SNOWFALCON

THOMAS

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CRAIG THOMAS

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For my Mother and Father

and

In Memoriam

John Knowler—simply the best

he situation at the moment is such, the Soviet Union's economy is on such a war footing, that even if it were the unanimous opinion of all the members of the Politburo not to start a war, this would no longer be in their power.

—Alexander Solzhenitsyn
March 1, 1976

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Craig Thomas,
Lichfield

Principal Characters

THE BRITISH

Kenneth de Vere AUBREY	Deputy head of SIS (British Intelligence)
Maj. Alan WATERFORD	Attached as instructor to 22 SAS
Alex DAVENHILL	Foreign Office special adviser to SIS
Lt. Allan FOLLEY	22 SAS, seconded to British Intelligence
PHILIPSON	SIS staff, Helsinki

THE AMERICANS

Charles BUCKHOLZ	Deputy directior, CIA
ANDERS	His chief assistant
President Joseph WAINWRIGHT	

THE RUSSIANS

Maj. Alexei K. VORONTSYEV	Special Investigations Department (SID), KGB
Feodor KHAMOVKHIN	First secretary, Communist party of the Soviet Union (CPSU)
Yuri ANDROPOV	Chairman of the KGB
KAPUSTIN	Deputy chairman, KGB
GROMYKO	Foreign minister of the Soviet Union
Mihail Pyotravich GOROCHENKO	Deputy foreign minister
Ilya Maxim Alevtina Pyotr	Junior officers of the SID
Marshal PRAPOROVICH	O.C. Group of Soviet Forces North (GSFN)
Admiral DOLOHOV	Red Banner Northern Fleet
Col. Gen. OSSIPOV	O.C. Far East Military District
Lt. Gen. PNIN	GSFN
Capt. NOVETLYN	GRU (Military Intelligence)
Capt. Yevgeni VRUBEL	KGB Border Guard
Maj. Gen. VALENKOV	Commandant, Moscow Garrison
Capt. Ilarion V. GALAKHOV	GRU
Anna DOSTOYEVNA	Former minister of culture
Natalia GRASNETSKAYA	Wife of VORONTSYEV

Preludes

At the border between the Federal Republic and the DDR west of Eisenach, the E63 ceases to be an autobahn, and becomes merely a main road for the sixty or more kilometers through the Kaufunger-Meissner Wald to Kassel. At one specific point along that more twisting metaled strip, Kenneth Aubrey had decided upon a road accident involving a container truck and three cars—one of them a Mercedes, the others Volkswagens.

He stood under the shelter of dark trees above the level of the road, the rain sweeping between him and the scene below. Behind and to his left, in a lay-by, the squat white shape of an ambulance waited, seemingly inappropriate to the erected carnage he was watching. The ambulance was still, its engine turned off, a fog steaming its windows.

Aubrey watched the mobile crane lowering the crushed bodies of the two Volkswagens painstakingly into the middle of the road. Small wet figures scurried around it, arranging the two wrecks as if in some display of modern sculpture. After perhaps twenty minutes, during which time he began to imagine the damp from the needle-coated earth under his feet was seeping into his Wellingtons, as he rested on a shooting stick, the Mercedes was towed up by a breakdown truck, unhooked, and men pushed it toward the two Volkswagens. Aubrey heard the rend of torn metal as it was edged into a grotesque three-pointed star against the smaller cars.

The German alongside him coughed. Aubrey glanced to one side,

lowered his glasses, and said in German, "Yes, that will do very well, Herr Goessler."

"I am pleased, Herr Franklin," the German replied without humor or enthusiasm. Punctilious, but reluctant, Aubrey decided. He smiled at the use of his cover name. Silly—but new regulations at every turn. Goessler knew him as Aubrey—had for years.

He turned back to the road, gleaming like the PVC jackets and capes of the men down there.

The container truck, SAUER AG large in yellow on its cab and cargo, was being driven slowly toward the mobile crane which hung above the wreck like a sinister carrion vehicle. One man in a cape was directing the driver with precise indications. Aubrey looked at his watch—plenty of time. Rain spilled from the brim of his hat as he bent his head. It wetted the knees of his suit, and he clucked his tongue in disapproval.

He watched as the mobile crane, gently at first, then as if delighting in its own strength, raised the body of the trailer, then jerked like an animal breaking its prey's neck so that the container toppled upon the wreckage of the three cars.

The metal shrieked. Aubrey winced, as if he had seen the weight topple upon himself in some dream. When the great truck had settled, he nodded, satisfied, and looked again at his watch. Late afternoon, perhaps an hour more to wait, and the day drawing in under heavy gray clouds.

The wind changed, blowing rain into his face. He rubbed the wetness away.

"It appears to be very convincing," he offered.

Goessler said, "It's as good as you will get—without *driving* all the vehicles together at high speed."

"A reasonable facsimile will suffice," Aubrey said stuffily.

He watched the mobile crane move off, and the shiny figures of the men gratefully clear the road, heading for the mobile canteen he had ordered for the purpose. Their bent shoulders, ducked heads, suggested gratitude.

Then, suddenly, the road was deserted. Toward Kassel there was a diversion sign, and east down the road, two miles away, there was another sign directing traffic onto the 487. That sign would be removed quickly, when the time came. He could faintly hear the helicopter that was spotting for them. God knew what the visibility was like—but he had to trust . . .

He focused on a bend in the road, perhaps fifty yards away, toward the east. From there . . .

Less than an hour.

The driver of the container truck traveling west from Jena and the Zeiss factory, carrying cameras and camera parts into the Federal Republic, was about to remark on the absence of traffic on that part of the E63 to the man seated alongside him—a man perhaps somewhat too old to be convincingly a driver's mate—when his truck rounded the bend on which Aubrey had focused his glasses.

The wreckage was bundled high in his vision like some gray bonfire ready to be ignited. He stamped down on the brakes, gripping the wheel as he felt the skid beginning. He eased off the brakes, eased them on again—but there was too little time and distance, and he knew it.

"Cover your face!" he had time to shout, and then the windshield was filled and the cab dark with the monstrous heap of tangled wreckage.

Aubrey watched the impact shift the wreckage as if the oncoming truck were a bulldozer. The noise assailed him, tearing, crying sounds that belonged to no human experience. The whole mass of metal, to which he had now added perhaps 350 pounds of human material, slewed across the road, almost into the ditch below him.

Then it stopped. Silence. He was grateful for that; he could sense Goessler crouched into shock beside him. A whistle blew, and Goessler's team went into action.

The ambulance, headlights gleaming off the road, blue light flashing, siren wailing, turned out onto the road. A police car appeared round the bend in the road, and parked broadside on, blocking oncoming traffic. Its red light swept continually across the road. A red fire engine appeared from the trees, as if lost, then drew out alongside the container truck.

The cab door had to be cut open with torches, which flickered blue off metal and wet road, sparked and blazed. When the first of the men, the driver, was lifted from the twisted intestines of the cab, it was evident he was dead. Aubrey did not need the white face of one of Goessler's men looking up toward them, and the shaking head.

"Why have they bothered with the driver?" he snapped. Then, raising his voice, he called, "The other man—he is the one. Is he alive?"

A fireman had clambered into the cab, and now he appeared, his hand raised toward them. Aubrey could see the extended thumb clearly in the glasses. The man was alive. A shiver of success, and relief, possessed his old frame for a moment.

"We shall go down, Herr Franklin," Goessler remarked, with the first urgency he had shown all afternoon. Aubrey raised himself from his stick, letting the glasses hang from their strap.

He was irritated by having to hold onto Goessler's arm for support as they descended the muddy slope.

The second man, the driver's mate, was extracted from the cab in half an hour. His legs were obviously crushed by the impact, and the German doctor continually shook his head. He administered morphine to keep the man unconscious. When he was finally lowered onto a stretcher, and the black bags had been inflated around the crushed limbs to form splints, the doctor glared at Aubrey with what seemed to him to be dislike, even momentary hatred.

"Don't waste your sympathy, *Herr Doktor,*" Aubrey snapped at him across the stretcher with its red blanket, and white, strained face. "This man is a senior Russian tank officer. *Not* a German—as you well know. Now, get him into the ambulance."

When the driver's mate was loaded aboard, Aubrey climbed into the rear of the ambulance, Goessler following him. He slammed the doors shut behind them. A nurse, water from her wet cape joining the pool from the umbrella Aubrey had folded, began giving a transfusion to the unconscious man on the stretcher.

As he watched the tube redden through its length, reach the arm like a quick red snake, and the bottle begin to empty, Aubrey was suddenly afraid. It was as if a hand had swept down the house of cards he had built—or someone had laughed at something he had thought or written or composed in secret.

"How bad is he?" he asked the doctor, sitting beside the patient.

"Bad."

Aubrey tapped the floor of the ambulance as it jerked into motion, its siren accelerating up the scale as it headed for Kassel. His umbrella sprinkled drops of water onto his trousers.

"He must live," he remarked. "It is imperative that this man makes a *sufficient* recovery." There was a hissing, almost threatening urgency in his voice. The doctor was quelled, rather than resentful. "The man must live—he *must* live."

The *Kasseler Zeitung* carried a news item on the accident, and what it claimed were exclusive photographs. There was a vivid description of the wreckage and the weather conditions. The main burden of the article seemed to be an attempt to reopen discussion on extending the E63 autobahn from Eisenach to Kassel through the Kaufunger-Meissner Wald, which stretch of road had proved once again fatally inadequate for the present volume of traffic.

A further item on the same page informed the readership of the death of the driver's mate, one Hans Grosch, of Stadtroda near Jena, after an unsuccessful operation at the Kassel Central Hospital. His

body, the authorities had informed the *Kasseler Zeitung*, would naturally be returned to the DDR for burial, in due course.

That evening, twenty-six hours after the accident, an RAF Hercules took off from an airfield outside Hanover. When it landed at RAF Brize Norton, an ambulance was waiting for one of its passengers, who was then driven to a small private hospital outside Cheltenham.

Cunningham looked down at the red file on his desk, then up into Aubrey's habitually ingenuous blue eyes. The face around those eyes, once childlike and unaging, now appeared drawn and thin. Age, Cunningham decided, did not become Aubrey. It seemed to have wasted him more than others. Unless the weariness, the stretched skin, could be put down entirely to his interrogation of Smoktunovsky.

"A great pity the man died," he observed. It was not a criticism.

Over Cunningham's shoulder, Aubrey looked at the bright wintry day outside in Queen Anne's Gate.

"I quite agree."

The warmth of the room was stuffy, dry, belying the weather, which possessed such an agreeable sharpness that Aubrey had walked part of the way to his office that morning. "However, perhaps convenient, since his body may now be returned to the DDR, in compliance with the official request by the family Grosch." He smiled thinly. "Colonel Smoktunovsky of Group of Soviet Forces Germany—I wonder how he liked playing the part of driver's mate? I quite forgot to ask him."

Cunningham flicked open the file. Aubrey was always bitter after a prolonged interrogation, as if hating something in himself.

"Satisfied—in broad terms, Kenneth?"

"I think so. In broad terms. Colonel Smoktunovsky knew a great deal."

"False alarm, then?"

"I think so. The military analysts are taking their time coming to the same conclusion—but I think they'll get there. No, the sending of perhaps the most senior tank officer ever into the Federal Republic to do his own routine reconnaissance was—well, perhaps an expensive luxury, or a piece of bravado. An old warhorse, feeling his oats . . . ?"

"Rather an expensive jaunt—for him."

"Quite. No, for the moment I don't think we have to worry about GSFG starting the next war just before this Helsinki business reaches an admirable conclusion. However, with Smoktunovsky coming over to survey the Federal road system disguised as a driver's mate of humble origins—one can't take chances."

"And you enjoyed your elaborate trap?"

"A hit—I do confess as much." Aubrey nodded. The gesture was almost sanctimonious, certainly smug, yet there was a flash of something Cunningham almost described as self-disgust, just for a moment. "However, perhaps you would turn to page thirty-six of the interrogation transcript. I have marked the passage."

Cunningham took his spectacles from his breast pocket, then flipped through the typed pages. Typescript, done with Aubrey's neatness of touch, on an old manual machine. A Russian had lived and died in those pages—Aubrey himself his only comforter and confessor; perhaps the most successful and remorseless interrogator Cunningham had ever known. There was nothing of the cramped, close intensity of those hours and days suggested by the double-spaced type.

As if reading something in Cunningham's face, Aubrey said, "I could admit that the whole thing was quite awful, if you wish." Cunningham looked up sharply. "But it is over now. And there may be something of interest for us." He nodded at the typescript, and as if bidden, Cunningham began to read. When he had finished, he looked up again.

"Mm. I am to make something of this?" He sounded as if he thought Aubrey was making the false judgment of a tired man.

"I'm not that tired, Richard," Aubrey said softly. "You may understand better, with a little perspective. Smoktunovsky was almost certainly GRU, Military Intelligence, as well as senior GSFG tank tactician. His rank at fifty-two was an affectation. As such, he was hard to crack, despite his injuries and poor morale. What I have underlined there came only towards the end, when he had broken almost completely, was rambling, trying to cover tracks, that sort of thing. But still he tried to hide this from me. I formed the distinct and certain impression that he thought it was what I was after all the time, and he certainly did not render it without the fiercest struggle."

"So?"

"Ciphers—code words. Little else. If I had so much as caught a whiff of it earlier, I would have gone for it—as it was . . ." He lifted his hands in a shrug. "Nevertheless, what Smoktunovsky considered *most vital* to conceal was encapsulated in those phrases, and that number. 'Group 1917—Finland Station' and the twenty-fourth. The last is presumably a date, though it might be something else. I am convinced that he thought it most important and highly secret."

Cunningham was silent for a moment as he reread the underlined passage. When he looked into Aubrey's face again, it was evident he was skeptical. There was sympathy in his eyes that could only be for Aubrey's tiredness.

"Wasn't the man just rambling—his prayer beads, perhaps?"

"I considered that. No, there is a later stage when he does that—a dead wife, I gathered, sons, his own father. His wanderings around himself were personal, not political."

"And you want—?"

Aubrey rubbed his eyes, as if assailed by the weariness of the interrogation again. He saw his suspicions with Cunningham's eyes, momentarily.

"I—should try to explain my feelings about this, Richard. I don't want to be accused merely of a womanish intuition." Aubrey smiled briefly. "It's the language that's being used. The whole *revolutionary* evocation—"

Cunningham smiled. "I see. This is a semantic intuition, then? We are to be concerned with language, with meaning?"

"You're dismissing the whole thing—but you weren't there, with him. He was down in his belly, escaping me in screams, Richard!" Aubrey shuddered, as if someone had opened a door and let in cold air. "No, you weren't there. This was *so* important to him, he had to hide it. Wainwright and the Soviet first secretary are to sign the SALT III/MARS agreement early next year. The Red Army is, we are certain, violently opposed to the Politburo over the whole package—they've even gone into print arguing for an *increase* in defense spending."

The words tumbled out now, as if he had struck some rock in his mind and a long-carried cargo was being spilled. The last hours with Smoktunovsky had been desperate, wearing; he had shortened the Russian's life by perhaps more than a day because he would not let him rest. In the end, he had had to lock the door against the medical staff while he went after what the crazed mind was still trying to keep from him.

Cunningham was shaking his head.

"Opposed, yes. That is to be anticipated—"

"Richard, I put Smoktunovsky in the bag because we were afraid of what Exercise 1812 could mean on the NATO central front. It turned out to be a false alarm. But that snatch was the result of well-founded suspicion on our part that the army was engaged in a bitter quarrel with the Kremlin. Smoktunovsky didn't tell me that they'd kissed and made up."

Cunningham rubbed his chin for a while, then nodded. "It all seems very slim to me, Kenneth. Perhaps you were in there too long with him—" Aubrey's old blue eyes flared. "No, I withdraw that. Very well—talk to people, send in a man if you wish. Where might you begin?"

"I'll talk to a couple of people at MOD—the less dense among them. As to a penetration mission—I accept that I have nowhere to send

someone at the present. But the Red Army is not going to lie down and let its balls be cut off by Khamovkhin and the rest of the Politburo. I'm quite certain of that."

"Kenneth—I do hope you're wrong about this."

"Exactly my own sentiments. *Exactly.*"

"Very well, play it back. If it's any good, then we'll send it upstairs for analysis." The tape operator made as if to rewind the spool of the tape on the recorder; then his team leader stopped him. "Who did you say this old man was?"

"His name's Fedakhin—Bureau of Political Administration of the Army."

"Are we interested in him for any reason?"

"No. He just used a Secretariat telephone, that's all. He wouldn't have expected it to be tapped, but it was. I was just playing through last night's efforts after I came in, and I heard it. He's talking in code."

"OK, Misha, the floor is yours. Impress me."

"Captain."

The younger man switched on the rewind, and they watched the spools changing their weight of tape and the numbers rolling rapidly back. Misha stopped the tape, checked the number with a list at his elbow, then wound back a little more. Then he switched to "Play" on the heavy old German recorder.

The captain noticed that, as usual with taps done as routine, the installation and quality both left much to be desired. The voice was tinnily unreal and distant.

"Our man for Group 1917 is in place," the old voice said.

"Good. But you should not have called."

"I apologize. Let the illness of an old man excuse me."

"Very well."

"You need have no worries concerning Finland Station, my friend. It has been settled, in terms of personnel, and it can now proceed satisfactorily. I shall be able to retire a happy man and await the great day."

The captain's nose wrinkled at the clichés, and he tossed his head, Misha being invited into the contempt he felt. He knew with certainty that contempt for the old fart on the tape was driving out curiosity, but the knowledge didn't worry him. Old men—his wife's father—talked endlessly of *great days*, and *happy retirement*, and *golden ages*, come to that—

"Thank you, old friend. Take care of yourself."

Misha let the tape run for a few seconds, then switched it off. He looked up eagerly into the captain's broad face, so that the older man felt obligated to feel interest.

"Well, sir?"

"Yes—tell me, then. Who was the other man?"

"Unidentified."

"What number was dialed?"

"Wrong sort of tap—no record."

"A name was asked for?"

"No. I'll play it, if you like—" The captain shook his head, lighting a cigarette. "Only an extension. Could've been anyone."

"So—what's the excruciating importance of all this, Misha?"

"I don't know, sir. But he was talking in code, obviously—and people who do that have something to hide, don't they?"

After a silence, the captain said, "Usually, they do."

"Stig, old boy—it's you."

The heavily built, florid Englishman, who never spoke Finnish if he could avoid it, looked up from the newspaper he was reading, recognized his visitor—unsurprising since he had been waiting for him in the bar on the Mannerheimintie for half an hour—and gestured him to another seat at his table. The bespectacled, fur-hatted Finn sat down, briefcase across knees pressed primly, and tightly, together. The Englishman watched him peer nervously into the less well-lit corners of the bar—a nervous tic that Stig had always demonstrated at every meeting over the last five years. He'd probably done it with his predecessor, Henderson. Poor little bugger—

"I—you always choose these public places, Luard. Do you have to?"

The Finn's English was excellent; unlike Luard, he had no distrust of a foreign tongue, speaking four languages other than his own. Luard's Finnish was improbable at best, Stig considered.

"Sorry, old boy. Standard procedure. And no one follows you about, old boy. No one has for years—" It was as if Luard suddenly became irritated with his companion. "Everyone lost interest in you years ago, Stig. They wouldn't care if they knew you passed stuff onto my lot—I should think Finnish Intelligence *hopes* someone does, just in case they ever get hold of something of importance."

Stig's narrow, tired face with its doughy complexion suddenly sharpened, took on a vivacity of anger.

"You need not insult me, Luard. I asked merely on this occasion because I have something that you must see—and this is not the place to start passing round infrared photographs."

Luard's narrow eyes slid into their creases of fat. Then his features went bland as the waiter approached. Stig ordered a beer, and Luard another scotch. When the waiter had brought the drinks, and Luard had made a patronizing show of paying, he said, "Infrared. They must be good. What of?"