

GREGG KUEHN



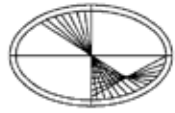
THE
SEVEN
ARROWS





THE
SEVEN
SORROWS

GREGG KUEHN



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THE SEVEN SORROWS

Gregg Kuehn

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DEDICATION

*Dedicated to my mom M.M, wife Kathy, sons Charlie and Andy,
and daughter-in-law Jane whose deep love of a far-away island
inspired me to never give up.*

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“This government, as promised, has maintained the closest surveillance of the Soviet Military buildup on the island of Cuba. Within the past week, unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island. The purpose of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere.”

*Address to the nation by President John F. Kennedy
October 22, 1962*

“I thought I might never live to see another day.”

*Robert S. McNamara, U.S. Secretary of State
Reflecting on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*

“The Soviet government has ordered the dismantling of bases and the dispatch of equipment to the U.S.S.R.”

*Letter to President Kennedy from Nikita Khrushchev,
Premier of the U.S.S.R.
October 28, 1962*

CHAPTER 1

Skornyazhny Lane, Moscow, Russia

The man who had less than one hour to live raised himself up on an elbow, craned his neck, and peered out of his filthy window. The smattering of rain blurred his view of the street below, and he fell back with a grunt. Alexei Baranov stiffened, leaned over the edge of his threadbare cot, and retched into his handkerchief. He pulled it away from his mouth, wiped his lips, and crushed the cloth into a ball. Reddish spittle oozed onto his fingers. The soiled handkerchief slipped from his hand and fell to the floor.

Alexei fell back onto the cot and groaned. His long snow-white hair lay in stark contrast to the dirty yellowed pillow. The pain was worse today, but he would not give in to it. He would not die before the boy arrived. Everything depended on Pyotr.

The pains in his stomach had increased to the point where it was nearly impossible for him to hobble down the dim hallway to the toilet he shared with another tenant of the aging apartment building. The three story brick structure sat on a narrow lane in a northeast section of Moscow not far from several metro stations, the busy “B-Ring” road that circled Moscow, and a few restaurants. On warm sunny days children played in a small playground just across the street from Alexei’s second floor window. But today his windows were fully shut and the street outside stood silent in response to the cold and rain. Alexei stared at the water-stained ceiling and drew a thin blanket over his frail body. The slight movement sent a stabbing pain deep into his belly. His body convulsed. The pain shot up into his chest and he grunted again. He lifted his head a few inches off the pillow and studied the door, hoping for Pyotr’s arrival. The hallway remained silent.

Panic gripped Alexei as he stared at the empty doorway. What if Pyotr hadn’t received the letter he’d sent nearly two weeks ago? Would his secret die with him? He closed his eyes, laid his head back on the pillow, and tried to smile, ignoring the rancid stench of his dim room. Pyotr will come soon, he told himself.

Alexei sighed, recalling those glorious days long ago when Khrushchev had challenged the West, when the real glory of Soviet Communism reached

its peak. He'd never been as proud of Mother Russia as he'd been during those October days of 1962 when the Soviets had challenged the power and influence of the capitalist pigs in America. Damn that arrogant Kennedy and his smug little brother, Bobby. They had ruined everything. A chuckle escaped his lips as he considered that he outlived them both. Another cough wracked his frail body. He felt each of his eighty one years, and they had been hard ones. The long years of running and hiding had taken their toll.

He flinched, and then smiled as he caught the sound of a distant door creaking open and then closed a moment later. Hurried footsteps pounded up the stairway and echoed from the hallway as Pyotr Asimov swept into the room. He was young, not yet thirty, with short sandy hair and brown eyes. His thin muscular body complemented his five foot eleven inch height. If not conventionally handsome, many women his age found him attractive. Something about the way his eyes smiled interested them. Pyotr stopped in mid stride as he took in the sick old man lying on the filthy cot. His eyes opened wide at the sight of Alexei's shriveled body, hollow eyes, and blood-spattered chin. He stared at the old man for a brief moment, taking in his crooked yellow teeth and dirty stringy beard, then hurried to the window and peeked out to the street below. It was empty. He took a step toward Alexei.

"Thank heaven, Uncle Alexei. I am so happy to see you. I'm sorry I couldn't get here sooner, but I only received your letter this morning. My mother sent it to me. The letter was unopened. Neither she nor my father knows where I am. But why am I here? What's going on? Why did you tell me to be careful?" Pyotr said as he sidled back to the window and glanced out again. In spite of the chill he raised the window an inch to allow fresh air into the stinking room. He studied the street below for a moment, but it was quiet. He was certain he hadn't been followed.

"Yes, my boy. I am happy you are finally here. It is good to see you after so many years. You have your mother's eyes. Is she well? I am dying and have something important to tell you. And something you must do. For the glory of old Russia. I don't have much time. Sit down and listen.

"Our entire nation was so proud, so excited, in 1962 when the thug Castro agreed to take our missiles in Cuba. But soon our joy turned to bitterness and despair when Kennedy outsmarted Khrushchev and forced him to send the nuclear weapons back to Russia. I was right there, in Cuba. We had the capitalist pigs cowering in a corner but we lost. Yes, later Khrushchev got what he deserved when the Presidium threw him out of office in disgrace, but by then the damage was done."

Pyotr leaned forward, his face just inches from Alexei's. "I am aware of the history of the Cuban Missile Crisis. But that is ancient history. Why am I here? What am I to do?"

"I will get to that, but I must tell you other things first. Only a few of us soldiers knew what truly happened. We stole some of the nuclear weapons and a launcher, hoping some day to return them to Cuba or to use them ourselves against America. Not the big ones. Those came back to Russia. The small hand-held ones that the Russians stole from the Americans when they were in Germany in 1957. We stole them from the shipment returning to Russia and then hid them. But not in Cuba. They were in a few small trunks and we were able to steal them without anybody noticing. We took them out by boat. I am the last who knows where they are hidden." Another hacking cough interrupted his story.

Pyotr fell back in his chair, shocked by what he was hearing. His mind reeled and he blinked hard. Was this finally his opportunity to get to America? The weapons could be his ticket to freedom and a better life.

"Yes, Alexei. How may I help you?"

"I must tell you where to find the nuclear weapons. You will be in danger, but you are young and can protect yourself."

Pyotr glanced at the window again, and then turned to Alexei. He had to get this information to Colin Farthington in America. It had been a long time since he'd communicated with him, but he still had the phone number for Colin's niece, here in Moscow. He hoped she hadn't returned to America.

"OK. I will help you. Now tell me: where are the weapons hidden. What do you want me to do?"

Alexei wiped his mouth with his sleeve. It came away with thick bloody phlegm. He rested on the pillow and closed his eyes, his breath shallow and labored.

"Soon everything went to hell," he continued, ignoring Pyotr's plea. "Captain Karmov had us posted to Siberia where we changed our names; eventually every one of my comrades disappeared or died under mysterious circumstances. I fled and imagined I was safe after Karmov himself died in a car wreck, but I was wrong. Somehow others found out and have hunted me all these years. If they caught me I would face a horrible death. I moved like the wind: here one moment and gone the next. Those who chased me are bad men who have no love of Russia. I, alone, had no power to bring the weapons back home, and those who ruled after Khrushchev were weak old men. Too weak. They were all a disgrace to the Party. I was poor scum in their eyes, and nobody would listen to someone like me. I had no choice but to flee for my life." Alexei paused, coughed, and took several raspy breaths.

“Enough of this history, Alexei. Tell me where the weapons are hidden. I need the information. Tell me while you still can.” Pyotr glanced at the clock and turned to the window. The building and street below were quiet.

“You must do what is right to restore the glory and honor of our Motherland. There are now men in the government who can help. Good men like our President. Old KGB. They are standing up to America again. You must find them. Tell them to get the nuclear weapons. They are called Davy Crockett.”

“Yes, yes! I will do as you ask,” said Pyotr. “Please hurry.”

A minute passed in silence. In spite of the chill in the room, sweat trickled down Pyotr’s forehead. He couldn’t fully process what this information might do for him, but he knew he must get it to the American. He peeked out the window and watched a small blue sedan creep past Alexei’s building. The driver turned his head, gazed directly toward Alexei’s room and then turned toward a man sitting next to him. Pyotr flinched in surprise, leaned away from the window and waited until the car disappeared from sight.

Alexei let out an agonizing grunt then opened his eyes and stared at the boy. His vision blurred and his lower lip trembled as spittle dribbled down his chin. A new intense pain stabbed into the back of his head, confusing his thoughts.

“Alexei! Cuba! Nuclear weapons! Tell me where they are hidden!” Pyotr said as he grabbed the old man’s shoulders with both hands.

“Yes, for Russia,” Alexei croaked.

Pyotr released his grip and let out his breath.

“Baranov! Tell me!” Pyotr nearly screamed as panic began to take hold. He must learn the truth. He grabbed a small flask of vodka from his pack and forced some into the old man’s mouth. A long minute passed in agonizing silence.

The old man jerked. His eyes opened and he tried to speak, but only a hoarse wheezing sound escaped his lips. Another shot of vodka made him shudder. Alexei closed his eyes, shivered in the damp cold and tried again. Slowly.

“Pyotr...go...Kremlin...secret...tower...tunnel...” he stuttered.

This time the cough brought blood from his nose. Pyotr tore off a small corner of Alexei’s blanket and, with shaking hands, shoved it into Alexei’s nostril.

“Go on,” Pyotr urged.

“Map...nuclear...Davy Crockett...” the old man gurgled as blood began to trickle from his mouth. A deep hacking cough brought another horrid stench as his bowels failed him. Gasping in pain, he tried again, his trembling hands clutching his belly under the thin blanket.

“Yes, you told me about Davy Crockett. Tell me the rest,” Pyotr said. Bile rose in the back of his throat and his heart pounded.

“Bonny...on island eh...fortune...in cave...” his voice failed as he stared wide-eyed into the horror of Pyotr’s face. He smiled weakly taking another shallow breath, “not Cuba...near...”

Finally he sighed and fell back on his pillow. Bloody spittle dripped from his chin and he spoke no more.

“Alexei! Who, what is bonnie? What island? Do you mean fortune?” Pyotr said in a hoarse whisper. Then he understood. Alexei Baranov would tell him nothing more. A moment later the old man’s eyes became dull marbles staring at the ceiling. The weak smile, more like a grimace, remained on his face.

Pyotr Asimov scanned the room for something to cover the old man. He would have to leave the body but couldn’t leave the corpse for the rats. He rushed out into the hall and into an open apartment. Yellow light filtered through a dirty window, providing enough light for Pyotr to see an old green metal desk, a rusty cot with no mattress, and a filthy gray military trunk. He grasped the handle of the trunk and found the latch still worked. This will do, he sighed.

Moments later he stepped out of the building and pulled his collar up around his neck. A young woman wearing a long gray coat and a black knit hat pushed a baby stroller on the sidewalk across from Alexei’s building. She hesitated for a moment and glanced at Pyotr. He turned toward her and she quickly bent over and reached into the stroller, cooing softly. A moment later she rose up and hurried down the sidewalk, ignoring Pyotr. He, however, watched until she disappeared behind a tall clipped hedge.

As soon as she turned the corner she checked her surroundings and then pulled a cell phone from a deep pocket and punched a button.

CHAPTER 2

El Fortunato Island, British West Indies—Somewhere East of Cuba

KC Jameson woke to the sound of water cascading over a large waterfall. The roar filled his head with a throbbing echo. He rolled over, pried one eye open, and peeked at the other side of his king sized bed. Empty. There was no waterfall he knew, just the flushing of his toilet down the hall. He sighed, closed his eyes and tried to will away the headache pounding right behind his eyes. Slight nausea tickled at the back of his throat.

A moment later the bathroom door slid open and the sound of footsteps clicked down the hallway outside his room. Melinda Singleton, wearing the same red shorts and white sleeveless top she had worn last night, stuck her head through the bedroom doorway. She was young, about 24, with short brown hair framing a narrow face and a turned up nose. Her thin lips bore no trace of lipstick. She was a small woman with just enough curves in the right places. Her tanned face betrayed no ill effects from the revelry of the previous evening.

“Morning KC. I started the coffee for you. I know it’s kinda early, but I have to go. Gotta change my clothes before work. Hey, I had a lot of fun last night. See ya around sometime. Soon I hope. Cheers,” she said in a loud voice, forcing KC to shut his eyes even tighter. The back door slammed, the noise pounding deep into KC’s skull. Minutes later he listened to the coffee machine finish its task, then struggled out of bed, hobbled to the bathroom, and downed two extra strength aspirins as he stood at the toilet. He felt much older than his thirty three years.

Half an hour later, after three cups of strong coffee and two glasses of mango juice, KC began to feel almost human again. At least physically.

Another meaningless fling, he thought, remembering the previous evening’s festivities at the Pink Grouper Bar & Grill. This wasn’t the first time he’d slept with Melinda, but he sensed that the next time, if there was one, would not be soon. There would be someone else, but probably not Melinda. At least for a while. Few of the young women on the island desired long-term relationships; they were all free spirits who enjoyed the wild lifestyle of the island. Women like Melinda always made him think of his little sister, Beth, and what she might

have become. Their cheery optimism and enthusiasm for life was in stark contrast to the memory of the horrible night in Seattle when a stray bullet had smashed through Beth's bedroom window killing her instantly. KC and Beth, not yet teenagers, had only each other after their father deserted the family and their mother sought refuge in the bottle and a series of abusive men. Somehow KC and Beth survived in their gruesome and dangerous lower class neighborhood. Throughout most of his twenties KC had fallen in and out of many shallow relationships that satisfied his physical, but not emotional needs. He shrugged off the depressing memory of his sister's murder, the blood, and the screeching of runaway tires, and the unsympathetic police.

"Same-old-same-old, maybe my luck will change today," he muttered to himself as he peeked out the window as the sun began its slow rise over the low hills. The needle on his outdoor thermometer was already pushing 80. It would be a good day to go fishing. Better hurry, he mused. Gotta get in my skinny dip before the tourists get to the beach. That should clear my head.

Grabbing a bright green and white striped beach towel, he dropped his shorts on the floor, slipped into his flip-flops, and shuffled down a narrow sandy path. Far to the north a bank of gray clouds hung low in the sky. The easterly breeze blew gently, and the salt water lapped quietly on the beach. The tall grasses on the sand dune waved at him as he hurried past. He never failed to marvel at his luck in finding the small cottage located less than one hundred feet from the beach. Far from the tourist resorts, his stretch of beach was usually quiet and rarely crowded. However, weekends became busier, and quite often a jogger or two trotted past in the cool early morning air. He stopped and squinted up the beach as the rising sun peeked through a break in the clouds and paused when something flickered in the glaring sun light. He waited a moment, but whatever he might have seen had disappeared.

"Safe to take my swim, no little old lady to offend," he said, laughing to himself. His wavy brown hair was cut short, a concession to the salty humid air of the island. Green eyes complemented the shimmering aquamarine colors of the ocean. He dropped the towel from his well-tanned six foot one inch frame, waded naked to knee depth, and dove into the warm water. With powerful strokes he aimed for a distant buoy. He loved the ocean, from its beautiful blue-green hues to the wondrous mysteries that lay beneath the ever changing surface. He was happy he had been able to leave his troubled life in Seattle for the sun and salt water of El Fortunato Island. After his sister's death he had floundered for several years, caught up with the petty crimes and risks of gang life. But ten days in the county jail at age 17 opened his eyes and gave him a new

perspective on life. In jail he'd been badgered by stinking drunks, ridiculed by haughty pickpockets, and pestered by heroin addicts. He'd retreated from them all, refusing to enter their dark world, and spent his time brooding in the corner of the large communal cell counting the hours until his release.

One of the local cops had kept his eye on KC and had suggested KC go and talk to Colin Farthington. The super-wealthy industrialist had immediately hired KC as a yard boy at his waterfront estate in an eastern suburb of Seattle. Colin had no family of his own and had taken an instant liking to the lad. For about a year KC performed a variety of menial tasks for Colin and then was promoted to his personal assistant. He learned basic self-defense tactics and began to travel with Colin. He saw the world in a different light, realizing there was much more to life than the back streets of Seattle. While the death of Beth still weighed heavily on him, he began to look at life in a more positive and confident way. During his off hours he worked on earning his high school equivalency. Studies in Environmental Science and Marine Biology at Western Washington University followed. For the past twelve years he'd moved around the world performing ocean related research for one of Colin's charitable foundations.

A sudden wave splashed over his head, bringing him back to the present.

Forty yards up the beach, a lone figure emerged from the glare of the early morning sun and eyed KC as he swam back toward the beach.

CHAPTER 3

El Fortunato, Up the Beach, East of KC's Cottage

Goddamn shit-hole.” Nikki Colt said to herself as she stepped out of her room at the Blue Wave Bed and Breakfast. The turquoise water and silky white sand beaches of the world famous Secret Bay held little interest for her. She’d much prefer to be climbing craggy mountains and exploring dark caves. El Fortunato was very dry and dusty with scrubby vegetation; the highest point on the island less than two hundred feet above sea level. Postcard photos completely ignored the interior of the island, focusing on the pristine sand beaches and the tantalizing water. In spite of her distaste for the immediate surroundings she aimed for the water’s edge. A brisk walk along the beach was an excellent way to stay in shape. She strolled past the swimming pool, hesitated, and studied the reflection of her face in the calm, clear water. She was aware that men found her attractive, intrigued by her natural beauty, and had learned to pay little attention to their stares.

A short walk later Nikki kicked off her flip-flops, stepped onto the cool sandy beach, and glided along the water’s edge with her back to the rising sun. It was unfortunate that her work had led her to this island with its low flat-topped hills and uninteresting flora. Nothing like the magnificent mountains of the Virgin Islands or the sheer beauty of Iceland’s glaciers.

Out to sea several fishing boats passed through the cut in the long barrier reef. The coral reef defining Secret Bay was one of the longest in the world and created a special place for tourists. The reef was miles long and protected the pristine white sand beaches from the ravages of strong wave action. Huge rollers only came ashore during the strongest gales. The generally calm waters were perfect for vacationers.

Nikki slowed when a small crab scurried inches from her bare feet and raced to the safety of the salty water. A few minutes later she turned her attention to the beach far ahead and stopped abruptly when a man dropped a towel and waded into the water.

“What the hell? Is that guy naked?” she said to herself. Shaking her head, she frowned when the man dove into the water. Silly, she thought, and turned her mind to the workday ahead.

Minutes later KC grazed the buoy, pivoted and began the return leg of his swim. His head was clear, his headache gone, and he felt terrific. Tiring of the crawl, he changed his stroke and swam like a dolphin, knifing through the waves. He knew the distance to the beach without looking; he sensed the gentle ocean current and adjusted his path to counteract the subtle forces and hit the shore exactly where he had dropped his towel. When his knees brushed the soft sandy bottom, he stopped and sank back on his heels and began to clear saltwater from his face and eyes.

He started to stand and wade out of the water when he glanced toward his beach towel. A pair of long, slim, and shapely female legs filled his view. KC quickly slumped in the water while his eyes traveled up the body of the owner of those beautiful legs. She wore short shorts and a light green T-shirt with a V neck. She wasn't wearing a bra, and the effect, while subtle, caused something to stir below the water line. The T shirt hung comfortably from her well-toned shoulders, exposing athletic arms that matched her legs. She had dark brown hair and wore it short. A simple pair of hoop silver earrings hung from her small lobes. Her lack of a deep tan told KC she had not been on the island for long. A pink hint of sunburn graced her round face. Standing with one hand on her hip, sunglasses propped on the top of her head, she stared at him and smiled.

"Hi," KC said from the relative safety of the water.

"Hello. Have a nice swim?" the woman replied with a grin.

"Yes, I do this almost every morning. Wakes me up. Say, I've never seen you around here before. Ah, what's your name?"

"I'm Nikki Colt."

"Are you on the island for long? Where are you staying?" KC said, running his fingers through his wavy hair.

"A little ways up the beach at the Blue Waves. Once my work is finished I'm out of here. A few weeks, maybe. Who are you?"

KC looked past her and pointed a finger.

"I'm KC Jameson. I live in the house over there and I do ocean research. I'm trying to get a handle on coral decline. What kind of work are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm here getting ready to install a new radar detection system for the island's government. I'm sort of the advance person. A larger team will be here soon. The system we're putting in will warn the government when unauthorized boats approach the island—I'm sure you're aware of the problems with illegal immigrants. We hope to have it up and running later this month," she replied.

"Cool. Say, would you mind turning your back for a bit so I can get my towel?" KC continued, looking first at her long legs and then at her large blue eyes.

“Why should I do that?”

KC scratched his neck with a forefinger and said, “Well, um, I’m in here without a suit. My daily tradition, you know, and I can’t spend all morning sitting in the ocean.”

“That’s OK. I don’t mind” the woman said slowly. Her blue eyes twinkled with humor and her lips curled with a smirk.

“Well, it matters to me,” KC said with emphasis.

“Tsk, aren’t you the modest one. And on a deserted beach to boot,” she said.

“Wouldn’t you be?”

“How would you know?”

KC hesitated. “Well, then I have an idea: why don’t you strip down so we’re on equal terms and then I’ll come out.” KC said.

“No, I’m sure my fiancé wouldn’t approve,” Nikki replied.

KC stared in disbelief and turned red. Another strike-out. Abruptly he rose to his feet, stormed out of the water, grabbed his towel and marched up the path toward the house, ignoring his flip-flops and sunglasses lying at the edge of the sand dune.

“See ya around, shorty!” Nikki hollered, and snorted as KC disappeared behind a large succulent flowering shrub. Her laughter followed him all the way to his private porch.

CHAPTER 4

Moscow, Russia

Pyotr Asimov huddled in the shadows outside the front door of the building that now served as Alexei's temporary tomb. Soon enough the body would begin to smell. The authorities would come and haul it away with little thought about how or why the trunk contained a stinking rotten corpse. Pyotr waited as a faded gray sedan rumbled down the street and a young couple hurried past him on foot, paying him little attention. In the dim light he headed down the narrow lane past several gated properties, keeping to the shadows as much as possible. He glanced at his watch and shivered in the cool afternoon breeze.

Pyotr pulled his cell phone from his pocket, scrolled down through his contact list, and pressed the call button. Three rings later a young woman answered. "Yes?"

"Hello Kristen. This is Pyotr Asimov. Remember me?"

"Of course, Pyotr. Where have you been, stranger?" she said. "What's up?"

"Well, I don't want to say too much over the phone, but I need to speak with your uncle, Colin. It's about those things he collects. I have some information for him and need to talk to him. You still at the pub?" Pyotr said.

"Yes," she said slowly. "Why not stop over tomorrow night. I have a conference call scheduled at 8 pm."

"I don't think you understand. I need to talk to him right now. It's a matter of life and death." Pyotr said, speaking faster than usual.

Pyotr listened to silence on his phone for about fifteen seconds and for a moment thought she had hung up on him.

"Come over to the pub right now. I'll try to set it up, but I can't promise anything. Order a beer at the bar and wait for a signal from the bartender," Kristen said as she ended the call without letting Pyotr respond.

Pyotr closed his eyes and let out a deep breath. He had to reach the pub immediately but couldn't afford to get careless. Dangerous men might be anywhere. He crossed a small park where the mature trees silently marked his path and hurried across the street. Stopping in the shadow of a larger tree he

kept his eyes on the entrance to the Metro station for nearly ten minutes. His thoughts turned to his dead relative and the difficult task ahead. He felt little regret, knowing Alexei's last dream would not be realized. The Davy Crockett weapons would not be returning to Russia.

Last year he'd come to the aid of an American named Colin who'd become lost in Moscow. Pyotr had guided the man and his niece, Kristen, around the city for three days, showing him the sights, especially the old weapons at the Museum of the Armed Forces, and getting him to his business appointments on time. Pyotr learned that Colin was an avid collector of unusual and rare weapons of all kinds. While Colin was working, Pyotr spent time with Kristen and they became good friends. Colin instructed Pyotr to contact him if he ever needed anything. Pyotr had long thought about moving to the United States—now he might have a chance. But first he had to reach Kristen's small office behind Flannigan's pub and contact Colin Farthington. With a sudden start he dashed across the street, sailed into the ornate Metro Station, and bought a ticket. He leaned against a stone pillar clenching his fists until the train began to move. His eyes darted from side to side searching the platform for anyone who might be watching him. At the last moment he leapt aboard the moving train.

Minutes later he emerged from the Biblioteka Metro Station near the Kremlin and hurried along Mokhovaya Street where he hoped to blend in with the University students who frequented the area. Massive brick buildings lined the street adding to the perpetual gloom of the neighborhood. He slipped around the corner and stepped inside Flannigan's Irish Pub. The dim tavern was crammed with young people, most of them smoking cigarettes and sipping Irish lager. He hurried to the bar, found an empty stool at the far end, and ordered a beer. The bartender filled the glass, looked Pyotr directly in the eye, and gave his head a small shake. Pyotr checked the time again and studied the interior of the pub. The dark wood typical of Irish pubs and the dim lighting gave him a sense of safety even as he scanned the room for anyone who might not fit. He found only a typical bar crowd with loud young men leering at smiling coeds. Pyotr played with the top button of his shirt and sipped his beer. Minutes later the bartender finished serving a pitcher to a table of young men and turned toward Pyotr. He didn't smile but cocked his head, shifted his eyes and nodded toward the back of the pub. Pyotr slid off the stool, left the remnants of his beer on the bar and waded through the sea of people until he reached a narrow door at the back wall. One last turn to survey the pub and he opened the door.

He passed into a dimly lit narrow corridor with worn walls and chipped flooring and hurried along the dusty hallway to a single door at the end. He

knocked three times and waited. Moments later, Pyotr listened to the sound of several deadbolts opening. A young woman jerked the door open and signaled for him to enter. She was tall, about 25, with long red hair and a well-proportioned body. Long shiny earrings hung from her ears. She wore black pants, black shoes, and a gray sweatshirt with a yellow smiley face on the front. The room was bright and clean, without windows. She closed the door and reengaged the sophisticated locking mechanisms.

“Good to see you Pyotr. The bartender buzzed me when he saw you enter the Pub but had to make sure the coast was clear before sending you back,” she said. “You’re in luck. Uncle Colin will be on the secure video conference line at any moment. Quick, sit down and I’ll log you in. Should I know what’s going on?”

Pyotr took off his coat and hung it on the back of a chair. “No. It’s very dangerous stuff,” Pyotr replied as he eased into the chair in front of the computer monitor. Kristen stepped into an adjacent room and closed the door, understanding the conversation with Colin was private. The less she knew, the safer she’d be.

The computer screen flickered briefly. Then a high quality image of a middle aged man with graying hair cut to medium length flashed on the screen.

“Hello, Pyotr. Very good to see you. I hope to get back to Moscow in a few months. Kristen tells me you have some urgent news. I have several undercover operatives in Moscow keeping an eye on the mob and a number of the more corrupt government officials. My informants are becoming concerned that our financial interests may be at risk. At this point we don’t know if it’s the Russian Mafia, the government, or one of the subversive groups,” Colin Farthington said. “Now tell me what is so urgent this early in the morning.”

Pyotr repeated Alexei’s stuttered references to nuclear weapons, a map, the Kremlin, a secret tunnel, bonnie, and an island near Cuba. He spoke slowly and accurately and finished by telling Colin of a fortune, a cave, and Davy Crockett.

“Now, Colin, I have a request. I want to come to America. I have little future here in Moscow. My job with the tour company is a dead end for me. And with what I know about the nuclear weapons, I fear for my life. I can’t live like Alexei did. I want to come to Seattle and work for you. Do you think this is possible? Do you understand what Alexei meant?”

“Well, I know what he meant about Davy Crockett, but not the rest of it. I’m very interested in acquiring the weapons. They would be really cool to have for my collection. I’m sorry to hear Alexei passed away. I would have loved to meet him. Hold there for a few minutes. I’ll get back to you,” Colin said and the computer screen went blank.

Eight minutes later the screen brightened and Colin’s face filled the screen.

“I’ve started people working on Alexei’s clues. I don’t think there will be too much of a problem in solving the mystery. But we’ll forgo searching for a map that may be in the Kremlin because we prefer to keep a low profile in the city. We don’t want the local bureaucrats snooping into our affairs. We’ll get the information we need another way. And you’ll be in America soon, my friend. You must leave Moscow immediately. No time to say goodbye to your parents. I have arranged to have you picked up, but not in Moscow. It’s getting late, but I think you can catch the next train, if you hurry. Get to Bellorusskaya Station and take the 195 train to Minsk and get off at Smolensk. Better to avoid the Belarus border guards if you can. They are usually no problem, but why take the chance. Your contact will be a woman about 30, short blond hair. Wears wire-rimmed glasses. Her name is Gabrielle, and she’ll be wearing a green sweater. Her father is a very close friend so you can trust her completely. When she asks what you are doing in Smolensk your response is ‘I’m here to shop for my mother’s birthday’. She’ll get you past the border guards, and then my chief European operative, Tom Smithers, will get you to the US. OK boy, go for it. Be careful, we cannot let anyone find out about this. The weapons will be safe in my private collection, but I hate to think what might happen if the wrong people get their hands on them. Remember, tell no one about the Davy Crocketts. I’ll see you in a few days. Colin out.”

The screen went blank.

Pyotr leaned back in his chair, stared at the ceiling and let out a long breath. He had to be very careful. Getting to America would not be easy. He feared bad men had nearly found Alexei hiding in his tenement and now they might find him. Pyotr shivered, realizing he and Colin Farthington might be the only people on earth who had real information on the location of the missing nuclear weapons—even if he didn’t understand everything Alexei had told him. He hoped his fears were unfounded, but the memory of the blue sedan creeping past Alexei’s building gave him cause to worry. Kristen returned to the room, interrupting his thoughts. He explained he had to leave to catch a train. He was going to America.

“Good luck, Pyotr. I will try to send someone to collect your things from your apartment and ship them to Colin. Safe travels, and keep in touch,” she said, leaning over and giving him a kiss on his cheek. A quick hug and he was gone.

At the end of the dirty hallway, Pyotr stopped at the closed door. Loud music pulsed on the other side. He opened the door and peered into the room. The pub crowd was louder than when he’d first stepped inside. Empty beer pitchers littered the tables. Young servers were replacing them with full ones.

Pyotr didn't find anything to give him reason to be concerned. He stepped into the main pub room and stationed himself in the shadows searching for something or someone that didn't look right to him. He froze in place when a drunken girl reeled toward him, smiled awkwardly, and spun off to the toilet. Two more followed, both stumbled into Pyotr, giggling and teetering after their friend. He had to hurry, but couldn't take unnecessary risks. He inched to the front door and surveyed the street outside the window. Curtains covered the lower half of the panes, providing a bit of protection as he eyed young couples stroll past, arm in arm. A few customers arrived, passing him without giving him a glance. He checked his watch yet again. I must hurry, he thought, only forty five minutes.

He rubbed his nose, opened the door, and hurried up the street toward the Metro station.

Half an hour later he marched down arched marble passageways to the train for Smolensk. He purchased his ticket then casually scanned the station. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. He relaxed a little.

Pyotr failed to spot the lone man standing in the shadows with a cell phone to his ear. The man's eyes followed Pyotr until the doors of the train closed.

"He's on the train to Minsk. Place two men at each station on the route," the man spoke into the phone. Then he turned and strolled out of the station. His face held a satisfied smile.

CHAPTER 5

Train Station, Smolensk, Russia

Pyotr's train arrived on time at 2:20 am. He had slept well during the six hour journey, but his stomach growled from lack of food. He hoped the woman in green would have something for him to eat. The few passengers who disembarked with him clutched their cases and bags and scurried away from the train to waiting cars and a lone rusted public bus.

Pyotr stepped off the platform and searched for his contact. No one appeared to be waiting for him so he followed the last of the passengers hurrying toward a parking lot on the east side of the station. Outside the front door he spotted a small garden area planted with trees and shrubs. A young woman with short blond hair and wire-rimmed glasses was standing alone nearly hidden by a tall evergreen tree. Her leather coat hung open revealing a green sweater underneath. She had chosen the best location to monitor both the walkways and the main terminal door.

"I am Gabrielle. Why are you here?" she said when Pyotr stepped close to her.

Pyotr hesitated when he gazed into her beautiful large brown eyes. He caught himself and started to say, "I'm here to shop for my mother's birth-" but stopped when her body stiffened and she squinted over Pyotr's left shoulder.

"Oh, shit! Run now," she hissed in a high-pitched voice. "I have a car."

Gabrielle wheeled around, grabbed at Pyotr's sleeve and sprinted toward the parking lot. Confused, Pyotr hesitated until he sensed a figure racing toward him from the direction of the train tracks. He raced after the girl and reached the passenger door at the same time the car roared to life.

He lunged for the door handle when something stung him sharply on the side of his neck. He slapped at the pain as a strange warmth spread to his shoulder. His fingers grasped the hard object sticking out of his neck but he couldn't quite get a hold of it. Stumbling, he tried to pull the door open. His fingers slid off the handle. Gabrielle's horror stricken face became a blur.

"Come on, hurry! Get in!" she shouted, reaching over to help him open the door.

It was too late. Pyotr was unconscious before his head hit the pavement.

Footsteps pounded on the pavement as Gabrielle slammed the gearshift into drive and spun out of the parking lot. In her rear view mirror she saw two men, both dressed in dark clothing, leaning over Pyotr.

CHAPTER 6

Somewhere in Smolensk, Russia

Pyotr Asimov's head throbbed and he nearly vomited as a sour taste rose to the back of his throat. He opened his eyes and squinted immediately as bright lights shot painful darts in the back of his skull. He shivered involuntarily in the chilly room, but tried to ignore his pain and assess the situation. Confused, he opened his eyes wider and was shocked to discover that he was completely naked and strapped tightly to a large wood table. Leather straps gripped both legs and arms, another wrapped around his stomach. He felt a strap hanging loosely at his throat.

When his eyes adjusted to the bright lights he inspected the room. It was small, perhaps three meters square, with plain white walls and no windows. A white door loomed straight ahead of him. To his right, on the floor, lay a large wooden trunk, its lid closed. He couldn't see anything behind him. He struggled without success to free himself from the bindings, and then lay still when he detected a sound from the other side of the door. His heart pounded and stomach churned in fearful anticipation. The door opened slowly with an eerie creak. A tall man entered and dimmed the lights.

"Ah, my young friend is awake. Welcome Asimov. With your cooperation I trust we will have a fruitful conversation," said the man.

"Where am I? What did you do to me? Who are you and why am I tied up? Why am I here? I am cold. Where is the girl?" Pyotr said with growing fear.

"I ask the questions young man. It is most unfortunate that your woman friend eluded my best men. I think you would have spared her much pain and given me the information I desire without delay. If you cooperate, your discomfort will be brief," replied the tall man.

With the lights dimmed, the man's features became more pronounced. He was very tall, well over six feet, with gray skin and a face so gaunt he appeared to be anorexic. The cigarette hanging from his thin lips only increased the appearance of evil. His shaved head and long narrow beak of a nose reminded Pyotr of a vulture. When the man moved around the table, as if eyeing his prey, Pyotr's stomach tightened with fear and his heart hammered against his ribs.

“What are you talking about? Why am I here?” cried Pyotr.

“I am Nikolai Ivanovich Chuikov and you are in Smolensk. Nobody knows where you are. This room is fully soundproofed. When we track down the woman, and I guarantee we will, there will be no hope of rescue for you. No help from Belarus. I do not care how wealthy your American friend is. He won’t find us. We are invisible. Now, I want you to give me the information you learned from Alexei Baranov,” the tall man said as a sneer curled his upper lip.

“He-he died right after I arrived,” Pyotr spoke rapidly. The effects of the poison dart had worn off and his mind was now clear. Fear gripped him as he stared at the creature that hovered over him. Cold sweat glistened on his naked chest.

“Hmmm, I do not think so. Why would you flee Moscow without any of your belongings?” Chuikov stated as he sidled to the foot of the table.

“I, I was in a hurry to meet my girlfriend,” Pyotr stuttered.

“No, I don’t think so. Here is something that might help to refresh your memory,” Nikolai said coldly.

He took a slow drag from his unfiltered cigarette, tapped the ash off with a long forefinger, and pressed the glowing tip into the bottom of Pyotr’s bare foot. Pyotr yelled and writhed but could not escape the pain. His feet remained strapped firmly on the table.

“Tell me what that pathetic old man told you,” Nikolai said.

“He told me nothing!” Pyotr said as each burn seared deep into the sole of his foot.

Again and again the glowing tip of the cigarette pressed gently on Pyotr’s exposed flesh. Nikolai Chuikov moved his cigarette up Pyotr’s leg leaving small piles of glowing embers every few inches until he reached the groin. Each time he wielded the burning cigarette long enough to bring an agonizing scream from Pyotr. He lit a second cigarette.

“I will give you another chance, my young friend. Tell me, and your pain will end,” the vulture-man pressed on. “These little burns are nothing.”

Nikolai lit a third cigarette when the second was only half burned. When both glowed brightly he pressed them on each of Pyotr’s exposed testicles. Pyotr screamed in pain as his stomach muscles cramped. Sharp pain raced like wildfire, and his lower body shook in waves of sharp spasms. Chuikov displayed his evil grin as the two cigarettes continued their slow singeing burn. Pyotr vomited and lost consciousness.

Sometime later, he woke, alone in the room, still strapped to the table. He shivered again as a frosty mist rose from his mouth. His burns throbbed in spite of the chill of the room and his mind reeled with fear and confusion. For a brief moment he wondered if he would be freed if he told the truth. He had made

an oath to Colin Farthington, and telling everything he knew about the nuclear weapons would mean losing the only person who could get him to America.

The door swung open and Nikolai marched in with a scowl on his gray face, his eyes betraying no emotion. He wore a heavy fleece jacket, no hat, and tight leather gloves.

“Ah, you waken so soon. You are shivering, I see. If you help me, I will relieve your discomfort. Are you eager to tell me what the old man shared with you about the nuclear weapons? You see, Pyotr, it is unfortunate for you that Alexei eluded us for so long. His comrades were not so fortunate. But alas, they, too, were stubborn and only gave us a few pieces of valuable information before they left us. We know about the Davy Crockett nuclear weapon system stolen from the American pigs in Berlin and eventually shipped to Cuba. Not only warheads, but also a launcher. The whole works, ready to fire. We also know some of the warheads never reached the Soviet Union after the Cuban missile debacle. We have wealthy and dedicated associates, shall we say, in the Middle East who will pay dearly for them. We will once again turn the tables on the imperialist pigs in America. Now, tell me where they are hidden!”

“I can’t tell you what I don’t know,” shouted Pyotr.

Nikolai rolled his eyes and said, “Oh, you don’t lie very well.”

Chuikov spun, reached into the trunk and extracted a strange looking wooden vice-like instrument. It was comprised of two thick spiked wood blocks, about 50 cm long, each with six sharply pointed eight to ten cm spikes on one side. Two long wooden screws connected the blocks, with the spikes facing each other. Chuikov lifted Pyotr’s left knee and placed one of the blocks under it.

“Hey! I don’t understand what you want from me. Please let me go,” Pyotr stammered.

Chuikov ignored Pyotr’s plea and reached under the table and pressed a button. Fifteen seconds later the door opened and a young woman, wearing olive drab military clothing entered the room. The chill of the room seemed to have no effect on her. She stood about five feet five inches and wore her dark brown hair cut short. She wore neither jewelry nor any obvious tattoos. She stalked toward Pyotr and studied him with narrow eyes, lingering for just a moment at his naked groin.

“Ha,” she said, shaking her head. “And you call yourself a man?”

“Welcome, Lukova. Thank you for taking the time to assist me. I just need a little help with my device. Please just hold this block steady over his knee while I insert the screws.”

Moments later the wooden device was snugly clamped in place above and

below Pyotr's knee. Chuikov nodded and Lukova spun and marched from the room without uttering a sound.

"Enough of your lies. I will untie your head so you can have a better view," the vulture said in a flat monotone. He unlatched the loose strap around Pyotr's neck and pressed a small lever below him. The table creaked as the head lifted up a few inches so Pyotr had an unobstructed view of his knee and the ominous looking device. Nikolai checked to make sure the straps holding Pyotr to the table were snug then tightened the vice on his knee.

"Tell me, Asimov," he said.

"I-I can't," Pyotr said as the sharp spikes dug into the soft skin behind his knee. A spot of blood dribbled from a spot on his kneecap. "I know nothing."

"Oh, so that hurts, does it? But you don't really know pain yet," Chuikov said and tightened the screws a quarter turn. Pyotr's kneecap flattened and the spikes penetrated the skin on the underside of his knee. Sweat formed on his forehead and he groaned with pain.

"Pyotr, tell me about the nuclear weapons and your pain will cease."

"I don't know!"

One more slight turn of the screws sent shock waves of intense pain up Pyotr's leg and into his spine. Blood began to seep more freely from the wounds and into a small pool on the table. A wave of nausea swept over him and the room began to spin.

Chuikov looked on, his face betraying no emotion. Slowly he unscrewed the knee splitting device and removed it. Pyotr's pain subsided just a little and he took a deep breath.

"Tell me and I will give you something for your pain," Chuikov urged.

"He-he said something I didn't understand."

"I will," Chuikov said as he fumbled with the device. This time, working alone, he spent a long minute attaching the device to Pyotr's right knee. Pyotr could do nothing but watch Chuikov thread the two screws.

"No, no more please," gasped Pyotr as Chuikov roughly tightened the screws. "He said-something like—a bonnie fortune and an island. I do not understand what he meant. One moment he was alive and talking to me and the next he was dead."

"Now we are getting somewhere," Nikolai said as he loosened the screws one more time. "Tell me the rest."

"Believe me, that is all I know," Pyotr said trembling from pain and fear. He dared not betray Colin. He sealed his lips and glared at his captor. He struggled with the straps, only causing more agony for his knees and back.

Chuikov stared at his captive, eyes mere slits, face gray and thin lips closed tightly.

Pyotr, drenched in sweat, gulped for air, his head swimming. His left leg, now swollen to nearly twice its normal size and turning a deep purplish red throbbled as blood continued to drip onto the table.

Chuikov tightened the screws again and the spikes dug in deeply. Vomit welled in the back of Pyotr's throat and he tried without success to spit it at Chuikov. One more slight turn of the screw and Pyotr felt a sharp snap in the back of his knee as the sharp spikes severed tendons. Pain hammered his entire body.

"He said something about a secret in the Kremlin!" he whimpered, voice growing weak.

Nikolai paused and stared at the bare ceiling, a frown barely creasing his smooth forehead. He paced around the table once, a dull humming sound escaping his lips. A sudden jerk of his head displayed a huge grin, exposing crooked, brownish teeth. He smirked, nodded his head and relaxed. His body softened, but his beady vulture eyes maintained their evil stare.

"And you passed all this information on to your American friend?"

"No. No, we lost the internet connection. I had no time. I had to catch a train," Pyotr said, eyes darting from side to side searching the small chamber. His captor had disappeared from view.

"You disappoint me, boy," Chuikov said as he stepped back into Pyotr's view. He reached once more for the screws and turned them violently. Pyotr howled in pain as he felt his kneecap shatter into small pieces. Several shards of bone poked through the side of his knee.

"A map. And a tunnel," Pyotr squeaked, his voice a mere whisper, his eyes closed tightly.

Nikolai sighed and squeezed his nose with forefinger and thumb.

"Thank you, young man, but I'm afraid my patience has worn out. Our conversation is at an end."

Pyotr let out a long breath, praying his ordeal was over. "Please, help the pain," he said, eyes open and pleading with his captor.

"As you wish." Chuikov nodded then pivoted on one foot and reached for a long narrow object hanging on the wall behind Pyotr's head. He loved the feel of the smooth rosewood handle and the shine of the Damascus steel blade. He wheeled around, raised the Chinese sword high over his head, and made a swift, powerful move. Straightening, he pulled a cloth from his rear pocket, carefully wiped the blade and returned the sword to its place on the wall. Then he stalked from the room without looking back, a satisfied smirk on his face.

Pyotr's open mouth was frozen in a silent scream, his eyes like marbles

staring with confusion and fear. Gravity slowly gained the advantage when his head slowly began to tilt to one side. Then it rolled once, fell of the table, and landed on the floor with a sickening thud. It was a sound nobody heard.

CHAPTER 7

Sinclair Island, San Juan Islands, Washington, USA

Fifty seven year old Colin Farthington settled back in his office chair and gazed out the huge picture window. Across the shimmering sea the rocky cliffs of neighboring Cypress Island were shrouded in darkness. Farther to the west storm clouds hung low over Vancouver Island. The simply decorated office was on the second floor of Colin's rustic home. He owned nearly eighty percent of Sinclair Island, a thousand acre spit of land located some twelve miles southeast of Bellingham, Washington. A handful of seasonal residents, many of whom flew their own airplanes to the island's small airstrip, inhabited the remainder of the island. Most residents, while friendly, kept to themselves. Except for two or three annual get-togethers, social life on the island was non-existent.

Colin gazed at a passing car ferry and smiled. He was glad they didn't stop at Sinclair Island. Colin had never married and treasured his privacy as much as he enjoyed the fabulous views of the other islands that dotted the ocean to the southeast of Vancouver Island. He'd certainly entertained many beautiful women over the years, but bachelorhood suited him just fine. His thoughts were interrupted by a gentle beeping sound coming from his computer. He turned his attention to the screen and studied the face of a one of his assistants.

"OK, Phil, so you recommend we take a position in Uranium? I read your report and agree. I know it's risky, but how much do you recommend?" Colin said.

"I'm confident that in six to eight years you'll triple your initial investment. I suggest forty to fifty," the young man on the screen spoke animatedly.

Colin's private telephone began to chirp.

He lifted his brow and said, "I agree, Phil. Up to fifty million dollars. I gotta go. I've got another call coming in. Do what you do best."

He hesitated for a moment as he eyed the rapidly blinking yellow light. He snatched up the phone and said, "Yes, Jane."

"Gabrielle is on the secure line from Belarus. She sounds frantic," Jane replied.

Colin frowned and punched a button on the phone.

"Yes Gabbi?"

"Colin I need help! Pyotr has been kidnapped! The men who grabbed him

almost got me, too. I am afraid to try to call him on his cell phone. They might be looking for me too. What should I do?"

Colin's mouth tightened.

"This is bad Gabrielle. Make no mistake. Tell me exactly what happened."

"It was at the train station. Two men appeared from nowhere. I kept watch before Pyotr arrived but didn't see them until it was too late. They shot him in the neck with some sort of a dart. I'm sorry. It's my fault. I should have been more careful. But I am frightened that the men will find me too! Please help me! And please find Pyotr."

"OK Gabbi, hold on. You did all you could. Stay in your apartment. Do not answer the telephone. Don't go near the windows. You will be safe. I'll send Tom Smithers over to your place as soon as I can. Trust him, completely, you'll be OK," Colin replied.

Better get Kristen out of Moscow too. His sister would strangle him if anything happened to her daughter.

He hung up the telephone and scowled out the window. The rain began to fall in heavy sheets. The seas outside Bellingham Bay had become steely gray and ominous. He had to make sure the men who had kidnapped Pyotr couldn't get the girls too. They were valuable assets. Even more, they were like family. Time was no longer on his side. He had to assume Pyotr told his captors everything. Soon others would be closing in on the nuclear weapons.

He drummed his fingers on the table for a moment then picked up the phone again and rang for Jane.

CHAPTER 8

The Kremlin, Moscow, Russia

Just after midnight on a moonless night three men crept along the southwest corner of the Kremlin, avoiding the bright lights shining from the top of the high red brick wall surrounding the huge complex. Each man was dressed in black and wore a small backpack and a harness, similar to those used by rock climbers. They crouched in the shadows watching the sparse traffic on the Bolshoy Kamenny Bridge that spanned the Moscow River. Silently they attached short climbing spikes to each boot, and when the road was empty of cars each took his turn to run to the base of a large tree and scurry up until he was well hidden by foliage. As they reached the top of the tree they removed their spikes and stowed them in their backpacks. A warm breeze blew across the river carrying with it a hint of diesel fumes and rustled the leaves around the three men. The five meter high brick wall of the Kremlin loomed eight meters away. The walls brought to mind images of a castle with one and a half meter wide notches cut into the top of the wall at regular intervals.

“OK, Goguniv, our position is perfect, do your thing now,” Pavel Dubkov, the leader of the team, whispered into the microphone of his headset radio. He continued his scan of the open area between the Moscow River and the Kremlin wall. The traffic on the four lane road that skirted the river moved along at a steady pace. A lone bicyclist cruised past on the sidewalk concentrating on the crosswalk ahead. They had at least four hours to break into the Kremlin, find the map showing the location of the nuclear weapons, and make their escape. But Dubkov was nervous. Nikolai Chuikov had entrusted him with the mission and would never accept failure. Pavel was well aware of Chuikov’s short temper and ruthlessness. He was certain that failure would result in a painful and slow death for his entire team.

Fadey Goguniv, a lanky twenty-five year old with extensive tattoos covering his arms and neck, opened his pack and removed a small crossbow, aimed for the top of the Kremlin wall and squeezed the trigger. A three-pronged hook hurtled forward, a thin wire trailing behind. A quiet *thunk* told him he had hit his mark. Quickly he yanked the wire tight and attached the end to the tree.

“Go Kerensky, hide yourself when you get across and signal when we can cross over without being detected. Keep an eye on the road,” said Dubkov.

Jasha Kerensky, the youngest of the three at only nineteen years of age, attached a wheeled trolley to the wire, lifted his wiry legs and silently slid toward the top of the wall, less than one-half meter below their position in the tree. As he approached, he used his feet to halt his slide, then unlatched the trolley and scooted through one of the notches in the wall. Finally he stepped down one meter to the narrow battle platform that ran along the inside of the wall. Peering through one of the notches he scanned the bridge and the river. A few cars sped past, but he was well hidden in the shadows. His comrades squatted in silence and waited. At the next lull in traffic Jasha flashed his light.

Minutes later the three intruders lowered themselves to the ground inside the Kremlin, an old fortress surrounded by more than 2200 meters of brick wall. They tugged on the rope until it dropped at their feet, then they hid it behind a shrub. Twenty defensive towers were irregularly spaced along the walls. One of these, 300 meters east of their point of entrance, was their target. The men waited without moving for five minutes to make sure security guards hadn't detected them. They crept silently, keeping to the trees that littered the dark southern portion of the Kremlin.

After a seven minute trek, they halted outside Tainitskaya Tower, more commonly known as The Secret Tower. Built over five hundred years ago, the red brick tower's primary purpose was to protect the river side of the Kremlin. The Secret Tower was unique in its design. As a key component of Kremlin defense, the Tower had a cache-well and underground tunnel that led to the Moscow River. This tunnel led from the well to the river and, if there was a siege against the Kremlin, defenders could either use it to escape or get water from the river. The Soviets filled in the tunnel in the early 1930's. During the following decades homeless people and drug peddlers scoured out small passageways deep into the tunnel. Recently the government had sealed the entrance so that access from the river side became impossible. The only access was from the inside of the Kremlin.

Pavel Dubkov, a small, thin man in his late 30's with a clipped military-style haircut, removed his backpack and dug out a small canvas case. He unrolled it and selected two narrow metal tools. In less than a minute he picked the heavy lock on the front door and slipped into the Tower. Fadey and Jasha eyed each other, shook their heads, and smiled. More than once they had been amazed at the strength and dexterity of their leader. Both of the men were at least fifteen centimeters taller and fifteen kilos heavier than Dubkov; but they could match neither his power nor his agility. Fadey followed Pavel into the tower; Jasha

hid a small wireless microphone under a nearby shrub and followed moments later—they would be alerted by any sound—and secured the door from the inside.

Pavel Dubkov led his team from the front door of the tower to a circular well filled with cobblestones. It was at the bottom of this old cache-well where they expected to find the tunnel leading to the river. Working with a sense of urgency, they began to remove the fist-sized rocks from the well. Forty-five minutes later they reached the bottom. Dubkov donned a headlamp, climbed two meters to the bottom of the well, and wriggled his way into the narrow tunnel.

“Do you see the map?” Fadey asked. “Chuikov thought we’d have to dig about one meter.”

“Nothing yet,” Dubkov said with a grunt as he squirmed farther into the narrowing space. He searched every inch of the exposed wall of the tunnel but couldn’t find the drawing. Fine dust coated the inside of his nose. He rested for a minute while the dust settled to the ground. He reached into a rear pocket, removed a bandana and tied it around his face. More comfortable, he renewed his search for the map. He cleared away several rocks to clear a larger path. He rolled to his side to move one of the larger rocks out of his way. He started to roll back to his stomach when he caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye. He squinted at the ceiling and discovered small dark etchings scoured deep into the stone.

“I think I found the map!” he shouted with satisfaction and relief.

“Pavel be quiet, someone is coming!” Jasha whispered as loud as he dared. “Turn off your lamp!”

The three Russians froze in place, holding their breaths, as the microphone Jasha had hidden picked up the sounds of someone approaching the Secret Tower’s front door. Fadey’s hand drifted to the pistol strapped to his right hip.

“Da, Svetlana, she is a beauty, Uri, but I do not think she will go out with you,” one guard said and laughed.

“Well, I can hope. You know she has not turned me down yet,” the other replied.

“Ah, two more hours until our shift is over and then you can visit her and I will go home to my lovely fat wife and cheap vodka. I think she is cooking shashlik for me tonight,” the first said and laughed loudly.

“All clear,” whispered Jasha as the sounds of the guards faded.

Pavel relaxed, rolled over on his back and tugged a small digital camera from his pocket. He adjusted his headlamp as the dust settled and went to work.

When he finished photographing the map that was etched into the roof of the tunnel, Pavel climbed out of the tunnel and helped Jasha and Fadey refill the well. Gathering their gear they crept out of the Tower, closing the unlocked door behind them.

The night was still dark and quiet when the three intruders approached the interior Kremlin wall where their rope was hidden behind a low hedge. They scaled the brick wall and worked their way back to the tree. Minutes later they raced down the Moscow River in a small motorboat, similar to many that would cruise the river when the sun rose.

Pavel reached into a compartment under one of the seats for a 2-way radio and flipped a toggle switch.

“We found the map. It will probably be days before they discover the Tower’s unlocked door. By then, it won’t matter,” he said with a broad smile on his narrow face.

CHAPTER 9

National Hurricane Center, Miami, Florida

Charlie Holly leaned back in his ergonomic chair with his eyes closed. He'd been on duty for nearly fifteen hours after agreeing to fill in for Maggie Booth, who had taken time off work to assist her ailing mother. Soon his head fell to his chest and his breathing became slow and quiet.

The National Hurricane Center's main operation center occupied a medium sized room with soft brown paint on the walls and muted lighting. A large map of North America, the Atlantic Ocean, Western Europe, and Africa took up most of one wall. Eighteen computer stations were situated around the rest of the room. A large desk in the center of the room housed advanced communications equipment and was used as the main control station for the Center. The computer screen on Charlie's desk displayed nothing more than a small, but intense, weather system off the African coast.

Gentle snoring filled the room with a soothing regularity as Charlie dreamed of marlin fishing and girls in skimpy bikinis. When his screen automatically refreshed itself the small orange dot surrounded by yellow where the thunderstorm had been turned a deep red and became much larger.

The door banged as senior hurricane specialist Sally Riggs hurried into the room.

"Wake up deadhead!" she said as Charlie's body jerked and his eyes opened.

"Uh, sorry, Boss. I've done a double shift and the weather has been real quiet."

"Well, what the heck is that red blob on your screen?" Sally asked, her forehead knitted into a frown.

"I have no idea. I only closed my eyes a minute ago," he said. "Let's check the barometric pressure."

Sally eased into her chair, clicked her wireless mouse several times, then sat back and waited. Two seconds later she leaned forward and studied the data that had appeared on her computer screen.

"No worries yet," she said. "Pressure's 1012 mb, just a bit below normal. I'll watch for a while. The storm might blow itself out near the Cape Verde Islands. I'll take over here."

Sally settled back in her chair and frowned. Something didn't look right to

her. She wasn't concerned about a tropical storm because the barometric pressure was normal and most big storms formed farther west than this one. But it had grown much larger in the few minutes she'd been in the center. Maybe it was only a local storm.

She checked the pressure reading again.

1002 and dropping. No worries, yet.

CHAPTER 10

Fort Belvoir, Virginia

Lt. Colonel Brad Wilkerson sat alone in his office on the second floor of a non-descript brick building at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, fifteen miles south of Washington DC. His second floor office was plain, with only a desk, comfortable office chair, and several filing cabinets. Photos of Wilkerson posing with small groups of soldiers covered the walls. An American Flag on a tall metal pole stood in one corner. His assistant occupied a small adjoining office. They shared a men's room with others on the same floor. Only Wilkerson's name was on a plaque attached to the outside door of their suite. There was no indication that he was assigned to the US Army Intelligence Support Activity (ISA), a relatively unknown foreign intelligence-gathering unit of the Army.

After reading the single paragraph report for a second time he stood up, walked over to the window, and looked out, unsure whether he should contact the man at the White House immediately or wait for more information. Majestic maple trees waved gently in the breeze. Beyond the trees dense woods separated the fort from upscale suburban neighborhoods. He stared at the vacant grounds for two minutes, and then returned to his chair, picked up his secure cellular phone, and pressed a speed dial button.

It was answered immediately.

"What is it, Colonel?"

"Well, sir, our listening post intercepted a transmission between someone in Moscow and an American businessman located on an island near Seattle. The key words of the communication were 'Davy Crockett.' We're confident the communication concerns the nuclear weapons stolen from our Army troops in West Germany back in 1959 when the Cold War was hot, but before the Wall went up in Berlin. We haven't picked up a reference to Davy Crockett in years. The rest of the communication was a jumble of phrases we don't yet understand, but my analyst is working on it."

Vice President Gordon leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. A moment later he blinked his eyes several times and nodded.

"Well, Brad, keep me in the loop, but keep a tight lid on this. You know

there are only a few of us who know the Russians stole our nuclear weapons. We've got to get them back. We're lucky neither the media nor my opponents have stumbled on the truth of what really happened. This new development is promising, though. I can't stress enough how important this is and that you've got to keep the situation under wraps. Inside your office. We can't share our intel with any of the other intelligence agencies. Especially those bastards over at NSA. OK? Anyway, who's this contact on the island near Seattle? Any chance we can bring him in to our side?" said Gordon.

"He's Colin Farthington, sir. We've had our eye on that rich sucker for a long time. U.S. Customs suspects that many of the weapons he reportedly has are illegal, but none of the agents has been able to catch him in the act of bringing them into the country. He's a sneaky son-of-a-bitch. I don't think he would ever help President Anderson's administration. I'm sure you are aware they're about as far apart politically as any two people can be. When we learn where the nukes are kept, I'll send a team to retrieve them."

Gordon rolled his eyes, his mouth tight.

"Colin Farthington? Shit. I haven't had contact with that scoundrel for years. We attended the same college and joined the same fraternity. I couldn't get a dime out of him for the campaign. Do whatever is required to get those weapons back. Don't bore me with the details, but you have clearance to take extreme measures if necessary. I'll get you whatever funding or equipment you need. You'll be responsible for securing your own weapons, though. Remember, the honor of the United States is at stake here," the Vice President replied.

Lt. Colonel Wilkerson hung up and smiled. He'd worked with Vice President Gordon enough times to see behind his phony remark about honor. Politicians were stupid, he thought.

Wilkerson had seen the Vice President whore himself for personal political gain. Sydney Gordon rose to his position by using his law enforcement experience. After serving four years in the US Army 18th Military Police Brigade, he attended law school at Harvard. At age thirty two he was elected Attorney General of Maryland, followed by eight years as Governor. Then President Anderson chose him as the Vice Presidential nominee.

Wilkerson's thoughts shifted to the problem at hand. He felt certain that the Davy Crocketts were within his grasp, but getting them back could be tricky. Weighing only 76 pounds, these missile launched warheads were the smallest nuclear weapons ever built, measuring only 30 inches long and less than a foot wide. They have a kill radius of 500 feet and expel a lethal dose of radiation up to a quarter mile. A detonation would render an area uninhabitable for as little

as two days, depending on the wind and terrain. Perfect for a terrorist group planning to attack the President or the Senate Office building. Or a compound like Camp David, the President's private retreat.

Wilkerson shuddered at the thought and checked his watch, hoping his assistant would report soon. The secret of the theft of the weapons had been kept within a tight circle. Previous Directors of the ISA had kept the information close to the vest; the troops who had been on duty when the Russians stole the nukes from under their noses had been systematically silenced. The few low level staffers and analysts that worked on the project were aware their families would be in grave danger if they leaked the information. Wilkerson was confident the secret would be kept in a tight circle. Damage contained for now. But not forever. The internet wasn't called the information superhighway for nothing. As well, he had no control over what the Russians might do; security breaches were very common in Russia and bribes ruled the day. Still, he had to learn the location of the weapons.

His phone rang.

"OK, sergeant. You'd better have something for me."

"I do, sir," Staff Sergeant Jack Smith said. "At first the analyst thought 'fortune' and 'island' referred to Fortuna Island near Croatia, but that didn't pan out. The geology's all wrong. I—"

"I don't care where they aren't, sergeant. Get on with it," Wilkerson interrupted.

"Yes, sir. We found this small island east of Cuba named El Fortunato. It's only about 15 miles long, but we discovered a reference to a geological tourist attraction called Bonny's Abyss. It's a good bet that's where the Russians hid the Davy Crockett nuclear weapons."

"Who controls the island, sergeant?" Wilkerson asked.

"Well sir, the British run it as one of their Overseas Territories. We can't invade it. And we'd never get permission to explore the abyss," Smith replied.

"Of course not. Make sure you shred everything. That will be all," Wilkerson snapped as he hung up the phone. He smiled to himself and nodded his head. They would be in and out before anybody knew they were even there, he mused.

Brad Wilkerson turned to his computer and printed a file listing his select teams from Seaspray, a covert Army unit formed during the Iran hostage crisis in 1980. Good thing his units were no longer working with the CIA. He could not risk other agencies learning about this situation.

Wilkerson studied the list and shook his head. His worst fears were confirmed. The best teams were stationed in South Korea or Pakistan. Several in

Venezuela and Libya. He told himself this job would be easy and he wouldn't need a crack team. But he hated to take unnecessary risks. He moved his finger down the list until he came to the last name.

Wilkerson closed his eyes and settled back in his chair. He sat without moving for five minutes. Then he lifted his spit-shined shoes with their one inch lifts onto his desk and crossed his ankles. He rubbed his chin and pulled at his nose. With a jerk he got to his feet, reached for the phone, and called Lieutenant Troy Baker.

He said a silent prayer while the phone rang.

CHAPTER II

Washington DC

Vice President Sydney Gordon settled into his chair and stared at the telephone. He was a good looking man, six foot two inches tall, with a square jaw and dark brown hair combed straight back. A bit of gray at the temples gave him a distinguished look. Yet his cold eyes only softened when it was politically expedient. After plotting for years to become President he had just fallen short of gaining his party's nomination five years earlier. He'd accepted second place on the ticket, understanding the Presidential nominee, Senator Marge Anderson of Oregon, chose him only because of the electoral votes he could deliver. It had worked; they'd won a very close election. Their reelection last year had been much easier.

Most of the political insiders understood she had preferred Senator Grayson Wythe of Virginia over Gordon. Wythe came from a family long entrenched in Virginian politics, even claiming lineage to George Wythe, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. But Gordon had ruthlessly out-maneuvered him in order to gain the Vice Presidential nomination.

Gordon had discovered that Wythe's father had been careless while posted in Germany. He'd been sent to Berlin as a military attaché responsible for the Davy Crockett weapons and had become involved with a young German woman who'd been an agent for the Soviets. When the Davy Crockett nuclear warheads had disappeared, so had she. The elder Wythe had quietly been demoted and sent to an outpost in Alaska.

Gordon also had information that Senator Wythe, as Chairman of an important foreign affairs subcommittee, had secretly buried this information. When Gordon had presented the proof to Wythe, the Senator had no choice to drop out of the race, citing "family considerations."

Sydney Gordon had never been able get his arms around the high approval rate the President enjoyed. Her dovish foreign policy agenda did not match the serious dangers all free nations faced from terrorism. But when he ultimately became President he'd lead the United States to its rightful place in the world, no matter who got hurt in the process. He was confident he would succeed her

if he played his cards right and if Wilkerson did his job. In three short years he'd be the most powerful man in the world.

He picked up the secure phone, studied his address book, and punched in the numbers, not trusting an assistant to place a call.

"Colin Farthington's office, how can I help you?" a young woman's voice said pleasantly.

"I'd like to speak with Mr. Farthington. Please tell him William Teller is calling," the Vice President replied in a steady tone.

After a brief silence, "Hey, Sydney, er—Mr. Vice President, it's been a long time. Why the cloak and dagger? You haven't used that ridiculous alias since our fraternity days at Tufts. What can I do for you?" Colin said in a friendly voice that did not match his mood.

"I'll get right to the point. We've obtained information you might be interested in some extremely rare military weapons from the fifties. Cold War items. What can you tell me?" the Vice President said.

"What is this, Mr. Vice President? You guys spying on me? I did have a lead on several unique Russian bazookas, supposed to be in the basement of an old bombed out building in Minsk. Unfortunately, nothing came of it," Colin said.

"Oh, you understand how it is, Colin. Some bureaucrat from West Point contacted my office. They'd like to fill out their museum collection of World War II weaponry and wanted my help. I know you're an old weapons collector and thought you might be able to help. I'm sure you're aware that some up here on the Hill, not to mention the FBI and a bunch of other Federal agencies, think you are crossing a legal line by obtaining some of your weapons. I've got no concerns about the methods you use," the Vice President said.

"Well, sorry to disappoint, Syd. But as I said, I reached a dead end. And remember what I said. I'm a law-abiding loyal citizen. Tell me, how did you learn of my interest in these particular weapons?"

Gordon reclined in his chair without speaking for nearly fifteen seconds. He enjoyed this kind of bullshit.

"Sorry Colin, you don't have clearance for sensitive information. Security has tightened up since 9-11, even with the policies of the current President. Contact me if you hear anything."

"Sure thing Mr. Vice President. You can count on me," Colin said in a flat voice.

After he hung up the phone, Sydney Gordon rose to his feet and withdrew to the window. He paid little attention to the beautiful white flowering shrubs outside and the neatly trimmed lawn. His eyes hardened into narrow slits.

"Fucking liar," he muttered.

CHAPTER 12

Sinclair Island, Washington State

Colin Farthington paced on his elevated outdoor deck. A foggy mist filled the air, hindering his view of the strait thirty five feet below his perch, but he didn't care. Passing whales and soaring eagles, had he been able to see them, would have held no interest for him today. Impatiently he glanced again through the window at the clock hanging on the wall of his office. There was much he needed to learn. He felt certain Pyotr was dead and prayed Gabrielle and Kristen had reached safety. Why hadn't Smithers reported in yet? Was he in danger too?

Colin questioned whether his passion for rare weapons was worth the loss of people he cared for. But he refused to give up. Especially now that the stakes had risen. Russian thugs might not be the only group hunting for the weapons. Sydney Gordon's call had complicated things further. The situation was getting a little dicey, but he had not become incredibly wealthy by panicking at the first sign of trouble. Experience told him that adversity often creates its own opportunities.

Colin's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps on the wooden deck. He turned as his administrative assistant hurried toward him. Wearing only a light sweater and knee length skirt, she shivered in the chilly air. Born in tropical Cairns, Australia, Jane Evers was used to rain but was still adjusting to the cool temperatures of the Pacific Northwest. Though only 5'2" she was a tough Aussie with medium length brown hair and blue-gray eyes. At the age of twenty two she'd come to visit the Canadian Gulf Islands, located a few miles north of Sinclair Island, after finishing her University studies in Brisbane.

She'd been sea kayaking with a group of friends when a sudden freak storm raged in from the Pacific and separated the kayakers. Huge waves and strong winds prevented the group from staying together. Jane found herself alone and battling rough waves and frigid water. Reaching a small uninhabited island she stayed alive using the survival skills she'd learned while trekking in the harsh Australian outback. She rode out the storm by building a crude shelter under a rock overhang and dining on the beach oysters that littered the beach. She

even managed to trap a Dungeness crab in an old bucket found lying in the underbrush. Two days later, after the storm had subsided and the sun had come out, she spotted a yacht passing close to the island and used a small signal mirror to attract attention of the people on the boat. She learned from the sailor, Colin Farthington, that her friends had survived the ordeal and had organized a rescue effort.

Jane was still with Colin, and even though he was her employer, they had a close personal relationship. He respected her intellect, determination, and loyalty. She admired his brilliance and level-headed approach to every situation.

Colin raised his eyebrows and asked, "Any news?"

"Yes, and it's mostly good," Jane replied. "Gabrielle and Kristen are safe. Tom Smithers called and reported a successful mission. He's got them both hidden in a secure apartment and is waiting for a transport plane to send them here. A shipment of precious gems is scheduled to leave Belarus tomorrow and the girls will be on board. He'll get them here safely."

"Thank God for that. But what about Pyotr?"

"Nothing yet," Jane said. "He's vanished. Smithers thinks he's been murdered, but has no proof. We don't know what, if anything, he told the thugs who kidnapped him."

Colin stared into the darkening sky. A sudden breeze ruffled his hair out of place. He brushed his fingers through his hair and frowned.

"We'll assume they learned everything. We have to move fast. Most likely they're in possession of the same information we have and are mobilizing their forces to recover the nukes as we speak. How are we doing with what Pyotr told us?"

"Our team should have an answer soon, I'm told. They're not sure there's really a map in the Secret Tower of the Kremlin but are convinced the weapons were hidden in a cave on an island near Cuba. We're still trying to identify the island," Jane said.

"Yes, it's too risky for us to search the Tower. There's plenty of data and information from Kennedy's blockade and the Russian retreat. Our guys will figure out what happened."

Colin's intercom buzzed, interrupting their conversation. He raced into his office and punched the transmit button.

"Colin here," he barked. "What have you got?"

"Edwards here, sir. We've identified the island as El Fortunato, not far to the east of Cuba, sort of in the Bahamas chain. That's the 'fortune' Alexei mentioned. And bonnie, well it doesn't really refer to a woman's first name like you might think. We're sure the reference is to the famous female pirate Anne Bonny who

prowled the waters around El Fortunato during the early 1700's. She was one of the fiercest and most feared pirates of her time. She was an incredible woman because during that era few pirates even allowed females onboard their ships. Women had few rights back in those days and rarely made important decisions. But as one of the pirate leaders, she was bloodthirsty and ruthless."

"You've got to be kidding. I know the island very well. Get to the point. What's all this have to do with the nukes?"

"I'm getting to that. There's a big sinkhole on the island. Supposedly Anne Bonny captured a Spanish galleon and murdered the entire crew by throwing them down into the hole. That's how it got its name. You're familiar with it, Colin. Bonny's Abyss near Magic Bay on El Fortunato Island. We're certain the weapons were hidden in a cave at the bottom of the sinkhole. They might still be there."

Colin dropped into his chair and stared at the antique clock on his desk. Bonny's Abyss at Magic Bay used to be a limestone cavern connected to the ocean by underground streams. Long ago the roof of the cavern collapsed, creating a hole some 80 feet deep and 40 feet across. The bottom still filled with water at high tide.

He stood up, leaned on his desk and turned his head toward Jane.

"This is good news, Jane. KC Jameson is living on El Fortunato. Get him on the secure phone. Hurry."

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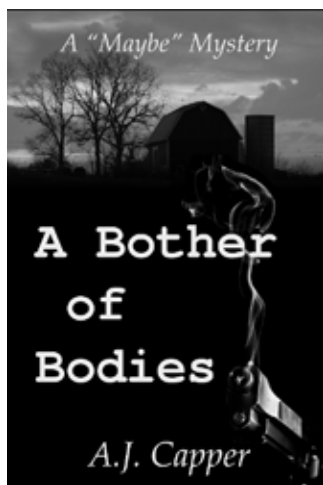
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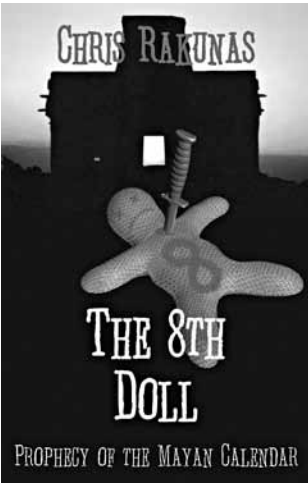
Blood Matter
by M.V. Ghiorgi

A broken hearted FBI Agent on the run from his demons...a sadistic genius with a penchant for vengeance...a beautiful forensic psychiatrist with a monstrous past...A doomed love triangle born of crime. Can Agent Vasquez survive the Blood Matter?



A Bother of Bodies
by A.J. Capper

Mabel Fuller and her brother are on the run because of Mabel's attempt to kill their mother fifteen years ago. But they're not worried about the law. Their main concern is the family that raised them, the McAllisters. Mabel and Dean manage to avoid the large Irish network with frequent moves and aliases. Or, so they thought. When dead bodies turn up in Dean's newly-purchased barn, the brother and sister fear the McAllisters have found them. Until they realize it's something worse...



The 8th Doll
by Chris Rakunas

When the body of geologist Charlie Landry is found beheaded beside the cenote at Dzibilchaltun, Skips Kane calls his old friend Professor Alex Guidry. Their only clue turns out to be a small doll with the number “8” written in Charlie’s own blood. The mystery of the 8th doll will take Kane and Guidry down the winding paths of the Yucatan where they will discover the answer to the age old question: what will happen when the Mayan calendar ends?



Fugo: Terror From the Sky
by Elizabeth Young

In November, 1944, the Japanese began launching 9,300 unmanned bomb-carrying balloons (Fugo) that were carried east over the Pacific Ocean by the jet stream. Now, almost 70 years later, a group of terrorists using modern technology will try and succeed where the Japanese failed. It will be up to an unlikely group to find a way to stop one of the deadliest terrorist attacks on US soil.

*Oh, how they flew from wave to wave, when the devil came to our blessed shore
And with smoke and fire defiled the cave
The Abyss now bare, spears no more, they lie below her most sweet soul
That, stabbed with seven sorrows*

A set of still-lethal handheld tactical nuclear weapons, stolen from the United States Army during the Cold War, has been hidden deep in a cave on the island of El Fortunato, British West Indies, since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Now terrorists are plotting to dig them up. The only clue to their location — a riddle written over fifty years earlier.

KC Jameson, a 33 year old marine biologist, is living a fairly care-free life on the West Indies island. That is until his boss, an *exotic weapons collector*, orders him to find the nuclear weapons. KC and his reluctant assistant, Nikki Colt, a squad of rogue Russian commandos, and a special operations unit from U.S. Military under orders from a corrupt politician finds themselves in a race to retrieve the weapons. Can KC and Nikki decipher the one clue to the missiles whereabouts before the missiles fall into the wrong hands? And exactly whose hands are the *wrong hands*?



About the Author: Gregg Kuehn grew up in southeast Wisconsin. He attended Tufts University and the University of Wisconsin–Madison where he earned a degrees in Psychology and Landscape Architecture. He and wife Kathy live in Grafton, WI where they operated a landscape design-build company for 35 years. He is the author of a non-fiction book titled *Start Your Own Construction and Contracting Business* (1st and 2nd editions). In his spare time he enjoys travel, golf, hunting, downhill skiing, solving logic problems, and spending time with his grandchildren.



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