

The Right Hand

Also by Derek Haas

The Silver Bear
Hunt for the Bear
Dark Men

DEREK HAAS

The Right Hand



First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Mulholland Books
An imprint of Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

1

Copyright © Derek Haas 2012

The right of Derek Haas to be identified as the Author of the
Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without
the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form
of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without
a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance
to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

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

Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 72919 1
eBook ISBN 978 1 444 72920 7

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural,
renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable
forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform
to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.hodder.co.uk

*For my older brother, who shaped me,
And for my younger brother, who straightened me out*



THE RIGHT HAND

PROLOGUE

HE SMELLED wood burning, and also flesh, like a pig roasting on a spit, and only then did he realize he was on fire. The pain came next, searing and relentless, and it drew him out of unconsciousness like a hypnotist snapping his fingers. He jolted upright and rolled, tamping out the flames at least temporarily.

The smoke was thick and heavy and oppressive. He stayed low and glimpsed an opening, daylight filtering through the haze. Instinctively, he gritted his teeth, held his breath, and crawled toward the hole. He reached the ledge just as his lungs were bursting and leapt forward, falling five feet to the gravel below, landing awkwardly on his side.

The drop might have hurt, might have caused him to wince, except there was so much blessed air, he gulped oxygen greedily, forgetting everything else.

Vaguely, a word tickled the back of his brain. *Run.*

His head started to clear, and he blinked away tears. Heat beat the left side of his face, and from his prostrate position, he looked in that direction, taking it all in.

A train was on fire. At least five cars were ablaze, and when he looked farther down the rail line, he saw the engine and eight more cars half on, half off the tracks, capsized like a herd of dying buffalo. The back of the engine was exposed, with two tons of metal ripped asunder, blown out from underneath.

Run, the voice inside his head repeated.

He found his feet, stood upright, and fought back dizziness and nausea. In that moment, it all came back to him.

Blake Nelson had spent the last eleven years as an officer for Central Intelligence. He was the rarest of recruits, thirty-three when he joined, plucked out of a successful import-export career in which he happened to do most of his business with Moscow. He spoke fluent Russian, a by-product of his Georgian mother's mother tongue. He was a bachelor, virtually friendless, and had a placid, easygoing disposition. When they came for him, he thought it was a Moscow client playing a practical joke. When he watched his own funeral after the CIA successfully faked his death, he knew exactly how real his new life was.

And for the last five years, he had been a remarkable field asset, rewarding the risky judgment of his recruiter while making himself indispensable as the cold war cooled and then heated again. So many of the government's resources had been funneled into the Middle East after September 2001, al-

THE RIGHT HAND

though a few in Intelligence recognized that the Old Bear was the sole nation in the world still capable of managing a serious growl.

His current assignment involved a rail station in Omsk; he was to board a freight train, on which he was supposed to meet...

Run.

He'd been set up. There was no other explanation, none he would like. The meeting was a sham, designed to flush him, and he had walked into the trap clumsily, like a rat after cheese. The implications were staggering. It meant someone knew about Stepnoy, and if someone knew about *that*, then they knew—

A thunderous crash snapped his thoughts back to the moment at hand as the train car he had climbed out of collapsed inward. He stared at the fire for a moment, a flickering yellow-and-orange inferno, and then movement to his left caught his eye. Men were coming, silhouetted against the flames, and not just coming...sprinting.

Run! the voice screamed, and this time, he trusted it.

Nelson might have had second-degree burns on his thighs, but his legs worked. He scampered away from the train in a vague notion of north, toward a thick forest. Safety involved camouflage and quietness, he knew from his training, but it would only come if he put enough distance between his pursuers and himself.

There was another alternative. How many men had he counted against the blaze? Six? He'd had only a brief moment before he found his feet, and he hadn't had time to check his

DEREK HAAS

gun, and could he be sure he'd get all of them if it came to a fight? No, flight was the correct option.

The woods were thick evergreens, old growth, and were spaced out so the threat wasn't from running into a low-hanging branch but from catching a root at an ankle-snapping angle.

A foreign sensation came over him. He realized he was winded, even though he couldn't have been running for more than five minutes. Smoke inhalation must have affected his lungs, and just as this realization hit him, that he wouldn't be able to outrun them after all, wouldn't be able to make it to safety, that he would have to mount a desperate stand and fight, a bullet ripped into the back of his left leg, spinning him like a top and pitching him forward into an absurd collision with the earth.

He didn't have to block the pain because there was no pain; just a dull sense that he could not feel anything, and when he tried to sit up to move, to crane his neck so he could catch a glimpse of his enemy, his body betrayed him and remained still, defiant.

He felt hands lifting him, but all he could see was the emptiness of the night sky holding down the trees.

CHAPTER ONE

AUSTIN CLAY looked like a hiker. His beard had grown in thick and full, a slightly darker shade of brown than the wisps atop his head. His North Face backpack appeared to have accumulated years of use, although it had been purchased only a few weeks earlier.

He wound up the path where the trees thinned and the limestone boulders seemed to multiply. He had made the journey once before, a few days earlier. He would be meeting the same man now, and this time, he hoped an exchange would be forthcoming.

Clay had been an Intelligence officer for fifteen years, six of those in black ops. The last three years, he'd operated in a program consisting of exactly two members, his handler and him.

The path led to a plateau, and he made out Beto standing beside a flat rock the shape of a dining table, the chosen meeting place. It was an inspired location: no listening devices at this altitude and a clear view for miles of anyone coming. It would take Clay another ten minutes to reach him.

They spoke in Spanish, with Clay showing no fatigue from the climb and only a slight hint of an American accent.

“Good afternoon.”

“Yes.”

“Do you have the name for me?”

Beto coughed into his fist. He was half a head shorter than Clay, but his arms and legs were as thick as tree branches. The American knew Beto’s age to be forty-one, but he also knew what this life could do to a man’s features. It was a wonder Clay’s own hair hadn’t prematurely grayed.

Beto finished coughing and wiped his lower lip. “I’ve been doing some checking.”

Clay waited. The conversation often turned in this direction with new contacts.

“The alias you gave me is unknown. We have sources within the intelligence community in the US, sources who have been validated on multiple occasions in the past. And no one has heard of you.”

“I operate outside known circles.”

“That sounds convenient for you.”

“Or inconvenient, at times like this.”

“Well, forgive me for being cautious, but I cannot trust a man who—”

“Then trust this. Your given name is Emilio Beto. You

THE RIGHT HAND

were born outside Madrid forty-one years ago last week. Your mother and father were killed in a small-plane crash while flying into Zaragoza when you were fourteen. Since joining El CESID after stints with the Spanish army in the first Gulf War and with NATO in Serbia, you've tried unsuccessfully to determine whether your parents were murdered by the same government for whom you now work. Your chief officer, Fernando de Lugo, told you to drop it if you wanted to continue covert work for El CESID, and professional self-preservation won out over family bonds."

Beto stood there, eyes as wide as *tapas* plates. He started to say something, but Clay kept on, voice filled with gravel.

"When you break from professional work, you hang your backpack in an apartment in Tenerife, near Teide, so you can hike up the volcano or lie on the beach. Your apartment has only one bedroom and a small kitchen. In the freezer right now is a half-eaten bonito you caught this summer. You consider no one your friend, and you seek no female companionship."

Clay watched the other man's eyes, looking for defeat to plant its flag there. "You may trust you don't know who I am, Beto, but you can trust I know who you are. I know where to find you, and I know how to get to you, and I know what weapons you have strapped to your hip, ankle, and wrist. So let's quit running in circles. You tell me what I need to know and you can have what's in my backpack. Withhold the information or lie to me and I'll leave this spot and find you another time. And then, I assure you, you won't have a mile to see me coming."

DEREK HAAS

The words had the intended effect. Beto swallowed dryly, his Adam's apple bobbing like a cork. His eyes darted, then settled as he reached his decision and found his voice.

"Gregory Molina."

Clay nodded before cracking the smallest of smiles. "Thank you. Let's hope we never see each other again."

He dropped the backpack, turned, and left the way he'd come. In the sky, a hawk circled lazily, hunting.

In Chelsea, the air smelled damp long before drops of rain would poke holes in the blanket of gray sky. Pedestrians hurried up the sidewalks, eager to get where they were going before the rain came. Clay didn't mind the weather. He liked the time right before the rain fell, when the air felt charged, volatile. He liked being reminded that whatever plans men might make, nature follows its own set of rules.

Andrew Stedding stood hunched in the doorway of a Mediterranean restaurant, closed at this early hour. He had his long raincoat pulled tight around him, the collar up and stiff, as if he were preparing to walk into a hurricane.

Clay smiled, seeing him there. Stedding never changed. They'd been together for three years, but it seemed much longer. They were opposites who somehow blended together to make a new whole, black and white mixing into a perfect shade of gray. Clay's handler was in his early fifties but knew how to play the curmudgeon as if he were near his deathbed. His face wore a permanent scowl. Clay would have sworn

THE RIGHT HAND

Stedding took pleasure from his sour disposition, but he'd never say it to the man's face.

"Morning, Steddy..."

"Don't call me that. You know how I hate that."

"But it's apt. You're as steady as a Swiss watch."

"I do my job. My job tells me to be here to meet you, so I'm here. On time, in the rain."

"It's not raining yet."

"Give it five minutes."

"Well, I'll bring the sunshine out. I have your name."

The elevation in Stedding's mood was marked only by a slight rise of the eyebrows. His frown never lifted.

"Gregory Molina."

Stedding nodded, mulling this over. "Well, we knew it was either him or the woman, Vargas."

The name Beto had coughed up was a compromised Spanish embassy staff member in Moscow, a national who had been sharing private correspondence with certain agents of the Kremlin. Some of the information was extremely sensitive, the price of a narrowed, postmillennial world. The US shared intelligence with select allies, such as Spain, and if that information leaked, it was still up to the CIA to plug the dam.

Gregory Molina would have to die, and Austin Clay would be the man to put his thumb in the dyke. The Spanish government would never know the Americans were responsible, and the Americans would only know that their problem had evaporated, ending in the accidental death of a midlevel Spanish embassy staffer.

There has always been a need in the spy game for opera-

DEREK HAAS

tions outside the boundaries of legality, for covert missions so black no one in the American government, and almost no one in Intelligence itself, knows of their existence. The left hand can't know what the right hand is doing. Most often in the last three years, Austin Clay had been the right hand.

"That's it, then," Clay said, popping his hands together. "I'll take care of it."

"No."

"No?" This was new. They'd been focused on this assignment for the better part of four months, and in Clay's experience, Stedding never pulled him off a mission until it reached its inevitable conclusion.

"We have a higher priority."

"Oh?"

"Blake Nelson."

The name rang a bell somewhere in the back of Clay's brain.

"I remember him. He started at Langley a month after me...."

"Yes."

"Russian op, from what I remember."

"The last three years in the field. He's been doing some very sensitive work near the Caspian Sea."

"Oil?"

Stedding nodded. "And missiles."

"Between Iran and Russia."

"We think so, but we're not sure."

"Nelson flipped?"

"We'd like to ask him that, but he's five days late on his last contact."

THE RIGHT HAND

“Missing, then?”

Stedding’s frown threatened to pull down his entire face. “That’s right. I got a personal call from the DCI. He wants Nelson back.”

Clay arched his eyebrows, impressed. “The Director. Someone must’ve finally noticed the work we’ve been doing.”

“There’s a difference between noticing and acknowledging. They always notice; they never acknowledge.”

“What if Nelson’s dead?”

“The Director wants him back. He didn’t say back alive.”

“Where can I get the case file?”

“I’ve got a man working it up right now. Dead drop in Heathrow in two hours. Burn it all when you land in St. Petersburg.”

The rain started to fall, pounding down all at once as if someone had turned on a faucet.

“Good seeing you, Steddy. I’ll report in as soon as I have something to report.”

Stedding just grimaced, pulled his collar up tight, and headed off into the rain. Clay watched him trudge away for a moment, then left in the opposite direction.

Heathrow’s enormous terminal was packed with travelers, a sea of bustling, milling, shopping, eating masses, killing time while waiting for gate information, ants scurrying inside an anthill.

Austin Clay sat at the end of a row of uncomfortable seats,

dressed like any other businessman. He held the *Herald* in his lap, but his eyes were fixed on a waste bin thirty feet away.

The news of the Director's involvement intrigued him. He thought back to what he remembered of the missing officer, Blake Nelson. They'd worked together only briefly, when Clay had completed training. They both spoke Russian fluently, and that had put them around the same conference table more than once. Clay was a bit surprised that Nelson had become a field officer... he remembered a lanky, bookish type, a guy destined for years staring at a monitor in a small office as satellite data splashed across his screen. Maybe that was precisely why he'd been placed in the field; the man could certainly pass for a Russian intellectual.

In Clay's experience, though, an effective field officer needed to be both intelligent and physical. It's one thing to move pieces around a chessboard, quite another to have a gun pushed against your temple or a knife pressed to your throat and still manage to move the pieces. And now Nelson had gone missing. Maybe he should have stayed behind a desk after all.

At exactly noon, an unassuming, portly man in an ill-fitting suit approached the bin with a briefcase in one hand and a half-eaten bagel in the other. The bagel went in the can, the briefcase went beside it, and the man left.

Clay stood and collected the case in seconds, then moved toward his gate without breaking stride.

THE RIGHT HAND

At thirty-three thousand feet, the plane leveled off and turned eastward. Clay had a pod in first class and spun his chair around so it turned inward, toward the small built-in desk. He opened the briefcase and thumbed through its contents, removing the thick Agency folder before settling in to read. Five hours in the air would give him plenty of time to catch up on Blake Nelson's recent history.

Nelson had been stationed in Moscow for the last six years, an embassy staffer who'd transitioned into a consulting gig with the Russian oil company, Rukos. This wasn't an especially clever cover for an American spy, and Clay wondered if Nelson had been compromised and tolerated for a while, or if his life in espionage had been discovered only recently.

Nelson's main contact was a handler named Nikolai Adromatov. Adromatov, a native Russian, had spent thirty years with the Agency, after being successfully doubled while the Iron Curtain remained on the shower rail. He had a life in Moscow, a family, a mistress, and a fine apartment near the Kremlin. He was former KGB and had risen to a midlevel staff position within the current government. His ability to survive the wall's coming down, regime changes, and infighting while maintaining his true loyalty to the United States made him invaluable.

Clay had met Adromatov twice before, once during a bit of nasty business involving a Georgian mole named Uznadzi, and a second time at Langley, right before Clay was assigned to his current black ops position. Clay had liked Adromatov instantly; the man was as large as a bear, with a wild, curly black beard and ruddy cheeks. His mind was like a computer,

able to process reams of minutia and spit out a wise, sound plan.

According to Adromatov's report, which Clay was reading over as the plane chugged along, Nelson had been carefully building a case that Russia and Iran were exchanging more than oil, that hard-liners and throwbacks within the Russian government were engaged in providing weapons to Iran that could proliferate throughout the Middle East. It wasn't groundbreaking intelligence; the US had routinely received similar reports from other officers since the mid-nineties.

Clay tried to read between the lines, a skill honed over his fifteen-year intelligence career. More often than not, the real gems were to be found in what was left *out* of intelligence reports. But there was nothing in this dossier on Nelson that leapt out at him as extraordinary. Nothing to point to why Nelson had gone missing. Nothing to point to why the Director would personally involve himself.

If Nelson had been compromised and arrested, the Russian government would have made a big political show of it, the way they had with Cecil Roots in 2001. They would have wanted to embarrass Washington. Catching a low-level spook gathering moderately sensitive information has more utility as a political showpiece than anything else.

Between the lines. That was where the truth lay. So what had Nelson stumbled upon that was more than moderately sensitive, perhaps even outside the range of his mission? And why would the Director send in Clay? Why would the left hand not want to know what the right hand had to do to get Nelson back?

THE RIGHT HAND

He read every page in the dossier twice more before touch-down.

Clay rode the bus from Pulkovo Airport to the city center. As always, it was numbingly cold in St. Petersburg, and there was a pervasive smell Clay always thought of as distinctly Russian. It was a mixture of charcoal and tobacco and wool, and it was as ubiquitous as the wind. The more time you spent in the country, the more your awareness of it dulled, but when you returned after an absence, it greeted you like an addled relative, at once welcoming and repellent. Clay breathed it in and headed past St. Isaac's Cathedral toward the river.

A gold-and-black Volga pulled up to where he stood. Clay looked into the driver's window, smiled, and climbed into the passenger's seat. Adromatov steered the car back into traffic, casting sidelong glances in Clay's direction. His expression was pleasant, though hard to gauge beneath the beard.

"Welcome back to Leningrad."

Clay smiled. "You're gonna get arrested for calling it that."

"Pssh. Half this city was happier before the wall came down. They worked without thinking. They were just as poor, but vodka was cheaper and their apartments were paid for."

With that, he tipped a flask to his lips and smiled broadly.

"They weren't free to—"

"To the working class, freedom is overrated."

"You sound like a revolutionary."

“The days of mass revolt died with the advent of the subsonic jet engine. Wildfires are now easily contained.”

“Tell that to the Republic of Georgia.”

Adromatov chortled. “I don’t have to. Vladimir Putin did a long time ago.”

He took another tug and waved the flask in the air as if he were erasing a blackboard. The car lurched toward the curb, then realigned.

“Enough. Discussing the shortcomings of the Russian people makes my mind atrophy. Let’s get to more pressing matters.”

“Blake Nelson.”

“Yes. You should have received my report.”

“What’s not in the report?”

Adromatov’s large face broadened as he smiled. “I remembered you, Austin Clay, but now I *remember* you. What’s not in the report? That’s it, then, isn’t it?”

“That’s it.”

Adromatov paused for a moment, his eyes intent on the city street. His massive chest rose and fell with his breathing. “A woman. A woman is not in the report.”

Clay started to open his mouth, but Adromatov waved him down with the flask. “I already know your two questions. Who is she, and why did I keep her out of the official file?”

It was Clay’s turn to smile.

“The truth is, I don’t know if she exists. I certainly would not commit ink to what is no more than a rumor.”

“Then tell me the rumor and leave the ink in the pen.”

The Russian laughed, and the baritone sound reminded

THE RIGHT HAND

Clay of a department store Santa. “Yes. The rumor, then. We have a bit of a drive before we reach our destination, and as you know, Russians don’t talk conversationally, they give speeches. So I will give you the speech, or—how do you say it? Tell you the story? Yes, I will tell you the story of this girl.

“Do you know the name Alexi Benidrov?”

Clay searched his memory but came up blank and shrugged.

“Why would you know it? Alexi Benidrov is a midlevel bureaucrat serving as a minister under Igor Zechin.”

“That name I know.”

“Yes. Deputy Prime Minister of Defense. Well, Benidrov was a man who used other men’s backs as though they were rungs in a ladder, yes? He destroyed careers and trampled anyone who stood in his way as he rose inside the Defense Ministry. He was ruthless and cunning, and as you might expect, became a favorite of President Sobyenin.”

“A man carved in his own image.”

“Precisely.”

“And yet you keep referring to Benidrov in the past tense.”

Adromatov laughed again, and this time, his whole body shook. *Like a bowl full of jelly*, Clay thought.

“Yes, past tense. Let a man tell his story the proper way, with the gruesome details spared for the grand finale, yes? Americans just love to get everything right out front and forgo the surprise.”

Clay nodded and the Russian continued, absently watching the road. Somehow, the Volga avoided careening into any number of trucks and sedans.

DEREK HAAS

“So Benidrov finds his way into the Defense Ministry, and his eye is on Zechin’s post. He is careful in everything while inside the Kremlin—careful to flatter whoever needs flattering, careful to crush whoever needs crushing—all without splattering any blood on his hands. As he becomes more and more relevant in the ministry, he is entrusted with more and more, let’s say, sensitive state materials, yes? Weapons deals, oil-for-cash deals, nuclear armament information, proliferation, too? Yes? And as I say, he’s careful, because the cost of being unstable is...” Adromatov drew his finger across his throat, crossed his eyes, and stuck out his tongue. Then he pointed his finger in the air. “Except Alexi Benidrov is not as careful as I have described.

“Yes, careful at work, in public. But at home? You see, Benidrov had a baby girl and a baby boy—twins, yes? His wife was weak from the pregnancy and her health failed and became...what is this word? Chronic? Yes? Because of this, Benidrov started to employ nurse care....”

“Nannies.”

“What is this?”

“A nanny. A full-time babysitter.”

“Yes, precisely. A nanny. And Benidrov liked to hire Hungarian women. They speak no Russian, they can’t know his business, they stay out of his way, they keep to themselves in uneducated oblivion. He can work late; his wife is infirm, after all, but the twins are looked after, and this continues for some time. The agency sends over various Hungarian women, and I don’t have to tell you that these ladies are built like blocks of cement, all broad shoulders and thick faces and

THE RIGHT HAND

arms like bags of flour. Benidrov barely notices them, this succession of Hungarian cattle—just enough to mutter a curt hello and a kiss-kiss to the little darlings and he's on his way.

“In the meantime, the pressure is building for him at work as he climbs closer to the top echelon of the Kremlin, and like a kettle of tea, he needs to release steam or he'll explode.

“Enter Marika Csontos, a breathtaking eighteen-year-old beauty with—according to accounts—a perfect pair of pouty lips and a face that radiated innocence. I mean, after the parade of bovine babysitters marching through that house, any girl with youth and a figure would have allure, yes? So maybe she was a great beauty, maybe she wasn't, but the story is better for it. Anyway, Benidrov takes notice, this we know.

“And here he is, a top deputy minister with no one to whom he can pour out his secrets as that pressure builds, no one who can listen and understand and nod encouragement and withhold judgment...except...here's the cream in the pie...except this Hungarian girl who speaks no Russian and can't understand a word he says. This is like an angel from heaven, a gift from the Almighty...someone up there recognized his unique problem and said, 'Here's the solution, my child.' Benidrov tells her everything. I mean everything. Who, what, where, when...all the state secrets, everything he's working on, everything. It's as if he's using her as his living journal.”

Adromatov grinned, as satisfied with his story as if he'd just devoured a hearty meal. “Can you see where this is going?”

“Marika could speak Russian.”

“Yes! Precisely! Russian and Hungarian. She lied to the

hiring agency because she needed the work. So she pretended not to understand a word he said, all the while hearing and retaining it all.”

Outside, the city turned industrial as they crossed the Tuchkov Bridge and moved inland.

“So what happened?”

“Pah. I wish I had an ending. Maybe it has yet to be told. But here are the only facts I know. A deputy minister named Benidrov was found dead in his office in the Kremlin, apparently a suicide, but as you know, ‘apparently’ is relative in the Russian government. A young Hungarian girl named Marika Csontos did work as his nanny for a month, until she vanished two weeks prior to Benidrov’s last day on earth.”

“Vanished?”

“Like a specter in the mists of a moor.” Adromatov waggled his finger and mimicked the hollow howl of a ghost, then burst into his now-familiar chortle. “No one knows where she went or why or how. But the story I’ve told you is the story that arose from the ashes of Deputy Minister Benidrov’s death, and that is why I’m relating it to you. And yet as to how much of the story is fact and how much is fancy, I can scarcely offer an opinion. Russians love their folktales, and this has the ring of the Brothers Grimm all over it. It even has a moral: Don’t spill state secrets to anyone or it will be your neck in a rope!”

Clay nodded. “Nelson believed it.”

“You are astute, Austin Clay. Very astute. I bet it would have been difficult to be your parents on Christmas morning. You had already figured out all the presents under the tree just by the size of the box.”

THE RIGHT HAND

Clay's mouth disappeared into a thin line. "I wouldn't know."

Adromatov swallowed and frowned for just a moment, sure he had made a gaffe, though unsure how it had happened when things had been going so well. Like a ship correcting its course, he deftly pulled the conversation back on track. "Yes, Nelson confided in me that he believed the story and he wanted to pursue finding this girl, this Marika Csonotos. I counseled him to forget it, that it was a fool's task and he had more important concerns on which to focus his attention. I believe he ignored my advice and spent the last several months doing his best to find the missing Marika. If he located her, I don't know it. He disappeared from a train traveling between Perm and Omsk."

"There's something between Perm and Omsk?"

"Ha. Miles and miles of forest and beet fields."

"Don't forget cabbage."

"How could I?" Adromatov was delighted that his gaffe didn't seem to be casting any lingering shadows over his time with the agent. He told himself not to bring up anything involving Clay's childhood, however innocently or indirectly.

"The train he was on exploded and derailed."

"I read about that in your report. A freight train."

Adromatov shrugged. "Not uncommon for a spy to travel this way."

Their car pulled up to a blocky, windowless building that looked like so many other Iron Curtain-era edifices in Russia: sexless and stale. Adromatov turned the key and silenced the Volga's whine.

DEREK HAAS

“Nelson’s office.”

“The Russians already pick it over?”

“The one he uses as a front in downtown St. Petersburg, yes. But they don’t know about this one.”

Clay liked Adromatov. He wore the spook life as comfortably as broken-in shoes and managed to do it without its seeming like an illusion, a façade. The Russian actually enjoyed it, and Clay wondered if maybe they shared the same secret, the same antidote to fear. Clay was a good spy because he never rattled. And he never rattled because he simply didn’t care whether he lived or died.