

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Ghost Force

Patrick Robinson

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## About the Book

### **A disappearance. An invasion. And the return of a legend.**

Tensions between Siberia and Moscow are already running high, when the sudden disappearance of top-tier Siberian politicians and oil executives sparks open outrage. With relations strained, Moscow needs a new oil source, and quickly, so a dangerous plan is set in motion. Persuading Argentina to invade the Falkland Islands again and reclaim the 'Malvinas', Moscow's hunter-killer submarine Viper 157 promises to come to their aid - in return for Falkland oil.

The United States is furious at this act of international piracy. Admiral Morgan and the Navy SEALs manage to persuade the legendary commander Rick Hunter to return. The mission: to hammer Argentina's military hardware and free the Falklands. For Hunter, the assignment strikes close to home. His English brother-in-law and an SAS special forces team are trapped on East Falkland, on the run from Argentine shoot-to-kill man-hunt, on their own. . .

## About the Author

Patrick Robinson is the Top Ten *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *Nimitz Class*, *Kilo Class*, *H. M. S. Unseen*, *Seawolf*, *The Shark Mutiny*, *Barracuda 945*, *Scimitar SL-2* and *Hunter Killer*. He is also the author of several non-fiction bestsellers including *True Blue* (with Dan Topolski) and *Born to Win*. He is the co-author with Admiral Sir Sandy Woodward of *One Hundred Days*.

*ALSO BY PATRICK ROBINSON*

Fiction

*Hunter Killer*  
*Scimitar SL-2*  
*Barracuda 945*  
*Nimitz Class*  
*Kilo Class*  
*H.M.S. Unseen*  
*Seawolf*  
*The Shark Mutiny*

Non-fiction

*Classic Lines*  
*Decade of Champions*  
*The Golden Post*  
*Born to Win*  
*True Blue*  
*One Hundred Days*  
*Horsetrader*

# Ghost Force

Patrick Robinson



arrow books

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

FOR THIS, MY ninth 'technothriller', set in the future and sailing perilously close to the wind, I needed to be more careful with my sources than usual.

For reasons which I hope will be obvious to the reader, I would not wish to implicate any senior officers of the armed forces on either side of the Atlantic in the many politically lethal issues explored in these pages.

So I decided to accept no direct advice or instruction from anyone. Rather, I would base the story on the strongly held views voiced to me by so many commissioned officers over several years.

This book involves a new journey to the cold South Atlantic, and the ever-vexed questions surrounding the ownership of the remote Falkland Islands. I have inevitably drawn on the mountain of information that I received from the British Task Force Commander of the 1982 war, Admiral Sir John 'Sandy' Woodward, whose autobiography I helped to write fourteen years ago.

This time, however, I did not go to him with every twist and turn in the road. Nor did I drive him mad for detailed explanations of the mass of high-tech naval data of which he is a world-acknowledged master and commander and where I remain, as ever, the layman.

I ploughed a lonely furrow, distilling many highly controversial opinions into my own story. I hope its covert message will be appreciated by serving and, indeed, retired officers. With perhaps a chilling lesson for the kind of politician that we all despise.

Any mistakes and wayward opinions, whether technical, tactical, or strategic, are mine alone. And nothing should be laid at the door of any senior armed-forces officer, still serving or not, whose acquaintance or friendship I have long valued.

This applies to perhaps a dozen people, but especially to Admiral Woodward who, on this occasion at least, remains shining-white innocent of any involvement with my occasionally acid-dipped pen.

- *Patrick Robinson, 2005.*



# CAST OF PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

## **United States Senior Command**

Paul Bedford (President of the United States)

Admiral Arnold Morgan (Private Adviser to the President)

Admiral George Morris (Director, National Security Agency)

Lt. Commander Jimmy Ramshawe (Personal assistant to Director, NSA)

Admiral John Bergstrom (SPECWARCOM)

## **Central Intelligence Agency**

Agent Leonid Suchov (Deputy Chief, Russian Desk)

## **United States Navy SEALs**

Commander Rick Hunter (Assault-Team Leader)

Lt. Commander Dallas MacPherson (2I/C. Explosives)

Chief Petty Officer Mike Hook (explosives)

Petty Officer First Class Don Smith

Petty Officer First Class Brian Harrison

Seaman Ed Segal (helmsman)

Seaman Ron Wallace (helmsman)

Chief Petty Officer Bob Bland (military breaking and entering)

## **United States Navy**

Captain Hugh Fraser (CO USS *Toledo*, SEAL-team insert submarine commander)

Lt. Commander Alan Ross (*Vigilantes* combat pilot)

## **United Kingdom (Political)**

The Prime Minister of Great Britain

Peter Caulfield (Minister of Defence)

Roger Eltringham (Foreign Secretary)  
Commander Alan Knell (Conservative Member of Parliament,  
Portsmouth)  
Robert Macmillan (Conservative MP)  
Derek Blenkinsop (Labour MP, East Lancashire)  
Richard Cawley (Conservative MP, Barrow-in-Furness)  
Sir Patrick Jardine (Ambassador to the United States)

### **United Kingdom (Armed Forces)**

General Sir Robin Brenchley (Chief of Defence Staff)  
Admiral Sir Rodney Jeffries (First Sea Lord)  
Admiral Mark Palmer (C-in-C Fleet)  
Admiral Alan Holbrook (Task Force Commander)  
Captain David Reader (CO HMS *Ark Royal*)  
Major Bobby Court (Company Commander, Mount Pleasant)  
Captain Peter Merrill (Commander Immediate Response  
Platoon, Falkland Islands)  
Sgt Biff Wakefield (RAF Rapier Missiles, Mount Pleasant)  
Brigadier Viv Brogden RM (Commander Landing Forces,  
Falkland Islands)  
Lt. Commander Malcolm Farley (CO Royal Navy Garrison,  
Mare Harbour)  
Captain Mike Fawkes (CO HMS *Kent*)  
Captain Colin Ashby (CO HMS *St Albans*)  
Commander Keith Kemsley (CO HMS *Iron Duke*)  
Captain Rowdy Yates (CO HMS *Daring*)  
Commander Norman Hall (CO HMS *Dauntless*)  
Captain Colin Day (CO HMS *Gloucester*)  
Captain Simon Compton (CO HM Submarine *Astute*)

### **United Kingdom 22 SAS**

Lt. Colonel Mike Weston (Commanding Officer, Hereford HQ)  
Captain Douglas Jarvis (Team Leader, Fanning Head Assault)  
Combat Troopers: Syd Ferry (communications); Peter  
Wiggins (sniper); Joe Pearson; Bob Goddard; Trevor  
Fermer; Jake Posgate; Dai Llewellyn

Lt. Jim Perry (Team Leader SBS, Lafonia)

### **Russian Senior Command**

The President of the Russian Federation

Valery Kravchenko (Prime Minister)

Oleg Nalyotov (Foreign Minister)

Gregor Komoyedov (Minister for Foreign Trade)

Boris Patrushov (Head of FSB - secret police)

Oleg Kuts (Energy Minister)

Admiral Vitaly Rankov (C-in-C Fleet, Deputy Defence Minister)

### **Russian Navy**

Captain Gregor Vanislav (CO *Viper 157*)

### **Siberian Political and Oil Executive**

Mikhail Masorin (*deceased*) (Chief Minister, Urals Federal District)

Roman Rekuts (new leader, Urals Federal District)

Jaan Valuev (President, OJSC Surgutneftgas Oil Corporation)

Sergei Poboziy (Chairman, Sibneft Oil Corporation)

Boris Nuriyev (First VP Finance, Lukoil Corporation)

Anton Katsuba (Oil Operations Chief, West Siberia)

### **Argentine Senior Command**

The President of the Republic

Admiral Horacio Aguado (Defence Minister)

Dr Carlos Montero (Minister of Industry and Mining)

### **Argentine Armed Forces**

Admiral Oscar Moreno (C-in-C Fleet)

General Eduardo Kampf (Commander 5-Corps)

Major Pablo Barry (Commander Marine Assault, Falkland Islands)

Lt. Commander Ricardo Testa (Head of Security, Rio Grande Air Base)

### **Principal Wives**

Diana Jarvis (Mrs Rick Hunter)

Mrs Kathy Morgan

### **UK Prime Minister's Principal Guests**

Honeyford Jones (pop singer)

Freddie Leeson (soccer player), Madelle Leeson (former nightclub employee)

Darien Farr (film star), wife Loretta (former TV weathergirl)

Freddy Ivanov Windsor (restaurateur)

## PROLOGUE

AS A GENERAL rule, Admiral Arnold Morgan did not do state banquets. He put them in the same category as diplomatic luncheons, congressional dinners, state fairs, and yard sales - all of which required him to spend time talking to God knows how many people with whom he had absolutely nothing in common.

Forced to choose, he would even have preferred to spend an hour with the political editor of CBS Television or the *Washington Post*, either of whom he could cheerfully have throttled several times a year.

It was thus a matter of some interest this evening to witness him making his way down the great central staircase of the White House, right behind the President and his guests of honour. The admiral descended in company with the exquisitely beautiful Mrs Kathy Morgan, whose perfectly cut dark-green silk gown made the Russian president's wife look like a middle-line admin clerk from the KGB. (Close. She had been a researcher there.)

Arnold Morgan himself wore the dark-blue dress uniform of a US Navy rear-admiral, complete with the twin-dolphin insignia of the US Submarine Service. As ever - shoulders back, jaw jutting, steel-grey hair trimmed short - he looked like a CO striding towards his ops room.

Which was near to the mark. In his long years in service as the President's National Security Adviser, he reckoned that the White House *was* his ops room. He always called it 'the factory', and he had conducted global operations against enemies of the United States with an

unprecedentedly free hand. Of course, he had kept the President posted concerning his activities. Mostly.

And now, with the small exclusive reception for the Russians concluded in the upstairs private rooms, Arnold and Kathy stood aside at the foot of the stairs, alongside the Russian Ambassador and a dozen other dignitaries, while the two presidents and their wives formed a short receiving line.

This was deliberate, because the Russians always brought with them a vast entourage of state officials, diplomats, politicians, military top brass, and, as ever, undercover agents - spies - badly disguised as cultural attachés. It was, frankly, like seeing a prizefighter's attendant goons and bodyguards dancing a minuet.

But here they all were. The men who ran Russia, being formally entertained by President Paul Bedford and the First Lady, the former Maggie Lomax, a svelte blonde Virginian horsewoman, fearless to hounds but nerve-racked by this formal jamboree in support of US-Russian relations.

As far as President Bedford had been concerned, the presence of Arnold Morgan had been nothing short of compulsory. Although the telephone conversation between the two men had been more like a verbal gunfight.

'Arnie, I just got your note declining the Russian banquet invite - Jesus, you can't do this to me!'

'I thought I just had.'

'Arnie, this is not optional. This is a Presidential command.'

'Bullshit. I'm retired. I don't do state banquets. I'm a naval officer, not a diplomat.'

'I know what you are. But this thing is really important. They're bringing all the big hitters from Moscow, civilian and military. Not to mention their oil industry.'

'What the hell's that got to do with me?'

'Nothing. 'Cept I want you there. Right next to me, keeping me posted. There's not one person in Washington

knows the Russians better than you. You gotta be there. White tie and tails.'

'I *never* wear white tie and tails.'

'OK. OK. You can come in a tuxedo.'

'Since I don't much want to look like a head waiter, or a goddamned violinist, I won't be wearing that, either.'

'OK. OK,' said the President again, sensing victory. 'You can come in full-dress Navy uniform. Matter of fact, I don't care if you turn up in jockstrap and spurs as long as you get here.'

Arnold Morgan chuckled. But suddenly an edge crept back into his voice. 'What topics concern you most?'

'The rise of the Russian navy, for a start. The rebuilding of their submarine fleet in particular. And their export of submarines all over the world.'

'How about their oil industry?'

'Well, that new deep-water tanker terminal in Murmansk cannot fail to be an issue,' replied the President. 'We're hoping that they'll ship two million barrels a day from there direct to the USA in the next few years.'

'And I guess you know the Russian president already has terrible goddamned problems transporting crude oil from the West Siberian Basin to Murmansk . . .' Arnold was thoughtful. He added slowly '. . . And you know how important that export trade is to them.'

'And to us,' said President Bedford.

'Gives us a little distance with the towelheads, right?'

'That's why you gotta be at the banquet, Arnie. Starting with the private reception. Don't be late.'

'Silver-tongued bastard,' grunted Admiral Morgan. 'All right, all right. We'll be there. Good morning, Mr President.'

Paul Bedford, who was well accustomed to the admiral's excruciating habit of slamming down the phone without even bothering to say goodbye, considered this a very definite victory.

‘Heh, heh, heh,’ he chortled in the deserted Oval Office. ‘That little bit of intrigue on a global scale. That’ll get the ole buzzard every time. But I’m sure glad he’s coming.’

Thus it was that Arnold and Kathy Morgan were now in attendance at the state banquet for the Russians, gazing amiably at the long line of guests entering the White House.

So many old friends and colleagues. It was like a fraternity reunion. Here was the Commander of the US Navy SEALs, Admiral John Bergstrom and his *soignée* new wife Louisa-May, from Oxford, Mississippi; Harcourt Travis, the former Republican Secretary of State with his wife Sue; Admiral Scott Dunsmore, former CNO of the US Navy with his elegant wife Grace. The reigning Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Tim Scannell, was with his wife Beth.

Arnold shook hands with the Director of the National Security Agency, Admiral George Morris, and he greeted the new Vice-President of the United States, the former Democratic Senator from Georgia, Bradford Harding and his wife Paige.

The Israeli Ambassador General David Gavron was there with his wife Becky, plus, of course, the silver-haired Russian Ambassador to Washington, Tomas Yezhel, and the various ambassadors from the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia.

Arnold did not instantly recognise all the top brass of the Russian contingent. But he could see the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Josh Paul, talking with the Russian Foreign Minister, Oleg Nalyotov.

He vaguely knew the Chief of the Russian Naval Staff, a grim-looking ex-Typhoon Class submarine Commanding Officer, Admiral Victor Kouts.

But Admiral Morgan’s craggy face lit up when he spotted the towering figure of his old sparring partner, the Russian admiral Vitaly Rankov, now C-in-C Fleet and Deputy Defence Minister.



‘Arnold!’ boomed the giant ex-Soviet international oarsman. ‘I had no idea you’d be here. They told me you’d retired.’

Admiral Morgan grinned and held out his hand. ‘Hi, Vitaly – they put you in charge of that junkyard navy of yours yet? I heard they had.’

‘They did. Right now, admiral, you’re talking to the Deputy Defence Minister of Russia.’

‘Guess that’ll suit you,’ replied the American. ‘Should provide ample scope for your natural flair for lies, evasions and half-truths . . .’

The enormous Russian threw back his head and roared with laughter. ‘Now you be kind, Arnold,’ he said in his deep rumbling baritone voice. ‘Otherwise I may not introduce you to this very beautiful lady standing at my side.’

A tall, striking, dark-haired girl around half the Russian’s age smiled shyly and held out her hand in friendship.

‘This is Olga,’ said Admiral Rankov. ‘We were married last spring.’

Admiral Morgan took her hand and asked if she spoke any English since his own Russian was a little rusty. She shook her head, smiling, and Morgan turned back to Vitaly and shook his head sadly. ‘Too good for you, old buddy. A lot too good.’

Again the huge Russian admiral laughed joyfully, and he repeated the words he had used so often in his many dealings with the old Lion of the West Wing.

‘You are a terrible man, Arnold Morgan. A truly terrible man.’ Then he spoke in rapid Russian to Mrs Olga Rankov who also burst out laughing.

‘I understand we are sitting together,’ said Arnold. ‘And I don’t believe you have actually met my wife Kathy.’

The Russian admiral smiled and accepted Kathy’s outstretched hand. ‘We have of course spoken many times on the telephone,’ he said. ‘But believe me, I never thought he’d persuade you to marry him.’ And, with a compliment

and a gesture more appropriate to a St Petersburg palace than a naval dockyard, Vitaly added with a short bow and a flourish, 'The legend of your great beauty precedes you, Mrs Morgan. I knew what to expect.'

'Jesus, they've even taught him social graces,' chuckled Arnold, carelessly ignoring the fact he was a bit short in that department himself. 'Vitaly, old pal, seems we both got lucky in the past year. Not too bad for a couple of old Cold Warriors.'

By now the guests were almost through the receiving line and had moved to the sides of the room, leaving a wide entryway to the State Dining Room. Within a few moments, President and Maggie Bedford came through, escorting the Russian president and his wife to their dinner places, with all of the guests falling in - *line astern*, as Arnold somewhat jauntily told Vitaly.

The President took his place next to the former KGB researcher directly beneath the Lincoln portrait. Maggie Bedford showed the boss of all the Russians to his place next to her at the same table, and everyone remained standing until the hostess was seated.

The banquet, on the orders of Paul Bedford, was strictly American. 'No caviar, or any of that restaurant nonsense,' he had told the butler. 'We start with Chesapeake oysters, we dine on New York sirloin steak, with Idaho potatoes, and we wrap it up with apple pie and American ice cream. There'll be two or three Wisconsin cheeses for anyone who wants them. California wines from the Napa Valley.'

'Sir,' the butler ventured, 'Not everyone likes oysters . . .'

'Tough,' replied the President. 'Russians love 'em. I've had 'em in Moscow and St Petersburg. Anyone who can't eat 'em can have an extra shot of apple pie if they need it.'

'Very well, sir,' replied the butler, suspecting, from vast experience, that Arnold Morgan himself must have been in the shadows advising Paul Bedford. The tone, the curtness, the certainty.

As it happened, there had indeed been one short conversation when the Oval Office had called Chevy Chase to check in on the menu content. 'Give 'em American food,' Arnold had advised. 'Strictly American. Big A-A-A. The food this nation eats. We don't need to pretend sophistication to anyone, right?'

'Right.'

And now, with the apple pie just arriving, the Strolling Strings, a well-known group of US Army violinists, began to play at the rear section of the room. Their short concert clearly followed a similar brief, comprising all-American numbers, such as 'Over there!', 'True Love' (from *High Society*), a selection from *Oklahoma*, 'Take me Out to the Ball Game' . . . and concluding with 'God Bless America'.

Finally the President rose and made a short speech extolling the virtues of the Russian president and the new and close trade links developing between the nations.

The chief guest of honour then stood and echoed many of the President's statements before concluding with a formal toast 'to the United States of America'.

At this point the entire room stood up and proceeded towards the door which led out to the Blue Room where coffee would be served, followed by entertainment in the East Room, and then dancing to the band of the United States Marines in the White House foyer.

The crowd was steadily moving towards the doors, when one guest suddenly stopped. Mikhail Masorin, the senior minister from the vast plains of Siberia, which occupy one-twelfth of the land mass of the entire Earth, had suddenly pitched forward and landed flat on his face. He collapsed right in front of Arnold, Vitaly, Olga and Kathy, and the huge Russian admiral had actually leaned forward to try and break his fall. But he was a fraction of a second too late. Masorin was on the floor, twisted on his back now, his face puce in colour, gasping for breath, both hands clutched to

his throat as he frantically worked his jaws, fear and agony etched on his face.

Someone shouted, *'Doctor! Right now!'*

Women gasped. Men came forward to see if they could help - mostly Americans, Arnold Morgan noticed. Casting around for someone who would be able to do something, Morgan realised quickly that Masorin was very nearly beyond help. He was desperately trying to breathe but his face showed a slight blue tinge now.

By now two or three people were shouting, *'Heart attack! Come on, guys, let the doctor through . . .'*

Within a few minutes two doctors were in attendance. One of them filled a syringe and unleashed a potent dose of something into Masorin's upper arm, but they could only bear witness to the death throes of the Siberian head honcho.

In seconds, he was gone, dead even before the Navy stretcher-bearers could get to him. Dead, right there, on the floor of the State Dining Room in front of his own president and the leader of the United States.

President Bedford forced himself to shake off the shock and fired a series of quiet orders into the small knot of people around Masorin. Luckily, only those few in the immediate vicinity realised that one of the Russian guests had actually died and the body was carried away before the other dignitaries were fully aware of what had happened.

Arnold Morgan and Paul Bedford watched the crowd warily, but the rest of the evening passed uneventfully and shortly before 11 p.m. the White House Press Office felt obliged to put out a general press release that the Chief Minister for the Urals Federal District, Mr Mikhail Masorin, had suffered a heart attack at the conclusion of a state banquet, and had been found to be dead on arrival at the United States Naval Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland.

Admiral Morgan and Kathy made their farewells a little after midnight.

‘Terrible about that poor Russian, wasn’t it?’ said Kathy, as they headed north-west to Chevy Chase. ‘He was at the next table to us, couldn’t have been more than fifty years old. Must have been a very bad heart attack . . .’

Her husband hadn’t said much for the remainder of the night. Now he turned away from the window he’d been staring out of. ‘Bullshit,’ he said succinctly.

‘I’m sorry?’ said Kathy, slightly perplexed.

‘Bullshit,’ confirmed the Admiral. ‘That was no heart attack. He was writhing around on the floor, opening and shutting his mouth like a goddamned goldfish.’

‘I know he was, darling. But the doctor *said* it was a heart attack. I heard him.’

‘What the hell does he know?’

‘Oh, I am so sorry. It entirely slipped my memory I was escorting the eminent cardiovascular surgeon and universal authority Arnold Morgan.’

Arnold looked up, grinning now at his increasingly sassy wife. ‘Kathy,’ he said. Then, more seriously, ‘Whatever killed Masorin somehow shut down his lungs instantly. The guy suffocated, fighting for air, which you probably noticed was plentiful in the State Dining Room. Heart attacks don’t do that.’

‘Oh,’ said Kathy. ‘Well, what does?’

‘A bullet, correctly aimed. A thrust from a combat knife, correctly delivered. Certain kinds of poison.’

‘But there was no blood anywhere. And anyway, why should the CIA or the FBI or whatever want to get rid of an important guest at a White House banquet?’

‘I have no idea, my darling,’ said Arnold. ‘But I believe someone did. And I’ll be mildly surprised if we don’t find out before too long that Mikhail Masorin was murdered last night. Right here in Washington DC.’

# CHAPTER ONE

*0830 Wednesday 15 September 2010*

LT. COMMANDER JIMMY Ramshawe, assistant to the Director of the National Security Agency in Fort Meade, Maryland had his feet and his antennae up. Lounging back in his swivel chair, shoes on the desk, he was staring at an item on the front page of the *Washington Post*.

TOP RUSSIAN OFFICIAL  
DROPS DEAD IN WHITE HOUSE  
*Siberian political chief  
suffers fatal heart attack*

‘Poor bastard,’ muttered the American-born but Australian-sounding Intelligence officer. ‘That’s a hell of a way to go - in the middle of the bloody State Dining Room, right in front of two presidents. Still, by the look of this, he didn’t have time to be embarrassed.’

He read on, skimming through the brief biography. The forty-nine-year-old Mikhail Masorin had been a tough, uncompromising Siberian boss, someone who stood up for his people and their shattered communist dream. Here was a man who had brought real hope to this 4,350-mile-long land mass of bleak and terrible beauty, of snowfields and seven time zones.

Of the three Siberian ‘kingdoms’ which make up this huge area, the two others being the Siberian Federal District between the Yenisei River and the Lena River, and the Russian Far East, the Urals Federal district was easily the most important. Here was where most of the oilfields were

located. Beneath the desolate plains of Western Siberia, the freezing place which locals claimed to be 'forgotten by the Creator', lay the largest oilfields on earth.

One of the reasons why Mikhail was adored in Siberia was because he was a politician who wasn't afraid to speak brass tacks, frequently reminding his Russian rulers that the oil upon which the entire national economy was built was Siberian and that it was the natural property of the Siberian people. He wanted more money for it from the central government. Not for himself, but for his people.

And now Mikhail was gone, and Jimmy Ramshawe's hackles rose a lot higher than his shoes on the desk. 'Strewth,' he said quietly, taking a swig of his hot black coffee. 'Wouldn't be surprised if a bloody lot of people were glad he died. And none of 'em Siberian.'

It was at times like this that Lt. Commander Ramshawe's famously reliable instincts sprang to the fore. Suspicion, mistrust, misgivings and downright disbelief, as well as a few harsh lessons taught to him by the Big Man fought their way to the front of his mind: *whenever a major politician with a lot of enemies dies, check it out . . . never trust a goddamned Russian - and never believe that anything is beyond them, because it's not . . . the KGB lives, trust me.*

'Wouldn't be the biggest shock in the world if the old bastard calls on this one,' he said, refilling his coffee cup. And he was right about that.

Three minutes later his private line rang. Jimmy always thought there was an irritable, impatient note in its modern ring-tone when the Big Man was on the line. And he was right about that, too.

'Jimmy, you read the *Washington Post* yet? Front page, the dead Siberian?' Arnold Morgan's tone echoed that of the telephone.

'Yessir.'

'Well, first of all, you can forget all about that heart-attack crap.'

'Sir?'

'And stop calling me "sir". I'm retired.'

'Could've fooled me, sir.'

Arnold Morgan chuckled. For the past few years he had treated Jimmy Ramshawe almost like a son, not simply because the young Aussie-American was the best Intelligence officer he had ever met, but also because he both knew and liked his father, an ex-Australian Navy admiral and currently a high-ranking airline official in New York.

Jimmy was engaged to the surf goddess Jane Peacock, student daughter of the Australian Ambassador to Washington, and Arnold was very fond of both families. But in Jimmy he had a soulmate, a younger man whose creed was suspicion, thoroughness and a tireless determination to investigate, someone always prepared to play a hunch, and with a total devotion to the United States, the country where Jimmy had been brought up.

He might have been engaged to a goddess, but Jimmy Ramshawe believed Arnold Morgan was God. Several years ago Admiral Morgan had been Director of the National Security Agency, and ever since had continued to consider himself in overall command of the place.

This system suited everyone, not least Admiral George Morris, the ex-Carrier Battle Group commander and current NSA Director, extremely well, because there was no better advice than that of Admiral Morgan.

When Admiral Morgan called the NSA, Fort Meade trembled. His growl echoed through Crypto City - as the Military Intelligence hub was called. And, essentially, that was the way Arnold liked it.

'Jimmy, I was at the banquet, standing only about ten feet from the Siberian when he hit the deck. He went down like he'd been shot, which he plainly hadn't. But I watched him die, rolling back and forth, fighting for breath, just like his



lungs had quit on him. Wasn't like any heart attack I ever saw . . .'

'How many you seen?'

'Shut up, Jimmy. You sound like Kathy. And listen . . . I want you very quietly to find out where the goddamned body is, where it's going, and whether there's going to be an autopsy.'

'Then what?'

'Never mind "then what?" Just take step one, and call me back.' Slam. Phone down.

'Glad to see the old bastard's mellowing,' muttered Jimmy. 'Still, Kathy says that's how he's talked to at least two Presidents. So I guess I can't complain.'

He picked up his other phone and asked the operator to connect him to Bill Fogarty down at FBI headquarters. Three minutes later the top Washington field agent was on the case, and twenty minutes after that Bill was back with news of the fate of the corpse of Mikhail Masorin.

'Jimmy, I walked into a goddamned hornets' nest. Seems the Russians want to take the body directly back to Moscow tomorrow afternoon. But the Navy is not having it. Masorin is officially in their care while the body's in the USA. He died on American soil, and they're insisting the formalities are carried out here, including, if necessary, an autopsy.'

'What do the Russians think about that?'

'Not a whole hell of a lot,' said Bill Fogarty. 'They are saying Masorin was an official guest of the President in the United States, and they should be afforded the diplomatic courtesy of treating his death as though it had happened in their own embassy where he was staying.'

'Will they get their way?'

'I don't think so. Under the law, a foreign national who dies in the USA is subject to the lawful procedures of the United States. If something has happened to a high-ranking Russian official, it is within the rights of the United States to demand the most exhaustive inquiries into the causes of

death until we are satisfied that every avenue has been explored. Even then, the body is released only on our say-so. And they still have the body at the hospital at Bethesda.'

Jimmy paused for a moment, thinking. Then he said, 'Bill, I'm gonna make one phone call. And I have a hunch it's going to end all speculation. After all, anyone who was in the White House at that time must be a suspect if there is a question of foul play. And that must include the President and all his agents and officials. That body's not going anywhere for a while, except the city morgue.'

Thanking Bill Fogarty, Lt. Commander Ramshaw immediately called the Naval Hospital. The conversation took two full minutes. The body of Siberia's Number One political commissar would be leaving for the morgue inside the hour and an autopsy would be carried out this afternoon. The Russians were, apparently, not pleased.

Jimmy hit the buttons for the Chevy Chase link.

'Morgan - speak.'

'Sir, the body of Mr Masorin will be at the city morgue in a couple of hours. The Russians are trying to kick up a fuss and get permission to remove it back to Moscow. But that's obviously not going to happen.'

'Doesn't surprise me any, Jimmy. Tell the pathologist we're looking for poison of some kind. I'm damn sure it wasn't a heart attack.'

'You think one of our guys got rid of him?'

'Well, that's what it looks like. But you never know with the Russians. A short, sharp murder in the White House gives 'em marvellous cover. Because then they can feign outrage at this disgraceful breach in American security, while they make their getaway, home to that God-awful country of theirs.'

'You mean they might have killed their own man?' Jimmy was taken aback but not really surprised. And Morgan apparently felt the same.

'It's happened before, both during and after the old Soviet era. But let's not get excited. We'll wait till we hear the autopsy report. Then we'll take a very careful look . . . Hey, well done, kid - but I gotta go. I'd better talk to the Chief.'

*1600: same day*

Lt. Commander Ramshawe's veteran black Jaguar pulled into the parking lot behind the city morgue and headed straight into one of the VIP reserved spaces. This was an old ruse taught him long ago by Admiral Morgan: *no one, ever, wants to tangle with a high-ranking officer from the NSA. Park wherever the hell you like. Anyone doesn't like it, tell 'em to call me.*

Inside the building, the area where the autopsy had been conducted was busy, despite the fact the FBI had denied the Russians entry. There were two US Navy guards on the door and three White House agents milled around in the corridor. The coroner, Dr Louis Merloni, was there, with the Chief Medical Officer from Bethesda in attendance. The autopsy had been carried out by the resident clinical pathologist, Dr Larry Madeiros. No details of the examination had yet been released.

Jimmy showed his NSA pass to the guards and was admitted immediately. Once inside he said firmly, 'Dr Madeiros?'

The pathologist walked over and held out his hand.

'Lt. Commander Ramshawe, NSA,' said Jimmy. 'I would like to talk to you for a few minutes in private.'

They walked across the wide examination room to an adjoining office, and almost before they'd had time to sit down Jimmy Ramshawe said, 'OK, Doc, gimme the cause of death.'

'Mikhail Masorin died of asphyxiation, sir.'

'You mean some bastard throttled him?'

'No, I don't mean that. I mean he was given a substance, a poison of some type, which caused the transmission of nerve impulses from the brain to the muscles to be seriously impaired. In the end to the point of limpness. When this process hits the chest muscles, breathing stops.'

'Jesus Christ. You don't think he was poisoned by something in his food?'

'No. I found a very fine puncture mark on the back of his neck, right side. I think we shall find he was injected with the poison through that hole.'

'Do we know what the poison was yet?' Jimmy wanted to make sure he got every detail for Arnold Morgan.

'No idea. All the bodily fluids are still in the lab. That's blood-cell counts, as well as bone marrow, liquids from the liver and kidneys, and all other biochemical substances found in the body. It'll take a while, but I'm pretty sure we're going to find something very foreign deep inside that corpse.'

'The bloody corpse itself is very foreign,' said Jimmy cheerfully. 'That makes the poison *amazingly* foreign.'

'Unless it was American,' replied the doctor, archly.

'Well, yes, I suppose so,' said Jimmy. 'When will you know?'

'You can call me on my cellphone at ten o'clock tonight. I'll let you know in confidence what we've found. Thereafter the report will be issued first thing tomorrow morning to the hospital and to the medical officer of record in Bethesda, and then to the FBI and the White House agents.'

*2200: same day*

*Australian Embassy, Washington DC*

Jimmy excused himself from the Australian Ambassador's dinner table and walked into the next room where he punched in Dr Larry Madeiros's number on his cellphone.

'Hello, sir. It was curare, and quite a sizeable shot of it. A most deadly poison originating from South America.'

'Kew-rar-ee,' said Jimmy. 'What the hell is it?'

'Well, curare is a generic name for many different poisons made from the bark and roots of forest vines,' said the doctor. 'The main one's called Pareira, and the lab technicians here think that's the one. Five hundred micrograms of that stuff will cause death in a few minutes. And Mr Masorin had more than that. It's a classic poison and it seems it's a favourite of the professional assassin.'

'Steady, Doc, old mate. This was a White House state banquet. There weren't any professional assassins walking around there.'

'As you wish,' said Doctor Madeiros stiffly. 'But that is very much the history of this particular poison.'

'Well, thanks anyway, Doc. You've been a big help.'

Jimmy clicked off and instantly dialled Admiral Morgan's number.

'You were dead right, sir. Someone hit Masorin with a lethal shot of poison injected into his neck. More than 500 micrograms, according to the pathologist . . .'

'Know what it was?'

'Yup. Curare, a type called Pareira.'

'Wait a minute, Jimmy. I got a book of poisons here. I was waiting for your call. Lemme check this out - yeah, right, curare, a known poison since the sixteenth century, a gummy substance used to tip hunting arrowheads by Indian tribes up the Amazon river in South America.'

Jimmy could hear Morgan flipping pages so he said quickly, 'Sir, I'll alert Admiral Morris to what's going on. And then I guess we'll let the rest of the investigation take its course. It's not really our business any more, is it? Civilian matter now, right?'

'Exactly so, Jimmy. But I'm sure as hell glad we know what's going on. Murder.'

For the US government, it wasn't quite so easy to get rid of the case. From an official point of view, inquests, coroners' statements and autopsies were a pain in the rear end, especially as they were always public and had to be entered in the public record. Thus it was that on the morning of Thursday 16 September, the FBI announced to the world that the death of the Siberian Chief Minister, Mikhail Masorin, was indeed suspicious.

Traces of the lethal poison curare had been found in the body, and the investigators were now treating the case as a murder inquiry.

MURDER IN THE WHITE HOUSE, bellowed the *New York Post*. SIBERIA BOSS ASSASSINATED, thundered the *Washington Post*. All of it on the front page, in specially reserved end-of-the-world typeface.

And while the maelstrom of a media frenzy swirled around the Russian visitors, the President's Aeroflot state airliner took off for Moscow from Andrews Air Base on Thursday evening. The body of Mikhail Masorin was not on board.

For some reason best known to neurotic news editors, the US media, including the 24-hour news channels, leaped to the conclusion that an American had been responsible for the Siberian's death. Perhaps it was just too far-fetched that the Russians would choose the White House as a theatre in which to assassinate one of their own.

And the American media, to a man, jumped on the story of an American-based terrorist, possibly a Chechen rebel in disguise, firing some kind of poison dart into Masorin's neck so that he had subsequently died while dining with the President of the United States and 150 of his friends.

The media grilled the FBI, grilled the Washington Police Department, grilled the White House press office. It took three entire days before it dawned on them all that no one had the slightest idea who had really killed Masorin, and that there had been no Chechen rebels at the state banquet.