

PROLOGUE

It had been a big week for Dr Desmond Kelly.

On the positive side, he had succeeded in his mission to pioneer the creation of a new generation of heavy-duty high-performance diamond batteries from nuclear waste, encased in recyclable plastic, that was destined to revolutionise the global manufacturing industry and clean up the environment.

On the negative, he had been diagnosed with cancer which, although not entirely unexpected given the tests he had undergone, came as a shock, nonetheless.

He was not naturally the collegiate type and these two significant outcomes had been realised without the active support of his peers and family. Both created a new dynamic in his life, or what was left of it.

The success of his experimentation with the catchily titled *Hyper Condensed Chemical Vapour Deposition* or ‘HCCVD’ had taken research into the crystallisation of radioactive waste graphite to a new level. By, in effect, locking a Carbon-14 radioactive isotope into a manufactured diamond and linking it to energy-harvesting sensors, he had developed an energy source that would not need renewing for at least 5,000 years. Although the basic science was known, its application had been strictly limited to low-level energy devices such as hearing aids and heart pacemakers. His innovation was to introduce a step change in performance – a unit that could create significant multiple and sustainable heavy duty power generation – everything from heating homes to mobilizing vehicles, ships and planes. Its basic raw material, derived from depleted uranium rods, was stored in potentially hazardous subterranean silos and with some 95,000 tonnes collected from its own power stations and those of its allies around the world, the UK was well placed to turn this innovation into a unique global industry.

While retaining its traditional brick-like look, this new battery was a complex piece of kit. Its precise make-up and manufacturing process was a trade secret, but he was confident companies around the world would bid for the production rights. The safety issues were significant. The core material would have to be encased on-site, prior to being transported for consolidation. But he was still some way off from that ambition. Tests had established the raw power of the product, but integrating it into vehicles and trucks in particular, was at an early stage. His real ambition for its application related to shipping – itself responsible for over 2% of global carbon emissions – but now he could not be confident about being able to develop the marine application.

As anyone involved in nuclear research was aware, the power for good or otherwise with the technology was immense. The scientists engaged in it themselves formed a unique global community, seeking knowledge for the benefit of mankind, but constrained; often working under diverse political influences that did not always share their high moral or ethical standards. Members of this exclusive club would meet from time to time, sharing their research papers at international conferences, inviting comment and analysis, except when a breakthrough was achieved – when their masters got involved.

Kelly was caught in such a moment and faced a dilemma. Yes, he had achieved a milestone in power generation in laboratory conditions. He had taken out the cerebral insurance of de-linking and distributing elements of his research programme to a diverse range of institutions, who in themselves would not have the capacity to interpret the results. As of today, his paymasters would not know of his achievement or how to replicate his work as the formula for his discovery had not yet been documented. If he followed through and completed his records, he knew they would be seized upon

first by the military, who were always looking for more efficient ways of killing people, and his true ambition of preventing excessive global warming would not be realised. And yet for him, time was short. He had received his death sentence and he had a matter of months or years.

From a personal point of view, despite his devastating diagnosis, Des had to admit to a fleeting moment of euphoria. After all, he had reached a seemingly impossible target, a milestone, perhaps ten years ahead of his own projections. He had to tell someone – an individual who knew of his research and who he trusted. That person, Dr Galina Rustanova of the Russian Academy of Sciences, presently on secondment at the US equivalent in San Francisco, would be his chosen confidant.

He had got to know Rustanova, as a result of assessing her work on the bioremediation programme, at Chernobyl in the late 1980s, and the pair had had cause to meet on many occasions since in different parts of the world. While their relationship had been, for the most part, platonic, Kelly had come to foster a real admiration for her as a scientist and an engaging character, capable of mixing humour with a dark sense of foreboding, so typical of her countrymen. She was attractive, too, in what he considered an understated way, with a trim figure, short sculpted blonde hair and intense eyes highlighted by the measured use of mascara. They had shared some memorable moments together; professionally, setting standards for nuclear inspections for the International Atomic Energy Agency and personally, over dinners from London to Moscow, Vienna and Jerusalem to Delhi. Although she was familiar to him, like a comfortable pair of lightly worn brogues, he had to admit he couldn't claim to know that much about her personal life. After all, why should he? All he knew was that she was in her early forties, married with a couple of children, had a flat in Moscow, and had binge-watched the US sitcom *Friends* as a way of chilling out. What he had shared in return, beyond the perennial strains about the vagaries of accessing funds for his research in the West, was limited to his two grown up children – Miles, a graduate trainee with Revenue & Customs and Abigail, an aspiring actress, recently hired to promote a new brand of yoghurt on TV – and his newly ‘semi-detached wife’, Sue, who had lost interest in him and his work but enjoyed the benefits of what had become a marriage of convenience.

Perhaps he had said too much. Anyway, what the hell...

He picked up his mobile and texted her a short message: “I’ve done it!”, followed by a smiley emoji.

Message sent. It was the end of an exhausting day. Time to sign off, shut down his computer and make his way home to his comfortable, if slightly anonymous, residence in the Thames Valley. He paused, looking at his reflection in the glass panel which formed one of the boundaries of his personal space.

For a man of his age, he still had a good crop of grey hair (admittedly with flecks of white), and a freshly grown beard and sunken eyes gave him what he considered an unjustifiably moody look.

No, he didn't feel upset, just worn out. It was time to raise his game for the journey home.

As he started to swap his white lab coat for a more sober tweed jacket and anorak, his assistant, Dr Jakeman (Jake) Roberts, walked into his office.

“Glad I caught you, Des, just taken a call from my *alma mater* at Stanford. They are looking to set up a conference early next year on new commercial applications from industrial waste. They want us – you and/or me, ‘someone’ – to give a keynote on the future of the industry; probably nothing more than domesticating small-scale community nuclear power stations, AI, that sort of thing.”

“Do you think we should do it?”

“Well, on balance, I think doing these things from time to time is a good idea. After all, you are not talking to a room of postgrads at Stanford. These are money men with deep pockets looking for the next big deal. If we impress, then it offers a shortcut to long-term finance without the normal bullshit commitments and form filling we get from the government here. It's also a great opportunity to show those guys that innovation is not defined by initiatives invented over there.”

Kelly was preoccupied and, at that moment, not engaged.

“OK Jake, give them a provisional acceptance for now. We’ve got a bit more time to think through how we want to play it. I understand you’d quite like to take it on, especially as you could combine a trip with a visit to see your mum and dad in Oakland.”

Roberts nodded, smiled, and moved towards the office door.

He hesitated, turning to Kelly.

“Des – sorry to be a bit personal – are you all right?”

Kelly fixed him with a steely look.

“If you have spent the afternoon studying a spreadsheet on micromovements of emissions from fifty-year-old contaminated rods, you get to look like me.”

Roberts laughed.

“Yes, and I bet you will be coming to me to calculate the rate of absorption into storage waters in a couple of days.”

“Careful what you wish for.”

Kelly followed him out, closing the door of his glass-walled office and made his way past the four rows of desks occupied by members of his team, nodding to the one or two who were still focused on their screens.

“Night, Jake. Let’s grab a coffee in the morning.”

“Night. Hope you feel brighter after a good sleep.”

“Sure I will. There’s nothing a couple of glasses of Mouton Rothschild won’t fix.”

If only it was that simple.

Cocooned in his car for the drive home, Kelly normally had the six o’clock radio news on, but tonight he just wanted to close himself off from the world as much as he was able to do, heading south on the A34 towards Newbury. This was not a night to shout out at the latest mad utterances of the prime minister but was a moment for introspection and reflection on his predicament. Looking at his music selection, Mahler’s ‘5th Symphony’ seemed to capture his mood best, especially with a winter squall enveloping his windscreen and the cloudy day fading into night.

What to do? He would need to tell his boss, Sir Gavin Laidlaw, at the Lauriston Foundation, who would be duty bound to tell his partners at the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority, Ministry of Defence and their colleagues in the energy department who in turn would in all likelihood tell the Americans. Maybe he should issue a press release? That way they might all get to hear his explanation of his situation and not how it might get to be interpreted by other people. And what about Sue and the children? For her, it would be an inconvenience. She would probably seek reassurance that the pension was in place and want a date when he was going into hospital, either to make sure she had a reserve bridge partner in place or to make alternative arrangements for her dog to be walked in the evenings. He might get a more sympathetic response from Miles and Abigail, but they had their own lives – flats, lovers, hopes and fears, where his news would only be a passing footnote in their own experience. Strangely he was comfortable with that. He respected their independence and certainly didn’t want them grieving his loss.

He had now reached the exit that led to his village. Home was just a few minutes from here. He expected Sue would be arriving about the same time, so whoever was there first would be expected to pull some dinner out of the freezer and get Milo the Rottweiler out to do his business.

So what was the answer? He remembered his Yorkshire father’s words, “when in doubt, do now’t”. The stakes were high; once the information was released it was out there and he would no longer be in control. Frozen dinner prepared and eaten, message from the missus confirming the assignation with the choral society received, Milo’s comfort restored, it was time to return to Mahler in the front room armed with a glass of claret, a quick look at the domestic CCTV footage and LinkedIn on his phone as well as the latest copy of *Private Eye* for entertainment.

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The following morning, he had a meeting with his doctor. The discussion was predictable. He was at Stage IV for prostate and his liver was under attack. Chemo was an urgent priority and although suffering a degree of discomfort he wouldn't necessarily describe himself as being in pain, due in part, he had to admit, to his permitted but liberal use of controlled drugs. So, to the big question: how long? Not much science on offer with this diagnosis. It all depended on how quickly he had treatment, the intensity of it and how his body reacted. A year, maybe two, but that was it. And what of the alternative doing 'now't'?

Six months at best. To Kelly, the alternatives didn't look great. The chemo would certainly force him to change his working habits and would make him feel a lot worse than he felt today. Given the advanced nature of his illness, it was still unlikely to clear him completely.

So he was trading a certain outcome for maybe a few more years of existence. Yes, existence was the right word; where although he would be alive, he would be unable to live it in the way he wanted. He had built his career on confronting problems and finding solutions. There would be no solution in this case other than to use his limited time to the full.

“I understand you are not keen on the treatment, Des. Nobody is,” his doctor observed. “Do remember, you may change your mind and then it will be too late. Take some time out today and think it through some more. Call me as soon as you're ready and I can make the necessary arrangements at the hospital. Have you discussed it with your wife? I thought not. You really should, especially if you are expecting her to look after you.”

Des grunted noncommittally. Their relationship was already in 'special measures'. She was not the compassionate kind and he didn't wish to feel the chill of her indifference.

“Thanks doctor, I'll think it through some more and come back to you. Sorry, I have to run now. I have a review meeting coming up with my boss. Maybe I will bring this into the conversation if the opportunity presents itself.”

The irony of his drive to his office in Oxford was not lost on him. The premises in the new wing of the Lauriston was only a few minutes' drive from the John Radcliffe, the likely venue for his treatment.

He was no nearer the pressing decision to take his peers into his confidence.

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The sun was setting on what had been a glorious spring afternoon in Kaliningrad Oblast – Russia's most westerly outpost, a corner of eastern Europe retained by the old Soviet Union after the second world war, located between Poland and Lithuania. Stefan Zanowsky had embarked on a little 'off the record' tourism, having arrived at the bus station on the early morning service from Gdansk and spent most of the day being a sightseer, catching another bus from Teatralnaya Street in the city to visit Baltiysk and then the Vistula Spit – a thin strip of land offshore running southwest to northeast between the Baltic Sea and the enclosed waters of the Vistula Lagoon. Although requiring the obligatory 'on demand' visa, this was not an excursion for the faint-hearted. Cameras were frowned upon and care required selecting the background for the obligatory selfie. The locality was the nerve centre of Russian military operations on its western fringe, with the docks being a hub for some of the Russian Navy's most advanced ships and submarines. As a traditionally 'closed' community, the sight of foreigners still drew some attention, especially those instantly recognisable as being 'different' – from Africa and Asia in particular. But the locals had been quick to take on the mantle of welcoming hosts, offering informal cash exchanges between roubles, dollars and euros, wherever they saw an opportunity, while others were keen to offer specialist tourist guide services, showcasing relics from the locality's bloody Prussian past and extolling the virtues of their favourite local food and drink, *Stroganina* and *Pologar*.

The town itself was bordered not only by the Baltic Sea, but some four military airfields bristling with advanced weaponry, targeted at the West. By Russian standards, it was an odd place. Perhaps unusually for its size, it had all the trappings of Nordic prosperity, which made it a favourite posting for sailors and airmen with a range of shops, bars, restaurants and nightclubs. Away from the docks, it also enjoyed the benefit of sandy beaches and opportunities for

birdwatching in nearby forests, especially on long summer days. Yes, this place could be regarded as a hidden gem, certainly on a par with some other towns on the more affluent northern seashore in Sweden and Finland.

Despite these distractions, Stefan’s purpose was clear. He had a job to ‘spring’ a Russian nuclear physicist, specialising in marine propulsion, on behalf of MI6. It was a typical British assignment, characterised by little effective forward planning, masking as a cloak of complete deniability in the event of failure, but offering the prospect of some serious money on delivery.

Although it was beyond his pay grade to understand the circumstances and method of communication which had led to the opportunity, he had a name, address and the flexibility to make the necessary transport arrangements as he saw fit. He had been on the payroll of MI6 for some three years now, a sort of unofficial gofer or ‘informal trade representative’ as he preferred to think of it. A Polish national, he had solid networks across the Baltic states and beyond who had the capability to manage cross-border transactions without the need for paperwork.

Although he had just arrived, his preparation had begun two weeks previously. The logistics were reasonably straightforward, the challenge was the extreme scrutiny that would be incurred as a result.

The basis of the plan was to mean that his subject was going to disappear, leaving a message for his housekeeper saying his mother in Rostov was dangerously ill. He knew the information would be shared and checks would follow but that would still allow him sufficient time to do what needed to be done before the bad news became known. The next thing had been to smuggle a ‘Stefan lookalike’ into the country to take his place on the return bus to Kaliningrad. That, too, had been relatively straightforward. His brother, Grigor, had left the northern Polish coastal holiday resort of Krynica Morska and hiked the four kilometres north with his girlfriend two days ago – up the 501 to Piaskowa on the Vistula Spit, where the road ended and the route to the Polish border with Russia descended into thicket. This frontier had no means of crossing and considering it had been arbitrarily carved out of the strip of thick woodland running shore to shore for less than a kilometre, seemed to have little other than symbolic value. Symbolism was, however, important to the Russians. There were two big security fences, a cleared open corridor patrolled by soldiers with attack dogs and several rather rickety-looking scaffolded eight-story watchtowers with cameras. And yet, compared to other Russian frontiers in the region, this one was distinctly low-tech and best traversed by climbing a tree on the Polish side and locking a grappling hook on one of the rungs of a watchtower, between camera positions. Having picked his moment after dark and attached his line with care, Grigor was able to shimmy over the barriers, disconnect the rope, which was pulled back by his partner, and climb down to the shadows on the other side. The border crossing was completed in a little under ten minutes with the military observers oblivious to his passing. Grigor pressed north, back into the thicket running parallel to the seashore, for what seemed an age until he reached, first, the oddly abandoned concrete deck of the former Luftwaffe runway and then the holiday cabins on the southern edge of Baltiskya Kosa, the small fishing village on the northern tip of the Spit, facing Baltiysk across the narrow straight leading to the Port of Kaliningrad. He made camp and pitched his small tent under the cover of trees but with a clear line of sight to the village. It was a grey day. The leaden sky and the brisk wind would ensure anyone stopping by would not be attacked by the marauding mosquitos which frequented the locality on warmer days. Should he be discovered, there was nothing odd about a hippy in a tie-dyed T-shirt, jeans and sandals camping here. Although early in the season, such sights were commonplace this side of the water as Baltiskya Kosa was, first and foremost, a laid-back leisure destination, all about beaches, fishing and surfing, without the industrialised urgency of the military infrastructure on the opposite bank.

This calmer environment not only had attractions for visitors. Increasingly, those senior officials in the military machine, who preferred some distance and additional privacy between them and their day jobs, were buying up holiday homes on the Spit and taking the daily ferry into the dockyards.

One such was Professor Boris Ponomariev, Stefan’s target, living at number 32 School Street. Grigor had arranged to meet Stefan at the general store on the quayside at midday. There was no showy greeting between the two, just a chance to surreptitiously swap jackets, sunglasses, passports, tickets and visas. The duty sentry at the end of the ferry

gangplank had started to show a passing interest but got distracted by a conversation with one of the deckhands. When he looked back at the two men outside the shop, they appeared to be sharing a cigarette – that was of no concern, just the typical reaction of a couple of bystanders hanging about waiting for the boat to start boarding. Grigor told Stefan where to find his backpack and Stefan told Grigor to pick up the tourist bus in the layby next to the Peter the Great monument by the Aquapark, just along from the arrival embankment. It would be delayed while the guide collected up the requisite number of passengers from around the famous star-shaped Pillau Fort complex before returning to Kaliningrad. It was a typical Russian tour, casual to say the least – nobody would give Grigor a second look – all that mattered was his documentation. Grigor told him where he had pitched the tent and went to the ferry; Stefan stood to watch the departure.

As the vessel departed the quay with its load of ten cars, two vans and a refrigerated truck, Stefan walked down Marine Drive towards the small flotilla of fishing boats, moored two abreast. Some were clearly laid up, their decks deserted, but those on the outer edge had men on them, some carrying pipes to refuel, others checking nets, loading ice into the temperature-controlled holds and stacking the plastic trays they were going to need to store their catches.

Stefan saw an elderly unshaven man with a pot belly and beanie hat walking towards him en route to the quayside shop.

“I’m looking for Igor,” he said.

The man waved his hand-rolled cigarette towards the craft at the far end of the strip. Stefan could see a tall thin man, in a wool toggled jacket, shiny waterproof over-trousers and wellington boots, hosing off the front deck. He walked forward at pace and shouted a greeting.

The man looked up as if surprised, smiled and waved him to come over.

Stefan scrambled across the two vessels to reach him.

They had met many years before when both had labouring jobs in the Gdansk shipyard and had retained their friendship ever since, even though Igor’s present unkempt appearance had proved to be a momentary barrier to recognition. Border restrictions meant stays were difficult but meeting for lunch was easy and social media allowed them to keep in touch as their lives changed. Igor knew Stefan was into the ‘import/export’ business but knew nothing of his clients. In Russia, it paid not to ask too many questions.

Putting down the free-flowing rubber pipe, he enveloped Stefan in a bear hug, as if to ensure he shared his labour-induced fish aroma with his old friend.

“Stefan – good to see you again. Clearly, the years continue to be kind. I think you Poles have gone soft, now that you don’t have to queue for bread like the rest of us. You should be careful about spending so much time on Facebook – you may look healthy but looking at porn will make you squinty-eyed!”

“I wish I could say the same, my friend. You look like you’ve spent too much time shagging and drinking in the Zolotoy Yakor nightclub across the water – although next time when you do, I hope you’re able to take a shower.”

Igor laughed.

“Well, that’s the life of a sailor and why I have to go to sea to pay the bills... which reminds me...”

Stefan thrust a thick brown envelope into his hand.

“As promised, half now and the rest tonight. Hope you are ready.”

“Yes, I will be ready, I packed the inflatable earlier on and will run a check on the outboard before I get fuelled up. I even arranged for my political supervisor to go on a date with Lyudmilla, the guide from the tourist office – although it will be expensive, it will be better for him than spending the night in the wheelhouse, moaning about his leaking roof and the neighbour’s dog. Besides, it will give him something more interesting to talk about when he’s out with me tomorrow night.”

“When do we go?”

“An hour after sunset. Pyotr and Arkady are taking their boats out tonight as well, so stay off the quay until they’ve weighed anchor. I want them to go ahead of us. Hope you’ll be kitted out properly. The forecast isn’t great; the sea will

be rough and, if it isn't raining it will be blowing, so don't eat a big dinner tonight unless you are going to provide some puke for bait. Oh, and don't forget to bring a decent bottle of vodka. I like your *Krupnik* best, makes me realise how much crap we drink most of the time.”

“See you later.”

Stefan smiled, playfully slapped Igor on the cheek, climbed back over the railings of neighbouring boats to the quayside and set off to look for Grigor's tent.

That part of the operation was not difficult. No one else had cause to be walking around there at that time, as most dog walkers stayed around the beach and dunes. Crawling inside gave him the opportunity to rest, think through his plan for the evening and to prepare.

Having checked arrangements, all he had to do was to wait for night to fall. Grigor would now be in the city having a beer, no doubt, before getting the late bus back to Gdansk. They would touch base at the end of the week.

For now, the question was how far away could he get from here without being discovered. Given the proximity of Poland, while being potentially the shortest route to safety, it would be the hardest. Smuggling some illicit amber momentos was one thing, explaining the presence of a revered nuclear physicist with your hand luggage was something else again. North-east Poland in some ways suffered the same as their European Union neighbour to the north – Lithuania. Although run by Western style anti-Soviet democracies, they were riven with Russian sympathisers and ‘influence’, to the extent that if he delivered his prize to his client in those places, they could not be sure of getting him safely into hiding. That is why the first base would be Sweden, and its Baltic-island outpost of Gotland – unfortunately a relatively long and uncomfortable sea journey, but ultimately the most secure alternative.

Stefan could see why Ponomarev had chosen to live on School Street; his well-maintained white-painted wooden two-storey house was on the edge of the dunes with an enviable sea view. From here he could while away any private moments watching the variety of shipping, from naval frigates and car ferries to bulk carriers and fishing boats heading through the strait, mainly towards the Pregolya estuary and the Port of Kaliningrad, but also for some offering a route across the almost enclosed Vistula Lagoon to the small Polish port of Elblag. The physicist was clearly a member of the social elite that warranted such accommodation, and yet, he was about to say goodbye to this relatively comfortable existence. Heaven knows what his new life in Britain would offer, but Stefan reasoned it would need to be special to justify this pending one-way ticket.

He had made time to allow him to find Grigor's tent, collect the backpack and walk round the boundaries of the property, to check sight lines, potential nosy neighbours and any CCTV positions. Perhaps surprisingly, away from the military bases, Kaliningrad Oblast seemed relaxed by normal Russian standards.

He recalled previous discussions over the years with Igor, who, although born and bred in the Oblast, didn't really consider himself to be Russian but ‘European’. Maybe it was a label that suited him when he worked in Gdansk. The term was meant to imply a degree of social sophistication not commonly found in the mother country. As a foreigner dealing with Russians and Kaliningraders, he hadn't noticed the difference. Maybe it was because the locals had a taste for wine and beer, not just vodka. When he'd taken on this job, Stefan had asked about family members who might wish to come or could be at the house when he called. He had been dismissed with the answer, “Oh don't worry about that,” which had the opposite effect. This whole shaky venture depended on the professor answering the door personally and offering his co-operation. Reluctantly he had to accept that there was a possibility he would be making the trip across the Baltic without his special cargo but, more importantly, without the prospect of his fee for his trouble.

The question on his mind was answered when he rang the doorbell just after seven o'clock, dressed in a dry suit and deck boots with the backpack.

It was opened by a prematurely balding, wire-spectacled figure with a fair skin, goatee beard and a quizzical expression – this was indeed a professor personified, albeit minus a white lab coat. Dressed in brown checked flannel shirt and matching heavy wool sweater and jeans, this was a man who seemed to fit Igor's image of a ‘European’ who,

at first sight, could have come from anywhere from Glasgow to Helsinki. It was the square jaw that gave him away. So many of his countrymen had that same look of a prize fighter.

“Professor? My name is Stefan. Winston sent me to collect you. May I come in for a minute? I have brought some over-clothes which may come in useful later on.”

Ponomariiev stood to one side and nodded to him to come in. The house’s timber interior was painted powder blue and furnished in a simple Scandinavian style with a minimal level of fixtures and fittings, as he would have expected to find in a holiday rental.

“Is everything arranged?” he asked.

“Yes, I will take you to the handover point. What happens after that is between you and Winston.”

“When are we going?”

“As soon as you’re ready. We’re taking a trip on a fishing boat, so you’ll need a dry suit and boots. You are a Euro size 45, right? The stuff is in the backpack.”

“Wait here, please.”

Ponomariiev took the backpack and made his way up the staircase. This would be the moment of truth. The moment when a couple of FSB goons leapt out from the shadows to arrest him. He had been prepared for this and so had those he was working with. He and each of his associates knew just enough about their own contribution to the plan to fulfil their role but nothing more, so in the event of being compromised they could not implicate colleagues. The expected challenge didn’t emerge and his walking ‘consignment’ came back down, the weight of his boots accentuated by their noise on the bare wooden steps.

He looked directly at Stefan.

The Pole saw a mixture of emotions in his pale blue eyes – emptiness and regret.

“So for now, Mr Stefan, I am in your hands. When we leave the house, I will keep my wool cap low on my face and the hood tied, just in case I see any of my neighbours.”

Given the fact that it was now dark, and the light drizzle was increasing in intensity on the back of an easterly wind, Stefan thought it unlikely they would meet anyone out at this hour before they arrived at the quay, but he just nodded his acknowledgement.

The professor locked the door, being careful to leave a lamp in the hallway on, and stepped onto the narrow pathway, walking with Stefan towards the first of the sporadically sited streetlights; the whipping sound of the wind through the shadows of surrounding sedge tufts warning them of the perils ahead.

It was relatively quiet at the quay. The other two boats going out that night had already left, so it was down to Igor doing his final preparations and waiting for his unusual cargo.

Stefan introduced Ponomariiev to Igor, who immediately gave him a lifejacket and took him below deck to a cramped cabin which had the benefit of a bed.

“The sea is a bit choppy tonight, so I suggest you stay here. There will be a bit of pitch and roll. If you feel sick, there are some bags to use over there and a piss hole through that door.” That marked the end of his welcome speech. He left his passenger down below, shutting the hatch behind him almost as though he wanted to forget he was on board.

“You heard that?” Igor said to Stefan.

The Pole nodded.

“Get your lifejacket on. I’m hoping we can outrun the weather when we get to sea and things will calm down. You must know that I cannot take you ashore at the other end and we may need to launch your inflatable in unstable conditions, which could be dangerous. Now the other two have sailed and most sensible people have gone home, I have got my boys to pre-inflate your boat and test the outboard before we leave, in case the weather is too bad at sea. I don’t think anyone has noticed but even if they have, I’ll say I lost it in the storm. We will keep it lashed and tied to the crane during the journey which should be OK, as we won’t be dropping nets until you’ve gone.”

“Can I help?”

“You can keep me company in the wheelhouse once we leave. I just need to radio the harbourmaster we are on our way. Our journey plan is authorised to take us 200 kilometres north towards the Gotland Deep, the closest quality deep fishing we have. That’s where Pyotr and Arkady have gone. I am planning to take you on a bit further and do the drop here, around fifty kilometres off Burgsvik. Then it’s up to you.”

“Are you being watched?”

“Normally I am required to take a commissar with me to ensure I don’t go anywhere I shouldn’t, but funnily enough I fixed him up with an expensive date in town tonight, so to avoid disturbing him I got him to sign the manifest earlier, before loading the inflatable. The authorities will just assume he’s on board because of our headcount – he certainly won’t want the harbourmaster to know he was out fucking in a warm bed instead of getting cold and wet with me. Otherwise, they’ll keep an eye on the radar and give us a call on the radio if they want a chat.”

“What about shipping?”

“The Baltic is a busy stretch of water. It’s normal for the Russian Navy to keep a vessel out on active patrol – something like a corvette with a pop gun up front to scare off any smugglers and make sure we behave, but that’s about it. They tend to be more concerned about coastal traffic heading east-west. The Swedes and the Poles have a presence out there as well but try to avoid each other. Our route weaves in between established ferry routes from Kaliningrad to Ust Luga and Petersburg so we can stay out of sight for part of the journey.”

Fishing boat B474 weighed anchor and headed north, following the same route as the other two who were around ninety minutes ahead of them, and soon found themselves battling the predicted heavy seas and driving rain.

Stefan had elected to stay in the wheelhouse with Igor and his bosun, Anatoly, while the rest of the crew took refuge in the canteen below. Time and again the bow dipped, confronting a wall of water which smashed down with what felt like the force of a truckful of rubble, before it seemed their vessel had launched itself up into the sky, only for the process to be repeated time and again. The only reassuring sound was the rhythmic knocking of the engine which gave them confidence about their momentum.

Stefan held onto the bulkhead as though on a fairground ride. Igor sat impassively in the captain’s chair, his feet locked around its steel base which was bolted to the floor. Anatoly, clutched the wheel, keeping them on their forward trajectory.

“Hope you brought that bottle of *Krupnik* I asked for,” Igor shouted.

Stefan smiled nervously, unzipping the top of the dry suit and extracting the bottle.

“Good man – this is probably the best way of passing the time when you are out in this.”

The hours passed.

The bottle was shared around and seemed to disappear rapidly.

The radio crackled intermittently with calls from Pyotr and Arkady, reporting improving weather, bad jokes and general banter before a more sinister call from the harbourmaster’s control centre.

“B474, adjust your navigation to 120 over 90. You are running wide of the corridor. Please acknowledge...”

The message was repeated.

Stefan looked to Igor. The bosun remained unmoved.

Igor took the microphone, opened the line and paused, sending a static message without speaking.

The line was quiet.

After a few minutes the message from Baltiysk was repeated, with Igor offering the same response.

“That’s our warning signal. They won’t be worried just yet. They will know I tried to respond and will just assume we are a bit fucked up. It does mean the start of the countdown to the drop.”

As Igor’s colleagues had predicted, they were outrunning the storm and it became sufficiently calm to walk outside the wheelhouse.

Stefan went to check on his precious cargo.

Although Ponomariev had a fair complexion, he wondered whether a human could look that white and still be alive. It was as though he had come out and left his blood in a bottle at home. He was glad he hadn't spent the storm time in the cabin; the window was damp with condensation and the confined space smelt of vomit.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

“As well as can be expected,” came the reply.

“Don't worry, we haven't got far to go now and then you will be on your way to a better life.”

Ponomariev confirmed what Stefan had suspected.

“I hope you are right. There was only one thing wrong with the one I left behind.”

“Why are you here then?”

“I'm gay – hadn't you guessed? Living freely as a gay man in Russia is impossible. If I was not an expert in my field, I wouldn't have a job. I have been tolerated for years but I can't continue to live in this way, when I am harassed and sneered at, outside my home, at the shops, in bars... it's ridiculous in the 2020s. Now Vladimir Vladimirovich has decided to make us illegal, banning same sex relationships. It was the final straw, and if VV really understood his own country it might prove to be his final straw too.”

The hatch door opened. Igor leaned through.

“OK guys, it's time to muster. Check your protective clothing and lifejackets and come up aft.”

Igor's intervention had saved a longer conversation which Stefan didn't wish to engage in. He really didn't wish to know much about Ponomariev, only to deliver him to Winston intact and get his money.

On deck, Igor pointed on the starboard side.

“This is as close as I can take you. From this point, you're about thirty nautical miles from Gotland in that direction. I hear these days, the Swedes have quite a strong military presence so I doubt whether you will have to wait to get to their coast before being intercepted.”

“The rest of your money is under the bed behind the bulkhead. I stuck it there to keep it dry. Thanks for your help and I will see you again soon, my friend.”

A brief hug and Stefan and Ponomariev were stowed on the inflatable and lowered into the sea. The outboard sprang into life and the final stretch of the journey began.

The inflatable bounced over the now undulating waves.

With Stefan focused on the way ahead, Ponomariev looked back to the declining profile of the fishing boat, the last vestige of his former life in Russia.

Want to know what happens next? Get the book [here](#).