

***Natasha***

*Michael Oldham*

*(extract)*

# Chapter 1

## *Prologue - Moscow, April 2012*

It had been a surprisingly warm and pleasant spring evening. Numerous groups of people were still outside enjoying the unusually high temperatures for the time of the year. Friends and families were taking advantage of the clement weather and children, dressed in little more than shorts and t-shirts, played in the park.

After a long hard winter, the sudden promise of a warm spring was not just appreciated but was greeted as a very welcome relief to the freezing conditions that had so recently preceded it. Of course, the key question was - would it last? No one seemed to know. Weather forecasters seemed vague on the subject and others who dared to express an optimistic view were thought to be unwisely really tempting fate. Best to say nothing, relax, and just enjoy the good fortune. As everybody knows - nothing lasts forever, perhaps best mentally is to prepare for the worst.

Nothing lasts forever and day transforms into night. The light slowly began to diminish and, as the sun disappeared behind a solid mass of menacing dark clouds lingering just to the west of Moscow, the temperature dropped abruptly. Suddenly, the air became several degrees cooler, and then, very quickly, almost in the blink of an eye, the city was transformed into a gloomy, uninspiring, monochromatic display of grey. Any residual sense of unfounded optimism quickly disappeared with the sun. Even the dull red walls of the Kremlin, which had radiated the accumulated warmth of the sun across Red Square only an hour earlier, appeared as a sombre souvenir of its former, authoritarian, austere, cold-hearted, frightful and infamous past. But then, why shouldn't it? That had always been an essential attribute of its undeniable character and a chilly twilight only confirmed what it represented.

And, as the past was really just as much a part of the present, as the present was still inescapably entrenched in the past; nothing in the Kremlin, what it represented and the way it was run, had ever really changed. A few rays of sunshine, a thawing in the cold war, might be a temporary respite, but it could never disguise the true nature of the red-walled establishment; the state within a state, and the men who ran it. And to be fair to the ruling elite, why should anything change? What advantage might add to their already privileged position? None whatsoever! What would real democracy and freedom from corruption bring? Nothing other than trouble, antagonised masses, discontent and subversion! Better to keep a tight control on matters.

For over a hundred years, through two world wars and two revolutions, they were exactly as they had always been - powerful,

corrupt, and perverted, quite above the law, and ruthlessly cold-blooded. The NKVD may have become the KGB, and the KGB may have changed its name to the FSB, but it was still the same organisation, run by the same masters who were resolutely committed to doing absolutely anything that was deemed necessary to keep their power base intact for as long as possible.

The Russian Constitution, adopted following the breakup of the Soviet Union, had never really proved to be anything more than a piece of elaborate window dressing. Those in power had never wanted a true democracy. The Constitution might declare the freedom of speech and an end to censorship, but open criticism of the state would at a minimum, probably result in arrest and incarceration, and at worst, in an unexplained death casually blamed on others and forgotten by everyone other than the bereaved. Despite a token opposition that trod very carefully and politely to avoid encouraging a repeat of Siberia and the gulags, it was still a paranoid one-party government, which had clearly demonstrated on a number of occasions that it could not tolerate criticism, or indeed any kind of opposition.

Thankfully for the country, paradoxically the black economy was still huge, otherwise abject poverty would cause uncontrollable social unrest and, whilst the flood of money from the wealthy leaving the country may have reduced a little, it had never really been stemmed. And, it was likely in the foreseeable future that this poor state of affairs would not change. Nearly a quarter of the country's economy came from prostitution, illegal arms, drugs, tax-evading enterprises, as well as coercion and extortion. Surprisingly, a substantial part of this black economy was achieved with the regular connivance of those in power in the Kremlin. Of course, it was much too important financially to leave it wholly out of control and certainly much too powerful to resist.

There were fortunes to be made, privilege and favours to reap, and enemies to destroy.

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Not far from Kremlin, in the offices of a state owned television station, Natasha was working late. It was normal; she was diligent, highly motivated, and thoroughly committed to her newly developing career. A few years earlier she could have hardly dreamt that such a thing was possible. Her unexpected fame astonished her and she took the responsibility of her new career very seriously. Natasha was in her early thirties and it was an excellent opportunity for her to create and enjoy a more stable life.

That afternoon, she had seen the latest in a series of special communiqués addressed to her boss. They were from the Deputy Minister of Defence and concerned the 'festering' problem of the Crimean Peninsula. The communiqué reported in detail how native Russians were frustrated by their continued separation from their 'motherland' and their concern at an emerging 'fascist' opposition to the existing pro-Russian government in Kiev.

These communiqués provided 'guidelines' on how reporting the evolution of this matter should be dealt with on Russian television. It was a propaganda guidance note. It had been issued fearing that the situation might degrade and an armed conflict might ensue. Natasha wondered - did that mean that it would and that it was planned?

She laughed. Cynically, she knew that she could have written the memo herself knowing little of the detail on the ground. It was no more than classic propaganda. Those that the Ukraine would probably describe as 'separatists and terrorists' would clearly be described in the Russian press as 'freedom fighters' who were 'oppressed' and what was really aggression would be described as 'legitimate defence'. However, what was crucially at stake, apart from the pride of Russia and the macho image of its President, was the status of the prime Russian naval base at Sebastopol. Russia had few naval bases in the west that were accessible throughout the year and Sebastopol, on the Crimean Peninsula, which formed part of the independent country of the Ukraine, was one Russia could not risk losing. Sebastopol was a gateway to be controlled and maintained for the Russian fleet's unhindered access into the Mediterranean.

However, internationally, many had recognised that the situation created by Khrushchev when he had curiously, mercurially even, and certainly unwisely given Sebastopol and the Crimean Peninsula to the Ukraine. This action had created an unsatisfactory situation that would need to be resolved sooner or later. And, while there was a treaty in place with the West for Russia to respect the frontiers of its former soviet partner, Russia was unsettled by what was happening in the Ukraine and beginning to think it would need to act.

What had made matters worse was that the Ukraine was a very divided country and increasingly there were many people who were openly expressing their objection to Russia's incompetent pocket President. Such open opposition would never happen in Russia, but it was happening in the Ukraine. It sent a shockwave all the way to the Kremlin. If the Ukrainian President were to be ejected from office and replaced by a pro-western government, who knows, in years to come Sebastopol might even become a NATO base! To do nothing would demonstrate impotence, but the alternative, to retake the Crimea might be risky. But what else could Russia do? It needed a plan.

What disturbed Natasha however, apart from being a native of the Ukraine and therefore feeling somewhat sentimental about Russia's poor neighbour, was the statement that Russian forces would never be involved, that weapons would not be supplied, and that military direction would be denied. This might be the overt political line but it contradicted the truth of what would actually happen. It was another political lie, what else could it be? Political lies, pronounced by unscrupulous politicians are a road to disaster. Even Hitler was actually voted into power by a duped and mesmerised electorate!

Hadn't Serbia played exactly the same card in the breakup of Yugoslavia with its constant assertion that it had no part in the destruction and massive ethnic cleansing that ensued in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo? But the attempt to bring under its control at least half of the former country of Yugoslavia was a gamble mainly conspired by criminals that cost many tens of thousands of lives. Did native Serbs believe the lies that their politicians told them? Thankfully, the strategy never paid off, but was it about to happen again, this time in the Ukraine?

Natasha knew enough about the way Russia was run to realise that these communiqués determining television coverage and 'correct' reporting were not simply briefing notes; they indicated that something might happen. She was curious about how the present president of the Ukraine would deal with the situation; that was, if he succeeded in

remaining in power. There were certainly doubts. Not only had he been highly divisive in leading the country, he was generally recognised as being corrupt; a crook largely operating under instructions from Russia.

Even back then, the Ukrainian President's future already looked bleak. He was increasingly detested by a large section of the population. If he were to go however, where would that leave those who still thought of themselves as Russian rather than as Ukrainian, and as sons of communists, rather than sons of fascists, as some considered native Ukrainians still to be. Another political lie spread by the unscrupulous. It was the Balkans all over again and distortions of the truth, rhetoric and racial hatred could easily reignite history.

During the following few weeks, Natasha secretly delved further. In doing so, she discovered that the regular communiqués between the Department of Defence and her boss revealed much more than what they actually said. Natasha considered the future and knew that she would soon be forced to make an extremely difficult decision. She wondered if she might lack the courage to do what was necessary. All her life, she had lived on the edge, taking risks; but now she had grown accustomed to being more comfortable, and the choices that she would soon have to make might not be so easy.

In the end though, it wasn't the rapidly changing political situation that forced the decision; it was a simple slip of paper that she noted sticking out of her jacket pocket. She guessed immediately who might have put it there; but she hadn't seen him. It must have been inserted there sometime that afternoon because the note hadn't been there before lunch.

The note was small and probably quite untraceable. It had been digitally printed in black ink by a laser printer on ordinary paper like a million other documents circulating Moscow that day.

The message, however, probably unlike many of the other documents that circulated that floor of the building was succinct and wholly unambiguous. It was succinct, it simply said –

**УЙТИ НЕМЕДЛЕННО!**

**GET OUT NOW!**

## *Chapter 2*

*Moscow, Russia - May 2012*

Fortunately, Natasha was tough, resilient and able to adapt. Life had always been hard and challenging for her but she had survived. She had experienced a difficult childhood, become attached to the Russian Mafia, spied for the FSB, escaped finally to England, only to be recruited by British Intelligence and sent back to Russia. Thus, in addition to being resourceful, resilient and streetwise, she had also been soundly trained in many aspects of life. She was an exceptionally skilled operator.

When the time came, which inevitably she knew it would, she was already prepared for the event and remained calm. A lesser person might well have panicked; she didn't. Regarding the note once more, Natasha sensed a brief charge of adrenalin as she understood the immediate implications of the message. Without hesitating, she tore the note into tiny pieces, fed them into her mouth and, with a swig of coffee, swallowed them.

Natasha had never known her parents; she had been abandoned and subsequently brought up in an orphanage in Kiev. She sometimes thought that it was perhaps better like that. If she had known them, she would have despised them for dumping her, whatever the reason. The first few years in the state run orphanage were especially difficult, she was small, appeared vulnerable, and was easily picked on. But she had a little luck, at least for a while.

A boy called Sergei, another orphan, had befriended Natasha. He was the nearest she ever had to any family. For several years he had acted like a brother to her. But Sergei was older than she was and when she was only thirteen, he had to leave. He departed for Moscow. Natasha felt that she had been abandoned again, but by then she had learnt how to look after herself; she had guile and cunning and she was a fighter.

After her seventeenth birthday, it was her turn to leave the orphanage. Her sole objective on departing was to travel to St. Petersburg in order to find Sergei. She thought that he would be there but she had no idea where to look. Despite all her best efforts though, she failed miserably. However, a powerful and influential young man called Yuri Nikitin had spotted Natasha and took her under his wing. Initially, her stunning natural beauty, her vitality, and her insatiable

ability to enjoy life obsessed him. She was unusual, clever, and had an ability to adapt quickly and assimilate easily within a group. Natasha became his girlfriend.

However, Yuri was second in command of a Mafia group called the *Russkaya Bratva*, the Russian Brotherhood. Yuri with his boss, Gregor Rostov, had set up in St. Petersburg following the break up of the Soviet Union. Already there were some small, ill-organised criminal bands operating in the city and these represented their main competition. So, with the benefit of their military training, they were both ex Spetsnaz (special forces) and had seen service in Afghanistan and Chechen, they rapidly set about eliminating the opposition. They did it quickly and thoroughly, and with utter ruthlessness. Any remaining competition, thoroughly traumatised by what had happened to others, quickly dissolved.

For a while, it suited Natasha very well to live with Yuri. She lived in luxury in a Russia, which was still trying to recover from seventy years of communism. Luxury was something that she was totally unfamiliar with. That the wealth came from organised crime didn't bother her; it was simply a means to an end; everyone has to make their way in the world. Nevertheless, over time, Natasha, who had retained a strong sense of justice and injustice, began to understand how evil Yuri really was. By then however, she was trapped with nowhere to go. Worse, when Yuri finally dumped her for another girl, he refused to let her go, he kept her on. Natasha was too important to let go, too useful, and she knew too much. Yuri recognised her intelligence and had a role for her to play in the organisation.

Her job was to run the prostitutes, book the hotel rooms, organise the diary, and ensure that the punters paid. If there were problems, she told Yuri, and Yuri had people to put things right. A little bit of violence sorted out the girls; rather more violence sorted out the punters.

Natasha was clever though; she was streetwise and she always remained friends with Yuri, she never crossed him. She was never vindictive, or difficult, she took to her new role easily, handled it with authority and competence and, as a result, Yuri trusted her and relied on her. She faded into the background when it was appropriate and she was always by his side when he needed her. He might have other girls, but Natasha remained essential to him. That he had dumped her didn't rankle, indeed she had already become bored with the relationship and was rather relieved that it had ended.

It was around about that time however, when, quite accidentally, she ran into Sergei again. He was working for the FSB. Clandestinely, they met a few times, renewed their friendship and became lovers. For Sergei, meeting Natasha again proved providential; he was desperately seeking someone working on the inside of the Mafia to provide him with information. He had become particularly suspicious of high-level corruption within the FSB and, in particular he had discovered some very insidious links with the Mafia. Natasha didn't need any persuading, she was delighted to agree to anything that might lead to the downfall of Yuri and eventually her possible freedom.

It was Natasha who discovered the files on Yuri's computer that provided the proof that several senior officers in the FSB, as well as a number of prominent politicians, were intrinsically linked with the Mafia. Between them they were spiriting colossal sums of money out of

the country to private, secret accounts in banks in Switzerland and Singapore.

Through a curious set of circumstances that resulted in the murder of two people and the death of a third, this information finally found its way to London and in particular to the headquarters of the Secret Intelligence Services; SIS (MI6). Once there, it was thoroughly analysed and evaluated, and became known as - *Babushka's Children*. The code name fitted. It was a set of Russian dolls, inside each one of which was a gem that needed great care to cut and make shine. Treated the wrong way, the gems would fragment and become useless, but treated the right way they would reveal a way to apply leverage on those it implicated and an abundant supply of secret information from the heart of the Russian Federation.

As for Natasha, I helped to spirit her out of St. Petersburg in a double bass case travelling in one of the support vehicles attached to the Walton Symphonia. My cover was associated with the production of a documentary of the orchestra on tour. Once in England, she was recruited by SIS. Not long afterwards, we went back to Russia together again under the cover of doing another music documentary. It was when I was declared *persona non grata*. Natasha stepped into the breach and took over my job as the presenter of the documentary.

Apparently, she was very good, far better than me in fact!



## Chapter 3

*London, England - May 2012*

In some respects, I suppose I probably knew Natasha as well as anybody. We had crossed paths several times in the unpredictable and intricate web of deceit and deception that largely seemed to dominate our lives. We had worked together, payed and travelled, and we had been lovers.

Not unlike Natasha, it seemed that constant changes also affected my life, although for the most part, in a rather less dramatic way than that which Natasha experienced. There was an empathy between us; I understood with some sympathy her restlessness and inability to find any kind of lasting stability. Indeed, I was somewhat surprised when she landed a job with the state television company in Moscow. She had certainly proved her worth fronting the documentary we had both been involved in making in Russia, but I wouldn't have thought that she would manage to hold on to her new job for very long. However, contrary to my expectations, she did. But then, she had surprised me in other ways on more than one occasion.

After I had been expelled from Russia, *persona non grata*, it took me a while to settle down again. It was several months before I unexpectedly ran into Shoko, the Japanese violinist with whom I had been so madly in love. Despite our complicated history, we both felt that we should try to give it another go. It was probably something in our eyes that attracted us together again; that lost haunted look, and maybe it was also the mutual need to rediscover the happiness that we had once found together albeit for a relatively short time. Sadly, it didn't last. We did our very best, but on reflection; it was probably doomed from the start.

Our jobs constantly drew us apart. I should have perhaps acknowledged before we even tried to make it work again that it would have little hope of success. Music and spying just do not mix. When I was able to spend some time at home in the cottage in Dorset, Shoko was away on tour, when she returned, I was often away in the Ukraine, or Belarus. We had tried renting a flat in London and lived in the city for part of the time but, when I was at home in the evening, she was playing with the orchestra and when she was free during the day, I was sitting behind a desk in SIS Headquarters, Vauxhall Buildings, or 'Legoland' as

it we sometimes used to call it. In the end, despite all our efforts, we just did not see enough of each other to make our partnership a success.

On reflection, my mid-life career change, which had projected me into the sinister world of espionage, was always going to be wholly incompatible with the life of a sensitive musician. I had never really properly considered the regularity of the kind of life I had willingly exchanged as a failed music teacher, to the world of spying which often seemed lacking in structure. It was consistently unpredictable and capricious. Perhaps it was good for me. Maybe it was that sense of adventure, as well as feeling needed and important that kept me at it.

However, I was shocked by its utter ruthlessness and acutely cynical nature. Indeed, so much so that at times I found it difficult to distinguish morally between the violence of organised crime and that of state sponsored thuggery. During those first few formative years I saw and experienced horrible things, things that I would never have dreamt possible, especially in my previous life working in a secondary school.

I had witnessed treachery and murder perpetrated by nearly all of the parties that I'd had some association with. However, to be fair, I have to acknowledge that I also became a willing part of it. Indeed, I had needed to; that was if I was going to survive. And, as it turned out, I was surprisingly good at it. I learned that I was much more resourceful than I had ever thought I could be, and cunning and deceit became part of my daily repertoire. I fitted in very well with the organisation I worked for and I had become recognised as a valuable asset.

I learned quickly, even before I got properly involved in the affair of *Babushka's Children*, that such a game accumulates quite a few casualties; tragically, some terminal. Sergei, Natasha's friend, was one, as well as his sister Anna. Then there was Rear Admiral George Bracegirdle who had been tipped over a cliff by a supposedly noble lord but really, an especially traitorous former colleague and Russian spy.

My former boss, Simon Sparrowhawk was another casualty. For him it wasn't fatal, but it probably did for his knighthood. He felt it necessary to resign his position. His close, and long-term friendship with the corrupt politician, who had been passing information to the Russians for years, finished him as far as the service was concerned.

As for the disgraced Lord Beddingfield, who cold-bloodedly murdered George, a case never came to court, probably because it was thought not to be in the public interest apart from opening a huge can of worms. For his other crimes, he was now languishing in jail where he would most likely spend the rest of his life. I had sworn to find him, if they ever decided to let him out, and then, in exacting some revenge for George, tip *him* off a cliff. I had even thought of visiting him in jail and hinting what he might expect if he ever got out. I would have liked him to contemplate what freedom might offer him. I did not though; vengeance wasn't really my game. As it turned out, I would have been wasting my time in any event - he wasn't anywhere near where I thought he was, but I didn't know that at the time.

General Mishkin, a senior FSB officer, who had been trapped and coerced into defecting, was another casualty. He was assassinated by a sniper's bullet whilst waiting in the British Consulate in St. Petersburg for a clandestine transfer; another matter that was hurriedly hushed up. Michael dubbings, the Consul in St. Petersburg, being responsible for the matters that went seriously pear-shaped within his domain, also suffered. His hopes of reaching ambassadorial heights and living in an elegant residence in some European country were dashed

when he was posted to Zimbabwe as a second secretary. I didn't grieve over that though, although I did feel sorry for his wife, she probably didn't deserve that posting any more than she deserved Dubbings. However, Dubbings was a pompous idiot who got exactly what he deserved.

As for Yuri Nikitin, he also got exactly what he deserved and I doubt that anyone lost any sleep over his death; he was a truly nasty piece of work. Moreover, it was Natasha, for whom vengeance meant much more than I had realised, who killed him with a single shot to the head. Her training report had noted 'deadly at short range!' I couldn't fault the report it was perfectly correct!

However, it did leave some serious problems for Yuri's boss, Gregor Rostov, and the Russian Brotherhood. As a former colleague in the FSB accurately predicted before he died, gang warfare did subsequently break out. It was a very bloody few months until a balance of power was finally restored, fragile though it was.

As for the FSB, I find it somewhat enigmatic that I should now even think of Boris, an FSB officer who pursued me relentlessly, as a former colleague; he had been very much my enemy at one time. His death by contrast, was largely self-inflicted. He was a chain smoker and a heavy drinker and I suppose he'd never had any intention of benefitting from a long and boring retirement.

When I first met him, he was already deeply disillusioned with politics and life, it was a condition that he had easily grown into over the years and never grew out of. His last act, that of signing the order for my expulsion from Russia, I recognised later to have probably been done as an act of friendship, or even compassion. It effectively removed me from the game at a crucially important time.

And, well, what about me?

After being expelled from Russia, the chances of my going back, even as a tourist, were nil. However, it appeared that I had become far too useful to leave the service and that my half-hearted idea that I should resign was seriously resisted. Thus, it was decided, as these things always are, in some secret meeting room, somewhere deep in the building, that my area of attention should be transferred from Russia to the Ukraine and to Belorussia. My language skills and knowledge of the area made me indispensable, if there ever was such a condition.

I should, of course, as with many things, probably have taken the opportunity to walk out at that time and return to teaching, but I didn't. And so, with the inducement of a further promotion and a new area of work, I remained as a special analyst and an occasional field officer with my base set firmly in 'Legoland', on the south bank of the Thames, in London.

That was until a coded distress call was received from Natasha and it was thought, not by me I hasten to confirm, that I should be the one to go back to Russia to help extract her. As the Chinese curse says - *may you live in interesting times*. Was going back to Russia going to live up to the curse?

I hoped not, but candidly rather feared that it might!

## *Chapter 4*

*Moscow - May 2012*

I told you that Natasha was well prepared but I hadn't appreciated exactly how well prepared she actually was. At the time, I was also unaware that she was still working for the British Government, but then, as usual, I was ignorant about many such things. I don't think that I ever felt that I was really in the loop, except perhaps on a couple of occasions when I had a quiet, off the record, conversation with Sparrowhawk. They were very few though! But then, as the Russians say - to know everything is to know nothing!

When Natasha found the crucially important note that sent everything into a spin, she didn't delay for a moment putting her escape plan into action. She reacted immediately, knowing that it might be fatally dangerous to lose time on any useless and unnecessary reflection. It was clear to her that her time in Moscow had just expired. She needed to move on, and quickly!

She started by removing all the essentials from her wallet and her wallet, now containing nothing important, she placed in full view on her desk. She picked her bag up off the floor, put it on the seat of her chair, and draped her jacket on the back of the chair. Then, she left the open-plan office and went through a door into the corridor. She ignored the lifts on the left and walked past them to the far end of the corridor. After one quick glance behind, she needed to check that there was no one in sight, she opened the door to the emergency staircase and descended all the way down to the basement.

The area below ground accommodated the heating and ventilating system as well as several miscellaneous small rooms. One of these rooms was reserved for archiving whilst a second, a much smaller room next to it, contained a number of redundant filing cabinets. Natasha opened the door to this room and quickly slid inside. After closing the door behind her, she waited before moving on to the next stage of her escape plan.

For a few moments she listened carefully for any external noise. When she was satisfied that she had not been followed down the stairs, and that she was alone in the basement as she had expected to be, she made directly for one of the filing cabinets. Feeling round the back of the cabinet, she retrieved the key that she had placed there. As she inserted

the key into the lock at the top of the cabinet, Natasha noticed that her hands were trembling slightly. Consciously, she forced herself to relax, let her shoulders drop, took a deep breath, and waited an instant for the trembling to diminish. Then, she opened two of the drawers. Inside the top one was a change of clothes, a wig, a baseball cap, and a set of trainers. In the other drawer was a small designer backpack. Inside were an assortment of documents - identity papers, passports, driving licences, cash and credit cards. She changed, leaving all her office clothes including her high heeled black pointed shoes in the lower of the two drawers. Before she left the basement, she locked the cabinet and placed the key in her backpack.

Within less than a quarter-of-an-hour of abandoning her desk, she was already on her way out of the building. The security cameras would have recorded her exit, but it would take some very careful, or even clairvoyant investigator to recognise that it was Natasha who was leaving. When they arrived to arrest her, the person they would be looking for would no longer be there. If they took the trouble to scrutinise the tapes, it would take them a long time to note that the person leaving the building had never actually entered it. But, by then, she would be well away.

In any event, the person that they would probably be looking for was a respectably dressed businesswoman with long flowing blond hair. She would be wearing elegant black high-heeled shoes; she would be dressed in a white silk shirt, not carrying a bag and she would be on her own. As it was, the girl with short black hair wearing a blue baseball cap, jeans, a well-worn leather bomber jacket, and carrying a small backpack, who left with a group of students, wouldn't figure at all, unless they decided to check them out individually.

It was a stroke of luck that she had accidentally run into the students. They had been visiting the television studios and were then going back to college. She took advantage of the situation and mingled with them as they left the building. The group headed northwest along the Patriarch Bridge after leaving the television headquarters going towards the golden onion-domed Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. Some of them might have known that this famous Moscow landmark close to the Kremlin had been commissioned by Alexander 1<sup>st</sup> to commemorate Napoleon's retreat from Moscow in 1812 and the subsequent defeat of his Grand Armée. However, somewhat curiously under the orders of Stalin in the 1950's, the cathedral was blown up and demolished. It was rebuilt and fully restored to its former glory in the 1990's following the break up of the Soviet Union.

Natasha remained close to the students, sometimes just behind them, as if a straggler in the group, and sometimes just to the side, occasionally turning as if in conversation with someone whilst systematically scanning in every direction to see if she was being followed.

As they approached the east façade of the Cathedral, it was already in shade. Only the golden edge of the southern side of the domes glittered in the reflected sunlight. By then, the group had begun to stretch out and started to migrate towards the southern side of the large square. Natasha disengaged and continued straight on to the base of the building. When she reached it, she climbed up to the top of the steps that led to the central entrance. Then, she turned round and sat down.

From this elevated position she had a commanding view of the bridge and the route she had followed from the television studios. She remained sitting on the step for no more than ten minutes, but during that time she carefully observed all the people who had been following her. Again, systematically, she quickly eliminated most of the crowd from her concerns, concentrating only on a few of those that remained to memorise specific individuals to check later if they were still in her vicinity.

Then, when she was satisfied that she had done enough, she got up, descended the steps, and set off going round the Cathedral. She went in the same direction that the students had, heading away from the Kremlin, which was located just to the northeast. Soon afterwards, she used the subways to cross over to the metro station at *Kropotkinskaya*, one of the oldest and most elaborate stations on the metro. Once there, she joined the milling crowd underneath the distinctive barrel vaulted arch that led towards the entrance to the underground station passing a few small boutiques on the way.

Well embedded within the mass of people, she progressed along the long promenade of massive, square, marble faced columns which led towards the platforms. Concealed lights cleverly illuminated the ceiling, but she didn't look up, she kept her head bent down and her baseball cap securely pulled forward. Occasionally, she adjusted her cap to ensure that her face was well hidden from the surveillance cameras. Once on the platform, she stood behind the crowd with her back next to the wall. Then, whilst waiting for the metro, she removed her pack and bent over to remove the key from the zipped pocket. When the train arrived, she was the last one to get on, having first checked that no one was hanging back, or observing her. As got into the carriage, she dropped the key between the platform and the rails.

The metro headed southwest on the *Sokolnichskaya Line* connecting the city centre with the main university campus. At *Universitet* she got off, again concealing herself with a group of students, walked down the platform and then got on the same train again, but this time in a different carriage. The metro carried on still heading southwest. At the next station, *Prospekt Vernadskogo*, she got off again and this time she left the station.

Natasha emerged from the underground on *Udaltsova* and from the exit she walked in the direction of a nearby park. She walked slowly, pretending to be talking on her mobile phone, distracted by the conversation, but really observing all that was happening around her.

On reaching the first of several pedestrian entrances to the park, she turned away from it and crossed over to the opposite side of the road. Then, she traversed a tree-lined car park and headed directly towards the second of several five-storey tenement blocks. The entrance to the tenement block was distinguished by a plain red door. The door was not locked and opened directly into a small lobby containing a number of post boxes, the lift and access to the stairs. Once again, prudently, she avoided the lift, preferring to take the stairs to an apartment on the fourth floor.

On the fourth floor she stopped outside a door. After removing a second, and rather more important key from her backpack, Natasha slid the key into the lock, quietly turned it, opened the door and went in.

Closing the door silently behind her, she listened to the latch click into place as it automatically locked. Then, she dropped her sack on

the floor, crouched down with her back against the door, put her head in her hands, and sighed with relief.

So far, so good!

## *Chapter 5*

*London - May 2012*

It was much later that I learned from Natasha that she actually had three different places in Moscow. There was the apartment that everyone knew about. It was located near to where she worked, and it was where her tax, telephone bills, bank accounts and the like were all registered, it was where her post was delivered, and it was where she met a few of her friends. The other two places had been set up as emergency boltholes. One of them was another apartment, the one next to the park near to the university campus and it was where she first went after leaving her office. The second bolthole was a dacha to the south of the city. In fact, the dacha wasn't much more than a wooden shack with a corrugated asbestos roof. It was in its own grounds which comprised a drive, a small unkempt allotment garden, and a tall overgrown hedge. However, what was most important about the shack was that it had a basement.

To go to this amount of trouble to set up these stages of an escape route, Natasha must have known that whatever she was doing, she was always operating on borrowed time and, that as such, sooner or later, she would have to drop off the horizon very speedily.

Indeed, Natasha didn't stay long at her apartment, less than an hour in fact; on this occasion it was no more than a staging post. She emptied the fridge, turned off the water and electricity and picked up a few essentials including the documents for a car that was parked below in the carpark adjoining the apartment block. That wasn't all. Before she left, she also removed a loose floorboard from the bathroom and extracted three small packages. In the first was a Makarov PB semi-automatic pistol wrapped in an oiled cloth. In the other package were two spare full magazines and a silencer.

The Makarov PB was a weapon that had been much favoured by the KGB because of its compact nature and its ease of concealment. The main disadvantage with the weapon was the small magazine, which carried only eight cartridges. However, the trade off was that this also kept the weight down considerably and, like the KGB, that suited Natasha. The weapon was only accurate at close range but this wouldn't



have presented much of a problem for Natasha, as I've already mentioned, she was deadly at short range.

From the same hidden compartment she then extracted the last package. Inside was a mobile phone. She inserted a SIM card which had been concealed in the lining of her pack, switched the phone on, and sent an SMS to a local number. It was no more than a numbered code, but for the receiver it would spell out her situation and the message for help that she needed to activate. Then she removed the card from the phone and set fire to it putting the ashes in a tissue. Satisfied that there was nothing else to do she left the apartment locking the door behind her. She wondered if she would ever go back there and suspected not. As Natasha left the tenement block, she dropped the tissue containing the ashes onto the footpath where it was taken by the wind thus efficiently dispersing the contents far and wide.

On the other side of the carpark looking decidedly pathetic was a plain grey, rusting, *Lada Kalina*. Natasha smiled. She remembered that *Kalina*, in Finnish, meant 'rattle'. And that was exactly what it did, or what she hoped it would do, if Despite having stood for sometime without having been run, it kindly relieved Natasha of one of her worst nightmares by starting, albeit with a cough and a splutter the second time she turned the key in the ignition. The engine ran unevenly for a short time and then coughed and juddered again before settling down, turning over at constant revs, and humming seemingly contented. Finally, reasonably satisfied that the car wasn't going to die on her, Natasha chucked her pack over to the passenger seat, put the car into gear, and slowly set off.

First, she headed back in the direction of the metro station and then at the crossroads, quite near to the pedestrian exit from the underground, she turned right onto the main road running southwest out of Moscow. Not long afterwards, the road widened and transformed as it became the motorway M3.

Staying in the inside lane, driving at a moderate speed, Natasha casually looked to the right as she passed Moscow's *Vnukovo International Airport*. There was a plane just taking off and she couldn't help wishing that she was on the plane, wherever it was going; she would have felt a lot safer. Letting the thought go, she concentrated on driving at the same speed as the traffic in her lane, keeping a safe distance behind the car in front. After travelling for no more than thirty-six kilometres, just over twenty minutes, she left the motorway at a major junction turning off to the right along a slip road.

Soon afterwards, she turned right again and then left, this last time into a long, straight, potholed, unmade road. She bounced slowly along it passing several expensive villas on both sides as well as a number of tumbledown shacks like her own. About a third of the way along the road she pulled up outside a property. Natasha got out and, while leaving the engine running, she unlocked a solid, but rustic looking tall wooden gate, opened it, and returned to the car. Carefully, she reversed the car onto a weedy, rutted, gravelled drive and, after getting out of the car again, still leaving the engine running and the door open, Natasha went outside into the road and quickly observed the scene. It was still deserted. Then, she shut the gate, locking it firmly behind her. Finally, she reversed the car further into the site to park it next to the right hand side of the dacha.

A rickety, framed veranda constructed over a narrow wooden terrace, protected the front entrance to the shack. It creaked noisily as

Natasha crossed it. She smiled, it was exactly as it should be. She placed a key in the lock. It turned comfortably. She opened the door and stepped inside. After dumping her backpack on the wood planked floor she unlocked a large wooden cupboard in which she had installed a computer wired to an array of displays. She powered up her security surveillance system which comprised several closed circuit television cameras as well as alarms. As soon as she was satisfied that all was functioning correctly; she locked the front door and effectively went to ground. Sooner or later she hoped that she would be rescued.

Natasha had no idea how long she might have to wait, but she was immensely relieved to be there and determined to stay calm and remain patient. Stages one and two of her escape plan had gone as smoothly as she could have hoped for. What happened next was wholly dependent on others. She prayed that they would play their part as well as she had played hers.

\* \* \*

I suppose that it wasn't that long after, a matter of hours quite probably, possibly even less, when I was first introduced to the my dubious mission of spiriting Natasha out of Russia. Rupert Balls called me. Rupert was my immediate superior; he had been so since I had joined the service. I was locked in my office when he buzzed.

'We're wanted upstairs, John; he who must be obeyed!'

I clearly remember that it was a Friday afternoon and I was already conjuring with the idea of leaving early and going down to Dorset for the weekend. No chance as it turned out, I might as well have dreamt for the moon! As it was, it was the precursor to a very memorable period in my life of exceptionally intense activity.

Interestingly, I thought, Rupert had applied for Sparrowhawk's post after Sparrowhawk had given in his resignation. Needless to say, he didn't get it and I honestly would have been surprised if he had been successful in his application; he didn't have the same presence, or gravitas that Sparrowhawk possessed. Moreover, and possibly more importantly, I suspected that either he hadn't gone to the right school, or he wasn't closely related to someone who knew someone. It was likely that he didn't mix with the right crowd anyway. That was the way it normally seemed to work and, as a result, it clearly placed Rupert in my lowly proletariat camp rather than the coterie that he had perhaps aspired to. To be fair, for the most part, the service was beginning to be run more on the grounds of being a meritocracy, otherwise, how could it be possible for me to have risen so rapidly through the ranks?

Was Rupert embittered by the experience? I don't think so, not really. I think it was probably just a try-on for him in any case. Maybe, he even felt obliged to apply, just to demonstrate an interest, but I can't imagine how the hell he would have coped had he been appointed. I couldn't see him comfortably operating in a top management role, too much of a ditherer to my mind. And, I could easily conceive that Rupert would actually have been relieved by their decision not to appoint him to the post.

'We'd better get going, John! JG's waiting,' he said with a degree of impatience as I was just tidying my desk and locking a few sensitive documents in one of the drawers. Fortunately, I'd already had the pleasure on several occasions of meeting Sparrowhawk's successor,

JG. I had found him to be more approachable, less stuffy, and considerably less devious than the former incumbent. He was a breath of fresh air!

JG, Justin Groves, had joined the service from Naval Intelligence. He wasn't the first to have followed this route into SIS and he certainly wouldn't be the last. He had spent a few years in Moscow as a naval attaché, where he had worked with Keith Jarvis, as I had, and was probably ideally suited to the post. Above all, he seemed to know most of the opposition in Russia. Was his a career appointment? I suppose it was. Many of the former chiefs of SIS were ex-military, and, if he kept his nose clean, and did a good job, why shouldn't he eventually rise to the top? Good luck to him!

Actually, I quite liked him. As I said, he was breath of fresh air after Sparrowhawk who was very much a throwback to the immediate post-war years when ex-public schoolboys with connections thought that they were an unassailable elite. Above all, JG belonged to a more modern age where teamwork counted, unlike Sparrowhawk who always maintained an artificial distance between himself and his staff. Different generations, I guess, certainly different philosophies.

After being hurried by Rupert to be quick, Rupert and I sat waiting silently and patiently for a good ten minutes in JG's secretary's office.

When Sparrowhawk had gone, I wondered if Emily, his PA come secretary, might also move on. She didn't, which I suppose was continuity of a sort. I liked Emily; she was unpretentious and easy to get on with. From what I had seen, she was good at her job and maintained a sense of calm whilst all around could exhibit symptoms of mild to extreme panic. Emily must have been at least twenty years younger than me and still had a youthful spring in her step. She also had an engaging smile, which she deployed sympathetically at us from time to time. It was both reassuring and comforting.

'He won't be long,' she told us. 'He's had a heavy day, non-stop phone calls.' We both nodded knowingly as her prediction was suddenly realised. 'He's off the phone,' she announced with a smile.

The door to his office opened briskly and JG waved us in.

'Come in. come in, sorry to keep you waiting.' He held on to the door as we entered and turned to face his secretary. 'No interruptions please, Emily.'

Quietly closing the door behind him, JG went across to the large meeting table that occupied half of his room. Neat piles of papers were spread out. He selected one and came over to join us, gesturing that we should sit down opposite his desk.

He didn't beat about the bush, as Sparrowhawk was very prone to have done. JG came straight to the point, although I should admit that I sincerely wished that he hadn't! A little gentle sparring might have at least eased the blow a bit! As I had already learned, JG generally avoided the intriguing foreplay that Sparrowhawk had practised so regularly, so infuriatingly, and yet so deftly. JG seemed less interested in playing mind games and projected a pressing need to get on with things!

'John,' he said as he looked me straight in the eye, 'we're going to have to send you back to Russia.'

I really didn't know what to say and felt as if I had been physically hit in the face with a wet fish and slumped into my chair with a foreboding sense of dismay. I hadn't imagined that I would ever be

returning to the *Bears Den* especially after I had been so ignominiously expelled. Anyway I thought - would they ever let me in again? JG was clearly also a thought-reader and quickly answered the question that was already forming in my mind.

'It will be an informal visit,' he said, 'if you understand me,' and added, as if to make it right, which it didn't, 'because of your history, this of course can't be an official visit.'

'No diplomatic immunity then?'

'No, John, no diplomatic immunity.'

I can't say I warmed to that idea at all. I knew the implications. Effectively I would be classed as an 'illegal' if I was picked up. 'So why me, and what's the panic?'

'Natasha.'

One word, that was all. It was a blast from the past that I certainly hadn't been expecting that morning. Natasha! All kinds of thoughts, including quite a few erotic memories, came flooding back.

'What about her?' I asked pushing the more appealing images to the back of my mind where I could possibly retrieve them later.

'We need to get her out.'

And that was another shock. 'We need to get her out? I didn't realise that she was still working for us.'

'She never stopped.'

Surely the FSB must have screened her thoroughly, I thought, otherwise, however could she ever have managed to become a presenter on a national television show? Lots more questions came into my head, but this wasn't the time.

'What's happened?'

'We don't know yet. GCHQ picked up a coded distress call indicating she needs to be extracted and urgently.'

'Why me though, there must be lots of others who can do this?'

'There are and there aren't, John.' Rupert Balls intervened. 'Actually, there aren't that many good alternatives. Natasha knows you and the code she selected specifically asked for your help.'

'Could it be a trap?' I asked looking in turn at both of them considering the possibility that I might be being set up again.

'Of course it could, John.' That was another thing I quite liked about JG; at least he was honest, although it might have been more reassuring if he had lied! 'We've checked it out though, and we're more or less convinced it's a genuine distress call. Of course, I can't deny that it might be a trap, John, but at present we don't think so. What possible advantage could the Russians gain from it? What could they achieve from capturing you?'

Expressed in that way it seemed rather like a put down; clearly I didn't represent an important asset. I considered his observation for a moment and, somewhat reluctantly, I had to agree with him. A more detailed explanation might have been helpful though. Since working in 'Legoland' I had been already set up, on more than one occasion, so what would be new if it was a trap? I decided to appear to stay cool, even if I wasn't and asked a serious question. 'What sort of a time period are we talking about?'

'A few days to set it up and then off you go.'

I realised instantly that the weekend in Dorset that I had been looking forward to had suddenly disappeared into the ether. And then, just to put me off for the rest of the day JG dropped another bombshell.

'I've invited Simon Sparrowhawk in on Tuesday morning. He really needs to explain a few things to you before you go. I could brief you, but I think it would be better if he does it himself, especially as he set some of this stuff up before he left.'

I looked at Rupert for some kind of explanation. He sort of tilted his head, or twitched, I don't know which, and gave me one of his enigmatic smiles.

Would it be a meeting to look forward to?

I didn't think so!

## *Chapter 6*

*London - May 2012*

As it turned out, I wasn't the only one to have my weekend plans wrecked. A small, I could say, select group of us, were destined to spend most of Saturday and Sunday investigating possible scenarios to provide Natasha and I with an escape route and a reasonably plausible cover story.

I was variously cast as a long distance lorry driver with a secret compartment in the cab. I was relieved that the idea bit the dust rather quickly. It would have taken much too long to organise and a lorry isn't necessarily the fastest, or most manoeuvrable of vehicles to make an escape in. On a similar vein, the scenario of the ambulance driver taking an Estonian patient back to Tallinn was also dismissed. Finally, we decided on a newly married couple on a round trip of Eastern Europe. I would take someone with me, we would be on our honeymoon and, at an appropriate moment, I would simply exchange my companion for Natasha, my companion subsequently exiting Russia by a different route. I much preferred the sound of this, it was more discreet and, to my mind, much more likely to succeed because of its natural simplicity.

Realistically, I imagined that if we followed this plan it would probably still take at least two weeks to properly set up, including obtaining the appropriate tourist visas, organising the hotel reservations, booking hire cars, and the rest. Universally we decided that this would be our preferred option and we started immediately to examine all aspects of it in detail. My remaining principal concern centred on Natasha and her capacity to hang on that long. But, as we didn't have a

viable alternative and we knew nothing of Natasha's actual situation, there was little else that we could do.

So, using this strategy as a base, we looked at means of getting her out. First we did some research on river cruises. There were regular eight-day cruises going from Moscow to St. Petersburg. The trouble was that we would probably have to participate in guided tours and visits to restaurants. Perhaps there might be an advantage in hiding in a crowd, but the downside was that it was a long time to remain in Russia and there was always the risk that she might be recognised despite being disguised. Once in St. Petersburg, a one-way day trip to Helsinki might be all that was required. Inevitably, that could be the most difficult, as well as the riskiest part. Finally, sensibly, we abandoned the cruise idea. I had some residual feelings of regret, it was a great pity; it was the only part of the whole thing that I actually felt that I might look forward to!

The final plan was for me to fly to Minsk, the capital of Belarus, with my newly wedded 'wife'. We would book one night in a hotel in Minsk, then pick up a hire car and spend two nights in a pre-booked hotel in Moscow. The couple would cross the Russian border just west of Smolensk. Whilst in Moscow, I would exchange my 'wife' for Natasha and then drive back to Minsk. The abandoned 'wife' would make her way to the British Embassy in Moscow to be returned later to London by some other devious plan.

In theory, the mission seemed to be relatively straightforward. In and out in less than five days, a good cover story, so what could go wrong?

I was less naive than I was when I first joined the service and experience had taught me that everything could go wrong and that, despite the most careful planning, it invariably did. And, experience had also shown that it was a complete waste of time concentrating on the weakest part of the exercise because generally that part was the only part that ever went smoothly. It was the other bits that everyone had thought were rock solid that fell apart. Why? I have no idea. Butterfly wings on the other side of the world causing a wrinkle in the space-time continuum, or something like that I suppose.

Still, it was one way of making a living and generally only marginally more dangerous than that of trying to teach classical music to unreceptive and difficult teenage kids. Was I glad that I wasn't doing that anymore? Of course I was, but I do have to admit that the idea of going back into Russia did not appeal much, in fact it made me feel somewhat anxious. I was teetering on a panic attack.

And, speaking of feeling anxious, after that weekend's intensive work I had to wait another whole day before the meeting with Sparrowhawk.

\* \* \*

The meeting was held in one of the small conference rooms and apart from Sparrowhawk who, technically, was a visitor on this occasion, JG, Rupert Balls and I attended. I was the last to arrive; the three of them were already sitting at one end of the table. There was a fifth person present, Emily. She was there, presumably, to take notes. She was the only one of the four that looked properly relaxed and the thought did

drift through my mind that she might also be the only one there with any common sense!

I closed the door and approached the table. As I did, Sparrowhawk rose to his feet and moved away from his chair. He held out his long bony hand. I shook it and looked into his steely grey eyes. I had the impression that he almost managed a smile.

'So pleased that we meet again, John, it's been a little while, hasn't it.' I nodded.

He was right, it must have been three years since we had last met. He seemed to have aged and his grand aura of superiority had diminished just a little. Nevertheless, I had the definite impression that I was still shaking hands with the headmaster.

'Come and sit here, John,' JG said affably and pulled out the chair next to him.

'Thanks,' I said and I raised my hand in acknowledgement and salutation to the others.

As soon as we were settled, JG got started. As was his habit, he dived straight in, avoiding all unnecessary pleasantries.

'You all know Simon.' I guessed that the others had only just beaten me there. 'I invited him along to this meeting because he was largely instrumental in making certain arrangements before he left office that you, John, need to be aware of. I thought it might be best if he disclosed these matters to you, face to face, in case you might have any questions. Simon?'

RG's succinct introduction was rather too quick for Simon and put him on the spot sooner than he had anticipated. Unusually, I had the impression that he was feeling some genuine embarrassment and a degree of discomfort he was unused to being unable to hide behind one of the melodramas that he used to create.

He coughed and then smiled at me. 'There are a few things that you will be unaware of, John.' Of course I knew this already, JG had just pointed it out! He coughed again and regarded me closely, his beady eyes trying to stare into my soul. 'I remember that you once criticised me for deliberately keeping you out of the know; well, I'm sorry to say that you will find that this is more of the same thing. I suspect that you may also find what I am about to tell you rather surprising, as well as somewhat uncomfortable perhaps, but there it is.'

It was my turn to regard him. What the hell was he about to impart?

'You will appreciate that whilst *Babushka's Children* was a veritable high as far as the service was concerned, the debacle concerning Beddingfield was an exceptionally distressing nadir.'

I nodded, what more was there to say on the subject? Sparrowhawk coughed again; evidently, however, there was.

Sparrowhawk smiled and continued. 'You did complain, didn't you John, that you were never let in on the big picture.' He pursued the point. I hadn't really expected this as an opening gambit, and he seemed to be waiting for a reply, although I thought he had already covered this point, so I replied just to keep the conversation going.

'Well, yes, I would admit that at times I found it hugely frustrating.' It was as far as I managed to join the conversation before he got in again. I had the impression that Sparrowhawk was smirking slightly and felt my ears burning with awkwardness. The clever bastard had already taken the upper hand.

'You were right of course. We did keep you out of the loop. In fact, to be candid, there was absolutely no need for you to know what I am about to tell you. Indeed, it was probably better that you didn't know, especially as for one, and one very important reason, Russia, after your diplomatic ejection, was no longer your concern. So, the information that I am about to reveal will no doubt come as a shock to you. You know,' he paused, was it for effect, or was he choosing his words very carefully? No, he was changing the subject! 'A large part of our trade is to make the most of even the worst situations. As it turned out, the political debacle that you uncovered was exactly one such situation.'

I think by political debacle, he meant the unmasking of a traitorous mole. He was beginning to string out his narrative as he used to and I was beginning to get impatient to learn what his revelation was going to be, so I tried really hard to remain passive and didn't comment further.

'You remember the not so noble Lord, Beddingfield?' Sparrowhawk raised his eyebrows as if it was a question, but it wasn't. 'Of course you do.'

He was right. Of course I remembered 'Bedders', how could I forget the cynical murderous bastard who had penetrated British Intelligence on behalf of his Russian paymasters? I sincerely hoped he was slowly agonising in his life long incarceration at Her Majesty's Pleasure.

'Well, John, I have to tell you that Beddingfield is no longer with us.'

I was about to exclaim my regrets that the evil bastard hadn't suffered longer, when JG, seemingly somewhat exasperated as I was, finally intervened. 'What Simon is trying to tell you, John, is that Beddingfield is in Russia, and has been for some time. He was exchanged.'

'What!' My voice seemed to bounce off all four walls and even Emily seemed startled by my outburst. 'So the bastard got away with it after all. Unbelievable! I suppose you were party to this arrangement!'

The last comment was aimed directly at Sparrowhawk; I wanted him to understand my extreme annoyance. I noticed Emily trying to suppress some sympathetic emotion, but Sparrowhawk didn't even flinch. He took a short breath and continued with his narrative.

'Surprisingly, the Russians were very keen to have him back; they clearly believed he still had a lot to tell them.'

He paused, was it for effect again? I didn't know, but he was one of the most infuriating people I ever knew.

'You know, John, I knew him well, and I knew exactly how we could best work him to our advantage. Thus, we offered him the opportunity of working for us. He agreed very quickly to the possibility of playing his *get out of jail free* card. I also had the impression that after *perestroika* he had also become rather disillusioned with his former communist convictions and that it was perhaps time to change sides again. Not surprisingly, it wasn't at all difficult to persuade him!'

'Didn't they suspect him though?' It was a naïve question, but I needed to voice it.

'Of course they did. But, they have already paraded him as a hero of the revolution, or something like that, and undoubtedly they will keep him well under control and away from anything sensitive. Indeed,



I believe he has already been awarded a medal as a *Hero of the Russian Federation*.'

'Bastard,' I repeated. 'And what do we get out of it?'

'More than you would ever imagine, John.'

JG decided that it was time to pick up the story. 'Beddingfield was already in position when Natasha was in the process of securing her post with the state television company.'

'Beddingfield hardly spent any time in prison?' Unbelievable, I thought.

'That is absolutely correct.'

There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment; then Sparrowhawk spoke again.

'It was never really in our interests to drag this torrid affair through the courts, the press would have had a field day, which would have been highly counter productive. The whole matter was dealt with very discreetly. Naturally, it was reported more widely in Russia, but we leaned on the British press to ignore the story, in the national interest of course.'

'It was Beddingfield who confirmed Natasha's cover story,' JG added.

'Which was?'

'That she was actually FSB deep cover, she had infiltrated the British Secret Service and she was working directly for General Mishkin. On his instructions, she had penetrated both the Mafia and British Intelligence and had all but succeeded in containing what became known as *'Babushka's Children'*. It was only because the Mafia suddenly became greedy and started blackmailing important politicians that Mishkin intervened personally and was killed as a result. As you may have guessed, his body was never found and, as you will also appreciate, there are very few left standing who could possibly contradict the story. We even rewrote your friend Boris back into the plot as Natasha's handler.'

'And they fell for it?' Frankly, I was even more astonished.

'Clearly, at least for a time.'

'And now?'

'Well, now it seems that they may have got wise to something, they clearly have become suspicious and now, Natasha desperately needs to get out of Russia as quickly as possible; hence this meeting.'

'I see.'

I could perceive that worked backwards, the plot was sufficiently complex as well as believable even though it was altogether different to what had actually happened. Interesting! I doubt that I could have dreamt up anything so devious, I would never have conceived that it could ever work. Nevertheless, I was able to appreciate that it must have been well worth a try, if Natasha was willing and, I presumed that she must have been, why not?

I suppose I should perhaps have congratulated Sparrowhawk for dreaming up this complex piece of deception, but then, I asked myself, what had we really gained by it - a couple of years perhaps, for what? As for Beddingfield, if he had fallen in a ditch, he would have crawled out smelling of roses. All ways round though, it seemed to me that he was the real winner. He had his freedom, he may be missing his London Club, but he had escaped incarceration. Was there still some contact with him? I assumed that there must be, but I didn't ask because I knew that I would not be told.

It was difficult to believe that they had engineered this! No wonder they kept me out of the picture; I would have been beside myself with anger. And then I thought, perhaps it was also in Sparrowhawk's interest to allow him to go to Russia on exchange; otherwise he would have remained an embarrassment and a continual reminder of a major failure in British Intelligence.

'We're set for Friday, John.' Rupert's intervention brought me abruptly back to the present. 'We had some success with the visas, which I won't go into.'

'Friday?'

'Yes, you will be leaving for Minsk on Friday afternoon with one minor change, you'll be going directly to Smolensk; no point in hanging around in Minsk.'

'Right. OK. Well, I'd better pack my bags I suppose.'

Despite any lingering doubts that I had, it seemed that I had in that brief phrase finally acquiesced and agreed to try to rescue Natasha from the Bear's Den. At least, I hadn't had the courage to raise any last minute objections. Perhaps I should have!

'So, John,' Rupert continued, 'we need to introduce you to your new 'wife' so to speak. Shall we?' Rupert pushed his chair back and got up. So, that was it, that was the end of the meeting.

'OK. What's her name?' I asked as I stood up.

'Caroline.'

As Rupert and I turned to leave, both JG and Sparrowhawk got up from their chairs.

'Good luck, John!'

They said in unison, they couldn't have rehearsed it better and I had a sudden somewhat awkward and embarrassing impression that they might have actually meant it!

## Chapter 7

*London - May 2012*

It's interesting how certain events are remembered with such detail. I recall with remarkable clarity reading Natasha's file for the first time. It was actually after we had inadvertently met; but she had already left a striking impression with me. Next to a photograph of her, a portrait presumably taken with a telephoto lens was a brief description. *Natasha Goloovnya: 1.54m, blue eyes, blond hair, no criminal record but known consort of Yuri Nikitin (Russian Mafia), orphan, originally from the Ukraine, born Kiev (1981?).* Of course the file was supplemented with details of all her known contacts, mostly members of the Russian Brotherhood, but it did exclude Sergei, of whom we had no knowledge at the time. When I read her file she would have been about twenty-eight years old. I supposed that now she must be about thirty-one, thirty-two. An awful lot had happened in those three years or so and true to form I was still somewhat confused about some parts of it. I don't suppose I would ever know the whole truth about any of it.

After the meeting with JG and Sparrowhawk, Rupert took me back to my office to meet Caroline. By the time we arrived, she was already waiting in the corridor outside. I have to admit that I was quite astonished at first sight, I could have quite easily mistaken her for Natasha. She was another petite, blue-eyed blond, who seemed to have come out of the same mould at approximately the same time. Indeed, they could have passed for identical twins. Caroline was wearing a blue shirt and a dark trouser suit. The blue of her shirt seemed to set her eyes off and make them sparkle in a very similar way that Natasha's eyes often did. I perceived that there was an element of mischief concealed behind them waiting to be released.

'Caroline, this is John.'

I must have looked totally dumb gawping with my mouth half-open observing her as if it was the first time I had ever seen a woman. Politely, she was waiting for me to speak. The embarrassing silence however quickly forced her to give up this formality.

'Hi, John, pleased to meet you.' She extended a small delicate hand towards me and I took it as I looked into her eyes.

'Likewise,' I said as I opened the door to my office still feeling quite astonished by the likeness. 'Please, go in.' She did and was quickly followed by Rupert.

'Take a seat,' I said to them both, trying to take control of myself.

It was incredible that, in such a short time, they had managed to find someone who was not only about the same size and weight as Natasha, but also who had more than a passing resemblance to her.

'Astonishing,' I said, still overcome, regarding her closely. It was probably too much because I had the impression that she was beginning to become embarrassed.

'Of course, we don't know what Natasha's appearance might be just now,' Rupert said, trying to bring some sense to our meeting. 'It's likely she may be in disguise.'

'Of course.' I replied still regarding her.

'I doubt it matters that much though.'

'No.'

'Let's suppose that Natasha moved in a hurry and that her hair was its natural blonde colour at the time, she would most likely have dyed her hair. We know that she's done this sort of thing before.'

'Or used a wig,' I suggested coming to my senses. I knew that Natasha was a master of disguise; I'd experienced it several times. 'I don't suppose you've got your passport with you, have you, Caroline?'

'I was asked to bring it.'

'Excellent!'

She slid her hand into the left inside pocket of her jacket, pulled it out and handed it to me. I opened it and examined the photograph. To be honest, the photograph was so bad it could have been anyone. 'Caroline Braithwaite,' I noted, looking at her again. 'It'll do very well.' I handed it back. 'Has anyone explained to you what we are about to do?'

'Only vaguely,' she replied.

'So, tell us the story line, Rupert. What's the legend, what do we have to play with?'

'Well, you're travelling as a newly married couple. You are on your honeymoon. Your name is John Braithwaite, so you're booked on the flight and into hotels as Mr and Mrs John Braithwaite. Yours is a false passport, but with a traceable history behind it. It's mostly your own early history with a few minor changes. It's all in the file. Caroline's passport is genuine. Everything fits except her place of work. Now she's a teacher in a private school, as you are, and that essentially, is how you met, in a school!'

'Where do you actually work, Caroline?'

'GCHQ.'

'Russian speaker?'

'Hardly!' she laughed, 'I can manage a bit of French, but I'm more into cyber science, computers. I'm what you might call, a scientist, or boffin if you like.'

'Probably better if you don't speak any Russian. Any particular concerns, Rupert? Anything that we should know about?'

'Not really. With the visas, going in should be a doddle, coming out may be more difficult, but theoretically it shouldn't really be a problem.' From my experience, that meant it probably would! 'Once you deposit Caroline in Moscow, Keith will arrange for someone to her pick up. She will be taken to the embassy. You will use Caroline's original

passport to get Natasha out of the country. Caroline will stay in Moscow for a short while until matters settle down.'

'Won't Caroline have a problem when she needs to leave?'

'No, we already have a plan.'

I looked at Caroline. 'How do you feel about having your hair cut short and dyed chestnut, or wearing a wig?'

She laughed. 'What, a makeover on expenses! Why the hell not!'

'I'm sure that Rupert will be very pleased to arrange something for you.' I turned towards him. 'Have we had any further contact with Natasha?'

'Nothing, absolutely nothing; she's gone to ground and I don't suppose that she will emerge until you arrive like the proverbial knight in shining armour to rescue her.'

It was an image that I tried to quickly obliterate from my mind.

As for Natasha going to ground, well, I have to say that at that moment we weren't exactly up to speed with what was actually going on.

But then, as is often the case, nobody was.

## *Chapter 8*

*South west of Moscow - May 2012*

Natasha explained to me later that she had a sudden premonition that something was not quite right a few moments before the warning light on the console next to her computer lit up. She had been alerted by a noise, or rather, almost a lack of noise. A sudden silence that didn't seem quite right. Cars travelled along the unmade road from time to time, not that often, but she was used to them coming and going. This time, the noise had ceased suddenly and she wondered if a car had actually stopped outside.

She studied the three screens around her computer regarding them intently to see if there was any movement. There wasn't. The screens relayed static black and white images from the four closed-circuit cameras that she had installed in and around the building. And, for a short while, they continued to show nothing unusual. What had set the alarm off? An animal?

Convinced that something was wrong, she remained glued to the screens longer than usual. Her diligence was rewarded when she saw a hand appear on the top of the locked front gate. It was quickly followed by the top of a head and a pair of eyes carefully scrutinising the garden. Not long after, a man clumsily clambered over and dropped somewhat awkwardly onto the rough gravel surface of the drive.

Natasha understood immediately that she had been right to be alerted to the potential danger. Her initial sense of alarm quickly changed to anxiousness as she appreciated that soon, she would probably have a major problem to deal with. The key question was, and it was impossible to answer at that point - how much of a problem? Was the man FSB, police, or was he just a common thief speculatively casing the joint? In any of the cases, she would have to deal with it if they broke in. A thief wouldn't present too much of a problem, but an FSB officer would be quite another matter with serious implications and possibly dire consequences.

Never taking her eyes off the screen, Natasha felt in the drawer under the table top and located the Makarov and the silencer. Without looking at them, she quickly assembled them and placed the gun on the table next to the computer. She left it there, ready for action. Her heart...