

STEPHEN COONTS'
DEEP BLACK: ARCTIC
GOLD

STEPHEN COONTS AND WILLIAM H.
KEITH



PRAISE FOR THE NOVELS OF
STEPHEN COONTS

THE ASSASSIN

“The action moves swiftly to its Hollywood ending.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

THE TRAITOR

“In bestseller Coonts’s assured new international thriller, Tommy Carmellini, the sardonic, laid-back CIA agent who became a star in 2004’s *Liars and Thieves*, gets a shot at the big time.”

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“Excellent.”

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—USA Today

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The Cannibal Queen

War in the Air

STEPHEN COONTS'
DEEP BLACK:
ARCTIC GOLD

STEPHEN COONTS AND
WILLIAM H. KEITH



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STEPHEN COONTS' DEEP BLACK: ARCTIC GOLD

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For information address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

ISBN: 0-312-94695-3

EAN: 978-0-312-94695-1

Printed in the United States of America

St. Martin's Paperbacks edition / February 2009

St. Martin's Paperbacks are published by St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

eISBN 9781429923057

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Epilogue

PROLOGUE

Latitude 90° N

1445 hours

IT WAS, FEODOR GOLYTSIN THOUGHT, *like touching down on the surface of another planet.*

“*Ostorojna!*” Captain Third Rank Dmitri Kurchakov warned. “Careful! Reduce speed of descent!”

“*Da, Kepitan,*” the helmsman replied.

“Vasily. Give me a readout on the depth below keel.”

“*Deseet’ metrov, Kepitan,*” the diving officer replied. Ten meters.

Golytsin stooped to peer through the thick quartz window into the alien world beyond. Another planet, yes . . . a very *dark* planet. Blacker than the surface of far Pluto, for there, at least, there was a sun, if one shrunken and wan. Here there was nothing save the luminescence of the abyssal fauna banished now by the light the submarine brought with her from above.

A dark planet, and a deadly one. At a depth of just over forty-two hundred meters, the pressure bearing down on each and every square centimeter of *Nomer Chiteereh*’s outer nickel-steel hull weighed almost two tons.

Muck swirled up off the bottom by the minisub’s side thrusters danced in the harsh white glare of the forward lights, like drifting stars. Briefly, something like a worm, half a meter long and fringed with myriad legs or swimmerets, twisted through the unaccustomed light, casting bizarre and writhing shadows within the cold and watery haze.

Astonishing. Even here, four thousand meters beneath the ice, within this frigid eternal night, there was life.

The submarine was a new, experimental, and highly secret military model with the less-than-glamorous name of *Nomer Chiteereh*, “Number Four.” Twenty-nine meters long and with a displacement of 150 tons, *Nomer Chiteereh* could reach depths of six thousand meters and could stay submerged for several days. A pair of external robotic arms operated from the forward observer’s seat gave the tiny vessel considerable dexterity beneath the glare of her external lights. She could be handled by a crew of four, but there was space in the cramped and cold-sweating pressure hull compartment for four additional passengers . . . or a squad of elite Spetsnaz in the cargo bay aft.

Today, however, there was only Golytsin.

The submersible’s sonar chirped, with ringing echoes. The diving officer read off the depth beneath the keel as they continued to descend, an almost mournful litany. “*Vaseem metrov . . . sem . . . shes metrov . . .*”

“I see the bottom, *Kepiten,*” the helmsman reported.

Side by side, heads nearly touching, Golytsin and Kurchakov leaned forward and peered down through the second of the forward view ports. “There!” the normally impassive Kurchakov said. He sounded uncharacteristically excited. A dour and taciturn man by nature, he now seemed almost boyish.

White light glared against the blackness, highlighted by drifting bits of organic debris. The bottom appeared disappointingly flat and featureless, an endless gray desert of fine silt and decayed plankton.

Mingled with the chirp of the sonar, the litany continued. “*Chiteereh . . . tree . . . dvah . . .*”

“Halt descent!” Kurchakov ordered. “Maintain position!”

The submarine’s side thrusters whined more loudly, gentling the beast to an awkward hover. The

sharp increase in the thruster wash kicked up additional billowing clouds of fine silt from the bottom beneath the sub's keel, filling the night with brightly illuminated particles. *A blizzard*, Golytsin thought. A winter squall such as he'd once known in the St. Petersburg—no, the *Leningrad*—of his childhood.

“So where is our flag?” Golytsin asked, peering into the murk as it gently subsided. As he leaned forward, the light reflecting back from outside illuminated the web of blue lines etched into his arm and the back of his hand.

Kurchakov didn't reply at first. He was staring at Golytsin's tattoos. Then Kurchakov looked away and shrugged. “It could be anywhere, just a few meters away, beyond the edge of the light, and we'll miss it,” he said. “Don't worry. We will drop another.”

“No need, sir,” the diving officer reported. “I have it on sonar. Bearing one-one-nine . . . range thirty-seven meters.”

“Helm. Take us there. Slow ahead.”

“*Da, Kepitan.*”

In August of 2007, a pair of Russian Mir deep submersibles had reached this, the Arctic seabed at the North Pole. They'd taken readings, collected samples of the sea floor, and planted a large rustproof titanium flag.

Since then, the Mirs had returned several times, taking further readings for the PP Shirshov Institute of Oceanology and extending Mother Russia's claim in this freezing wasteland. And today the Mirs were back, shepherding the much larger and more sinister *Nomer Chiteereh* to the cold, black depths of the Amundsen Plain.

An apparition emerged from the shadows beyond the light, broad rectangular, held above the mud by weights deeply imbedded in the sediment. As *Nomer Chiteereh* drifted forward, the colors emerged as well . . . the white, blue, and red horizontal bars of the Russian Federation.

“The Pole,” Golytsin breathed. “The *real* Pole.”

Not the imaginary point on the ever-drifting, ever-changing pack of ice four kilometers overhead but the *actual* pole of the planet, on the seabed 4,261 meters beneath the surface.

A point now claimed by Moscow as a portion of the Eurasian landmass and part of the sovereign territory of the Russian Federation.

A point, Golytsin thought, that would very soon return the *Rodina*, Mother Russia, to greatness.

British Airways Flight 2112
JFK International Airport
1015 hours EDT

“SO, DOC, IS IT TRUE WHAT THEY SAY?” Kjartan Magnor-Karr said with a breezy insouciance as the two men strode down the boarding tunnel. “About you and Big Oil, I mean?”

Dr. Earnest Spencer scowled. “Young man, I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about.”

“This solar theory thing of yours,” Karr said. They reached the entryway of the British Airways 747 and he grinned and winked at the welcoming flight attendant.

“Welcome aboard, sir,” she said. She had the most gloriously pale blond hair. “May I see—”

Instead of his ticket, he flashed an ID at her, together with his special clearance. The ID, of course, was a fake. Despite what it said, he was not a special agent of the FBI, though the lie, the *legend*, as it was known in intelligence circles, occasionally was a useful fiction. Everyone had heard of the FBI, but very few even knew there was such an organization as the National Security Agency. The clearance was real enough, however. It gave Karr permission to carry a firearm on the flight.

“Thank you, sir,” she said. “I’ll inform the captain.”

“You do that, sweetheart,” Karr told her.

He and Spencer filed aft and found their seats, located toward the rear of first class. For a few moments, the two men were preoccupied with putting their carry-on luggage in the overhead compartment and getting themselves settled in. Spencer had the window seat, Karr the aisle. As planned.

Spencer appeared ready to ignore the topic Karr had just raised, but the younger man persisted. “Aw, c’mon, *you* know, Doc. Everyone says the oil companies pay you to tell everybody that global warming is nonsense.”

“Young man . . .,” Spencer began.

“Tommy.”

“Eh?”

“Call me Tommy. All my friends do.”

Spencer frowned at him in a way suggesting that he most assuredly did *not* consider Karr to be his friend. “Young man,” he repeated. “If the oil companies were paying me, perhaps I could afford to buy their product. Secondly, global warming is not nonsense. It is real. All *too* real. My solar model simply demonstrates that human activities have little effect on the world’s climate.”

“Sure,” Karr agreed. “So people can drive gas-guzzling SUVs all they want and not melt the ice caps, right?”

“Tell me,” Spencer said, glaring at him over the top of his glasses. “Are *all* FBI agents as irritating as you?”

“Well—”

But Spencer had produced a copy of *American Scientist* he’d purchased at a kiosk inside the JFK terminal, and made a production of opening it and beginning to read.

“Jeez, Tommy!” a voice boomed inside his head. “Lay off the poor guy, how ’bout it?”

Karr chuckled in answer but didn’t say anything out loud. Spencer glanced at him suspiciously, the

returned to his magazine. Like all Deep Black field operatives, Karr had a minute speaker surgically implanted in his skull just behind his left ear, and he also had a microphone sewn into the collar of his pastel blue shirt. The transmitter hidden inside his belt linked him via satellite with the Deep Black nerve center deep beneath Fort Meade, Maryland, the Deep Black command center within OPS known as the Art Room, to be precise.

“Everything look okay at your end?” the voice continued.

Karr glanced around the first-class cabin. Three other men in plain, dark suits had taken their seats along with the other first-class passengers. FBI, all three of them, though all were taking care not to meet one another’s eyes. The economy-class passengers were filing past, now. The agents surreptitiously watched each as he or she entered the plane and walked down the aisle.

“Mm-mm,” Karr grunted the affirmative. It wouldn’t do to have Spencer or the other passengers hearing him talk to himself.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes,’” the voice said. The speaker was Jeff Rockman.

The last of the passengers, a frazzled-looking woman with two small and screaming children, herded her charges past Karr and into the aft section of the plane. The attractive blond flight attendant Karr had flirted with stood at the front, preparing to go into her spiel about oxygen masks and flotation cushions. She began with the usual admonition to turn off all electronic devices during the takeoff portion of the flight.

“Okay, we’re gonna sign off for a while,” Rockman told him. “Wouldn’t do to get in trouble with the FAA.”

“Mm-mm.”

“And for the love of God, stop annoying Doc Spencer! He’s not the enemy!”

Karr didn’t reply, of course, but the statement brought a renewal of recurring questions. Just who was the enemy? Why would anyone want to kill Earnest Spencer and, perhaps more to the point, why was the threat serious enough that the NSA and Desk Three were involved? It was a waste of time, money, and vital personnel assets, having him here, pretending to be an FBI agent while babysitting a Ivy League professor type from the U.S. Department of Energy.

Well, at least he was off the Art Room’s radar for a precious few moments. Aircraft navigation systems could be thrown off by signals from a field op’s comm unit, hence the injunction to turn off all electronic gear during takeoff and landing. If anyone was going to try something stupid, this would be the time to try it, with the Art Room effectively out of the picture.

But save for the somewhat too-obvious watchfulness of the FBI guys, everyone in first class appeared to be acting with complete indifference both to him and to Spencer.

Karr caught the pretty attendant’s glance as she chattered on into her microphone about wing exits and emergency landings, and winked.

He wondered if he would be able to get a phone number from her before they reached London.

DeFrancesca

Operation Magpie

Waterfront, St. Petersburg

0024 hours

Lia DeFrancesca took a moment to run the palm-sized lock scanner along the entire perimeter of the door and around the lock itself, its powerful magnetic field probing for wiring or other signs of hidden electronic devices. The digital readout remained unchanging, indicating the presence of iron and steel.

but not of electric currents.

Slipping the scanner into a thigh pocket in her black field ops suit, she produced a set of lock picks and began to work at the ancient padlock securing the door's hasp.

"Hurry; hurry," her partner whispered with fierce urgency. "If we're found . . ."

"Patience, Sergei," she replied. "We don't want to rush this."

She was having more trouble with the rust than with the padlock's mechanism. With a click, the lock snapped open, and she pulled it off the hasp.

A foghorn mourned in the damp night air. The warehouse loomed above the waterfront, overlooking *Kozhevennaya Liniya* to one side, the oily black waters of the southern mouth of the Lena River on the other. A chill and dripping fog shrouded their surroundings, muffling sound. Carefully she edged the sliding door open, but stopped after moving it only a couple of inches.

"What is it?" her companion asked. "What's wrong?"

She didn't answer immediately, but pocketing the lock tools, she pulled out a cell phone and a length of flexible tubing, as thick as a soda straw. One end of the tubing attached to the cell phone; the other she inserted into the partly opened door to the warehouse, turning the fiber-optic cable this way and that to let her peer around the corners. On the phone's screen, an image painted in blacks, greens, and yellows shifted and slid with the movements of her hand, giving her an infrared image of what lay beyond the door. She saw large open spaces . . . piles of crates . . . a trash can near the door . . . discarded junk . . . but no glow from warm-blooded humans lying in wait.

"Okay," Lia said at last. "It's clear."

Sergei Alekseev rolled the door far enough aside that they could enter. He was scared. Lia could almost smell his fear, could feel it in the way he stared and started at shadows, the way he moved hunched over and rigid. Replacing the IR viewer, on the ground beside the door she placed a motion sensor, like several dozen button-sized devices she'd already dropped around the area. Only then did she extract a small flashlight and switch it on. "Which way?"

"Over here," Alekseev said, pointing. "I think."

"You'd better know."

"*Da*. This way."

Before moving deeper into the darkness, Lia tried her communicator again. "Verona," she said aloud. "This is Juliet."

A burst of static sounded in her ear, loud enough to make her wince. She thought she heard a voice somewhere behind the audio snow, but couldn't make out the words.

It would help if Romeo were here. Where the hell was he, anyway? With a small satellite dish on top of one of the surrounding buildings, they might have a chance of punching through the interference.

"Verona," she said again. "Juliet. Initiating Magpie!"

Again, static.

Damn. . . .

The Art Room

NSA Headquarters

Fort Meade, Maryland

1624 hours EDT

“What do you mean, we’ve lost her?” William Rubens demanded.

“We’re just getting fragments, sir,” Sarah Cassidy replied from her console. “Her signal intermittent. It might be the sunspots.”

Rubens bit back a most unprofessional word. *Sunspots*. . . .

Desk Three’s communications system depended upon a necklace of military comm satellites parked in geosynchronous orbit twenty-two thousand miles above the equator. Lia currently was working pretty far north—at sixty degrees north, in fact, the same latitude as the southern tip of Greenland. That meant that in the city of St. Petersburg, the comsats hung low in the southern sky, subject to interference from buildings, transmission lines, and any other horizon-blocking obstacles.

Add to that the fact that the sun was approaching the most active phase of its regular eleven-year cycle. Increased sunspot activity, solar flares, auroras in the highly charged upper atmosphere in the far north and south . . . it all meant that communications with field operatives could be a bit ragged at times.

But damn it all! He looked around the huge high-tech chamber known within the NSA as the Art Room, scowling at communications consoles and computer displays and satellite feeds. Hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of technology. What good was it all if it didn’t *work*? . . .

“What about her backup?” he demanded.

“Romeo’s not in position yet,” Sarah told him. She indicated the big screen dominating one wall of the Art Room. It showed a highly detailed intelligence satellite photo of St. Petersburg’s waterfront district, the southern shore of Vasilyevsky Island close against the southern estuary of the Neva River. A winking white point of light marked one of a line of warehouses along the wharf, together with the name “DeFrancesca” in white letters. A second white marker blinked several blocks away, on the *Kosaya Liniya*, accompanied by the legend “Akulinin.”

“It’s these buildings, sir,” Jeff Rockman said. He used a laser pointer on the screen, indicating several tall warehouses and skyscrapers across the river on the south bank of the Neva. “They must be blocking her signal.”

Rubens picked up a microphone. “Romeo. This is Shakespeare.”

“Copy,” a voice said from an overhead speaker, harsh with static.

“Where are you?”

“If you’re in the Art Room, I assume that’s a rhetorical question, sir,” Akulinin replied. But he added, “I’m driving southwest on Kosaya. Just passing Detskaya.”

Rubens glared at the satellite map on the wall above him, which mirrored Akulinin’s description. *Damn it, Lia should have clapped a hold on things until her partner could get into position.* Alekseev’s Russian contact, had been too anxious, however, too skittish, and Lia had told the Art Room that she was going in, whether she had backup or not.

“We think Lia is inside the building. We’re not getting a clear signal. We need you in place to relay her transmissions . . . and to watch for the opposition.”

“Yes, sir.” Akulinin’s voice was momentarily garbled by static. Then, “I should be there in five minutes.”

“Make it faster. I don’t like the way this one is playing out.”

Operation Magpie had been running rough since its inception. A good intelligence op *flowed*, like a carefully orchestrated ballet. Every operative had a place and a task, a precise and meticulous choreographed passage of a ballet. Of course, many of the dancers didn’t even know they were

performing—the local contacts, the informers, the marks, the opposition. The only way to keep them in the dance was for the operatives to *stay in complete control of the situation* . . . meaning each of them was where he or she was supposed to be when he or she was supposed to be there, leading the unwilling and hopefully clueless participants in the drama through their steps and turns without their ever knowing they were onstage.

Of course things were bound to go wrong from time to time, but good operators could ad lib until things were back in control, back in the flow.

This time around, Rubens thought, someone had lost the beat, and now the situation was fast slipping into chaos.

The ballet, he thought, was fast on its way to becoming a brawl.

“What is the current position of Ghost Blue?” Rubens demanded. He didn’t want to use that option but . . .

Ghost Blue was an F-22 Raptor deployed hours ago out of Lakenheath. Stealthier than the F-117 Nighthawk, which it was currently in the process of replacing, more reliable than the smaller, robotic F-47C UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles), the F-22 had sophisticated avionics and onboard computer gear that allowed it to serve as an advance platform for ELINT, electronics intelligence, enabling it to pick up transmissions from the ground and relay them back to Fort Meade via the constellation of military comsats.

“Ninety-six miles west-northwest of St. Petersburg, sir,” James Higgins replied from another console. “Over the Gulf of Finland, tucked in close by the Finnish-Russian border.”

“Send him in.”

“Yes, sir.” Higgins hesitated. “Uh, that requires special—”

“I know what it requires. Send him in.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ninety-six miles. Ghost Blue would be staying subsonic to maintain his stealth signature, so the flight was seven and a half minutes’ flight time . . . or a bit less to a point where he would be able to intercept Magpie’s transmissions. Call it seven minutes.

Of course, this was a flagrant violation of Russian airspace and territorial sovereignty. At the moment, the Raptor was loitering unseen within Finnish airspace, also a violation of territorial boundaries, but not so deadly a sin as moving into Russian territory. St. Petersburg sat like a spider within a far-flung web of radar installations and surface-to-air missile sites, protecting dozens of high-value military installations in and around the city.

And if anyone could defeat U.S. stealth technology, it was the Russians. In 1999, Yugoslav forces had scored a kill, probably with Russian help, shooting down an F-117 with an SA-3 missile. The pilot had been rescued, but Yugoslav forces had grabbed the wreckage—and almost certainly turned it over to the Russians for study. The Russians, it was well known, were *very* interested in learning how to defeat American stealth technology.

Rubens had just kicked up the ante in an already dangerous game.

He reached for a telephone on the console beside him.

DeFrancesca

Operation Magpie

Waterfront, St. Petersburg

0025 hours

Well, they'd warned her she might find herself out of communications with the Art Room. There was nothing Lia could do about it now, however.

Like all Desk Three field operatives, Lia had a tiny speaker unit implanted in her skull just behind her left ear. The microphone was attached to her black utilities, while the antenna was coiled up in her belt. The system provided safe, clear, secure communications . . . usually. It was a bitch, though, when the technology failed.

Still, the satellite dish receivers at Fort Meade were a lot better as antennas than the wire in her belt. It was possible that they were receiving her back in the Art Room even if she couldn't hear them.

She would have to keep operating on that assumption.

What she couldn't rely on was the Art Room warning her of approaching threats.

She tried raising her backup. "Romeo, this is Juliet."

Nothing. And that was worrying. It meant she and Alekseev were on their own.

Alekseev had moved ahead and was searching the huge chamber now with his own flashlight. She could see stacks of crates, some covered in tarpaulins, looming out of the darkness.

But one large crate was off by itself, near the back wall of the warehouse. She could see words stenciled in bold, black Cyrillic lettering on the sides: *stahnka*.

Machine parts.

Akulinin

Operation Magpie

St. Petersburg

0026 hours

Ilya Ilyitch Akulinin peered ahead through fog and cold drizzle, past the monotonous beat of the rented car's windshield wipers. *Kosaya* came to a T at *Kozhevennaya Liniya*, and he turned the ugly little Citroën right.

That put him in a narrow canyon, with two- and three-story structures, most with façades of either concrete blocks or rusting sheet metal, looming to either side. Lia should be in the third warehouse in the row on the left side of the street; he pulled over to the curb and parked. He didn't want to get too close.

Akulinin was new to the National Security Agency and Desk Three. Born in Brooklyn, the son of naturalized Russian immigrants, he'd joined the Army out of high school and served as a Green Beret with the Army Special Forces, where his fluency in Russian had put him in great demand in joint operations with America's new ally, the Russian Federation. His had been among the first American boots on the ground in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, just prior to the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.

Leaving the car, he dropped a button-sized sensor on the street, then walked across the street with casual nonchalance. If anyone was watching, they would see a tall, blond man in laborer's coveralls carrying a large toolbox. Reaching a warehouse two down from the one Lia should be in, he stepped into the narrow junk- and garbage-littered space between two buildings and began looking for a way up. There was a ladder—or the remnants of one—but it began halfway up the side of the building. The rest had rusted away, or been stolen long ago.

Much of St. Petersburg's infrastructure showed the same advanced state of decay and crumbling collapse. Many of the buildings in this area were abandoned, and scavengers had long since stripped them of copper, lead, brass, and anything else they could pry loose, haul off, and sell.

He stepped over a pile of garbage and a set of rusted bedsprings. Something large and furry squeaked as it scuttled from beneath an overturned two-legged chair.

At least, he thought, he shouldn't have an audience here tonight.

Except for the rats.

DeFrancesca

Operation Magpie

Waterfront, St. Petersburg

0027 hours

Removing yet another small gray case from a pouch on her combat blacks, Lia slipped a plug into her ear and held the device itself out in front of her. Instantly a staccato burst of clicks, harsh as the earlier static, sounded in her ear as numerals appeared on the small LED readout screen.

"Machine parts, my ass," she said.

"It is radioactive, yes?" Alekseev said.

"It is radioactive, yes."

"It is not harmful, I was told," Alekseev told her. "I was told—"

"Not harmful unless there's prolonged exposure," Lia corrected him. "So let's get this the hell over with and get out of here. Give me the pry."

"Huh? Oh, yes." He handed her one of the tools he'd been carrying at his belt, a short pry bar. She used it to jimmy up one of the boards on the crate's top with a sharp squeak of dry wood and bending staples, giving her a peek inside.

The crate was filled with what looked like thin sheets of metal, dull steel-gray, gleaming in the flash beam. *Bingo*.

But just to be sure . . .

Akulinin

Operation Magpie

Waterfront, St. Petersburg

0027 hours

Placing some more sensors, Akulinin emerged from the alley on a broad concrete promenade. The fog clung low and close above the black flow of the Neva. A thousand yards across the water lay the Russian Navy shipyard, but he could see no sign of it, not even a fog-shrouded light. Somewhere in the distance, a buoy-mounted bell clanged fitfully with the chop of the water, followed by the lowing of a foghorn.

Sticking to the shadows next to the line of dilapidated warehouses, he began making his way toward Lia's position.

When Ilya Akulinin had left the Army, shortly after his third tour in Afghanistan, he'd been approached by a recruiter with the the National Security Agency. The NSA was America's premier eavesdropping agency, and they, too, could use a man with his language skills, experience, and security clearances.

That had been just three years ago. After six months of training in Georgia and at the CIA's "Farm" at Camp Peary, near Williamsburg, Virginia, they'd put him at a desk listening to electronic intercept from Russia . . . for the most part tracking the activities and the shadowy members of Russia's fa

flung criminal underground.

Crouching beside a rust-clotted cliff of sheet metal, the southwestern wall of an empty warehouse, he paused to check his communications link with the Art Room. "Verona, this is Romeo," he called softly . . . but the answer came as a harsh burst of static. The surrounding buildings, concrete and metal, must be blocking the signal. He'd thought that perhaps here, directly next to the water, he would have a clean line of sight to a satellite, but evidently there were buildings across the Neva high enough to block the signal. He would need to get up high for a clear line of sight . . . and it would be better if he could deploy a small dish antenna and get a good lock on a comsat.

He touched his belt, changing frequencies. "Juliet, Juliet," he called. "Wherefore art thou, Juliet?"

"Knock it off, Romeo," was her response. Her voice was scratchy, with a lot of static, but he could hear her well enough. "We're almost done here."

"Where do you want me?"

"Sit tight. Everything's cool. Where are you?"

"On the ground, at the corner of the warehouse southeast of you, about fifty yards from your position."

"Stay put. We'll be done in a second."

"Roger that."

He waited. The damp breeze off the water made him shiver.

Akulinin had endured the boredom of a desk job for the next couple of years after his recruitment until last month when out of the blue they'd asked him to volunteer for a routine but possibly dangerous operation in Russia. After almost two years of listening to recorded voices and filing reports upon electronic ream of reports, of *course* he'd volunteered.

He'd volunteered without ever having heard of Desk Three. And that had proven to be quite a revelation in itself.

The National Security Agency was *the* largest of America's intelligence agencies, and the most secretive, the least known. The old joke held that the letters stood for "Never Say Anything" or, more sinister still, for "No Such Agency." The NSA's charter had given it two basic missions—creating codes to ensure national security and breaking the codes of other nations. The few people who'd ever heard of the organization assumed it handled nothing but SIGINT—signals intelligence—that it was a security-conscious band of mathematicians, programmers, cryptographers, and similar geeks who would never get their hands dirty on an actual black op overseas. *That* was the sort of thing left to the CIA. . . .

But the Deputy Director of the NSA, William Rubens, had approached him in one of the staff cafeterias last January and asked if he would consider transferring to the Agency's Desk Three, where both his language skills and his combat training and experience as a Green Beanie were badly needed. Some outpatient surgery to plant a communications device behind his ear, another month at a specialist school at the CIA's Farm, a quick series of briefings bringing him up to speed on something called Operation Magpie, and he'd found himself on a plane bound for Pulkovo International Airport.

And so far the mission had, indeed, seemed pretty routine. He and Lia had entered the country on separate flights, linked up in a seemingly casual encounter beneath Alexander's Column in the Palace Square in front of the Hermitage. That night, they'd picked up their special mission equipment where their support team had left it, in a well-hidden drop on the shore of a wooded lake in Primorskiy Park. Yesterday Lia had met with the furtive Sergei Alekseev in an out-of-the-way teahouse off the Nevsky Prospect while Akulinin had provided backup, listening in unobtrusively from a nearby table.

And Alekseev had brought them here.

~~But now things were turning sour. Akulinin had been supposed to be here forty minutes ago, before Lia and Alekseev even arrived, scoping out the dockyard and the approaches to the warehouse and setting up a satellite dish on top of a nearby building to provide reliable communications with the A Room. No one had counted on his being stopped by that damned officious traffic inspector demanding to see his papers . . . or the need for him to bribe his way back onto the road.~~

Anxiously he watched the front of the warehouse, waiting for Lia and Alekseev to emerge. Smeared of wet illumination from a couple of streetlights up on *Kozhevennaya Liniya* cast just enough of a mist-shrouded glow for him to see the main door and a line of loading docks above a parking lot.

Opening his workman's toolbox, he extracted his weapon—an H&K MP5K PDW—a compact little submachine gun chosen precisely because its fourteen-and-a-half-inch length would fit into a standard tool kit. He opened the folding stock and felt it lock, snapped in a thirty-round magazine, and dragged back the charging lever to chamber a round.

“Come *on*, come *on*,” he muttered, half-aloud.

DeFrancesca
Operation Magpie
Waterfront, St. Petersburg
0029 hours

LIA USED AN AEROSOL SPRAY from a canister the size of a lipstick to mist over one corner of the metal. She then twisted the cylinder of her flashlight sharply clockwise. The visible beam snapped off, but in its place, the wet corner of the metal took on a magical green-blue luminosity, glowing brightly in the near darkness.

“What is that?” Alekseev asked.

“A solution of sulfonated hydroxybenzoquinoline,” Lia replied, rattling off the tongue twister with practiced ease. “It fluoresces in the presence of beryllium and an ultraviolet light source.” It was all the proof she needed.

“It is as I told you, yes?”

“Yes, it is. You did good, Sergei. Hold the board for me.”

As Alekseev held the crate open, she took a final device from a pouch, a flexible bit of metallic foil the size and thickness of a postage stamp, its surface precisely the same dull gray as the beryllium shipment. Reaching gingerly into the crate, she slapped the rectangle onto the metal at one corner, pressing it hard to activate the sticky side. Then she nodded to Alekseev, and he lowered the loosened slat, working the protruding ends of the staples back into the wood so that it was not evident that the crate had been opened.

She checked her cell phone, this time tuning it to the low-level signal emitted by the tracking device they’d just planted. When she sent a low-frequency RF signal, the microtransponder on the chip caught the pulse and flashed it back, a good, sharp signal.

“Verona, Juliet,” she said, just in case they were reading her back at the Art Room. “We found the shipment. Tracking device is in place, transponder test positive. We’re initiating our E and E.”

Still, nothing but static.

They started for the front of the warehouse.

Akulinin
Operation Magpie
Waterfront, St. Petersburg
0030 hours

The sound of a vehicle engine startled Akulinin. It was coming from *behind*, moving toward him along the concrete wharf. He turned, crouching low to stay out of sight behind another pile of discarded rust- and rat-infested trash. One . . . no, two cars were approaching, driving up the wharf with their lights off. They raced past, then turned into the trailer-loading area in front of Lia’s warehouse.

Not good. . . .

“Lia!” he called urgently. “Lia! We have company!”

Car doors slammed as men tumbled out into the night. He counted ten, five in each vehicle. It was tough to see in the dim light, but they appeared to be wearing civilian clothing. Reaching into the to

kit again, he fished out a set of OVGN6 binoculars, a compact handheld unit with two eyepieces but only a single light amplifier tube. Switching the unit on, he pressed it to his eyes.

Under LI, details sprang into sharp, close focus.

He could see their weapons. . . .

DeFrancesca

Operation Magpie

Waterfront, St. Petersburg

0030 hours

Lia and Alekseev were halfway back to the warehouse entrance when Akulinin's warning came through. An instant later, they heard the bang of car doors outside.

"This way!" Lia hissed, tugging at Alekseev's elbow. She moved off to the right, ducking behind the shelter offered by a stack of wooden crates. It took her a moment to realize that Alekseev hadn't followed her, that he was still standing in the open with a deer-in-the-headlights look to him.

A hollow boom echoed through the warehouse, followed by the sound of the main door sliding open. An instant later, the lights snapped on, the overhead lights first, then the glare of a powerful spotlight from the main entrance.

"Stoy!" a voice boomed from behind the light. "*Ktah v' takoi?*"

"*Nyeh strelyai!*" Alekseev screamed, throwing his hands straight up in the air.

But Lia was already moving, plunging out of the light and into the shadows cast by stacks of crates to her right. She pulled her weapon from its holster, an accurized .45-caliber H&K SOCOM pistol fitted with an under-barrel laser sight and with the muzzle threaded to accept a suppressor. She was already pulling out the sound suppressor and screwing it down tight as more shouting sounded from behind her.

Alekseev, she thought, had been pretty damned quick to surrender, and she wondered if she'd been set up. It was possible. Alekseev was Desk Three's link to one of the local branches of the Organizatsiya, the Russian mafia.

It was the Organization that Desk Three was up against this time. That radioactive beryllium in the crate back there had come from a nuclear power facility in Rybinsk, stolen by members of the Russian mafia either in or working with the Russian military.

And the word was that the shipment had been sold to the highest bidder—which in this case happened to be the nation of Iran.

Beryllium possesses some interesting properties that make it invaluable within the nuclear industry. It doesn't absorb neutrons well, which makes it ideal as a neutron reflector and moderator in atomic piles. More significant, if the sphere of plutonium within a nuclear weapon is surrounded by a beryllium shell, preventing neutrons from escaping, much less plutonium is necessary in order for the weapon to achieve critical mass—and detonation.

"American!" a harsh voice snapped in English, echoing through the warehouse. "You cannot escape! Throw down your weapons and come out!"

Were the attackers mafia enforcers? Police? Or military? She had to find out. Moving silently, staying in the shadows, she worked her way around behind the stacks of warehoused crates, edging closer to the front entrance. There were several other doors to the building as well, she knew from her studies of the structure's blueprints before her deployment, but she also knew that those would be watched. She would have a better chance where the opposition had already entered the building.

Maybe. . . .

Akulinin

Operation Magpie

Waterfront, St. Petersburg

0031 hours

Akulinin watched as several of the men pushed through the open front door on the southeastern facade of the warehouse. Others were spreading out to the left and right, moving to cover other entrances. He could hear shouting coming from inside, in Russian.

Through the light-intensifier binoculars, he could clearly see that the newcomers were wearing civilian clothing, which meant nothing. They might be OMON, MVD, or local militia, or they could even be Russian Army wearing low-profile civvies. The weapons they carried were definitely military-issue assault rifles, however, AK-74s and AKMs.

It was also distinctly possible that they were Organizatsiya enforcers. Alekseev had been a member of one of the major organized-crime groups, the Blues, but when Desk Three approached him, he had been willing to help in exchange for asylum for himself and his family.

“Lia?” Akulinin called over the tactical channel. “You reading me?”

“Yeah.” She sounded out of breath. “Who *are* these guys?”

“Not sure. They’re wearing civvies . . . with military weapons. Are you okay?”

“So far. Stay put. I’m trying to reach the southwest door.”

He swung his night-vision device in that direction. “You’ve got two goons outside,” he told her. “Just waiting.”

“Can you take them down?”

“Not without alerting half of St. Petersburg.” The MP5K did not have a sound suppressor, unlike some of its larger and more cumbersome cousins. Besides, the range to those two sentries was better than seventy yards . . . a hell of a long range to tap someone with that weapon. To make matters worse, a sheet-tin storage shed built just off the corner of the warehouse was partially blocking his view. He couldn’t be sure there were *only* two men there.

“Copy,” Lia said. “Wait a second. . . .”

The Art Room

NSA Headquarters

Fort Meade, Maryland

1632 hours EDT

“Ghost Blue is now inside of Russian airspace,” Rubens said. He held the telephone handset to his ear while looking up at the big screen above him. The map’s zoom had been pulled back to show the entirety of the St. Petersburg area, from Primorsk on the Gulf of Finland to Kirovsk, twenty-five miles east of the city. At this scale, the white pinpoints marking Lia and Akulinin had merged into a single point on the southern point of Vasilyevsky Island; a new flashing icon had just appeared at the extreme left, moving in across the Gulf of Finland on a heading straight for St. Petersburg.

“Is there any sign of a reaction from the Russians?” Dr. Donna Bing wanted to know.

“Not so far, ma’am,” Rubens replied.

“The President will have to be informed,” the National Security Director said. She sounded angry.

and Rubens knew she had cause. Ghost Blue had been built into Magpie from the beginning as a backup in case of unforeseen technical difficulties, but no one had actually expected that option to be put into play.

The big danger was that Bing would use this in her power-play shenanigans against Desk Three. She'd tried it before.

"How long before the plane is over the city?"

"It won't actually overfly the city, ma'am," Rubens replied. "It will orbit about ten miles out, over the Gulf of Finland. That should be close enough for them to pick up our agents' transmission. He should be at his loiter point in . . . five more minutes."

"I don't like this, Rubens," Bing told him. "Not one damned bit. We have no business putting military aircraft that deep into Russian airspace."

Rubens, always the diplomat, did not point out that the United States had no outwardly legitimate business putting human agents into Russian territory, either . . . or that both Russia and the United States had a very long history of intruding into each other's territories when they needed to do so.

Of course, both countries had long used all kinds of assets to keep tabs on each other, from human agents to spy satellites to submarines to ELINT and reconnaissance aircraft. Of those various means of gathering intelligence, though, aircraft made the people in Washington the most nervous.

No doubt the shoot-down of Captain Francis Gary Powers' U-2 over Sverdlovsk in May of 1960 had something to do with that.

"Ghost Blue knows what he's doing," Rubens told the National Security Director. "He'll know he's being picked up by the St. Petersburg air defense net, and he has means by which he can evade any hostiles."

A rather sweeping generalization, that. Rubens wasn't trying to be misleading, but he was oversimplifying to a rather alarming degree. So very much could go wrong in an op like this one. It was impossible to predict how it would come together.

Or fall apart.

"Your tail is riding on this one, Mr. Rubens," Bing told him. "Keep me in the loop."

"Yes, ma'am."

But Bing had already hung up on him.

He glanced at Rockman as he replaced the handset. "We'd better tell Dean, too."

Pistol Range

Fort Meade, Maryland

1633 hours EDT

Charlie Dean squeezed the trigger twice in rapid succession, tapping off two rounds, the bangs echoing down the white-painted room. Two shots, two hits . . . squarely at the center of mass and less than two inches apart.

Recovering, he shifted his aim, gripping the pistol firmly in the classic Weaver stance, right hand holding the grip at full extension, finger lightly caressing the trigger, left hand cupping and holding the right. Accuracy in the Weaver stance depended on the interplay of forces as he pushed with the locked right arm and pulled with the supporting left.

Two more shots, two more hits, this time in the target's head.

"Target left!" a voice growled from beside and slightly behind him. Dean shifted instantly, bending

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