

Author's Note

The following article is true. I read it on my return to London on January 24th 1994. It appeared on the front page of the British national newspaper, *The Independent*.

British Mercenaries for Azeri War. *Tim Kelsey* reports.

Government turns blind eye to illegal programme to supply men and arms for conflict between two former Soviet republics.

Government has given tacit support to an illegal scheme to supply Azerbaijan with military backing in its war with Armenia, according to a British peer who has admitted his own involvement. The Foreign Office also agreed yesterday that it knew of the project.

The Independent has learnt that a group of British and Turkish businessmen are negotiating with the Azeri authorities for the supply of arms and a large number of mercenaries, mainly from Britain. The Foreign Office confirmed that there is a British Arms embargo against Azerbaijan, which is fighting a vicious war with the neighbouring former Soviet republic of Armenia over disputed territories. It is illegal for a Briton to be a mercenary soldier.

The Azeris are said to be prepared to pay an annual fee of as much as 150 million British pounds.

It is understood that negotiations are still not complete, but private chartered Russian aircraft have been put on standby to fly mercenaries into the area. The first phase of the scheme is to provide British military trainers.

The Azeris would pay the bills mainly in the form of oil. An American oil company is reported to have provided training for Azeri soldiers by former members of the US armed forces in breach of American embargoes. The US State Department is investigating the allegations, which were made by foreign diplomats based in Baku, the Azeri capital.

Preface

The phrase “The Great Game” first gained recognition in *Rudyard Kipling’s* novel *Kim*. Long before this colonial masterpiece, however, Captain Arthur Connolly used the phrase in a letter home while serving with the Bengal Light Infantry. In it he was describing the struggle between two imperial superpowers, Russia and The British Empire, for control over Central Asia. Captain Connolly was eventually murdered for his efforts to Queen and country in 1842. His fate sealed by the British Government’s shameless decision to abandon him.

Those two superpowers have since dwindled to obscurity. But the Great Game continues. In its long and bloody history there have been periods of relative peace and tremendous violence. Through all, the subtle intrigue remains, only coming to the fore when national interests are at stake, as is the case now; with one major superpower vying for influence against many smaller nations, rich and poor, for the only truly valuable commodity left in the world. Oil.

For this, countries still send their soldiers. But now under the guise of consultants and advisors instead of travelers and tradesmen. The present struggle is no longer limited to the mountains of Central Asia, but is fought worldwide. Neither is it fought solely by nations, but by powerful transnational conglomerates and their private “security” organizations. Religious ideologies also play a greater and more dangerous role than ever before; with Islamic fundamentalism clashing violently against western religions, values and naïve interventionism. Yet no matter how often the “whom” and the “where” may change, the “what for” never does. It remains forever influence, supremacy and, ultimately, domination.

Individuals drawn into this fight are still abandoned by fickle national and corporate policy and few are remembered for their efforts. When the instigators give up and wash their hands soldiers die. All so their masters can have a continued role in The Great Game.

Chapter One

Ice formed rapidly and hardened on his face. Caused by his breath freezing the instant it hit the frigid air around him, leaving a thick frosty moisture encrusting his stubble, which, because of his speed, then solidified into hardened white crystals. The corners of his mouth were warmer and tiny watery beads formed and dripped to his chin, to freeze again into translucent icicles that hung delicately from his reddish beard.

The late afternoon was cold, crisp and perfectly clear. The sky a beautiful pale blue, typical for the time of day. In the distance a hint of darkness on the eastern horizon signaled that his surroundings would soon be cocooned in a silent world of frigidity and darkness.

It was unusual for him to be out this late and the temperature would soon plummet to its seasonal low of minus forty degrees Fahrenheit. By then he hoped to be home soaking in a hot shower. But for now he was enjoying the comparative warmth of minus twenty in the bright afternoon sun. It felt good.

The steady movement was invigorating as he powered his thin waxless skis forward with each seemingly effortless stride. Although breaking tracks in the fresh snow was harder than before, when there had been railroad-like tracks made by many previous days of exertion. But they had been obliterated by the new fluffy white carpet that is all too frequent in its abundance in the frozen forested flatlands of northern Minnesota.

More arm strength was needed to pole forward through the fresh powder and his legs burned as the lactic acid built up in his thighs. The effort was nevertheless a usual friend, and he urged himself forward into the next bend, the next rise and beyond into the unending whiteness and solitude. Even with the fifty-pound pack on his back his motion was smooth and steady, born from years of practice. Still, today was unusually tough going and extremely cold.

Regular exertion maintained his endurance. In the summer months he would run, but this was mid-winter and so he skied. There was no particular reason for it nowadays except that he had always done it. Without it he felt weak and lazy and he loathed that. With blood pumping warmly through his veins and oxygen surging through his brain he was energized. And the tranquility gave him time to think.

The first few miles were always the worst. His knees felt as if they would seize and his hips ground in their sockets. His shoulders strained under the weight of the Bergen and his extremities remained chilled throughout. But skiing wasn't as hard on the body as running and the winter gave his joints time to recuperate from the punishing summer runs, for which his knees were grateful. Then, after a few miles, the niggling pains disappeared as his body became accustomed once again to the stress and effort forced upon it.

In the surrounding wilderness there were just a few natural sounds. Wind; sharp as it whistled off the frozen lake, blowing the last of the long dead leaves over the ice; icicled branches tinkling as they swayed and cracked in the breeze; dogs barking in unison as they chased a snowy critter across a distant lake; or a startled crow, leaving a tree because of his presence and cawing its annoyance to the world.

His sounds were more unnatural and methodical. Slight, but steady and machine-like,

from years of relentless effort; balanced rhythmic breathing common to those of supreme fitness, especially in exertion; skis gliding over fresh snow, each stride crisp and clear; and the gentle whisper of material rubbing together. All these, as he powered forward with each stride and pole plant, covering mile after frozen mile.

Another five miles, a few more twists and turns around the lake, then back to the farm and the warmth of a hot shower to wash away the cold sweat from under his layers of cotton. He rarely wore the new synthetic fibers because they smelled too bad after a good sweat and the new outer materials were too noisy when he preferred to be silent. "Why be loud when you can be quiet," he had always said. Besides, in his pack there were plenty of fresh dry clothes to change into if he became chilled.

After a couple more miles a sound interrupted the serenity. It was distinctly familiar. Not a snowmobile, but something from his past and not heard in many peaceful years. The hairs on his neck twitched and his gut instinctively tightened. But those days were over. This must be a civilian machine, a state helicopter being used to count wolves on the refuge. While in the bar he had heard of them doing that. It was settling down a few miles away. Although maybe that was just the cold winter wind playing tricks.

Suddenly the noise became louder and he was instantly aware of his mistake. The state used four bladed Jet Rangers. This had the telltale "whomp, whomp, whomp" of a twin bladed Hughes. It was all too familiar now, and getting closer by the second. In this desolate area of snow, leafless trees and lakes there was nowhere to hide. To worsen matters the setting sun was creating harsh shadows that made his tracks all the more visible from the air. Those tracks led to only one place.

Doing a swift practiced one-eighty he sped off in his previous tracks, using the existing pole plants as he thrust forward with all his strength. It was easier in the tracks and his skis did as they were designed, and with skill and extra effort he covered the ground quickly. If he could find some brush to hide in he might remain unseen while the ship passed overhead. Then he could ski to the road while the Huey continued to the end of his tracks. He hoped they would first look for him there.

But the thumping of the helicopter got progressively louder and he remembered there being a spot to hide a couple of hundred yards away. Years of training and paranoia were paying off. Arriving at the brush a few seconds before the approaching Huey he dove in and frantically covered himself with as much snow as possible. His skis became tangled in the tough little twigs beneath the snow and his knees twisted uncomfortably. But he dare not move.

The matte black UH-1 appeared just over the rise and was so low it was blowing the loose snow into a great whirlwind. He was right. There was only one reason anyone would be flying like that. He knew because he had once been on the other end of it.

The Huey's skids appeared to clip the treetops as it followed his well-defined tracks. He knew the tactics. Two men would be looking through the whirlwind beneath them, one out of each side of the ship, and with it flying so close to the ground the downdraft from great blades would clear the snow from anything recently hidden. They would have nothing to fear. They had the advantage. And with the blades slicing through the air just fifty feet above his head he stayed absolutely still.

They remained above him for what seemed an eternity and the blast was intolerable,

blowing snow, leaves and branches in all directions. They were so close that he inhaled the residual Jet-A fuel from the turbines. In another moment there wouldn't be a flake of snow left for a hundred feet either side of him. He suspected they must have seen something to remain for so long. Maybe they saw his frosty breath rising from the snow.

The initial dramatic rush of adrenaline had subsided. Now fear was emerging and while being still he was slowly freezing. At minus twenty degrees Fahrenheit it doesn't take long to lose body heat when sweat becomes chilled, and not being able to move to generate heat wasn't helping. The wind chill created by the ship's powerful rotors was unbearable and his muscles would soon freeze to the point of immobility.

Finally the ship moved. He feared they must have seen something suspicious. Nevertheless he had to move. Move to get warm. Move to survive. He looked up and saw the skinny black tail disappear over the ridgeline from where he had just come. He emerged from the snow and desperately tried to get up, but there was a great weight pushing him down.

His pack! Jesus! What an idiot! Why did he not rid himself of it earlier? He was so used to its weight that it usually wasn't a hindrance. But now he needed mobility and the faster movement would retain his body heat. He wouldn't need the pack if they caught him anyway. He thought about the contents; blankets for padding the bundle of bricks, old jackets, t-shirts, and running shoes. Not much use for the bricks right now and he felt uniquely dumb for having been caught with them. But another jacket would be good, and the shoes if he got to the road. He released himself from the shoulder straps and tore into the pack, retrieving an aged sun-bleached green camouflage jacket and an old pair of studded running shoes. It wasn't a suitable camouflage for the terrain but it couldn't be helped. He placed the shoes in the large interior pockets of the jacket and struggled into it while still lying prone. He then shoved the pack deep into a drift.

Untangling his skis from the brush he stood up and rubbed his knees. With the weight gone he immediately felt lighter than air. But the sweat on his back was cold and he missed the protection of the pack. He was glad of the extra jacket and the thick cotton would keep him warm enough, but not too warm.

He had always taken extra clothes ever since being stuck outside in a subzero blizzard in the middle of nowhere. Then, he had almost frozen to death after his truck's engine had died, and probably would have if the power company hadn't found him stranded in the ditch. Since then he had learned about the severity of a Midwest winter and the deadly price of not respecting it.

Stepping carefully into his tracks he moved off. Stiff, cold and unstable at first. But with a revitalized determination he soon regained a steady momentum of pole plant, push and glide. The effort was immense even without the hindrance of his pack and the sweat on his back started to warm, causing uncomfortable little rivulets to trickle down his spine. His legs loosened and moved with greater purpose again, and his neck and shoulders relaxed, providing him with the power and strength he needed to push. All fueled by his lungs desperately inhaling gallons of frigid air.

The woods, once serene, fresh and clean, now stank of that damned helicopter. Jet-A permeated the air as a reminder to the threat and he felt as if he was already trapped in its web. He was forced to inhale the sickly vapor deep into his lungs with each breath, leaving a nauseous dry aftertaste in his mouth.

To make matters worse the trail back had been rearranged. Where there were twigs there

was now nothing. Where there was nothing there was now debris. Everything had been blown around and he had to be careful not to snare his skis among the branches that now lay on the path. In some places the trail had become a drift as piles of snow had been loosened from the trees. There were no longer any playful critters running along the ground or birds in the trees, just a big black monster scything through the air behind him.

The heavy drone of the helicopter was still very much evident in the distance. He hadn't traveled very far and they were only a few ridges and a couple of bends away at most. They would surely soon realize his trick and return. He had to get to the road.

At this time of year the road was sheer ice, with foot traffic difficult at best. But if he could just reach it they wouldn't see which way he went because the choppy ice wouldn't leave any tracks, giving him at least a fifty-fifty chance. The odds weren't good, but they weren't going to get any better doing nothing.

The Huey must have set down because he could hear voices in the distance. Commands shouted. They would be combing the area. He knew a trained tracker would soon determine his direction by simply studying his pole plants. But he was still surprised at how quickly they discovered his ploy. Someone in the group was obviously very proficient, and the realization that he wasn't up against rank amateurs didn't inspire much confidence in his plan.

He could hear the helicopter's engine clattering away and echoing off the ice, but the blades hadn't completely spooled up. The pilot was probably concerned for his engines in the freezing weather, and being careful not to suck too many ice particles into the air intakes. He willed them to stay down a little longer. Another mile. That wouldn't usually take him very long, but right now, with all the new debris in his tracks, it seemed to be taking an eternity.

Using every ounce of power and turning it into speed his lungs were bursting for air. The exertion was intolerable as fear began using the energy that could better be used for escape. He knew he must concentrate. He had been in this situation before and was wise to the problem. He thought about his stride: To push off, but not too far; to relax on the glide and save strength; and more importantly, not to fall. He calmed himself and a steady breathing returned, matching perfectly his practiced rhythmic movement. Not much further now.

The trail was like an old friend. Every little rise, bend or dip, be it only a few feet, was etched in his mind from the numerous times he'd been over this once peaceful ground. One more curve and over the fallen tree that he wished he'd moved a long time ago. Under the low fir from which snow would go down his back and then a hundred yards more. He prayed that a tree hadn't fallen across the trail as he pumped his arms to get more speed and relieve his aching thighs.

He could hear the helicopter building up to a crescendo as the blades spooled up faster. They were airborne again and retracing their route. This time the blades sounded impatient and he knew that meant the men would be angry. With that anger the pilot had thrown caution to the wind and was swinging the machine around violently, its long blades grabbing mercilessly at the thin air. He hoped their frustration might give him a small advantage.

Finally he reached the road where his skis would be useless. He had tried in the past but there was too much ice for the skinny little skis to handle and he had continually slipped and fallen, slapping his hips painfully into the hardened ice. So he sat briefly on the icy berm at the edge of the road, removed his skis and boots, and shoved them deep into the fresh snow on the wooded side. Still breathing heavily, he slid his cold clammy feet into the studded running shoes,

laced them up, and immediately set off running down the road.

Everyone had always laughed at him for customizing his running shoes by inserting hex screws into the soles. But they made excellent winter shoes, allowing him to run almost normally on the compacted ice covered roads. But the added steel removed the insulation qualities of the rubber sole, causing his feet to freeze even when running. That was the least of his worries right now however.

After skiing for so long his running muscles weren't functioning properly. The transition always took a while but in the meantime his strange loping action helped. He had found from years of running with weight that he could cover ground just as swiftly without the high knee lift of most runners. While dramatically lessening his effort it also protected his knees from painful impact injuries. He'd been running for twenty years and was very capable of competing against a fit twenty-year old.

The roar of the engines was clearer now and the blades were back doing their infamous little sonic booms, "whomp, whomp, whomp," and hauling the Huey back along the trail with purpose. They knew where he'd gone and it was a determined sound now coming from the approaching helicopter. But on the road he had left no tracks and he could dive off into the brush if they got close. Plus they couldn't do a serious search because they didn't have the manpower, and wouldn't risk splitting their forces since they were already few. Although many more than he.

It was five minutes since he had shed his skis and he figured he should be almost a mile away. He heard the roar die again and return to its steady resting clatter. They were probably around the bends by the lake, or maybe they had found his pack. Wherever they were, so long as they were down, it gave him valuable time.

His legs regained much of their normal running strength just as his breathing started to labor. He had been out for over two hours and the extended effort was telling. His lungs were bursting, his airway cold and his internal organs were chilled from the continuous inhalation of frozen air. And at some point he would have to slow down because he couldn't maintain this frantic pace. But neither could he stop because he would freeze, and soon it would be dark and much, much colder. Although the darkness would be an advantage, he just hoped he wasn't going to be out that long.

This was a major wildlife refuge area. There were no buildings, encampments or structures to hide in for miles. There was just snow, barren woods, icy lakes and more snow, and not even enough snow for the safety of a snow hole. All told there was only about sixteen inches, despite having a few feet of the white stuff fall over the winter since October. Most of it had compacted or blown into drifts. The only discernible depth lay in the great piles along the side of the road that were rock hard. Distance remained his only friend and he maintained the relentless pace.

His feet slammed hard against the ice with each confident step, and with the studs conducting the cold with unwanted efficiency his feet slowly formed into useless blocks of ice; numb, painful and, worse, uncontrollable.

By the change in the clatter of the rotors he could tell the Huey had reached the road. They were now reverberating off the compacted ice rather than being muffled over the fresh snow. The intensity grew for a few seconds as it hovered out of ground effect before settling down, reducing the stresses on the engine. They were looking for tracks and would no doubt soon

find the skis. But that wasn't a concern. They already knew he was there. Although they would soon have to follow the road in one direction or another and he would then find out if he had chosen correctly.

On the road ahead he saw a half a mile of open white expanse. On one side was an open field, on the other the lake. Between him and the far end there was nowhere to hide and it would take three minutes or more to get across. Knowing he had no choice he went for it without hesitating.

The studs in his shoes spat out slivers of ice as he increased the pace. It wasn't pretty as his arms pumped the air and his legs sprinted for all they were worth. At least it felt to him like they were sprinting. They wouldn't see his tracks. There had been too much traffic on the road earlier in the day, with people out driving and enjoying the scenic fresh snow in the sunshine. But now it was deserted of revelers, everyone was home where they belonged, enjoying the warmth of a fire and an early evening meal in front of the television. Coach potatoes, he thought. Sounded rather nice right now.

A minute into the dash and his lungs felt as though they were coming apart and ready to explode. His legs burned with effort and his feet were freezing. His gloved hands grabbed frantically at the air, desperately trying to aid his ungainly motion. Still, the pain was a good sign. As long as he could feel something he was all right. If he could keep up the movement his body would stay warm. But a lack of food was taking a serious toll on his energy and his core temperature was dipping dangerously low.

The engines increased again as they became airborne barely a mile or two away. He needed one more minute of sheer effort and pain to get across the expanse. Pump, pump, move those legs, he urged himself. His heels dug hard into the ice to get the best traction. His toes pushed off with equal effort with only the occasional slip. The ship was just behind him but he dare not look back for fear of losing momentum or his footing. A slip on an unseen slab of black ice would mean the end. It would take too long to get up after falling and sliding for yards, even if he didn't injure himself in the process. Surely they could see him. His movement would be too obvious even from afar, especially against this barren backdrop. He hoped they were still flying low, for if they were higher they would see him for sure. He just needed a few more seconds of freedom.

Using his last ounce of effort he hurled himself over the berm and into the first pile of thick brush. The frozen branches clawed away at his face as he crashed headlong into them. But he didn't feel anything. Exhaustion had created such intense pain for which there was no competition. He couldn't move a muscle, not for making a noise, but so as not to shake the brush that engulfed him. He feared that the world must hear his desperate gasps for breath. They were deafening him and ripping his lungs apart. He dreaded that they might see his breath as it froze in the still air above him. He breathed into the snow and as he searched for air his chest heaved violently.

The noise was incredible. They were just a few feet off the surface. The din was reverberating down the icy road and he could feel the vibration as the powerful turbines powered the heavy twin blades. Still, he thought he was reasonably unseen. He couldn't see out of the thick brush and supposed that they couldn't see in either. It was also getting to be dusk when shadows play tricks, especially when looking down from an aircraft. He knew that only too well.

But he was in an obvious hiding place, the only one in the last half-mile. He did the only thing he could; he laid still, waited, and slowly froze.

He was in desperate need of fluids and regretted not spending an extra few seconds to retrieve the water from his pack. It had been over two and a half hours of continuous effort and he had sweat profusely without any liquid replacement. He could eat the snow but that would be too cold for an already frigid body and it would make his situation worse. He also needed a piss, and although that was a good sign, showing he was still moderately hydrated, he couldn't. The rising steam would be a dead giveaway and he doubted he could piss even if he'd wanted to, he was so shrunken with the cold. He tucked his hands between his legs for warmth, protection and comfort, hoping that by making his dash they wouldn't think he could have had time to reach the woods. In that hope he waited, expecting the worst.

Then the reverberation changed pitch, signaling the ship had banked away. He dared a look and saw the Huey as it clattered itself away across the lake, blowing snow in its wake like some great angry black monster. The noise lessened until it was just a faint mechanical whir in the distant eastern sky. Then finally, the approaching darkness swallowed it back into its lair, leaving just the telltale navigation lights flickering in the sky as the only evidence to its existence.

“Who were those guys?” He said.

Chapter Two

He hauled himself from the brush and struggled painfully to his feet. In the evening gloom and with snow to his knees he knew well enough his predicament; he was miles from anywhere and the temperature would soon drop to minus forty degrees Fahrenheit. He had no food, no water, no heat and no extra clothes since discarding his pack earlier. And the nearest habitation was ten miles away. He had to get moving, and quickly.

The effort was intolerable. Just placing one foot in front of the other caused a searing pain in his feet that shot up his legs like knives. It was as though all his blood had collected in the soles of his feet and they were about to explode. Worse, a lack of food and the increased lactic acid had turned his legs into useless blocks of lead. His usual youthful fluidity had vanished.

He crawled over the berm and fell painfully hard onto the thick ice of the road, not in any hurry to get up. But after struggling to stand and slowly regaining his footing he began to slide each foot in turn along the ice, trying to stimulate some momentum. He felt like an old man. But at least he was moving and heading in the right direction, which, under the circumstances, was all he could expect from his exhausted body.

Night arrived and it became pitch black. Of the million stars overhead none penetrated the darkness and he could barely make out the dull glow of the berms on either side of the road. He stayed close to the left in case he needed to hide. It was closer to the woods and made walking easier as the ice was less slippery. And when he fell it didn't hurt as much.

He figured about five miles before the nearest cabin but doubted anyone would be there. Most were only used as summer lakeside cabins for the richer folk from the city. If it were empty there would be nothing worth staying for. There would be no heat, food or water. He willed for a pick-up to come by, a neighboring farmer going home to milk his cows after spending the afternoon with friends. Why hadn't he done that? Why did he never do that?

His loping motion gradually returned as his blood warmed and seeped back into his aching muscles. His fingers endured the relentless pain of thawing as the warming blood reached his extremities. But his feet remained like blocks of ice. They were nothing more than boards as they slapped the ground uselessly with each stinging pitiful stride. He used to pride himself on quiet movement, but now worried about waking the dead. On the refuge the January wolves howled their disgust.

There were no lights or movement at the cabin but he slowed his snail-like pace to gain a few agony free moments before surveying the area. Listening through his heavy breathing he heard nothing. He edged closer to the end of the driveway and found it hadn't been plowed since the first snows in October. There were a few tracks but only from the occasional whitetail searching for a morsel under the snow. There was nothing for him here so he continued toward his farm where there was warmth, food and comfort. And where his herd would be getting restless waiting for the evening milking. He was already over an hour late and they disliked change, and with his wife gone for the weekend the chores were his. Thank God she wasn't home. At least he didn't have to worry about her. Or worry about her worrying about him.

Indeed, he seemed more worried about the cows than himself. But without him there would be no milking, no cows and no farm. Thinking the worst he wondered what he would discover when he got there. But that was just paranoia. Nevertheless he decided to stop at a neighbor to borrow a rifle, using the old excuse that he had a stray dog bothering the livestock again. He had borrowed one before and they'd always suggested he keep it, but he preferred not to keep a weapon at home. There had never been a reason.

Calling the police crossed his mind, but after a recent hunting incident, when he had run off a group of poachers with his horse, they thought him nuts. And besides, the small town's sheriff department would be out of their depth anyway. He would do better alone. Involving others might only get them hurt. But more important, what could he say? He had no explanation or proof for what had happened.

With his knees in constant pain he shuffled off and after another four torturous miles finally came to signs of civilization at the recently plowed refuge entry. Along the narrow track there was a small summer cabin, and beyond, a stream that he'd have to cross before reaching the hill behind his farm. This route would alleviate the need to head blindly up the county road and run into a trap. From the overlooking hill he would be able look down at the farm, which by now would be illuminated by the vapor lights.

It wasn't far to the cabin and he reached it quickly on the more solid footing. But afterwards, the going was harder, more painful and uncomfortably wet as the snow became crusty and deep. The woods were thick and sheltered and the wind never dispersed the snow. Instead it blew in circles and collected in large piles between the strange inverted cones around each tree. Avoiding these natural mantraps meant the snow was up to his thigh, and his already freezing feet were getting soaked as more wet snow fell inside his shoes. None of it was helping his mood.

The small stream never froze completely and he could hear it trickling just under the solid surface. Even at minus thirty it still flowed gently under a layer of ice, and it cracked under his second step. In frustration he splashed through the stream uncaring to stay dry anymore and ignored the discomfort through anger and frustration. He struggled on, stumbling, and almost crawling in places as he moved defiantly toward what he hoped was safety.

His neighbor's house was situated a few hundred yards behind his. Together they were the only homes in ten square miles. Originally they were part of the same farmstead but had been separated in the 1960s. One had been physically moved and now stood within its own twenty-acre parcel, while his farmhouse had remained in its present location since being built there in the early 1940s. Both homes maintained the same driveway and the duties of snow removal generally fell upon whoever vehicle would start first on the bitterly cold mornings.

To aid starting in the subzero temperatures all the vehicles were equipped with block heaters that were plugged into the mains supply. They eased starting by keeping the engine oil warm and loose. But sometimes he would forget to plug it in, causing the battery to take the punishment of cranking over a cold heavy engine filled with thick coagulated oil. Usually resulting in a dead battery, an unplowed road and a pissed off mailman.

He stopped and surveyed the scene at the top of the small wooded ridge that overlooked both properties. It was quiet and peaceful, perfectly normal for a Sunday evening. But this evening was unusually quiet due to the absence of the deep throaty hum that should have been emanating from the vacuum pump.

The pump provided the suction for the milking equipment and was used twice a day on their herd of forty-five Holstein dairy cows. The large docile creatures had been his livelihood for the past three years, and his wife's for three years before that. At this time of night they should have been quite happy in the parlor being milked, but the absence of the habitual pump noise was making them anxious.

Studying the ground between him and the two homes he saw nothing out of the ordinary. But neither did he expect there to be. These men were better than that. They wouldn't be obvious and he wouldn't know until the last minute of anything being wrong. If at all.

Methodically, he made his way down the hill, crawling and sliding along on his belly to reduce his silhouette and avoid the low branches. He slithered under the sagging strands of rusty barbed wire at the edge of the properties, careful not to loosen the wintry chain of icicles dangling from the barbs.

A bluish glow flickered from the neighbor's living room. The evening news was on. He wondered what was happening in the rest of the world. Maybe the hostages had been released or maybe the guys from Hereford had sorted the problem. He had always wondered what people were thinking when taking hostages in Britain. Surely everyone knew of the government's resolve in dealing with such situations. And of the very capable men who inevitably regain control on those thankfully rare occasions. He wished he had a few of those guys with him right now.

Reaching the neighbor's garage he took a minute to look around and check for anything strange. A vehicle left out, a light left on or off. More than the usual tracks or less than the usual tracks. An extra vehicle or a missing vehicle. But there was nothing. Everything was as usual except for the lack of movement in the barn. He went toward the garage and peered in through the window. The sight horrified him. His reflection showed that he had aged twenty years. His face was torn and thick slimy beads of blood matted his beard. The hair sticking out from under his woolen cap was littered with debris and his clothes were ripped, dirty and soaking wet.

He couldn't calmly knock at the door and ask for a rifle in this condition. The neighbor would be justifiably shocked even if they did recognize the forlorn figure before them. Then of course they would ask questions, for which he didn't have any answers.

His slid down the garage wall and sat despondently on the freezing ground thinking of what to do next. A weapon was now out of the question. Or was it? There were other weapons. On a farm the choices are endless; shovels, forks, machetes and axes were just a few. A myriad of choices lay in his shed. But they were close quarter weapons and given a choice he preferred not to get into close contact in his current condition. These men would be younger, fitter, quicker and certainly more recently trained. There were also more of them.

Crossing the barbed wire at the back of the small paddock he made his way forward. There was still nothing strange, just a coating of fresh white snow everywhere. His decision would have been easier had he seen a black helicopter sitting in the front yard. His confidence grew as he heard the comforting sound of cows shuffling around in the barn, probably sensing his presence and getting excited about being fed.

His awareness peaked as he covered the few remaining yards before the small shed and the farmyard weapons. He remembered that the door had a nasty squeak and wished he had oiled it earlier. He checked around the handle and the door. No wires and no telltale smells. He turned

the handle slightly. Lifting as he turned he silently pulled the door ajar, looking at everything. He slipped in quickly. The vapor lights sent a bluish light through the dirty windows and he immediately saw where everything was. It wasn't neat but everything had its place and he knew exactly where to look.

His favorite piece of hickory was just behind the small wood stove. The old axe handle had been too beautiful to burn and he had kept it for an unknown purpose. Tonight he might have a use for it. The wood was light and hard and could easily do some damage in the right hands. Best of all it was quiet.

His gloves were slick from freezing, thawing and refreezing and the smooth wood was slippery in his hands. So, after removing his trashed gloves he found some old rubber palmed chore gloves, and breathed into his clammy hands to generate some heat before putting them on.

His hands were numb from the cold and barely functioning. But after long ago discovering that machinery always waits for the coldest day before breaking he had grown accustomed to using useless hands in Minnesota.

Once ready, he returned outside. There were a few yards of open ground before reaching the front door. With his light toe-first steps the compressed snow still crunched slightly beneath his weight as he inched forward. He peered into every shadow and in each imagined a nightmare, listened to every sound and expected an explosion.

Halfway across it happened. The deafening noise and the blinding light seemed to suck the life right out of him. Terror instantly returned as adrenaline surged into his stomach. He threw himself to the ground, smashed his knee into the ice, and froze. He was ablaze in light, immobilized with pain, and hugged the earth in protection from the inevitable.

Nothing came. The milk pump! Christ, it's just the fucking milk pump! The sound was so familiar. And the large spotlight always came on when the pump started. It shone brightly into the yard removing any vestige of shadow, and after the initial explosive start the pump soon returned to its normal steady hum. Then the dairy door opened and his wife appeared to stare at him in utter amazement. He looked up and felt small, vulnerable and dumb, but incredibly relieved.

All that had happened over the last three hours flooded back and played over in his head. Had he imagined it? No. There had been a helicopter and it had chased him. Otherwise what had it been doing flying so low and following his tracks? Also, there was the shouting after the Huey had set down. They had clearly been angry. He couldn't be so wrong. He couldn't be that paranoid, not now, not after all these years.

"Where've you been? I thought we agreed you were doing the chores tonight," she said. Exhausted and embarrassed he struggled to stand, looked past his wife in the doorway, and saw a green military backpack leaning against the wall. His Bergen!