



Jennifer Maiden was born in Penrith, N. S.W., and has had 29 books published: 23 poetry collections and 6 novels. Among her awards are 3 Kenneth Slessor Prizes for Poetry, 2 C.J.Dennis Prizes for Poetry, the overall Victorian Prize for Literature, the Harri Jones Memorial Prize, the H.M.Butterly-F.Earle Hooper Award (University of Sydney), the Grenfell Henry Lawson Festival Prize, The FAW Christopher Brennan Award for lifetime achievement in poetry, 2 The Melbourne Age Poetry Book of the Year Awards, the overall Melbourne Age Book of the Year and the ALS Gold Medal. She was shortlisted for the Griffin International Poetry Prize.

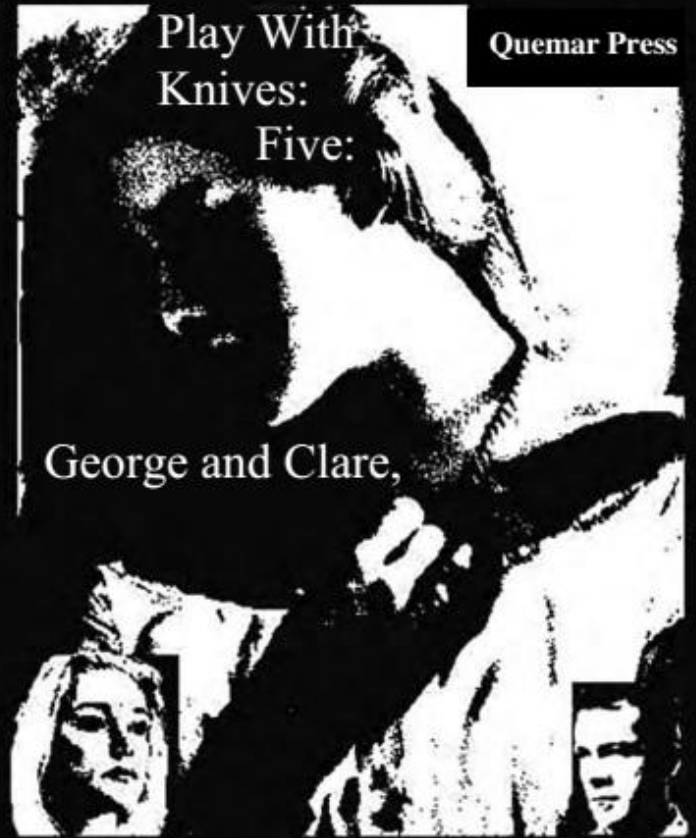
Clare and George first appeared in Maiden's original *Play With Knives* novel, published in 1990, when Clare was about to be released from prison. In *Mount Druitt*, Clare and George, now human rights observers, are implored by a friend to rescue her daughter, Quentin - a young arms dealer who has been taken to Russia by her husband, Schmidt, a sinister telecommunications figure dealing in silicon-impregnated quantum diamonds, assets prized by national forces. Quentin herself is prized by Australian government and security forces, for her contacts and skill in selling arms.

*Play With Knives: Five: George and Clare, the Malachite and the Diamonds* balances between dichotomies, places (the Sydney Western Suburbs and Russia), forms (prose and poetry), victim and killer, tangible and intangible levels of reality. One aspect of duality never seems to be minimised for another. Mount Druitt, a Western Suburb of Sydney, with transparent conversations and shop lights at night, is as vital to this story as Russia, with political drives and constant snow, where cityscapes and landscapes have the same colour as the malachite beads worn by Clare and the woman she is trying to rescue.

Whether in Russian winter light, or the light of a Mount Druitt mall at midnight, this work experiments to create platforms where aspects of reality or experience can integrate, as they move between a sense of self and overview, between action and the ability to transcend it.



Jennifer Maiden *Play With Knives: Five: George and Clare, the Malachite and the Diamonds* Quemar Press



The Malachite and the Diamonds

Jennifer Maiden



**Play With Knives: Five:**

**George and Clare, the Malachite**

**and the Diamonds:**

**A novel in prose and verse**

Jennifer Maiden



*Play With Knives: Five: George and Clare, the Malachite and the Diamonds*

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**Previous Publications by Jennifer Maiden:** *Poetry Collections* *Tactics*, 1974; *The Problem of Evil*, 1975; *The Occupying Forces*, 1975; *Mortal Details*, 1977; *Birthstones*, 1978; *The Border Loss*, 1979; *For The Left Hand*, 1981; *The Trust*, 1988; *Bastille Day*, 1990; *Selected Poems of Jennifer Maiden*, 1990; *The Winter Baby*, 1990; *Acoustic Shadow*, 1993; *Mines*, 1999; *Friendly Fire*, 2005; *Pirate Rain*, 2009; *Intimate Geography: Selected Poems 1991-2010*, 2012; *Liquid Nitrogen*, 2012; *The Violence of Waiting*, 2013; *Drones and Phantoms*, 2014; *The Fox Petition*, 2015; *The Metronome* Electronic Edition, 2016; Print Edition, 2017; *Appalachian Fall*, 2018; *Selected Poems 1967-2018*, 2018. **Novels** *The Terms*, 1982; *Play With Knives*, 1990. New Revised Electronic Edition, 2016; *Play With Knives: Two: Complicity*, 2016; *Play With Knives: Three: George and Clare and the Grey Hat Hacker*, 2016; *Play With Knives: Four: George and Clare, the Baby and the Bikies*, 2017; *Play With Knives: 1&2: Complicity (combined volume)*, 2018

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To Katharine



## ***Introduction***

*Play With Knives: Five: George and Clare, the Malachite and the Diamonds* balances between dichotomies, places (the Sydney Western Suburbs and Russia), forms (prose and poetry), victim and killer, tangible and intangible levels of reality. In this novel, analysis comes from a two-fold nature of experience.

Ultimately, the female hero, Clare, who murdered her siblings as a child, speaks to her partner and former probation officer, George, about their infant son: 'I dreamed that I'd had another dream about killing him - Coleridge is right about human experiencing being "double-touch" - and that I told him about it and that he just looked at me quietly with his understanding quiet eyes'. While Coleridge spoke of an internal experience of sensation, a wider sense reminiscent of this 'double-touch', runs throughout this work. Here, someone is able to experience something in a doubled state, as participant and spectator. In this work, George and Clare speak intimately by telephone across two countries, and the story itself takes place across third person poetry and first person prose.

One aspect of duality never seems to be minimised for another. Mount Druitt, a Western Suburb of Sydney, with transparent conversations and shop lights at night, is as vital to this story as Russia, with political drives and constant snow, where cityscapes and landscapes have the same colour as the malachite beads worn by Clare and the woman she is trying to rescue.

Clare and George first appeared in Maiden's original *Play With Knives* novel, published in 1990, when Clare was about to be released from prison. In *Mount Druitt*, Clare and George, now human rights observers, are implored by a friend to rescue her daughter, Quentin - a young arms dealer who has been taken to Russia by her husband, Schmidt, a sinister telecommunications figure dealing in silicon-impregnated quantum diamonds, assets prized by national



forces. Quentin herself is prized by Australian government and security forces, for her contacts and skill in selling arms.

The sharp-focused study of topical events is also a dualistic process here: political strategies and analysis both surround the characters and affect them directly, from the creation of the new Russian war cabinet, to Novichok, to political isolation and survival, to staying in a Russian summer house with a Russian journalist, a member of Russian undercover police, and a Saudi agent, with Australian and Ukrainian mercenaries at the gate.

Throughout, the sudden juxtaposition of third person poetry and first person prose seems to mirror the heroes' experience. On one level, vigilant first person prose allows the character to be a witness to the plot's reality. On another level, intricate third person poetry shows things known and unknown in spaces where there is always overview, and something immediate can be internal or spiritual, an intrinsic explicit love scene, or a space where Clare can survive, reassuring herself that her murders are not forgiven or compartmentalised.

Whether in Russian winter light, or the light of a Mount Druitt mall at midnight, this work experiments to create platforms where aspects of reality or experience can integrate, as they move between a sense of self and overview, between action and the ability to transcend it.

Katharine Margot Toohey

Quemar Press



## Chapter One:

### *Well-dressed, haunted angels*

Clare was standing at the window in the late saffron orchid, orange orchard light of a Mt Druitt December. She was in a smock-like translucent azure kaftan, and still a bit rounded by her recent pregnancy. She looked as innocent and preoccupied as a Vermeer wife, and was holding a letter to Silkie Roberts from Silkie's daughter, Quentin. This included a new photo of Schmidt and Quentin. Clare showed it to me. Schmidt was thinner since the recent stabbing-attack on him, and was grasping Quentin's shoulder with sharp, skinny, greedy fingers.

Schmidt did not see himself as having human dignity. I realised that he felt he had replaced dignity with his own particular sadistic mischief and an equally particular sensuous relish. It was the mischief and the relish which most fed him in the captivation of that beautiful young woman. There was no scope for dignity at all, and he must have decided that he was more powerful without it.

He had taken her to Russia.

Clare confirmed: 'Some of his CIA sponsorship - the old pro-Kissinger people - have soured towards him after he killed Bryony' - his late chief wife - 'for spying on him for them, and his main income's now from the secret quantum technology symbolised by his acquisition of silicon-impregnated diamonds. Russia's new arrangements with Saudi-Arabia are opening up links for him in Moscow.' Her finger was absently tracing the fat strand of dark malachite beads around Quentin's throat in the photo.





I added, 'And Moscow is increasingly sensitive about Chinese quantum satellites. The same information the Kissinger faction were so reluctant to challenge, and Pine Gap has been so eager to acquire. Is the Saudi-Arabian thing making it easier for Idris and his Palestinian bitcoin?'

She had been skyping with Idris, my grandson, who was still hacking and still hiding out in Russia, and who was outside the Winter Palace this morning. She said, 'He thinks it may be, but he also thinks the Russians are still as close to the Israelis as they are to the Saudis. Not that there aren't affinities there, anyway. Everyone hates Iran. But of course the Russians are also trying to calm everyone down about Iran - wanting Syria in one piece, and all.'

I told her, 'Put on your own malachite beads.' She still liked me giving her odd unexpected orders, even when she was wearing clothes.

She kept her accessories in a zip-up travel case on the dressing table in our little guest room here, at her mother's. Her face pulled an urchin-grimace at me, but she strolled across the room and found them. Malachite was her favourite mineral: the mossy darkness, night-streaks, deep greenness that actually glowed. She held the beads, considering, but didn't put them on. Rather, she brought them to me to attach behind her neck, as if suddenly needing closeness. I was sitting on the end of the bed, but she slid to her knees beside it and rolled her forehead on my knee.

I thought it would seem more sexual to her if I concentrated on tying the clasp - the clasp and interjoining beads glinted polished gold - at her nape. She twisted her head back up against my fingers and there was a sense of routine about it - but only in that routine in itself can be used to conduct an erotic impulse. When the beads were secure, she knelt stilly, sighed loudly to signal practicality, and asked:

'Did Silkie Roberts ring you about Quentin? Ruth said she was going to, when she gave me the letter.'

I answered, 'Not yet. I'm not ready to know how to respond, anyway, if she wants us to help retrieve her daughter from Schmidt.' I showed





Clare the photo: 'Do you think that's a young woman who craves to be rescued?'

'She's craving for her mother apparently. And she says in the letter she doesn't like Russia. She's right: she's too old to be galloping around in the snow like Florence does. And I'd think too many of the women there have her type of beauty: slender and with aloof shyness, like well-dressed haunted angels.'

I said, 'She looks like the heroine in *The Cranes Are Flying*. That's still my favourite movie.'

She asked, fingering her own malachite necklace now, not the photo: 'I thought your favourite movie was *Aggie Appleby, Maker of Men*?'

'Well, after *Aggie Appleby*.'

She saw me looking wistfully at my laptop. The Russians always maintained a glorious print of *Cranes* on YouTube. She said, 'Maybe Corbyn would like to watch it. He listens to everything we say. He's got an incredible attention span for someone still under four months old.' We looked out the window into the golden backyard, where Corbyn was riding against Clare's mother's shoulder and being shown the progress in crowded olive trees and apple saplings. His profound lapis eyes - Clare's but less mysterious - studied everything on display with orderly but gentle focus. They had been watching one of Clare's mother's pirated TV series together: some sort of sitcom in a women's prison. Every now and then we would hear them laugh. He would laugh when anyone else did, in communion.

Clare sat down next to me, as I started to watch *The Cranes are Flying*, and then she gave another serious sigh. I held her hand in the way she liked, with my fingers ruthlessly tight down between her fingers, and my palm on the front of her hand.

She said, 'Idris says we should all go to him in Russia, the three of us.'

I said, 'Silkie hasn't even asked us to find Quentin yet.'



'But she will, and we'll try. And I'd like to see Sophie and Florence again. Idris still seems to be making them happy.'

I said, 'My grandson has a gift for that: giving some people their happiness. And some other people other people's state secrets, of course.'

She said, 'Well, that makes *them* happy. And no one seems to really mind the Palestinian bitcoin.'

'Yet.'

She said after a while, 'I dreamed I killed Corbyn.'

'You mean you might *not* have dreamt about that? Did you stab him?'

'No. I was standing with him at the edge of a balcony and dropped him. The whole dream before that I was afraid I'd drop him and then I did. It was like one of those railway station things when you think you're going to do an Anna Karenina and jump in front of a train.'

'But one doesn't. And in reality, Anna'd have gone back to Karenin - Tolstoy makes it clear she was really in love with Karenin - and have spent the rest of her life happily nagging him for being a religious fruitcake. That's what Russian women do. Russians understand that nagging is foreplay and survival.'

She said, 'I never dream about when I actually stabbed my brother and sisters either. I only play and talk with them, or I'm sitting with their bodies.'

'Did you sit with Corbyn's body?'

'No. I woke myself up.'

We always called him 'Corbyn', not 'the Baby'. 'The Baby' was still what we called Florence, whom Clare had rescued with Florence's mother, Sophie, from a murderous arsonist husband in Paris. When they were together, Florence and Clare had the energising rapport of an instinctive mother and daughter. With Corbyn, Clare was quieter, and he would watch her carefully and quietly, except when he was



suddenly overcome by a quick elated crowing cry that she existed at all. In both moods, I knew what he meant.

Coral, Clare's mother, brought him in to Clare, who fed him. Her nipples were always like dark winter roses in the unusually translucent skin, with its faint blue spiderweb of veins. Her breasts and her whole body retained a defensive buoyancy from her pregnancy, as well as its rationed weariness. When he'd suckled, he looked around for the diluted indigo grape juice that had become his dessert. I fed it to him.

'It's the closest he can get to wine as yet,' I said: 'after a while, you realise how much all escape is genetic. Do you want to talk about your train problem?'

'Not in front of him. He understands everything.'

'In that case, he'll understand something frightening is being kept secret from him. A bad thing to do to a child. You've said that.'

She asked me directly: 'Do you think I could do it?'

'I think you could do anything, but you're more likely to want to kill me than him, and at my stage of life and deterioration, I'd probably enjoy it more than not.'

She nodded and tapped her hand conclusively on her knee. My phone rang. I still hadn't been able to stop the *Marche Militaire* as a ringtone.

The call was indeed from Silkie Roberts. She asked, 'Are you still investigating Cobham?'

'Not Cobham as such, but we're doing a general report on Solitary Confinement of Adolescents in NSW, for Prisoners of Conscience. Do you mean are we leaving here yet?'

'Ruth said you might be checking out political deaths in Russia. I gave her Quentin's letter to give to Clare. My Quentin would be a political death, wouldn't she, if Mr. Schmidt kills her?'

I said, 'I'm not sure'. I wondered briefly if Bryony's death could have been classified as 'political': it seemed to be stretching the definition



slightly, but perhaps not. All murders when you witness them, however, seem to be either automatic slaughter or enraged *crime passionnel*.

Clare and Corbyn were at the window, mouthing a greeting to the Egyptian dog and Greek cats outside. He was still a light baby, and she was balancing him on her hipbone, so that her small bottom jutted beautifully sideways. It sloped a little *en poire* and then rounded unexpectedly inwards *en pomme*, outlined through the clear summer cotton.

I conveyed the conversation as it progressed. I said, 'Silkie thinks Schmidt is going to kill Quentin.'

Clare asked, 'Does Quentin think that? In the letter she only says she is afraid of him, but that her mother would make things worse. And then she talks of him taking her out to oligarch restaurants and buying her the malachite necklace and some diamonds. Natural transparent white ones - D, V.V.S.I. - not Schmidt's usual cheap brown industrial ones made for the silicon. She seems proud of that.'

Silkie heard Clare and surprisingly uttered one of those guttural wailing mother-noises. Clare projected her own voice loudly, ostensibly to Corbyn:

'On the other hand, he probably will kill her if we don't go, and the Russian Orthodox Christmas is later than ours, so we could have two Christmases. And we'd like *that*, wouldn't we?'



## **Chapter Two:**

### ***Malachite Room***

George Jeffreys woke up in the Malachite Room of the Winter Palace, now part of the Hermitage Museum, in St. Petersburg, asleep on his feet with jet-lag, but excited by the sight of Clare in a winter coat of leopard fake fur, face snow-flushed, hair twisted up like a small shining tree, eyes the endless colour of frozen tarns at dusk. She swayed back, high as a skater, with the weight of Florence and Corbyn. Her children - but the other three she had killed seemed here in Russia as real and as normal to consider. George's grandson, Idris, and his girlfriend Sophie, Florence's actual shrewd Parisian mother, held hands like lostlings in a forest, but now happy that family had come. George saw that the Malachite Room was not so much green mineral as gold and air, but there



were malachite pillars, a mantle, a bowl, some vases, things of antique delicacy in pointed glass. A long reception lounge stretched rosy beneath a wall of angels. The chandelier, round, was like an illuminated pudding. To wake himself up properly, he said, 'This is the room where Prince Lvov and Kerensky met with the Provisional Government after the bewildered Tsar was removed, but before the real revolution.' The baby Corbyn hearing his voice at once concentrated, if languidly secure in the milk arms of his mother. Clare said, 'In another room here, the Petrograd Soviet was meeting.' Idris added then: 'But they dithered about the details of their planned election and staged a phony coup by Kornilov.' 'To win sympathy,' laughed Sophie, exchanging incredulity with Clare. However, George added, 'Showing that false flags don't help you, even then.' 'Well, no,' said Clare, 'especially since the Petrograds won all the guns from him and then took over.' Florence's eyes shone like live French raisins. She loved these impromptu symposiums to aid her education, loved being the hub of such amused attention.



She unembraced Clare's waist and began dancing. Clare and Corbyn followed on the geometric stone, the mocking Sophie joined them. There was in those minutes no other visitor. Idris observed quietly 'Schmidt is in Moscow with Quentin. I saw him at a bitcoin meeting, but I don't know where they're staying. If she is a death-row prisoner, she certainly looked the part: polite, and with the eyes in an abattoir before they smell the blood and mount each other.' Clare, overhearing despite marbled whirling, breathed, if puffing: 'So we *are* just in time.'





## Chapter Three:

### *The Copper Mountain's Mistress*

It was December daylight in St. Petersburg, the air and the sharp shadows a little distorted, as if one's eyes had re-prismed them through ice, although my jet-lag edged anyway in and out of some autistic black and white realm.

Clare, Corbyn, and eight-year-old Florence and I caught the new daytime Sapsan Express train to Moscow. Prisoners of Conscience had unaccountably agreed to pay for our second-class tickets, and Idris was paying for Florence's ticket from his bitcoin investments. The journey would only take about four hours, as opposed to nightlong insomnia on the overnight vodka trains. Idris and Sophie had left us for a Hacking Convention in nearby Finland, and would meet us back in Moscow to collect Florence in a week.

The windows were long and smooth. The train glided like a stiletto through snow that rippled in sculpted tides to a forest thick horizon. There were infinitely glittering Chistmassy conifers, of course, but also the ubiquitous deciduous branches that seemed so transparently bone-brittle that they looked as if they had been destroyed in a bushfire and would never recover. Corbyn watched everything through the glass, smiling all the time since he'd just learned how, and holding hands with Clare and Florence, who were seated on either side and talking over the top of him, their conversation quicker than the train.

Florence had a heavy volume of Pavel Bazhov's *The Malachite Box* folk stories from the Urals. She showed us: 'There are these two where a factory worker called Stepan passes some tests from the magic *Mistress of the Copper Mountain* and he's given a malachite casket of gems for his betrothed. In *The Malachite Casket*, their daughter, who has green-eyes like a changeling, plays with the jewels



and promises to marry a nobleman who courts her if he will let her see the Tsarina in the Malachite Room. That's why I wanted to see it.'

Clare said, 'They seem to have had better luck than Kerensky. I wanted to see it, too. I still love malachite.'

She had left her beads with her mother in Mt Druitt, but I planned to buy her some even better ones in Moscow. I thought: It's strange that thing men have about buying women such necklaces, wanting to see their throats encircled by an atavistic but somehow daring, oddly delicate act of possession. I thought that Schmidt would still have that thrill watching his expensive bright malachite on Quentin, had maybe even had it about the less expensive, poignant satin scarf with which he had tried to hang Bryony before she was shot by his men.

We read aloud in turns from *The Malachite Box* for the rest of the journey, except when Corbyn and Clare slept spontaneously and Florence explained to me the history of copper-mining in the Urals and some of the finer points of safeguarding a currency against manipulation by fine-tuning a bitcoin system. I gathered that Idris' work for the Palestinians had become something of a family project, and I knew that Clare's mother must have been persuaded to provide a mirror for it sometimes. I think these days she was 'Pirate Coral' on the Web. It sounded quite adventurous and poetic.

Idris was still 'Red Idris', of course, and still had his internet show, *Moscow Nights With Red Idris*, although it was said widely that nothing could surpass the evening that he sang 'Smuglyanka' with Anna Chapman on the barstools. Sometimes Sophie went on it now, when they talked about France and the perfidies of the European Union, but they sat close together on a couch. Sophie seemed to have some family connection with the French Catalans who wanted rather understandably to join a new Catalan country, so Florence told me about that, too.

I liked the idea of the Copper Mountain's Mistress in the stories. She was powerful, mystical and either just or arbitrary, according to the needs of the story, and maybe the needs of the reader. She rewarded and discarded at will, in indifference or desire. And she seemed to be in an established conflict with the brutal capitalist mine-owners,



although maybe from her own conservation choices rather than some later communist viewpoints.

Florence showed me a set of vivid recent Russian stamps she was using as a bookmark. Several had the Copper Mountain's Mistress in stately long garb, stiff headdress, watchful and iconic, with graceful, slim, confident hands. Clare woke up and used the same quiet, poised hands to waken Corbyn. The snow's timeless versts had gone and Moscow was outside.

We were staying in Big Afanasyevskiy Lane, near the Kremlin. A radio journalist had fled the country after death threats and what she felt was a general lack of police protection. She had worked with Prisoners of Conscience and asked them to look after her little pleasant flat, in return for allowing them to use it. It was a pleasant street, too, long and commercial but with comely pastel older houses, in varying patterns, and sometimes trees. There were trees next to our windows, skinny and unleaved, but comforting. The cellphone my CIA beer-drinking mate in Langley had given me had a contraption that started whistling if you pointed its sensor at anything else that was bugged, and when I carried it around this flat it literally whistled *Dixie*.

Clare said, 'I don't think I've actually heard all of *I Wish I Was in the Land of Cotton* before.' She was lying, limbs spread, on the double bed, watching tree-branch-shadows flicker on the ceiling plaster. Corbyn was napping in the bedroom next door as Florence dramatically read him the story about the craftsman who is beguiled by the sight of a malachite flower belonging to the Copper Mountain's Mistress, until she tests his fidelity and returns him to his village girlfriend.

With Clare, jet-lag had a time delay, and was only affecting her now. She was more exhausted than I was. I sat beside her, leaning my hand hard on the quilt on the other side of her, so that at least there was some message of possession. She said, 'I wanted to see the Kremlin in the snow tonight, but I think we'll all be asleep. It really would be like something out of *The Malachite Box*.'



I said, 'We'll go tomorrow night. Although of course the prettier it is around that area the more you are likely to find someone spreadeagled, shot, on the pavement for something rather another. They like photo-ops, maybe. They're a very visual people.'

She said, 'But the visuals are lovely. There's that interconnection between the luscious fairytale orbs and minarets and the dark desperate underpinnings, but it's much more profound than just hypocrisy. It's how they produced Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. Will you buy me some more malachite?' The last question achieved flirtation, heroically.

'A much better necklace'. I cupped her throat with my other hand, and the warmth at that connection point reassured us both, so that her head relaxed slowly, to and fro, and we kissed, having wrung a ritual spark from weariness. I moved her spine up to my fingers, and we let our tiredness carry us through sex - it hadn't the energy of fucking - that was like being lifted or floated freely on a strong receding tide.

In the room next door, Florence began reading the story of *Goldenhair*, sleepiness returning her voice to her mother's French accent, and then stopped. When I fetched Corbyn, she was asleep in bed next to the book, her blue snowflake teddybear and the *Frozen* travelcase Clare had bought for her in Mt Druitt. A twig screeched on the window in the black wind, the opposition radio was describing Russian oligarchs and American oligarchs embracing in the Ukraine, and I shivered and wondered why I had thought I had the power to rescue anyone, let alone Quentin from the whimsically merciless Schmidt, in my encroaching old age and in the full invincibility of a fatal Russian winter.



## Chapter 4:

### *Swanlike in their stillness*

Clare watched the Christmas tree. Behind it, the Kremlin onions in light snow against haunted azure did have the otherworldliness for which she had been wistful. She held hands with Florence on one side, with George on the other, and George tucked Corbyn into the crook of his sleeve. Clare saw there was snow-darkness everywhere at the eye's corner. Prettiness beyond problems in smooth complex palace pastels soothed one with its power here, however, and she feared that she might cry. Instead, she swung the hands of both companions, and George asked her: 'Who is this journalist we're meeting. Do I know them?', so she explained, 'No. They just rang on the bedroom phone. Of course, it's the clearest line in the city. I suggested we meet in the open, said we were coming here. Her name is Ninel Lebedova.' The charm of the onions still embraced her, and she added 'It's a common name in Russia. I believe that it means "swan".' The onions were swanlike



in their stillness, sumptuous curvings. She added, "'Ninel" happens  
often,

too. It's "Lenin" spelt backwards, but they like it because it's lovely,  
and totally streamlines out traditional custom.' The baby Corbyn  
ventured out his tongue to taste the snowflakes. Florence began  
to direct snow as if her finger were a wand. George said, 'I like  
the way

we promenade with the children in these dangerous situations:  
it reminds me of the Viet Cong in their battalions, with the infants  
and the aunties.' She said, 'They thought it made them better fighters.  
They were right.' Ornate streetlamps curved wandlike in snowlight,  
with a deliberation to enthrall all hearts. She said, 'The name of  
the swan

also belonged to that oligarch who rivaled Putin, and ended up  
in prison,

and of course to your friend Alexander Lebed, who had sorted out  
Chechnya for a while and also rivaled Putin - this time in politics,  
not cash - and died in that helicopter crash.' George remembered  
the deep-slow voice of General Lebed, the hinted humor,

battalioned bravery,  
compressed in the peasant-patient eyes. He asked, 'But this woman



is unrelated to anyone, works at the radio station?' 'And is nervous,  
like all the local staff. So here we meet her. She's friends with the lady  
who bolted and left our flat.' The Christmas tree had a spine  
like a soldier,  
thought Clare, and its sides were as straight, if tapering. On it,  
ornaments were crowded like an over-raised cake, but it had  
twinkling  
streamers in a quilted diamond shape, and the whole effect  
was of new-cut stones against brimming old-cut brilliants:  
executed, she saw, with a geometric cunning.





## Chapter Five:

### *Grushenka*

The Kremlin dusked darker, and the streetlamps shone whiter in snow-blue, but there was still no sign of Ninel Lebedova. Corbyn seemed tired from processing the novel snow taste - half familiarly watery, half unfamiliarly intense, cold and tactile - and had hidden his frosty little Clare-nose in my shoulder to sleep. Clare and Florence were chasing each other near the Christmas tree, manic for warmth.

Then Clare paused, face slightly raised to one side, like a white fox hearing danger, sent Florence back to me and walked towards a near sidestreet. There was no one in that area. There were pockets of people, but they were clustering near the rigid tree, and further on to photograph the Kremlin onions in a snowfall.

I followed Clare, with Corbyn and Florence, and soon heard what she was hearing. In another of those large, strangely sedate and Edwardian-looking laneways, like the one in which we stayed, there was the sound of a woman gasping and crying out, and hurried scuffling. Under the streetlamps, I caught up with Clare, and Florence gripped my coat, so that we walked into the lane in a line formation. I spoke up loudly, in my best disturbed and indignant bull-elephant: 'What on earth were you imagining, Susan? This is Moscow. It's full of police and people don't just get mugged!'

Florence asked, 'Who's Susan?'. Clare smiled briefly, as if she knew I had already slipped some time ago to the other side of sanity, but then she sank to her knees next to a writhing body on the pavement. Two heavily-coated men hit the body once more with night-sticks and then ran to a nearby doorway, rattling it open and locking it noisily behind them.



Florence started to wail, the pitch reverting to a French prolonged and recurrent nasal. I don't think she knew she was doing that. She knelt by Clare in the same position as Clare, but somewhat farther back.

The sufferer was a woman. Clare asked her, 'Ninel?' and Ninel asked, 'Clare?', so there was no mystery about identity.

The blows seemed to have fallen on her hands, arms and coated body. Her face was inflamed rather than blanched - I was reminded of Clare's in labour with Corbyn - and I realised again what hard work it was to endure and resist a beating.

Naturally enough, she didn't want us to call anyone in authority, and asked us to take her back to our apartment. Clare began to assess the extent of the injuries, but Ninel gripped Clare's wrists and levered herself upright, at once swaying forward so that I caught and steadied her. We all walked a few paces and then back towards the Kremlin, cutting across the tree area and so back eventually to our busy laneway. People carry each other around rather a lot at that time of night in that area, so we didn't look out of place. By the time we were inside the flat, she was staggering as I supported her, her feet mainly off the ground, and Clare was holding Corbyn.

Ninel was obviously familiar with the positioning of the furniture, and laydown quickly on the wide lounge couch, pulling a cushion emphatically under her head and crossing her feet, still in buttoned boots, on the couch arm. She was superbly well-dressed in the way of those young Russian women. She had short-cut, floppy blonde curls. I felt the lingering attachment that one does towards a woman one has just been carrying, but we seemed to be playing pass-the-parcel with Corbyn, and Clare gave him back to me until Florence carried him off to sleep in her bedroom, and listen to her sing French carols.

Clare looked at Ninel and said, 'Grushenka' in a tone of affectionate amusement. It was the name of the complex courtesan in *The Brothers Karamazov* and I thought it suited her appearance well enough, but they both looked at me - already a communication-unit unto themselves - and Ninel explained: 'It is my pseudonym on the radio and in the papers. Sometimes just "Grusha" - that means "pear". My mother would say I had pear-colored hair.'



'You do', said Clare, brushing some of it back from Ninel's forehead - and at the same time assessing her temperature and signaling to me with minimal eye-contact that it was steady but left a bit to be desired. There were now two separate communication units in the room, with Clare in both of them. Of course the obvious question, to be discussed with Clare later, was how genuine the assault had been, and how much it was designed to place Ninel at once in our confidence and under our protection.

With Ninel full of hot milk and sleeping, Clare and I lay hand in hand in the bedroom, watching the December shadows on the ceiling again. She whispered, 'So now we are rescuing two young women. I've always thought Grushenka was Dostoevsky's best character.'

I said, 'I don't know if it was just how the weight of Ninel's body felt, but I keep thinking of that scene in *Karamazov* where Grushenka sits on Alyosha's knee to tease him, and then becomes sincerely sympathetic and remorseful when she finds out his mentor has died.'

She said, 'That may be the great danger here for us in Russia - with Quentin, too: these beautiful girls and their deadly, reversible emotions.'

I said, 'I've always thought you were rather like Grushenka. She is finding her way, after all, after being over-controlled. There's a suddenness, a grimness but a tenderness about her.'

'Over-controlled by who?'

'Much earlier than me,' I said, 'I meant Mt Druitt, and all the compulsions and restrictions of a child.'

She seemed satisfied by that, and meticulously but casually kissed my fingers. Closer to each other, we listened to 'Minuit, Chretiens' sung by Florence from the next room perfectly.



## **Chapter Six:**

### ***Ghost Christmas***

Clare Collins woke up in the Moscow apartment in a dark where snow and ice were singing, as if the window glass were as close and absorbing, as not-there as skin. But her own skin was freezing. She had been dreaming of the Caves where Schmidt's wife Bryony had died closed in George's arms. The embellished Russian clock said it was after midnight, therefore Christmas Day now in Australia. The Russian Nativity was not kept until the seventh, but she felt like phoning Christmas. In her dream, Bryony's spirit wandered helpless through bush outside Jenolan, dappled white as if marbled by the river, sobbing when remembering distress. Clare pursued, trying to comfort, but the thin ghost



in its tornado-twisting scarf writhed back from her and then Ruth was there, looking unusually irate as well as Indigenous, wearing a long wind-streaming nightdress of grey ashes, saying that the only ceremony that would help was to smoke the dead to rest. Clare sat up and found her cellphone. George, in an armchair in the lounge room with Corbyn, explained to the baby that when Putin just thanked Trump for the CIA exposing a terrorist plot against St. Petersburg, it was Idris who had told the CIA. That was indeed Idris' version, back from the Finnish Hacking reunion, and Clare thought it possible to believe it, as apparently did Corbyn. When Clare's cellphone glowed, Florence came in, staying again, since Idris and Sophie were lecturing on Bitcoin at some Russian think-tank . These days here, they had more think-tanks than Washington. Maybe, she thought it went with the nervous dichotomy between the rich and poor. Florence asked 'Are we



phoning Australia?' and Clare nodded and they shared a look of mischief and the mutual, excited by their own excitement more than anything unusual. In Mt Druitt Clare's mother was staying with Ruth, who picked up the phone, with noise in the background: whirling children, raucous-throble country-and-western. Small Charlotte - recovering from Schmidt's abduction - could be heard above the rest with the authority of trauma. Clare asked Ruth directly, 'Have you ever done a smoking ceremony?' 'Eh?' 'Is this about ghosts?' discerned Florence eagerly. Ruth asked, 'Eh?' again, but with more concentration, now taking the enquiry as serious. She remembered, 'Well, yes I did once. I didn't know anything about it, but I knew Mum Shirl had done them.' Clare thought: yes, George once said Roberta Sykes had been comforted by Mum Shirl smoking out a haunted flat. Ruth said, 'I did one once for Tyffanie. She was still in the Satan Cult, and when they moved back to Mt Druitt, there was this child



- a little girl - on the left-behind back swing. The previous family had skipped the rent, moonlight-flitted to Brisbane, so there was no use asking them if that baby ghost, singing to herself about wanting a puppy, had been theirs. Tyff was pregnant at the time, and it made her nervous. I got some wood and found out the right words. I thought if I fuck it up, I'll burn down half Tregear. It was a heat-wave Christmas like this one.' 'And did she leave?' asked Florence. Ruth said, 'I'll tell you at Russian Christmas.' The best part of any story was the agony of waiting, so Florence, at her most French, was elated even more. Ruth asked Clare, 'Will I get your mother?', meaning: *I can hear you are upset*. Clare said, 'Have you heard anything about Bryony walking at the Caves?' Ruth said, 'Not from anyone up the Mountains. She'd be pretty wild at being hanged, shot, and not alive, and Mr. Schmidt in Russia with young Quentin. Don't forget Quentin's poor Mum is still awfully unhappy...says they're not worth it, malachite or diamonds, even top-secret.





I could ask the Lithgow Coven?' But Clare: 'No. They're really busy at Christmas. It was just a bad nightmare.' Coral asked, 'Did you get the toys?' as she took the phone, and Florence, wise, described fully Coral's *Frozen Troll Garden*: adults never know that much about the gifts they give.



## Chapter Seven:

### *Like a lotus on the river*

We were sitting around a table in the Moscow apartment, on Russian Christmas Eve. Corbyn was examining politely a second blue loud rattle, larger than the one sent by Coral from Australia which had been opened earlier on the Australian Christmas. There were the traditional twelve dishes in front of us, but vegetarian and mainly soup and dip, rather than the astonishingly carnivorous Russian ones, often involving the heads of pigs. I said, 'When we've been to the Church, you can phone Ruth for the end of the ghost story.'

Present were Clare, Corbyn and I, Idris, Sophie, Florence and Ninel. Ninel had taken refuge with friends in the country, but returned tonight briefly with gifts of bright-wrapped food and toys for the two children. We were going to Church - or at least Clare, Corbyn and I were - because Idris had been told by one of Schmidt's Russian colleagues that Quentin had wanted to pray in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour tonight for a few hours. Schmidt would be there, watching her, as always, but it would still be good if she knew we were around. And, of course, Schmidt already knew we were. He had to stay in Moscow for a while, however - Idris said that was about the acquisition of even more light-sensitive silicon quantum diamonds, with the Saudis as first potential buyers.

Clare rubbed her tense forehead on my shoulder and I slid my arms around her waist. Earlier, she'd said she'd had the nightmare about Jenolan Caves and Bryony's ghost again. I'd said, 'You should have woken me', but she'd smiled: 'I'm not an adolescent anymore, George. I don't do nightmares as foreplay.' I'd protested, 'I have social skills. I know more forms of comfort than just sex.'



Now she said, 'Maybe it will help if I meditate a bit in the Cathedral. I was always good at Yoga: I see the lotus really easily.'

We left the others eating finger food (fortunately no creature's fingers) and taking turns to play maracas with Corbyn's rattles, the adults drinking some old blazing vodka Ninel had brought especially from her best friends in the Urals.

The Cathedral was near the prised river and voluptuously night-lit as only the Russians can illuminate their treasures: its white flanks reminding us of the Police Station in Kos, but domed golden.

Inside it was crowded, but with that odd sort of pious attendance in which each individual's face advertises their own private rapture or stoical annoyance. Clare and I sat separately, I with Corbyn and she in a blue and soft silver woollen scarf, her face unusually peasant-still, less elfin.

It may have been that stillness which finally disarmed Quentin. She came over quietly, picking her way, as if the crowd were a shallow river, and knelt beside Clare. I saw Schmidt's face, at once over-animated and cadaverous, a few pews away in a corner. Quentin said nothing except to mouth once, 'I love him', her words holding all the tragedy and horror in the world.

The long liturgy continued, the deep bass perhaps not quite as mellowly profound as Vladimir Miller, but nevertheless beginning its journey in the earth and lifting upwards through the body like an invincible sustenance. Her opened hand gently on Quentin's shoulder, Clare had her eyes shut, and I knew she was seeing the lotus, other epiphanies. Corbyn's eyes were shut, too, but not sleeping. Mine were open. Schmidt's were open. After a while he summoned Quentin by inclining his head and turning sharply. She followed him out at once, her new heavy Christmas necklace of malachite and diamonds seeming part of the immense luxury in the church.

Outside in the immense cold, the immense beauty, Clare touched the malachite beads I'd given her for Australian Christmas. They weren't as dark and pure as Quentin's, but they were variegated and patterned



like cut wood, and their green shone in many-hued layers. They weren't a warm stone particularly, but any stone was warmer than this night.

Clare said, 'We have to take Quentin home soon.'

I thought about it: 'But first other things will have to happen'.

'Then we'll make them happen.' We held hands across the bridge on starry icewater.

Back at the apartment, the vodka, grim information on the hacking of the Finnish Hacking Conference, and the evening's general icicled atmospheric burden had slowed the adults into isolate revery. But Florence dragged us at once into her room to phone Australia, where Ruth obliged with the rest of her ghost story.

She said, 'Well, I managed to get a fair amount of smoke into Tyffanie's yard without anyone calling the Firies, and I could just see the little ghost at the far end standing next to the swingset. Then it was really strange, because it was as if a red dustcloud had just swept in from the northwest, the sort that when it happens the birds get confused and fly into houses, because they navigate from the sun. The little girl suddenly flew past me into the back room of Tyff's house, brushing my shoulder. It was hard to know what was going on, what with the smoke and the dust, but then the ghost wasn't there anymore - just a grey female blackbird sitting looking confused on Tyff's wardrobe. I flapped it out the window with a teatowel.'

Florence asked, 'And did the ghost come back?'

'Well, yes. When Tyffanie got Charlotte back from being kidnapped by Mr. Schmidt, Charlotte looked a bit older: she'd been crying a lot and had lost her baby fat. When I was standing on the back step, and I saw her near the swing playing with the chihuahua, I realised that she had been the little ghost.'

Clare said, 'Yes. Ghosts are just from out of time, aren't they? It can be the future as well as the past.'



We wished Ruth a happy Russian Christmas. Florence was excited by the story's ending. She asked me, courteously, to include me (was I still looking that old?) 'Do you think all ghosts really just want to come home?'

Clare's face still had meditative sadness, her head tranquil but tilted as if floating, on my shoulder like a lotus on the river.



## Chapter 8:

### *Spectre and Meltdown*

George Jeffreys woke up in Dobrovisky in January, the snow smoothing the window like royal frosting, the utter cold below the floorboards making their bedside boots ice to the touch, here in a country hiding place with a manor and a church, here twenty five lonely miles out from Moscow, in a house owned by Ninel's friends from the Urals, used to store classic vodka normally, but where the fraught young woman was seeking sanctuary - Clare, George and Corbyn riding shotgun, on her journey from the city. But the place seemed safe enough. Clare's cellphone rang. It was Idris in Moscow, who was solving the government's Spectre and Meltdown problem. He explained: 'It's a bit of a beat-up, Dude, but, hey, they're Russians. They believe in flying saucers. They think the Democratic Party



will hack into their kernels. Spectre's just a filing system that's gone sort of over-the-top on being helpful.' 'Don't call me "Dude"', said George, 'and, anyway, I think the Spectre situation just mirrors my own synapses: every time I think of something my brain offers a thousand associations, usually unasked.'

Clare said, 'When I met you, that's why I knew you could love.'

George asked, 'You thought I might not have been able?' She said, 'You were acting out some pretty weird emotions.' She'd alternated her hands on his penis all night, to stay warm, but now gave it her kitten-dismissing pat, sighed, as she handed him the cellphone, hoisted Corbyn to her breast.

Ninel came in wearing a billowing flannel nightdress - as white as the window, white as her face. It was only diurnally she was svelte with Moscow fashion. At night she became the other half of Russia: firm and barefoot as Natasha at the end of *War and Peace*. Clare asked, on that wavelength, 'Isn't Tolstoy buried somewhere near here?' and George thought, worked out geography, and answered 'He's in an unmarked grave



over a hundred miles away in Tula, but I suppose that is quite near, if you're a Russian.' They both had a snow-dazzling vision of the smooth plot iced with blizzard, looked up and the glass, in the window, had that overlit same dimension, but at least temporarily free of human shadow. Sat on the quilt, Ninel watched Corbyn suckle with a kind expression, like his own placid attention, she comfortable before all elegance demanded of Grushenka by the day. Then she begged them unexpectedly, 'Why does Quentin want to die?'





## Chapter 9:

### *'Why does Quentin want to die?'*

Ninel asked again, her English sounding very Russian, her breath rising a little to the roof of her mouth: 'Why does Quentin want to die?' She sounded feline in her fear we wouldn't answer.

Clare responded: 'Why - do you know her?'

'No. Idris and Sophie told me about her at Christmas. But I've heard some of Schmidt's organisations - maybe the old Kissinger CIA and the anti-Isis KGB - are planning to finish him off after the next silicon diamond sale to the Saudis. Idris made Quentin sound very tragic, as if Schmidt might kill her, because he is sick and old, or she felt compelled to die with him - perhaps die for him?'

I had an unsummoned image of Clara Petacci strung up upside down in death beside Mussolini, after the partisans had shot her, too, at her own request.

Corbyn had stopped suckling and looked seriously back and forth between Clare and me, as if hoping we would solve Ninel's problem.

Clare, obviously suppressing any suspicions that Ninel might be KGB, answered: 'She certainly seemed to be in an agony of love. But I'm not sure if some of her motives aren't business. In Australia, Schmidt had been giving her a fair bit of the lower level drug and real estate management, including Asian travel, and I'd be surprised if she's not managing some stuff for him here. She may not want to be buried with her Pharaoh, after all. She was there when he killed his first wife.'

I said, 'But that seems to be the sort of thing which inspires feminine devotion.'



When she had been using my penis for a hot water bottle, I'd had the front of my hand pressed against her perineum, in an accustomed sleeping position, and I was experiencing an old man's exasperation at the creaking transition between the hardness and softness in that closeness and her superficial even-tempered practicality now.

Ninel left to dress and came back looking like an oligarch's granddaughter in a fashion shoot, wearing her feathery charcoal coat like a sleek flourish of independence, with her hands spreading the pockets out as wings.

Clare and I put on extra trousers and overcoats and bundled up Corbyn, after changing him. His nappies still had the same sweet smell as lochia, vanilla biscuits, although Clare's post-partum bleeding had stopped at last, and I was no longer pursuing her with iron tablets and warnings of anaemia while she called me a bloody mother.

The snowfall had recommenced outside, hesitant at first and then feral, like the noise of a car door slamming - or was it a car door? In Australia, the weather often sounds like a slamming door, especially the arrival of a southerly, but this sound was too controlled, as if customarily muffled. We all went automatically into the living room, where a couch, chairs and table sparkled with byzantine curves between the dull glow from the vodka bottles lining the walls. I'd found the Glock in my greatcoat pocket, and sat with my hand on it at the table, with Clare and Corbyn. Ninel whistled nervously, making coffee. She had a boy's long, tuneful breath-outward whistle, not Clare's inward, interrupted, blackbird-sounding one. I recognised the song *Stenka Razin*.

So did Clare, who asked, 'Why is the Russian favourite traditional song about a Kossak rebel who spends a great night with a captive Persian princess and then drowns her in the Volga because his men say he's getting too soft?'

I said, still irritable: 'Of course it's to show that you have to sacrifice everything for survival: that's how they got through the Great Patriotic War against the Nazis.'



She warmed each hand alternatively on her coffee: 'And of course it could be a warning to Mrs. North Shore about her sexuality: too much bondage and being mastered and you end up being carved up physically or verbally, or floating in the Lane Cove River.'

'But Mrs. North Shore seems to want *that*, too.'

She studied the coffee, murmured: 'So back to Quentin.'

But I was still elsewhere. I said: 'One of my clients was a guy who put on a black suit, hood and mask and hit people all the time at the Hellfire Club. He was suing them for tenosynovitis of the right arm.'

But the superficiality of that was too much for her, and she considered banging the cup down, decided to drink it instead, did so in ten seconds - fortunately the air had already cooled it - and then gripped my wrist tighter and tighter, looking me in the face so intensely that she might have been willing something truer out of me by soul force.

I said, 'If I were Quentin, I'd have been so afraid when he killed Bryony that I would have internalised his power, lost my sense of self, even to the point of letting him kill me. Of course that also means that his internalised power might want to continue in my body, not his, and that I wouldn't be the one who died. And of course I wasn't suggesting that when I'm dominant in our sex I was just doing it to be obliging. Although you should acknowledge that chivalry - pleasuring in any form of a woman's pleasure - has a genuine part in some men's desire. And I can't help being superficial: it's because I'm getting old and superficiality seems to be the worst part of aging. But for your sake I'll fight it all the time.' I held the wrist that had seized mine with comparable force, and she relaxed in a stylised limpness, so that the whole thing had plainly transformed to foreplay. I certainly felt clearer in the head.

Ninel had stopped whistling but the comments about Quentin seemed to please her.

And at that point Schmidt knocked at the door.



## Chapter Ten: *Ice Plunge at Epiphany*

On the table between Jeffreys and Schmidt were their guns: the Glock and Schmidt's heavy old-fashioned Russian pistol, a Makarov. There was a fringe of sweat-melted rime on Schmidt's brow, on his jacket haphazard snow, a cough - peripheral as if polite - inhabiting his speech. Still the most misogynist of villains, he focused on George not Clare, although in terms of expressed violence, Clare's history so often fascinated the evil ones. The barrels on the guns appeared to watch each other peacefully, leashed dogs awaiting cue. Ninel went to brew tea in a samovar, like some ruling aunt in Tolstoy. 'Bolshoi', she shrugged, for the samovar was heavy. Schmidt looked heavy, despite thinness from illness, and heavy on the roof the slush and ice slid down, blinded the window. Clare asked, 'Is your cough from your injuries in Australia?', a normal bold Clare-question. Schmidt answered her, not ceasing to watch George: 'No. I got it when Quentin wanted to swim in an ice river, trying out that custom the Russians indulge on the Feast of the Epiphany. We were in a party with Putin. He dived in and she, too. Unlike him, she kept her shirt on. But then within a short time, she was in trouble in black water, and I had to follow. Since



then I've had a cold. She has recovered.' His voice had sweet-bitter Viennese refinement, seeming humorous and harmless. Jeffreys asked, 'How many of your people wait outside? This situation is a bit like *The Big Sleep*.' Schmidt's eyes creased with worldly wrinkles: 'There are three of my colleagues in the car, but I hope to survive, unlike in the movie.' Clare saw that his eyes had slight peasant downturns in the corners: they looked steel but sad: she found him physically pleasing, perhaps because, she thought, his disregard of her gave her the space to watch him. Then he glanced at her with grim brevity, her very *pia mater* felt a threat to her spinal cord and brain, and he lowered his paced voice to funereal business tone: 'Lets discuss this mother-panic about Quentin...'



## Chapter Eleven:

### *Pia mater*

I thought it must have been Clare's sensing some threat through her *pia mater* - 'tender mother' - the waterproof membrane most intimately protecting the meninges and spinal cord - that made her qualify aloud: 'Sometimes mothers stoop to panic for a good reason', in the middle of Schmidt's sentence. If he remembered that we had witnessed his last wife Bryony's destruction at his hands in Jenolan Caves, it was tonight so far a tacit subject, even for Clare. But she took advantage of his misogynist focus on me to persist with a subtle interrogation, I think seeing that his eyes being elsewhere made his responses to her peripheral enough for perfunctory honesty. But she had seemed so discomforted when his eyes had suddenly met her objective scrutiny that now as soon as he would begin to look in her direction, she instantly lowered her lips and pressed them onto the top of Corbyn's head, eyes downcast like an autistic madonna. Her response was so quick that I don't think he ever realised that her gaze was still inspecting him. I think she did quite like the look of him - he had a pleasant, urbane, greed-matured visage - but if there was any need to combat him physically, in some gunfree arena, it would be more likely her than me in combat. Perhaps that was why her *pia mater* was prickling.

Clare looked to me as if she was imagining a situation in which I carried off Quentin - as I had Ninel - and she interposed herself to ward off Schmidt. She asked him, 'Is Quentin here?'

He said, 'In the car, but she doesn't want to come in. She has asked me to explain to you that she wishes to stay here with me, and that she understands the full situation. She says it is good that you are here, because you have seen our circumstances, and you can reassure her mother that she is safe.'

Ninel asked, 'I've never met her. Can I go out to the car?'



I frowned, as I wanted all my lambs in one Glock-protected fold, but Schmidt opened and shut his hands permissively, and Ninel strode outside, her fists still winged wide in her sleek coat pockets. When she opened the door, the Russian winter rushed in on us like a triumphant child.

Clare did not seem to think there was any real reason to go out to the car - clearly neither she nor I sensed that either of the young women was in any danger at this moment, despite my general control-misgivings. I think she intuited, as I did, that there was still some crucial piece of knowledge that Schmidt himself might yield. We both knew that if we spoke to Quentin in the car, she would just say what he had said she would, and be irritatingly convincing.

Schmidt said to me, 'You understand fidelity, Mr. Jeffreys. You have been loyal to one woman for a long time. I have always wondered if such unions do last such a long time because the two are trying compulsively to solve some problem in their relationship.'

Clare's murmur interpolated at once: 'Is there a problem like that between you and Quentin?'

He chose the superficial, but it was still an uneasy shallowness to master: 'She is a fit young woman. I am an ill old man.' Then he apologised to me: 'I did not mean to insult the quality of your devotion.'

I said, 'It's alright. Language isn't your first language', grinning enough to diffuse my own accuracy. We both glanced at the guns on the table. I thought he must have adjusted enough to Australian mannerisms to feel accepted by my use of male banter, although I would never consider insulting him as much as I insulted Assistant Commissioner Harry Terrence in Mt Druitt. I suddenly missed Mt Druitt. I knew Clare missed it all the time.

But I was also obsessed by my own recent epiphany that superficiality is the vice and torment of old age, and that one must brace to fight it in oneself. I continued: 'Just because I love Clare for all the wrong reasons doesn't mean that I don't also love her for what she might consider the right ones.'

He didn't look at her, but I did. For a second, her lips on Corbyn's head not only pressed down but kissed him.





Then, however, she murmured another question, 'What does all this have to do with the Turnbull Government's decision to fix the Balance of Payments by becoming one of the great Arms Exporters?'

I thought: either a hole-in-one, girl, or nothing. At first it seemed nothing, so I added, 'The U.S. wouldn't like that, would they? It's not really their most efficient field. But the Russians and Chinese wouldn't feel so threatened?'

He considered it, then echoed the littleness of her whisper: 'I don't deal in that sort of technology so much, anymore. I like the innovative and the digital. Quentin still handles some armaments, though, and keeps the old Kissinger people happy. They don't like me, after Bryony...' so he at last referred to Bryony... 'but they think I hold Quentin prisoner, and they want to strengthen her. They have their own sort of chivalry.' His sarcasm was so unusually obvious that Clare was safe to add, 'As chivalrous as bombing Cambodia.'

But he said, 'They don't do that so much now. They still want to un wedge China and North Korea. They did feel safe with Rudd. But with Trump, they're not sure what buttons to press. He's probably got the right ones, don't you think so, Mr. Jeffreys?'

I said, 'I don't know him that well. He seems to be a classic isolationist, talking like a classic brinkman. They're used to many versions of the Haka in Appalachia. So: yes.'

Corbyn looked as if he'd just realised that thing he'd always liked experiencing was a kiss, and as if he were working out how to give one in return, with his head tilted back sideways.

Clare asked, 'So Quentin isn't handling the silicon diamonds? She could go home then, deal with the old-fashioned arms stuff from an office in Sydney? There'll be enough of it there now.'

Schmidt said, lifting one fist of his close-bitten nails to wipe the meltwater from his face, 'Yes, but I need her with me. You *understand*?' The question was to me and I said, 'Yes, I understand.'





## Chapter 12:

### *How did the Devil come?*

There is nothing more anthropomorphic than the wind in Russia.

Here it became louder but the shriek became sobbing. How the window seemed made of infinite snow, its compact pressure making Clare feel frozen in a time cube: an unprogressing Now.

George unexpectedly quoted, as if to restore his remembering:

'How did the Devil come? When first attack?' from a primer anthology piece by Betjeman on childhood in *Norfolk*. Schmidt responded as Clare knew he would: real evil as he embodied always thought of itself as innocent beforehand, it felt invaded or possessed by life's corrupting. She herself had known herself even at nine years old well enough to understand that in killing all her siblings the anger in herself was sole and ample. Jeffreys she thought, as now, brought the continuous to things, creating

his Commonplace Book where there had been at best one page of oasis in a blizzard such as this. So the Devil told them of his boyhood in Vienna. She waited for the twanging of a zither, but Schmidt was solemn, described a solemn boy impoverished and implored by his mother, in the lime trees and the rations, to succeed and without much insight into anything but acting skill and vice. The weight he had lost from pain and wasting made his face that of a hoping ingenue this morning.

As always when telling of youth, the face became younger, the gentled gaze fixed relievedly beyond death's single meaning.



## Chapter 13:

### *The colour of ghosts*

Schmidt's recalling of his pre-vice childhood didn't seem to preclude his abstracted gaze switching its longing to the vodka tiers on the walls. I hesitated, not knowing how many Makarovs Ninel's friends packed, but Clare was always more facilitatingly larcenous than I was, and she at once placed Corbyn on my knee and brought back an oversize bottle of overproof, diamond-white grog.

She wiped out the teacups with a doily and half filled each with vodka. Despite its effect at Christmas on Red Idris, Sophie and Ninel, I always find it takes me a while to get drunk on any vodka, so I thought I was fairly safe to sip this one. Clare tasted it with recurrent but small mouthfuls, mindful of the potential ghastly image of an intoxicated Corbyn. Schmidt drained his first teacup and poured himself another decisively. I wondered how long he'd stay decisive, if he continued drinking for his former weight.

Quite a while, it turned out. He asked, 'Do you deny that Bryony betrayed me?' All his questions were still to me.

I said, 'No, but you shouldn't have killed her.'

Clare asked, 'If Quentin betrayed you, would you kill her?' He had lifted Quentin in his arms, almost toppling forward from a fatal height at Jenolan, but it was tacit that we did not admit what we had witnessed. And he had been crazed with pain, perhaps not organised in his intentions.

He said, looking down at the cup, pursing his mouth, considering: 'She has never betrayed me,' but I knew he'd be aware of the inadequacy of the answer, and I gave him time to continue. He gave a



snorting sigh and straightened his shoulders: 'I still would let her live.' Then he asked, with a thin-lipped parody of playfulness: 'How do you think she might betray me?'

It was a troubling question. Clare and I weren't really conceptual gamers, but there were obviously several parties interested in his demise, and it was easy enough to conceive scenarios involving Quentin in that goal. We were there to protect her, however. Clare said, 'You're right: she has never betrayed you, and she never will.'

He drank more vodka. He decided: 'I will talk to her mother.'

I asked, 'On your cell phone from Dobrovisky?'

He said, 'My phone will not work here, but you have a Langley phone, Mr. Jeffreys. It will reach a Chinese satellite.'

I was overcome by schoolboy gadget-curiosity to find out if it would. It did.

On my knee, Corbyn twisted in against my lower ribs with that talent babies have for wriggling their boredom into affection, and began to doze.

Silkie answered the phone. It was too remote for Skype, but her voice was without static. She asked, 'Quentin?', her tone so desperate with hope that it tried to reveal no hope at all. Clare looked inadvertently moved at these two people conversing who were so profoundly at the mercy of a pretty young arms-trader. And who was so profoundly in thrall to them.

Schmidt said, 'Quentin is fine. She is being interviewed by a journalist in the car. I thought I would take the opportunity to borrow Mr. Jeffreys' splendid phone and speak with you. You know she is quite safe?'

She begged, 'Send her home'.

But he lied, 'Very soon.'

Then she didn't know what else to say, so resorted to Western Suburbs perspectives: 'Did you really get married?'



'Of course. In Los Angeles. We could not have guests for security reasons.'

'In a Church?'

'No. She did not wish it. But I think we will do so soon. She has become very attached to Russian churches. It is easy, you know, to fall in love with Russia.'

This meant something to her, as the weird indictments of several Russians for interfering with American politics via Twitter and stacked meetings was still in the news, somewhat confused by the fact that they had campaigned both for and against Trump, and also for Jill Stein and Bernie Sanders. Anyway, it was the most fun the FBI had had since Anna Chapman, and I wondered again what wit in the Russian Secret Service could achieve such vast funds from Vladimir Putin. Whoever it was seemed to have been employing more Americans than the New Deal. I felt it unlikely to be anyone as public as those named. Idris would know. I must ask him. Then I swallowed more vodka and realised that Idris, too, was in love with Russia.

Silkie asked Schmidt, 'Quentin's not working on American politics, is she?'

'Oh, no. Perhaps they work on her a little, but I make sure it's never dangerous.' He could not hide some of that lifted, waltzing tone of a Viennese lying to a woman, and I could tell by her silences that she was succumbing to sheer panic.

Clare understood that, too, and nodded me towards the phone. I retrieved it, and told Silkie, 'It's alright. We won't leave without Quentin.' She believed me more than she did most people. She said, 'Okay', as her voice weakened out.

The car door slammed outside, but the only footsteps returning were Ninel's. They sounded light but not flurried.

Schmidt clearly felt he had achieved his aim: reassurance, terror, or both, and was looking at the morning light in his vodka.

'I've always thought vodka was the colour of ghosts,' I said.



## **Chapter Fourteen:**

### ***Do they purchase arms in Fairyland?***

Ninel when she came in outlined by ghostly snow  
looked at once childlike and monumental, stilled  
in the doorway with what seemed no landscape but icelight  
like an explosion around her. Even for a Russian, the cold  
had stunned her. It was Clare who closed the door.

Schmidt stood up and easily went to Ninel,  
put his arms around her, warming, stripped her gloves,  
rubbed her hands, as if the practical dissolved all  
personal space barriers. Clare thought again how evil  
makes such a religion of the practical. Ninel accepted.  
Then Schmidt distanced himself from her by exclaiming,  
'Ah, the famous Grushenka!' as if he had never  
seen her before at all that morning, and Ninel said,  
'Dostoevsky wrote the famous Grushenka. I am



just a working journalist.' He smiled with those charming European wrinkles: 'Sometimes you are a Swan - a Lebed - sometimes you are a Pear, when you are bravest, loyal, clinging to your orchard, golden Grusha.' Clare said, 'Grushenka was very brave', with her small usual Mt Druitt factual interpolation. Schmidt again might have been joking: 'Were you interviewing my wife or buying arms from her?' He patted the flat of his hands down Ninel's coat as if searching for a mobile rocket launcher. Ninel gave the Russian woman-smile, a subtle arcane stoical scowl, and moved away from him to the vodka-cluttered table. George poured her a little, dabbing out her old teacup. The fresh air from the door unmasked the smell of alcohol. She drank it with one hand, pulled a book from her deep stylish pocket with the other. It was Jason Matthew's *Red Sparrow*. Clare asked George: 'Isn't that the one your Langley drinking buddy was upset they had to read and spruik because it's anti-Russian, when



he's in the pro-Russian faction?' 'Well, yes,' said George, 'but the author's ex-CIA' - Clare: 'Ex?' - he continued: 'And in Langley they do all like to think there is a life after the Company, writing sexy novels with a touch of Praxis pizzazz about them. I think Matthews gave everyone there that hope.' Ninel explained, 'Quentin lent it to me. She'd just finished it in the car. We were agreeing how much the movie sucks.' 'It sucks indeed', said Clare, who had only seen the trailer, 'but Lawrence guys up the Russian and she's really sexy, although the sex is still Appalachia, not Moscow. She doesn't get yet that the Russian's ethereal.' Fresh from the snow, Ninel's skin, she thought, was ethereal enough: a cool white fairy painted on the Copper Mountain. Knowing George would not need her to fill in any linkage, she told him: 'And I'm a sucker for books with pictures of Fairyland, aren't I?' Do they purchase arms in Fairyland? they both wondered, as Schmidt sighed and stood to go.





## Chapter 15:

### *The Great Game*

The snow skipped and scurried, childlike again, around Schmidt in the doorway. He looked back at us, as if wondering whether his chilled, dry lips would stretch to a parting smile, then realising that they wouldn't. He slammed the door behind him, but not violent: practical, to show that's what he was.

Ninel said, 'Quentin was crying in the car,' as she began to flip through the novel. She seemed to have the same habit Clare and I had of reading a book at random, including the last page, to see if we would like it. In Ninel's case, with her firm, manicured Russian fingers, it looked like someone routinely testing fruit at a market. Her eyes were mainly on us.

Clare asked, wriggling slightly with anxiety, turning it into a stretch and standing up: 'Did she want to go home?'

'Of course, especially now the Australian Government really wants to be in the Arms business. She says they've already approached her. She said she'd like to be out of the cold. But she wants to stay with Schmidt, too, says she loves him. I asked: or are you afraid, and she said it's the same thing. Funny girl, or maybe not. It's all what turns you on. But I don't think she wants to die. She kept fiddling with that malachite and diamond necklace, like she try to take it off. This book is wrong about Putin. He wouldn't like a sulky girl like that heroine, and there wouldn't be any danger about it. It's all straightforward with him, like a smile at a dance.'

Like most Russian dissidents, she was strangely defensive about her President's love life, as if anything about sex always reflected more on



the nation than the individual. I said, 'Or jumping into ice water at Epiphany.'

She nodded cheerfully, 'That, too. Schmidt was wrong about Quentin recovering from the swimming. She sneezing in the car.' The Russian casualness with auxiliary verbs was newly evident as she concentrated more on the Matthews thriller. She reproached, 'There are recipes at the end of the chapters,' as if the author had forgotten to remove them.

Clare perched on my other knee, the one Corbyn wasn't asleep on, and shifted her weight a couple of times in case I wasn't aware of the small round pressure of her bottom through several layers of winter textiles. I was aware of it. I wondered if we were so relaxed in front of Ninel for erotic reasons, but then thought: no, it was as if on some level Ninel was always absent. Not an existential impostor, but it was the feeling I usually had when a person has another, secret role. It was as if the part of her reserved for authentic observation was committed elsewhere, although she observed everything.

Clare asked, 'What did you talk about with Quentin in the car?'

Ninel answered without effort: 'Arms sales. It is a legitimate business. And why Russia is more interested in defensive weapons. The only war we want is to include back the Russian-speaking peoples. And to stop Syria falling to the Jihadis. And that Russia needs more modern weapons. Defensive weapons need to be more up to date than attack ones. But that is her job, of course, to talk up sales. It probably helps her that the West demonises Russia again at moment.'

Clare said, 'They'll never stop playing the Great Game, so she's got a safe market there.'

I added, shifting her wriggleness a little, both for the pleasure of it and so that I didn't have to choose between circulation to my left testicle and femoral artery: 'That's why Trump is staying in Afghanistan. He buys off the anti-Russian faction, so that he can keep things quiet in the Middle East. You can see why Turnbull wants some of the action for Australia. But he's temperamentally like Trump, I think: not a



Great Game player as such. They both went to conservative schools as boys. Bright boys from that background hate games.'

Clare had settled herself a bit on the edge of my thigh, so that I steadied and held her on it with my free hand. She leant across me and kissed the drowsing Corbyn, so that he smiled unconsciously with a prematurely adolescent expression: like a schoolboy simultaneously pleased and embarrassed at his mother's affection. As she sat back, she deliberately stroked my mouth with her warmer breeze of hair.

She said, 'One of the still really conservative and misogynist things about you is how you always analyse other men by where they went to school. You don't do that about women.'

I said, performing another really-conservative-and-misogynist trick by over-focusing on the personal: 'But you mainly went to school in prison.'

She said, 'I could say most women do that', but she didn't say it. The position she was in meant that she had to angle her face sideways down onto mine. I hadn't had a chance to shave and she curved her tonguetip for a while along the slight stubble on my upperlip. I was reminded of Corbyn putting out his tongue to taste the snowflakes. She said, 'You taste of minerals, just as snow does.'

I said, 'Malachite and diamonds.'

And she reflected: 'Yes.'

Ninel seemed reminded by something in the pulsy propaganda novel to check her cell phone. Like my Langley phone, it appeared to be working. She read her new texts solemnly then gave an old quick Russian grin: 'It is safe for us to return to Moscow now.'



## **Chapter 16:**

### *Novichok*

Moscow in mid-March was vagued by slender snow  
slanting down politely as if it scarcely remembered how.

The grey sky was as close as a pillow to the face.

Clare pressed her face to her pillow, its grey lace  
crisping on her cheekbone, chafing it like tears,

and indeed she had a feeling that the fears

jack-knifing her had a simple exit in crying.

She grasped George's hand where it was lying,

doubled it up like a doubled-up body, tighter

so that the knuckles, aged slower and sharper,

could be rubbed up and down her own bones.

He had developed a manner to permit this long

guiding of the parts of his body, so that she could



manoeuvre him but still know that his blood  
informed each thing she moved, and now her grip  
took his from her restless head down to the hip  
and rubbed his knuckles along the jointed thigh  
and coccyx and then above the back of her knee  
and up again to stop on the clitoris: his fist not moving,  
but hard there like granite until she sighed, relaxing  
and he assumed all pressures until she came. She slid  
her head to his neck then, crying: the purpose in this:  
a functional thing, not pleasure or mutual tasting, although  
it might revert to foreplay should their mood allow  
a particular guying of formality, as if in dislocation,  
through experience, of the phrases in sexual diction.  
She cried quite formally, her body and her heart  
expelling toxins neatly like a housewife in Mt Druitt  
wrapping up and putting out the trash. He let his mouth  
drink in her face's wetness: mineral taste. She asked:  
'Malachite and diamonds?' He said soon: 'Yes. I guess



I should ask why you were crying? Or I should know  
tides wash in with no reason but the moon?' But: 'No',  
she said, 'Strangely, it was Corbyn. I mean, the politician,  
not our son. The way he was being reasonable at the poison  
and the Russian spy, but everyone went for him. I thought:  
maybe they'll get him this time, because he's old, and right.'  
'I'm old and right', said George: 'Perhaps it was transference.  
Calling a toxin "Novichok" seems to belittle it: the reference  
to it as a "new guy" might mean it didn't happen. There is  
some evidence it never did exist. Indeed, the primary source  
is someone called "Mirzayanov", who put up the formula  
everywhere, and the whole degrades so easily into water  
it would be hard to identify in tests. Talking of new guys,  
Idris is bringing round a Russian scientist to meet us.  
He met him through Anna Chapman, but Sophie isn't jealous.'  
She asked, 'Since no one's saying: has anyone let on to anyone  
you know if the toxin victims are alive, awake or gone?'  
But he said, 'In this paradigm, that isn't one of the questions.'  
She feared: perhaps nonsensical maze-microcosms



like the current British thing made life *itself* lying to one  
real, unavoidable: a tide savage with its salvage in the moon.

The baby Corbyn

called her then in the spring-dimmed room.



## Chapter Seventeen:

### *The Red Queen*

Outside the window, the trees weren't yet in leaf, but further down the street the evergreens' branches were as richly stilled as paintings. As usual in Moscow in March, the only things moving were the cars and the snow. After she had fed the baby, Clare and I had made love - including fucking - spontaneously but profoundly and we were still relaxed from that, and the newness and choices it always gave the morning, like returning from a holiday or illness. There was no need to discuss whether tears and fears were foreplay. They weren't, they were, and it didn't matter. When Idris, Sophie and Florence arrived with Kirill, we were still holding hands over snow-cold coffee.

Idris said, 'You don't really want that coffee, do you?', drank mine and gave Clare's to Kirill. Cold coffee was as close as Sophie came to imagining Hell, and she went to make a fresh one. Florence picked up Corbyn and sat on Clare's lap with him, asking enthusiastically, 'Is there going to be a war? Ninel said last night that there's going to be a war.' She was always going to be a little French girl.

I asked Idris, 'Is there going to be a war?' I wasn't going to assess that myself yet, not wanting anything in my current elation to be redefined as *fin de siecle*.

'There is always going to be a war', said Clare, her dark chimes-blue eyes reflecting black above Florence's Paris-black gaze.

Idris looked at Kirill. Kirill said, 'It's less likely now the story is that they found the Novichok in Yulia's luggage. That may mean the Red Queen version that they fed to the tabloids: Yulia's Ma-in-Law in the KGB got tetchy about her son breeding with a traitor family. It doesn't finger Putin anymore.' He looked even younger than Idris, like something vulnerable Florence would bring home from a freezing playground. He added, 'Chemically, of course, the stuff could come





from anywhere, and no one actually keeps it, except maybe Mossad off the internet formula. Anyone could actually make it, it's inert unless in situ. And every now and then you hear it doesn't exist.'

Clare said, 'The luggage sounds like Mossad. They muck around with suitcases. But would they really be that pissed off about Russia creaming the Jihadis in Syria? Someone there must have twigged by now that that whole area being run by Saudi Arabia isn't one of their long-term security goals? Maybe it *was* the Mother-in-Law. It sounds silly enough to be partly accurate. I'd believe it in Mt Druitt.'

'I don't think a Mother-in-Law would be subtle enough and then theatrical enough to use Novichok', I said, 'And it's probably harder to get here than most places? Even if she keeps some in the fridge?'

Kirill nodded: 'We actually did quite a good job of cleaning out or abandoning the chemical weapons, just as they did in Iraq. The Red Queen Ma-in-Law couldn't just go to the fridge and get some.' He had a Russian solemnity about frivolous questions.

Clare muttered at me, 'Don't be frivolous' - literally from the corner of her mouth. I wanted to kiss it. I said, 'My Langley buddy does think Skripal contributed to the Orlov dossier on Trump, but that it's a golden shower of bullshit and there's no way Trump even cared about it. Maybe someone didn't want it invalidated, though.'

Clare asked me, 'Do they still say "no way" in Langley?' Then she asked Sophie: 'How is Ninel?'

Sophie's expression always quickened, talking to Clare: 'Happier. She's writing about Putin and the Oligarchs again, as Grushenka. She's showing the links with the British Royal family, that Britain putting sanctions on the Oligarchs would be a shock to the Royals. And she talks about Quentin. She wants to rescue Quentin.'

I said, 'There's a queue.' But then I remembered Silkie's husky, resigned, helplessly anxious voice, and my heart tightened for her. From a purely personal point of view, I thought Prime Minister Turnbull couldn't set up an Arms exporting industry and recall the expert Quentin as an executive quick enough. Clare saw what I was thinking and whispered blackly and sweetly: 'Well, it would help that, wouldn't it, if Mrs. May declared war?'



**Chapter Eighteen:**  
*On the death of brothers*

Idris had in his backpack the phone he called 'Frankenphone, the Unhackable Hacker', an invention he and Sophie had perfected even further, and the dual text version of *War and Peace* given him by Anna Chapman. He boasted: 'I can read it now in Russian. God, it's great. I've just finished the chapter where the French shoot Natasha's little brother, Petya, in action. It's all so true to innocence, and accident and grief.' On the TV in the dappled little apartment in Big Afanasyevskiy Lane, the pictures of the Siberian shopping centre fire recurred like punctual sermons, with punctual Putin on the scene, confirming them a negligence, a crime.

Clare made herself view them directly, re-enduring her old fire horror. She envied Natasha's clean grief for her brother: Natasha

who had never

killed a brother. She said, 'It was a particularly facile thing to compare Putin to Hitler as Prince Charles and Johnson did, when

Putin's brother



died of diphtheria in the Siege of Leningrad.' 'He is the best "Hitler" they have had since Saddam Hussein', said Kirill: 'The word

is a trigger

for Cruise Missiles, I believe?' Sophie laughed:

'Except the new weapons

Putin announced can take out the delivery ships forever.' 'That means Damascus stays intact for a bit longer', said Clare, and told Florence:

'Also the Russians and Syrians just seized

the chemical plants that were

going to manufacture the false flags to justify the bombs.' Corbyn

on Florence's lap on Clare's lap had the same intent expression

as Florence, listening. George said, 'So now we're all playing a game

of musical diplomats again. The Russians do it best. Last time,

they expelled all the real staff, retained the spies, so that an entire

embassy broke down. You have to respect their sense of humour.'

Kirill shy-smiled at the respect for his humour. Florence's laughter

was rapid and genuine, from her deep French appreciation

of inappropriate substitution. Corbyn laughed

as always in communion.

Clare embraced Florence and Corbyn tighter, remembered that 'Viktor'

was the name of the diphtheria brother, who must have been an icon



posthumously within the Putin home. She thought: I cut rivers  
as icons into Anthony, my brother, when he was dead, not my sisters.

I loved him more and less than them - I being, when I was young,  
as heterosexual as humiliation. When will I tell Corbyn?

*The girls were Janice and Tess...* The shops in the Siberian Centre  
looked like a Mt Druitt plaza. George saw her blood still from grief,

then

reassured, 'We'll go toy-shopping at midnight with these children  
soon back home.' Here now, however, what was real was Quentin,  
terrified on Clare's mobile phone.



## Chapter Nineteen:

### *Smelling silk and fear*

Quentin was crying aloud and beyond interrogation, except to confirm she was at her home in Moscow, and not to call the Authorities.

Clare asked Idris, 'Where do they live?'

He thought about it: 'We saw it at the bitcoin meeting. It's a weird old wedding cake mansion in Khamovniki, near the Golden Mile.' Sophie remembered, too, and gave an emphatic Parisian nod about the weirdness.

'So take us there,' I said.

It was quicker to walk. We all went there. I carried Corbyn in his sling on my chest, but found I was outpacing the others, even Idris and Clare. I hoped she was impressed.

The Nineteenth Century building was made up of ornate pastel squares and small curved windows. Quentin was at one of these on the top - third - story. There was a blue Aston Martin Vanquish tourer parked outside and the front door was half open. There were the sounds of angry voices inside, and of violence to furniture.

We were five adults and two children. Quentin had sounded so desperate that I had put the Australian police Glock from Harry Terrence in my hip pocket. The close sky became suddenly nacreous as clean snow fell.

We refastened Corbyn's sling onto Sophie and she took him and Florence back around the street corner. The street was outlined sharply to my eyes in an existential mode and I realised I knew I might die in it. My first reaction was an odd resentment towards my setting, since it would be indifferent to my loss, but then I felt a shared anthropomorphic compassion with it - the buildings, poignant



trees, the bare weather - understanding that they were no more permanent than I was, no more aloof.

Clare saw that I was adjusting to these nuances for survival's sake and asked, 'Do we go up or does she come down?'

Kirill asked me, 'What gun are you carrying?' He didn't seem less waiflike, but was outlined sharper, like the street. I thought: there was no point in Quentin's request to avoid the Authorities. I said, 'A Glock. Is yours a Makarov?'

He nodded, 'Standard issue.' Idris didn't seem at all surprised.

Clare seemed to be factoring in that two eccentric men with guns would complicate things even more logistically, but that she could probably cope with it.

I asked Kirill, 'Who are those men in the house?'

He said, 'I wasn't expecting this - but Quentin is correct: I'll try to minimise it. She hasn't been doing anything serious lately, I believe: just selling some Russian and Chinese weapons to Myanmar, with everyone's blessing, except the Rohingya, and some Israeli and Ukrainian arms-selling rivals. Of course, *they've* just been stirred up against the new Silk Road and the second Gasprom pipeline. The EU backing the new Israeli gas pipe changes everything somewhat. More Cold War stuff, more money stuff.' He was looking concernedly at the Aston Martin.

Idris said, 'I've heard that Schmidt is hedging his bets with some Ukrainian oligarchs, since the old Kissinger faction is a bit chill about his wife-killing thing. They really may want to dump him one way or another after he sells the new quantum diamonds to the Saudis. I don't think he'd sacrifice Quentin to ingratiate himself with Kiev, but he may have miscalculated a bit.'

I said, 'Quentin will have quite an employment resume to show Malcolm Turnbull.'

Clare observed, 'I think the car has been specialed and shut again' and gave her parodic giggle: 'Novichok?'

Not an area for Russian humour. Kirill said, 'Perhaps a more realistic nerve agent. No one should touch it.'



Clare asked, 'Whose car is it? Schmidt or the gang inside? If Schmidt isn't inside, of course.'

Kirill said, 'He's in St. Petersburg.'

The noises inside were increasing and Quentin reappeared at the window like a stoical ghost.

'Can she shinny down the outside?' asked Clare, but a threatening face appeared craning up from a lower window.

Quentin phoned Clare again. Clare asked, 'Is that your bedroom? Have you barricaded the door enough? Keep away from it. They can shoot clear through it easily.' Quentin was calmer, probably from despair. Now she had a small obedient ironic tone that reminded me of Clare's in prison long ago.

The first gunshots barked inside. A heavier weapon than a pistol. Clare said, 'She has to slide down as far as she can, then jump. George, you'll have to catch her.' She asked Kirill, 'Can you distract them inside? Shots or tear gas or something?'

He said, 'Gas wouldn't immobilise them enough, and we haven't much time to organise anything. She can try to climb down while I shoot at the ground floor windows. George can keep his gun free to protect her.'

Idris said, 'I'll chuck some garden stuff and stones at the window while you shoot.'

More shots inside. I said, 'Go. Do it!'

Any pedestrians in the street had been prevented by the commotion and the snow, and Sophie warning them of a noxious accident. Idris threw a stone babushka at one of the windows. It shattered green like ice.

Clare told Quentin: 'Get on the windowsill.' She did, wearing a lavender silk housecoat over designer jeans and long violet boots. And her malachite and diamond beads. Clare whispered, 'Slide', and she did, to the small windowsill below, clutching lacy casements. The menacing face didn't return yet. Using the same method, she scrambled further down to the next floor, then ran out of handholds



and footholds. I gave Clare - who still refused to learn to shoot - the Glock and positioned myself underneath Quentin with my arms out.

I caught her. She was smelling of silk and fear - both of them seemed floral. I sat down slowly with her momentum, and then stood up quickly and took the gun from Clare. At that moment, the man with the menacing face appeared in the doorway and evaded a shot from Kirill and a letterbox from Idris, raised what was luckily just a pistol and shot at Quentin. I clicked the safety catch off the Glock and kept on firing at the doorframe. I think I missed once and hit his shoulder. He stopped weaving back and forth and flinched back inside.

Quentin was still sitting on the ground, but she had doubled over on a leg wound. Clare and I both thought: *artery*, simultaneously, but the bullet appeared too shallow for that. Clare held her firmly and pressed the silk coat on the wound. Quentin said, 'It *burns* - so badly, like electricity. I thought it would be more like stabbing.' An ambulance and a police car came, and a forensic towtruck for the Aston Martin.

The snow continued thicker and Sophie returned with the children. Unusually, Corbyn was distressed. So was Florence.

By that time the house was empty, and looked like compulsively desirable real estate again. The men had left by the back door and over the fence into a series of expensive, sheltering gardens.





## **Chapter 20:**

### ***Easter Eggs at Mt Druitt***

When Clare and George rang Silkie with the news that her daughter was shot and sedated, she was spending Easter Saturday with Ruth, some indigenous Darug and Ruth's great grand-children Charlotte and Jimmy at Mt Druitt. Charlotte's mother Tyffanie wasn't there: she was visiting the Lithgow Coven - with whom she'd reconciled - to assist their Solstice rituals, and also to avoid Charlotte's father, Andrew, who was visiting from America, wanted to see his daughter.

Ruth had agreed to supervise the meeting. Small Charlotte

was boasting

to him that she'd escaped her kidnapping by his employer, Schmidt, as if forgetting his own involvement. It was as if, thought Ruth, he had forgotten it, too. Not she, however: she watched him like a panther. So did Jimmy, from his room. George took the opportunity to ask Andrew: 'Did you meet Sergei Skripal where Schmidt sent you to the arms deals in Dubai? What was he like?'

Andrew was too flattered by his own celebrity experience to dismiss



the admiring query entirely, so said, 'I think I saw him there, but he'd be operating from Porton Down for Kiev to the Saudis. Mr. Schmidt wasn't interested in chemicals, just physics. He kept working on getting the light more accurate in the diamonds, but they'd always pay for that okay. That's why he never sent his lover Quentin to Dubai.' 'She's his wife now', said Ruth, with a whisper of centuries-long sadness like a ceremony for the dead. Silkie said, 'She's still my daughter', begged Clare again for any purpose in her going herself to Russia. Clare explained: 'She said to tell you not. They knocked her out with benzos in the ambulance, a Russian cop called Kirill went with her: he's probably alright. We're going to visit her as soon as they'll let us. If you stay home there everyone is safer.' But she had a visceral feeling, suddenly, that Silkie wasn't safe. Ruth, as if knowing, reassured her: 'I'll look after her now: ring us back as soon as you have information.' Clare agreed. In Ruth's house, children were exchanging eggs and rabbits. Silkie said 'My son's girlfriend's son would have liked me to buy some. I would have, at Mt Druitt tonight. Is anyone going to the Plaza?' Jimmy stroked a pet real rabbit against his face, left his room. After Cobham, he was simplified and gentler. He said, 'I'm going there to meet some mates.' Andrew offered to drive them: 'I'd like to buy something else



there for Charlotte.' Ruth said, 'Charlotte stays with me, however.'  
She relaxed when he agreed, although her eyes still had the stillness  
of indigenous mistrust. Then Tyffanie rang and Charlotte

ran to answer.

In Andrew's hired Audi, the autumn nightwind's dry smoothness  
soothed like a sighing motor. Silkie combed her silk hair

in the mirror, its

colour reassured like her golden lipstick, and the holiday-bright shops.

Jimmy's mates all seemed to be his cousins, including the notorious  
Trent himself from Cobham, but their conspiracy that night was just  
buying sweets for even smaller relatives. Silkie left

them outside Kmart.

Inside, it was dazzle-lit like a pirate's cavern, long alcoves of food,  
utensils, the occasional person quieting with confidence in the order  
of the items, and unpressuring emptiness. There shone gleaming eggs  
she could buy for the little boy and she bought some and a tough

rabbit

in manly tartan to outlast his grip. She didn't know where

Andrew was:

perhaps outside, already with Charlotte's gift. But outside, he had left.

She thought: I will see if he's at the car. The shadowy car was parked



around a concrete corner. She stood waiting at its door, but

he attacked

from nowhere with a knife that broke her shoulder, since it was aimed down at her heart so fiercely. She called out -

one of those cries that are

inadequate and do not carry, since only formality dictates them, as if her fifty years in suffering had prepared her now to be polite

and perfunctory at their ending. She knelt down with her arms raised above her for the execution, long fair hair catching around her,

snagged everywhere and tugging in the blood. She felt that he cut her head, but then the knife had gone and Jimmy thinly shouted

with a voice back to unbroken, and the other boys arrived, so that she was encircled by their deft protective anger. Trent hotwired

the Audi and they drove her back to Ruth. Ruth called the doctor

her Shelter used to keep the victims' secrets, then conferred

with eternally unofficial Harry Terrence, who advised her

that Silkie be transferred to the shelter network, it still expert

in smuggling women up and down the suburbs. He could offer

in the meantime a couple of police sentries, but the powers

at work in this were political with danger. Ruth rang Clare,

who agreed the network was a good idea and added, 'And don't



forget the Lithgow Coven.' George asked, 'Did Andy Pandy, as Tyffanie once called him, explain at all his newest whim to butcher women in the Plaza? Did he say it was Schmidt's orders?' But 'She said that he said nothing', Ruth accepted, her focus as ever, thought Clare, upon the rescue and not the reason. Ruth took the Easter presents from Silkie, promised to take them to her grandson, as she'd intended, carefully washing off the mess that reddened them, with practised tact.

Earlier in Moscow, Clare had given Corbyn a chocolate egg for Australian Easter. He melted it on the palms of his hands then nibbled and sucked like a kitten. George wiped them with a sponge later. Clare'd said, 'I promised him two Easters just like the second Christmas. He understands everything I promise him, you know, like you do. That's why I'm never not careful what I promise both of you.'



## Chapter 21:

### *Kulich and Kutuzov*

On Orthodox Easter Sunday - a week after Silkie had been attacked in Mt Druitt - Clare, Corbyn and I were sitting in a comfortable private room in a clinic on 1st Tverskaya-Yamskaya Street, Moscow, with Quentin, Ninel and Schmidt. Quentin was propped up in bed on plump ice-white pillows, surrounded by a vast banquet-breakfast of Russian Easter food that was crowded onto the cheerful daisy quilt and lacy side-tables. Schmidt had pressed much Russian currency into Ninel's hands and sent her out to buy the feast. She seemed to have purchased at least some of it from a nearby church, as the white-iced kulich - sweetened bread - had just been consecrated to be eaten before the rest of the food. I remembered that the Russian Church was often indistinguishable from the Intelligence Services, and wondered again who her contacts were. I also reminded myself, as Clare did sometimes, that these Intelligence Services should be considered the FSB and SRV, and not the old Soviet KGB. Nothing much else seemed to have changed in the Church, though.

Clare liked the peaceful energy she acquired from eating consecrated food - she would occasionally nip up and receive the Eucharist wafer from a friendly priest with a sense of humour in Mt Druitt - and we were soon all munching the kulich reverentially. It had a lighter, succulent but less doughy texture than I expected. I told Clare, 'Even if she is a strict connoisseur of western suburbs sponge cakes, I think your mother would approve of this.'

Clare said, 'I approve of it,' pushing some more into her mouth while crumbling a small amount in her fingers for Corbyn. He mimicked her but rolled it around in his lips. Not much went down. These days I carried a damp washcloth in a plastic bag in my pocket - the opposite side from the Glock, when I carried that. I was carrying the Glock this morning. Anywhere near Schmidt, I carried the Glock.



Schmidt had largely convinced Quentin that the attack on her mother hadn't been ordered by him but was a false flag ordered by the Kissinger CIA through Andrew, who was now working directly for them. Now, again, he complained: 'They want you to leave me. They want you to go home. They want you to think I attacked you, too, at the house. They knew I would be in St Petersburg.' The Viennese lilt was so credible, so reasonable, so martyred.

Clare broke off another kulich wedge and smiled. The elf smile. I murmured 'The Copper Mountain's Mistress would smile like that', and her smile broadened with more mischief.

Quentin had spoken to her mother on her cell phone, and seemed to feel at ease enough at present. She swallowed a little kulich obediently and then spooned up some paskha, which was a mountainous rural cheesecake. There were sumptuously stained-glass hued eggs strewn everywhere, and piled-up pastries delicate with icing sugar. I ate one. It was all rich food, but none of it stolid. Again, I was reminded of a profound bass in an Orthodox church choir, the very heaviness of the voice at once rising ethereally by its own solid substance. I said: 'No wonder the Russians cling to the Middle East. It's the source of their spiritual being.'

Both Clare and Schmidt seemed to understand that I was thinking of the news that Easter weekend about the forming of a Stavka - traditional war cabinet - in Moscow. The Russians had understood the significance of Western sanctions, the Skripal false flag, the apparent confinement of Yulia and murder of her pets, and they had predicted the false flag gas incident in Syria that would justify a Western attack. They had returned to centrist government and restricted any control Putin might have over decentralised policy, although they had considered placating him by appointing Moscow Mayor Sobyenin the new Prime Minister and not someone he thought more a rival. But the situation was all Tolstoy now. Idris was reading the right book at the right time. I had reminded him of how in *War and Peace* General Kutuzov had maintained that battles cannot be planned - you can only respond to them. Idris and Sophie had spent all Orthodox Easter working out how to protect and restore anti-war sites the West was



going to hack down. And Assange was already silenced. As Clare said, resignedly: 'It's not appropriate to joke about him now.'

Quentin had some white icing smeared on her top lip and Ninel moistened a napkin in her own mouth, leaned forward and dabbed the icing off. Quentin looked amused but appreciative of the mothering, Schmidt didn't look as if he minded, and Clare looked fascinated - so Corbyn did, too. I tried to look like an unsurprised man-of-the-world, as usual.

Clare was assembling a huge brown paper doggy bag of sweet things to take to Florence - and also to the street dogs and street cats.

She said, 'I was thinking about the Russians and hunger. Apart from his brother dying, Putin's mother almost starved to death in the Leningrad siege. It's so bad for them that the English story is that the Skripals' pets were just left to starve. I think there is some really deep link between nations that have been hungry and nations that love animals, you know: all animals are so obvious in their hunger.'





## Chapter 22:

### *Devoured in private*

Clare said, 'I was thinking of that line in Patrick White about the married couple who still devour each other in private: that it's an odd way for him to think about sex when he was in-love so much with Jim Sharman, or Manoly.' She was stretched out nude on his thighs backwards, a position allowed now by the blossoming Moscow spring, if needing warm air conditioning. George cupped his hands behind her head, lifted her face to his lips like a goblet, added: 'But maybe that sort of being in-love didn't involve much devouring. Or when he wrote *Chariot* he was still young enough to pretend at a sexual distaste at odds with his necessity. And mellowed about it later.' His mouth drank her mouth's spring water. They were in vast escape from watching Russian cable cover the Syrian bombing. Sophie on the phone with Idris and Kirill had been unpatriotically triumphant that the Russians blocked the electronics for the untried new French Cruise missile. The eager French had wanted to demonstrate it to make sales, but it ended up bobbing corpselike in the sea, devoured in private.



George said, 'It still may be that Trump was trying to prove the unsuccess of force. Although he does do a convincing Haka. Most of the weaponry from the West hasn't connected, at least if it were really aimed mostly at Damascus.' It wasn't a good day for selling any arms that large and Schmidt was probably right to concentrate on the conventional or quantum. For Russia, Red Idris seemed on call tonight to solve computer glitches. Clare said, 'I dreamt last night of blood on blonde hair, but I don't know if it was Sophie, Ninel, Quentin or Silkie. You must be worried about Silkie. You do still have that thing men have when anxiety is the form sex takes towards women.' He accepted what she said, to be annoying, consented: 'I'm anxious about Silkie, yes, of course. You were right about safe houses, though: she's up at the Lithgow Coven. They seem to be doing wonders for her broken shoulder.' She didn't bite: 'I've heard Andy Pandey is back in America?' 'Well, yes. My beer buddy in Langley says he is, and that he has transcended Schmidt, just as Schmidt told Quentin.' 'We should all transcend Schmidt', she shrug-sighed, stretched her head and shoulders back from him again, and writhed



against the air as restless as a dancer. She straightened, with fingers clasped behind his neck: 'But not of course in that CIA fashion.' She gazed in his eyes too long: a length of time an animal would have categorised as aggression, but her uncertainties fluxed in her fixed expression, its wryness seductive with mutuality, its mutability like a kaleidoscope made from new night air. Florence and Corbyn slept in the next room, their bodies and limbs in April freedom now angular under doonas orchard-bright as easter. Clare let her eyelids close down as if she lied, in nuance of foreplay not confession, volupt in duplicitous submission. The eyelids, she thought, can kneel down like limbs in supplication, made herself forget the eggshell eyelids on an unliving body, blood-blond hair. He resumed his tasting: mouth, skin, eyes, labia, from those the mild tears demonstrating relaxation, her thighs resting tilted child-angular around his shoulders when her sudden shudder came. She squirmed curved into a casual for-spoons shape. He thrust much longer than he hoped, and it was as if his age helped diffuse pleasure through all his freed bones, spine. Trauma-tremor needled through them both after, but they had known that this was forever an approach and not escape.



## Chapter 23:

### *Pantsir and Buk*

In Australia, all miscellaneous computer glitches including a nation-wide supermarket one were being blamed by the press on the Russians, and Clare's mother was on the phone to her from Mt Druitt in a froth of indignation. When she had soothed her mother, Clare told me:

'She does take these things personally. I think the neighbours know she's mirroring the Russian sites when they see those while she shares all the downloaded movies. I suppose their patriotic indignation compensates for their pirate guilt, as usual. *Anyway*, no one would want to miss *Moscow Nights with Red Idris*.'

'I would', I lied: '- and, *anyway*, I'm not sure if he didn't hack down the Australian supermarkets. He's practising for when the American Fleet arrives in the Mediterranean. He says it's correct that 71 out of the 103 Western missiles were shot down in Syria last night.'

Idris himself had entered and qualified my report: 'Only by some small simple systems like Pantsir and Buk. Buk seems to scare them shitless especially.' He looked irritatingly mischievous: 'You think I hacked down Woolworths, don't you?'

'Heaven forbid', murmured Clare and I together simultaneously. Ninel, Sophie and Kirill (who seemed their permanent companion) arrived, and Florence carried Corbyn out of our bedroom, where she'd shifted from the guest room when we were asleep in the middle of the night.

Ninel explained: 'Our missile defences are very Russian. "Pantsir" is just "armour", like "panzer", but "Buk" is the beautiful bay tree, spreading its protective branches and spicy sweet leaves.' Ninel was in her Grushenka mode: part capricious courtesan, part investigative journalist with a placid slavonic smile. Andre Vitchev's new essay that



the West was suffering from Sadistic Personality Disorder was beginning to spread on the Internet and she was discussing it enthusiastically with Kirill. He was pointing out that Stalin did the same stuff, not to mention the Czars, and she was countering that Stalin was the product of Western Marxism and that the Czars who weren't just maniacs all thought they were French.

Clare said, 'That's one of the things Tolstoy loved about the serfs isn't it? They had their own democratic socialist system that he thought was indigenous Russian?' Corbyn, on her knee now, was clearly considering.

I said 'When I first met Clare, the stylised punitive way she was addressed and treated - including by myself - reminded me of wider politics. And we got back together for a while during Bush Senior's Gulf War, so I thought of that even more then.'

Clare added, 'Sometimes I think my own crimes were punitive, or maybe punitive mirrors. Vitcek has an exaggerated revulsion against the details of the punishments, though. It's as if he thinks you can maybe shock the perpetrators as well as the readers. But the perpetrators are usually quite sophisticated in their abstract of sadism. And they have this weird-cute sense of humour about it. And he brings in Sade himself as such without enough synthesis, I think. The key to Sade is always his practical passivity. Like Proust writing himself out of the compulsion to torture rats, although *his* sadists are always someone else.'

Sophie said, 'Vitcek's right that *Juliette* is an awful novel, though. It's huge' - like most of the French, she judged novels by an inverse length ratio - 'and the torture of the woman is far more terrible and fatal than in *Justine*. It is unreadable.'

'The question', pondered Clare, 'may be why was it writable? It's hard to get past horror at the contents, though. The woman is burned and' - her voice shrank involuntarily, 'I'm always so afraid of fire.' Perceptively, Corbyn put his arms up to her fear. She responded by touching foreheads with him, but I knew she didn't gather him up at that moment in case it would seem like an act of hubris to declare that either of them could really protect the other.



I said, 'Sade is always more sociological than you expect. He may have been exhausting the charms of Joan of Arc porn. The French always adore Joan of Arc's immolation. He hated anything the French adored, including guillotining family members. The French made him a Magistrate and were disillusioned that he didn't execute anybody, even his Mother-in-Law, although they hated each other.' I always found that fact reassuring.

Ninel said, 'If Russia is isolating itself again under a Stavka, it may not be a bad thing. The oligarchs create a lot of the violence, and they are more expendable here than they are in London or America. And even the Americans are starting to pick and choose legally between them. And the English have tended to handle them with sugar tongs - in this case, those sugar tongs usually being lesser members of the royal family. The English are much more comfortable with the Saudis.'

Clare said, 'That's because they'd rather sell arms than assets. Mister Schmidt is more comfortable with the Saudis, too.'

Idris said, 'They seem less comfortable with him these days. He has that discomfort problem passim, I'm still hearing.'

Kirill's phone rang. Clare said, 'Speak of the Devil', before it was even confirmed to be about Schmidt.

Kirill said, pondering: 'He has flown Quentin to the Urals.'

I sighed, 'Mistress of the Copper Mountain.'

Kirill still pondered: 'We don't know where she is there yet.'

Ninel sat down in shock, also to think. And Florence stated sleepily, as if channeling: 'She is back in the Malachite Box.'



## **Chapter 24:**

### ***Purity of nerves***

George Jeffreys woke up in the bedroom in Big Afanasyevskiy Lane, his legs weighed down by women. Clare, Ninel and Florence sat on his feet at the bed's end, watched Putin's recent Inauguration, on a laptop Frankenfixed by Sophie, now out with Idris at a party, they said for Anna Chapman: Kirill, of course, was with them.

Small Corbyn

weighed down George's arm that held the CIA phone. Langley - at least at middle level, from where his haunted, drunken buddy had phoned to discuss the mysteries of Putin - seemed to be oddly tizzy tonight. George had been dreaming of diamonds, not this time industrial ones for silicon and quantum, but a purity of gemstones, from a mine that was somehow Clare's vagina: nerves, he thought, the purity of nerves. When he was an adolescent at university, he remembered, there had been a myth that vaginal nerves did not exist, no doubt in necessary propaganda for the clitoral orgasm. It was best in those dim years that the clitoris be more known. Ninel lamented, 'Putin will make that diamond oligarch Kudrin



his Vice President soon, now that Medvedev isn't gone. He is Prime Minister again, not the Stavka's Sobyenin. We may now abandon Syria and not defend Iran.'

'Why', asked George, 'did Putin want this to happen?', as Corbyn snuggled close to his ribs in this cold cunning Moscow spring.





## Chapter 25:

### *Diamonds of Urals*

After the Putin Inauguration tape, Clare had been searching up one of her favourite alternate political analysis sites, *Moon of Alabama*, named after the Brecht/Weill song: 'Oh Moon of Alabama/ We now must say goodbye/ We've lost our good old mama/ and must have whiskey/ Oh, you know why'. In between humming the song with a gloriously phony German accent that sounded like a cross between young Lotte Lenya and old Marlene Dietrich, she was doing a sitting down hug-dance to it with Florence on my shins, and discussing with Ninel a Michael Hudson theory referred to on the site that the crucial difference between Western and Orthodox Christianity was that the Orthodox had not abandoned the Judaic tradition of rulers decreeing anti-oligarchical debt relief. Ninel nodded passionately and said 'Da' at intervals. Her dissidence was definitely anti-oligarchical more than than anti-state. Hence, I supposed, her determination to rescue Quentin from that ultimate oligarch, Schmidt.

Schmidt had apparently an oligarchical interest in gem diamonds as well as the industrial ones for silicon and quantum, and Kirill had reported to us that Schmidt and Quentin were at a dacha near Krestovozdvizhenskoye - where 'the first Russian diamond is said to have been found by a boy washing alluvial gold in 1819', as Florence explained in between dancing bounces. Idris and Sophie had taken her to a *Diamonds of Urals* Exhibition at a Geological Museum when they were on holiday there.

I said, 'But the main diamond mining is at an enormous frozen open-cut at Mir in Siberia. That's where Schmidt's actual gem investment would be.' I added, for Florence: 'The pit is so big that it sucks down helicopters', because the French are always thrilled by such things. She *was* thrilled, an adamantine diamond glint further animating her anthracite eyes.



Clare fiddled with the laptop and found an actual recording of Lotte Lenya singing *Moon of Alabama*. I had heard later versions by other women, and they had Lenya's cynical rasp but not her frightened quiver, innocent cheerfulness or reasonable cadenced sweetness. I could see why Clare felt so akin to it. Clare said, with pensive suddenness: 'The best diamond-cutters are in Israel, of course.' And with her ingrained pert Western Suburbs factuality, as if continuing Florence's education: 'And there are over one million, two hundred thousand legal Russians in Israel.'

At that stage, I felt as if the legal over one million, two hundred thousand, were all perching on my legs, so I sat up with Corbyn, wriggling out from underneath everybody.

On TV in the lounge room, Putin was at the May 9th Victory Parade watching the old soldiers and the new weaponry pass, including a hypersonic 'Kinzhall' missile on a couple of MiG-31K jets and the treasured new Uran-9 killer robot tank. One seat down from him was his unexpected visitor, Netanyahu, simultaneously with Israel bombing Syria. Putin's face seemed as impassive and unprovoked by him as Kutuzov's face might have been, looking at a map of Napoleon in Moscow. I thought: this is a cold, profound climate and the foreplay is as patient as the Great Game is long. I thought of the thirty million Russians killed in the Great Patriotic War, and unexpectedly of Putin's dead brother.

Clare came out of the bedroom, holding out her phone and my Langley phone. She walked into my arms beside Corbyn and rested her forehead on my shoulder, holding the phones out sideways at the strange angles of two broken bones. She said, 'Schmidt is on your phone and he wants you to come to the Copper Mountain. The Lithgow Coven are on my phone and they want our advice. They think that Silkie is dying.'



## Chapter 26:

### *Weave a circle round her thrice*

George Jeffreys and Clare Collins pressed together on one phone in the spare bedroom of a flat lit by the icy breezy morning sun in warm reassuring streetnoise from Big Afanasyevskiy Lane and talked to the Lithgow Coven, who were anxiously alone in their crisp Lithgow cottage, Silkie in the soft spare room, her stabbed shoulder at first 'really nicely healing along', according to Brit, the younger witch, but frighteningly then she'd deteriorated quickly, in a trance of blood and bone, too afraid to leave the bedroom, too certain of detection.

Brit and Brit's mother - who was also the mother of the man Andrew, who had done the stabbing - circled her three times with smoky unguents, and that comforted her an afternoon, but she woke in liquid fever, quoting, mumbling, the poem:

Coleridge from a School Anthology, the febrile *Kubla Khan*:

*And all should cry, Beware! Beware!*

*His flashing eyes, his floating hair!*

*Weave a circle round him thrice,*



*And close your eyes with holy dread*

*For he on honey-dew hath fed,*

*And drunk the milk of Paradise.*

And she tossed with the same weary thirst as someone who has touched death's face by accident in sleep, then commanded her legs in the clambered sheets to run, but found the dark prevented any moving. When Brit brought her the phone, it seemed the only one she confided in was Clare, as if Clare's stoic tone, suggesting grief's thin agony could still choose function, might lead her to some way out of the problem.

It seemed to her that the long loss of Quentin was like Clare's mourning for the murdered children, as if the love would only be reclaimed, the body again held only on the other side of dying. The Lithgow Coven told George, however, of their greater concern that Andrew in America had tried at Schmidt's instruction to steal one of their otherworldly hexes, Silkie's fear the form it had taken, although Andy Pandy had always before been more frightened of the magic of his mother: one reason Clare thought of her for refuge: but kindness, too, in the women



a haunting recommendation. 'Kindness, George', she told him, 'Sometimes seems to be me like a ghost wafting through things: like something that clings to other summonings, outlasts them. You were never a likely person for it, but it always did come biologically, sinewed your bones to your skin,' her teeth along his wrist bone, nipping the sour but succulent, warm taste like unsweetened chocolate again. Silkie on the phone was retelling Quentin's history like a mourning Celtic keen, over and over, then begging George that Clare return, with 'I'll go to hospital if she takes me' a pathetic bargain. She was in a fire where safety has symbols beyond reason. Now Clare's mother and Ruth and a baker, Silkie's son, were also in the cottage, Clare's mother in sly persuasion that if Clare came back It Might Actually Be A Good Thing, particularly since she'd help Clare by minding Corbyn, and she was 'lonely now to have my Clare back home'. George: 'Tell her you'll send her a stray Borzoi', but it did seem sensible if the diamond Urals in their treacheries of spring and Schmidt's desperateness be risked by him alone. He said, 'You will be needed home, but, God, you will be gone.' She squeezed her malachite beads in her closed hand.



She said, 'We might lose each other in the mountains.

And one of us should always live for Corbyn.

And if Silkie dies that is the end for Quentin.

I think that's why she knows I should return.'

So the separation swirled sharp like sleet inside them,

between them,

before them,

like sleet's pain-breaths on Big Afanasyevskiy Lane.



## **Chapter 27:**

### ***The Doll Shop***

Clare and I were in an upmarket, gorgeous doll shop in Moscow. She was shopping for a Mistress of the Copper Mountain doll for Florence, before returning to Australia with Corbyn that dreaded afternoon.

Schmidt had been agitated on my Langley phone. His light, managing Austrian tone angeschlossen often into the high pitched or guttural. Orders were his last resort and no one but Quentin seemed to be obeying. And she was prone with a gunshot wound in his malachite silk bed in a Urals dacha, anxious about her mother, and asking to talk to me.

Although they still seemed to approve of Quentin's arms business practices, his CIA overlords were pressuring him to relinquish the arms sales side and concentrate again on the drug sales. Ninety per cent of the heroin in Canada alone came from Afghanistan, and the U.S. Senate had been defining most of the big banks as being drugs money launderers in a basically non-punitive way that seemed to make it all more acceptable. Ostensibly, he was being offered a peaceful retirement. He was breaking.

I asked, 'Any hope with the Saudis?', but he dismissed my dorothy dixer irritably: 'Of course not. They don't have an army. They only buy small arms to please the Americans. Everything else is mercenaries, or in the air. They won't want me if the CIA don't, although they're intrigued this once by the quantum diamonds. Maybe someone wants to juice up Arabsat. But you know that.' I did.

Things were settling down again in the Kremlin, but not quite so auspiciously from an oligarch like Schmidt's point of view. The oligarch, oligarch's favorite, Kudrin had been given a business planning post not a Vice Presidency, confirmed by a Duma observably unenthusiastic about him. And even that was after he had made a speech re-positioning himself in an Anti-Western stance. Like the



Vicar of Bray, the comely and doll-like Medvedev was Prime Minister again, and the Stavka's patriotic choices remained firmly in place. Ninel was relieved about the whole thing, despite some of her editors having ties to the pro-Kudrin English *Financial Times*, and her radio station being financed by America as well as the Russian FSB and SRV. It was clear that her faction of dissidents were sponsored by conflicting sources but she approved none of those attacking Russia, and no oligarchical rule. I was reminded of my Langley drinking buddy: 'We have many heads, George, and none of them like each other.' I hoped that Ninel would survive as long as he had. But, unlike her, he hadn't been thrashed in a sidestreet yet.

This was a small, new doll shop with strange, once-off designer dolls as well as the traditional extravagantly costumed beauties. And even the latter had a dash of peculiarity, of wayward style. Corbyn, in my arms, was absorbed in what seemed to be a puzzle about how to greet them. He knew if his lips shaped a kiss the effigies wouldn't respond. Clare whispered to me lovingly, 'He'll miss you', as she picked up a large Copper Mountains Mistress about the waist, and held her up to inspect her.

I was in some state of bitter geriatric grief perhaps, because I couldn't imagine anyone missing me, least of all Clare, or Corbyn - the two people who would be most bereft of any hope or spiritual security if I permanently wasn't there. I suppose I had to numb any appalling empathy just to take them to the airport that day.

Clare had found the right Copper Mountain Mistress for Florence. The doll was a queenly lady in a rich gem-studded bodice and headdress, much malachite, with a bejewelled choker necklace and a collar transparent with gauze to the throat but beaded lowcut between her breasts. Her face and bosom had a sophisticated, dreaming but tender look and her ringed fingers were delicate and poised in reflection and arcane premeditation. Her eyes were clear and pale like moonstones, with hooded lids and long double lashes: attentive, gentle, but of questionable compassion. She had a small smile at her lip corners, ethereal with power.

I said, 'It isn't you, my darling, but it will certainly remind her of you.'





Many of the dolls reminded me of her, actually. Many dolls have an iconic quality: delicate bridging objects between life and death. And their sexuality is at once powerful, active, and indrawn, passive. Many of these dolls had been given her white hair, inexperienced but existential face and profound, indefinable eyes. In some of the eyes, the gemlike lustre was indistinguishable from brimming tears. It always seemed to me that the oriental taste for actual sex dolls is more about the doll itself than the doll as substitute for woman. Fetishistic, of course, but in the true anthropological context of the word.

Many of these dolls were slim and heavily jointed, some nude and sprawled on shelves in positions even more sexual because accidental. Clare, following my thoughts, looked at them and said, 'I still think deliberation is more sexual', but I added: 'The deliberation comes first to allow the accident, like here.'

Our gazes flirted with each other inadvertently, and I felt more cheerful. We'd had separations before. This one wasn't different.

The maternal Russian woman shopkeeper watching us showed that Russian trait of totally understanding and misunderstanding a situation simultaneously and asked courteously if we'd like to see the dolls which were behind the curtain.

I murmured to Clare, 'Well, yes. I probably won't even notice the difference after a while.'

She chortled, also discreetly: 'I doubt if these are like real Japanese sex dolls, though. The Russians are terrible prudes about things like that, even the gangsters. Although they do make a lot of snuff porn.'

'That's part of the prudery', I suggested.

There was indeed a curtain: bluebell velvet at the back of the shop.

Clare was right. The secret dolls weren't particularly lascivious or functional. But they were very beautiful. They had strong posable joints and white camellia skin - or gleaming African - long expressive hair, and each had a finely painted and completely different unhidden clitoris and labia. There was an indent, not hole, for the vagina. The pubic hair varied on each in colour and quantity. Their hips were carefully modulated, so that the distinctive crease women have



between the spine and the top of the buttock was quite clear - and again differentiated between dolls. Some of them - which didn't have that crease - were wild, gentle boys, but almost parodic in their undetailed, anonymous penis and old master androgyny.

The shopkeeper picked up one of the female dolls and held it out to me. Clare watched, stilled by curiosity, judging. If I laughed or rejected it in anyway I was toast, but I shouldn't look lecherous, either. I held out my palm quietly and the woman placed the little kneeling figure on it. I felt the smooth weight of its knees and hips first, and the brush of its hands like the claws of a tiny mammal. Its impossibly long white hair tickled my fingers. It was so well jointed that any movement of my hand made it change position. I did what I wanted to do and turned it on its stomach, then its back. It sprawled more extravagantly than a real person, as if contortions were a part of its being. I didn't want to part with it.

Clare said, 'I'll buy her for you. She can keep an eye on you while I'm gone.'

The shopkeeper dimpled with Slavonic delight.

I said, 'I'm not that old.'

But Clare said, 'If you were that old, you'd have laughed or run by now. But you're so young you still suffer from animism. Don't worry. If something happens to the doll, it won't happen to me, too. Although you might want it to.'

The shopkeeper recognised a completed transaction, put the doll in a red velvet box with a minute wardrobe, including vintage 1990s 'big shoes', and wrapped it up in rosy tissues. Clare, paying for it at the same time as the Mistress of the Copper Mountain, said, 'There. We needed a distraction. Give the Mistress to Florence for me, and don't get the dolls mixed up.'

Trying to look as if I'd saned up, I bought a sumptuously soft and winsome toy black bear cub for Corbyn. He accepted it with endearing solemnity. Like Clare, he had a genius for any tea ceremony, at the same time as being too resilient and private to be trapped by one. He didn't have her deviousness, though.



At the airport, she suddenly hugged me, with Corbyn tightly in the middle, and we gripped each other as hard as if hurricanes or policemen were trying to separate us. Then she went limp with reality, and I did, and I waved extravagantly from the transit lounge, contorted, as they left me.



## Chapter 28:

### *The Woman from ASIO*

Clare sat in a cafe in Mt Druitt opposite an ASIO agent who was a warm young woman from the Darug tribe. Ruth introduced her and left them discreetly: 'This is Olivia. She wants to help with Silkie and Quentin. She's Tyffanie's friend, and my Goddaughter,' with the *whatever* of the survivor: 'Her company gives money to the Shelter.' So Clare asked Olivia directly: 'Has Ruth told you where Silkie is and does that put her in danger? Are your Company still close to Schmidt?' Olivia put four spoons of sugar in milk coffee in the centre of a perfect frothy heart, explaining, 'My blood sugar gets low really quickly. No, we don't even know if Silkie was attacked by Schmidt or if Andrew Traske was paid by someone else entirely. But probably not by us.' Clare said, 'You'd like Quentin to come home, though, wouldn't you? And Silkie being so sick does help with that. It might square the arms sales with Israel, the Emirates, the Ukraine: they are all okay with Quentin, some of the old CIA, too. She



would be a supersalesperson, no?' Olivia's voice was soft as milk and sugar coffee: 'You know, I used to write for Rupert Murdoch. No one defends the rights of the Indigenous in Custody as strongly as his Press.' 'I remember your pieces. They were powerful', said Clare, 'Were you recruited by then or was it later?' Her own coffee was black and bitter. Olivia was as candid as milk and sugar: 'It was at Bankstown Campus: Professional Writing - nothing furtive. They put up posters, and I was already interned at the Murdoch papers. My auntie had been left to die in Darwin prison. Diabetes is a death sentence up there. Sure, the Company was using anything Indigenous, but Murdoch was sincere.' Clare said, 'I never expected to be a go-between in arms sale recruitment, but there's no doubt that Quentin must return. And George would be broken hearted if Silkie died now' - realising: 'So would I. George goes to the Urals soon to visit Schmidt and Quentin. We will see what we can do for you, but there must be no more pressure on Silkie and I'll know if I am followed.' Olivia nodded calmly. They embraced when Clare left, but Clare felt that Ruth had successfully concealed the Lithgow Coven.



She went back to her mother's to check on Corbyn. He was in her mother's arms in the back garden, caressing gnarled winter apple branches like cats, the plush bear baby George had given him tucked in his other arm. Like George, she thought, he was strong in the arms, did not release when his mind seemed to do so, and yet did let go, at times in some kind of fruitful interim. Feeding Corbyn on the back step, surrounded by cats from Kos and the dog from Egypt, she asked her mother, almost serious: 'Would you actually like a Borzoi? There's a lovely stray bitch in Moscow.' It was cold, it was June, and Clare's nipples winter apples, until suckling soothed them smooth, blood-mottled warm below.

But, then, Ruth arrived to drive to the Coven over the mountains. Lithgow in this weather was almost grey with almost-snow.



## Chapter 29:

### *Persephone*

I was on the phone to Clare, absently fingering the little Russian barbie in my other hand, removing and replacing its tiny enormous square-heeled red shoes, and stroking its legs as I quoted from Swinburne's *The Garden of Proserpine*:

*' "Pale, beyond porch and portal,  
Crowned with calm leaves, she stands  
Who gathers all things mortal  
With cold immortal hands...  
From too much love of living,  
From hope and fear set free,  
We thank with brief thanksgiving  
Whatever gods may be  
That no life lives for ever;  
That dead men rise up never;  
That even the weariest river*

*Winds somewhere safe to sea."* It's always reminded me of you, that poem. But now I keep thinking of Quentin, too. Even if I can retrieve her from Schmidt and send her to her mother, like Persephone back to the Harvest goddess Demeter, she'll still be the goddess of death.'

'Am *I* still the goddess of death?' Clare asked: 'I just managed to get Silkie to see a doctor. When I found her at the coven she was in bed white as a corpse with the baker-son trying to feed her bits of a custard profiterole, because she usually likes them.'

'What did the doctor say?'



'He wasn't sure. Needed more tests. Her blood pressure was low and she was malnourished. Hexes will do that to you, if it is Andrew. His mother and sister think so. But I think she's probably just terminally depressed. I would be, if my kid was with Schmidt. She cheered up when I was talking to her. I reassured her that her guilt was absolutely justified. Guilt does give you some sort of control. But, still, she'd been so guilty I actually thought she might be dying. I kept on talking about how you were going to see Quentin in the Urals. When I left, she was eating the profiterole by herself.'

I said, 'Good girl,' because she seemed to be asking for approval, but my voice must have sounded ironic. I was braiding the snowy hair of the barbie untidily with a thumb and two fingers. She asked, 'Are you being aggressive because you miss me?'

The strange large over-flexible joints of the doll's arms doubled back behind it when I turned it over. I lied obviously, teasing Clare: 'I don't miss you. I've got the doll.'

She said, 'The doll wasn't meant to be an aid to phone sex. What are you wearing?'

'Pajamas. It's Moscow.'

'What's the doll wearing?'

'Nothing. I wasn't nuts enough to dress it. Big red shoes.'

'Well, you got those on her. Does she still look like me?'

'You have normal joints. Maybe the hair. And the bottom' - I perceived - 'sort of *en poire*, but not entirely *en poire*, because not too heavy, and rounded underneath. What are *you* wearing?'

'A flannelette nightdress. It's Mt Druitt in June. I've been sleeping. I've got delayed jet-lag. Corbyn's with Mum in the lounge watching that sitcom she pirates about the women's prison. They all seem to be in there for life, including the screws.'

There was more breath in her voice and it was slightly more hollow, and I recognised the tone of her sexual quickening, perhaps before she did. I said, 'The doll has joints directly under its hips, so that it bends wildly around, and the elbows twist in all directions through that hair's whitewater Niagara.'





'The doll's hair?' Her voice was drowsy, one of those interstices in which she might come and sleep in the same second.

'Yes, the doll's. I can listen while you come. That would be more effective than me talking, don't you think? Otherwise, we're just going to break each other up laughing.'

'Okay.' So she did, quickly and easily. She said, 'You, too.'

And I did, but not so easily, and I told myself I was doing it because I was being democratic, although I had been aroused by her coming. She said, 'Focus on the doll. I'm too intense a subject. Think of Peter Pan in a cartoon spanking Tinkerbell with his finger.' But the doll had sad elsewhere-eyes and I needed suddenly to imagine a woman's skin enveloping my penis. I ignored the doll and concentrated on a feeling of moist rose velvet in my head. But the fact that she wasn't there was now actually inhibiting, like a child uncertain because it needs more than just to hear its absent mother's voice. When I came, it was more perfunctory than when she had, and the noise I made more like pain. We both said 'I love you' when we came.

Then she said, 'Olivia from ASIO said they do want Quentin to do some selling for the new Turnbull arms industry. They got Ruth to get me to meet Olivia. But I don't think they had anything to do with Silkie being sick.'

I said, 'They're welcome to Quentin, if Schmidt will let her go. He won't let her go smoothly, though. He's a desperate old man. Like me.' I sat the doll up in a more sedate position with its legs swinging slim on the edge of the bedside table.

She said, 'I'll ring you back when Mum brings in Corbyn. You can say goodnight. Oh, will you give that Borzoi in the Lane some scraps for me? I don't want to make it dependent, but I don't want it to die.'

'This is Russia', I said, 'Don't worry. They've always known that independence is death, including the Borzoi. Why don't I just post it to your mother? You can supervise it in quarantine while you're there.'

'I thought you were joking about that', she said. She was almost asleep again.



I said, 'Everything I joke about turns into reality, including the Borzoi. And you once. But you were always real.' I was trying to make her real in that room which was now empty of her, and was just a furnished antechamber to Schmidt and Quentin, and to the fierce mountains treacherous with cold summer and meltwater.

She woke for a minute and asked, 'What is the doll's name?', so I invented one at once: 'Persephone.'



## Chapter 30

### *Solstice Eve*

It was the eve of winter solstice in Australia. Silkie seemed still safe with the Lithgow Coven, was still eating bits of the vegan feast they were preparing. In Mt Druitt, Clare's mother, Coral, hugged the baby Corbyn closer and sang to his hair some lullaby in a murmur like the soft sea at Thirroul outside a window, probably the sound, Clare thought, in which he was conceived. She was lulled in a cold armchair with a cup of tea, which she caressed lingeringly with her fingers, as it was warmth from her mother, but relieved that Corbyn like the tea was a conduit now for the illusive love between them. Perhaps she was conceived in the same sound, she drowsily remembered when she was a baby the lullaby Coral sang next to her cot as much the same noise as the croonings from the bedroom when her mother placated one angry husband or another.



Clare's second-last stepfather  
killed himself when she was in prison for her murder  
of her younger siblings. George had told her later  
using the truth as he did then like a hammer.  
But she had never felt she was the cause.  
Nor had her mother been the cause of her deaths.  
Near her arm there was a square fan-heater, flame effect.  
Paper on wire inside turned round, as if the breeze  
blew delicate flames on ashes. It also had a mutter  
like immortal sea, the room's noises swirled together  
with the midnight wind outside to slow the heart  
until the air was beyond time and space. I wonder,  
she considered, if this is when and how  
I should talk to my mother about jealousy.  
Jealousy, too strong for just one object was searing  
like an amputation again inside her body,  
at some apex of feeling and lack of feeling,  
in a skin that was unchosen and imprisoned.  
Their gazes relaxed at last in meeting, briefly.  
Then they both looked down to concentrate on speech.  
Clare said, 'I don't know if jealousy is a simple matter.



Do I want to be the baby in your arms, or the you he trusts and nestles into maybe over there as much as he does me? If I were only one of you, is that enough to soothe me? It wasn't that you didn't care enough, but there were always others. You asked me to babysit, and not go to the movie. I knew at the time you thought you were helping me to love them, letting me be you, as if my ego boundaries were too narrow.' Her mother said,'When you brought up children then they told you that they learn to love by having responsibility, as if all the numb ones needed were pet rabbits. I never thought you did it on purpose.' The solstice rain fogged like filmy swaddling on the window.

In Coral's accustomed arms, the baby stretched away arms-length: bored, fickle or understanding his mother's defeated sadness. Glow, from wire and paper, flickered on him as Clare took him back in keeping.



## **Chapter Thirty One:**

### ***The World Cup***

In a cafe near 1st Tverskaya-Yamskaya Street, I was sitting with Idris, Sophie, Florence, Ninel, Kirill and a Saudi agent called Samir. The name meant 'evening conversationalist' as explained by Ninel, but at least in this daylight frost, Samir seemed characterised by an almost tearful muteness. Ninel explained that he'd had money on the Saudis in their recent World Cup match against Russia in Moscow, which Russia had won 5-0. I comforted, 'I've never seen patriotism and successful gambling go much together', but Idris had already dis comforted him further by repeating the joke going around here that Russia had 'defeated Isis twice: once in Syria and once in the Stadium.'

Florence was clutching the new Mistress of the Copper Mountains doll. It still had Clare's formidable elfin abstraction, but I suppose all dolls had that. Samir was a slim youth, like Kirill.

Kirill played with some fragrant frozen leftover kulich with a fork and told me, 'Clare put me onto your Australian agent, Olivia, so we could try to smooth out Quentin's return. I don't think it will be easy, though. Quentin has been getting involved in Saudi and Israeli Arms against the Syrian Government and selling to the Emirates' Australian mercenaries in Yemen. My people would like her out of here, but Samir's people aren't so eager about that.'

Samir added, 'Some of the CIA are pressuring my people for her return in case Schmidt kills her. But we also wish to purchase from Schmidt the new quantum diamonds. And she seems at present healthy in his care.'

Ninel explained, 'It is Samir who is going to take us to see Schmidt in the Urals. Schmidt wants to see you, George, but he doesn't mind if Kirill and I come with you.'



Florence looked excited: 'Will you be in a helicopter?'

I said, 'Some of the way. But we won't be flying over the open-cut pit at Mir, so there's no danger of us being sucked down. Schmidt's little holiday house is in the mountains.'

'Where you can fish jewels out of the rivers,' Florence added, still excited, her eyes gleaming like the coloured zircons and dark semi-precious beads on the doll. She would phone all this new information to Clare even quicker than I did.

I asked Idris and Sophie: 'Do you know what is happening with Assange now? Prisoners of Conscience can't find out anything, except that Australia isn't likely to bring him home, and Ecuador is still being pressured by Spain as well as the U.S.. Ecuador seems more scared of Spain, actually.'

Sophie, with her usual unusual allegiance to the French Catalans, grew indignant and said, 'That's because he is a hero of Catalan Independence.'

Home-schoolers from Queensland have strange destinies, I thought.

Idris said, 'I think he'll be okay, but it's all a bit precarious.' And changed the subject. Who didn't he want to hear? Ninel? Kirill? Probably just Samir? He continued: 'The World Cup is doing everything Russia wanted it to do, PR-wise, don't you think? Particularly since the Skripals recovered so miraculously from all that fatal Novichok. Wherever they are now. I think Yulia might quite like to be back in Moscow with her relatives, her boyfriend and her dog.'

'Talking of dogs,' I said, 'I told Clare I'd have that Borzoi sent to Mt Druitt.' I asked Ninel, 'Will you help me do that today?'

She was enthusiastic, having the Russian love for animals, and the hardwon Russian knowledge that Borzois are not natural hunting dogs, are hardly ever streetwise and are prone to nervous breakdowns. And, despite her mixed allegiances, she also loved displaying her mastery of the Russian postal system.

We found the Borzoi quivering in its habitual laneway. It was afraid of the other streetdogs. Kirill fed it what was left of his kulich and it co-operated as if it had always been aware of this plan. Maybe Clare



had been making it promises. It was good, anyway, to think of it in her mother's backyard with Egypt, the Kos cats, the apples and the olives.

I had a picture then in my head of Clare and Corbyn together in that dappled yard, waiting in, and like, winter branches with the prised solstice moon above them. I couldn't think of where I had to go this night, think of the terrible Schmidt or the invincible Urals, in these hours now at all.





## **Chapter 32:**

### ***Fancy Bear, Cosy Bear and Cranky Bear***

Clare and Olivia were walking to Ruth's, discussing Quentin: her possible repatriation to Australia. When they were near Ruth's garden of blonde grevillea, wrinkled roses, Clare heard tires doing catscream wheelies, dragged Olivia by instinct the concrete distance, as the charging car followed them on the footpath then reversed, its sound still feral as a threat. It wildly vanished. In Clare's arms, Olivia breathed out in paroxysm like any victim, even if ASIO had trained her to be calm. Clare thought: I can see why George likes carrying women. She asked, when they were drinking Rudd's tea at Ruth's: 'So who were those people?' Olivia said, 'Just the Ukrainian diaspora. It's okay. I was warned to expect a warning. Quentin's coming back annoys them.' Clare said, 'The Ukraine is expanding its arms exports again to two billion of the 80 billion world total,' so Ruth could join in. Ruth asked, 'Is that why there's so much fighting there?' 'Good point', said Olivia, ' because any weapon



sells better if it's been tested in real war.'

Clare's dorothy-dixer:

'But I thought Quentin still sold for the Ukraine in Asia?'

was met by Olivia: 'Until Myanmar. Then she made a bargain

under the table with China.' Clare asked, 'Has Andrew Trask

transferred to the Ukrainians? Was that the real reason

he attacked Quentin's mother, not Schmidt, newer CIA?

I'd like to avoid an attack from mad ex-Nazis.' Ruth's mouth

had a closed tremulous but resilient Darug grin.

Clare teased, 'You are thinking you will have to shift

Olivia as well as Silkie around on your underground. Olivia

would be safer with you than with her employer.'

Ruth's grin widened up to the firm Darug cheekbones.

Olivia said, ' My work is safe enough.'

They finished Rudd's excellent tea. Olivia said, 'If

you want to know more about The Ukrainians

ask Idris about Fancy Bear and Cosy Bear.' 'Those',

Clare told Ruth, 'are the accusing nicknames

a Western hacker gave to hackers of the Democrats

and many other institutions. Blamed the Russians.'

At the names, Ruth nodded, amused, but drove



Olivia to an Auntie's, Clare back to her mother's.

Clare rang Idris from her mother's kitchen.

He said, 'Olivia's right. It seems to be the Ukraine. I've been unhacking their hacking for a while here.

Your mother will tell you: they call me "Cranky Bear".

Clare said, 'That sounds more like your Grandpa.

Is he in the Urals yet? I can't contact his cellphone.'

'He should be. He went with Ninel and Kirill and a young Saudi agent called Samir: not very experienced, really.'

In the over-lucent kitchen, Clare said goodnight to Florence and Sophie. Florence sang a new French popsong for her and Corbyn. French female popsongs were always so subjugated and sooky, thought Clare, even Piaf was a lie, but Florence's angelus chime gave the pealing a resonant strength.

Corbyn held the gentle-furred bear

George had given him in the same firm trusting way he had held George by the arms. She realised now with all that was happening she had lost sight of George, and was in that moment in ancient fear that, because she had lost sight of him, he would die.



## Chapter 33 :

### *The Summer Dacha*

It was a simple environment, but not primitive. Schmidt's dacha had settled securely into a hillside near a meltwater stream that in Florence's terms glimmered with sunlight gems, and possibly some real ones. The house had several rooms and electricity from a generator. My room had a view of the stream and I woke to the sound of it, more soothing than the sea. I remembered the sea at Thirroul, and bit my lips because my mouth had opened to meet the imaginary closeness of Clare's.

We had arrived in the dark last night and I was elated this morning because I had been able to talk to Clare on my Langley phone. I suppose the CIA had business in the Urals - anywhere there were rich minerals, of course. Clare and I had not much time to talk - it was probably an orbital not stationary satellite - but our anxious 'I love you's were much more than just courteous, affectionate punctuation.

At breakfast were: Schmidt, Quentin, Ninel, Kirill, Samir, myself and a couple of Schmidt's bodyguards. The latter also swarmed all over the house and grounds, silently. One was looking down in a reverie at the stream's brimming luxury. Another seemed to be trying to make his own cellphone work on a glittering ledge. It was the sort of edgy thawing light that distracts with jagged exaggerations. It was hard to concentrate on anything, hard to make it safe.

Breakfast was as ample and aromatic as the Easter feast Schmidt had provided for Quentin. There were various manifestations of egg, solemn Russian porridge and heaped buttered toast with garlic or fat raisins. The samovar steamed like an engine. Ninel had already filled our teacups, as Schmidt seemed to expect that of her. Quentin still sat with childlike frailty and abstracted politeness, certainly not



appropriate to the role of mother. Every now and then Schmidt's hand lingered gently on the smoothness of Quentin's hair.

If the Mistress of the Copper Mountain had appeared outside the window, it would not have been inappropriate. Echoing my recent conversation with Clare, I asked Quentin directly, 'Do the Ukrainians want to kill you?'

She said, 'Yes, but so does he' - indicating Schmidt. There was no lightness in her tone, except stoical faintness. Once again, I was reminded of Clare in prison, except that some irrepressible undercurrent energy from Clare's secrecy wasn't there.

Quentin asked me, 'How is my mother?'

I said, 'She seems to be recovering slowly. Clare took her to a doctor. Your brother is cooking for her. But she's desperate to see you. So is ASIO. Top salary. Wouldn't you like to go home?' I included Schmidt: 'You could go with her. The Australian police won't interfere with the Australian Deep State.' It was the first time I had heard it made explicit that Australia had a Deep State that was different to America's, and it was me saying it. I resolved to consider it later.

Schmidt said, 'But it is you who have arrived to take her home.' He seemed newly streamlined, European rather than Austrian, younger and more austere, like a Marseilles contract gunman. His gaze was formidably level and informed.

I responded, also level: 'When will that be?'

Kirill, Ninel, and Samir stopped eating, attentive, innocence restored by the healthy taste of porridge.

But Schmidt answered, Austrian again and sighing: 'Ach, not yet, you know, George. You must stay here for a while.'



## **Chapter 34:**

### ***'Are you going to kill my lover?'***

Clare woke up in Mt Druitt at her mother's, weary. Ruth and Olivia waited in the loungeroom with the solemnity of a committee. Clare took Corbyn from Coral, to carry him underarm on her side, point him like a football. He laughed. Clare played at energy, to combat the exhaustion that had finally caught up with her last night, and he perceived that and snuggled tranquil when she sat. Her mother gave her coffee, almost flesh temperature, knowing her mouth was too sensitive to scalding, when she was as tired as this. Olivia stood and said: 'Jeffreys is with Schmidt in the Urals, but now we consider it a hostage situation, even if the Russians are reluctant to move on it.' 'You mean', Clare asked, 'you'll hire mercenaries to rescue Quentin? That should create a real mess. You'd be wrong if you thought no one cares what happens in the mountains.' Ruth said, 'Olivia says it was Mr. Schmidt who told Andy



to stab Silkie Roberts. That he'll do it again if no one sorts out the problem. Her family think it was him. I don't know if I can move her from refuge to refuge again in the state she's in.' But Clare sighed grimly, as Corbyn tensed on her ribs: 'She alright. She's eating. The Coven are more concerned about Andy's hexes than his knife, and they can always out out-hex those.' She thought of George, looked directly at Olivia then: 'Are you going to kill my lover?' Olivia had the grin of allegances suddenly even more multiple, but responded: 'They say there'll be no collateral damage. If I were you, I'd go back to Russia, however.' Having given an official message, undermined it, she kissed everyone in the room, a good Darug niece, and left them. Clare's mother said, 'Well, that's decided, I suppose. Will you be taking Corbyn?' 'Yes, but I'll leave him in Moscow with Sophie and Florence and Idris, while I get George. We should be back well in time to get Kutuzov' -the Borzoi - 'out of quarantine.' But Ruth looked at her with a steady Darug compassion, at once in keeping with long tragedy. Clare asked,



'So you think George'll die?' Ruth flicked her head, became more superficial. Clare was reminded of George's alarm at old age's superficiality. Ruth said, 'I didn't mean you wouldn't be able to solve things.' Clare said, 'His reflexes are older. He drinks if he has to shoot a gun, to increase his accuracy coming down, like some aging mercenary. He has those tricks of age.' He reins in each resource, she thought, now so he can be clenched profound, on call, in spontaneity.

Ruth stayed. Clare gave Corbyn to her to hold to re-deepen their discourse, was still too tired to be afraid.





## Chapter 35:

### *Persephone's Garden*

I sat with Schmidt in the dacha's garden. It was a bright, fecund, fruitful place. Half of all Russian vegetables are grown in domestic gardens. We were drinking Pol Roger, an unusual champagne species at the best of times. I thought it had probably been Churchill's favourite because one can work drinking it: the flavour grows with no need for re-chilling or re-corking. It was Clare's favourite, too. We had drunk it in Washington astonished on the last U.S. Election Night. Once, to amuse her, I said, in bed with her head relaxed on my arm and our gazes confessionally on the ceiling: 'It breathes like a red, and so do I'.

Schmidt wasn't drunk, but he was lulled by the the sun and his own habitual adrenalin. I wasn't drunk, either, just quoting Swinburne:

*' "Here, where the world is quiet;  
Here, where all trouble seems  
Dead winds' and spent waves' riot  
In doubtful dreams of dreams;  
I watch the green field growing  
For reaping folk and sowing,  
For harvest-time and mowing,  
A sleepy world of streams.*

*I am tired of tears and laughter,  
And men that laugh and weep;  
Of what may come hereafter  
For men that sow to reap:*



*I am weary of days and hours,  
Blown buds of barren flowers,  
Desires and dreams and powers  
And everything but sleep." '*

Schmidt said, 'You have jaded tastes. You like simple, lyrical poetry - like an old man in a brothel asking for a virgin.'

I said, 'My virgin is in the village, and you won't let her visit me.'

He said, 'She can visit if she wishes, but she cannot leave. Anyone can visit, no one can leave.'

We were referring to Clare. She was staying at a house in the nearby village, but we hadn't seen each other, only spoken on the Langley phone and sent messages via Kirill. Kirill was the only one of us allowed to come and go, as Schmidt did not want to provoke the Stavka. They apparently didn't care about Ninel, or maybe they didn't want to admit ownership. Or, like everybody else, they weren't sure if they owned her or not - Grushenka. Clare had left Corbyn in Moscow with Idris, Sophie and Florence. He seemed as happy with them as he was with her mother. And already, like me, he had a visceral discernment about the necessity in Clare's absences, that it was not a withdrawal of love. But perhaps, I reflected, neither he nor I were sufficiently violently possessive.

Schmidt was wearing a scarf in summer colours, its two sides open on either side of his white silk shirtfront, making him look vague and professorial with power. Ninel and Quentin came out hand in hand in dresses patterned with orchards and gardens. Ninel went over to wash a pile of potatoes affectionately under the tap of a big watertank. Quentin sank on her knees on her own faithful cushion beside Schmidt with her head on his lap. She was wearing a wide, untied coloured scarf, too. No one but me seemed to be reminded of the similar but knotted one with which he had tried to strangle Bryony. Quentin was also still wearing the favourite malachite and diamond beads, in this, their wet moss green and transparently coruscating original landscape.



Clare rang then and reported that a gang of loud Australian mercenaries had moved into the village inn near her. She said on her cellphone to my Langley phone: 'They can't handle the local vodka. It's the same brand Ninel's friends were storing in the house at Dobrovisky. I miss being with you there.'

I said, 'I miss being with you anywhere, even Dobrovisky in winter. But you can't come to Schmidt's dacha. If you do, he still won't let you leave.'

Kirill had come out to help Ninel wash potatoes. He commented, 'I've made it clear to Olivia that those men must do nothing yet, and I think her people understood. I believe we are making a counter-offer to the Saudi one for Mr. Schmidt's quantum diamonds.' Schmidt, listening, nodded with graceful Austrian cordiality. I asked, 'Does Samir know?'

Kirill affirmed: 'Yes, but we are all men of business.' Samir still seemed to me a very fragile, very young man of business and, considering the number of unspeakably ghastly and clumsy public executions his government had performed, even in the last few days, I hoped his government did still regard him as an effective agent.

Ninel carried a tray of potatoes away into the dacha's earthen kitchen and returned drying her hands on a blue linen cloth, with a garden cushion under her arm. On some intimate impulse, she knelt next to Schmidt, on the opposite side to Quentin, and also put her head on his knee, her bounce of fair curls mingling against Quentin's glowing sleek hair. He squeezed Ninel's shoulder and then continued to stroke Quentin, and the two women suddenly held hands again.

There were more glasses on the table and I offered the women and Kirill some of the champagne, opening another bottle from an ornate gilt icebucket. I was still wearing my Glock uncomfortably on my thigh. No had bothered to search me. There had not been any searches. And no doubt Schmidt still wore his Makarov, although the ubiquitous guards should have made it superfluous. He seemed purposefully passive, as if passivity were still an ultimate luxury. It was appropriate that I poured the wine.



He held out his glass and almost lilted: 'You know, Mr. Jeffreys, I am at that blessedly tranquil point where the question is no longer when and whether to die but how and with whom.'

I said, 'Die with no one. If you truncate someone's life too early she will perhaps not be ready to meet you anyway in the afterlife. You must wait for her there. It's all that question of maturity. You can't marry yet someone's little future-ghost.' I thought of Ruth's wistful Tregear apparition. Clare had said that when she had left Mt Druitt, Charlotte had been playing, still bossy and lively with survived trauma, in Ruth's backyard with her cousins.

Schmidt caressed both the women and tilted Quentin's face up, like his glass: 'Is that true? You are not old enough? My darling?' The thin trim Marseilles assassin with the vicious cynical geriatric soul seemed at once as young as the tender face his hand was holding. His grip was not a claw any more. He could relax. His final business doublecross was a smooth success, his perfect young mistress adored him and the barbarians waited armed and drunken at the gates.

But Quentin did adore him, that was the problem. That was an appalling coincidence. She had dealt efficiently in death, appraised and profited from its successful playthings, and she was in love with someone who was as lonely for her as she was for him, and who had no other choice now but to die. If she did not die with him she knew - as I did, watching - that she faced a lifetime of unfading grief, as unending as Clare's guilt and grieving for her brother and sisters. It was Clare who should come to her now. But perhaps even for that reason Schmidt could not allow it.

Ninel stirred, restless with stylised jealousy and the gaze between Quentin and Schmidt was broken. I poured them more champagne, like a persistent waiter.

Clare rang again on the Langley phone. She said, 'The Ukrainian mercenaries have arrived. They're getting on okay with the Australians, but they can't hold their liquor either. They all worked together in Syria and Yemen, but there's bound to be some friction soon. The Ukrainians are definitely planning to kill Quentin, and the Australians are working out how to save her. The one thing they'll still



agree about is destroying Schmidt, but they don't want to antagonise the Russians.'

I asked the vital question: 'Do you know where the Saudis are on this now? If they're still trying to outbid Russia for the diamonds, Schmidt is safe' - Schmidt was listening intently - 'but if not, the only protection he has is Russia.'

Schmidt interpolated gently: 'They are still trying to outbid each other.' Samir nodded, gliding shyly from the kitchen with a tureen of golden fried potatoes. I had never actually eaten solid food with champagne before, but the flavours were quite compatible.

When we had finished the potatoes, Schmidt stood up. He was still holding his champagne glass. Samir was holding the simplest of weapons: a small gelignite stick bomb with a detonator under his thumb and forefinger. It was clear from his comprehensive glances that he would detonate it if anyone moved. They didn't.

Samir said, 'There is a helicopter outside in the meadow. Mr. Schmidt can come with me and bring the diamonds. This is what I have been told to do. I am sorry.' He was more than sorry. He was distraught.

Clare rang again, with her usual awkwardly psychic timing. I said, 'Mr. Schmidt was wrong about the Saudis. They're out of the bargaining contest and into the kidnapping, larceny and torture competition. Mr. Schmidt is about to be subjected to extraordinary rendition.'

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***The rest of this chapter, 35, and the 2 final chapters, 36 and 37, are in the completed paperback and electronic book for purchase, or available in electronic form free from Quemar on request.***

