Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Timebomb

Written by Gerald Seymour

Published by Corgi Books,
an imprint of The Random House Group Ltd

All text is copyright © Gerald Seymour 2008

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA
A Random House Group Company
www.rbooks.co.uk

First published in Great Britain
in 2008 by Bantam Press
an imprint of Transworld Publishers

Copyright © Gerald Seymour 2008

Gerald Seymour has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBNs 9780593060056 (cased)
9780593060063 (tpb)

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Addresses for Random House Group Ltd companies outside the UK
can be found at: www.randomhouse.co.uk
The Random House Group Ltd Reg. No. 954009

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest-certification organization. All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace-approved FSC-certified paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found at
www.rbooks.co.uk/environment

Typeset in 10.5/13pt Palatino by
Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Mackays, Chatham, ME5 8TD

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1



Mixed Sources
Product group from well-managed forests and other controlled sources
www.fsc.org Cert no. TT-COC-2139
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

Prologue
24 March 1993

'Come on, boys, put your backs into it,' he rasped. 'Show some life and push.'

But they wouldn't have heard the anger, or the anxiety, in his voice.

It had been sluicing rain when they had started to move the cart and its load away from the bunker in Area 19. By the time they reached their destination, the sleet would have become a dense shower of snowflakes.

Three conscripts were at the back, gasping with the effort. Their boots slithered and slipped on the metalled surface where thin layers of ice had crusted. Himself, he had his shoulder on the right side of the cart. From there he could use his strength and guide it down the centre of the roadway towards the check-point. They had already passed through the gates in the wire that circled Area 19. In front of them was the entry and exit guard post to the Zone, and another half-kilometre ahead the main security post. Even he, Major Oleg Yashkin – and he had thirty-two years' service with the 12th Directorate – was subject to the bitter cut of the cold in the gale. His uniform, of course, was of far better quality than those of the conscripts, and his greatcoat

was heavier and thicker, but he, too, felt the brutality of the weather, coming from the north, sweeping down from the regions of Arkhangelsk or Novaya Zemlya or the Yamal peninsula. It was perfect for his purposes.

Not that he would show the three chosen conscripts that the cold affected him. He was an officer of status and experience, and to these three wretches he was a deity. He drove them on, his tongue lashing them when the speed of the cart sagged. He had chosen them with care. Three kids, none yet beyond their teenage years, none intelligent and able to question what was ordered of them – putty in his hands when he had come to their barracks hut and made the selection. He could reflect, as he strained against the cart, that the quality of the conscript kids was far below – in these times of chaos and confusion – what would have been tolerated in the 12th Directorate in the past, but standards for recruits were disappearing into the abyss . . . That, at least, suited him. These new times of chaos, confusion and betrayal were the source of his anger.

The cart slewed to the left, one of the kids tumbled over, and he had to wrench it back on course. Pain snapped in his shoulders and forearms, but it was merely a minor, irritating distraction from the anger that consumed him.

'Come on, boys, concentrate. Work at it. Do I have to do it all myself?'

At the guard post was a barrier, chipped white paint highlighted by faint diagonal red lines. Another conscript came out of the hut and seemed to rock in the force of the gale. Inside, an NCO sat at a desk and showed no willingness to move into the teeth of the elements. Major Yashkin anticipated no problem, but anxiety lingered in him. It should not have. He had, after all, responsibility – six more days of it – for the perimeter security of Area 19 and the Zone. He commanded the troops, regulars and conscripts, who patrolled the fences and stood sentry on the gates. But anxiety gnawed in him because what he did that late afternoon, in a freezing sleet storm, was more than sufficient to cause him to face a closed, secret court-martial and be sentenced to death – a pistol shot to the back of the neck while kneeling in a prison yard.

At the barrier he told his conscript kids, his donkeys, to stop.

Major Yashkin straightened to his full height, thrusting his medals' strips into the sentry's face, and accepted the salute. Beyond the grimed glass in the hut he saw that the NCO stood at attention. He did not have to, as a respected officer, but at least he had made the gesture. He went to the far side of the cart and lifted the protective covering, an olive green sheet of oiled plastic, shook the sleet from it and exposed the ends of two metal filing cabinets each laid lengthways. The sentry had little chance to observe that between them a smaller item was swaddled in black rubbish bags and fastened down with rope. The bar was raised. The NCO was now at the guard-post door: did the major need help? He declined the offer.

Two check-points were now behind him, one remained.

It was that sort of afternoon when the pulse of the huge installation had almost died. Physicists, technicians, engineers, chemists, troops of the 12th Directorate, managers, all those who contributed to the beat of the pulse, were gone to their homes if they did not have duties. The buildings on either side of the road were dark.

Twenty minutes later, the major, the three conscripts and the cart were through the outer gate. If the guards at the final barrier had demanded to search the cart, they would have found a canister, close to a metre in length and two-thirds of a metre in height and width, contained in a dull camouflaged protective bag that had stencilled on it 'Batch No. RA-114' in heavier type than the name of the mechanized-infantry unit to which it had been issued. As it was, they had seen only what was visible, the ends of two filing cabinets, and not the weapon, designated RA-114, which had been returned from Magdeburg as a front-line division packed, sent home its arsenal and stripped out its armoury from a base in eastern Germany.

The previous evening Oleg Yashkin had removed or amended the paperwork that existed around RA-114. He believed that unless a thorough search was made, RA-114 no longer existed and, in fact, had never been manufactured.

The afternoon had become evening. The sleet had become snow. The cart creaked through the suburbs of the city beyond the perimeter fence, its wheels gouging tram lines in its wake. They had left the road behind them and were on a track of rocks and stone chippings. Now he was close to his home. The cart was pushed past

clumps of birch and pine trees, past small plots where families would grow vegetables after the thaw, past small houses from which dark smoke bustled out of chimneys to be dispersed in the increasing pitch of the snowstorm . . . If what he had taken out of the bunker in Area 19 had been smaller and more easily handled by a single man of his age, he could have carried it to one of the many holes in the fencing that now existed, where the alarms no longer functioned, and from where the patrols had been withdrawn because of troop shortages.

It was all chaos and confusion at Arzamas-16, the place that had no proper and historic name and went unmarked on any map covering the Nizhny Novgorod *oblast*. He had given his working life, his loyalty, his professionalism to that place. And for what? Major Oleg Yashkin did not see himself as a traitor, nor as a thief, but as a man wronged and betrayed.

His home was single-storey, built up from the foundations with bricks to waist height that gave way to an upper frame of stained wood planking. There was a low picket fence separating a handkerchief-sized front garden from the track. A dull light burned inside, where there was a living room, a bedroom, a bathroom and a kitchen. It had been his home for eighteen years, since he and his wife – Mother, as he called her – had moved out from an apartment in a block inside the wire. For years now she had been 'Mother' to him, though they had not been blessed with children. She was not privy to what he had done that afternoon, with the help of the three young conscripts, but he had asked her specifically to cook apple cakes with the last fruit of the previous autumn's harvest and to leave them in the small porch at the front of the house.

He had the kids unload the cart, take off the filing cabinets and the wrapped shape, then gave them the cakes. The following morning, back at his office inside the Zone, he would write the orders that would transfer each of them – with immediate effect – to duties closer to their homes and many hundreds of kilometres distant from Arzamas-16. Oleg Yashkin had had only four days to make his preparations, but the hours had not been wasted . . . In bed, that night, he would tell his wife – Mother – of the betrayal inflicted on him four days earlier.

He watched them push the cart away up the track and disappear into the whirlwind of the snow.

The filing cabinets were heavy, but he was able to drag them past his parked car, on which smoothed snow had settled, to the porch and to stack them on either side of it. Their usefulness was now over. Sweat trickled on his back, under his uniform clothing, as he heaved the wrapped shape, RA-114, round the side of his home to the plot at the back. In a wooden shed, he took off his greatcoat, tunic and trousers and hung them from nails. The cold clawed at him as he put on two sets of workman's overalls, then lifted tools from more nails and went outside into the dusk. A mound of earth confronted him. The previous night his neighbour, who outranked him and was a *zampolit* in the community inside the fence, had called 'What are you doing? You'll disappear in there, Oleg. Is it your own grave . . . ?' He had been more than a metre down in the pit, and he had yelled back to the political officer a lie about a blocked drain. Then he had heard a gust of laughter, and 'You shit too much, Oleg. Shit less and your drain will flow.' He had heard a door close behind his neighbour. With a spade and a pickaxe he had dug till past midnight by the light of a hurricane lamp. Then he had scrambled out of the hole on his hands and knees, and washed in the kitchen. Mother had not asked why he had dug a pit in the night that was a full two metres deep.

He dragged the canister to the pit's rim, paused, then put his boot against its side. It was a weapon. It would have been built to withstand being bumped and rocked across country in an army truck. He pressured the sole of his boot against it and it toppled into the black hole. He heard the squelch as it fell into the muddy pool from the earlier rain, but he could not see it and did not know how it lay – on its side, askew, on its end.

There was lead sheeting at the back of his home, strips of it, which had been there for weeks. He had planned to use it to repair the flashing around his home's single chimney, but now he took the strips and laid them in the pit across the plastic sheeting that he could feel but not see. Then, laboriously, he began to throw back the earth, and cover what he had brought home.

He wanted to be finished by the time his wife came back, wanted it hidden. Inside the Zone, the name they had for the wrapped

weapon was Zhukov. The fact that the weapon was called after Georgi Konstantinovich Zhukov, victor at Leningrad and Stalingrad, conqueror of Warsaw and Berlin, the most renowned commander of the Great Patriotic War – dead now for nineteen years – was a reflection of its reputation for awesome power. As an officer of the 12th Directorate, he knew that the giveaway radiation signature of a Zhukov would be masked by the lead sheeting.

He had not thought when the grave he now closed would be opened . . . More pressing among his concerns was how he would explain to his wife what the future held for them. It had to be done that night, could be delayed no longer. She did not know yet that at 16.05 on the afternoon of 20 March he had been summoned to attend the office of a brigadier general in the administration complex, or that he had reached the outer door at 16.11. She did not know that the brigadier general had not asked Oleg Yashkin to sit, or offered him coffee, tea, an alcoholic drink, but had kept his eyes on his desk and a typed list in his hands. He was told that, for financial reasons, the size of the 12th Directorate force at the Arzamas-16 site was being reduced by thirty per cent, that officers of long service whose wages were highest would be the first to face dismissal, and be gone by the end of the month. The sheet of paper was flapped in his face long enough for him to read the names. He had pleaded: what was the position with the pensions of retired officers? The brigadier general had shrugged, held out his hands, implied he had no authority to speak on the matter. He was told again that his last day of service would be at the end of the month, and then – as if this was news of high quality – that the house he occupied would be given him in thanks for his devoted service . . . There would not be a party to see him off after thirty-two years with the Directorate, no speeches and no presentations. He would come to work on the last morning, leave on the last afternoon, and there would be no line of hands for him to shake. He had seen the brigadier general take a pen, scratch out the name of Yashkin, Oleg (Major), then look sharply at his wristwatch, as if to say that the list was long and others waited, and would he, please, double quick, fuck off out of the room.

He had blundered out, across an anteroom, and barely seen those now waiting for an audience because humiliation blurred his vision

. . . A man such as Oleg Yashkin believed himself owed the respect of the state and that he was entitled to his dignity. He remembered, of course, all those dismissed the previous year because their wages could not be paid – but such a thing could not happen to a trusted officer charged with the security of warheads. He had been in the room for eight minutes. His lifetime achievement was reduced to an interview with a bureaucrat who had not had the courage to look him in the face.

It wasn't that his job was becoming less important, less busy. Most days, now, weapons came in to be stored haphazardly in the bunker and in wood buildings at the side. There were Zhukovs, and warheads for artillery shells, for torpedoes, for mines. They came to Area 19 to be dismantled – swords to be turned into plough shares – because the state could no longer pay the bills. Receipt of them was scribbled on dockets, abandoned in trays on crowded desks, and they were stacked in readiness for transportation to the workshops used by Decommissioning on the far side of the Area. He had taken one, and it would not be missed.

He had been the servant of a great country, a superpower. But wages could no longer be paid and his reward for loyalty was to be pitched out on the last afternoon of the month. His anger had found purpose, had been channelled. He tossed the last sods on to the slight mound, and in the spring – when the thaw came and the ground loosened – he would plant vegetables around it, would have time to do it. Behind him, a light came on in his home. His wife would have returned from the chapel that was a shrine to St Seraphim where she obsessively cleaned and scrubbed.

He changed back into his uniform. Racked with exhaustion, he went in through the kitchen door. Having washed his hands in tepid water, he poured himself coffee from the pot, laced it with vodka, and wore his best smile to greet her. Later, in bed, when they lay close to pool their body warmth, he would tell her of the betrayal and injustice inflicted on him. And he would tell her – so rare for him to lie to her – that he had repaired the damaged drain in the plot at the back of the house so she could parrot it once more to his neighbour.

He did not know of the grave's future, or when it would be

opened. Anger had made him dig it and fill it, but to what purpose he could not have said.

What Oleg Yashkin did know: he hated them for the humiliation piled on him. For the first time in his adult life, hatred governed him, not loyalty.

Outside, the snow fell and disguised the mound of displaced earth. The whiteness gave it cleanness and purity.

Chapter 1
9 April 2008

He had been embedded in the family since the start of the year. Jonathan Carrick waited at the front door, listened as the children's mother chided them for being late and not hurrying. He heard the scolding and could not help himself. He smiled. Then the clatter of feet on the landing above him, and their mother was leading them down the wide staircase and past two paintings, sixteenth-century Italian, more suitable for hanging in a gallery. She grimaced at him. 'I think, Johnny, that finally we're ready. At last . . .'

'I'm sure we'll make up time, Mrs Goldmann. Won't be a problem.' It was a soft lie, not an important one. The traffic would be building on the streets between the house in Knightsbridge and the school in Kensington that specialized in providing an education to 'international' children from families of great wealth. For Jonathan Carrick, every waking moment of his life was governed by deceit, and each time he spoke, he had to consider whether he risked exposing it. He grinned. 'No, they'll be there for Assembly – I promise, Mrs Goldmann.'

The housekeeper emerged from the door at the back of the hall, the route to the kitchen, holding two plastic lunchboxes containing fruit

and sandwiches. It was more of the ritual of the morning departure. The children would take the boxes with them to school, would eat the lunch the school provided, and the boxes would come back in the afternoon, unopened. The sandwiches and fruit would be eaten in the kitchen by Carrick, or Rawlings, who had been his entry point to the family, by Grigori or Viktor.

She called again. 'Please, loved ones, hurry.'

Selma and Peter cascaded down the stairs. The girl was nine and the boy was six. Cheerful and happy, noisy and loved. The children greeted him: 'Good morning, Mr Carrick . . . Hi, Johnny . . .' It was not right that he should show familiarity in front of their mother, so he assumed a frown of mock-severity, muttered about the time and gazed at his watch. His reaction won shrieks of laughter from the girl and giggles from the boy.

He had the car keys in his hand and stood by the heavy door. Now Grigori had slouched out of the kitchen area, skirted the children, their mother and the housekeeper and come to stand beside Carrick. Their eyes met, a formality of communication. He had little time for the Russian bodyguard, and the bodyguard scarcely hid his dislike for this intruder into the household. Grigori nodded sharply to him. They did not have to discuss the procedures. After three months they were well rehearsed. Carrick's fingertips hit the keypad, unlocked the door, closing down the alarm, then opened it. It was well oiled but heavy, having a steel plate covering its back.

Grigori clattered down the steps, his eyes raking the street, each car and van. Then he waved, a small, economical gesture. Carrick came next, going awkwardly on the steps. The limp was accentuated. The big Mercedes was parked across the pavement. Carrick went to it, flashed the key, slid into the driver's seat, gunned the engine, then leaned back and opened the rear near-side door. Now the children spilled after him and dived in. As their belts clicked, as the door was slammed shut, he pulled away from the kerb.

He looked back a last time. Mrs Goldmann, Esther, was at the top of the steps and waving, then blowing kisses. If it had interested Carrick, he would have said that she was a good-looking woman, with something slightly feral about her thinness. The way her collarbones and cheekbones protruded from the skin was attractive, as was

the blonde hair that the morning sunlight caught. She was dressed quietly, blouse, skirt, a knotted scarf at her throat . . . He thought her as dangerous to his safety as any other adult in the household.

Each morning he drove the children of Josef and Esther Goldmann to the international school. And each afternoon he brought them home. Between the trips to and from the school, he sometimes escorted Mrs Goldmann to an exhibition of furniture or art, to a reception for a charity she supported, to a lunch appointment. After school, sometimes, he took her to a cocktail party, to the theatre or a concert. He would have described her as discreetly prominent in the community of newly rich Russian citizens making their home in the British capital, would also have said she was intelligent and sharp-witted, much more to her husband than a social decoration. He could not have said how much longer he would continue working for the family, maybe weeks but not months. He drove carefully, not fast.

The truth was that high expectations had not been fulfilled; he was inside the family's home, but outside the kernel of the family's existence. He did not know where Josef Goldmann, or Viktor, or indeed Simon Rawlings were that morning. Behind him, the kids were quiet, stamping their small, pudgy fingers on the controls of their GameBoys. Josef Goldmann, Viktor and Simon Rawlings had left the house before Carrick had arrived for the start of his day. It was not that he could be criticized for not knowing where they had gone, but there would be disappointment that an operation involving resources and expenditure was proving much less than fruitful.

Often he looked in the rear-view mirror. He did not know whether a tail was on him, if back-up was close. His employment was to prevent the kidnapping of the kids – they were a worthwhile target, had to be, with a father worth more than a hundred million in sterling. The Mercedes sat low on its tyres because of the armour plating on the doors and the reinforced glass, and he carried an extendable baton with an aerosol can of pepper spray in his suit jacket . . . He was so damned alone, but that was the nature of his work.

Near to the school, he joined a queue of top-of-the-range people-carriers, sports utilities and saloons with privacy windows. He did not let the kids out and on to the pavement short of the school gate,

but edged forward till he was level with it and within sight of the school's own security staff. He was not a child-minder, a chauffeur or a door-opener. Jonathan Carrick, Johnny to all who knew him half well, was a serving police officer, Level One Undercover, a bright star in the firmament of a small and secretive corner of the Metropolitan Police Service that carried the title of Serious Crime Directorate 10. And the high-value target that was Josef Goldmann still eluded him.

He braked and loosed the lock on the rear door, near side. 'OK, guys. Have a good day.'

'And you, Johnny . . . You have a good day, too, Johnny.'

He grimaced. 'And do your work. You work hard.'

One droll answer. 'Of course, Johnny, what else?' And one query: 'Will you be picking us up, Johnny?'

'Yes, lucky me.' He gave an exaggerated wink, and they were gone. As ever, the little beggars didn't bother to close the door behind them, so he had to lean back and do it himself. It would be him who picked them up because he wasn't yet deep enough into the family. To have been deep, to have made the operation worthwhile, he would have been driving Josef Goldmann and Viktor to whatever destination was given him, as Simon Rawlings had that morning.

It was regular, not sophisticated but simple.

It was a procedure that was used twice a month during the spring, summer and autumn.

Sitting in the back, on the leather seat of his 8-series Audi, Josef Goldmann waited for Viktor's return. In front of him, head back and eyes closed, was his driver, Simon Rawlings. He liked the man. Rawlings drove well, never initiated conversation, and seemed to see little. There was a litheness to his movement that came from his pedigree history: Rawlings – why Goldmann had chosen him – was a one-time sergeant in the British Parachute Regiment. It had been Goldmann's opinion, when he emigrated from Moscow to London, that he must have his own men for close protection but British men for the driving. His mind that morning was clouded. Other matters dominated his mind and had for the last two months – since Viktor's

return from Sarov in the Nizhny Novgorod *oblast*. He could have refused what had been offered to him, perhaps should have, but had not. Every day of the last week he had checked the Internet for a weather forecast in the region of that *oblast*, with particular reference to the air temperature. What he had learned yesterday and the previous day had warned him to expect the call, and a mobile phone in Viktor's pocket was dedicated solely to receiving it. It was beyond anything that Josef Goldmann had attempted before, and there had been many nights in those two months that he had lain awake on his back, beside Esther while she slept, and his mind had churned with the enormity of it. The business that brought him regularly to the port of Harwich was predictable enough to allow him to be distracted.

Gulls wheeled over the car park, shrieked and yelled. Away to his right were the sheds for arrivals and departures, and above their roofs were the angles of the cranes and the white-painted superstructure of the cruise ship. The *Sea Star* was the first of the season, 950 passengers on board, to have returned from a Baltic sea voyage to St Petersburg. A pair of pensioners, probably using an inside cabin, would be bringing with them two large suitcases, and would have told Security on the quayside near the Hermitage that they had been so cheap in a street market they could not pass over the opportunity to purchase them . . . Not sophisticated but simple. It was the waiting for the mobile call that chewed in him. A gull, flying a few feet above the car, defecated and the windscreen was spattered. Rawlings jolted into action, swearing softly. He leaped out to clean the glass, wiping it furiously.

Through the windscreen, beyond the smears, Josef saw Viktor pushing in front of him a trolley with two suitcases . . . and then he stopped. He had a mobile phone in his hands, lifted it, had it against his ear – possibly for ten seconds, no more – and then it was back in his pocket, and the trolley was wheeled past the Audi. Goldmann snapped open his door, was out of it and by the boot. If any had watched the parking area, they would have seen a host of cars, large and small, expensive and cheap, into which such suitcases were loaded. At the front of the car Rawlings had finished cleaning the windscreen and was now back in the driver's seat. The man was

suitable because he heard nothing and saw nothing, and could drive at speed with a soft touch. And now Rawlings had introduced his friend, brought him to share the workload, to drive the children and Goldmann's wife . . . Waiting to be told of the call's message, he found that his breath came faster.

He stammered his question: 'What-what information?'

Viktor said, calm, 'They have replied to what we sent them. Just one word, difficult to hear, not a good connection, and the one word repeated three times. "Yes . . . *da* . . . *da*." I think I heard their car engine.'

'Just that, nothing more?'

'Just that.'

'So, it has begun.'

'They are on the road,' Viktor said, 'and the schedule is one week.'

As if the enormity of it had struck him a powerful hammer blow, Josef Goldmann gasped. It was a moment before he had collected himself. 'Viktor, tell me, should we have followed this path?'

Viktor said, 'Too late to forget it. The offer was made, the price indicated, they accepted. Arrangements are in place, people are alerted, and they're coming. It has begun and can't be stopped.'

Goldmann winced, then snapped his fingers. He was given the keys to two suitcases. He unlocked two sets of padlocks, unbuckled reinforcing straps, dragged back zips. He rummaged through two thin layers of unwashed clothing, then felt for the catches that released the false bottom of each case. Exposed were hundred-dollar bills. Packages, each bound with elastic bands, of a hundred notes, each package with the value of ten thousand dollars. Fifty packages in the base of each bag. A tidy one million dollars, to be repeated twice a month through April and May, June and July, August and September. He replaced the lids, then the pensioners' clothing, drew the zips tight, fastened the padlocks and slammed down the boot lid. He sighed.

'Maybe twelve million comes out of St Petersburg, maybe seven million out of Tallinn, nine million out of Riga on the boats, and twenty on the roads across the frontiers. I take my cut for washing it, and I have four million, and that's the top of what the market can sustain. Two men are on the road, send a message of one word,

repeated three times, and we have negotiated a fee of eleven million.'

'Your share is five point five – which means that everything coming from the boats, with expenses, is chicken shit.'

'But what is the danger when you play with chicken shit?'

Viktor had minded Josef Goldmann since 1990. He had been put alongside Josef Goldmann in the city of Perm by Reuven Weissberg. He protected Goldmann on Weissberg's orders. He heard a grim little cackle of laughter. 'Where is the excitement in living when there is no danger, where there is only a carpet of chicken shit?'

'You'll tell him now?'

'I'll call him.'

A call was made. Three or four words. A connection of three or four seconds, and no response gained.

They were driven away at speed, but within the legal limits, to a warehouse in an industrial estate outside the Essex town of Colchester. From habit Simon Rawlings twice employed basic anti-surveillance techniques: circled a roundabout four times on the A12 at Horsley Cross, and slowed on the fast dual carriageway to twenty-five miles per hour. No car had followed them on the roundabout, or slowed to keep pace with them. And the car was clean of tags – it was swept each morning. All routine. Another safe run. Risk minimal. At the warehouse on the industrial estate, the two suitcases containing a million American dollars were to be loaded into a container that would hold, when filled, a cargo of best Staffordshire bone china to be exported to the Greek zone of the island of Cyprus. Reuven Weissberg touted for the business, Josef Goldmann washed the money, and the new millionaires and asset-strippers of the Russian Federation could rest assured that their nest eggs were safe and well protected.

Josef Goldmann laundered cash and made it clean for legitimate investment, was regarded in the Serious Crime Directorate as a major Organized Crime target, and thought himself safe . . . and wished that time could be turned back, that two old men had not started out on a drive of sixteen hundred kilometres, had stayed in their goddam hovels in the arse-end of Russia. But, and Viktor could have told him this, time was seldom turned back. On the return journey to London, he wondered what progress they had made – two old men and a carload

that was worth, to him, a half-share in eleven million dollars – and he knew the clock was ticking.

The departure had been planned with the care and precision expected of former officers. The details of the journey, the route and the distance to be driven each day of that week, had been pored over, analysed, queried, debated and agreed.

But they had left late. Should have been gone as the dawn broke under the low cloud on a spring morning. In two weeks they would be home, his neighbour had said to his wife, with attempts at reassurance: there was enough cut wood for two weeks, they had no need of soup, bread and cheese, bills could wait for two weeks, in the car he would be warm, and what did it matter if he stank in soiled underclothes? It wasn't a posting to Afghanistan, the Chinese border or the Baltic fog fields . . . It was two weeks' journey, there and back.

Then it had struck Igor Molenkov, co-conspirator and neighbour of Oleg Yashkin, that Mother's prolonged goodbye intimated that she had sensed danger he had not considered, or Yashkin spoken of. Pride, self-esteem, had rejected any acknowledgement of danger – as had anger. They were now on the road, and the car rolled along through the sodden forest of the state park, then past great stagnant lakes.

The anger remained as sharp today as when it had been bred, sharp as the talons of a fish-eating eagle circling over the park, sharp as the claws of the bears in its remotest parts. There had been so many days of anger over the betrayal he had endured, and their accumulation had put him in the Polonez car with the road map on his lap, his neighbour beside him, and a destination almost sixteen hundred kilometres to the west.

They had chosen to drive on side roads, and the potholes shook him. Because of the weight at the back of the Polonez, the car jerked with each pitch of the wheels.

But his anger had found a valve through which to escape. It had put him where he now sat, in a weighted-down Polonez whose engine and bodywork were a virtual wreck. His wife was now twenty-four years in her grave. Their son, Sasha, had burned to death in an ambushed tank a few kilometres short of the Salang Pass,

one of the countless casualties of the failed Afghanistan campaign . . . His son had been the idol of his brother's boy, Viktor. He, Colonel Igor Molenkov, had fast-tracked his nephew's application to enter the ranks of the Committee of State Security. Viktor had left the KGB after only two years' service, and gone to work in the flourishing new industry of 'security', had worked with a criminal gang in the city of Perm, gone abroad, then come back in the last days of that year's February to visit him; decent of him to do that. That visit had begun it all. Dinner cooked in his neighbour's house by his neighbour's wife, 'Mother': grilled chicken, potatoes grown the previous summer, cabbage stored for six months, and a bottle of vinegar-like wine from Sochi. Hints dropped of the rewards of protection, of the 'roof' for which businessmen paid willingly and heavily or saw their trading opportunities collapse in bankruptcy. A small envelope left on the table when his nephew had driven away in his silver BMW, as if they needed and were deserving not only of thanks but of charity.

And then they had talked. 'Mother' away to her bed. The dregs of the bottle were there to be drunk. His neighbour's confession. Knowing he was the first to be told of a grave dug in the vegetable patch. Looking, as if he needed confirmation, out of the kitchen window and seeing the snow lying smooth on the shaped mound. Shrugging into their coats and stumbling away down icy roads to the hotel where Viktor had stayed the night. Waking him, watching the dismissal of the girl, and waiting for her to dress and leave. Telling him what was buried and offering it for sale, and seeing the wariness on his neighbour's face give way to growing excitement. Telling him their price. Past four in the morning, they had emerged from the room with a new mobile phone each, instructions on what message would reach them, and what message they should send back. The girl had been waiting downstairs in the lobby. As soon as they had passed her she had run to the stairs, her short skirt bouncing on her arse as she had gone back up.

In time, a message had come.

Together, in the dark before the dawn, they had dug rain-saturated earth from the mound, then pushed aside strips of soil-coated lead, then lifted up – struggling, cursing – the drum still wrapped in

rubbish bags. The plastic torn away, they had gazed at the warhead, so clean when exposed to the torchlight that he had been able to read the batch number stencilled on it. He had felt fear at handling it, but not his neighbour. Clean plastic had been put over it and tied with string. They had carried it – a desperate weight – round the side of the house and dumped it in the boot of the Polonez, which had sagged on its rear wheels. They had laid a tarpaulin over it. They had stowed inside their own bags and – a small gesture, but demanded by Molenkov – hung their old dress uniforms across the back doors.

Before they had left, Colonel (Ret'd) Igor Molenkov had walked down the track in front of their homes, found the best place for a mobile transmission and used the phone Viktor had given him to call a pre-programmed number and say the word three times: '*Da . . .da . . . da*.'

The car drove along the side road towards the city of Murom.

Molenkov reflected: what had the old fool hunched over the wheel beside him led him into? Wrong, sadly wrong. There were *two* old fools in the Polonez. Two men of equal guilt, two men who had stepped across a threshold and now travelled in the world of extreme criminality, two men who . . . He was thrown forward and his hands went up to protect his head before it hit the windscreen.

They had stopped. He saw Yashkin's yellow teeth bite at a bloodless lower lip. 'Why have we stopped?'

'A puncture.'

'I don't believe it.'

'Rear left. Didn't you feel the bumping as it went down?'

'Have we a spare?'

'Bald, old, yes. I can't afford new tyres.'

'And if the spare is holed?'

He saw Yashkin shrug. They were beside a wide lake. From the map left on his seat, Colonel (Ret'd) Igor Molenkov estimated they had covered no more than forty-eight kilometres , and now they had a holed tyre to be replaced with a bald one, and a further 1552 kilometres before they reached their destination. He could have sworn, cursed or stamped.

They hung on each other's necks, and their laughter pealed out.

*

There are great white spheres on a Yorkshire moor. There are antennae on the summits of a mountain range running across Cyprus. There are huge tilted dishes on the roofs of the buildings on the edge of the town of Cheltenham. Spread across the United Kingdom, and behind the perimeter fences of a sovereign military base on a Mediterranean island, there are vast computers, some manned by British technicians and some by American personnel from the National Security Agency.

Each day they suck down many millions of phone, fax and email messages from around the northern hemisphere. The majority, of course, are discarded – regarded as of no importance. A tiny minority are stored and transmitted to the desks of analysts at GCHQ, who work below the dishes, in that Gloucestershire town. Triggers determine what reaches the eyes of the analysts. Programmed words, phrases, spoken in a mêlée of languages, will activate a trigger. Specific numbers will attract a trigger if those numbers have been gobbled into the computers' memories. And locations . . . Nominated locations are monitored. If a location registers in the computers, the memory will search back for matches and a trail is established. The men and women who sit in darkened rooms and stare at screens are unlikely to understand the significance of what the triggers throw up. They are a filter, unsung and anonymous.

The city of Sarov, in the Nizhny Novgorod *oblast* of the Russian Federation, trips a trigger. Calls into and out of the city that cross international frontiers are noted, and the location of the receiver or transmitter can be narrowed to a square with a precision of less than a hundred metres.

The calls in question came to the screen of a young woman, a graduate of Russian studies, working on the third floor of the central building at GCHQ in D Wing. Four days before there had been a mobile-telephone connection to another mobile telephone in Sarov, duration eight seconds, from a residential street in the London district of Knightsbridge. That morning, a call was placed from Sarov and answered at the dockside in the East Anglian port town of Harwich, duration four seconds. The same mobile phone from Harwich had then called from the Essex town of

Colchester to a location adjacent to the Polish-Belarussian border.

The young woman could not have been aware of the significance of what she learned – priorities were beyond her remit. But she typed in a code on her keyboard, opened a secure electronic link, transmitted the details of the calls and included as an attachment satellite pictures. They showed an unmade road or track in Sarov, running east to west, that was flanked to the north by trees and to the south by small detached single-storey homes. Another showed the car park at Harwich, another identified an industrial park on the outskirts of Colchester, and another a Knightsbridge street. There was a final image of a forest of pines and birches where a wide circle filled the only cleared space, to the right side of the picture, and a railway track ran close to it . . . It was all so easy.

She left her desk and went to the coffee machine.

A spider's web of trails had been made.

If, *if*, the call to Sarov had been answered as few as twenty-five kilometres from the city, the triggers would not have reacted . . . Mistakes had been made. The young woman's messages and attachments were now inside a building in London of monstrous ugliness on the south side of the river Thames, VBX to all who worked there.

The trees moved with the wind. The pines had been planted in regimented lines and filled rectangular shapes, apparently the work of a woodsman with a character of parade-ground orderliness, and they grew ram-rod straight. Among them, making a defiant chaos, were wild birches that lacked the strength of the pines, and were forced to grow tall and too fast if they were to find natural light. They were spindly and many had been bent almost double by the winter snow. The canopies of the pines wavered, moved with that wind, but they were planted sufficiently close to diminish the daylight on the floor of needles. Reuven Weissberg sat quietly among the trees, awaiting the call.

A light rain fell, but the wind was from the east, from across the river, and the tight canopies deflected the dribbling water. Little cascades came down among the birches, but where he sat his head and the shoulders of his jacket stayed dry. It was a small matter to him whether he was soaked, merely damp or dry, and his mind was

far from considerations of his personal comfort. His thoughts were of what had happened here more than six decades ago, and the stories he had been told, which he knew by heart. He heard the bright songs of small birds, and the cry of an owl . . . That was no surprise to him because the place had long been known – before the events that had made the stories he could recite – as the Forest of the Owls. The surprise was only that the owl had called, perhaps to its mate, during the day, in the morning. That small birds sang was a surprise too. It was said, he had been told, that birds did not come, refused to nest and breed in a place with a history such as this. They flew between the lower branches of the birches, perched precariously and called for company, then flew again; he watched them. It was strange to him that they should show such joy here, as if they had no sense of where they were, did not understand that the misery of mass death haunted this place.

Behind him, a mobile phone had rung, had been answered. Then the silence had cloaked him and the trees again.

In that quiet, he could imagine. Not imagine Mikhail, who was fifty metres clear of him and would be standing against the trunk of the broadest pine he could find, a pile of littered cigarette stubs at his feet. Or imagine the screams and struggles of the Albanian Mikhail would bring to the warehouse the next afternoon. Or imagine the consequences of the call that Mikhail had taken.

He seemed to see them, figments of his thoughts that came to life. They were in flight. The heroism of some and the panic of many had shaped his existence. He was their creature. Figures drifted, either fast or painfully slowly, between the steady trunks of the pines and the wavering stems of the birches. They were clear in his eyes. He thought he could have reached out, touched them. The sight of them was agony to him. In the peace around him, he could hear also the guns, the dogs and the sirens.

This was Reuven Weissberg's heritage, here, in the Forest of the Owls. He did not know that a satellite photograph of this mess of farmed and wild trees had been sent as part of an attachment to a building known as VBX, and that the photograph had picked out a grey-white shallow mound. Such a mound was in front of him, perhaps eighty metres across, but near-hidden from his view by the

pines and birches. To him, a story that has a beginning is only of value if it has an end. He knew that story from its start to its finish.

He had been told it so many times. It was the blood that ran in his veins. He was the child of that story, knew each word, each line and each episode. As a small boy he had wept on his grandmother's shoulder as she had told it to him.

Now he told it to himself, as she would have done, from the beginning. The trees rustled above him, the rain fell and the birds sang. It was Anna's story, and in his lifetime he would never be free of it, or want to be.

It was early in the morning of a summer day in 1942 that we were ordered to be ready to move from Wlodawa. Most of our people had already been taken in the previous four months, but we did not know where they had gone. We no longer had access to our homes, but had been made to live inside and around the synagogue. That area was fenced off and we were separated from the Polish people – already I had learned that we were Jews, were different, were subhuman.

I did not know where we were going . . . If there were any among us who did, they did not share it. I believed everything I was told. We were told that we could bring one bag with us, and in the last hour before our departure each of us – young and old, man and woman – filled a bag or a case, and some of the older men sewed gold coins into the linings of their overcoats and some of the older women stiched diamonds or other jewels from bracelets, necklaces and brooches into slits they had made in their clothing.

Always there was little food at the synagogue, and that morning I do not remember whether we ate. I think we started off hungry. Yes, hungry and already tired.

When we were formed up and counted, about a hundred of us, the officer said that we were going to walk to a transit camp. There, selections would be made, and then we would move to new homes in the east – in the Ukraine part of Russia. We walked, and left behind our synagogue. As we went through the town we passed the houses where some of our people had lived. Washed sheets hung from windows and the doors on to the street were open, and we realized that our homes had been occupied by Polish people while we had been kept at the synagogue.

I walked near the back of our group. I was with my father and mother, my

two younger brothers and my elder sister, with my father's parents, my mother's father, three uncles and two aunts. We wore the best clothes we still had. At the front of us was an officer on a horse. I remember it – a white horse. Alongside us were Ukrainian soldiers who walked, but there were Germans at the back on horses. We crossed the bridge over the Wlodawka, near to where it flows into the Bug river, and then we came to the village of Orchowek. The reaction of the villagers, as we passed them, was a great shock to me . . . but for many months we had been confined inside the wood fences around the synagogue, and it was nearly two years since I had seen Polish people.

People were lined on either side of the road, as if they had been warned that we were coming. They abused us, threw mud and rocks at us, spat on us. When I was a child, before the war had started, before we were sent to the synagogue, I had worked often when there was no school in my father's shop where he repaired clocks and watches. Among those on the side of the road, I recognized some who had come to my father's shop. They had thanked him for the work he had done, or had begged him to accept late payment. I did not understand why now they hated us. A bucket of waste and urine was hurled at my father. Some of it splashed the silk scarf I had been given for my eighteenth birthday, two weeks before. I looked at the Germans on their horses, hoping they would give us protection, but they were laughing.

Beyond Orchowek, where the road goes east and towards Sobibor village, the officer on the white horse led us on to a forest track close to the railway line, the one that goes south to Chelm. I remember also that in the late summer of 1942 it had rained heavily. The track we were now on was a river of mud. I was one of many women and girls who had worn their best shoes and one of many who lost a shoe and had to walk barefoot through big puddles.

There were older people who could not keep up with the pace of the white horse, so those who were younger and stronger carried them or supported them, but the bags of the infirm and weak were left beside the track. I helped my father's parents, and my younger brothers helped my mother's father, while my elder sister – it was hard for her because she had had polio and walked with difficulty herself – helped my two aunts. If the speed of our march dropped, we were shouted at by the Germans, and a few of our men were hit with whips.

A train came past, and our guards waved to the crew. The engine pulled

many closed cars. I thought they were for animals and had not been cleaned because the smell was disgusting, like a place for pigs. It stayed in the forest after the train had gone on towards Wlodawa. I said to my father that I hoped we would have a different train when we went to the east: it was intended to be funny, but my father did not laugh. Usually it was easy to make him laugh, even when we were kept in the synagogue.

And we were there.

I think we had been walking for two hours on the forest track when we came to the place. The officer on the white horse was shouting orders, the Ukrainians were pushing us together, close, using their rifles. I thought we had arrived at the transit camp. It was huge, but so quiet. As far as I could see there was fencing, but it was strange because the branches of fir trees had been woven into the wire strands, and I couldn't see what was on the far side, except the roofs of some buildings and a great high watchtower. At the corners of the fencing and by a gate there were more towers on stilts with guards in them and machine-guns, and I saw that the barrel of one of those guns followed us. What threat were we – old men and old women, girls and children? How could we hurt soldiers?

I was so innocent. Perhaps I should thank God for my innocence.

We were lined up outside a gate. We were in twenty ranks, five in each rank. Women to the front, with the children, men at the back. I saw my mother leave my father's side and she tried to kiss his cheek, but a Ukrainian put his rifle between them and forced her back. I saw my father shrug, and his lips moved as if to mouth a word, but I did not hear it . . . and it happened very suddenly.

The officer on the white horse surveyed us, as if he was a kaiser *or an emperor, and he pointed to me with his whip. A guard moved forward, grabbed my shoulder and dragged me out. Why? Why me? I was eighteen and my elder sister had said enviously that I was beautiful, that my hair had the sheen of a raven's feathers. I had heard men in the synagogue speak of me and praise the shape of my body – but my mother had not spoken to me of such things. I, I alone, was taken out of the group.*

I was led to another gate. I thought then it was a more important gate, the main gate, and I stopped, twisted and tried to look back, tried to see my parents, my younger brothers, my elder sister, my father's parents, my mother's father, my aunts and uncles. But I was kicked hard in the back of my legs, a boot against the skin. I never saw them.

I was brought through a maze of paths and on either side of them were the fences with the fir branches slotted on them. Then I became aware of sounds – the shuffling movement of men at the end of their strength, low, muttering voices, hacking coughs and sharply issued orders. More gates opened ahead of me, and I was escorted through. Then they closed behind me. There was the smell, and the men who shuffled, the women who coughed, the Germans who strutted with whips or guns did not seem to notice the overwhelming stench around them, of decay and burning . . . did not seem aware of it.

Inside a compound, I was met by a Jewess. She led me towards a long, low, wooden hut. She told me she was a capo, that I should obey her at all times. I heard then a new sound. Shots were fired, individual shots and many together. I asked the capo who was shooting and why, but she did not answer.

Later, at the end of the afternoon, I learned that I was in Camp 1, that in the morning I would be given work. The sinking sunlight was then obscured and the compound darkened by a black cloud of smoke that was carried from beyond the woven fences. The pall hung over me, and fine ash coated my hair and face.

I did not understand and was blessed briefly with ignorance The innocent do not know evil. But innocence cannot last, cannot continue to protect against evil.

'You going to be all right tonight, Corp?'

'Not a problem, Sarge.'

'Don't want me to hold your hand?'

'Can manage without.'

It was their banter, to use the old ranks of their army service. Simon Rawlings had been a Parachute Regiment sergeant when he had come out to try his hand in the civilian workplace, with a Military Medal on his record, and Carrick had been a corporal. Each would have said that any man, at his peril, ignored the value of an old, proven friendship. Their friendship had been combat-tested on the streets of Iraq: when the bomb had detonated, catapulting the Land Rover off the banked-up roadway, when Corporal Carrick had been wounded, bad, in the leg and bleeding, close to unconscious, Sergeant Rawlings had been two vehicles behind in the patrol. He

had taken the decisive actions, had staunched the casualty's injuries and organized the defence of the ambush site, had sanitized a perimeter big enough to accept an evacuation helicopter, had seen his corporal lifted off to the trauma theatre of the hospital at the base out in the desert from Basra. Sergeant Rawlings had come to visit him while he had waited for shipment out and treatment back in UK. 'I tell you what, Corp, I don't think you'll be doing too many more jumps, or wearing that pretty beret much longer . . . Nor me. I'm thinking it's time to ease into the slow lane. Had an offer last leave of bodyguard work – plenty of holes to be filled by Special Forces, marines and Paras, and you don't get your butt shot off or your leg mashed. Keep in touch, and I hope it mends.' He'd been given a scrap of paper with Rawlings's number on it, and he'd been flown home. The leg had looked worse in the devastated Land Rover than after it had been cleaned. Skill from surgeons and physios had put him back on his feet, crutches and shaky at first, but then he'd walked, the torn muscles had knitted and the bones had fused, leaving him with only a slight limp.

Paratroopers weren't permitted to limp, but policemen were. He'd come out of the army four years back, and within three months a West of England force had accepted him. Then he had been thirty-two, and had a leg that was a mass of blotched, grafted skin but serviceable. Time had moved on. Change of workplace and change of specialization, a target in his new unit that was being evaluated for a crack or weakness in its defences. A surveillance photograph showed Josef Goldmann, Russian national and launderer of dirty money, on the steps of his London home, two Russian hoods escorting him, and a springy, slightly built guy holding open the door of an armour-plated, 8-series Audi saloon. 'I know him – God, saved my life in Iraq. That's Rawlings, my sergeant in recce platoon, Zulu Company, of 2 Para . . .' An engineered meeting had led to an interview with Josef Goldmann. Rawlings must have spoken up for him, and the Bossman must have felt the threat level around him and his family rising – could be rivals after his cake slices or could be government agents from back home. Anyway, Carrick had been offered employment. His controller had said that after three months 'on the plot', the operation would be reassessed. His cover officer

had said that three months would give them an idea whether the investment was good, indifferent, or cash down the drain.

It wasn't going well. Carrick drove the children to school, drove Esther Goldmann to shops and parties, watched the security of the house, and spent most days in a basement ready room, watching security screens and waiting to be called upstairs. Most hours of most days he sat with Grigori and most hours of most days the heavier honcho, Viktor, was closer to the family and up close to the Bossman – and Simon Rawlings had the Bossman's trust, drove him, and never talked about him. Simon Rawlings was a model of a limpet shell: closed down and gave nothing, didn't even do small-talk about his employer.

'Haven't had a night off in a fortnight, about damn time.'

'Not going down the pub to get bladdered, Sarge?' Carrick grinned because he knew the response.

'Cheeky sod. When did I last have a drink? Eh, tell me.'

'Have to say it, not while I've been here – haven't seen you.'

'Not since I walked in the door here, not one. That's three years, five months and two weeks. Go down my pub, but no alcohol. Get pissed up, chuck this lot away, you've got to be joking.'

'You have a good evening. You going to call by, late?'

'Maybe, depends whether I've a promise . . . That's a joke, Johnny. Most likely I'll call by.'

Carrick understood the pecking order and, also, that nothing could be done to alter precedence. The family, the Bossman in particular, depended on Simon Rawlings because of the man's bloody dedication and reliability. He was always there for them, their doormat. And he doubted that Simon Rawlings knew, or cared to know, the first basics of cleaning, washing and rinsing money. 'Have a good evening, then . . .'

He watched Rawlings take his coat and go out through the ready-room door. Grigori looked up from the TV home-improvements show and waved a languid hand. Carrick checked his watch. He went to the hooks, took down the Mercedes' keys. Time to get the kids from school.

He was the most disliked man in the building. With the exception of two people – his director general and his personal assistant – he had

no friends, no soul-mates, no confidants inside the massive edifice beside the river. Every weekday morning upwards of two thousand people streamed through the main gates and out again every evening, and more came for night shifts and more for weekend work. Other than Francis Pettigrew and Lucy, none of them knew him well or even had a slightly complimentary word for him. The dislike ran like a virus through all floors of VBX, from heads of department and heads of section, via heads of desks, and down to chauffeurs and analysts, typists and human-resources clerks, archivists, security guards and canteen staff. The dislike was based on his keen rudeness, his refusal to gild lilies when most would have applied a brush of sensitivity, his short-fuse impatience, and a boorish refusal to accept diminished standards. Those who knew his domestic situation best gossiped that his wife treated him as an unwelcome stranger in the marital home and that the only child of the union now lived on the other side of the world. They also said that he cared not a ha'penny damn for their feelings.

Christopher Lawson was sixty-one, had been an officer of the Secret Intelligence Service for thirty-eight years – never had and never would answer to 'Chris', would ignore any man or woman who addressed him with a comrade's familiarity. But somehow, aloof, awkward and prickly, he survived. His most recent ultimatum had been accepted; his seniors had caved in the face of his demand. His most frequent heresy was ignored. Other men and women of similar decades of experience had issued ultimatums on where in the building they would work and where not, in what fields they were prepared to operate and what they would refuse: they had been politely given their premature pensions and had their swipe cards summarily removed. Other men and women who had voiced the ultimate heresy – that the 'war against terror' was being lost, was unwinnable, that the tectonic plates of global power had shifted irreversibly – had been labelled defeatist and had gone by the end of the next Friday.

His survival was based on his success as an intelligence-gatherer. Without it, Christopher Lawson would have been put out to grass years ago, like the rest of them. The director general had told him, 'The vultures may hover above but I'm not letting them get to your

bones, Christopher. I'm not losing you. About as far from Arab matters as I can shunt you is Non-Proliferation. You'll do the Russian section there. I remind you, but I'm not hopeful you'll remember it, that blood on the carpet leaves a permanent stain. I value you, and by doing so I expose myself – I urge you not to abuse my support.' And his personal assistant, Lucy, had said: 'I don't care what people say about you, Mr Lawson. I'm staying put and not asking for a transfer. I'm running your office, at your desk, and the legs of my chair are set in concrete.' And he hadn't even thought to thank either of them.

He was, to be sure, a much disliked man. He was also a man who had respect, however grudging. Respect came from success. Success came from his ability to isolate and identify seemingly trivial items of information, then ruthlessly focus upon them. It was not a talent that could be taught by the Service's instructors and was in rare supply. Christopher Lawson was blessed with it, knew it, and was arrogantly dismissive of colleagues lacking his nose. It was on his screen that the detail of calls from and to the Russian town of Sarov arrived.

It had been a quiet week. He had gutted a couple of papers on arms reduction, and Lucy had worked on the improvement of his computer files . . . Then he had read the word 'Sarov'. He knew where the town was, what work was done there, what name the town had had in Soviet times . . . Papers were flung aside, the filing abandoned. The scent of a trail was established, and his eyes gleamed.