yuri Nikitin was the number two in the Russian Brotherhood - *Russkaya Bratva*, the St. Petersburg mafia. I realise now that Peter couldn't let her escape, it wasn't any special duty that he felt towards Yuri; Peter was just trying to save his own skin. Natasha recognised him and once she was in Britain, Peter's links with the mafia would have quickly been exposed. Peter tried to kill me and I only escaped by the skin of my teeth.

Roland Blundell, the timpanist with the orchestra, was with us when the row broke out and unfortunately, so was Shoko. Roland, it emerged, was not just the timpanist; he was another of Sparrowhawk's men; deep cover, as Sparrowhawk described him. He saved my life. He was a big man, and strong, and as it turned out, more than a match for Peter. I didn't see him break Peter's neck, I was lying on the floor at the time, trying to dodge bullets, but I heard it. It was very fast and very efficient. Shoko saw and heard it and it was that which finished everything between us.

I suppose it was why I was so despondent when I returned. I had lost Shoko, I had thought Peter not only to be my friend, but someone who I could rely on, and I didn't even know of the presence of Roland in the game. In all, I felt let down, deceived, and completely useless. Sparrowhawk pretty well confirmed my thoughts concerning my own ineptitude when I returned and now, he wanted to talk to me again, and privately. Why?

'Your whisky, sir,' the wheezy voice floated ethereally across the room breaking the silence and my reverie.

'Thank you,' I said, watching Giles remove the glass from the tray he was carrying, and set it down on the table next to the red leather armchair. I walked over towards it, picking up the Financial Times on the way. Giles shuffled out of the door and closed it behind him as I slid into the plush leather.

However, despite the chair being exceedingly comfortable, I felt far from being at ease. Notwithstanding my curiosity, I could hardly say that I was looking forward to my meeting with Sparrowhawk; he always made me feel inferior, rather stupid, and completely out of my depth. It's even possible that I might have felt more comfortable meeting Sparrowhawk in 'Legoland' - at least there, I would have been on familiar ground. However, here, in his private club, it was rather like visiting the snake in its nest.

I took a sip of the whisky and let it linger a while in my mouth whilst I savoured the flavour. Then, as it slipped down my throat, the warming, relaxing quality of the alcohol began to work a little of its magic. I took another sip and then put the glass down to open the paper.

It was useless. I couldn't concentrate on anything. I got up; I had to walk around. Taking my glass with me and returning the newspaper to the table, I sauntered back over to the window and looked out, down into the street again.

There below me, I watched a taxi pull up outside the entrance to the club. After a short delay, the door opened and the tall gaunt figure of Sparrowhawk stepped out onto the pavement and held the door open while another man alighted. He was not someone that I recognised, but it seemed that my private lunch with Sparrowhawk might not be quite so private after all. In a way, I was quite relieved. Ten minutes alone with Sparrowhawk was a bit of a trial, lunch would have been purgatory; I might even have been sighing for a sight of Anita, however unlikely that might seem.

I watched the two men as they entered the building and then went back to sit in the armchair in an attempt to look relaxed. I closed my eyes and waited. A few minutes later Giles, wheezing even more heavily, ushered them into the room.

'Ah, John, so pleased you were able to accept my invitation,' Sparrowhawk said as he strode confidently towards me. I stood up as he approached. His long bony hand found mine and started pumping my arm vigorously.

'May I present Lord Beddingfield,' he turned slightly as he introduced the man who had followed him into the room. Lord Beddingfield was a rather short, rotund, pink man. His flabby neck looked constrained in the white collared shirt, and his red tie echoed the colour of his cheeks, nose, and apparent political persuasion.

'Hello,' I said, wondering if there was any protocol I should have adopted, like adding, your Lordship, and curtsying.

'Delighted to meet you, John,' he replied simply, as we shook hands and stared at each other, rather different thoughts

no doubt echoing in our mutually empty heads. I noted the overtones of a northern accent, which although subtly modified over the years, betrayed his origins.

'We've just come over from Westminster,' Sparrowhawk explained, 'so sorry we're a little late, the meeting overran rather.'

I sort of nodded in acknowledgement.

One of the things that Peter Gibbs taught me before he died was that it was often better to remain taciturn than compete with the bastards. That kept them guessing what you were really thinking - but then Gibbs was a supporter of the People's Republic of South Yorkshire and fiercely anti-establishment in any event. I wasn't anywhere near the same political persuasion as he had been. In fact, I was largely apolitical, having watched successive governments with some amazement compete to destroy the education system, mismanage hospitals, diddle the public both psychologically and financially, and invade foreign places on what seemed little more than a whim.

'I've ordered lunch,' Sparrowhawk said, 'I hope you don't mind?'

I smiled.

'I imagine that you're probably wondering, John, why we're meeting here?' I smiled again, wondering how long I could keep up this one sided conversation.

'It was at my request, John,' Lord Beddingfield cut in. 'I was keen to meet you after learning about your exploit in St. Petersburg, and I prefer not to be seen too often in 'Legoland', as some of you call it. Westminster is also awkward for different reasons. Here, is convenient and very discreet.'

I was about to say something, it would have melted the ice perhaps, but Giles staggered back into the room to announce that our lunch was about to be served. I downed my whisky. My two companions invited me to follow Giles out of the room. We slowly retraced our steps to the landing at the top of the majestic staircase and then carried straight on through a set of double glass doors that led on into a narrow corridor. Half way along was an open door where Giles stopped and then standing by it, he indicated, bending slightly at the waist, that we should enter.

Inside were a steward and a waitress standing to attention, their hands clutched behind their backs. Immobile, they were patiently waiting for us. In the centre of the room, a large round table was set for three. Compared to the other parts of the club that I had visited, the room was light, airy, and considerably less gloomy.

'If you would like to freshen up gentlemen, there is a cloakroom just in here,' the steward said, indicating a door. I think that Sparrowhawk and Beddingfield must have been bursting after their long meeting as they bolted for the door. Stupidly I followed them in. It wasn't a large room, and what ensued was a slightly awkward experience which manifested itself in a. Still, when in Rome, and all that!

When we were finally seated, the young woman asked if she could serve. Sparrowhawk gave his consent and we waited silently as the cold salmon was deftly arranged on the plates in front of us. The steward then showed a bottle of wine to Sparrowhawk who regarded it knowledgeably and nodded. The wine was opened, the cork smelt, a small amount tasted, approved, and then it was poured. When the ritual was completed, Sparrowhawk announced that we would look after ourselves, and asked the couple to return in twenty minutes, to serve the dessert.

As they made their way out and closed the door to the room, Sparrowhawk raised his glass, proposed a toast, 'confusion to our enemies,' to which Lord Beddingfield added, 'exactly so.' Then we got on with the meal. His Lordship must have been starving because as soon as he had finished the first plate, he was up and over to the sideboard to help himself to more.

'Dig in, John,' he said, but my appetite was nowhere near his, and I was still in the dark as to why I was there with my comfort level being far below what I would have preferred. Sparrowhawk topped my glass up. I have to admit it was a rather good Mersault and it went down excellently with the salmon. In other circumstances, it might have been a thoroughly enjoyable experience, as it was, it was just about tolerable.

My experience of Sparrowhawk was that he liked drama; he used it frequently to create effect, and now he was doing it to increase the tension. I was sure that he was waiting for me to break to ask him what the purpose of the meeting was, then he would tell me slowly, probably in riddles, so that it retained a sense of mystery and intrigue. I resolved to remain silent.

In the end, it became a battle of wits, but I knew I had time on my side. Well, nearly, I still had a meeting with Anita at the end of the afternoon, and, at the worst, I could always call and cancel it. By contrast, whilst I suspected that both of my lunch companions could afford a long lunch, I imagined that Sparrowhawk had meetings that afternoon, and the Lord Beddingfield would either want to get back to Westminster, or down to the country. Finally, it was Sparrowhawk who broke.

'I suppose you must be wondering, John, why we invited you to lunch?'

*Ranger 1 - Sparrowhawk 0!*

'Yes, I am rather,' I admitted. It was an understatement - I was dying to know, and it was time he told me. However, Lord Beddingfield, who until that point had seemed more interested in food and wine, neatly intervened, stealing Sparrowhawk's thunder. I suppressed my amusement as I had the distinct impression that his sudden interest in the conversation might have somewhat irritated Sparrowhawk. It also made it clear, who was superior to whom. Beddingfield had the definite edge.

'I understand that you were thinking of leaving the Service, John,' he said.

'It had crossed my mind.'

'May I ask why?'

'I had concluded that I was particularly amateurish at this business. I blundered through the Baltic affair with hardly a clue about what was going on around me, and it was only through chance that I succeeded in my mission, simply to find that what I had believed to be the main purpose of the mission was never expected to succeed. I didn't really know what I was doing there and so I thought that going back to teaching music might be less confusing.'

'But, as it turned out, you came back with some quite extraordinary information.'

'So I understand.'

'Well, John, this is not really the time to be thinking of jumping ship - the information you brought back with you is dynamite. Candidly, our problem now is deciding how to use it most effectively. Used wisely it could be a huge resource, used badly it might cause in chaos and project Russia back into its communist past, or worse still, into another Cold War. It's

neither in our interest in particular, nor the western world in general, to go there again.'

Lord Beddingfield picked the Mersault out of the iced water and wrapped the napkin carefully round the neck of the bottle. Without asking, he topped up Sparrowhawk's glass, then mine, and then tipped the remains of the bottle into his glass. Afterwards, he reversed the bottle and put it back in the bucket before continuing

'When you were in Russia, you made some particularly useful contacts. We believe that the moment is right for us to take advantage of these contacts and explore all the possibilities.'

'I don't remember making any special contacts,' I replied. I wasn't trying to be funny; it was just that the only contacts I had really made were with two ex-KGB agents, now FSB, who followed me rather irritatingly around the Baltic States.

'I understand that you had some informal meetings with the FSB,' Beddingfield said, picking up his glass and draining it.

So, it was this that he meant by making contact with the natives. Certainly, I remembered the informal meetings with the FSB when they strip searched me and probed me in intimate places.

The first time it happened, Boris had used the occasion to teach me a lesson in spying protocol. Ineptly, I had taken them on a wild goose chase in Tallinn and lost them both. It was just for the fun of it. It had been a hot day and neither Boris nor Anatoli saw the joke and decided to take it out on me later when the convoy including the orchestra crossed the frontier into Russia on its way to St. Petersburg.

I was taken off the coach at the border. Boris's words still rang in my head as he conducted the search none to gently – 'fuck with us and we'll fuck with you.'

Peter Gibbs had also told me that I was stupid, whilst explaining that we know we're being followed, it's part of the game – if we try and lose them they get anxious, think they're being excluded from something, and then they become unpredictable. It's best not to do it simply for fun!

He was right.

'I wouldn't have described my encounters with the FSB as informal meetings, rather more as unpleasant souvenirs of Russia.'

'But you did get extremely drunk with Boris Lazerev at your last meeting with him, didn't you, John?' Sparrowhawk intervened.

'Yes I did, but I hardly had any choice in the matter.'

'No, I know, but the point is, as you explained in the debriefing, Boris was a friend of Sergei, Anna's brother, and Boris was someone who would have helped Sergei, if he could have.'

'Perhaps.' I wasn't wholly convinced.

Beddingfield stepped in again. 'What Simon is saying, is that we believe that Boris could be an ally,' Beddingfield added, labouring the point rather. 'What do you think, John?'

I knew that whatever I thought would be of little consequence if they had already made up their minds. Beddingfield and Sparrowhawk, it appeared, practised thinking rather more than I did. I imagined that their heads were bursting full of strategies that might be devised for the benefit of HMG, and I knew that they must have had something in mind.

I did my best to contribute. 'Boris is certainly an interesting character, probably fairly straight, undoubtedly a cynic and most likely the last person I imagine who would ever

betray his country. Turning Boris I would have thought is an absolute non-starter. As for Anatoli, his side-kick, I haven't a clue.'

'Let's ignore Anatoli for the moment,' Sparrowhawk said, not wishing to be diverted from what ever it was he wanted to pursue. 'Let me ask you a question - how do you think Boris would react to someone betraying his country?' Sparrowhawk asked.

'I think if it was in his power to do something about it, he would without hesitation.'

'And this, John, is the key. The information we have shows an elite group, representing politicians, the mafia and the FSB stripping the country of its wealth. If it goes on unchecked it could plunge the country back into abject poverty and thus into a repeat of the communist experiment, or national-socialism, and when it comes down to it frankly, there's not much to choose between them.'

'So what's your proposition?' I asked.

'We need you to get Boris onside.'

'Me!'

'Yes you, John. We believe that you have more chance of engaging his assistance than anyone else.'

'And then what?'

'Then we can work together with him to infiltrate some specially selected information as well as some other useful gems.'

Of course, I could see what he meant, but it was something more easily said than done. I didn't comment - the thought of trying to get Boris 'on side' was too awful to contemplate. I would be much better going back to Dorset and slipping quietly into oblivion. However, Sparrowhawk wasn't one to give up.

'He won't be able to do anything on his own, but he is in a position where he can start to disseminate this information to colleagues, friends, even perhaps newspapers and television.'

'He wouldn't survive for five minutes,' I said, recalling how relieved I had been in a way that the information I spirited out of Russia hadn't fallen into his hands. It would probably have resulted in his immediate death, just as it had for Anna and Sergei.

More to the point, if he had got the information, to whom could he have passed it on; indeed, whom could he trust? Some of his superiors were inevitably quite heavily implicated in the widespread corruption that affected the country, and it would most definitely not have been in their interests to respond, other than ordering Boris's death. As for the mafia, who play a crucial role in this powerful, alternative, non-democratic government of the country - they dealt, amongst other things with money laundering and death.

Thus, government, or at least eminent politicians proposed, the FSB commanded, and the mafia disposed - all very convenient. Indeed, it was largely believed in 'Legoland' that it was the mafia, acting under instructions from the FSB, who followed Anna and Sergei to Dorset and then killed them.

'In any event, we shouldn't really concern ourselves with the idea that Boris would be a permanent fixture in the strategy,' Sparrowhawk said having eased himself into a more prominent position in the discussion, 'we should think of him as more of a way of getting in, if you see my meaning.'

Well, it wasn't very difficult for me to translate Sparrowhawk's meaning - Boris was expendable. In fact, from Sparrowhawk's perspective, I imagined that pretty well everyone was expendable sooner or later, including me!

So why didn't I walk out then? Why did I stay? What was it that intrigued me? Was it being close to power, real power? I don't think so. From what I've seen of real power, it is so corrupt I wouldn't want any part of it. It wasn't that I was enjoying the meal, or the company, that much either. True, the wine was good, and the ambience, although hardly riveting, was amusing, but that wasn't enough, so why did I stay?

I've often wondered. I think it was because I thought that I was valued. I know, it's difficult to understand why particularly, but they had made an effort, and although I could see through the theatre of it, despite my cynicism, I was flattered again, and then, there was one further aspect of our discussion that concerned me that I haven't told you about. It was next on the agenda and finally, it was this that convinced me to go along with their plans, regardless of my huge reservations.

'And then of course, there's Natasha,' Sparrowhawk said and then pausing, he observed me. It was partly a dramatic pause but also I think he wanted to see if I reacted in any way. I tried not to. I tried to remain impassive. But the name *Natasha* rang in my ears and I thought of her sprawled across the bed that morning and felt my face redden. I don't believe for one moment that my engineered look of indifference succeeded.

'John, I must tell you that Natasha is greatly in our thoughts,' Sparrowhawk continued. I wondered if he had ever thought of a career in the church, he had all the patter. My ears pricked up. 'And there is another question that I must ask you John. It is important that we know. I don't wish to pry, but is your relationship with her serious?'

What kind of a question was that to ask? He sounded as if he was her father wanting to know if my intentions were honourable, if I had a decent job, or if I wasn't already tied up with someone else. And then, before I had even had a chance to respond, Sparrowhawk posed another awkward question.

'That thing with Miss Kurosawa, is that all over now? Or are you playing the field?'

I wouldn't have minded, but it was all so patronising and, it was like pouring pain on embarrassment. However, I was somewhat relieved that he hadn't mentioned Miranda! But, what could I say – yes, it's all over and I'm deeply upset, I wish it were otherwise; or, yes, you pompous bastard, you were right and I was wrong. He had warned me of the complications of getting involved with Shoko before I went to St. Petersburg, and I will admit I was a slow learner and that it wasn't very clever, but I really didn't need reminding of the affair.

'Confined to the past,' I said with an air of confidence, which must have been as transparent as a brick wall with a huge hole in it.

'And Natasha?'

Well that was a difficult question – one I was quite incapable of answering – I hadn't even got round to asking myself properly and coming up with a sensible answer. I hardly knew Natasha. We had probably spoken less than one hundred words in the whole time that we had known each other, it was just sex, and it had an urgency about it that didn't require much intellectualisation. I wondered what the word was in Russian and whatever it was, whether anyone one used it much.

'It's not really a question that I can honestly answer,' I replied. It was succinct and it was frank, qualities that Sparrowhawk probably wouldn't have recognised as being at all virtuous.

‘Actually, it’s not really that important a question,’ Sparrowhawk said leaving me wondering why the hell he had asked it then. ‘Except, we are of the opinion that it would be especially useful if Natasha went back to Russia with you.’

There were three things about Sparrowhawk’s statement that caused me to reach eagerly for my glass of wine and down it, hardly tasting the distinctive flavour of the fine white burgundy. The first was that it was *definite* that he intended that I should go back to Russia. The second, picking up on what he had said earlier, was that I would be expected to form some sort of solid, amicable relationship with Boris. And thirdly, it was implicit in his asking about my relationship with Natasha that he was already expecting me to persuade her to return to Russia with me.

I wasn’t sure that I was entirely happy with the first – the second I thought was a long shot to say the least, but the third was definitely in the realms of cloud-cuckoo land. Natasha might be fond of me, she might even think that she loved me, but there was no way that she could be encouraged to return to Russia. She was terrified of Yuri and knew that he would not hesitate to kill her the next time they met, but probably only after he had humiliated and tortured her.

‘Do you have a problem with any of this, John, you seem rather quiet and distracted?’ Beddingfield asked.

‘Lots of problems,’ I replied glumly.

‘Shall I order the dessert, Simon, or are we going French, and having the cheese first?’

‘Oh, the cheese first, I think, Horace,’ Sparrowhawk replied, getting up from the table and walking towards the sideboard. ‘And there’s a rather fine Chateau Margaux waiting to be drunk over here.’

He picked up a bell, similar to the one on the counter in reception, rang it, and then returned to his seat. ‘So, where were we?’ he said, looking at Beddingfield, ‘I’ve sort of lost the plot.’

That I didn’t believe for one moment - more theatre.

‘We were just discussing John’s next assignment and the company he’s going to take with him,’ Beddingfield answered casually, as if I wasn’t there.

That made me angry and should have been a cue for my departure. I know I should have left then, but again I didn’t. It must have been the Chateau Margaux that interested me; I’d never tasted one.

‘I can’t believe that Natasha would in any way, be remotely interested in going back to Russia.’ I said. I thought it was time that I contributed something useful to the conversation. ‘The mere thought of going back to Russia would terrify her.’ I was irritated by the game these two were playing, not just with me at that moment, but generally.

‘It’s not really as simple as that, John,’ Sparrowhawk started and then stopped abruptly as there was a knock on the door and the steward entered accompanied by the waitress.

‘Cheese first,’ Beddingfield stated, whilst Sparrowhawk smiled ingeniously at me, our conversation on hold again for a moment.

After the cheese had been served and Beddingfield declared the wine ‘excellent’, which I admit it was, the couple left us again to our intrigue and perhaps, not so gentle sparring.

‘As I was saying, John,’ Sparrowhawk recommenced, ‘it’s not at all as simple as that. You see, Natasha is here at our pleasure, or rather the pleasure of HMG. We could if we wanted, just put her on a plane back to St. Petersburg. At



present, she has no papers, we could simply deport her as an illegal immigrant.'

Sparrowhawk could see that I was about to explode. She had risked her life getting hold of the information that cost Anna and Sergei their lives and which he now considered to be gold dust. However, before I had chance to call him all the names under the sun and walk out on them, he defused the situation, by adding, 'but of course, we wouldn't do that. We recognise what she has sacrificed and the extreme danger that she was in whilst she was helping us. We want to help her find a new life here in England, protect her from the mafia, the FSB or both and, give her a chance to completely rebuild her life. However, we would also like her to seriously consider working with us. Let me explain.'

Simon Sparrowhawk did explain in the only way he could, ponderously and pedantically, justifying that whilst she could be protected for a while, she couldn't be protected forever, and that there was no guarantee, that inevitably, someone wouldn't catch up with her. It was in her own interests to ensure that those corrupt people, currently in power, who might think that they would profit from her death, were eased out of the game, one way or another. I liked the way he used the word *eased*. Of course, as usual, he didn't elaborate any further.

'So you see, John, it's really in her own interests to help us in this matter,' concluded Horace. 'Remarkably good vintage this Premier Grand Cru Classé, Simon, don't you agree?'

'Excellent, really excellent,' agreed Simon.

They really were a couple of pillocks, but clever, all the same, I have to admit.

'What do you think, John?'

'Stunning, Horace, absolutely stunning!'

## Chapter 3

If Horace Beddingfield and Simon Sparrowhawk epitomised public school culture and refinement, Anita Pickering characterised a middle class working woman with a huge chip on her shoulder that was mostly aimed at authority, men, and any woman who gave the slightest hint of being sexually attractive, let alone desirable. That Ms A. Pickering was neither sexually attractive, nor desirable, were two factors that contributed hugely to her capacity for work – she was, quite simply, a workaholic. However, she was also recognised as being exceptional at what she did. Anita was very talented and she was generally much sought after as a production manager for certain types of documentaries for which she seemed to have a kind of intuition.

Hugh, her acolyte, and there was really no other way of describing him, doted on her. He saw her as a source of artistic inspiration and I suspect, cherished her as something of a mother figure, earth goddess, or something, but then sexually, he wasn't at all interested in women. When I had last met Hugh, he was making goo-goo eyes at a tanned, blond, blue-eyed German called Joachim, who represented some French/German television company and who had joined us for the last few days filming with the orchestra and chorale in Helsinki.

I was just about on time when I arrived at Channel Four headquarters in Westminster. By the time that I had been through reception, security, and waited for the lift, I was already ten minutes late. However, I knew it wouldn't be a problem as Anita would never be ready in any event. Indeed, as I approached her room, Hugh emerged from the staircase; his office, I remembered, was on the floor above that of Anita's

'Hi Hugh,' I said, 'How are you. Are you coming to this meeting?'

'Yes,' he panted, 'it was supposed to start over ten minutes ago, then Anita asked me to copy something, and I had to wait for the copier. She's always reprimanding me for being late.'

'How's Joachim?' I asked, changing the subject, attempting to be friendly, and understanding. Hugh and I had had a slight falling out in St. Petersburg when I threatened to kill him and it took a little while for him to recover. However, my question was apparently ill timed, or ill advised, because Hugh burst into tears and ran back to the staircase. 'Oh dear,' I said to myself as I continued down the corridor to Anita's office.

I knocked quietly on the door and poked my head round. 'Come in, John,' Anita said, an unlit cigarette hanging out of her mouth, 'I'm nearly ready!'

What did I tell you! She was one of the most disorganised people that I have ever met. There were even

times when I wondered if she was actually autistic, her social skills were so limited. I exaggerate, I know, but only a little; she could be quite infuriating.

Her mobile phone rang. I didn't recognise the melody, did I say *melody*, well jangle or whatever; she'd changed it again since I had last met. It was something that she did regularly in a vain attempt to remain trendy.

'Is that yours?' she asked accusingly.

'No, it's yours!'

Unusually, the phone was on her desk, rather than being buried deep in her bag. Even more unusually, she found it quickly as it was vibrating as well as ringing under an agitated pile of papers and answered it before the person rang off. Anita opened it, and then started speaking to me!

'John, whatever you do, don't mention Joachim to Hugh, it will devastate him, he's only just getting over the disappointment of finding that he already has a long-term partner living in Strasbourg.'

I did wonder whether I should tell Anita that she was keeping someone waiting on the phone, but it seemed so obvious. Nevertheless, I gestured drawing her attention back to the phone. If her correspondent were patient, no doubt they would hang on until she'd finished her private conversation.

'Hello, Peter, thanks for phoning, I've been hoping to catch up with you all day, we need to get together urgently, have you got your diary handy, how does next Tuesday seem, say mid-morning?'

Peter, whoever he was, was not at all patient and clearly had more important things to do than listen in on a private conversation. Peter, who probably knew Anita better than I did, wisely had already rung off.

'Bollocks!' Anita swore, 'I've been cut off!' The two phrases, so close together, I have to admit left me feeling more than a little queasy.

There are times in one's life when it would seem not only appropriate, but also even perhaps kind and helpful to take people on one side, and explain the importance of good manners. I wondered if this might be one of those times, but understanding that my intervention would first, not be understood, and second, not be appreciated, I quickly dismissed the idea.

'What were we talking about, John?' she said, closing the phone and dropping it absentmindedly into her bag.

'You were explaining something about Hugh's love life and advising me that it would be better not to mention Joachim,' I said.

'Oh, yes - tragic story really. Do you know...?' I'm sure she would have told me the whole story if I had let her, but I interrupted and said that I had already seen Hugh and mentioned the unmentionable.

'You didn't!' She looked aghast.

'I did,' I said, 'I was just trying to be friendly.'

'Oh dear!' She said. 'Oh dear!'

For a few moments, there was an uneasy silence between us as we looked at one another, wondering if we might ever see Hugh again, considering if he already was in the process of throwing himself out of a window. Eventually, Anita broke the silence.

'Well, it can't be helped; he was stupid to get involved with him. I told him at the time that it would never work out. It's just a holiday romance, no more, I told him. Don't get too involved. Joachim's away from home and he thinks he can play around if he wants to. Hugh wouldn't have any of it, he was

already completely besotted, and John, he's so impulsive at times. It's difficult to believe, isn't it.'

I didn't comment.

'What was the purpose of this meeting Anita?' I asked, sighing and already feeling tired. My overactive night, followed by my gourmet lunch was catching up with me and, as dealing with Anita usually demanded a huge amount of patience, I had just passed the point where I could reasonably cope.

'I have a letter I want to show you. It's from Gunter,' she said as she rummaged through the pile of papers on her desk. If I'd known who Gunter was, I might have showed more interest. 'He's delighted with the last documentary,' she said, 'and he has an idea that he would like to explore with us.'

She threw more papers in the air and on the floor as she continued her search, becoming increasingly frustrated with her horizontal filing system. Then her phone rang again.

'It's in your bag,' I said, hoping to save her the trauma of looking for it again

'Thank you, John,' she said diving into her bag and retrieving it. As she answered it, she looked guiltily at me. 'You don't mind if I answer it do you, John, its Peter, I've been trying to get him all day?'

I shook my head and closed my eyes while I listened in on a conversation that took nearly ten minutes to agree a time for a meeting, the following week. Hugh's sudden entrance into the room reminded Anita that there were other matters to discuss. Thankfully, she quickly terminated the call observing Hugh as he sidled in and sat down next to me.

'I'm so sorry Hugh,' she said, closing the phone and looking sympathetic that he should have been so distressed by my remarks. I considered adding my apology but imagining that might produce another flood of tears and resolved to remain silent.

'I've brought the papers,' he said, ignoring her seemingly genuine concern and placing a folder on Anita's desk. He looked sideways at me and tried a smile. I think I raised my eyebrows; smiling might have given the wrong signals. Anita opened the file, pulling out the papers to add to those already hiding her desk, whilst still rummaging for the hidden letter.

'Here it is!' she said, delighted by the discovery. 'Gunter's letter.' She passed me a copy.

Gunter Gloeckner was the Broadcasting Head of one of the German television companies. His letter expressed his delight at the preliminary version of the documentary, accepted that there would need to be some work on it, but that overall he thought it was very good. He added that they were looking forward to the final version to add the German sub-titles to the documentary. He and his colleagues were expecting the programme to impact positively on their viewing figures. Most importantly however, Herr Gloeckner was keen to explore another documentary or *docusoap* as he described it. He put forward the suggestion that a tour of jazz clubs in Eastern European capital cities might be the sort of thing that his company would be willing to participate in financing. In his letter, he specifically mentioned me. Strange, I thought, that he should consider that I would be perfect to present such a series.

'Well, John, what do you think of that?' Anita was quite animated. 'If Gunter thinks that you would be good, I couldn't possibly disagree with him, he's very astute in these matters. Of course, we know that it would take sometime to put it together, planning, logistics, research, all that, but it has the potential to be a real goer – what do you think, interested?'

I didn't know what to think. I wasn't exactly a free agent, my day job, as you might say, was with HMG. Sparrowhawk had engineered my role in the previous documentary, twisting Anita's arm somewhat. I couldn't see how it might work the other way round. Nevertheless, I'll admit that it did interest me, and it was considerably more appealing than the prospects of trying to persuade Natasha to go back to Russia, meeting with Boris, and starting to play silly games with the FSB and the Russian mafia.

'It's appealing, I have to confess.'

'I know it's complicated, John. I had a long meeting with Simon Sparrowhawk before the last trip, but I think if you talk to him, he may see some advantage in the proposal.'

I've wondered about Anita from time to time, whether most of it was an act, but the idea that there was some complicity between Simon Sparrowhawk and Anita Pickering conjured up a picture of a very odd couple! I conjured with the image several times but I couldn't quite get them to stay together.

I think I was tired and it was time to go home. My brain was feeling quite addled, I had a splitting headache, probably the result of the Chateau Margaux, wonderful, but heavy, the *crème brûlée*, and the very interesting 18 year old Bunnahabhain single malt Islay whisky that I ingested following the coffee at *Chislehurst's*.

The question was, was I going back to see Natasha, should I spend the night at Riverside Villas, an SIS hostel near Vauxhall Bridge, and risk either the pleasure or discomfort of seeing Miranda, something I should tell you about later, or go back to Dorset? The way I was feeling, there was only one answer – Dorset.

## Chapter 4

I spoke to Natasha from my mobile phone in the taxi on my way to Waterloo Station; I had concluded that I needed a quiet weekend to reflect on the two riveting meetings that I had so immensely enjoyed. I joke, of course.

Needless to say, Natasha was very disappointed and said that she had been looking forward to spending the weekend with me, although I imagined that for several reasons we might never have been able to leave the flat. Some sentiments of guilt and selfishness were difficult to avoid, but escaping to the southwest and avoiding the issue with Natasha for a few days was absolutely necessary. I needed time to think. At least, that was what I tried to convince myself.

Fortune was on my side when I arrived at Waterloo and unusually, I was able to find a seat on the 'Occidental Express'. Any who arrived afterwards had no such luck. Well, it was Friday evening, and it was summer. The train left on time at 18.25.

I used to refer to it, as the 'Occidental Express', because it was the antipathy of the 'Orient Express'. Everything that the latter embodied, psychologically or physically, seemed to be lacking in the train that descended to Weymouth, heading, seemingly and appropriately in the diametrically opposite direction. Fortunately, not long after rattling through Clapham Junction, I fell asleep.

I surfaced for a short time at Winchester, and regarded through a mist of semi-consciousness and heavily drooping eyelids a crowd of passengers alighting at the station. Thankfully, I went to sleep again after the train left the station and didn't really wake up properly until we arrived at Southampton Central. The passengers had thinned out considerably by the time it reached Bournemouth, and then, somewhat tediously, the train traversed East Dorset, stopping at every station and halt on its way to Weymouth.

To the south, in the vicinity of Corfe Castle, the Purbeck Hills were softly illuminated in the fading evening light, and long shadows stretched out across the flood plain of the River Stour. By the time the train arrived at Dorchester, it was dusk and there remained only a faint glow in the western sky. It was just after nine. I found my car where I'd left it in a side road near to the station and left Dorchester heading towards the narrow band of light on the horizon, the last glow of the setting sun, and the cottage at Charmouth.

When I arrived at Charmouth .....

**Read on.....**