



The Andaman Express

"Chillingly highlights the age
of the energy wars."

Lorne Gifford

Lorne Gifford is one of a handful of professional subsea engineers developing the worlds remaining offshore oil and gas fields. Starting on home territory in the North Sea, his work has taken him on a global journey from Trinidad to Thailand and from the Arctic to Africa. He is degree qualified, a Chartered Marine Engineer and one of less than a hundred registered subsea engineers.

He lives in London with his wife and two children and is currently working in Angola.

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Vanguard Press

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Dedication

For Wendy, Assisi and Reuben.

Adventures are pointless
without someone to share them with.

This book and the characters, companies and actions of organisations and governments it contains are completely fictitious. With the exception of course of Lt John Hanks, PFC Batkin and Admiral Miller, who have all insisted they are nothing like their characterisations and would never allow themselves to be portrayed as they have been. Sorry guys.

A major natural gas gathering system exists off the coast of Thailand, with the gas being piped to shore along two pipelines; one running to Bangkok and one to the country's major industrial area.

The Thai offshore gas gathering system, along with many other offshore oil and gas platforms, are insured principally through the London insurance markets.

Burma, or Myanmar as its ruling government calls it also has a significant offshore gas industry and exports large amounts of that gas to Thailand via a single pipeline. We all have heard of Aung San Suu Kyi and her protests against the governing regime. I for one support her wholeheartedly.

The Isthmus of Kra, a thin strip of land between two seas that is owned by Burma on one side and Thailand on the other, exists as described.

Hydrogen Sulphide, H₂S, also exists, and is a deadly gas often found within natural oil and gas reservoirs. In very small quantities it is characterised by the smell of bad eggs. And as described in this book, in higher doses it quickly deadens the sense of smell and becomes highly toxic. It is also the major cause of embrittlement in pipelines.

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The Andaman Sea, South East Asia

A gentle hiss of escaping gas instantly killed the conversation. Nkong glanced up from the pipework and saw panic in his friends' eyes. He dropped his tools, turned and ran for the exit. The automatic door proved quicker than he was though. As the alarms began to sound, its hydraulic rams closed it at an astonishing speed and held it shut with a force he couldn't hope to push against.

Nkong banged in frustration on the steel door knowing there was no other way out. He took a last deep breath of the rapidly fouling air and turned to look for the emergency breathing equipment. Both sets had been claimed. Their new owners already had the air tanks on their backs and were hurriedly donning the full face masks. There were only two sets of breathing equipment because there was only ever supposed to be two people in the room. The difficult task of manhandling the gas tanks into position required at least half a dozen though. And like the rest, he'd willingly taken the risk because to do otherwise would have cost him his job.

Nkong realised now that going for the door had been a stupid mistake. Still holding his breath, he rushed one of the men and set about tearing a mask off. Four of his former companions had come to the same decision at the same time and a hard elbow in the face momentarily stunned him before he was pulled off balance and flung to one side.

He dropped to his knees, trying to control the rising panic. His heart was pumping, his lungs were beginning to tear his throat open, but he commanded himself not to breathe. He must maintain control. There must be something else he could do.

He watched as the first man doubled over and vomited onto the floor, causing an immediate rise in savagery from those still fighting for the masks. Exhausted from the battle, they also quickly fell victim to the poisoned atmosphere and were violently battered to the

floor. The transformation from human to wild animal to violent death had taken mere seconds.

There was only him left now. Him and the two men with breathing equipment.

As darkness began creeping into his vision, Nkong put his hands together and pleaded. He begged with his whole being to be allowed a breath of clean air. Sweat was pouring down his face and mixing with the toxic gas and tears he didn't know he was crying to burn at his imploring eyes. Although he could hardly see, he knew the two men were backing away from him, taking all hope with them.

Oblivion was rapidly closing in now, and Nkong faced up to the reality that he was about to die. There were no other options left for the few seconds he still had of conscious thought.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair on him or his wife and children.

As oxygen starvation finally enveloped him, Nkong collapsed to the floor. His unconscious mind now took over, releasing the stale air and drawing in a lungful of pure poison. An instinctive feeling of relief was followed by the sudden conscious dread of what he had just done.

The North Sea, Europe

The metallic snarl of the twin Panther outboards quickly grew to a howling chorus as Finn pushed the throttles wide open. Their propellers tore deeply into the frigid water and the fast rescue craft responded by lifting its nose and surging forward.

Finn pulled away from the sixty thousand tonne floating factory and set about shortening the distance through horizontal sleet and a turbulent sea to his destination. The coxswain shouted in his ear to take it easy. Finn smiled. He was in no mood to take anything easy. After six weeks on that damned factory, the pipeline construction barge *Independence*, he was as stir crazy as the Panthers he'd just unleashed.

Fifteen hundred dollars a day might have kept his outer display of emotion in check, but internally he'd boiled over into a caged madness long ago. Now he was going to release his pent up craving for escape and freedom with a high-speed rush of pure adrenaline and enjoyment. It was a total release he needed to get back to the right side of sanity.

Finn knew he should have used the videoconference system for this meeting with his opposite number on the nearby *Norgeslav*, or, failing that, taken a helicopter on the short hop from one barge to another. A boat transfer hundreds of miles out in the open sea wasn't an authorised method of travel. He'd do the paperwork to justify his decision later, coming up with something that didn't mention how much he hated helicopters and that all he wanted was a little excitement and liberation.

Finn had the speedboat positively flying now, spending nearly as much time out of the cold grey water as on it. The coxswain was bitterly regretting giving in to the client's request to drive and swore loudly as a cloud of half-frozen spray hit him full in the face. He crouched down beneath the small Perspex screen, pulled up the hood on his survival suit and held on for dear life.

Finn figured that after this little show of exuberance he wasn't going to be allowed to drive the boat on the return trip. He therefore determined to make the most of the outward journey, watching the crests of the irregular and broken sea and judging his route to maximise the fun and the amount of full throttle he could get out of the Panthers. 'Low flying' was how he described it. A comfortably controlled point of complete synergy between man and machine that lived a hair's breadth below the level where it would all go ragged and he'd lose control.

Finn guided the fast rescue craft around the bigger waves, but deliberately ran over the crests of the longer swells, flying into the air and being rewarded with a brief but magnificent view of a thousand white and stormy peaks between him and the massive drilling towers of the brilliantly lit *Norgeslav*. It was an enchanting and spellbound moment of complete enjoyment that held absolutely no fear of death or disaster. He felt good to be alive again.

Later that day, and back on the *Independence*, Finn was deep into a post-euphoric depression. Finlay Nichols, now feeling much closer to middle age than he would like, was slumped in front of his computer. He had been at sea for thirty-nine days on the *Independence*, high up in the Northern sector of Britain's oil rich but stormy North Sea.

The *Independence* was a strange place to live. On the surface it looked like one of the world's few truly multicultural communities. Whatever was going on in the real world, its crew members would fit in with whoever was there and do their job to the required standard or they would be on the next helicopter back to the beach. No arguments, no second chances and absolutely no room for politics, racism or religious zeal. Underneath this enforced harmony though, the construction barge ran a caste system rigid enough to make India look like a model meritocracy. The labour, those two hundred plus people who actually operated the heavy equipment, drove the cranes or welded the undersea pipelines were mainly from

Eastern Europe and the Indian sub-continent. Cleaning and catering personnel were solely from one remote Philippine island for some reason Finn had never figured out. The chefs were Italian and the medical staff Ukrainian. Supervision and offshore management was by a mixture of Americans, Norwegians and Brits. And then, supposedly at the top of the heap, was Finn and his six-man client team. Four quality assurance engineers, one safety inspector and himself, the senior client. The client team were all British, living in West London or Surrey, and close to where independent oil company Eider Petroleum had its head office.

‘Glad you made it back in time for dinner, boss,’ Howard, the safety inspector, remarked as he came up behind the slumped form in front of him. He poked Finn in the shoulder to make a point before continuing, ‘Actually, quite glad you made it back at all. You should have heard the language on the bridge as we watched you disappearing off to the *Norgeslav*. Twelve sets of binoculars were scanning the sea for the odd glimpse of a small boat flying between heaven and a very wet hell. You know the captain was absolutely convinced you were going to turn it over and he’d have to launch the other FRC to go fish your sorry arses out of the sea.’

Finn didn’t even bother to lookup. ‘Oh great. Dinner. I should have stayed on the *Norgeslav* for dinner.’

‘Not tonight,’ replied Howard. ‘Chef’s cooked us up a bit of a treat this evening.’

Finn wearily raised his head and looked into the unshaven face of Howard. ‘Don’t tell me, steak and bloody chips, satay and rice or garlic pasta. I hate satay. Hold another satay stick under my nose and I’ll guarantee I’ll throw up here and now.’

‘Hey hold on!’ replied Howard, standing back with his hands up in mock defence. ‘Tonight is special. We’ve got roast lamb, Yorkshire puddings and roast potatoes.’

Howard was smiling from ear to ear and paused to let the thought of a real roast dinner reach Finn’s taste buds before he

added, 'With cauliflower cheese, gravy and best of all, mint sauce! Didn't you read today's menu on the intranet?'

He had Finn's undivided attention now, as any change in the monotonous menu was worth serious consideration. 'You're kidding me right?'

'No, honest.' Howard's smile widened even further. 'One of the chefs is doing it just for us. Well just for me actually, but I don't mind sharing seeing as it's practically a whole sheep he's roasting. He won the last safety incentive prize and is chuffed to bits with the iPod I gave him. Even likes the Eider Petroleum logo on it. Says it gives it a customised feel.'

'He won!' Finn felt an irrational surge of annoyance in him. 'It was his idea to breathalyse all incoming personnel of the helicopters. Well I hope they set the allowable limit pretty damn high or we're going to have a real manpower shortage. Why the hell did he have to make such a stupid suggestion?'

Looking at Howard's scruffy face made Finn rub his own week-old stubble. He resigned himself to having a shave that evening and perhaps suggesting the rest of the guys did the same. After all, the client team needed to keep up a smart appearance, or at least what passed for smart in this alien world. 'I was half-cut by the time I got onboard myself. Large G&T in the Heathrow lounge, another on the morning flight up to Aberdeen. Would have had a third at the bar before going to the heliport if you hadn't shown your ugly face.'

'Yeah, I know,' said Howard. 'The last chance bar in the sky before a couple of months' purgatory. It's only a safety suggestion, doesn't mean it'll be followed through. Anyway rules don't apply to the client team, we do what we want.'

'Just wait and see,' Finn replied. 'Once the management back on the beach hear about this we'll be the guys at the front of the queue setting the example. We'll have to turn up on god knows how many thousand tonnes of rusting steel, hundreds of miles from

sodding anything remotely connected to the real world, being completely stone cold sober. God what a shitty thought.'

'Maybe I'll modify the idea to compulsory urine tests for drugs,' Howard suggested as he heaved on the door to break the air lock between it and the stairway down to the mess. 'Or how about including porn in the kit bag searches?'

Finn was on his feet, following Howard down to the mess. 'Be serious, Howie. There's no women out here to offend. Take the porn away and we'd have a bloody riot.' He paused before adding in a slightly more inquisitive tone, 'You find out yet where the smutty tapes are kept?'

Howard faked surprise at Finn's ignorance. 'First day, mate. You know there's one film with a girl that looks awfully like Liz. Makes me feel like I'm having a torrid affair with your wife.'

Finn grinned and punched him on the shoulder as the reminder of his life back home, the whole reason he was out here, brought him back to his old self. 'She loves me pal. Won't ever leave me. And certainly not for someone as short and ugly as you.'

For Finn the older, day number forty started the same way as every other, with a hurried shower followed by a dash down to the mess before breakfast closed at six thirty. Trying to avoid the ever-present smell of satay, he had a waffle and a couple of coffees before setting out on his daily commute back up ten flights of stairs to the client office.

By half past ten the morning's work was completed and Finn was back at his desk wondering whether he had enough energy to tackle the gym before lunch. The office espresso machine was gurgling away, so he figured on a shot of caffeine and a chat with the lads before taking on the running machine.

The aroma of fresh coffee tempted the still unkempt Howard through the door just as the phone rang. He picked it up.

‘Independence client office, Howard Darlington speaking. Oh, hi, Mark. Yeah, just another day. No he’s here. I’ll pass the phone over.’

He handed the phone to Finn. ‘The big boss wants you.’

‘Bit of a strange one for you Finn,’ said Mark. ‘You’d better go pack your bags as I’ve got a helicopter on its way out to pick you up.’

‘Jees, Mark, have I done something wrong?’ Finn felt a cold and illogical fear that he was about to be canned.

‘Don’t think so, pal. We’ve had a call from Wade, the insurance brokers. They’ve urgently requested your services for a month or so on something else. They won’t tell us what, but I pulled your CV up and it shows you did some work for them back in ninety-nine.’

Finn cast his mind back. ‘Yes, a couple of things in the Far East. To do with contingency spares for the Thai offshore gas network.’

‘That’s what your CV says,’ replied Mark. ‘Also says you ran a twelve-week project to replace the condensate FSU’. The FSU – floating storage unit – in question was a modified super-tanker that held the highly volatile liquid condensates produced from the gas fields.

‘Twelve weeks is pretty fast, what was wrong with the original one?’

‘It was leaking, boss. Not to put too fine a point on it, it was pissing condensate into the Gulf from the bottom of its hull. You could see the slick from miles away. One decent typhoon would have put it at the bottom of the sea and shut down the entire gas network. Thailand would have been blacked out from fuel starvation at its electricity generators.’

Mark laughed. ‘Well son, I guess your cut and shut FSU replacement must be leaking as well. Get yourself on the heilo and down to Wade’s offices. They’ve got their company jet heading up to Sumburgh airport to pick you up.’

‘OK. You want me to leave Howard in charge here? We’ve got another ten to fourteen days to run before the pipelines are all down.’

‘Yes, let him have it until I can get myself out there. I’m not too old to be an offshore tiger every once in a while. You’d better go and pack. The heilo lifted from Sumburgh ten minutes ago.’

‘What’s up?’ It was Howard, Mr inquisitive as always, questioning the look on Finn’s face. ‘They suss that little con trick boat ride of yours yesterday? Or has Liz run off with the milkman again?’

‘Uh...?’ Finn was in a world of his own, back all those years to Thailand. That FSU should be all right. Granted the conversion from tanker was fast enough to have won a gold medal at the Olympics, but he’d done it properly and made sure the whole lot was pretty much a Rolls Royce job when it went out.

Howard was looking at him, waiting for an answer.

‘Sorry mate? Boat ride? No, nothing wrong with that, but you’ve got to sort the paperwork out for me. I’m off to see the insurance boys down in the City. You’re in charge until the gun slinger gets here.’

Howard’s normal relaxed attitude turned to one of visible shock. ‘Mark is coming out? Holy crap. Who’s he going to fire? Is he on his way now?’ Mark had a reputation for not messing about when it came to people he thought weren’t up to standard.

‘No, give him a couple of days,’ Finn replied, with an evil smile of pleasure beginning to make its way across his face at Howard’s obvious discomfort. ‘Guess you’d better find a breathalyser and make sure he blows into it when he arrives.’

Forty minutes later and Finn was in the *Independence’s* heliport waiting for the incoming flight. His kitbag sat in front of him, with a well-travelled, hard-cased backpack on top of it. The backpack contained his most important possessions, including his

beloved Apple PowerBook. Even though it was often a hindrance in the Microsoft dominated world of business, Finn loved the PowerBook for its sheer ability and the stability of its operating system. A high capacity USB memory stick solved the file transfer problem with Windows-based networks and its hundred gigabyte internal drive allowed Finn to store literally hours of digital film.

Finn freely admitted to being a bit of a nerd when it came to technology. He'd often remark that the Apollo 11 computer, which landed the first men on the moon in the year he'd been born, had less processing capacity than his watch. This had been true when he wore an electronic watch, but these days he used the mechanical Montblanc that Liz thought more fitting for an oil company executive. Now each year for his birthday, Finn would suggest she buy him a digital Casio so he could set the time on the completely inaccurate Montblanc. It was one of the ongoing jokes between them and highlighted their fundamental difference. Liz was a lover of the visual, of art, design, fashion and culture. Finn, however, was a professional engineer who didn't really give a damn what things looked like as long as they functioned correctly.

Delicate technology required expensive protection if it was to survive in the rough world of the offshore oil industry. Hence the carbon-fibre backpack. It provided the maximum available level of protection for his gear and had proved its worth on many occasions. So what if it cost as much as a Ch  nel handbag? It carried more, protected it far better and, with its unassuming black outer shell, was less likely to get nicked.

The helio officer brought Finn back from his daydreaming by advising the incoming flight was two minutes away.

About time thought Finn. He was already uncomfortably hot in the survival suit and couldn't open it to let the sweaty air out because the inflatable life vest and underwater re-breather set were obstructing the diagonal chest zip.

A few seconds later he heard the distinctive beating of approaching helicopter blades, stood up to stretch as much as he could in the all-encasing neoprene suit, put on the padded ear defenders and picked up his heavy bags.

Out of the heliport lounge a single flight of stairs led up to the helideck that the Sikorsky S76 was settling onto. Finn ducked low as he passed under the fast running rotors and headed for the cabin door. The co-pilot slid back his small side window, motioned Finn toward the luggage compartment for his bags and then passed him a wrapped tube of newspapers and an empty flask.

‘Black with sugar,’ he shouted above the noise.

Back with a full flask of stewed coffee from the heli-lounge percolator, Finn climbed in and strapped into the full restraint harness of the nearest passenger seat. On top of everything else, the harness now completely restricted all freedom of movement. And with the muted whine of the turbine engines reverberating in his ears, it further removed him from any semblance of comfort.

Still holding the flask, he leaned forward as much as he could, tapped the pilot on the shoulder and twirled his finger in the air in the universally understood signal for ‘Get this bird in the air and let’s go.’

Finn muttered his helicopter prayer as the whine of the turbines quickly rose to a barely muffled scream. The helicopter gently lifted into a hover just above the helideck, the pilot holding it there for a few seconds whilst he checked all instruments were in the green. Finn glanced across at the bridge of the *Independence* and saw Howard smiling. But before he had the chance to wave back the S76 suddenly climbed like an express elevator, the undercarriage retracting with a clunk he could feel but not hear. It then dipped its nose straight down at the sea and shot off in a diving transition into forward flight. The *Independence* and his life for the last six weeks were gone in an instant.

Finn stared out of the window at the weak sun glinting off the sea, the only break to the monotonous view being an occasional fishing boat shooting beneath them as the two thousand horsepower helicopter powered its way back to civilisation.

Always alert to what was happening on the flying coffin, he glanced back into the cabin as the co-pilot flipped a switch on an overhead panel, twirled a little dial, and then leaned around and pointed at the hanging headset near Finn. He made the sign of a phone call with his thumb and little finger.

‘Finlay Nichols speaking.’ Finn shouted into the microphone after he’d put the headset on.

‘Hello, Finn,’ replied a broken, but distinctly Germanic voice. ‘This is Hans Dietrickt of Wade, the insurance brokers. I’ll keep this short as we’re on an open line. Thank you for agreeing to come and see us. We’d like you to update the work you did for us a while back. Can you give me an email address I can send some files to for you to review on the flight down?’

Finn spelled out his personal email address and asked, ‘Why the urgency?’

‘No reason,’ replied Hans. ‘Well, to be honest it’s Friday and we’d like to talk to you and get you on your way before everyone leaves for the weekend. You should be in the office by three this afternoon. I’ll meet you in reception.’

Get on my way before the weekend? thought Finn. Not likely! The six weeks he’d spent on the *Independence* had been a long stint. Too long really with young children back at home. The only place Finn was going this evening was home to Wimbledon. Thailand and whatever Wade’s problem was would damn well wait.

Sumburgh Airport, Shetland Islands

Finn accepted the offer of a long deserved G&T from the sole air hostess on the executive jet. He relaxed back into the deep leather seat and stretched out, eternally glad to be free once more of the neoprene body bag.

Once airborne he dug out his laptop, logged onto his email via the plane's satellite phone and downloaded the files Hans had sent, plus the dozen or so other emails that had backlogged on this address since he'd last checked.

Hans's email contained the original reports and recommendations Finn had compiled back in 1999 as well as the last few years' inspection reports on Thailand's offshore gas network. He scanned the latter whilst eating the baked cod that Joanna, the air hostess, had prepared, along with a light side salad and a glass of chilled Chablis. The Chablis was nice, really nice.

He'd meet the Wade people at three and no doubt they'd ask him to get an evening flight to Bangkok. Finn would, of course, refuse with an excuse that meant he couldn't leave until the weekend was over. There was nothing, after all, that he could see in any of the reports to indicate any problems or urgency.

After his lunch, Finn phoned home and caught Liz clearing up after feeding Christopher, their two year-old mischief seeking son.

'Hi gorgeous, you'll never guess where I am.'

'Go on surprise me. Tell me you've really spent the last month and a half lying on the beach in Barbados and now you're running off with a teenage starlet you've met.'

Finn smiled. 'No, even better than that. I'm sitting in a private jet. A really big private jet I might add, on my way to London for a three o'clock meeting in the City. Should be home in time to help with the children's baths and beds.'

He heard a little yelp of joy at the other end of the phone.

‘Oh, excellent! We’ll have to make a surprise for when you get in. The kids will be so excited. Why are you coming back early? You said another two weeks last night on the phone.’

‘Remember that job I did in the Gulf of Thailand a few years ago? Well the insurance broker, Wade, have called me back to work on it again. I’ve got a meeting with them this afternoon.’

Liz was confused, the happiness of Finn’s early return temporarily put on hold until she sorted out just what her husband was up to now. ‘What do you mean working for Wade again? You haven’t quit Eider have you? You can’t just dump them. That’s a long-term job that’s going to pay off some of the horrendous mortgage on our new house. You said they were looking at other oilfields after this one and that you might be there for years, even go staff with them. Come on Finn, you can’t ditch that for an adventure back in Thailand.’

‘No I haven’t dumped Eider, that’s the good bit. Wade are the insurance brokers for the Eider field development I’m working on. They’ve asked if they could just borrow me for a bit and I guess Eider said yes to keep on friendly terms with their brokers. I’ll do this for a couple of months and then go back as the golden boy.’

‘Wow. OK then, I’m impressed. How big a plane is it?’

‘Oh, about the size of a Boeing. And I’m the only passenger.’

‘Finn?’ From the tone of her voice, Liz obviously wasn’t interested in the plane at all. ‘You know today is Victoria’s last day of term? Well, if you go back to Thailand then do you think the children and I can come as well? God knows I need a break from sorting this house out and the same dull routine every day.’

He hadn’t known it was the end of school term, hadn’t even known it was a Friday until the phone call in the helicopter, but Liz’s idea certainly sounded good. ‘I’ll see what I can do,’ he promised.

‘You’d better make sure you make a good impression at your meeting then. Have you got smart clothes on?’

Smart clothes? Oh shit, thought Finn. I look like a homeless bum.

‘Liz, I’d better go. I need to shave.’

Tower Hill, Central London

The real life Hans Dietrickt was the exact image Finn had mentally formed. A nearly anglicized German of around thirty. He was tall, blond and wore a dark tailored suit. It wasn't the blond hair that gave him away as a German. It wasn't even the silly rectangular wire framed glasses or the way his suit jacket was cut one button too high. It was the shoes. Why could no one except the English ever get shoes right? Hans's shoes weren't City regulation brogues or oxfords. They were some sort of ankle boots with eye catching brass straps on the side. Definitely naff. Definitely German.

Hans held his hand out to welcome Finn.

'Finn. Good of you to come at such short notice.'

'Good to meet you too, Hans. I hear you didn't give me much choice about coming to this meeting.'

Finn was wearing his trademark khaki chinos, along with Timberland loafers and an open-necked pink Ralf Lauren shirt with the sleeves turned partway up his forearms. Pink was a good choice because it didn't show any residual blood that might have got onto it from the half dozen nicks he'd inflicted with the razor in the small toilet on the plane.

'No, I'm afraid we didn't. Had to ask Eider very politely though, as they are one of our best customers. I see you travel light.' Hans was referring to the backpack, the only bag Finn had with him.

'No, not really. I've got a twenty-five kilo kitbag in the boot of the car you sent for me. The driver said it was OK to leave it there as he'll take me home later.'

'Home? Yes, of course. Come, let's meet the others.'

Hans showed the way to the lifts where they travelled up in silence to the top floor and a very impressive meeting room. The room was a seventeenth century wood-panelled banqueting hall that had been transported lock, stock and barrel from a stately home to

the ultra modern steel and glass offices. Three heavy looking lead crystal chandeliers, along with an assortment of superbly polished mahogany furniture and large oil paintings had also made the trip. Seven people, all but one dark suited men of middle age, were sitting at one end of a long table that could easily take thirty.

As Finn put his bag down, the sole lady turned her back to pour a coffee from a side table, while the rest shook hands and introduced themselves. He didn't catch many of the names, but was impressed at the number of times he heard Manager or Director.

The coffee, white with a hint of sugar, just as he liked it, was handed to him by a face with a broad lipstick smile and sparkling white teeth. The lady held out her hand and introduced herself.

'Gillian Williams, we met a few years ago when I was in Ralf's department. I handle the special risk desk now, well the Far East part of it at least.'

Gillian, of course. She was quite the bombshell. Finn remembered she had some sort of qualification in Chinese art or something and had been completely clueless about oilfield engineering. Gillian was a classic example of the confident and assertive City woman that Finn liked so much. He didn't much care for their attitude; what Finn liked was the way their assertiveness made them walk too fast for their boobs and their confidence made them wear tight tops and slender skirts. Summer in the City was a paradise of expensively dressed women hurrying around out of sync with the natural bounce of their cleavage. Finn also remembered he'd caught a glimpse of Gillian's suspender clad thighs all those years ago and wondered if she was wearing any now.

'Yes, Gillian, of course I remember you. I doubt if anyone you've met has ever forgotten you.'

It was a little flattery and unspoken suggestion in his eyes that bought the hint of a blush to her cheeks and made her self-consciously look away.

Wade was a very big and extremely successful insurance brokerage. They handled much of the energy business in Europe and Asia, placing risk with the myriad of syndicates operating out of the Lloyds of London building clearly visible from the boardroom window, as well as insurance markets in other European capitals and across the world. Finn had been surprised to hear at least three of the men refer to themselves as a Director of the company. Directors of Wade would be the sort of people who had country estates in the home-counties as well as Chelsea or Kensington town houses. He wondered just how important this meeting was to them.

‘Mr Nichols,’ said one of the dark suits, ‘First of all let me thank you for coming so quickly. No doubt you are curious as to why we’ve pulled you in to see us. Well let me explain as succinctly as possible. We would like you to update the report you compiled for us a while ago concerning Thailand’s offshore gas network. And whilst doing so, we’d like you to look into a problem. A problem we think might be quite serious.’

‘I’m all ears, mister, um—?’

‘Martin, David Martin. If I could ask you to sign this confidentiality and non-disclosure agreement—’ he pushed a single sheet of A4 paper across to Finn, ‘Then I will be able to explain.’

Finn briefly scanned the sheet. It was a standard confidentiality agreement, already sporting the signature of a certain David Martin, Managing Director, Wade Insurances. He signed the sheet and passed it back.

‘Could I have a copy for my files please.’

‘Yes, of course. Hans, will you see to that please.’

Hans departed the room, paper in hand. The gofer after all, Finn noted.

‘The problem, we think, is with the main undersea pipeline from the Luann Alpha platform to the shore, although it could be originating from anywhere in the offshore network.’

Luann Alpha, Finn recalled, was the hub platform for Thailand’s offshore natural gas fields. Four pipelines merged on it,

bringing natural gas from the dozen or so surrounding fields. Luann Alpha processed the gas to sales specification and used its powerful compressors to get it up to something like two hundred times atmospheric pressure before sending it down a single long pipeline to the shore. The high pressure was necessary in order to get enough gas through the pipeline to satisfy Thailand's incessant energy demand.

David Martin continued, 'Over the past four years a number of new gas fields have been connected into the system. All of them have been those new subsea slave systems, with the nearest platforms acting as the control masters.'

Slave mode meant the gas wells were placed directly onto the seabed and controlled and monitored from nearby platforms. It was pretty standard practice these days and typical of the developments Finn usually worked on.

'So what's up with Luann Alpha?' Finn enquired.

Hans Dietrickt had returned from the photocopier and butted into the conversation.

'That is what we would like you to find out, Finn.'

Finn was really beginning to dislike the arrogant German.

'Well, Hans, perhaps you could start by giving me a clue. For instance, why do you think there may be a problem, what do you think it is, and why do you think it's on Luann Alpha's pipeline to shore? I'm not Sherlock Holmes.'

The obviously less dramatic David Martin gave Hans an annoyed look before taking over again.

'We've got notification of an intended insurance claim from one of the power stations fed from the offshore gas system. They had a catastrophic failure of an electricity generating turbine. It appears to have quite literally shaken itself to pieces whilst revolving at over twenty thousand rpm. The engineers at the company that make the turbines say this sort of failure cannot happen. Or rather that it can only happen if dozens of turbine blades all break off at the same time.'

‘I see,’ said Finn, not really seeing at all.

‘Their initial prognosis is that the blades must have been—’ David looked down at his notepad for the right word, ‘Inbrittled, no sorry embrittled. It means...’

It suddenly clicked in Finn’s mind what this was and what might have caused it. He cut in quickly, keen to make a good impression with his knowledge.

‘It means, Mr Martin, that the normally ductile metal of the turbine blades has become very brittle. What was once nice flexible steel has essentially turned into glass. Whilst still notionally strong, the blades have lost all their ductility and impact resistance, so will shatter if subjected to a sudden shock load. One blade breaks off for whatever reason and takes out lots more as it passes through the engine. Normally you’d expect a broken blade to pass through and out the end of a turbine without destroying it.’

‘Yes, very good Mr Nichols. In a couple of sentences you have succinctly summarised the problem. Miss Williams’ assessment of you would appear to have been correct.’

They both glanced across at Gillian, who made eye contact with Finn and smiled shyly. Finn thought he saw a slight hint of another blush around her neck. Obviously Gillian hadn’t forgotten him either.

‘Tell me,’ asked David. ‘What would you guess the cause of the problem is?’

Finn looked back at David. He knew very well what the cause was. The cause was the subject of a whole realm of offshore engineering. And it always led to a play off of metallurgy against processing; of the exotic, high cost chrome alloys able to resist embrittlement against the cost of the process equipment otherwise needed to remove the chemical culprit.

‘The problem is the fuel gas. The gas coming from one of the fields tied into the offshore network must have hydrogen sulphide in it. Someone has connected a sour field into a sweet system.’

Finn continued, 'Thailand's offshore gas has traditionally been classified as sweet, in that it has no hydrogen sulphide present. As such, all the pipelines and compressors are made from normal steel as there is no need for the expense of high chrome alloys. If you've now got a sour field sending hydrogen sulphide into the offshore system then a few broken turbine blades are the least of your worries. The whole pipeline system might be CF.'

'CF?' enquired David Martin.

'Completely err...' replied Finn, 'Sorry. Completely useless. Embrittled pipelines are very dangerous, especially when run at the pressure Luann Alpha generates. If it's fully embrittled, then the whole line could burst at the slightest provocation. And there is no way of reversing embrittlement once it has happened. You'll have to replace the entire system. Plus all the piping on the platforms and wellheads that have been affected. Not to mention the compressors and process gear on Luann Alpha.'

One of the suits that had been quiet up to that point looked around at his colleagues in a very uncomfortable manner before speaking up.

'Mr Nichols. I'm Nathaniel Piers. I am the Director of Far East energy business for Wade. We find ourselves in the rather uncomfortable position of holding almost all of an unlimited liability insurance policy for Thailand's offshore gas network. We have been...' He looked around at his colleagues again before taking a deep breath and continuing. 'We've been a little lax in hedging down the risk from the policy renewals to the syndicates at Lloyds. If what you say is true, and since it is essentially what our consultant metallurgist suggested yesterday, then we have a conflict of interest if we now try to sell the policies on. We will have to foot the bill for a replacement system ourselves, probably with little hope of recovering much of our money from whichever company is to blame.'

Nathaniel waited for Finn to take this in before explaining further. 'Since its privatisation, the Thai offshore system has been

owned by several of the smaller independent oil and gas companies. None of them have the financial strength to foot the bill. We'd make the offender pay until bankrupt of course, but that's still going to leave us with a very hefty bill.'

Finn was quiet for a few moments as he considered the problem.

'Am I right in assuming your insurance also covers sequential liabilities as well as re-build costs?'

'You are, Mr Nichols; our exposure at the moment is simply horrendous. The sequential liabilities from stopping Thailand's natural gas supply are enormous. Offshore gas is used to generate eighty per cent of the electricity in the country. Every one of the people around this table, plus many dozens of others within Wade, will be left completely penniless. Unlimited liability really does mean unlimited, down to the shirts from our backs.'

The immaculately dressed Nathaniel certainly looked like he was worried at this thought.

He continued, 'If I might be so bold as to say, it is not just Wade that would collapse. The entire credibility of the London insurance market could disappear over night. No credibility, no insurance market. No insurance market and the City might just as well pack up and go home.'

A little dramatic perhaps, but Finn got the point. Wade had been making a little extra money by holding on to an insurance policy they couldn't possibly pay out on. Now they stood to lose everything they had. No wonder they were concerned.

Looking back toward David Martin, Finn asked, 'Tell me, Mr Martin, why am I here? If it is a sour gas reservoir then the people you should have investigate would be chemists and I guess your metallurgical consultant. I'm a construction engineer, not a specialist in sweet and sour gasses.'

David Martin leaned back in his chair, looked up to the ceiling and glanced around the room before replying.

'Please. Call me David and I'll call you Finlay, if I may.'

‘Finn will be quite fine. Only my mother calls me Finlay, and that’s only when I’ve done something she doesn’t approve of.’

‘Finn it is then.’ David leaned forward. ‘Finn, the reason we are talking to you is very simple. We would rather not alert any of the companies involved in this to our suspicion. Or indeed to alarm the whole insurance market with the possibility that Luann Alpha and the offshore network it supports may have to shut down whilst a new export pipeline is built. On the pretence of updating your old contingency reports you will have free access to every one of Thailand’s fifteen offshore platforms without raising any suspicions.’

‘I guess the Thai government would be none too pleased to hear the country might have to live without electricity for the two or three years it would take to replace the pipeline network,’ Finn voiced, still thinking about the enormity of the problem.

Nathaniel Piers angrily cut in. ‘We don’t give a damn about the Thai government. This is the future of Wade and each of us here that we need to protect.’

Finn felt rebuffed and focussed again on the problems of the people around the table rather than what would happen to a country of sixty million when the lights suddenly went out.

‘So what’s the plan? If I accept your proposal, how do I find out which platform or subsea well is the bad guy and how bad the problem really is?’

‘Finn.’ It was David Martin speaking again. ‘We only found out about this in the last couple of days. We don’t have a plan at the moment. We are,’ he paused. ‘We’re working on it. Although we’re really not sure at the moment how we can extract ourselves from the financial liabilities we possess. We figure Luann Alpha is a good starting point as the entire network flows gas to it. You could find which of the incoming pipelines has sour gas, just how sour it is, and then trace that branch back to the culprit. At the same time we will be trying to figure out what to do when we find out who is at fault.’

‘Now, as for whether or not you wish to take the job, then let me spell out the terms we are offering you. You will need to find a way of detecting which pipeline is flowing sour gas without raising any suspicions. Then you will need to use whatever you come up with to find which particular field, or fields, is or are the culprit. Needless to say, no one should be able to deduce what you are doing. Once you have found the culprit you will assess how bad the problem is and let us know. Revising your report will just be a cover for you.’

‘As for remuneration,’ David continued. ‘We will pay you a hundred thousand pounds for your time and effort. It seems to us a very reasonable sum of money for a month or two’s work.’

Finn was so astonished at this offer that his eyes widened and his mouth involuntarily opened. A hundred grand was a hell of a lot of money.

He quickly composed himself, biting his lower lip as he thought about the offer and the people he was dealing with. In Finn’s experience of negotiation he had developed a technique all of his own. He would imagine what the other person looked and acted like when they were seven. It was a reversal of the old saying, show me the boy and I’ll show you the man. It was easy to do and it always gave him a good feel for the character of the person he was dealing with and how he should play the game with them. Better still was that in circumstances like this it made him feel comfortable and less intimidated.

Finn imagined that David as a seven year-old was a slightly nervous kid. Smart and quick, but also keen to please and hence quite probably prone to snap decisions. The five-second character assessment over, Finn decided his best approach would be to go for a quick closure.

‘David, I have to admit I am very impressed with your offer. I also have to admit that I am very unimpressed that you gentlemen could manage to put yourselves in a position where you might lose

everything. How about we settle for two hundred thousand. Paid upfront.'

David bit down on his jaw, the muscles in his cheeks bulging and his lips pressing together. He wasn't smarting from Finn's comment, but was annoyed at the implication the man had suggested by asking for payment upfront.

'As you have just shown, Finn, we are all prone to being greedy when the opportunity presents itself. None the less, we accept your proposal. Gillian will fill the figures in on the contract and the money will be transferred first thing on Monday morning. I assume you have details of the account for it to go to.'

Finn thought of Liz and the weekend before adding, 'Give me a few days to do some research and figure out how to approach this and then I'll be on my way to Thailand. Just one other thing though. I'd like my expenses to cover bringing my family to Thailand as well. I've just spent over a month offshore and it would be unfair on them to leave again at such short notice. I also need a desk here for a couple of days with access to all the records and documentation you hold on the Thai gas system and all the companies involved in its ownership.'

'Yes,' replied David Martin. 'That will all be acceptable, again liaise with Gillian and Hans, who will ensure it is done.'

Wimbledon, West London

Finn sat in the back of the car on the half hour drive from the city to his home in Wimbledon. His mind was a mix of thoughts. How would he secretly check for hydrogen sulphide in the gas? How was he going to prioritise the order in which he visited the platforms? How could Wade be so stupid as to not hedge down such a massive risk? Were they doing the same thing with other projects such as the one he had just come off? If Wade went down the tubes what would that mean to Finn? Would Eider be able to continue the field development without any insurance? Unlikely, he thought, Eider were too small to carry the risks on their own. It was far more likely that the whole offshore industry except for those companies big enough to self-insure would stall and not do anything until a new mechanism was in place.

The view of West London as the Jaguar drove down the King's Road was familiar and yet so intense. After the dull monotony of the *Independence* and seeing only scruffy men wearing dirty and oily fireproof overalls, the sight of a flower stall, the hustle and bustle of normal life, and so many colourfully dressed people was incredibly vivid.

Finn wandered away in his thoughts back to the *Independence*. Some of the Philippine catering personnel had been onboard for over nine months without a break. The construction barge stayed out at sea until it needed to go in for major repairs and maintenance. Food, fuel, pipe joints and everything else it needed, were delivered by the ever present supply boats and shuttle helicopters. The crew themselves never saw land, never had even a single night's run ashore during their tours.

His thoughts flicked back to the meeting he had just come from. I bet those guys at Wade are hiding some money away in case the company goes bankrupt. They'd all have offshore bank

accounts: Jersey, the Cayman Islands, the Bahamas, somewhere where it would be safe. If they didn't then they were really stupid.

A buzz of excitement ran through him as the car crossed over the Thames and headed up the hill towards Wimbledon Common. Just wait until Liz hears about this one!

The children came running out of the house as soon as the car pulled into the drive, followed by Liz with a big kiss and an equally big question.

'Tell me then. Are we going to Thailand?'

She had all the essential details extracted before he was even through the front door. Whilst he unpacked his kit bag, Liz disappeared into the study and went straight onto the Internet to look up hydrogen sulphide detectors. And as he was shoving his dirty clothes into the washing machine, ably assisted by Victoria and Christopher, she called out that there was one that could be bought over the counter at a number of trade stockists, the nearest of which was in Birmingham. She followed it with an order to leave her washing machine alone and to put his clothes in a pile on the kitchen floor.

Finn went into the study to look at the detector she'd found, not believing for a second that it could be so easy to solve his first problem.

It was though. The detector was battery powered, surprisingly small at about the size of an old mobile phone and would pick up concentrations as low as one part in ten million. It was perfect. He asked Liz to print the address of the stockist as he would drive over in the morning and buy one.

The next two hours of Finn's life was devoted to Lego, dolls, jigsaws and drawing colouring-in cartoons for the kids before they finally flaked out enough to sit quietly for ten minutes drinking their bedtime milk and then be tucked up in bed with a story and a kiss.

‘Hydrogen sulphide, or H₂S, is commonly referred to as sewer gas as in small quantities it smells distinctly of rotten eggs. However, if inhaled in anything other than extremely low concentrations, H₂S deadens the sense of smell and is highly toxic...! Just what the hell have you gotten yourself into Finn?’

Finn leaned against the door frame of the study with a glass of wine in his hand as he listened to Liz tell him what he already knew. He wished she hadn’t read that last bit on the Internet, as his rapidly forming plan was simply to crack open one of the very small double block and bleed valves always found on offshore pipework and put the H₂S detector in the little puff of gas that would escape. To do this secretly he would of course have to be alone, but for two hundred grand the minimal risk that he would get a lungful of high concentration H₂S was worth it. He was, in any case, planning on taking precautions. Well actually he was planning on holding his breath. Portable breathing equipment was not an option because it was far too large to be lugged around unnoticed.

Finn leant down and put his arms around his wife’s shoulders, drawing in the aroma of Chánel No. 5.

‘Gorgeous, I’m not about to sniff anything other than your perfume. Anyway, stop telling me what I already know and find us somewhere to stay. On the beach you said, and reasonably close to Bangkok would be good. Also, can you check the airline departure times from Heathrow. Let’s aim for an overnight flight, so the children can sleep most of the trip. I’m going to take a bath and then hit the sack. You coming up soon?’

‘Not long, just let me skivvy through that list of things you want done, my lord and master.’

The subtlety of the sarcasm in Liz’s voice completely went over Finn’s head. He had other things on his mind. ‘Wearing any nice underwear?’

‘Guess you’ll have lay off the wine so you can stay awake long enough to find out.’

The little wink and smile, combined with the fresh smell of perfume, was enough to let Finn know she probably was. It was good to be home.

Tower Hill, Central London

By mid-afternoon on Monday, Finn was sitting at a desk in Wade's office and had just about everything he needed. He'd downloaded pipework diagrams for all the platforms from Wade's files and located the double block and bleed valves on each system, which, as he'd expected, was an awful lot. The H2S detectors – he'd bought all three the trade supplier had in stock – were in his kitbag back at home, along with a pack of fresh batteries.

Right now, he was drinking coffee whilst aimlessly sifting through the other information Wade had on the companies operating in the Gulf of Thailand. He wasn't expecting to find anything useful, but it was worth a couple of hours' looking as he might come across some nugget of information. All in all, he couldn't believe how easily this was all coming together.

The production and reservoir data the insurance broker held, and which was of most interest to Finn, was very limited. This was not really all that surprising as the owners of each gas field guarded this type of information with great care due to its financial sensitivity. One interesting thing he did come across though, was the insurance costs for the majority of the drilling conducted over the last ten years. Semi-submersible drilling rigs were insured on a daily basis, as it was an expensive and high-risk business, and this meant the amount of insurance paid on each well was directly proportional to the time spent drilling it. The insurance revenues showed that the Sancto Soperi rig, which drilled the 2001 'Bravo' subsea tieback to Luann Alpha, had been on station for a long time. A total of a hundred and twenty days to drill and complete just four wells. That was an average of thirty days per well. Compared to the eighteen to twenty days for the wells drilled on the other developments offshore Thailand, it was unusual. Drilling time, not surprisingly, was a good indicator as to how deep the wells had gone. Luann Bravo's wells must therefore be quite a lot deeper than

anyone else's and as a result would be tapping into geological layers that had formed in a different epoch and hence under different climatic conditions. This little piece of information put Luann Bravo as Finn's prime suspect for a sour field and meant his first port of call would most definitely be Luann Alpha. Alpha platform was the master to the subsea Bravo slaves and the first point where Finn could get easy access to pipework carrying Bravo gas that wasn't a hundred metres below the sea's surface.

Bangkok, Thailand

That night's flight to Bangkok was blissfully uneventful. Travelling business class on British Airways they had seats that would lie completely flat and were way up towards the front of the plane, sufficiently far ahead of the big Boeing's engines that the constant roar heard by passengers further back was little more than a gentle hiss.

The air hostesses made a fuss over Victoria and Christopher, which the two children lapped up with glee. An hour into the flight Victoria had jumped at the chance to 'help out' in the galley. As with all two year-olds, Christopher wanted to tag along with his big sister, but had to settle for sitting on Liz's lap and watching cartoons on her entertainment console.

As they'd hoped, three hours into the twelve hour flight and the excitement had worn the children out. They'd been fed, changed into their pyjamas, cleaned their teeth and gone to the toilet. Now they were tucked up with cushions, blankets and their favourite teddy bears. They were asleep before Finn, who was sitting on the foot of Christopher's bed, had finished story time.

Liz watched a film whilst Finn spent the next hour reading through some of the company and financial information on Eagle United Energy that Gillian had supplied him. He hadn't yet told anyone at Wade that his suspicion was focussed on Eagle United, the owners of both Luann Alpha and Bravo, so he'd asked Gillian for as much financial information on all the different owners as she could find. Luckily this all came on a CD, otherwise, what with his offshore kitbag and holiday suitcases for the family, he would have exceeded even the generous business class luggage allowance.

Nine years ago Eagle United Energy had made its first venture away from its Texas base and bought Luann Alpha for \$165 million during the privatisation of Thailand's offshore gas network.

Luann Alpha was no longer producing any gas of its own, but it was making good money through the processing and onward shipment of gas from the myriad of other fields that made up the offshore network. It was a safe bet for a first move into foreign territories and the US banks had been keen to lend Eagle United the money to buy it.

Unfortunately for Eagle, Finn's 1999 report had highlighted the poor state of the condensate FSU they had inherited along with the platform. Eagle had been forced to fork out another \$42 million to build a replacement and to stock the onshore support base with additional emergency and contingency spares. Further adding to year 2000 expenses had been the wildcat drilling on a promising sub-salt geological formation that would eventually become the Luann Bravo gas field.

It would have been a risky play to drill that well and Finn could imagine the worries and concerns that went on in Eagle United's boardroom before the drill eventually hit pay dirt. But hit pay dirt it did and Eagle United quickly set about bringing the new field on stream.

The quickest and cheapest way to develop a new offshore field was always as a subsea slave. The wellheads sat on the bottom of the sea and were controlled by an umbilical and telemetry system from a nearby platform in the classic master and slave system. Eagle United owned the nearest platform anyway so it was an ideal way of quickly getting the gas to market. From finding the gas to bringing it on stream had taken a mere nine months, at the end of which Eagle's financial worries would have been over.

There must certainly have been some serious money worries during early 2000 because the company's credit rating had been downgraded to E status on the international grading system. Finn didn't know how low the ratings went, but E sounded to him like they probably couldn't even borrow the money to buy stationery, let alone the millions required to drill a risky wildcat exploration well in a foreign sea. The annual report for that year showed that Eagle

United's management, in a bold move, had put up its own money in a partial management buyout to finance the wildcat.

By late 2000 the wildcat must have shown a sizeable gas reservoir because the company's credit rating had jumped to B and the banks came in with the money required for a fast track development and to complete a total management buyout. The buyout meant Eagle was no longer a traded stock but instead had become the personal property of those executives who had risked their money and livelihoods.

It seemed pretty obvious to Finn that the wildcat well must have tested positive for hydrogen sulphide. And on seeing that the big accumulation of gas they'd just found was sour, the executives of Eagle had been staring financial ruin in the face. No doubt they had run the figures and guessed they would go bankrupt if they played by the rules, so they chose to bend them a little. After all, the sour gas from Luann Bravo would be mixed with sweet gas from over a dozen other offshore fields once it reached the Alpha platform, so the resulting mix must have only carried small concentrations of H₂S. Unfortunately though, eight years of trace amounts of hydrogen sulphide appear to have been enough to deteriorate at least one power station turbine to the point where it fell to bits.

Finn took a deep yawn and stretched out. He shut down his laptop, reclined his seat to level with Liz's so he could hold her hand, accepted the offered cushion and blanket from an air hostess and watched the rest of the film before drifting off into sleep.

The hotel Liz had booked was beautiful. They had a small suite on the third floor with a large balcony overlooking the beach and the brilliant blue-green sea of the Gulf of Thailand. The children took one look at the beach and were immediately tugging at the suitcases for their swimming costumes. After a few brief minutes offloading bags, digging out costumes and suntan lotion,

the family descended to the beach and the beachside shop where buckets, spades and small nets on bamboo sticks were bought.

Half an hour later the hot sunshine was getting to them and Finn was sent to find bottled water.

‘Good move to book an all-inclusive hotel,’ Finn remarked to Liz as he, Christopher and Victoria returned from the bar laden down with water, cold drinks and snacks. Christopher was intently giggling to himself as he blew on the straw into his orange juice, slopping half of it down his tummy in the process.

‘You can always trust me to find the best deal,’ she replied from behind her dark glasses, accepting the heavily iced gin & tonic with a smile. ‘When are you going to start paying for this little holiday?’

‘Quite frankly up until a few seconds ago I had no intention of ever moving from this spot, but since you’ve just bought it up then I guess the answer had better be tomorrow. I’ll go along to some of the offices of the platform owners and sketch out to them when I’ll be doing a round of the platforms. Gillian has already contacted them and told them to expect me to call to arrange visits. You fancy a little shopping in Bangkok tomorrow?’

Liz stretched out on her sunlounger and took another sip of her icily cold drink. ‘Not tomorrow. It’s too early for me to go charging around a big city in this heat without acclimatising for a couple of days.’

Victoria had been listening intently to the conversation and now voiced her thoughts.

‘Can I go with daddy? Please. I promise to be very good and not ask for any ice creams or anything. Please, mummy, please.’

‘Better ask your father that one, young lady. He’s going to lots of offices so you would spend most of the day waiting for him.’

‘I don’t mind. Daddy, can I come with you? Pleeeeeease!’

‘Yes, of course you can, babe.’ Finn never could say no to his children’s requests.

Early the next morning Victoria and Finn got into a taxi and went to his meetings together. Victoria had put her new dress on, the one that she had chosen with mummy at Debenhams in the Wimbledon shopping centre near her home, but now half a world away in cold and damp London. She'd eaten a proper breakfast and had packed her school backpack with colouring-in things, reading books, pens and her purse. Mummy had put some money in the purse and the address of the hotel they were staying at. Victoria knew though, that if she got separated she was to wait exactly where she was and not talk to anyone until her daddy came back to find her. Her daddy would always come back. That was an absolute in Victoria's life.

By midday they had been to three different offices and Victoria was quite frankly bored and fidgety.

'Where do you want to go for lunch, Petal?'

She instantly came alive at that question. 'Do they have McDonald's in this country and can I have chicken nuggets? And ice cream with a flake for pudding?'

'OK then. Let's see shall we? If we're lucky we might find a McDonald's in that big shopping centre over there.'

Finn held out his hand and Victoria grasped it tight as they crossed the road and headed for the shopping centre he had pointed out.

There was a McDonald's and luckily it was just the same as in London. She had an ice cream for pudding, and was surprised that Finn also had one, which was very unusual. Guess he must be as hot as me, she thought.

After lunch, Finn held her bag and his own black backpack across his chest and gave her a piggyback as they looked around the shops.

'I'll have to tell mummy about these shops,' she said, holding on tight and relishing the time they had together. 'She'll love all the

lovely clothes, and Christopher will like the toys. Have we earned enough money today to buy things?’

‘Yes, I think so,’ Finn replied. ‘Maybe you can bring mummy and Chris back to these shops when I’m offshore. Now, we’ve only got two more companies to visit and then I think we can call it a day and head back to the hotel. Are you doing all right back there?’

Victoria squeezed Finn even more tightly and snuggled the back of his neck.

‘Urghh, strangling me, honey.’

‘I love it here, Finn.’

She called her daddy Finn sometimes because she knew it made him smile, and even though she couldn’t see his face, she could sense the smile spreading across it.

‘How did it go?’ Liz asked when they finally got back to the hotel.

‘No problems, Victoria was as good as gold the whole day. I think her blue eyes and blond hair astonished everyone we met. The receptionists and secretaries doted on her everywhere we went.’ He ruffled Victoria’s hair. ‘I need to spend the next couple of days calling in on some more companies and then I’ll set about taking a tour of the platforms.’

‘Can I go tomorrow again, Daddy?’ Victoria asked. ‘But this time with mummy and Christopher so we can go to those shops we saw today?’

‘Yes. Why not,’ Liz said. ‘A morning’s shopping in Bangkok will be fun. Did you see anything nice, Vicky?’

Houston, Texas

James 'Mac' MacAlister, Chief Executive Officer of Eagle United Energy, was driving to his downtown Houston office. He was cruising Houston's equivalent of the M25, the beltway, at seventy in a new Aston Martin DB9 when the call came in from Thailand.

'Mac, it's Bill here, didn't wake you did I?'

'No Bill, I'm on my way to the office.'

'Good. Well I met the Wade Insurance guy earlier today at our Bangkok office. It's pretty much as we thought. He wants access to the onshore logistics base and to Luann Alpha to check on our contingency spares and the general state of the facilities and operation. 'Says Wade are moving a big chunk of the insurance risk from one Lloyds syndicate to another and the new one will only accept the risk once they have a full update on the state of the facilities and spares. I've checked and he's doing the same to all the operators out here.'

'OK Bill, make sure the platform and the logistics base in particular are cleared of anything to do with project Abzu.'

'Already in hand, and thanks to that leak on the Burma rig last week we don't have any of those particular goods this side of the border at the moment.'

Mac was satisfied. An insurance guy sniffing around would be a pain, but he trusted Bill to ensure nothing suspicious would be found. As far as getting any reduction on the insurance was concerned, then Mac couldn't care less. He wasn't intending on paying insurance premiums on the platform for that much longer.

'Bill, did you get any feeling from this Wade guy that he might have any ulterior motives to the sudden visit? We only had word from the brokers that they needed to re-look at things late on Friday and now they've already got someone out there sniffing around. It's far too quick for them. Way faster than they normally work.'

Mac heard a loud snort of laughter from the other end of the phone.

‘I certainly did, buddy! He told me exactly why he was out here so quick. And he even had the evidence with him, literally holding his hand! He had to excuse himself for bringing his young daughter to the office, but said the whole family had jumped at the chance to get out of the miserable London weather for a holiday in Thailand. His sudden appearance after being asked by Wade to redo his report on the offshore network was because his daughter is on school vacation at the moment. Said he was doing the fieldwork first and would write up the report later when he got back home and his girl had started the new school term. His daughter’s a pretty little thing. She had the girls in the office running rings around her.’

‘Well that’s good then,’ replied Mac, relieved at the innocent reason for the suddenness of the visit. Then, having fully absorbed what Bill had said, added in annoyance.

‘Bill. You said re-doing *his* report? Is this guy the same one that wrote up such a shitty report just after we bought Luann Alpha?’

‘Unfortunately it is, but he seems nice enough. Not out for anything other than completing his work and having a free holiday.’

Mac wasn’t happy. His whole mindset had suddenly moved to what he saw as a perfectly rational anger and irritation at the faceless person from Wade that had nearly cost him his company a few years ago.

‘That goddamn motherfucker cost us forty million bucks last time he set foot on one of our platforms! I want you to make damn sure one of our guys sticks to him like glue. I don’t want him pissing all over our operation again! Kid daughter or not, he’s a wild card that we don’t need at this moment.’

Bill was taken back at the spite in Mac’s reply, before recalling that unwittingly, thanks to a certain Mr Finlay Nichols, the additional year 2000 expenses had hurt the company very badly.

‘Sure will. I’ll put someone on him at all times. You want me to have him followed onshore whilst he’s here?’

‘Yeah, make absolutely sure we know where he is and what he’s up to. He starts looking into things we don’t want him to know about then I want to be the first to know.’

Mac hung up the phone without the normal salutations and slammed his fist into the heavily lacquered walnut dashboard of the Aston Martin.

‘Goddamn Limey engineers,’ he shouted out loud. He hit the dashboard hard several more times, cracking the consol above the integrated radio and navigation system. ‘Goddamn Limey piece of shit car built by goddamn Limey engineers!’

Gulf of Thailand

Finn got into the Bell 206 Jet Ranger that was to take him the hundred and fifty miles to Luann Alpha. He was dressed in a shirt and chinos and took the front left-hand seat next to the pilot, a similarly dressed middle-aged Australian called Jimmy.

As he sat in the non-existent co-pilot's chair waiting for the single turbine engine to wind up enough to get the Jet Ranger into the air, Finn reflected that things were certainly done differently here than in the North Sea. Still, Finn didn't really mind the more casual attitude of Thailand as it was far too hot and sweaty to wear a survival suit. Two engines would be nice though. In Finn's mind, two of anything was always preferable to one, especially when his life depended on it. And a helicopter that was less than twenty some-odd years old would also be good.

As the helicopter began to lift, Finn instinctively muttered his helicopter prayer. 'Please God, don't let the Jesus bolt fail.'

From a technical point of view there were actually two Jesus bolts that he was referring to, but he figured God was probably smart enough to work that one out for himself so he didn't need to be too specific. One held the helicopter onto the main rotor, the spinning blades above his head that kept them aloft, and the other held the tail rotor on. Rumour had it that if either one failed the first, and probably last, words everyone would say were 'Jesus Christ!'

Finn had an exciting new toy in his backpack for this trip. It was an Iridium mobile satellite phone that he had bought whilst performing his normal duties of bag carrier and bottom size assessor on Liz's last Bangkok shopping trip. It was a big and beefy brick of a handset, but it would connect directly to whichever communications satellite was above and allowed him a secure and easily accessible line of communication. The Bluetooth connectivity kit ensured that Finn would be able to wirelessly send and receive emails from his laptop through it. And best of all, it allowed him to

ring Liz on her mobile back in the hotel as and when he felt like it to keep in touch and update her on his progress around the platforms. The phone, along with three thousand minutes of prepaid call credit, has cost a wallet-busting five thousand US dollars; an amount that Liz had cursed at when he'd spent all of five minutes looking for one and then negotiated and paid for a deal.

Finn smiled to himself. A mobile Sat phone was something he'd wanted for a while now, but never before had the excuse to actually go out and blow thousands of pounds on.

As they came to within a few miles of the platform, Luann Alpha began to materialise out of the blurring heat haze of horizon and sky. The initial black smudge focussed into a clear view of a monstrous yellow and black steel obscenity seemingly cast down by the hand of god into the pure blue water that surrounded it. The disused drilling derrick and flare stack that stuck up above the bulk of the platform looked like the blackened frameworks of two burned out church spires. And as they came closer he could focus on the cascade of cooling water from the gas compressors that was streaming into the calm Gulf of Thailand.

To Finn it was a magnificent sight. Forty thousand tonnes of steel, and one of a thousand similar examples dotted in seas and oceans around the world of the engineers' ability to accomplish the seemingly impossible.

The Jet Ranger settled onto Luana Alpha's helideck in a flawless landing on a crystal clear day. The heat haze that neatly blended the dark blue sea into the light blue sky made the whole scene surreal and a far cry from the North Sea, where he was normally greeted with low cloud, driving rain and a struggle to get down from the helideck without being blown off.

Finn thanked Jimmy the pilot over the intercom for a pleasant flight, removed his bags from the passenger seat behind him and exited the aircraft into the tropical heat. When he was clear, the helicopter rose, peeled off to one side and disappeared below the

helideck in a diving transition on its way back to the beach. Finn would phone Jimmy when he wanted his next ride.

A recognisable face came up the helideck stairway to meet Finn, surprising him by its presence.

‘Bill! Good to see you again. I didn’t know you would be out here.’

Bill shook Finn’s offered hand.

‘This is where I live and work, Mr Nichols. The Bangkok office is only there for meetings with the Thai government and some of our suppliers. We run all in-country operations from this platform. I find it a good way of doing things in these Third World countries. We have all our personnel, computers and logistics in one place, so we can run things without too much interference. Keeps the boys out of trouble as well, if you know what I mean. How long do you think you’re going to be onboard, Finn? Need to sort out cabin space and catering.’

‘Don’t really know,’ replied Finn. ‘Depends on how things are running. I shouldn’t expect anything more than a couple of days though.’

Bill nodded, took Finn’s kit bag and showed him through to the platform’s hotel block. The radiating heat from the sun-baked steel deck was already making Finn sweat profusely.

‘OK,’ said Bill as he moved into the cool atmosphere of the hotel block, ‘We’ll give you a free run of the platform, but I’ll need to have someone accompany you all the time you’re out on deck. Don’t want to have to explain to Wade that their engineer fell overboard and no one was there to see it.

‘Platform rules are reasonably relaxed here. You need to wear a hardhat, fireproofs and safety boots outside the accommodation. Harness and life vest if you’re planning on doing any over the side inspection or going down to the spider deck, and I’ll give you one of our VHF handsets. We work channel six-eight. Now let’s sort out a cabin for you and then we can have a cold beer. Or warm beer or tea

if you prefer. I hear you Limeys, oh sorry, Brits, live off the stuff. What made the British Empire great, huh?’

Now he was in the ice-cold interior and able to think again, Finn couldn’t resist a come back on that last point.

‘You know, Bill, you’re not far wrong there. Warm beer and tea were the staples of the British Army for hundreds of years. Meant we never drank the local water without it first having been sterilised by fermentation or boiling. Reduced illness and kept the soldiers healthy enough to walk over anyone dumb enough to put up a fight.’

‘Ha, ha, you shitting me right?’ replied the American.

‘Nope, not shitting in the slightest. And by the way I don’t mind being called a Limey either; reminds me why the Royal Navy ruled the seas.’

‘Yeah, why?’ Bill was obviously quite interested.

‘Limes were our secret weapon. We bought them in vast numbers whenever a ship made a port call.’ Finn was now halfway down the first flight of beautifully cool stairs following Bill. ‘Limes, warm beer and tea were the reason we ruled the world.’

‘What did you do with the limes, put them in your tea or throw them at your enemies?’

‘Fed them to the ship crews. Vitamin C kept the navy free from scurvy for a century before anyone else knew about it. We could go out on year-long voyages and still have a fit fighting force at the end of it. The French would be there, trying to build their empire but suffering fifty per cent casualties through scurvy and dysentery, and probably a hangover in the other half from all that wine they drink, and we could just hammer them. You know, most of the British Empire was made up of places the French found and we nicked off them.’

‘No kidding?’

‘They still hate us to this day because of it,’ Finn added.

‘Never knew. You want your beer warm?’

‘No, the colder the better for me.’

Bill slapped him on the back as he showed him into his cabin.

‘Come up and find me once you’ve settled in. Lunch is at noon. You gonna give me a lecture on how fish and chips helped conquer the world or are you happy with steak and fried onion?’

After a typical American lunch of half a cow, fries and heavily buttered corn on the cob, Finn set about the twin tasks of digesting the vast quantity of meat he’d consumed and trying to matching the engineering drawings he had for Luann’s topside piping to the reality of what he was looking at. It quickly became apparent that although the pipe work was broadly similar to the drawings it wasn’t exactly the same.

‘Let me see the drawings,’ Bill suggested, looking over Finn’s shoulder at the screen on his laptop. ‘Oh, I see what the problem is. You’ve got the issued for construction drawings on your computer. The as-builts are slightly different. Particularly after we hooked up Luann Bravo we made quite a few modifications to the piping. A lot of the stuff coming from the design engineers wasn’t possible to build. You know the problem, the drawing says to run pipes this way and put a valve at that point, but when you set about doing it you find a main spar supporting the helideck is smack bang in the way. Building things always results in loads of little changes to what the designers wanted, but it’s all essentially the same system. We didn’t remove any safeguards or anything.’

‘Yeah Bill, I know. I’ve handled my fair share of changes. Since you’ve got your whole country operation based out of this platform does that mean you’ve also got the latest set of as-built drawings on board?’

‘Yeah, sure do. You want me to print off a set?’

‘To be honest, no. If I get hard copies of all the drawings for all the platforms I’m going to, then literally I’d be carrying a tonne of paper work at the end of it. Can I copy the pdf’s or drawing files across to my laptop?’

Bill took Finn down to his office and logged onto the central Eagle United server, which just happened to be about ten feet away in a sealed and climate controlled room.

‘Here we go, now let’s see. Ah, I remember they’re under Year 2000 in a directory called Bravo modifications or something like that.’

‘Bill.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Bravo wasn’t tied back until 2001.’

‘Oh, yeah you’re right. They’ll be under Year 2001 then.’

Ten minutes later and Bill was still looking for the right directory when the Tannoy called him away to the control room.

‘That’ll be the supply boat coming alongside. I’ll just be a few minutes while I go through its platform exclusion zone checklist. Why don’t you get yourself a cup of tea or something.’

With that Bill disappeared out of the office and up the stairs.

Finn thought this was too good to be true. All of Eagle United’s operational data was now sitting on a logged in computer just in front of him. He would bet his bottom dollar there would be details in there of problems on Alpha associated with sour gas coming out of Bravo. Maybe he might even hit gold and have a full breakdown of wellhead gas composition and Eagle’s attempts to disguise the hydrogen sulphide content. Without a second’s more thought Finn pulled out his memory stick and plugged it into an empty USB socket on the side of the computer’s flat screen. A couple of seconds later the screen flashed up its identification of the memory stick insertion.

Removable Disk (E:)

This disk or device contains more than one type of content

What do you want Windows to do?

Finn clicked on the Open folder to view files and then clicked OK.

He went to the window Bill had been navigating through to find the latest drawings, clicked the pull down menu and highlighted the root directory. The root directory was the starting point that had all the other directories in folders beneath it. Finn right clicked the mouse, selected properties and clicked again. A small window came up and showed the root directory properties. It was 4.9 Gigabytes in size, surprisingly small and a lot less than Finn's memory stick could take. He closed the properties window, highlighted the root directory and dragged and dropped it onto the USB window.

Another little screen came up showing the files being transferred and once the transfer rate settled it advised him Remaining time approx. twelve minutes.

Blimey, Bill would be back by then!

Finn tidied up the windows on the computer screen until they looked just like they had when Bill left. Only the file transfer window remained, now showing eight minutes remaining. Finn sat on the edge of the desk, picked up a magazine that was lying around and opened it to any page, trying to look like he was just sitting around waiting for Bill. He was intently listening for the bang the closing fireproof door would give as Bill entered the stairwell two floors above him on his way back. As soon as he heard that he would whip out his memory stick, clear the file transfer window and pretend he was reading the magazine.

Sixty seconds remaining. Still no sign or sound of Bill on his way.

Ten Seconds remaining, five... two... File transfer completed.

Finn pulled out his USB stick, clicked OK on the 'You didn't remove the device properly' window that popped up, dropped the magazine back on the desk and left the office for the nearby mess room.

After making and drinking a cup of coffee in the mess, Finn headed up to the control room to see what had delayed Bill, who had still not returned.

‘Finn, sorry for leaving you for so long, did you have some tea?’

‘Yes thank you. What’s happening?’

‘Oh, you know, normal stuff. The supply boats out in this part of the world are little better than fishing junks. The one we’ve bought alongside just now didn’t have a clue what to do. He thought he could just pull up, tie himself to the platform legs and we would offload his containers.’

Bill looked across at Finn a little nervously. ‘Guess I shouldn’t really be telling you that, what with you about to write up our new insurance certificate.’

‘Don’t worry, Bill, small stuff’s not really in my remit. I’m only looking for the big stuff. You haven’t taken any emergency shut down valves offline that you might want to tell me about have you?’

‘God no!’ said Bill, startled, before seeing Finn grinning. ‘Oh, Limey humour. Good one.’

Later that afternoon Finn was back in his cabin looking through the drawings that Bill had finally managed to find on the platform server.

He had copied the drawings onto his USB stick with Bill looking over his shoulder, obviously keen to see that he didn’t ‘inadvertently’ copy anything else.

Once in his cabin though, Finn had transferred the entire contents of his memory stick to his laptop and started sifting through what he had there. Finn’s focus was on looking for sour gas. Right now, thanks to the ever present Bill preventing him from roaming around, Finn would hunt for a paper trail. And that, he thought, would start with the gas composition tables that would be kept somewhere in the data he had just got hold of.

Sure enough the data was there, under Year 2000/ Offshore Ops/ Bravo/ Wells/ Technical/ WC1/ Composition/ Well Test.

The gas composition showed it as sweet. Only 0.001 ppm H₂S, less than one part hydrogen sulphide in a billion parts of natural gas. Still convinced that on Luann Bravo was the culprit, Finn figured the data must be fixed. He would have to go crack some valves open after all, and he reckoned that during the night would be his best chance, when even Bill would at some stage have to go to sleep.

One in the morning. Bill had disappeared to his cabin at ten thirty, straight after the evening film in the small cinema. Finn had joined him in watching the film along with half a dozen of the crew who were comfortable enough with English to watch a Hollywood film in preference to the Thai TV that was always on in the mess rooms. They'd watched the *Bourne Supremacy*, an excellent film that had really got Finn in the mood for some late night prowling.

If he was going to earn that two hundred grand then now was the time. Finn was wearing the darkest clothes he had, blue jeans with a dark blue shirt and red hardhat. Two of the H₂S sniffers were stuffed in the back pockets of the jeans, batteries in and checked. He casually opened his cabin door and headed toward the lowermost exit from the hotel block.

Out on deck it was a dark and humid night. Heat was still radiating from the steel of the platform structure and the closeness immediately made him break out in a fresh sweat. Finn had memorised the route to the five sets of valves he wanted to use for the tests and quickly made his way to the first and most promising target, the pig receiver on a branch line from Luann Bravo. The double block and bleed valve he had selected was on the rear of the pig receiver hatch and therefore would be in an easily accessible but still out of the way place.

The deck was clear of any personnel, for which Finn heaved a big sigh of relief. He guessed that most of the night shift would either be in the air-conditioned control room or the compressor area. Since Luann Alpha didn't produce its own gas anymore the

wellheads and most of the topside piping would be of little interest to the crew.

Two decks down and a gangway away from the hotel block, Finn crouched down behind the Luann Bravo pig receiver with his tall frame hidden from any casual glances. He pulled out one of the H₂S sniffers, switched it on, waited for the beep that said it was ready and then moved around to the rear hatch. Wearing his leather rigger gloves, Finn took a firm grasp of the handle to the half-inch valve. It was about the size of a kitchen tap but difficult to turn. He forced it anti-clockwise a quarter turn, into the fully open position and then back again to fully closed. A cubic inch of pressurised Luann Bravo gas would now be in stored in the tiny chamber between the double blocks and the bleed valve. Finn gripped the quarter inch bleed valve handle, again the size of a kitchen tap. He held the H₂S detector at the outlet, took a deep breath, prayed that Liz wasn't watching him at this very moment and turned the valve to release the small quantity of gas.

Nothing happened. The valve wouldn't turn. Finn tried again with all his strength but still couldn't get the damn thing to budge. He retreated back behind the pig trap and wondered what he would do next. There were no other double block and bleeds close to where he was, and this was by far the best hiding spot, so he would have to try again. The small valve probably hadn't been used for a while so the best way to unstick it would be by hitting it. Finn pulled one of his safety boots off and held it by the ankle so that he could use the steel lined toe as a hammer. He moved back into position and gave the valve a resounding whack. There was a loud but instantaneous hiss as the small valve broke clean off and clanged onto the steel floor. The released gas pocket formed a cloud of vapour around the outlet. Forgetting to hold his breath, Finn scrambled for the still turned on H₂S detector and stuck it into the dissipating cloud. He then moved back into his concealed position and looked at the readout on the detector. The light was too bad for

Finn to read the LCD screen. Should have bought a bloody torch he thought.

Finn tugged his boot back on and moved quickly from the pig receiver back to the deck walkway, where he held the detector up to the overhead fluorescent light. It showed an H₂S reading of zero.

Bugger, thought Finn, no hydrogen sulphide from Luann Bravo, the field is sweet after all. Now I'll have to go and test the four incoming pipelines from the other platforms and work my way up the positive tree until I can isolate the offender. He switched the H₂S sniffer off, put it back in his rear pocket and, still sweating, set off to find the main platform manifold. The manifold was where the incoming gas from the other fields co-mingled before being processed and then compressed for its long journey to the beach. The myriad of small block and bleed valves along its length were his next best chance of finding the sour reservoir stream.

As he briskly descended the stairs to the well deck, lost in a world of his own thoughts, Finn practically collided into two Thai workers coming the other way.

'Sorry, sir', one of them said as he jumped out of the way. 'Good evening, sir.'

'Err. Yes, good evening. Lovely evening isn't it,' Finn replied, thinking quickly for an excuse for his presence. 'You couldn't direct me to the spider deck could you? I think I saw some sharks from my cabin window and I want to see if I can take a photograph of them.'

The two Thais chatted briefly to each other, one of them obviously making a comment at Finn's expense as they both sniggered, hiding their grinning teeth behind gloved hands.

'Very sorry, sir,' the talkative one said. 'Not allowed on spider deck without lifejacket and not allowed at night, in case you fall in and sharks see you before we do.'

'Oh, I didn't know that, perhaps I'll see if I can take a photo from this level then.'

Finn moved to the bottom of the stairs and then over to the edge of the platform before looking down.

The two Thais followed him.

‘Excuse me sir. Where your camera?’ Mr Talkative asked.

Bugger, thought Finn for the umpteenth time that day. He wasn’t really very good at this secret agent stuff and now he was about to get rumbled.

Finn knew from his time working on barges and rigs around the world that the local workers who managed to get offshore jobs were generally very smart and normally extremely well-educated. They took even the most menial of offshore jobs for one reason only – they could earn vastly more money, even with the lousy wages paid to them by Western companies, than they ever could back at home. This made them susceptible to bribery. Actually more than susceptible, as bribery was just about the only way of getting things done sometimes. On the *Independence* it had been a few American dollars and packs of cigarettes in thanks for pointers toward substandard procedures or safety violations. Out here and in Finn’s current predicament it would have to be something on an altogether larger scale.

‘Alright,’ said Finn showing his open palms and going for broke. ‘You got me. I don’t have a camera and I’m not looking for sharks. What I do have’, he rummaged in the back of his jeans, ‘is a hydrogen sulphide detector and two hundred dollars, American dollars, back in my cabin. I could do with a little help. Hush, hush help if you know what I mean.’

The two Thais were suddenly very serious. They chatted to each other in a very animated, but inconspicuous way. They looked up at him, nodded to each other and Mr Talkative came back with a counter proposal.

‘Two thousand dollars and the camera we saw you with earlier.’

Now that was negotiation, Finn thought, straight to the kill.

‘I don’t have two thousand dollars,’ he replied. ‘I have maybe five or six hundred. My camera is a Leica, it’s worth five hundred bucks on its own.’

There was some more animated talking between the two Thais before Mr Talkative came back with his response.

‘OK, but we need to pay the other men if you want us to be quiet. We already see you at Bravo pig receiver opening little valves. We told by camp boss to keep an eye on you and say what you doing if we see you alone.’ His quieter companion said something to him before Mr Talkative continued.

‘How about you and me go see how much cash you really got. Kristian here will talk to other men and we strike a deal. You get what you want, we get a little extra money for our families.’

Finn was really very relieved at this.

‘OK, you come with me,’ he indicated to Mr Talkative. ‘But I need to get a reading on all the gas in the system on this little machine.’ Finn waggled the H₂S detector. ‘And I need to see the readings and tell you where to take them, so you tell your friend Kristian to wait for us here. OK?’

‘Yes OK,’ replied Mr Talkative without even consulting the silent Kristian.

Finn led the way back to his cabin with the Thai in tow. ‘Be very quiet, yes?’

Once in his cabin, Mr Talkative eventually settled for all the cash Finn had in his wallet, a total of almost six hundred US dollars and an amount of Thai Baht that Finn couldn’t figure out was worth. He also took the Leica camera.

The Thai was really very nice as he let Finn extract and keep the memory card from the camera. It had pictures of Liz and the children as well as the platform on it. He also left him with his video camera, which he had obviously seen as Finn rummaged for the Leica. In return, Finn delved a little deeper and found the spare memory card for the camera.

Back on the wellhead deck Kristian had assembled a couple more of the night shift and was eagerly waiting for Finn and Mr Talkative to return so that they could get on with the work.

Thirty minutes later and Finn had witnessed and accepted gas samples from all the inlet pipelines flowing into Luann Alpha. Puzzlingly all of them showed a negative reading for H₂S, leaving him completely stumped as to how sour gas had managed to contaminate the turbine in the power station. He guessed he would have to check and see if any fields were temporarily shut-in on his tour of the platforms. If one or more were then at least it narrowed the suspects down.

It turned out that the previously quiet Kristian spoke better English than Mr Talkative and knew what the detector was sampling for.

‘All the gas is sweet, Mr Englishman,’ he said. ‘No bad gas, no smell of rotted eggs. But sometimes we have problems with valves. The valve seals fail too much. Maybe something else in the gas that not good.’

‘Do you have any of the failed valve seals here?’ enquired Finn, grasping at possibilities, but at the same time thinking it was no wonder he had broken the pig trap valve off with such a gentle blow.

‘Oh yes, many. You want some?’

Finn wondered what the cost would be. All he had left to barter with was the watch Liz had given him, video camera and laptop. The computer, though, would never leave his side as it contained information that was worth more to Finn than almost anything else in this world.

‘Yes please,’ he said.

‘OK, I ask Rathapunda to get them.’

Kristian spoke to one of the helpers, who scurried away reappearing a few minutes later with a plastic bag containing valve seals and the broken half of the pig trap valve he’d knocked off earlier.

‘Here you are, Mr Englishman. You better go back to your bed now, the Americans will be awake soon and we not want you around then. No cost for the seals, we already feel guilty about taking all your other stuff.’ He grinned as he said the last sentence, obviously not feeling guilty at all.

Finn shook hands with the assembled crew and bid them goodnight. He really did make a lousy James Bond, but as luck had turned out he’d got all the information he needed. If there were no shut-in fields then there must be another component in the gas that was causing the damage. Finn couldn’t think what it was and as he only had an H₂S detector he had no way of sampling the gas for any other components, even if he knew what to look for. He briefly considered taking gas samples back with him in bottles, but decided against it. Wade had only asked for H₂S detection and that’s what he had done. If they subsequently wanted him to take on a new set of risks then they would have to pay extra.

Anyway, perhaps the gas composition data he had from the Eagle United server would show what the mysterious bad component was. Failing that then he had the valve seals, which at least could be tested once he got back to the UK.

Back in his cabin Finn got undressed, set his alarm for six and tried to get some sleep.

The next morning he had the familiar slightly sick feeling that always accompanied a night without enough sleep. He had several strong coffees and a light breakfast of jam and toast.

Bill was his normal cheerful self, reading an A4 stapled together edition of an Australian morning newspaper that had been printed from the Internet.

‘Well, Bill, I think I’ll book my ride out of here this morning. Just a couple more things to look at and I’ll be out of your hair.’

This came as a relief to Bill.

‘Good, do we get a clean bill of health?’

‘Yes, everything seems fine. Can you get me an inventory list for your onshore logistics base and let them know I’ll be calling in on them next week. Just going to do some quick stops at the other platforms whilst I’m out here.’

‘No problem Finn. It’s been a pleasure to have you onboard.’

‘Just one more thing, Bill.’

‘Yes?’

‘You couldn’t cash a cheque for me could you? I think my wife must have cleared out my wallet before I came out here because I find myself in the embarrassing position of having no money on me at all.’

Jimmy and the Jet Ranger arrived on time shortly after lunch.

The helicopter refuelled at the platform and then took Finn on the short hop across to the Gyliris platform, twenty minutes and a further thirty miles out into the Gulf of Thailand.

Finn spent the next five days touring the remaining platforms, running through each one’s safety and contingency systems, reviewing the general state of repairs and looking for anything suspicious. He didn’t try measuring any more gas for hydrogen sulphide. There was no point. All the platforms fed into one of the four pipelines that ran to Luann Alpha, so any sour gas would have been detected there on his first night offshore. And since by the end of his trip he had established that no fields had been shut-in that night, the whole offshore network must most definitely be flowing sweet gas.

Finn kept the helicopter with him most of the time as he was cracking through platforms at a decent rate and wanted his airborne taxi available as and when he required it. In fact the helicopter only went back to the beach on one occasion when Jimmy said he needed to get some work done on it because of low oil pressure. Finn was more than happy for it to get fixed, as the thought of that single engine failing in mid-flight wasn’t very pleasant.

On that occasion, rather than sit on a platform waiting for the helicopter to return, Finn took a basket transfer to a supply boat that was heading to another platform. The basket transfer, like almost everything associated with offshore operations in Thailand, was definitely sub-standard compared to what he was used to. Again there were no survival suits or lifejackets available and the basket itself was of the old type, where you stood on the outside ring and held onto the rope netting.

Bangkok, Thailand

By the following week Finn had completed his offshore surveys, visited the onshore logistics base and had almost finished an amendment to his old report detailing the major changes since that date.

The onshore base visit had proved as fruitless as the rest of the trip to Thailand in determining what had caused the turbine failure in the power station. In many ways, though, this was probably the best possible news that Wade could hear as it meant they could quite happily sell on the insurance risk to the Lloyds syndicates without fear of a comeback if the network later needed a major rebuild.

The recommendations he was making were pretty minimal, basically covering some procedural changes and the need to increase the safety culture to reduce the number of small accidents and low-level fatalities.

Through his new Iridium phone, Finn had been able to keep Gillian at Wade updated on his progress and findings. He had sent the broken valve seals back to the beach when Jimmy went to get his oil pressure fixed and from there they had been airmailed to her to pass on to the metallurgist. The results would take a couple of weeks to come back and would prove conclusively what, if anything, was in the gas that could have caused embrittlement of the power station turbine blades.

Finn said he would finish his report in the next couple of days and email it to Gillian. Thereafter the family was going to enjoy the remainder of their time in Thailand on holiday.

A few days later, with his report completed and many happy but exhausting hours playing in the swimming pool, building sandcastles and exploring the country with his family, Finn decided

he might as well have a proper look through all the files he had copied from Eagle United's server. They would be heading back to London soon for the start of Victoria's new school term and Finn would once again be immersed in the Eider Petroleum project he had so abruptly left almost a month ago. If he didn't look at the files now, chances were he never would.

The downloaded root directory from Eagle United's server contained thousands of different files, far too many to go through individually. Finn started looking at a few files in each subdirectory and if nothing new or interesting became apparent then he moved on to the next. Once finished, he would delete the whole lot as it was, after all, illegal for him to be holding any, let alone all this information on Eagle's Thailand operation. This thought had occurred to him shortly after he had copied the directory, so as a security measure he had password protected it and run a programme that encrypted the data within it. Without the password and decryption key the data was nothing more than unintelligible ones and zeros on the hard disk. Still, better to be safe than sorry, so if he hadn't found anything of interest by the time to go home then he would delete the lot.

Most of the almost five gigabytes of files consisted of production logs, correspondence, photographs and the normal junk that people leave on hard drives. Bill hadn't been joking when he said Eagle United ran its entire Thailand operation from the platform. Goods in and out of the onshore logistics base were stored there, as were such mundane things as rental payments on a couple of apartments and the small Bangkok office.

After an hour of trawling through directory after directory Finn was rapidly losing interest. Liz was relaxing with a book on the balcony and the children were asleep in their beds. He was about to call it a day when he chanced across a subdirectory called Myanmar Logistics. Myanmar, or Burma as most people still thought of it, had been developing its own offshore gas network in response to some

major finds over the last decade and Eagle United were apparently interested or actively involved in this.

Myanmar was of interest because Finn had been offered work there a few years back. Like most offshore engineers though, he had declined because of the human rights abuses of the Burmese military government.

Everyone had heard of Aung San Suu Kyi and her party's moves to make Burma a democratic country. She was something of a modern day Nelson Mandela, resisting all efforts by the military junta to make her give up the fight for a free country and, as a result, spent all her time either in prison or under house arrest. Her plight had raised awareness of Burma's problems and as support grew, had ensured the country was definitely not on the active list of any company wanting to maintain a clean public image.

Interestingly, after Aung San Suu Kyi fairly and squarely won the first democratic elections for decades, the military junta refused to let her become the Prime Minister because she was married to a British engineer. It was a good excuse, thought Finn. Couldn't have the leader of your country married to so much foreign influence. But then her husband had subsequently died and apart from still not letting her become the PM, the junta had even refused to allow her out from house arrest to go to his funeral.

When offered the work Finn had checked out the situation in Burma and read a statement on several websites in which the People's Democratic Movement, or some similar name that he couldn't recall, quoted Aung San Suu Kyi as asking that no one help or supply the current Burmese government with any assistance. Finn had therefore declined. He did after all have a conscience.

Or perhaps it was just because there were other jobs available at the time that meant he didn't have to face the difficult decision of earning money for the family or sitting at home not earning money. If push had come to shove and, say, mortgage payments put Finn's house on the line, then he knew deep in his heart that he would have gone.

Other engineers however hadn't carried such superficial moral scruples and firmly adhered to the oil industry mantra of 'Pay no heed to race, religion or politics. Do your job and leave it to others to fight over the wealth it creates'. Offshore Burma had therefore been developed and now the country was a major exporter of natural gas across its border and into Thailand.

Finn opened the subdirectory and saw a few dozen Excel spreadsheets in there. He opened up one that was in a sequence of obvious dates, MGS_2001.xls to MGS_2007.xls

The file listed shipments of supplies between Eagle United Energy's Thai and Myanmar base camps and offshore platforms. It was news to Finn that Eagle United were actually operating in Burma, particularly at a level to require a logistics base, but he wasn't really all that surprised. If money was to be made then someone would be there making it and the Eagle senior management had shown itself not adverse to high risk plays.

On first glance the shipments looked quite innocuous. Thanks to Aung San Suu Kyi efforts, Myanmar would undoubtedly be a difficult place to get supplies into. It would therefore make sense for Eagle United to ship goods to its Myanmar operation via the Thailand logistics centre. That way the suppliers would in good faith be expecting their products to be going only to democratic Thailand and not onward and across the border into nasty Myanmar.

The supplies being sent to Myanmar were typical goods needed to run an offshore operation; drill string, valves, computers, even peanut butter and coffee. Onward shipping from Thailand to Burma must be via road because the dates for dispatch and receipt between the two bases were never more than two or three days. This was too long to be sending them by air and far too short for boat.

One column in the spreadsheet was headed 'Border Tax' and consisted of a regular payment of ten thousand dollars per month. No one paid border tax at such a consistent and regular amount. Not unless the payments were actually bribes to the local military to ensure goods passed without any form of inspection or delay. About

par for what I expect of Eagle, Finn thought to himself. If there is a way to get something done, then they will do it, even if the legality is dubious to say the least.

As he scanned the spreadsheet one product on the list became particularly noticeable. Noticeable in that it was being shipped in the opposite direction to all the others. That product was something called Abzu.

After a half second processing the word, Finn realised why it was familiar. Abzu was the Sumerian god of the underworld and the six thousand year-old origin for the modern word Abyss. To name anything in the offshore oil & gas game Abyss would be considered very bad luck and tempting fate at its highest level.

The reason the word was familiar and why he knew its origins was thanks to the time Finn had spent in the cradle of civilisation, Mesopotamia, 'the land between the rivers', where agriculture and a settled civilisation has first developed many thousands of years ago. Nowadays it was called Iraq.

At the time, Finn had been a few years out of university and keen to move his career along, as well as to save the money for he and Liz to break into London's horrendous property market. The Iraqi job had given him the ideal opportunity to leapfrog ahead of his contemporaries by working somewhere that the older, more experienced engineers could afford to pass by. A bit like modern day Myanmar he thought, with a tinge of guilt.

The cradle of civilisation, between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, was aptly named as it was there the first towns, cities and eventually commerce and writing had developed. Southern Iraq, where he had been based, had hundreds of the unnatural looking low mounds or hills known as Tells that grew up when communities rebuilt themselves on their ruins countless times over the millennia. And because of the animosity between Saddam Hussein and Western politicians, the country was pretty much closed to all westerners except those engineers required to keep the oil flowing,

oil that had been largely exported illegally or semi-legally under the UN's wonderfully incompetent 'oil for food' programme.

During those long tours in Iraq, Finn had at first enjoyed the odd day off by blasting around the Gulf of Arabia in one of the company speedboats, specifically bought to allow the guys to let off steam and get to Kuwait City for a beer and a little R&R. He'd become quite good at handling the sleek-nosed cigarette boats through the choppy waters of the Gulf.

Later though, he'd taken every opportunity to borrow a Land Rover and disappear off on his own, to sift curiously through the edges of the old Tells that no modern archaeologist had ever set foot on. Yes, he knew it wasn't allowed, and he certainly wasn't following any of the rules of modern archaeology, but he couldn't resist a little dig around. Among the items he found had been dozens of clay tablets with what he later discovered was the five thousand year-old wedge-like cuneiform shapes of the very first written script ever to have been invented. Finn had sneaked a few of the best out of Iraq, hidden inside bags of dried pistachio nuts, themselves inside a faulty valve that was being returned to the UK. He had them now on the shelves of his study.

With the aid of books, the Internet and his insatiable curiosity, Finn had deciphered much of the cuneiform writing on the tablets to reveal they were little more than very old tax returns:

'This is to certify that twelve bushels of corn, three goats and one bucket of tar pitch have been given to the servants of the temple of the sun god in the fourth year of the reign of our lord the great and ever youthful king Sinobe, long may he reign, by goat man, son of goat man the cripple, for this years uninterrupted supply of the sun.'

Great, paying for the sun to shine! Writing had been invented by the taxman. They had done something useful after all!

Abzu, Abyss, what kind of a product was that? It was obviously a cover name for something else.

A jolt of fear and cold, clear realisation suddenly hit Finn. Perhaps Eagle United had a second line of business. Perhaps they were transporting drugs, gemstones or something else from the Burmese jungles to Thailand? Those same jungles were, he recollected, part of the golden triangle of heroin production and also a region of substantial ruby mining.

If Eagle were shipping contraband then Finn figured they would need some pretty good contacts within both countries border guards to keep them safe. Contacts that would probably cost the ten thousand a month border tax.

Finn went onto the web and found a map of the Myanmar offshore gas system. It was certainly a lot bigger than he remembered, now numbering six interconnected platforms and two export pipelines. One pipeline ran toward the capital city, Rangoon, and the other, much bigger one to the south of Burma, where it quickly crossed into Thailand. Google searches on the names of the fields showed hits from the companies that had helped build them and the names of their original clients.

Finn spent another hour on the Internet looking up these companies and was shocked to find that within the last three years every single one had sold their Myanmar assets outright to Eagle United Energy.

Although production figures were not available, Finn made a good estimate on the potential gas flow based on the size of the pipelines in the system and the distances each one ran for between compressor stations. He combined these figures with the known production and throughput he had for the Thai Gas gathering system and was again shocked. Eagle United's Myanmar operation could supply something close to sixty or seventy per cent of the natural gas used in Thailand if it was run at capacity. And thanks to its ownership of Luann Alpha, Eagle United had all of Thailand's gas running through its facilities. The company had created one heck of a monopoly for itself.

That night Finn went to bed with an uncomfortable feeling. Eagle United were obviously a company with very few moral scruples. They were probably in bed with one of the world's least liked regimes and were involved in some secretive trade that you could bet your bottom dollar would be illegal. Finn had been snooping around one of their platforms and had illegally downloaded a whole heap of sensitive information, accidentally including a bunch of clues that pointed a finger of guilt directly at Eagle United Energy. And now he was sleeping in a hotel room on a Thai beach with the Burmese border less than a hundred miles away. Worst of all he was here with his whole family. Talk about accidentally straying into a lion's den!

Finn decided that tomorrow the Nichols family would cut and run. No matter what, by the next evening they would be on a flight out of Thailand. The holiday was most definitely over.

Next morning, when he broke the news to Liz that they were going home a few days early she was not really all that upset. Three weeks in paradise was enough, she said. The food was delicious but tending toward repetition and there was only so much playing on the beach and in the pool that she could tolerate. Besides, any more shopping and she would have to buy a new set of suitcases to put everything in.

Finn felt a little less uneasy than he had done the night before, but still considered it better to be safe than sorry. Wet and windy London was very appealing right now.

After breakfast he rang British Airways in Bangkok to change their reservations to that afternoon's flight to Heathrow whilst Liz set about organising the packing. By midday the flights were confirmed and they were all packed and ready to go. They left the bags in a neat line in the middle of the lounge of their mini-suite and went down to check out, order a taxi to the airport and have lunch.

Wimbledon, West London

It was early morning, local time, on the next day when they arrived home. London felt decidedly cold after their long break in the tropics, so the first thing Liz did was to turn the central heating up high and put the kettle on for a cup of tea.

‘We should try and keep the children up to at least six o’clock tonight, to adjust them back into this time zone,’ she said. ‘Why don’t you take them to Tesco and buy fresh milk and food while I unpack and get the first load of washing on.’

Finn jumped at the chance. He hated unpacking and sorting things out. And as for washing, well a slight error of judgement with respect to a dark red towel early in their relationship had ended his association with such machines once and for all. Pink tee shirts and underpants had been part of his offshore kit for a couple of years after that.

By the time they got back from the supermarket the first wash was already filling the drying racks in the utility room and a second load was sloshing around in the machine. Liz was most definitely in command on the home front.

‘I’ve unpacked everything so you can put the suitcases back in the basement. Can you sort your stuff out and put your bags away before you unload the shopping. Oh, and what did you get for lunch?’

Finn was in the hallway, putting his wallet and one of his passports back into his carbon fibre backpack. His passports went with him everywhere, along with his offshore survival and medical certificates and next of kin details, all the latter stored electronically on his Vantage card.

‘Spaghetti. And roast lamb for tea. Victoria picked them.’

‘Oh, lovely. Good girl. Nothing beats being in your own home does it?’

‘Liz, have you unpacked my laptop?’ Finn called out from the hall.

‘No, I haven’t touched your backpack, darling. Never do, you know that.’

It was gone, not in his backpack. Finn definitely remembered packing it and Liz had done her normal final sweep of the suite in Thailand, looking in every drawer and under every bed for things that might have been missed.

She came out into the hallway, drying her hands with a dishtowel. ‘When was the last time you had it?’

‘Last night, or rather the night before when I was using it before we went to bed.’

‘Well, if it’s not in your bag then it must still be at the hotel. Call them to see if they have it and if they don’t then ring BA and report it stolen.’

‘No,’ Finn replied, ‘I packed it in my backpack and kept it as hand baggage. I always carry my backpack as hand baggage so it can’t have been stolen. The only place I ever left it alone was at the hotel. It must have been taken when we went down for lunch and they put our bags in the cab for us.’

‘Well ring the hotel. But don’t go immediately accusing them of pinching it. Ask them to check the room or lost property for it.’

Finn held no hope at all that it would be in lost property. It was a two thousand pound laptop after all.

Oh Christ! he thought, I didn’t delete the stuff I downloaded from Eagle United Energy, and I’ve got my invoices and bank details on it as well.

Not surprisingly, the hotel had no knowledge of his laptop and although most apologetic for Finn having lost it, insisted that all their staff were completely trustworthy. Finn asked them to notify the local police and to fax him a copy of something or other that showed the police had been informed. He would need that to claim on his insurance.

It was a bad ending to what had overall been a very enjoyable three weeks. At least Finn consoled himself with the knowledge that no one would be able to read the hard drive on the laptop. He'd seen too many films in which the bad or good guys guessed a computer's password or an encryption key in three or four tries, so he had avoided using family names or dates of birth. Finn's logon password was 'bluelimo', the encrypted directories were protected by 'tiptronic' and 'gearbox', and the de-encryption key word was '245VR'. Without an in-depth knowledge of the car he drove and extreme luck, whoever had stolen the computer would have to boot it from a start up CD, reformat the hard disk and reload an operating system to get it working. After that, the only trace of him having ever owned it would be a bunch of deleted and encrypted data hidden on the hard drive. Data that would slowly be overwritten and erased forever by the new owner.

Houston, Texas

Mac was pacing around his office as he listened to York reporting on the contents of the Limey's laptop.

'IT reports he had a complete download of the Thailand operating directory. About five to ten percent of the files have been opened. It looks like just random surfing through the directory, opening a file here and there to see what's in them.'

Mac was annoyed. 'How the fuck did he manage to get a complete download of everything? Don't we have some sort of protection against people just sidling along and copying what ever they goddamn please from us?'

'We do, Mac.' York replied. 'The system is completely unhackable. But this guy had been logged on by the offshore manager and he was sitting at a terminal connected directly to the central server in the platform's computer room. He was inside our firewalls and had access to anything he wanted.'

York Kendrick was used to Mac's anger. Over the years he had seen, heard and dealt with just about every aspect of the CEO's fragile temperament. He knew that Mac deliberately played hardball with him – a volatile bad guy against York's more restrained good guy.

The two of them not only had completely different personalities, but physically as well they were opposites. York was a tall, slim, balding African American who wouldn't look out of place as a college sports coach. Mac on the other hand was almost a foot shorter, overweight by any but Texan standards and had a distinctly unnatural looking growth of well-groomed dark hair.

Mac favoured extravagant signs of his wealth, perhaps as a way of overtly projecting his power and money to make up for his physical shortcomings. The new Aston Martin was a good example, thought York. It was a pointless car to be driving in Houston. Too

low in this land of big SUVs to be able to see the road properly and too powerful for a country which still sported a fifty five mile per hour general speed limit. Even on the Houston Beltway, where the speed limit had been raised in recent years to seventy, York couldn't see the point in driving a car capable of almost three times that. And why bother with the convertible Volante version? The temperature outside was way above ninety Fahrenheit most of the year, and Mac anyway would need a whole can of spray to prevent his immaculate hairstyle from blowing around if the top was down. No, the Aston was nothing more than just showing off. York's anonymous S-class Mercedes saloon was by far the better car.

York pondered again what had bought him to this nondescript glass tower in downtown Houston from his working class background in Long Island, New York.

Like many of his friends, York had joined the Marines straight from high school, as much because he could think of nothing better to do than out of any desire to fight or feeling of loyalty. The Marines had been good to him though. The lanky, unfocussed school kid had been turned into a lean and mean athlete, quick on the uptake and with complete loyalty in following orders. After a few years his CO had decided that the recently promoted Sergeant York was smart enough to be an officer and encouraged, or rather ordered, him to apply.

Officer training had been a real eye-opener. It taught York to manage men and situations calmly and concisely, something he took to naturally and now thought that Mac could definitely benefit from. But the lure of an officer career was not for York. Once he had taken all the Marines had to offer, he left to make his own way.

At first he'd gone back to Long Island to try his hand at a car dealership, but quickly discovered selling was not one of his attributes. So he'd headed down south, to Texas, to work as a roughneck on an Eagle United drill rig. That had suited him ideally, working with other tough men at a physically demanding job. His intelligence and leadership had quickly shone through and within

two years, York was the crew chief and felt he was well on the way to mastering the strange mix of feeling, instinct and technology that made a good driller.

It was his new wife, Marjory, who first suggested he should move into management. She was obviously keen for him to be based in the Houston office rather than all over the Texan oil patch and, to be honest, the thought had been high in York's mind as well. So he'd moved to a desk job, studied for an MBA in his spare time and over the years had progressed rapidly up the career ladder to his current role as a Vice President at Eagle.

Eagle's move away from its Texas oil base into foreign fields had been as much York's idea as anyone else's. An ideal way to replace the fast declining reserves of the now hopelessly over-drilled state with the prospect of new wealth from overseas.

But what had been a good move had soured when the Board got overly greedy. It was the decision to move into Myanmar that York knew had finally sealed his fate with Eagle United. They'd bought drilling rights and production platforms at rock-bottom prices simply because they had agreed to actively support the plans of the Burmese military rulers.

Now York had all the money he could want, but none of the self-respect that he needed. He was for ever stuck with the dozen other Board members and senior personnel that had taken and then implemented that terrible decision.

York looked with resigned eyes at Mac and answered his latest criticism.

'Mac, when you look at it, the security we have is extremely good. After all, you do have to get onto an offshore platform two hundred miles out to sea and ten thousand miles from Houston before you can even think about trying to access the system.'

Mac grudgingly accepted this, shrugging his shoulders as if to say OK.

‘Yeah, you’re right. I know, York, that you have always put security of the Abzu project as our highest priority. And I support that, you know I do. God knows if anyone found out what we’re really up to there, then I reckon they’d send us to the chair. Our security is good. This incident couldn’t have been predicted. Bring me his computer though, I want to see what files he opened.’

‘We can’t do that,’ York replied, ‘IT had to reinstall the operating system and then scan the disk to another machine and try to repair the damage from the system installation before they could see what he had. He had two areas on his hard disk that had been encrypted. We can’t break the encryption on these areas, at least not without involving the CIA or NSA.’

Mac’s temper once again boiled to the surface, as predictable in many ways as Old Faithful, the geyser in Yellowstone National Park, or perhaps, York thought, a better analogy would be as predictable as showing a red rag to a bull.

‘You can’t break the fucking encryption!’ Mac spat out with furious venom. ‘Why the hell not? Have our Ivy fucking League IT boys been horse-shitting us about how good they are?’

‘Mac, calm down. Our IT is as good as the best. It’s just the encryption that’s all. He used an Antanzic rotating cipher. It’s an easily available software package that really does provide completely secure data protection. We’ve looked into using it for our central servers. Hell, even the big banks use it.’

‘How did you know he had our directory then and had opened up ten per cent of it?’

‘Well Mac, one of the encrypted areas was exactly the same size as the Thailand operating directory on the Luann Server, down to the last kilobyte. And we could also see from the computer’s history file, which we could access after we’d loaded the new operating system, that he had accessed that area three or four hundred times. That’s almost ten per cent of the files. It was generally a regular access every minute or two, so he must have just been surfing through it looking at the odd thing here and there.’

‘Goddamn it, York! Where’s that Limey motherfucker now?’

‘He’s back in England. Spent a day at home with his family and the next morning at Wade’s offices. Didn’t do much over the weekend and since then he’s been back at work with Eider Petroleum.’

‘Who’s he been talking to at Eider? Has he put them onto the scale of our Burma operation and the reserves out there?’

‘We don’t think so. He’s working out of a project office in South West London and hasn’t been anywhere near their head office. We can’t tap his phone of course, just eyeball following, but he hasn’t done anything suspicious since he got back. You’d have guessed if he knew what we were up to, then the first thing he would have done would have been to go straight to the police, but do you know what he did?’

‘No, go on surprise me,’ replied Mac, beginning to calm down again from his latest outburst.

‘He went to the local super-mart with his kids. And when he got back he hung up washing in the backyard and then cut the grass. Virgil says it looked like his wife had a real go at him for getting grass cuttings on the washing.’

‘Well, it’s just as well if he doesn’t know what we’re up to. It’s taken days for those Ivy League buffoons in IT to even get a hint of what was on his computer. What if he’d got off the plane and gone straight to whatever the British CIA is called? That must be somewhere in London.’

‘Yes, it’s on the river Thames, not more than five miles from his home. And if he’d done that he never would have made it through their front door. The two guys Virgil has tailing him would have taken him out as soon as he parked his car.’

‘Who you got tailing him?’

‘Two Russians called Olav and Vlad. Or it could be Gorbachev and Molotov. Whatever they’re called, they’re typical Russians with no connection to us. We pay through Virgil and they

do exactly what he says. Finlay Nichols alone or with all his family, makes no difference to them.'

Mac paced his office again. He was now debating a life or death decision. York had put everything in place and now only awaited his decision. Would he get rid of Finn or let him live? Which option presented the lower risk?

He didn't care about having the Russians kill him. A western life was only one up from a slant eye, and he reckoned a fair few of them had been killed in the pursuit of Eagle interests over the past few years. The military had been most helpful, to say the least, in Eagle United's negotiations with other companies to buy their offshore assets and drilling programmes. They had then assisted Eagle in clearing the areas they needed for the onshore support base and pipeline routes, as well as replacing the Thai border guards with 'friendlies' that didn't even slow the Eagle United trucks down as they crossed the frontier. The payback of course, was the deal they'd made with the government, of which Eagle's part was the completion of project Abzu.

Killing Finlay Nichols though would arouse suspicions. The Russians would probably use a gun and in England that was a sufficiently unusual way to die as to warrant a decent police investigation. The risk, Mac decided, was therefore probably higher in removing him than leaving him.

'OK, have Virgil keep a close tab on him until this thing is over. He goes to the police or British intelligence services then you take him out before he talks. If he stays clean then pull out when Abzu starts for real and leave him be.'

Mac thought to himself for another couple of seconds.

'And do something about our IT department. I want proper security and I want people that can read a laptop hard disk in thirty minutes, not four fucking days. Why the hell did they have to wait for the machine to get to Houston, can't they just copy the hard disk over the phone, encryption and all and then get to work cracking it straight away?'

‘He had an enormous hard disk in it Mac. IT said it would have taken twelve hours to copy it over our Thai to Texas network even if they could connect to it. The network is pretty broad band, but it’s just not designed to handle that amount of data volume.’

Mac turned to look at his friend and confidant, with a questioning look.

‘York, we couldn’t connect to it? Why not? I can plug my laptop into the system at any of our bases. Just connect the cable at the back and away it goes. Why couldn’t they do that with the Limeys’ computer?’

‘The laptop is an AppleMac. Our system is not set up to allow access to them. We always use Windows-based computers.’

‘Well how did he get five gigabytes of Eagle United system files onto it if you can’t even plug the damn thing in?’

York was stumped. How could Finlay Nichols have done that?

‘I don’t know, Mac. I really don’t know.’

Three minutes later Mac had one of the IT Ivy Leaguers in his office and asked him the same question.

Still trying to calm his heart down from the sudden summons to the CEO’s top floor office, the first time he’d been there, Joe Rickman, who like most IT guys had only just graduated from High School and never been near a university let alone the Ivy League, babbled out the answer.

‘The person would have used a memory transfer device, Mr MacAlister. Something like a portable hard drive, an iPod say would do just fine, or maybe a high capacity memory stick. You can get up to sixteen Gigabytes on the latest models, and they give a better transfer rate.’

‘Get me Bill Murray at Luann Alpha! And make it fucking quick,’ Mac barked out.

‘Sir?’

‘Not you, boy. York, you!’

‘What did the memory stick look like?’ It was York talking.

‘Well,’ replied Bill, talking from the platform in Thailand over the speakerphone in Mac’s office, ‘It was black and about the size of my thumb. He had it on a fob with his car keys and put it in his pocket when he transferred the drawings onto it. It was just piping drawings though York. I watched him do it and can swear that he didn’t copy anything else over.’

‘Did you leave him alone with the computer at any time?’ Joe from IT voiced.

‘No. Well only for a couple of minutes whilst I ran through an entry zone check list with a supply boat. But he went to get a cup of tea then.’

Mac hung up the phone without bothering to reply, his rage boiling over.

‘York, you fuckwit. That Limey still has a copy of everything sitting in his goddamn pocket! Get it! Get those Russian guys to snatch it.’

Mac thought for a second, before reversing his earlier decision. The risks on Finlay Nichols had changed now.

‘And I want the Limey dead. I’ll bet you a million bucks that if he hasn’t found out what we’re up to yet then he sure as hell will in the next few days. I want him permanently silenced in a way that won’t bring the Brits down on our heels. I’d kick the arsehole in the face myself if he was here right now.’

Mac looked around and focussed his attention on Joe.

‘And you boy. You keep your mouth shut over everything you’ve seen and heard, OK.’

‘OK. I mean yes,’ replied the startled Joe.

Guildford, near London

Finn wondered if he shouldn't, after all, call in at the local police station to report his stolen laptop in person.

When he'd rung to explain the circumstances of its disappearance they'd said that since it might have gone missing on the plane or at Heathrow they would record it as a possible UK crime and would send him an incident number for his insurance claim. That had been two days ago and Finn was keen to get the claim in. He wanted a new PowerBook, or rather a MacBook Pro as it was now called.

As far as what he should do about Eagle United's involvement in smuggling, Finn had a real battle of his conscience against his family's safety. The information he possessed on his memory stick had itself been gained illegally and wasn't conclusive. It needed someone with Finn's understanding of how the international oil and gas industry operated to put the clues and pointers together and show what it meant, or at least what he thought it meant.

Finn had a driven character. He knew that all too well. His instinctive tendency was to latch onto something and not let go of it until he was satisfied. But he also had his family now, his wife and children, to think of. That acted as an enormous brake on his personality, something that reined in his anger and desire to always put the world to right.

The only way he could prove an allegation of smuggling would be to physically open a truck carrying Abzu and see what it was, even remove a sample if that was possible. And the only way he would know when a consignment was on the move and the route it would take to whatever destination it was going to was by hacking into Eagle United's Myanmar logistics centre. If the Thai operation was run from Luann, then it probably figured the Myanmar operation was run from Sittwe, the hub platform for the Burma offshore gas gathering system. Sittwe would have to rate as one of

the most difficult places in the world to get too, seeing as it was an offshore gas platform hundreds of miles from the coast of a closed country run by a murderous junta who would no doubt be actively involved in protecting what was quite possibly one of their best exports.

Still the memory stick contained good information and for all Finn knew it could well be the missing link in some ongoing investigation. He knew that he really ought to do something about it. He eventually decided he would have to pass the information on to someone. But he also decided prudence required that he should first of all wait a while, perhaps for six months. That way, if Eagle's operation was suddenly blown wide open there would be little suspicion pointing back to him as the source of their downfall.

Finally, Finn reckoned the only person he could pass the information to and explain its importance in confidence was Steve Sharpe. Although Finn didn't really know him all that well, he felt that Steve was someone he could trust. Steve was a detective in the serious crime squad of London's Metropolitan police. He also happened to own a flat in the same central London building that Finn and Liz had their old apartment in, the one they rented out now. Finn had met Steve on several occasions, normally when all apartment owners got together to discuss repair or painting work on the old Victorian building. He'd found the younger detective to be a pretty normal sort of guy, significantly more down to earth than the other owners, who were generally lawyers or accountants and, as such, inclined to delusions of self-importance.

Having decided to wait a while before telling anyone of his suspicions about Eagle United Energy, Finn quickly put the Wade job to the back of his mind and focussed on catching up with the action at Eider Petroleum. Pipelay had finished a couple of weeks ago and the project was now mobilising the trenching and diving spreads.

There was a lot of diving required on this project and, as always, it was amongst the most risky operations in offshore construction. Finn would accompany the diving vessel along with two other Eider reps for the six-week campaign to connect up the wells and pipelines so that he could ensure the work was conducted to his own personal, technical and safety standards.

The divers themselves lived for a month at a time in pressurised steel chambers deep inside the dive support vessel, and were transferred to the bottom of the sea in similarly pressurised diving bells. This way they stayed at seabed pressure all the time and were able to work without the long and time consuming decompression stops required with surface based diving. Finn didn't envy the divers. Not for one second did he envy the thought of living with eleven other guys in a metal container more claustrophobic and less comfortable than a typical London tube carriage.

All the procedures and risk assessments were completed. Three two-man client teams had been selected for the vessels in the pipeline trenching spread and all that remained now was the notifications to the Admiralty, coastguard and fishermen as well as a courtesy update to the DTI regarding their 'construction of a major hazard pipeline' permit. Finn would do them tomorrow. Today he would catch up on the gossip and try to clear his Eider email inbox.

This was his fifth day back in the UK and the first time he'd been back to the Guildford project office in a month.

The first day he'd devoted to packing away the holiday, cutting the grass and going through the post that had arrived while they were away. The second day he had spent at Wade's offices in the City. And the third and fourth days had been the weekend.

Wade were as confused as Finn about the lack of a positive identification of a sour gas reservoir. A metallurgical analysis on the broken turbine blades had conclusively identified hydrogen sulphide

as the cause of embrittlement, so it had to have been in the fuel gas. They were now looking into the possibility that the power station owners had deliberately introduced H₂S into the fuel gas at the plant in some kind of elaborate insurance fraud.

The valve gaskets Finn had sent back were still being tested, with initial results expected within a week. They would provide conclusive proof of whether or not sour gas had ever been through the offshore platforms.

The directors of Wade were very happy with the idea of an insurance fraud – in fact they were positively ecstatic about it. If they could prove a scam then the power station insurance would be voided and they wouldn't have to pay out a penny. Best of all it meant that the offshore system was free of hydrogen sulphide. Finn's valve gaskets coming back with a clean bill of health would be the final conclusive proof.

Now it was Monday morning and Finn had driven the familiar route to the project offices to return to his bread and butter work. He was two hundred grand richer than he had been a month ago, had done his James Bond bit, got a free holiday for his family and was glad to be going back to work. Things couldn't have been better. Well, perhaps it could have been better he reflected. The fee from Wade had already been spent in Liz's mind and nothing was left for Finn to buy new car. He had eighty thousand miles on his five year old Audi A8 and although the big car was quite capable of doubling that, he really fancied something new. Finn would have to talk very seriously with his accountant about the level of tax he could get away with paying on Wade's fee.

Hounslow, West London

Michael Barashnikof, Gregory Slavich and Virgil Thomason were in a hotel room a mile or so from Heathrow airport. They were discussing the best way to get the USB memory stick and to dispose of its owner. The two Russians were excited that the surveillance job had suddenly turned into a hit job as it meant substantially more money.

‘The stick, you say, is on a key fob with his car keys,’ Gregory was remarking. ‘And we can assume he probably drives the same route to his office every day. We followed him on the bike this morning and there were three points early in the journey where he was trapped, stationary in traffic. Once he got clear of the traffic onto the expressway though, he was gone. Disappeared in a cloud of dust as you say.’

‘So it is very simple. We pull him from the car when he is boxed in, shoot him in the knee caps like the Irishmen like to do, then twice in the head and take his car. It will look like a car theft by the Irish.’

Virgil’s team had only been in England for five days, the first time for all of them. They were staying at a hotel near Heathrow, a Marriott at Virgil’s insistence because with an American chain he was assured of a proper shower and a decent steak. Virgil had heard that British plumbing was as mean as their food and if there was one thing in this world he really liked, it was a decent hot shower.

‘We can’t shoot him,’ said Virgil in an exasperated voice. When would these Russians ever learn? ‘I specifically said no shooting. The Brits don’t do guns and I don’t think the Irish come over here and steal their cars. You shoot him and we’ll have all the cops in London looking for us. Just show him the gun to scare him but don’t use it. Pull him from the car and kill him in an accidental way like breaking his neck. Anyway, why can’t you get him when he gets into his car in the morning, less people will see you there than in the middle of traffic.’

Gregory was an experienced hit man. He'd learned his trade on the Moscow circuit after quickly dropping out of the apprenticeship his father had worked so hard to get for him and his brother. His brother though, had stuck to it and several years later emigrated to America with his family, where he now made a good living as a twenty-four hour emergency plumber. He had sponsored Gregory to also move to America in the hope that the errant younger brother would mend his ways and knuckle down to hard work and live the American dream. Gregory had different ideas though, and after his work visa came through he dropped out again and headed down to Miami to meet up with old friends and his old way of life. From there he acquired an American passport via a long since broken marriage and moved across to Texas when another friend had put him in touch with Virgil.

Gregory didn't like Virgil. The Texan was too brash and too big. The muscles on him were obviously worked up in a gym and only for show. Gregory was far leaner, and also far meaner. However, dislike or not, Gregory needed Virgil as he was the contact man with the client. Virgil was the only person who knew the client's identity and similarly knew who the hit was and what he had done to warrant the three of them being flown at such haste from Houston.

Since they had arrived, Virgil had been acting like a fish out of water. He was too cautious in many respects, but also foolishly reckless in others. Renting the Avis car and booking in at a large hotel owned by an international chain were good examples of his stupidity.

It was Gregory who had bought the motorbike, paying cash to a private seller he found in a bike magazine and giving a false name and address for the registration document. And it had been Gregory who had gone off with Michael on the first evening to find a pistol. Gregory knew how gangs worked and in that respect London was no different to any other city. If you wanted a handgun fast you simply had to turn up in the right neighbourhood and look for the

gang members. One of them would always be able to produce something pretty much instantly if the cash was there waiting.

Making the hit at the guy's own house was another example of Virgil's foolish thinking, something that marked him out as the amateur he was. Gregory explained, 'No, we don't attack at the house. We can't get him there without breaking the gates across the drive. That would look too suspicious, like we only after him and not the random target you say we should do. Maybe also he have hidden surveillance camera at his house. Then our picture will be at the airport when we leave. Much better to get him in traffic from the motorbike, with helmets on.'

'OK,' said Virgil. Gregory did after all have a good reason not to make the attack at the house. 'It's settled then. We hit him tomorrow morning when he's stationary in traffic. Gregory, you ride the bike with Michael as a pillion passenger. Show him the gun so he knows you mean business, it should scare him enough to ensure he doesn't try to run. Pull him out and work him over. I don't know about actually taking the car. Do it if you can, but if you do make sure you ditch it pretty quick.

'Once the hit is done then make a quick exit and we'll meet up at the car park in Richmond Park where you can leave the bike and we can drive to the airport. I'll get us booked on a midday flight back to the States and let the hotel know we are checking out early tomorrow. Is that all clear to you?'

Michael and Gregory looked at each other. It was shit working with such an idiot. The only good thing was that Virgil would be safely out of the way sitting in a car park chewing on his nails when the job went down.

'One more thing.'

'Yes, Virgil.'

'Don't forget to get his car keys and make sure the memory stick is on them.'

Gregory almost screamed out loud.

Wimbledon, West London

One of Victoria's duties when daddy was at home was to make sure he woke up on time in the morning. Victoria herself never had any problem at all with waking up – one minute she was asleep, the next she was wide awake and out of bed.

This morning was extra special because Finn was going to take her to school on his way to work. Yesterday had been the start of the new term and she had worn her new summer uniform for the first time. Her hat, a boater was its name, was the same as last year, but it fitted her properly now. Well almost. And the rest of her uniform was all brand new. Mummy had taken her to school yesterday because she wanted to chat with the teachers and other mummies. But today it was Finn's turn.

She jumped out of bed and slowly tiptoed across the hall and into mummy and daddy's bedroom. She was as quiet as a church mouse, just in case it was too early to get up. She silently made her way around to Finn's side of the bed and gently patted him on the face. He opened his eyes, looked at her and then the clock. He winked and whispered quietly.

'Hello, Petal.'

'Is it time to get up, Daddy?'

'Oh, I think so.'

Victoria spun on her heels and nipped back into her bedroom to start putting her new uniform on. 'Don't forget you're taking me to school today, Daddy.'

'Shush! I haven't forgotten, Petal,' Finn whispered back.

'Do you think we can go early and have a Starbucks while we wait in the playground for the bell?'

Finn was out of bed now and, wearing only his boxer shorts, had crossed into her room. 'Depends on how quickly we can all get ready and get Christopher fed and dressed. Don't forget to put a tee

shirt on as well as your vest beneath that dress. It's still far too cold for the dress alone.'

By eight o'clock Victoria was ready to roll. They had eaten their breakfast, cleaned up the mess Christopher had made all over himself, waited until he used the potty, put a nappy on him and got him dressed, shoes and socks included.

'Can we go now?' she asked

'Ten minutes, babe, just need to wait for mummy to come down and take care of Christopher.' The whole idea of him taking Victoria to school was that it would allow Liz a once in a blue moon lie in.

Eager to get away, Victoria knew how to take care of that one.

'Christopher,' she asked in her nicest little brother talking to voice.

'Yeeeeath.'

'Do you want to go upstairs and wave bye bye from mummy's room?'

And as if by magic, Christopher was on the stairs, shooting up on all fours shouting, 'Mummy, Mummy, bye bye!'

They waved to the little face that popped up from behind the curtains, standing on the window seat of mummy's bedroom. It took a lot of waving, even to the point that Finn opened the sunroof so that Christopher could see them in the car waving up at him.

They waited for the big steel gate to slide to one side, pulled out slowly, and were off, on the short car ride to Starbucks and school.

Mrs Johnston, further up the road, watched from behind the net curtains as the two men finally got on the black motorbike and pulled away from their parking spot.

'Just me worrying to myself,' she said to the empty room. 'And to think I was about to call the police.'

She had noticed the bike and the two men standing, no, it was definitely loitering, suspiciously near it in jeans and leather jackets about half an hour ago. She was pretty sure they didn't belong to the flats they were parked outside of. But then you never could tell these days. There were so many comings and goings.

She watched the bike disappear up the road and silently cursed the property developer who had bought what had once been a lovely house, extended it to double the original size and turned it into lots of small flats. She particularly didn't like the way he had cut down the tall road-front hedge and replaced it with a low brick wall fronting a tarmac monstrosity of a car park.

The Honda Fireblade followed the target's car at a distance he would be unlikely to detect. The hit had been late this morning, obviously not quite as predictable as they had assumed, so Gregory was a little closer to him than he would otherwise have been, just in case the route suddenly altered and he lost him. True to his suspicions as the hit emerged onto the main Parkside road he turned in the opposite direction to yesterday. Gregory closed the gap a little more and behind him felt Michael reach inside his jacket for the shoulder-holstered pistol.

They were heading into an area with shops on the left and Wimbledon Park on the right. Shops would mean traffic lights, or roundabouts, perfect locations for the hit to go down. Gregory didn't want to go too far down this road, as it was a location he didn't know and he didn't want to risk getting lost on the way to the meet-up with Virgil. It was bad enough having to remember to keep the bike on the wrong side of the road. Navigating an area he hadn't been in before was an extra complication he could do without.

Gregory shifted down a gear and was closing the gap in earnest when the hit suddenly pulled into a vacant parking spot on the left of the road. The kerb side passenger door popped open and a little girl jumped out wearing a stripy dress, bright red blazer and a hat. Gregory slowed and rode past the parked car, watching in his wing

mirror as the driver's door opened and the hit also got out. He took the next right, up a side street, pulled over and switched the bike off. They watched as the hit and the girl entered a coffee shop.

'He has his daughter with him, Gregory.' Michael said through the open visor of his helmet. 'It is why he was later today. He has parked in a good place for the hit. Maybe not take the car, but for sure get the keys and take him down.'

'No,' replied Gregory. 'See the girl is wearing a school uniform. The man is taking her to school. They have gone into that coffee shop. He will have hot coffee in his hand when he comes out. It's not good, too easy to recognise if you have coffee burns over your pretty face. We will let him finish his coffee, drop the kid at her school and then take him straight afterwards.'

Although this was true, Gregory was not completely without feeling. He would rather not kill a man in front of his child if he could help it.

'Virgil will be getting worried, we are running later than planned,' remarked Michael.

'Virgil can go fuck himself. It will do him good to sit and sweat at the meeting point. Shows we used our initiative and are not his donkeys, eh.'

Starbucks to the school was only a two or three minute drive. Finn parked in another vacant spot and still holding his tall double shot latte the two of them walked the final twenty yards to the school gate and through to the playground. Victoria had an espresso cup containing warm milk with a dash of Finn's latte in one hand and half an almond croissant in the other. It was one of her favourite treats.

Gregory and Michael waited a good twenty minutes at the far end of the tree lined road, keeping the parked car just in view. They discussed the pros and cons of making the hit here, but again it was Gregory who said no, he preferred nearer the expressway, where they could make a quicker getaway.

Finally Finn emerged from the school gates, chatting to one of the mothers as they walked to their cars. He got back in his car and headed onto the Parkside Road and off in the direction of the A3.

Once away from the school, Finn put his foot down as he would have to get a move if he wasn't to be late for the ten o'clock weekly meeting with the installation contractor. He caught the first traffic light on green, jumped the second as it went from orange, and when halted by the third was almost at the front of the queue. He was relieved that the traffic waiting to get on the A3 was lighter than normal, probably, he thought, because he had missed the worst of the rush hour.

Waiting in traffic for the lights to turn green Finn noticed the black motorbike coming up in the driver's side door mirror. A slight confusion ran through his mind. I've seen that bike already today. It was going the other way when I got out of the car at Starbucks. There aren't that many black bikes with two people on them, especially ones that ride without headlights on, so it must be the same one.

Finn watched the bike close up and come to a halt right next to his door. That's a bit weird? Why doesn't he go ahead to the front of the lights? It's only a small Renault Clio ahead so there's plenty of room to get through. Finn checked his backpack was on the passenger seat next to him, away from the bike, and not where it could be snatched. They must be casing out cars, hoping to snatch a bag. Well you're not going to get mine, sonny. He clicked the button on the dashboard console, automatically locking all four car doors.

He turned his head away from the console switch and looked straight up into the eyes of the rider. Immediately he saw the driver and the passenger were both intently staring at him. Adrenaline cursed into his veins raising him to a high level of awareness and anxiety. He felt the blood around his cheeks and eyes rush. Finn suddenly knew this wasn't normal, it wasn't right, it wasn't just bag

snatching. I'm boxed in front and rear and on both sides by London traffic, I'm trapped. Maybe they want my car, that's why there's two of them, one for the car and one for the bike. The panic was rising in him as he quickly looked around him for a way out.

He heard his door handle being pulled, shot back to look at the bike and something caught his eye. In utter disbelief Finn looked at what the now dismounted pillion passenger had in his hand. He stared directly down the barrel of a gun that was pointing right at his face.

Jesus!

Time seemed to slow, Finn went numb, looking only at the gun, unable to move, barely able to think. It's black, looks modern, Jesus it's big! And it's pointing directly at my face. He was completely frozen in shock. These are the last seconds of my life and I can't move. I should do something other than just look at the gun. I'm about to be shot like a caged dog. My beautiful daughter in her fine red blazer and straw boater was the last person I love to see me alive. Poor girl will have to live with it forever. Will Christopher remember the morning he waved goodbye to dad for the last time? I should do something. I can't just let them shoot me.

The urgent tugging on the door handle combined with the hard crack as the pistol barrel tapped violently on the window momentarily broke the spell of the gun and instantly a voice that had been shouting somewhere deep inside finally made its way into his conscious mind.

'Finn, run! Run, Finn, run! Hit the accelerator. Do it now or we won't see you again!'

The screaming voice was a montage of Elisabeth, Victoria and Christopher – the most potent and urgent parts of each character. It was so loud and so commanding that he immediately and without thinking obeyed. His right foot shot from the brake pedal to the accelerator, stamping it to the floor.

The 3.7 litre V8 surged into life. There was no delay in the automatic gearbox, which was still in drive, and the car instantly

leapt forward. He was still staring directly at the gun as the muzzle flashed and he actually saw a bullet exit the barrel.

The impact slung him forward, throwing his head down onto his chest. He instantly recovered and looked up to see he had rear ended the Clio and was rapidly shunting it forward, his foot still hard on the accelerator. The Clio driver was fighting his steering wheel, no her steering wheel, it's a girl. Her eyes are wide open with panic and she's looking at me in her rear view mirror, looking directly into my eyes with a mixture of panic and questioning.

The Clio driver had the brake pedal pushed the floor, the toes on both her feet clenched together to help resist the force from behind. But the powerful V8 and permanent four-wheel drive of the big Audi were easily overcoming the resistance and pushing her forward and away to the right. Finn couldn't have taken his foot off the accelerator even if he wanted to, and right now stopping was the very last thing he wanted to do.

Finn was trying to focus on saving himself, but his mind kept jumping around. The gun shot at me! Did the bullet hit me? I saw it! I actually saw the bullet come out of the gun.

'It's a royal barge, dear. Why did you get a car that big?'

'Because, dear wife, with two children we need a lot of space and you wouldn't let me buy a Volvo estate because you think it's an old man's car. Because, dear wife, three hundred horsepower and permanent four wheel drive will shove anything out of the way.'

Why didn't the airbags go off? Where's the motorbike?

The Clio gave up all resistance and the Audi flew forward, scrabbling to make the left hand turn onto the A3 and accelerating like a bat out of hell down the slip road.

Finn finally regained control of his mind and his body. He passed the speed camera sneakily hidden behind a big road sign. A glance at the speedo showed the car accelerating past seventy, the autobox shifting seamlessly from second to third. The camera flashed, making Finn involuntarily duck.

Where's the bike? Did he really shoot at me? Or am I in really big trouble for shunting a car off the road and driving like a loony at a stupid speed? Finn breathed deeply. Speed. I need to stop accelerating or I'm going to lose control of the car.

A glance in the rear view mirror showed another flash, not another camera but another gunshot, another bullet racing towards Finn's head. The bike was real, not imagined and he could see it was now gaining rapidly, really rapidly. The pillion passenger had one arm tight around the rider's waist. The other arm, the one holding the gun, was in the air, also trying to come around to hold the rider's waist. They're coming up the wrong side of the car for him to get a clear shot. The passenger was banging the rider's helmet with the gun and indicating with the pistol to go to the other side.

Michael's heart was racing. The hit had gone wrong, he'd fired his gun in instinct when he saw the target suddenly lurch forwards, but the rapid movement of the car meant he fired through the rear passenger window, missing the mark by half a metre. The big Audi had pushed the small red car out of the way with incredible ease and had broken away from them before Gregory had come to his senses and got the bike in gear. Michael would have taken another shot before getting back on the bike if he'd known Gregory would be so slow.

Gregory is not right for this game; his reactions are far too slow, Michael thought. It is time to find a new partner, someone who is more reliable. That business with Gregory's squeamishness about taking out the target with his daughter around, because Michael had seen clearly through the excuse, and now taking forever to get the bike moving. It all showed that Gregory was losing his edge.

Once they got underway they gained quickly on the Audi, Gregory leaning down low onto the fuel tank and accelerating the bike as fast as it would go. Michael, also low and holding onto

Gregory, sensed the opportunity for another shot. He raised his free arm and fired two off in quick succession. Both bullets were off the kill, hitting the car but not the driver.

Michael could see Gregory was coming up on the wrong side of the car now. He wouldn't be able to shoot properly from the driver's side, as he was right-handed. The bike needed to come up on the left of the car when everything was going so quickly. Michael banged Gregory's helmet hard with the butt of the pistol and flicked it to the left in front of his visor. Move over the other side, you idiot!

No car can out-accelerate a big bike, thought Finn. They are crossing behind me and will be on me in a second or two. Oh god, I've only got a second left to live! I'm dead again.

The bike was growing quickly in his rear view mirror, almost directly behind him now. Finn suddenly realised there was an opportunity immediately and took it. He stamped on the brakes. No bike can out-brake a car. The bonnet of the A8 nose-dived toward the tarmac as the ventilated disc brakes bit hard and the wide tyres tore at the tarmac. Finn felt the judder of the antiskid ABS system immediately through the brake pedal. The wide tyres and light aluminium bodywork meant the Audi shed its speed at a phenomenal rate.

A glance at the central rear view mirror showed a manic swerve as the bike tried to get out of the way of the two tonnes of aluminium it was about to rear end. Finn could see that the rider had messed up the swerve, losing the balance of the bike due to the pillion passenger not reacting with him. There was another flash, another gunshot. Finn moved his head down and felt the zing of a bullet shoot past him and out of the windscreen. Immediately after he felt a satisfying thump as the bike caught the rear quarter of the car.

Michael knew he was about to fall from the bike. He'd lost his grip and balance as Gregory swerved violently away from the back of the Audi. Even though he was falling, Michael saw the opportunity for a good headshot and immediately took it.

As he started to come off the bike Michael tensed his body to slide along the road. His mind ran quickly over what he was wearing. The leather jacket was good, the blue jeans bad. He was going to lose the skin off his legs and backside.

Michael didn't anticipate the impact with the car though. The bike felt like it had been hit in the side with a sledgehammer. It was only a glancing blow on the rear of the bike, but it was enough to throw Michael's unbalanced upper body across to slam onto the boot lid. He knew his right leg was smashed at the knee, but worse he was trapped, held to the bike by the side of the car. He felt himself dragging along the car, momentarily noticed he was falling off the back of the bike, caught a fleeting glimpse of the road, a wheel and then nothing.

Finn, still braking hard, felt a rush of immense satisfaction and relief as he realised he'd hit the bike. It wasn't a proper square on impact, but enough to unseat the guy with the gun.

The bike shot up the left hand side of the car and Finn instinctively turned into it, trying to shove it off the road.

From his peripheral vision he saw the pillion passenger dragging up the side windows, and then watched as the wing mirror unhooked him and he was gone. A gratifying lurch of the car was enough for Finn to know he'd run the guy over.

The bike was in front now, regaining balance and accelerating away.

One side of Finn's mind was astounded at what has happened. Reliving snatches of the scenes, interspersed with the thought that he just deliberately killed someone. The other side of his mind though, was watching the bike pulling away from him in a cold and calculating manner. It looks a bit wobbly, not surprising after

running into a car. The rider is getting it under control. A flood of anger ran through him. That bastard just tried to kill me and now he's running away!

Finn stamped back down on the accelerator, jaw gripped tightly together. Within less than a minute, he'd gone from trapped animal to hunter, hell bent on killing not one, but two people that day.

The rider had both hands full trying to escape. There's no way he can kill me now. I have two tonnes of space frame aluminium surrounding me in the safest car in the world. He can out accelerate me, but I know the A3 like the back of my hand. The bends and humps mean he'll have to either slow down or lose control, and if he slows down I'm going to ram him.

Heading out of London, even in rush hour, the A3 was almost clear. Coming the other way though it was completely solid. Accelerating, Finn passed ASDA at eighty, momentarily reaching ninety at the next speed camera before braking hard to seventy and feeling the car skip to the right as it took the gentle left hand corner at Robin Hood junction.

The road opened into a three lane twisting urban carriageway. A brief section of straight road saw the bike pull away from him again. Finn floored the throttle as he exited the corner and the car responded by shifting down two gears and taking off again. By the end of the straight Finn was close to a hundred and twenty and the Audi was still pulling strongly. The rider, he could see, was flat on his fuel tank, knees and arms tucked in as he leaned left and then right, braking heavily for the corner to keep his damaged bike on the road.

Past another speed camera, this one set to go off at fifty-eight, just eight miles per hour over the speed limit.

Finn switched his headlights on, main beam from bright white Xenon bulbs burning through the dull and overcast morning and straight into the bike's rear view mirrors. He passed two cars as he

seamlessly moved from the inside to the outside and then back to the middle lane. He went to undertake a third car, but it tried to move into the inside lane as he was passing, tearing off his driver's side wing mirror and bouncing away in shock.

If the bike accelerates again he's not going to make the next right hander, where the road drops quickly on the other side of the flyover at New Malden. Finn urged the bike to accelerate and to his joy he saw it pulling away from him on the run up to the flyover. As the rider crested the ridge Finn could still see him clearly, see the bike go light as the road dropped away quickly beneath it. He's going too fast, he's scrabbling to make the right hand bend in the road, drifting too far and too quickly towards the left hand side barriers.

Finn crested the flyover a few seconds later and felt the car drop away sickeningly quickly below him. Full brakes, ABS juddering, he began to slow safely and in reasonable control.

He searched for and then reacquired the bike as it bottomed out at the base of the flyover. Leaned right over it just avoided hitting the barriers.

Shit! He made it and is going to get away.

Gregory felt the cold sweat all over him. That was a close call, no skill, just pure luck he didn't go into the barrier. He had the bike at the very limit of its traction, leaning so far to the right he could feel his knee brushing the tarmac. It was a perfect racing line through the bend.

Gregory knew he was pulling away from the Audi, slowly but certainly increasing the distance between him and it. He could feel that he was winning in this race. He was going to live to fight another day.

A car is in the way! It's right on my line and I can't do anything to avoid it, oh sweet Jesus! In the last second of his life Gregory closed his eyes and apologised. Sorry, dad.

The bike rear ended the Volvo estate at over a hundred – a closure speed of at least fifty miles per hour faster than the car. The rider, still leaned over to his right disappeared right into the car, his bike going underneath and momentarily throwing the rear of the car up into the air and off to the left, before the remains of it spun off over the barriers and down toward the houses below.

Finn shot past the crash, quickly slowing to a complete halt further down the road. He sat at the wheel for a few seconds, taking in what had happened, trying to make sense of it.

A murder attempt on a London street in broad daylight. It's so unreal I can't understand it. Why am I suddenly so far outside the realm of an acceptable, law abiding life? I am a normal person, one of the millions of good guys that make up society. I'm not a gangster or someone with a price on their head. Those two on the bike saw me earlier. They were clearly looking at me when I got out with Victoria for coffee. They positively identified me. There is no way this was mistaken identity. I'm Finn Nichols and I've just deliberately killed two people.

Eagle United Energy. It has to be them and whatever they're up to in Burma. There's simply no other explanation.

The car was a mess. Broken windows everywhere, shards of glass all over him and the seats. One side rear view mirror was hanging by wires, the other was not there anymore. The passenger headrest was nothing but torn leather and foam padding, destroyed by that first bullet. The one, Finn thought, which was going directly at him before he lurched forward into the Clio. If Liz had been sitting there she would be minus her head now.

Once again a wave of anger surged through him, this time aimed at the faceless Eagle United Energy. Those bastards! Those fucking bastards are going to pay for this!

His rational mind came back to him. What if they had a back-up? Someone else making their way toward me right now?

Finn looked in the rear view mirror as he shifted the autobox back into drive and took the New Malden slip road off the A3 and onto a roundabout. He headed into the solid traffic making its way towards Kingston. Headlights off, he wound down the remains of the broken windows and at a set of lights leaned over to the passenger seat and shook some of the glass out of his hair.

A police car went screaming past in the opposite direction, heading toward the A3 with lights and siren blaring. They didn't even look at Finn in the anonymous but battered, dark blue Audi.

Interestingly, he didn't feel any guilt at having just killed two people. There was none of the aftershock he might have expected. No uncontrollable shaking, no cold sweating. He felt nothing but anger and simmering rage at the faceless corporation. Maybe if the two men he'd killed had been innocent bystanders he might be feeling some guilt or remorse. But they hadn't been innocent, they weren't bystanders and they didn't deserve his guilt.

He thought back to Christopher waving from the bedroom window and the image of Liz just visible behind, looking annoyed that Finn and Victoria had slipped out of the house early and deprived her of an extra few minutes in bed. Life was too precious to end it on a sour note. From now on he promised he would always leave home with her happy.

Richmond Park, West London

At first Virgil had been delightfully surprised. He'd been sitting in the car park for only ten minutes when he saw a herd of deer pass not more than a few yards in front of him. Amazing, reindeer running wild through a park in the middle of London. He got out to take a photograph as there was no way in hell the boys back in Houston would believe this without proof.

That had been over two hours ago. Now Virgil was getting increasingly anxious. He knew there was some flexibility in the timing, but this was far too late. Where the hell were those damned Russians? Nichols would have left home at half past seven, like the day before. Gregory had reckoned that they would take him down within fifteen minutes of leaving home, before he got onto the highway. Then they would circle around and head into Richmond Park to meet up here where Virgil was sitting. Even allowing for delays and traffic that meant they should have been here by eight fifteen. It was now nine thirty and they were over an hour late. The sons-of-bitches hadn't even bothered to call him on the cellphones he had bought especially for this kind of eventuality and weren't responding to his increasingly frequent attempts to reach them.

He would wait another half-hour, maybe an hour at most. If they still hadn't turned up or made contact by then he would have to assume that something had seriously gone wrong and take appropriate action. With or without the two hit men Virgil would be on the early afternoon flight he'd booked back to Houston. The only comfort in this mess was that the stupid Russians didn't know who they were working for. Virgil had been the only person they had ever met or spoken too.

He turned up the radio in the car and listened to a Jennifer Lopez song. Bored and anxious he realised he was getting twitchy – continuously on the lookout for a police cruiser. Damn Russians!

The radio automatically switched over to a traffic news update, from ‘the Capital FM flying eye. Russ boy, how’s it going up there?’

‘Well, Chris, we’re circling above the A3 at New Malden where we can see major tailbacks both out of town and town bound. Police have closed the southbound carriageway and we can see several ambulances and a fire engine in attendance at what looks like a very serious accident. The southbound tailback runs all the way to Putney roundabout and town bound is now backed up to the Crooked Billet underpass. Another accident is blocking the Parkside to A3 junction, where a car is stranded in the middle of the junction and there is yet another ambulance and police cars in attendance near the Robin Hood roundabout. My advice is to find another route at the moment. These accidents look like they will take a while to clear.’

Virgil snapped to attention, A3 Wimbledon to New Malden. Something had gone seriously wrong. It was time to leave. He started the hire car, swung around the gravel car park and headed out on the route to Heathrow.

Kingston, West London

Five miles away Finn was listening to the same traffic update.

Good, no mention of my car. Hope the driver of the Volvo is OK. He should be though, driving a big tank of a car like that.

Finn was making his way slowly round the Kingston one way system, not really knowing where he was headed or what he would do. He was using the time to think and to wait and see if he would get some reaction other than just the anger he felt.

Despite the calm exterior he always presented, Finn was quite a nervous guy by nature. He was fully expecting to break out in violent shakes or go into shock, or something. But no, there was still nothing. Nothing, that is, but anger.

Eagle United Energy was to blame, that was for sure. The work he'd done for Wade was the only thing it could possibly be connected with. They must believe he knew enough about what they were up to in Burma to warrant killing him. But Finn didn't have anything other than spurious references to Abzu to prove anything. Hell, he didn't even know what it was that they were smuggling. Sure he had gun holes in his car to show that he had been attacked, but Finn had smeared the two assassins over the tarmac of the A3. If he went to the police now they would certainly detain him. And right now the one thing he knew for absolute certain was the anger he felt would not be detained. Not for a minute, not for a second. Running for the cover of the police was therefore not an option he would entertain any further.

The best form of defence is to attack: Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 500 BC.

The best way to attack a seemingly invincible enemy is hard and fast, and where and when they least expect: Finn Nichols against David Saunders in the school dinner queue, 1980.

Finn would attack because that's what he did. He was a problem solver and not a problem avoider. Abzu was the problem and the problem, as well as its solution, was in Burma. Finn would therefore get himself onto Eagle's Sittwe platform, the hub platform for the Burmese offshore network. Once there he would download their logistics data and see what they were up to. Then he would bring down the whole pack of cards quickly and thoroughly enough that it would leave them without the ability to counter attack.

It sounded difficult, but it would be easy. The seemingly difficult was always possible with a little thought. Fishing boat to the platform, a night-time boarding up one of the escape ladders. Bribe the first Burmese worker he met. Email whatever conclusive proof he could find to someone who could do something. That would be the plan. Details to be worked out and refined en route.

Better take plenty of money, he thought. Money was always the key to solving details. Enough for bribes, equipment, travel and living costs. And who would he email whatever it was he found on the Sittwe platform server to? Detective Inspector Steve Sharpe for sure, as well as MI5, MI6, the CIA, CNN and the BBC and any other group he could think of or could find an email address or phone number for on the Internet.

The first requirements, therefore, were for a large amount of cash and to get to Burma.

Finn rang Lloyds TSB in St Helier, Jersey, on his car phone. It was the branch that currently had the two hundred thousand pounds from Wade sitting in it until Finn's accountant figured out a way of getting it into an onshore branch without paying too much in the way of tax. He gave them his phone bank identity and, when requested, the third and ninth letters from his security password.

'Hello, Mr Nichols. How can I help you today?'

'Hi. Look, I'm on my way to Heathrow and I need to take a chunk of cash out. Can you arrange it as quickly as possible?'

'Yes certainly, we'll see what we can arrange. Can you tell me how much money and where you'd like to collect it. You will need

to bring proof of your identity with you and it will need to be a main branch for a large amount.'

'I'll pick it up at any branch you tell me that is near Heathrow and I need twenty five thousand pounds. Ten thousand in Sterling and the rest in US Dollars, if you have them. Otherwise whatever you have in dollars and the remainder in Sterling. I'm on my way to Heathrow now, so can you arrange it and call me back as quickly as possible.'

They may not answer the phone within four rings as they used to promise, but at least the Lloyds TSB offshore centre was comfortable with arranging large cash withdrawals at short notice from its worldwide network of branches.

'OK, Mr Nichols, we will see what we can do and call you back within fifteen minutes. Are you on the contact number you supplied the bank?'

The next phone call Finn made was to Liz. This was altogether more difficult.

'Finn, you know I'm busy, what do you want?'

She was still angry at him from the morning.

'Liz, listen to me, this is serious. Put Chris in the car, go and get Victoria out of school and I want you all to go to your mother's in Dorset.'

'Don't be stupid, I'm not going to mum's.'

He felt her hesitate as if she just realised that something was wrong. Maybe it was something in his voice that had told her he wasn't joking because suddenly she was serious.

'What's happened? Why are you saying this? Are you all right?'

'Yes, I'm fine but something has happened. I don't know how everything fits together, but I don't think it's safe at home right now. Just get in the car and go. I want you out of the house in five minutes.'

‘You’re serious aren’t you? What’s happened? Tell me, Finn. You’re scaring me.’

What should he say? Tell her the truth or try to make it less dramatic? He knew there was only one answer to that. If he lied it would only upset her more when she knew the truth. And if he lied she probably wouldn’t understand that he wanted her out of harm’s way as quickly as possible.

‘Someone just tried to kill me. They shot at me in my car from point blank range with a gun.’

‘Oh my god! Finn, are you all right?’

‘Yes, I said I’m fine. Liz, just get in the car. Get Victoria and get to your mum’s. Once you’re there call the police. I think they will be expecting a call from one of us by that time. I can’t talk anymore, were wasting time. Please just do this.’

‘But—’

‘Liz, just get in the car and go! Now!’

‘OK, we’re going.’

Heathrow Airport, London

Forty minutes later Finlay Nichols showed his passport at the Lloyds TSB he had been told to go to, picked up ten thousand pounds in Sterling, twenty five thousand US dollars and, as a change to his original request, a further ten thousand euros. He went back to his wreck of a car and drove the short distance to Heathrow Terminal Three, where he parked in the short term car park, picked up his backpack and headed to the SAS electronic ticket booth to buy and collect an e-ticket for the lunchtime flight to Trondheim.

Why Trondheim? Well Finn knew Trondheim and the surrounding area very well. He knew there was a lunchtime flight everyday and that he could quickly get a ticket and a guaranteed seat for it via his Star Alliance gold frequent flyer card. He also knew he could pick up a hire car at Trondheim airport and drive it anywhere in Scandinavia without border control. In particular, being a small airport in the part of Norway that wasn't more than thirty miles wide, Trondheim had the advantage that he would be off the plane, into a car, and over the Swedish border within an hour and a half of landing. His final two reasons for going to Trondheim were the short flight time of only two hours and the fact that being outside the European Union it would probably be more difficult for the police to locate him. He wanted a short flight as he doubted if the police would be able to identify his car, trace where he was and have a reception committee to greet him off the plane in just two hours. If he went for a twelve-hour flight direct to the Far East then he felt the chances were high that they would be waiting for him on arrival. This way Finn hoped he would be several countries away from the UK and would have switched to a different identity by the time the police figured out it was his car on the A3 this morning. Or by the time Eagle United Energy got the manpower together to go looking for him again.

Virgil handed the keys for the big Peugeot automatic to the receptionist at the Avis Heathrow car depot. He settled the bill with his American Express and took the courtesy bus around to Terminal Three.

He tried ringing the phone number of the mobile he had given to the Russians one more time, but as before it diverted directly to voice mail. Virgil didn't leave a message.

Once he had checked his bag in, he looked around for a bin to throw the small package containing the passports and wallets of the two Russians and his redundant cellphone into. He couldn't find one though. Another stupid thing about this country, he thought. They can't even put a rubbish bin in an airport, exactly the type of place where people would be guaranteed to want to throw things away.

The Russians' stuff represented a serious problem to him now. He certainly didn't want to go through passport control or the X-ray machines with them in case he was searched, but then he could see nowhere to dump them. Just leaving them behind a chair was risky in itself because of the ever present armed police who were seemingly watching everyone all the time. He scanned around, still unable to comprehend why there were no bins, and saw a sign for the toilets. He went into a disabled toilet with the idea of ripping the passports up and flushing them down the john. But as soon as he locked the door and turned around Virgil saw a small bin for sanitary products. At last, he thought, and stuffed the package and then his cellphone into it.

Virgil went through Terminal 3 passport control at exactly the same time as Finn, although since Finn went through the business class fast track entrance, Virgil didn't see him.

Once airside, Finn headed into Dixons where he used his credit card to buy a new MacBook Pro, a copy of Microsoft Office for Macs, in-car charger cable and a universal power plug adaptor. He then went across the Departures area to Gap and bought several sets of socks, underwear and tee shirts. Next door at Boots, he finished

his shopping with a toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant and sun-block.

Despite having killed two people that morning Finn still felt remarkably calm. True, he had seen violent death before, up close and graphic on a drilling rig when a roughneck had got caught up in the top drive. But now, despite having been the instigator of death, he still didn't feel any shock or remorse. It was quite strange, he thought to himself, that a normal guy could kill two people and then calmly board a plane and just leave.

Finn had fifty minutes left before the flight departed so headed into the SAS Star Alliance business lounge where he could set about installing Office for Macs and configuring Entourage to send and receive email from his account.

The black backpack with its distinctive orange sweat absorbing back piece caught Virgil's attention as he sat in the public lounge. He looked at it and then glanced up at the figure crossing in front of him carrying it by the side handle. Finlay Nichols!

Virgil was stunned. Nichols was the hit, the target, the man who should be lying in a pool of blood with a broken neck. The man who according to the radio had caused an accident serious enough that neither one of the Russians had been able to call him. What the hell was he doing at Heathrow?

Virgil hastily got up and followed the departing Finn's back, thinking that maybe he could get him himself if he went somewhere quiet. He watched as Finn went through the sliding glass doors for the Star Alliance lounge and shortly afterwards followed him in. The glass doors slid closed behind Virgil, immediately cutting out the hustle and noise of the public areas and replacing it with a calm quiet.

'Can I see your boarding pass or frequent flyer card please, sir?' the uniformed woman behind the desk asked.

‘Oh, here.’ Virgil pulled his boarding pass out of his shirt pocket and handed it over, looking past her shoulder to see if he could locate Nichols.

‘I’m sorry, sir, only business class tickets or silver and gold card holders can use the lounge.’

‘I just saw a friend of mine come in. Can I go and join him?’

The lady looked at Virgil.

‘I’m sorry, sir,’ she said again, with a polite smile, ‘I can’t do that. But if you could tell me his name I’ll page him and he can accompany you in.’

‘Oh, err, no. Doesn’t matter.’

Virgil left the lounge and sat down back in the noise on the nearest seat he found. He would wait as long as he could before his flight was called and if he saw Nichols come out he would do something. Exactly what he didn’t know, but something would come to him. Whatever it is, he thought, he’d better be very careful. Nichols was obviously a more dangerous person than they had first assumed.

Virgil considered calling York in Houston, but immediately thought better of it. No, if he didn’t see Nichols before he left then he would pretend he had never seen him.

All the packaging from his new computer and software went straight into the bin and, once configured, the laptop went into its place in his backpack.

Finn had a large gin & tonic, which he immediately regretted as it meant he would be over Norway’s zero tolerance drink driving level, and ran through a mental checklist. Tickets, passports, wallet, communications. Finn’s second passport, the Irish one, was in its normal place in his bag along with the British one he’d used for this flight. He would switch to his Irish passport, in the name Dr Reuben Nichols, once he was clear of the UK. There was no need to use it now as he was sure he was leaving London too quickly to be on any ‘detain on departure’ list.

Reuben was his middle name and the Irish passport application checks had missed the fact that it wasn't his first name when he wrote it as his given name on the application form. It was an honest mistake, Americans after all often use their middle name in preference to their first name. On the form he'd used the title Dr, which he was entitled to use thanks to his PhD in subsea engineering, instead of the normal Mr that everyone knew him as.

He normally used the Irish passport for travel to countries where a British passport was a hindrance. Unfortunately, these days that covered most of Africa and the Middle East. These were places where Finn had correctly figured that as an 'Irish doctor' he wouldn't have any hassle. No one after all hates the Irish and everyone respects a doctor.

Despite only having visited Ireland a couple of times, Finn was entitled to Irish citizenship and one of their passports because he had been married for more than seven years to an Irish citizen. Liz was as English as him, but both her parents had come from Ireland in the 1950s and hence she too was considered a de facto Irish citizen. Seven years after their marriage, when they were both entitled to be Irish citizens according to the rules, they had applied for the green passports.

The lounge pager announced the final call for the flight to Trondheim. Finn picked up his now fully reloaded backpack and went through the business lounge side exit that fed directly into Gate 2, where the SAS flights departed. Still sitting outside the lounge entrance, Virgil never saw him leave.

The flight was uneventful. Finn had bought a business class ticket so was assured of having a hot meal and space to think. He went for the small fillet steak with a very restrained glass of lemonade instead of wine and spent the short flight working on his plans and writing the email he would send to Inspector Steve Sharpe of the Metropolitan police serious crime squad.

Trondheim, Northern Norway

Once on the ground in Trondheim, Finn switched his mobile phone on. He needed to phone Steve to get his email address.

The email summarised both what he knew and also his conjecture about Eagle United Energy's smuggling operation out of the Golden Triangle. Finn had copied and attached the relevant Abzu files from his memory stick as backup to his allegations.

He called UK directory enquiries.

'The Metropolitan Police in Barnes. Would you like me to connect you sir?'

'Yes, please.'

'Connecting you at fifteen pence a minute from a UK landline.'

Finn wondered why they always said that and what the cost was from a mobile in Norway?

'Metropolitan Police.'

'Hi, can you put me through to Steve Sharpe please, it's Finn Nichols calling and it's very urgent I talk to him.'

Barnes, West London

Steve was a little annoyed to receive an urgent phone call from Finn. He guessed it was only a follow up to the message he'd left on Finn's home phone a week or so ago asking for a recommendation on paint types. The Victorian stucco-fronted building that they both owned flats in was due for an external decoration and Steve had figured that as an engineer, Finn was the best person to ask about paint specifications. What was so urgent about bloody paint?

The West London Serious Crime division was positively buzzing. There had been a shoot out and car chase on the A3, barely three miles from their office. Two bodies were in a morgue, one of them with a face that was damaged beyond recognition. Witnesses were reporting a dark blue Audi A8 had been the target, but had evaded the assassination attempt and then turned the tables on the attackers before disappearing.

The police station was nothing but questions that morning.

Steve thought the Audi A8 pointed toward a political connection, as it was a favourite amongst foreign dignitaries. The A8 was a powerful, low profile limousine that could be armoured to withstand an attack as well as providing the utmost level of comfort and refinement to its occupants.

But the only person to give a decent description, the girl in the Renault Clio that had locked eyes with the Audi's driver, said she thought he was on his own, didn't look at all foreign and was wearing an open shirt. That didn't fit the political profile. It was puzzling and Steve wanted time to figure out the options and beat everyone else to tracing the driver. The very last thing he wanted to do was talk about painting the outside of the flats with Finn.

Steve decided he'd be polite but quick with Finn and the paint colours.

'OK Nikky, put him through. Finn, hello. Look I'm a little busy at the moment. I know we need to get the painting contract in

place but I'm really going to have to ring off and call you back this evening. There's quite a lot going on here at the moment. Hope you don't mind me being so blunt.'

'The two dead on the A3 this morning?'

Steve diverted all his attention to the phone, quite literally bringing his eyes down from the surrounding scene to look at the phone on his desk. Two dead on the A3. How did Finn know? There had been no media release on fatalities. Of course! Finn's car was a blue A8. Steve had been in it with Liz and their children. And the woman Clio driver had reported the A8 driver as white, short dark hair with a strong and handsome face. Jesus! No wonder the identikit picture had looked strangely familiar when he first saw it an hour ago. It was Finn, Finlay Nichols. The picture, the description and the car fitted Finn to a T. The friendly engineer didn't work for an oil company after all. What was he? MI5? MI6? army intelligence?

Steve's mind processed the possibilities in less than a second. The car, flat and house in Wimbledon were certainly too expensive for a government employee. But maybe Liz, the ex-TV producer, was the money in the family. Or perhaps Finn was ex-army made good with a history in Northern Ireland that had just caught up with him? Or was he involved with the mafia or some other organised crime syndicate?

Steve instinctively favoured government employee or ex-army. Finn was a regular guy with a nice family, not the sort that was part of organised crime.

'Steve, are you there? It's Finn. I need to talk.'

'That was you?'

'Yes. Look, I need your email address.'

Steve wasn't listening, he was still thinking through the options.

'Where are you Finn? Where are Elisabeth and the children? You all need to come in. Whatever you're involved in this looks very much like a professional assassination attempt. You need to

think of your safety and that of your family as your main priority. Who do you work for?’

‘Steve, I need to sort something first. Liz and the children are at her mum’s in Dorset. Can you send someone over there to take care of them?’

Steve scrambled for a pen and note pad. ‘Sure, give me the address. Where are you and what’s happening?’

The airport Tannoy bing-bonged, making Finn put a finger in his ear so that he could still hear Steve on the phone. He didn’t even think to ring off because airport announcements were so familiar to him that they didn’t register on his consciousness anymore. The Tannoy announced in Norwegian and then English:

‘Final call SAS flight 4356 to Kirkenes, gate five.’

Steve wrote down the flight number and destination.

‘Twelve Waterloo Road, Newton St Cyres, Dorset. What’s your email address Steve?’

‘Err, it’s um?’ What the hell was his email address? ‘It’s Stephen dot Sharpe at metropolitan police dot gov dot uk. Metropolitan police as one word.’

‘Thanks.’

The phone went dead.

Steve sat for a minute thinking what to do.

The flight, it was SAS. He opened up Internet Explorer, Google searched SAS Airline, went to the website for Scandinavian Airline Services and clicked on download timetable.

SAS flight number 4356 came up as Trondheim to Kirkenes. A route map showed him Trondheim was halfway up Norway and Kirkenes was at the far north of Norway and literally right on the border with Russia.

This was serious, very serious. Finn, the man who had survived an assassination attempt that morning, was already out of England and was running. A new possibility now existed for Finlay Nichols in Steve’s mind, one that had nothing to do with British SIS

or Army, and one he was highly inclined to believe. Maybe he really was an engineer. In that case why would a British engineer leave his family and make a run for a remote Russian border crossing? Of the two dead this morning, the one that still had a recognisable face had distinctly Slavic features. And the fact that neither of them had any form of identification on them indicated professional hit men.

As much as his instinct told him Finn was OK, his training now took over and told him this was out of his league. This was espionage or following the fall of communism, more likely crime on the ultimate scale. Nuclear, chemical or biological. Something hi-tech that required a highly qualified engineer like Finn to be involved. It fitted nicely. If Finn was the money in the family, then he was obviously no ordinary engineer. The Wimbledon house alone must be worth over a million. Steve had the address and had driven past it on his way home one evening. And he knew the four hundred thousand pound Pimlico flat was owned outright. His position as secretary of the owners' association had given him that information. The silver BA and gold Star Alliance frequent flyer luggage cards attached to Finn's ever present black backpack also showed that he travelled a lot.

The more he thought about it, the more it made sense. An oil company executive was the perfect cover for something else. Friends and acquaintances would accept the high income, the travel and short notice disappearances overseas as all part of the job.

Steve made his decision. He got up, walked across to the situation room dealing with the A3 incident, knocked once and went in.

'The driver of the Audi is called Finlay Nichols. He's currently getting on an SAS flight from Trondheim in Norway to Kirkenes. Kirkenes is on the Russian boarder.'

Detective Chief Inspector Reynolds looked up from the table he was leaning over and exclaimed, 'Jesus, Steve, you're back

office on this case. What is this? Who is this person? Where is he? And how the hell did you find out?’

‘He just phoned me Sir, I know him. Both of the airports are in Norway with Kirkenes in the far north, above the Arctic Circle.’ Steve paused for effect. ‘And as I said, it’s on the border with Russia. Right on the border. His plane lands in a little under ninety minutes.’

DCI Reynolds paused himself, not for effect, but to take in the enormity of this information. He looked around the table at the four officers he had been brainstorming with.

‘John, get onto the police in Norway. Have them confirm a passenger list and meet the flight. Make sure they get a copy of the identikit picture and a description of height and physical characteristics from Steve.’

‘On it boss.’

‘John, tell them he is wanted in connection with a double murder in London and may be making a run for the Russian border. They should treat him with extreme caution.’

DCI Reynolds turned to the next inspector. ‘Daniel, inform MI5. They’re already checking out any political connections. They might want to call MI6 in as well, now that it’s gone international.’

‘Jeremy, you check the two in the morgue against whatever we have for Russian hit men or Brits involved with or against them.’

Reynolds went quiet, thinking for a moment. Why fly to an airport near the Russian border? Why not just fly straight to Moscow or St Petersburg? He turned to the last inspector, who was waiting for his instructions.

‘Matt, tell John that our man may be going for a port. Find out if there is a port near Kirkenes and help him in liaising with the Norwegian police.’

Steve spoke for the first time since he delivered the information that had instantaneously changed the whole focus of the investigation and thrown it into top gear. ‘Sir, Kirkenes is a port, it’s right on the coast. Probably the most northerly port in the world.’

DCI Reynolds shouted the last nugget of information after the departing Matt and added, 'Norwegian coastguard as well.'

Alone together in the room, his instructions being carried out by his deputies, DCI Reynolds turned to Inspector Sharpe and asked him why? Why had this man called Steve?

'Didn't say, sir. And also didn't say where he was or where he was going, although he did ask me to make sure his wife and children were protected. I heard an airport announcement in the background asking him to go to the departure gate just before he rang off.'

'He has a wife and children, how many?'

'Two of them, Sir. Names Victoria and Christopher if I remember rightly. Must be about six years old for the girl and probably two or three for the boy. I was with them and his wife, Elisabeth, a couple of months ago. They'd been to their flat. It's in the same building in Pimlico where I live and gave me a lift to Oxford Street.'

Reynolds was flabbergasted.

'Jesus, Steve! This Nichols guy escapes a perfect assassination. He's boxed in traffic in his car, point blank range, sitting like a...' Reynolds looked around for inspiration but found none. 'Like a sitting duck. And not only does he escape, but he manages to kill both the hit men. Not by shooting them, mind you, but by using his car as a lethal weapon. He does all this in the morning and then by early afternoon he's deserted his wife and children and turns up in Norway making a run for mother Russia, probably heading for a hastily arranged rendezvous with a Russian trawler outside some unheard of port in the arctic. This guy's not just cool, Steve, he's ice cold.'

Reynolds leaned towards Steve, his face less than a foot away, he spoke with a slower, more determined and focussed voice. 'And you went on a shopping trip with him and his family last week!'

‘Sir, it’s not like that. My gut feeling is that this guy is all right. I know him, sir, not well, but well enough to think that he’s not some ice man killer.’

Reynolds stood back and spoke so loud that all heads outside the glass partitioned room turned in his direction.

‘Then why the hell is he running for Russia!’

Trondheim, Northern Norway

After talking to Steve, Finn phoned Liz, who was now at her mother's house in Dorset. She'd been anxiously waiting for him to call and the relief in her voice was palpable. Finn felt though that her tone was tempered with uncertainty and perhaps a hint of underlying annoyance. He ignored the notion as he needed to stay focussed and simply gave his wife a blunt and untempered run through of the morning's events and his half-baked plans to nail Eagle United Energy.

She was very understanding, all things considered. After all, what had started out as just a regular day had degenerated beyond her worst nightmare. Her loving and kind husband was a fugitive on the run who had not just killed two people, but was now talking to her like a stranger, with a completely unemotional and uncaring voice. She said police on the radio were asking for the owner of a blue Audi A8 to come forward after an incident on the A3 and she'd guessed it was Finn they were looking for.

They'd find the car in the Heathrow car park soon enough he thought.

Liz didn't want him to go to Burma and wasn't in the least persuaded by Finn's promise that it would be one quick and easy flying visit. In the end Finn gave in a little to her emotion, but said he was sorry. He was going regardless. He had neither the time nor inclination to hang around whilst the police got their act together and arrested him for a double murder. He'd phone her again when he could.

And with that Finn had reluctantly hung up. She didn't want him to go and Finn knew there was absolutely no way he would be able to convince her that his way was the right way. He didn't want to argue and he didn't want to listen to reason. Most of all though, he didn't want to listen to the one person who could persuade him out of it. All semblance of family life and normality were gone from

his mind. He had moved effortlessly into offshore tiger mode and then further beyond that into an even sharper and colder area of his personality that he hadn't experienced before.

Finn was going to do what he did best. He would use his brain, his skills and his knowledge to strike faster and far more deadly than anyone could possibly imagine. He was going to take the heart out of his enemy.

Liz was in tears by the time Finn had rung off. She knew him too well. Knew he was not only stubborn, but always believed he was completely right in what he did. She knew he would risk everything on this.

Finn, however, knew something she didn't. Not only that he could do this, but that he would do it.

The phone call to Steve had been a stupid idea. It had dawned on him whilst talking to Liz that the Tannoy in the background was giving his location away.

Rule two in the Art of War: All warfare is based on deception. If the police knew he was in Norway then Finn would use that to his advantage. He switched his phone to silent mode, put the key lock on and went over to the departure gate for Kirkenes where he sat down next to a Norwegian soldier and pretended to rummage in his backpack. There were always lots of soldiers at airports in Norway; civilians travelling to and from postings on their annual two weeks' army service. As the soldier looked up at the gate waiting for his seat row to be called, Finn slipped the phone into a pocket on the soldier's small Bergen rucksack, got up and walked away. With any luck the soldier wouldn't find the phone for a while and it would end up transmitting its whereabouts from halfway up a mountain.

Finn's thoughts briefly turned to the *Bourne Identity*, the film he had watched with Bill that night on Luann Alpha. Finn was now taking tips from Jason Bourne as well as Sun Tzu, and he reckoned the mobile phone on its way to one of the world's most inhospitable regions was one to be proud of.

Finn went down the stairs from the airport arrivals and departures area, through passport control, past luggage reclaim and straight to the Hertz desk. He rented a Volkswagen Golf.

With the car keys and hire contract in his hand he left the warmth of the terminal into the frigid air of northern Norway and went over to the car park. Once in the car he plugged his laptop into the cigarette lighter to charge its battery and adjusted the seat and steering wheel to suit him. He hadn't been able to send the email to Steve yet because the battery on his MacBook was flat. Now plugged into a power source he lifted the lid on the laptop bringing it out of sleep mode and showing the email he'd composed on the flight over, ready to send to Steve. Finn filled in Steve's email address and was going to click on send when he realised he just put his phone on a plane to Kirkenes. Damn! What an idiot. He would have to switch on his Iridium sat phone now if he wanted to send it.

Better not use the Iridium to send an email to the police, Finn thought. He shut the lid on the laptop. Got to be smarter than this if you want to succeed Nichols, got to be smarter. The email would have to wait until he could buy another mobile, something he could use a few times and then throw away.

Finn remembered to take the car out of gear before turning the key to start it. Why on earth did the car hire companies at Trondheim airport always leave their cars in gear? He'd lost count of the number of times he had jumped into a car, turned the key and had it lurch forwards or backwards. He put the Golf into gear and carefully pulled out of the car park, paying particular attention to not stalling it due to the manual gearbox or inadvertently going onto the wrong side of the road; again both of which he'd done numerous times before. Last thing he wanted now was to be stopped by the local police. Knowing his luck, they'd probably breathalyse him and that large G&T in London would land him in the nick.

Finn headed north on the A6 towards the giant fabrication yard at Verdalsora. He knew this area well enough, having been to the Aker yard on many occasions to check the progress of work, talk to site reps and witness testing.

After twenty minutes, and about halfway from the airport to Verdalsora, he turned off the main road and headed inland towards the mountain range that separated Norway and Sweden. The outside temperature gauge began to quickly fall as he gained altitude and the lightly used road disappeared beneath a layer of first ice and then white compacted snow.

Although it was early April, the hire car still had its winter tyres on. They were ideal for driving on main roads and around town, but nowhere near as good as the studs or chains that were needed for this type of surface. Still, Finn pushed on as fast as he dared, frequently testing the level of grip by pumping the brake or accelerator to feel for the onset of slippage. 'The best all terrain vehicle in the world,' someone had once said to him, 'is a hire car.'

After another half hour he reached the border and was relieved to see it in just the same state as the last time he'd crossed. There was a sign advertising you were now entering Sweden, an empty sentry post and a single wooden gate pole, handily in the up position. He drove into Sweden without even slowing down, still gaining altitude and with the car's external temperature gauge showing the temperature had now fallen to minus eight centigrade.

A little while later SAS flight 4325 landed at Kirkenes to be greeted by six armed Politi officers, who stopped and questioned every departing passenger. Two of the male passengers were English, one was French and the rest Norwegians. The Englishmen and the Frenchman were detained for a further three hours, even though none of their descriptions matched that from the London police. The three endured questioning, a search of their luggage and extensive checking of their credentials and backgrounds before they too were allowed to pass.

The soldier and his colleagues were picked up by an army bus outside the airport. Although he didn't know it, Finn was lucky. The soldier was heading for the docks and a ferry to his posting in Vardo, right on the Northern tip of the border.

Barnes, West London

‘Steve. He wasn’t on the flight. The only three suspects they held have all checked out.’ It was DCI Reynolds, standing behind Steve’s chair and looking over his shoulder at the computer screen.

Reynolds was annoyed that the Norwegian police hadn’t held onto any of their own countrymen. He suspected that Nichols could quite possibly speak Norwegian without any foreign accent and might possess one of their passports. That would figure if Norway was his pre-arranged escape route.

‘Other flights departing Trondheim at the same time?’ Steve asked, closing the Internet website of Eider Petroleum he had been looking through.

‘The local police are working on it, but don’t go holding your breath on this one. Finn Nichols, if that’s his real name is too professional to get caught without a massive manhunt, and he’s already too far out of our hands to start that. I think he’s given us the slip. The Norwegian telephone companies have started checking for his mobile signal, but I doubt he’ll turn it on again.’

Steve had at least managed to convince DCI Reynolds of his ignorance of Finn’s real identity or occupation. It wouldn’t look good on his record, but at least his previous contact with Finn had got him a front row seat on the investigating team. Now he would do his best to solve the enigma of Finlay Nichols and track him down. And to do that his first point of call wouldn’t be the Arctic, it would be Dorset.

Jamtland, Northern Sweden

Finn crossed the treeless expanse of the high wide plateau that was the desolate backbone of Scandinavia, a plume of diamond snow dust glittering in his wake to mark his progress.

Spring came very late to the plateau, but when it did he knew the snow would quickly disappear and be replaced by a burst of colour from millions of wild flowers. It was one of the most magnificent sights in the world and one he had shared with his wife many years ago on this exact road, back when it had just been the two of them. But that was a thousand miles and a million dreams from where she was now.

The dashboard display was showing an outside temperature of minus fourteen centigrade. Inside the car though, it was a warm and comfortable shirt-sleeve environment. Finn was glad that the Golf had a decent heater as well as heated seats, because he certainly wasn't equipped to survive outside. On the occasions he cracked the window open to blow cigarette smoke out, he could feel the chill of the Arctic wind cutting into his ear.

The road beneath him had long since disappeared and was now only marked by the compacted snow surface and red and white poles at its sides. Still, the car coped well with both the cold and the snow, so Finn was able to keep the speed up to seventy and on occasions eighty kilometres per hour. The cloudy sky of coastal Norway had cleared and the sharp sunlight made the whole scene completely dazzling. The superchilled snow and ice particles shimmered all around him. It was truly a desolate and treeless wonderland, occasionally speckled with a small brightly coloured house or a salt and dirt encased lorry coming the other way. Finn breathed deeply and reflected to himself that the most beautiful landscapes he had ever seen were those at the extremes of temperature. Cold arctic snowscapes like this, or the hot sand

deserts and barren mountains of the Middle East. Both had that feeling of desolation and isolation he felt a complete synergy with.

Middlesbrough, England

Hans Dietrickt was cleaning the rain marks from his wire framed glasses as he sat in the office of Professor Watkins at the Institute of Materials Testing. Religiously cleaning his glasses was something he did when he wanted a few minutes to think.

Hans had a problem. Actually, he reflected, he had several problems.

For one, he had great difficulty actually understanding what was being said to him. It wasn't the technical language the Professor was using, it was the language full stop. The local accent was just so difficult for his German ear to tune into.

His second problem had been trying to find a decent hotel. These apparently didn't exist in Middlesbrough, so Hans had been forced to stay at a run-down place that didn't even have room service while he waited for the material testing on the gaskets Finn had recovered from Thailand to be completed.

His third problem, however, had just eclipsed the other two and relegated them to the minor leagues.

'So, can you explain again, slowly this time, what the results are saying,' he asked.

Professor Watkins turned his computer screen around so that Hans could see the graph. Watkins was keen to explain as clearly as possible to the young German what he had found. As far as he was concerned it was conclusive proof that his initial conjecture of a sour gas reservoir had been right on the mark. The work he did for Wade Insurance was very well paid and Watkins was eager to justify his fee by showing that he was extremely good at what he did.

'The material testing is not complete,' the professor started, 'but as you can see from this graph, the spike here,' Watkins pointed to a clear high spike in the graph on the screen with his pen, 'corresponds directly with the spectral analysis for hydrogen

sulphide. I have booked enough spectrometer time to test the remaining samples over the next few days, but I think this single sample is proof enough that you have a serious problem with the pipeline in Thailand.'

Wade were not going to like this, thought Hans. Having thought they'd got away with it, this was now the worst possible news. For the good of the company, and for Hans's future career, it needed to be suppressed. Completely and permanently.

'Professor. Can you hold on the remaining tests. I need to talk to my colleagues in London about the implications of this result before we go any further.'

'Hold? You mean not do any more tomorrow?' Watkins replied. 'Well, I don't know. I've booked the time on the mass spectrometer you know. It's expensive, and I've got all the samples prepared now, so I need to use the time and get the remaining tests completed.'

'Professor. Charge the spectrometer time to Wade, but please understand I do not want any further testing conducted at the moment. And also please remember the terms of the confidentiality agreement you have signed. No word of the nature of your current work for Wade is to leave this room.'

As soon as Hans was away from the Professor he called Nathaniel Piers, the Director of Far East energy activities for Wade.

'Nat. Hi, it's Hans. Bad news I'm afraid. The first test is clearly positive for H₂S. I've instructed the Professor to stop all work and reminded him of his confidentiality agreement.'

Hans listened to Nathaniel swearing and cursing his bad luck before continuing.

'Do you want me to shut him up permanently? Yes, OK, I'll do it now.'

Ten minutes later Hans returned to the professor's office. He had been to his car and retrieved the briefcase from the boot. The

briefcase contained a hundred thousand pounds of Nathaniel Piers' personal fortune in cash.

The other directors might be prepared to lose everything, but Nathaniel most definitely wasn't. Now Hans would make the proposition that would ensure the Professor remained quiet, his boss remained rich and Hans remained on a fast track career in Wade. If the proposition wasn't accepted then Hans would have to seriously consider how he would accomplish the alternative method of permanently silencing the Professor that Nathaniel had proposed.

Either way, Hans knew that the secret he now shared with Nathaniel was enough to ensure he had a golden career track ahead of him.

Despite the rain, the bad hotels and a diet of continual fried food, Hans felt good.

Sundsvall, Northern Sweden

Just before nine o'clock that evening Finn arrived at the small coastal city of Sundsvall. He'd only stopped once since getting into the car at Trondheim airport. A five minute shivering break to leave a little patch of yellow snow and to flex his aching back and shoulders.

A quick drive around the city showed it had a train station and a small port and, as was typical in Scandinavia during anything except the peak of summer, the streets were largely deserted. Finn parked at the port's small car park and headed back to the station on foot.

The evening was chilly. Nowhere near as cold as the high plateau, but still below freezing. Finn was shivering in his lightweight fleece jacket. He walked as quickly as he could, not just to get to the relative warmth of the station, but because he was acutely aware that he looked completely out of place. He was a suntanned foreigner not acclimatised or equipped for the cold in a remote Swedish coastal town and as such his presence would hardly be unnoticed.

At the station he bought a ticket on the next train heading for Stockholm, paying in euros and receiving his change in Swedish Krona. He kept the change in his hand and went to the station café to refuel and warm up. Jason Bourne said food was just fuel, you needed to refuel to keep running and right now all Finn could think about was getting out of Sweden and back into the European Union before he was tracked down. Once in Europe proper he could disappear and pick any of a dozen international airports from which to fly to the Far East.

Houston, Texas

Virgil arrived at George Bush International airport on the outskirts of Houston still not knowing what had gone wrong with the hit. It was four in the afternoon in Houston, but almost midnight by his body clock. The American Airlines 747 had been packed and he'd suffered a long flight squeezing his large body in between two equally large Americans who were returning from a sightseeing holiday in London. They'd taken a window and aisle seat, thinking the seat in the middle would be left free. It wasn't; it was Virgil's seat.

All Virgil wanted to do now was go back to his condo, sleep and forget about London. But he knew his contact in Eagle United would be waiting for him. Wearily he made his way to the cab rank and rehearsed his explanations for the encounter to come.

Sam Burton of the Houston Police Department watched Virgil come through the arrivals gate and followed him to the cab rank.

Sam was there because Detective Chief Inspector Reynolds had quickly latched onto Virgil's trail. Although the two hit men had carried no identification, they had still led Reynolds directly to Virgil Thomason thanks to the battered mobile phone that had been recovered from one of the bodies. The phone was almost brand new and therefore very easy to trace. It had been bought in Hammersmith a few days earlier on a credit card belonging to a certain Virgil Thomason, American citizen. The hit men might have been professionals, thought Reynolds, but this guy Thomason certainly wasn't.

The sales assistant had remembered Virgil as a big suntanned American. Very muscular. He'd bought two phones and forty pounds of credit for them, twenty on each one. An alert to all UK ports and airports to detain on departure an American called Virgil Thomason revealed that he had already boarded a Houston-bound

flight. The passenger list was confirmed whilst the plane was in the air and a visual description by the chief steward on the aircraft matched that from the sales assistant. The US State Department provided a digital copy of his passport photograph and the Houston Police were called to organise a reception.

Sam Burton was the reception. He liked the idea of working on a British case. The Brits were America's best ally in a troubled world and if Sam could do something to help them track down and nail a terrorist or a crime ring then he would. Perhaps, Sam thought, he'd get to go to London. Accompany this Virgil Thomason back to custody in the land of British bobbies, fish & chips and Royalty. He liked that idea. For now though, he would simply follow Virgil and report back on his movements.

At the reception desk of Eagle's downtown office Virgil asked for Mr York Kendrick, took a seat on the indicated sofa and waited.

Surprisingly his old Marine buddy came down to personally meet him.

'Virgil, we need to talk before we go upstairs. MacAlister wants to see you and he is not in a good mood.'

Virgil felt a dread of gloom descend on him. He'd met MacAlister once before, for a very short conversation in which he had been told quite bluntly that he was not to divulge his connection with Eagle United Energy to anyone he might employ for short contracts on their behalf. He'd had the distinct impression that the Eagle United CEO wanted to meet him for the sole purpose of sizing him up and intimidating him. It had worked.

Virgil envied York. The two of them had first been paired together as eighteen year-olds newly indoctrinated into the US Marine Corps and had quickly become friends. Everything, though, that York had done was better than Virgil and he felt he was always struggling to keep up with his buddy, physically as well as intellectually. Then when York had been accepted for officer training Virgil had taken it as a personal blow to the stomach. He

believed that his friend had severed their relationship once and for all. Marines raised from the ranks to become officers were never posted back to their original units. The powers that be felt the subordinates wouldn't be able to effectively obey instructions from one of their own, and probably more importantly, the new officer wouldn't put mission accomplishment over and above the welfare of his old friends.

Virgil had spent another ten years in the Marines, hardly ever thinking about his old buddy, until one day he received a message from York asking him to call about a job. The job, it turned out, was perfect. It was the one job that all Marines suffering under government pay and with no outside world skills dreamed they would get. He would be a security consultant for an international oil company. Based in Houston, he would travel the world to ensure the oil company executives and drilling crews were always kept safe from the local bad guys. For a soon to be ex-marine it was a gift from God.

Reality, it soon turned out, was no less desirable than the dream. Virgil had relished the months he spent flying between Houston, Bangkok and Rangoon. In particular he'd enjoyed his time with the Burmese military, the ex-Sergeant now giving orders to Captains and Majors.

He had quickly established himself in a gated community in a Houston suburb. A rented two-bedroom condo with a garage for his cars, and a communal swimming pool and gym to keep his muscle tone and tan up. There was a fine selection of single women and divorcees in the gym, supplemented by the even finer young girls he had readily available on his frequent trips to the Far East.

Now, though, Virgil felt like his dream was about to end. And all because those two stupid Russians had fucked up a perfectly easy hit.

'So what happened Virge?' York was sitting next to him on the reception sofa. He didn't even warrant a private chat in York's

office anymore, but would have to make do with a hushed conversation in a corner of reception.

‘The two Russians blew the deal. I had everything set up perfectly, York. We had trailed Nichols, learned his routine. I personally selected the time and place where we would hit him, but the Russians blew it.’

‘Well, at least you got out OK. And thankfully the Russians won’t be able to debrief the British police.’

‘They’re dead?’

‘It would appear so. Nichols ran one over and the other one rode his bike into the back of a truck.’

Virgil felt a little less gloomy now. He had a scapegoat, or rather two scapegoats that couldn’t answer back. He would transfer all the blame onto the Russians, maybe make himself out to be some sort of saviour. He might even come out of this with an enhanced reputation.

‘Please tell me there was nothing about these Russians to connect them to you or to Eagle United Energy.’

‘No way, York. Neither of them had any ID on them. I had their passports and wallets with me in my car and securely ditched them before I got on the plane. If they’re dead, then all the Brits have are two nameless bodies. I made sure they used false names when they bought the bike and the piece. There’s nothing to trace them to us.’

‘So, good then. Nothing to worry about. All right, let’s go and see Mac.’

MacAlister was altogether less easy to convince. As soon as Virgil walked in the office and York had closed the door behind him, Mac’s loud voice barked out the question uppermost on his mind.

‘So where’s my goddamned memory stick? Flown to the four fucking winds with the Limey!’

Virgil didn't know what to say in response and hesitated for the second it took Mac to breath in and continue.

'Get your fucking arse out of my office and out of my company. You were supposed to solve a problem and all you've managed to do it make it a hundred times worse.'

Virgil hesitated again, turning to York for support.

'Get out I said! York, escort this meathead off the premises.'

York knew better than to open a discussion with Mac when he was in such a foul mood, so quickly ushered Virgil out and into the lift back down to the lobby.

'That's just the way Mac deals with things when he's annoyed. Let me talk to him, see if he is serious or not and we'll meet up later. Can you hang around somewhere for a bit or would you prefer I call you on your cellphone?'

Virgil was in a panic now. He'd been stunned by the malevolence in the old man's voice and hadn't had a chance to react to it.

'York. You've got to tell him this wasn't my fault. The Russians fouled it up, not me. It was a good plan, faultless in fact. I'm not to blame on this, York.'

'Yeah I know, but who picked the Russians? That's what Mac's thinking at the moment.'

'Don't dump me, York. I know too much about this company and what's going on in Burma just to be kicked out on the streets. There's nothing else I can do. You know that. Come on old buddy. Help me on this one.' Virgil was pleading now, almost on the edge of tears. If he thought it would have any effect he would have got down on his knees.

'Virgil. I am not about to dump you. Mac is annoyed, I'm annoyed. Let me talk to him and I'll call you later.'

'OK, I'm going to head back home. But I'll be waiting for your call. You will call won't you? Don't leave me hanging out here, buddy.'

York genuinely felt sorry for his old marine comrade. It had been York that had got him the job and now he felt a certain responsibility to ensure the company did right by Virgil. Sure the guy had made a big mistake in mishandling a simple job, but at least there would be no comeback to Eagle United. Virgil had at least done that right.

Mac had calmed down by the time he returned and was sitting at his desk clicking with his mouse on his computer.

‘He gone?’

‘Yeah. Look Mac, I don’t think it’s a good idea to fire him. He’s been with Eagle for several years now. Done a lot of good work for us in Myanmar. I think he just messed this one up and certainly won’t let it happen again.’

‘I guess it wasn’t such a good idea to fire someone who knows what we’re up to out there was it?’

‘No, not really,’ replied York.

‘We need to get rid of him. Quickly and permanently.’

York was stunned.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Look at this.’ Mac indicated the computer screen. ‘It’s his American Express online account.’

‘His private credit card account?’ York said looking at the details. ‘How have you got that? It’s illegal.’

Mac glanced up at York. ‘The card with the false ID that we gave him is maxed out, so I had IT check on his personal cards.’

‘So? How does that affect us?’

‘Look at the latest entries. He’s been using this card in London. Hotels, phone company, car rental is bad enough. But the fool was paying restaurant bills with it in the Wimbledon area. That’s just plain dumb. Wimbledon is the part of London where Nichols lives isn’t it?’

York understood immediately. Virgil was obviously spending money a lot faster than he was earning it and the use of his personal

credit card had left a paper trail that led from West London right back to Houston. Mac wanted Virgil out of the way because if the police made the link between him and the hit men then the guy would probably cut a deal and sing like a canary.

‘Perhaps we could ship him back to Myanmar until this all cools down a bit?’ York wouldn’t abandon his old friend, not if there was another solution.

Mac pondered the thought.

‘Yeah. Get him out of town on the next flight. If the police start looking we’ll have our friends over there take care of him. It’ll be a lot easier than here in Houston. Good thinking, York.’

It was early evening as York drove through the gates of the condominium and up to Virgil’s block.

Virgil opened the door looking the worse for wear. He’d obviously had a few drinks and had been asleep on the sofa when York rang to say he was on his way over. His shirt, which he’d been wearing for over twenty hours, was creased, dirty and sweat stained. It fitted nicely with Virgil’s overall appearance.

York tried to ignore it, but couldn’t help but think Virgil was on the slide.

‘Good news, pal. You’re reinstated. Weren’t ever fired at all.’

The relief on Virgil’s face was immediate and immense.

‘Need to get you out of the way for a bit though. I suggested you go back to Myanmar until the heat from the Nichols affair blows over.’

Virgil readily agreed, nodding his head rather than try to say anything as no words came to his lips.

‘Good, you’re on a flight out of here at eleven this evening. Rangoon via Hong Kong. Come on, I’ll help you pack and take you to the airport. You want to jump in the shower and freshen up a bit?’

Sam Burton followed the Mercedes back to George Bush International airport. He called in to the station as soon as he guessed the destination. Ten minutes later his cellphone rang.

‘Burton,’ he answered.

‘Detective, good evening to you. This is Detective Chief Inspector Reynolds of the British police here. I understand our man is making his way back to the airport?’

‘Yeah. He’s in a fancy Merc driven by a black guy in a suit. Not a driver, but an executive at a company called Eagle United Energy. You want me to pull them over?’

‘Do you know who the coloured man is? I mean his name or role at Eagle United Energy?’

‘He’s called York Kendrick and he’s a vice president at the company. Their office is where your man went as soon as he landed. I got a positive identification of him from his licence registration.’

‘OK,’ replied Reynolds, ‘In that case let Mr Thomason go on his way. We’ll track him if you let your captain know which airline desk he goes to. In the mean time I’d like you to divert your attention to Mr Kendrick if you can. Find out exactly what he does at Eagle, his history, all that sort of thing.’

Reynolds knew Virgil was small fry, just a contact person between the client and the hit men. Kendrick however was an energy company executive. This was quite a stroke of luck. The client might be a corporation. All he had to do now was to find a link between Nichols and Eagle United Energy and the whole thing would become clear. The link would most certainly be there, not least because being in Houston, Eagle was probably an oil company. And Nichols was an oilman.

Copenhagen, Denmark

By early next morning Finn had trained his way to the southern Swedish town of Helsingborg and taken the short ferry crossing into Denmark. He showed his Irish passport at the control point and as on previous occasions was waved through without it even being opened.

Now at Copenhagen's central train station Finn stood and looked at the departures board. Where would he go? It was seven o'clock in the morning and other than a brief and fitful sleep on the train he hadn't rested. He could easily go through the day without sleep, but by the evening he would need to get his head down if he was to keep sharp.

He would be able to get a decent sleep on an overnight flight to the Far East, but to do that he first needed to get to a large airport. Copenhagen had a suitable airport, but although he was now back in the European Union he didn't want to risk flying out of an airport that was still essentially Scandinavian and therefore might well already be on the lookout for him.

The departures board showed a train leaving for Paris in half an hour, going via Hamburg, Amsterdam and Brussels. Perfect, four major airports, any one of which would do.

Before boarding the train Finn bought a Bluetooth pay as you go mobile phone, a spare fully charged battery and a thousand Danish krone of credit, about a hundred pounds. Again he paid in cash with euros, and put the handful of Danish change into the pocket that already held his remaining Swedish krona.

His laptop was fully charged from the cigarette lighter in the hire car, so if he was lucky he'd get a full five hours out of it before needing another recharge.

On the train Finn hooked up to the Internet via the Bluetooth connection on the phone and set about figuring out his route to Eagle United's Sittwe platform.

It quickly became apparent that flying directly to Myanmar was not a possibility. Finn didn't have an entry visa and according to the web it would take an absolute minimum of seven to ten days to get one. He couldn't just turn up at Rangoon airport and hope to bribe his way into the country without a visa as that sort of thing, easily done in Africa, would most likely be impossible in the police state. Bugger, he thought. That means I'll have to fly to a neighbouring country and try to cross the border somewhere remote. It immediately cut down his chances of being able to get to Sittwe.

Finn searched for a map of Myanmar and surrounding countries, opened one of the dozens that were on the Internet and studied the terrain and transport links. He had Thailand to the east, Laos and China to the north, and India and Bangladesh to the northwest. Myanmar was a big country with very long borders and, luckily, an extensive looking rail network. Finn reckoned he should be able to cross the border somewhere without too much trouble. The problem would be once he was in country. Would his passport be checked when he bought a train ticket or stayed somewhere? And even if he made it to the coast how would he get to the platform? He'd never been to Myanmar so didn't have a feel for how easy it would be to bribe his way onto a fishing boat.

Looking at the map Finn figured a crossing in the South of Thailand would probably be the best solution because of the short distance from the border to the Burmese coast. The border there was very long, stretching for over two hundred miles down a thin piece of land called the Isthmus of Kra. The Burmese side varied from about ten to thirty miles from the coast and Finn knew there were plenty of holiday resorts fronting onto the Gulf of Thailand along the Thai side. A foreigner wouldn't look out of place there. Perhaps he could pick a narrow piece of the isthmus and simply hike from Thailand to the Burmese coast?

He scanned down to the bottom of the Isthmus of Kra where Thailand's territory expanded out again. Right down at the bottom Finn saw the holiday resort of Phuket. It was about a hundred miles below the southern tip of Myanmar, but had the advantage of fronting onto the Indian Ocean and not the Gulf of Thailand. It was also a well-known travel destination, so Finn would be able to get there on a scheduled flight and was certain he would be able to find a cheap hotel that wouldn't lodge his details with the local authorities. The decision was made as soon as he saw the resort on the map; Phuket it would be.

Next stop on his Internet surfing was the Schiphol airport web site. Schiphol was Amsterdam's airport and one of the largest hubs in Europe.

Finn checked out the options for getting to Phuket. Nothing direct was going until the day after tomorrow, but there was the option to fly via Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. The KLM flight to Kuala Lumpur departed at noon, arriving twelve hours later at just past six in the morning local time. From there he could pick up a regional flight to Phuket that took off a little before eight and arrived in Phuket a couple of hours later. From Phuket Finn figured he could probably hire a boat and skipper to take him into Burmese waters. It would undoubtedly cost him, but the thought of a boat crossing was infinitely more appealing than trekking across the border through the jungle.

He took a deep satisfying breath and leaned back from the laptop to start on the sandwich and coffee he'd bought on the train. The plan was beginning to come together.

Damn, he suddenly thought. The email to Steve! I completely forgot. Finn fired up Entourage, pulled up the email from the Drafts directory and clicked on send. The email immediately disappeared into the ether on its way to the Metropolitan police.

Steve, however, was not at his desk to receive it, and in fact wouldn't see it for several weeks. Steve was in his car, on his way to see Finn's wife in Dorset.

Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam

At Schiphol station, located directly beneath the airport, Finn departed the train. He had almost an hour before the flight left, perfect timing. He bought a one-way business class ticket to Kuala Lumpur at the KLM desk, showing his Irish passport for identification and paying in Euros. The ticket clerk was surprised that he paid with cash, but Finn explained to her that his English University had given him a cash advance for his expenses as he didn't carry credit cards and certainly didn't have enough money in his bank to use his debit card. She smiled sweetly at him and made some sort of note on the computer console in front of her. This worried Finn a little, but he dismissed it as probably her noting for the cabin crew that he was a little eccentric or something.

Schiphol had expanded since the last time Finn had been there. It now boasted a new extension to the terminal and lots more duty-free shops.

As soon as he was through passport control, Finn headed for one of the hi-tech electrical stores and bought a hand-held GPS receiver and a couple of sets of spare batteries. The Global Positioning System receiver would be very useful in finding the Sittwe platform. And batteries, well Finn had his own version of the old saying that the only things certain in life are death and taxes. To Finn the only things certain in life were that the battery will go flat at the wrong time and you won't have enough disk space on your laptop.

Now that he had the GPS receiver all he needed was the latitude and longitude of the Sittwe platform. To get that he would have to phone someone he knew in one of the companies that had built it. That would be his next task, to call in on the grapevine and find out who was working for McDermott, Single Buoy Moorings or perhaps Total, the original owners of one of the pipelines connecting into Sittwe.

Last on the list before boarding the plane to Kuala Lumpur would be a call to Liz to let her know he was OK.

Guildford, near London

DCI Reynolds was accompanying the MI5 man who was investigating Finn's history. Reynolds had increased the secret services involvement when the link to Eagle United had been established. He'd also placed a call to MI6 to update them after a little searching had shown Eagle didn't have any operations in the UK. Whatever it was that Eagle and Nichols were involved in had therefore probably happened somewhere overseas.

With the investigation moving ever more rapidly into foreign soil, Reynolds felt he would soon lose control of it. Foreign investigations, particularly those involving political or commercial espionage were always run by MI5 or MI6.

The MI5 man was trying to build a profile on Nichols. As well as looking for any clues that would point to what he had been up to. Like everyone else he wanted to know what it was that had made him suddenly become a target and spook him so much that he'd abandoned everything and run for cover. It was proving to be a big task as Nichols had apparently worked for at least half a dozen companies since he graduated, possibly more. The profiling so far was simply that he had never been at one place long enough to become too friendly with anyone.

A detective from the local police station in Bournemouth had been to see Nichols' wife and reported back that she didn't know anything and said she wouldn't tell him even if she did. Poor woman, Reynolds thought. Standing up for her man even after he has fled the nest. DI Sharpe has disappeared down to Dorset to see if he could play the friendly card with Nichols' wife, but Reynolds didn't hold out much hope that she would divulge anything to him either. He thought she probably knew less than them and would be reeling from the sudden abandonment, holding onto the hope that her husband would come home with an innocent explanation for his absence and his shot up car.

Right now, Reynolds and the MI5 man were at the Eider Petroleum project office, half an hour down the A3 from the scene of yesterday's carnage. They were in talking to Mark, the project manager for subsea systems at Eider and Nichols' immediate boss.

'He's my senior project engineer,' Mark was saying. 'Been on the development from day one. I knew him from a Conoco project a few years back so when I heard he was coming free I jumped at the chance to get him on the team.'

'What is he like? What's his character? Did you socialise with him out of the office?' the MI5 man asked.

Mark thought about this. These two were on the hunt for something bad about Finn, something to confirm whatever their opinions were. Their whole stance indicated so. Still, they were policemen, or rather one policeman and one anti-terrorist man, so he wouldn't lie to them. He wondered just what the hell Finn had gotten himself involved in this time.

'To be honest, Finn never really socialised outside the office. Not as long as I've known him anyway, and that's at least six or seven years. He always had an excuse; something else that was booked, one of his kids was ill, painting the house, that sort of thing. I've met his wife and children though, as they used to drop in at the office with lunch or coffees when we were particularly busy and working weekends. Nice people.'

'Character? Any suspicious absences from work?'

'Yes, Finn often used to disappear out of the office for a day or an afternoon.' Mark suddenly stopped in mid flow.

'I'm sorry, but I just realised I'm talking about him in the past tense. He is OK isn't he?'

'Yes, as far as we know he is fine,' replied Reynolds.

'Oh, well that's a relief because we haven't finished this oilfield yet and it would be practically impossible to find a replacement so late in the game. Anyway, as I was saying, he was working on a variety of other things as well as this oilfield development. He has quite an interest in marine current turbines at

the moment. That's tidal power if you didn't know. Once said Allah definitely existed because he gave the ragheads, oh sorry the Arabs, all the oil, but that the top god must be English because he's given us not only all the tides but also the right technology to exploit it at just the time we need it to save our sorry arses. He's convinced it's the future, you know.'

The MI5 man who was making notes, looked up at Mark.

'What is his character? This is the third time I have asked.'

'Oh, character. Well, Finn is very friendly. You know the sort, calm and relaxed, but also confident and in control. He can be very opinionated though, like with his tidal power stuff. Don't try and argue with him when he thinks he's right, because he won't listen.'

'Sounds like someone who could easily hide the truth then. A stable and predictable character.'

'Oh, no. Finn's not predictable. No way is he predictable. No, quite the opposite, completely unpredictable. The phrase offshore tiger fits him perfectly; pussycat one moment, but show him something he doesn't like and the tiger will emerge to tear it apart. No, the only thing predictable about Finn is that you haven't got a clue what's going on in that head of his. You might believe you know what he's up to, but believe me you'll be wrong.'

'Do you have a photograph showing Nichols?' Reynolds cut in.

'Oh. Yes. I'm sure there'll be one on the server, let me look.'

Mark sat at his desk and searched through the various computerised directories until he came across the one they stored the offshore photographs in.

'Here you are,' he said pulling up a picture showing Finn and a couple of other people proudly standing by a pipeline initiation head that they had painted smiley faces and little logos on. 'That one's Finn, would you like me to print you a copy?'

'Yes if you wouldn't mind,' replied Reynolds, 'and can you e-mail the file to me.'

‘Err,’ Mark hesitated. ‘You’re not going to show this on the TV or anything are you? Only Finn is wearing Eider Petroleum logos on his safety gear and we wouldn’t want ourselves implicated in anything. Bad for the share price you know. Maybe I should have IT blank out our logos before I send it to you.’

‘Maybe you should,’ replied Reynolds. He fully intended on sending the picture to the press as soon as they went public that they were looking for Nichols.

‘Better check with MI6 about showing this on the TV,’ the MI5 man cut in, ‘We know Nichols has left the country, so British TV and press coverage won’t do anything other than to publicise his name. And I know Six might not be too appreciative if you do that to someone without their approval.’

Reynolds pondered the advice. ‘You’re right Maxwell.’

He looked back at Mark. ‘Just email me the picture, with no alterations on it. If we publish it I’ll be sure to have your company logos removed.’

Mark wished he’d never shown them the picture now.

Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam

Finn changed the battery in the mobile phone to the reserve one and called Liz. He would be careful when calling her from now on in case her end of the phone was being listened in to. As a precaution he was sitting on a toilet in the first floor KLM business lounge. He'd sat there for several minutes now and had heard a muffled boarding announcement from outside. It was too quiet to be overhead by anyone at the other end of a phone line, so the Trondheim fiasco would not be repeated.

'Liz, hi it's me.'

'Finn! Where are you? What's happening? I'm sorry about getting so annoyed yesterday but I still think the best thing is for you to come home and sort it out from here.'

'I know, but I know how these companies work. If I don't do this now, there won't be anything left to find. They'll be off scot-free and I'll be facing a long jail sentence for killing those people and after that spending the rest of my life looking over my shoulder. Even if I get let off with self defence it will still be a criminal record that won't allow me to travel freely anymore. I wouldn't be able to work, Liz. We wouldn't be able to pay the mortgage, school fees or anything. We'd lose the house.'

'That doesn't matter Finn. I want you, not what comes with you. We can all move down here to Dorset, the children can go to the local state school and you can do something else for a living. You're always full of silly ideas anyway. Please Finn, come home.'

'Look, the police will be onto me by now. I spoke to Steve Sharpe yesterday and he knows it's my car they're looking for. They might have your phone tapped so we can't mention anything about my plans or where I am, do you understand?'

'Yes, I understand. A detective from the Dorset constabulary knocked on the door first thing this morning. I told him to piss off. They think I'm some kind of moron to be standing by you, but they

don't know you like I do, and they don't know the reason for all of this. You still intent on going through with it?'

'Yes, hopefully it will all be done within three or four days. I'm making my way there at the moment. By Friday I'll be ready for the last part of the trip. There's nothing to worry about, I've figured out a completely safe way to get there and do what I need to do. And to get back afterwards.'

Finn hoped Liz believed him on the last two points. Truth was he hadn't fully figured out how to get onto the platform yet and thought it was probably going to be a lot more dangerous than he had first anticipated.

'Finn, be careful, I love you.'

'I'm always careful, babe. Do you remember the place I bought that suitcase that broke the first time we used it? The one we needed because of all the shopping you'd done.'

Liz thought for a second, 'The silver suitcase? Yes, I remember where we bought it. Is that where you are?'

'I'm heading there now. Day after tomorrow I'll be an hour and a half northwest of it ready to depart on the final part of the journey. I love you darling. See you soon.'

Bournemouth, Dorset

‘Where did you buy the suitcase?’

‘I shouldn’t tell you Steve. Finn doesn’t want anyone catching up with him until he’s finished. He’s very angry at the moment. God we both are! They tried to kill him. If he’d had me and the children in the car they probably would have killed us all.’

She snuggled Christopher closer to her, who responded by trying to put his finger up her nostril. Liz moved her head out of the way and held Christopher’s hand, scolding him with a look before continuing.

‘Finn is a very determined person. He smiles a lot and acts all relaxed, but inside he’s different. Inside he’s, what’s the word? Well he’s different. If he wants to do something then you had better believe that he will do it. And god help anyone that gets in his way.’

‘Elisabeth, Liz, look you can trust me. I’m not going to tell anyone else where he is. I’m in big trouble myself, just because I know him. I want to salvage my reputation in the force, but equally I want to help you and Finn. The more I think about it, and especially after talking to you, then the more I have a problem in believing he’s on the run. It just doesn’t add up. I think he might be on our side, as it were. Has he been working on something, Elisabeth? Something that could justify what happened in London yesterday morning?’

Steve didn’t really know what to think about Finn. Sure he had trouble believing that he was a traitor, but it wasn’t for the reasons he’d given Liz. No, the reason was simply that he’d seen him with his wife and children and knew from a gut instinct there was no way in hell the guy would just desert them. No, Finn loved Liz, probably more even than Steve did.

From the first moment Steve had seen Liz he’d been absolutely smitten. She was a tall, slim and, above all, a devastatingly attractive and elegant lady that had stolen his heart with the briefest

of smiles when they'd first met. She was the sort of unobtainable beauty that he imagined he could devote his whole life to. He knew now, sitting within touching distance of her in the small and fussily decorated lounge, that he would gladly walk through fire just to gain her approval. And if that meant going on his gut feeling about Finn and not following the strict letter of the rulebook then to hell with them. Rules were for idiots to follow and smart guys to use for guidance only. He'd been a policeman for long enough anyway and gone as high as he thought he could given his working class background and lack of social skills.

Steve was almost thirty years old and try as he might, he hadn't been able to adjust from beat cop to the increasingly backbiting world of the serious crime squad and New Scotland Yard. Sure he was a good detective, even a great one in his own mind, but he simply couldn't master office politics and the social niceties he needed to stay on the career ladder, let alone climb it any further. Steve wanted out of the police, but he knew he wasn't trained for anything else and so had resigned himself to the thought that he would at some stage get sidelined out of the serious crime squad and sent to a backwater division.

Listening to Liz tell Finn that money didn't matter and she would be happy living in a small house in Dorset had almost been too much. He would do that if he were married to her, happily go back to being a uniform officer or provincial detective.

He breathed a deep sigh. To hell with the rulebook, this was going to be his make or break time with the Met police force serious crime squad. Either he'd show them all as wrong and leapfrog over their heads or he'd fail, Finn would end up dead and Steve would request a transfer to the Dorset constabulary.

Liz looked long and hard at Steve. She was assessing him and deciding whether or not she should trust him. She didn't know the full story of Finn's involvement with Eagle United, but she sure as hell knew a lot more than Steve. She thought that perhaps Steve was

being genuine. She could see in his eyes that he was more involved and concerned than a policeman ought to be. God knows she could do with a shoulder to cry on and support her now.

‘Well, it doesn’t really matter. You and the rest of the police can’t get to him now. And he won’t be back until he’s done what he wants to do.’

‘Do you know what he’s going to do?’ asked Steve.

‘Yes. Yes I do.’

‘Is it dangerous?’

‘Finn says it’s not.’

She looked up at Steve again, looking him straight in the eye to judge if she really could trust him. He looked away, unable to hold eye contact for more than a couple of seconds.

‘What are you hiding, Steve? Why won’t you look me in the eye?’

‘Nothing, Elisabeth, Liz. Honestly it’s nothing.’

‘Is what he’s planning dangerous? Yes, I think it is. Can he do it? Yes, if anyone can then my Finn can. He knows oil rigs like the back of his hand.’

‘He’s going to an oilrig? Which one? Is it one owned by Eider Petroleum? Look, Liz you’re going to have to trust me. I promise you I won’t pass anything on until I am certain it won’t harm Finn. The Met Police think he’s a spy and has deserted you and his family to run for cover. He isn’t though is he? Finn’s not deserted you, and Moscow isn’t where you bought the suitcase. Where was it, Liz?’

She was still looking at Steve, unable to work out what the young detective was concealing. She decided either he was the world’s best liar or he was Finn’s best friend, even though neither of them knew it yet.

She went for the latter. Finn was going to need help even if he wouldn’t admit it to his wife.

‘Kuala Lumpur. We bought the suitcase in Kuala Lumpur. He’s going to Burma, to a gas platform in the Andaman sea owned by an American company called Eagle United Energy.’

‘Burma?’ Steve had to think for a moment just where in the world Burma was. ‘Well I’m impressed. He sure threw everyone off the track by heading to the Arctic. Half of my colleagues are there now, chasing down his mobile phone signal.’

Liz pulled her mother’s *Times Atlas of The World* out from the bookshelf.

‘Kuala Lumpur is here,’ she said turning to the right page and pointing at the map that showed the capital city of Malaysia and the rest of South East Asia. ‘He said he’d be an hour and a half north west of it by Friday, ready to go to the rig.’

‘How far northwest would he get in an hour and a half?’ Steve asked. ‘Fifty or sixty miles? What are the roads like there?’

‘No, more like six hundred miles. Finn is talking about flying time.’

She sized six hundred miles from the scale at the bottom with her finger and thumb and measured northwest from Kuala Lumpur.

‘Phuket. He’s aiming for Phuket.’

Phuket, Southern Thailand

Finn arrived in Phuket refreshed and with his plan now firmly worked out. He had slept through most of the long flight from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, upgraded at the gate to first class. ‘We hope you have a pleasant journey, Doctor Nichols, and please remember to fly with us again.’

If he ever got out of this then Finn would certainly remember to change the name on his British passport from Mr to Dr as it appeared to offer an almost guaranteed upgrade.

First thing on arrival in the resort town was to find a local English language newspaper and then a cheap hotel. In Phuket a cheap hotel that wouldn’t insist on taking his passport details would be easy as there were hundreds of hostels and back street hotels a few blocks from the beach. Phuket town was exactly what he expected. A complete spectrum of budgets were catered for, with everything from five star beachfront holidays through to backpacking students on gap years.

Finn strolled the town, stopped at a bank to change some cash into the local Baht currency and bought himself Bermuda shorts, sandals, a tourist tee shirt and a sunhat from a small shop. He changed into these in a hotel toilet, and thanks to his still bronzed suntan he didn’t look at all out of the ordinary. In fact, once he looked for it, he realised there were an awful of people without a suntan, obviously fresh off a plane from North Europe. They also looked far more uncomfortably hot and sweaty than him in the thirty-centigrade humid heat.

Finn sat down at a seafront café, ordered a pitcher of cold beer, applied a small amount of the sunblock he’d bought in Heathrow to his nose and ears and set about reading through the small ads in the Phuket Gazette.

His plan had been modified slightly on the flight over. Chartering a boat was going to introduce an extra element of risk that Finn didn't want; namely the skipper that would accompany it. So he'd decided instead of chartering he was going to buy something. He wanted a speedboat, a fast and low profile speedboat. It had to have a low profile to minimise its chances of being picked up on any radar that the Thai or Burmese military might operate to protect their coastal borders, or indeed the radar that was bound to be on the platform. Twin engines would be good in case one of them packed up at any stage, but Finn was prepared to sacrifice his ideal requirements for whatever was available in his desire to get to Sittwe as soon as possible. The boat, though, would have to be big enough to hold a decent speed in choppy seas and be able to carry enough additional fuel and supplies to get him all the way there and back.

Finn had decided he wouldn't land in Burma if at all possible. Provided he found a suitable boat, there would be no need to risk a landing as Phuket to Sittwe was only a little over three hundred miles. If he could average twenty knots and carry enough fuel, then that was only fifteen hours. There and back could be done in thirty-six hours, forty-eight at the most, which was well within his ability to stay awake and coherent. And if choppy seas or unforeseen problems delayed him beyond this, then he would simply switch the engines off and drift for a bit whilst he slept. The GPS would guide him back on course once he woke up.

Unfortunately, though, it soon became apparent that there was nothing evenly remotely suitable for sale in the small ads. So Finn phoned around some of the marinas and yacht brokers that were advertising in the paper on his Iridium sat phone, consulted his tourist's guide to Phuket and took a cab to the most promising one.

The boat he settled for was a seven year-old, thirty footer made by a company called Checkmate. It sported a single internal 425 h.p. Mercruiser V8 engine that would supposedly take it above forty-

five knots and had the typical speedboat layout of open rear cockpit and small cabin in the bow. The fuel tank was a lot smaller than he would have liked at a hundred and thirty gallons, but overall it was perfect for the job, and definitely the most suitable boat from the limited selection within his price range.

The marina wanted twenty five thousand US dollars for it, but after some quick haggling settled for eighteen thousand, no receipt required, made up from the rest of Finn's euros and the balance in dollars. It was more than Finn wanted to pay, but still left him with sufficient cash to kit it out, bribe the crew on the platform and get out of Thailand as soon as he returned.

Well, thought Finn, at least the boat solves my accommodation arrangements. The small cabin was more than sufficient for him to bed down in.

He sat in the cockpit feeling satisfied that his original half-baked plan was beginning to gel together, and set about making a list of everything he would need to buy before leaving: petrol, engine spares, a VHF marine radio, water, food, toilet paper. Toilet paper, even though there was no toilet. Better get some more batteries, he thought, and whatever I can find to recharge my phone and laptop with as well. He kept the list as short as possible because it was already past three now and he wanted to be on his way by lunchtime tomorrow so that he would arrive at the platform in the darkest hours of night.

Finn rang UK directory enquiries and asked for the number for Checkmate boats in Southampton. He figured the company that made these boats would be bound to have an office in England's most prominent boating city.

'Checkmate in Southampton. Would you like me to connect you?'

'Yes please.'

'Connecting at fifteen pence a minute from a UK landline.'

The phone rang a few times.

'Checkmate International, how can I help you?'

‘Hello, can you tell me how many miles to the gallon a Convincor 300 does at speed?’

Nine gallons an hour at twenty-five knots. Finn calculated the maths, that’s less than three miles to the gallon! Bugger! It meant a full tank would only get him half way through the round trip. He wanted to go six hundred miles and have a bloody good reserve of fuel in case he got lost, changed his plans or had to run the engine flat out for any length of time. He would need to store another two hundred plus gallons of petrol on this boat, along with a lot of fresh water to prevent him dehydrating in the heat. And of course food, fuel for the body. At least the essential spares list the salesman in Southampton had given him was short. Fuel and oil filters, oil, spark plugs, couple of belts and a battery were about it.

To his surprise he’d found that the Checkmate had a cigarette lighter, which meant he could plug his laptop and phone into it to recharge their batteries, solving one of his problems.

The yacht store at the marina supplied the marine radio engine, spares and a suitable tool kit. They directed him to a wholesaler where he could buy a fifty gallon drum of fuel. Finn had only asked for one so as not to arouse their suspicions too much. He already knew he was beginning to look dangerously like someone setting himself up as a smuggler.

He rang the wholesaler who said, yes they had plenty of fifty gallon drums and could deliver them already filled up. They would also provide a hand transfer pump for use at sea. Without giving his name or where he was calling from Finn said he would call again first thing tomorrow to have some delivered.

Back in town he had a very pleasant evening meal in a café and later found a store that was still open where he bought five cases of water, each with eight two litre bottles, plus a selection of tinned and fresh foods. Like most of the so called supermarkets the shop was really a small general store stocking everything from inflatable rubber rings to paint. Finn bought a tin of dark blue paint and a brush on impulse. The boat was white, which wasn’t the best

colour for a stealthy night-time approach to an offshore platform. He also bought a bottle of gin and a couple of litres of tonic water. The toilet paper and personal cleanliness issues were solved by a couple of packets of baby wipes that would double up as an alternative to showering for a few days.

Laden down with supplies he took a cab back to the marina and after changing the spark plugs for a fresh set and topping up the engine oil he settled down in his boat for the night.

Finn had a restless night. There was too much on his mind and his body clock was still operating in the wrong time zone.

The engine oil had looked pretty dark when he checked it, but he couldn't drain it straight into the marina so had just diluted it with fresh oil. That, and the single engine and single propeller were playing on his mind, especially as the boat was far from brand new and looked like it'd had a tough life. He kept running through his list, thinking if there was anything essential he had missed, as well as going over his plan and trying to refine it to reduce the risks as far as possible.

In the end it was only the liberal consumption of alcohol that eventually disrupted his body clock and thoughts enough to finally allow him to sleep. As on the flight over, his dreams were filled with images of the car chase, the gun flash, the bullet coming straight at him and of his wife and children. It was too hot in the small cabin for his body, which had partly reacclimatised to the chilly climate of Northern Europe. And as much as fresh air would have helped him sleep, Finn resisted the temptation to open the small skylight hatch because he knew that would result in mosquito hell.

He woke late; ten in the morning local time, but still early by London time, and just lay there for a while in a damp sweat thinking to himself. Today would be make or break day. He had managed to get himself halfway across the world and prepare for the final

assault in just three days. Now he had a mere three hundred more miles to go before he reached his target.

After that? Well lady luck would prove whether of not he could get the information he wanted and make a clean getaway. And then he would figure out what to do based on whatever information he managed to get off the platform's central computer server.

Nine fifty gallon reinforced plastic petrol drums arrived at midday on a Toyota pick-up truck. Finn paid for them with US dollars and he and the driver set about man-hauling six of them off the truck and onto the boat. The other three stayed on the quayside where they were used to fill the boat's empty fuel tank to the brim, thankfully using an electric fuel pump that the driver had in his truck.

'You going long way?' the driver asked in a curious way.

Finn was prepared for this question.

'Yes, I'm taking this boat down to Singapore. My brother has a house there with a berth and I am going to give this to him as a birthday present.'

'Wow! Big present.'

'Big birthday. He's forty this year. I think he needs to regain his youth with a nice toy, and sports cars are just far too expensive in Singapore.'

The truck driver laughed, adding, 'Not only are cars expensive, but they put you in prison for driving with too much speed or spitting chewing gum out of window! Singapore is very boring place. You know they fine you five hundred dollar for not flushing toilet? Crazy place if you ask me.'

Finn began to relax a little and enjoy the conversation. He knew that alone he had been dwelling on things too much, going over his plans again and again looking for areas he might have missed, or risks he could reduce. All he had managed to do though, was to work himself up with anxiety. But with the driver now

helping with the fuelling and chatting away about rubbish, he felt himself calming down again.

‘How do they catch you for not flushing the loo?’ Finn asked. ‘I suppose they must have a special branch of police called the turd detectives.’

They managed to squeeze five of the full drums into the small central isle in the cabin. The last full one would have gone in as well but Finn didn’t want it lying on its side on one of the seats-come-beds. That would be too risky a place, likely to come loose even if secured properly. Instead they put it behind one of the two cockpit seats; the passenger seat Finn had insisted, so as to balance his weight in the driving seat and ensure an even keel. The two completely empty and one partially empty fuel drums were placed wherever they would fit in the cockpit. Finn wanted to bring them so he could fill them with water before approaching the platform as extra ballast to reduce his radar profile.

With the fuelling complete, Finn was now very keen to get out of the marina and on his way. It was obvious to anyone looking at it that the boat was sitting very low in the water, was packed to the gills with fuel and prepared for a long journey.

He headed back to the yacht chandlers to buy a dozen cargo straps, a fire extinguisher and a spare propeller. There was already one fire extinguisher he’d found in the engine bay, but another one would be a good investment considering he didn’t have room for a life raft. The smell of petrol had put him off smoking for the time being, but Finn knew that as his nerves built the closer he got to Sittwe, then the more likely he was to light up. If he did light up he didn’t want to inadvertently blow up as well!

Securing the fuel drums was more difficult than he had expected. The straps were fine, but there was a lack of hard points in suitable places to tie them to. It was also a very tight squeeze

down in the cabin, with practically no manoeuvring space and as hot and sweaty as hell.

In an effort to speed things up he resorted to punching holes in some of the boat's fibreglass ribs with a screwdriver and threading the cargo straps through them. By the time he finished the cabin looked like a spiders web of straps, but at least everything was secure.

'Finlay Nichols?'

The loud voice from the quayside made Finn jump, banging his head on the low cabin ceiling.

Oh fuck. Fuck, Fuck, FUCK! How the hell did they catch up with me? And just when I was about to disappear again.

'Can I come aboard?'

He felt the boat move as a heavy foot landed on it and saw an overnight bag drop into his line of sight on the cockpit floor.

'One hell of a squeeze in there. You planning on going a long way?' The voice was much closer now, just outside the cabin hatchway.

Finn tried to extract himself from the cabin. He held the screwdriver tightly in his right hand, a stabbing weapon with which to attack as soon as he got the chance. He was coming out legs first over the fuel drum that practically blocked the doorway. Whoever was outside hadn't yet seen his face or heard him speak, so couldn't be sure it was him. Finn would keep his face hidden as long as possible and until he was in a position to strike.

No such luck though. He felt two hands grab the back of his shirt and pull him out. He gripped the screwdriver tighter and tensed his arm to be ready to plunge it into the person's face or head. There was no time for hesitation or doubt now. He would check only to see if the person was wearing a police uniform, in which case he would not strike. Anything else he would assume was from Eagle United and he would kill instantly.

Finn half turned, as he emerged the arms still holding his shirt, and glanced up at the quayside expecting to be greeted by a dozen armed Thai police looking down at him. It was empty. Bad sign. Not an arrest then. He turned fully and immediately lunged at the man from his still kneeling position, aiming the screwdriver at the head before even focussing on it.

One of the hands pulling him instantly left his shirt and blocked the flashing screwdriver a fraction of a second before it hit home. And before Finn could react the second hand pushed hard, throwing him down and onto a fuel drum.

Finn was still gripping the screwdriver and recovered to strike again, this time swinging his fist up at the assailant before he had time to take his guard. A foot kicked the back of his hand, throwing his aim off, and a second later another foot knocked his legs out from under him.

‘Hey! Stop it for Christ’s sake!’

Finn hesitated. He looked up at the voice talking down to him and had the second major shock of the day.

‘Steve? Steve Sharpe? What are you doing here?’

‘I’ve come to help. Provided you don’t kill me first that is.’

Steve was putting his arm out to shake the bewildered Finn by the hand, but all he was greeted with was a still clenched fist with a screwdriver blade pointing out from it as Finn struggled to get to his feet.

‘You on your own?’ Finn looked around nervously for signs of accomplices.

‘Yes. Decided, or rather was persuaded by your wife that you’re one of the good guys. You heading off to some gas rig?’

Finn, still startled, began to evaluate if Steve’s presence was good luck or bad. He put the screwdriver into the pocket of his shorts, wiped his hand on his tee shirt and tentatively shook hands with Steve.

‘Who else knows where I am?’

‘As far as I know its just you, me and Liz. Last I knew my boss and the rest of the Met were wrapping up in heavy coats and heading out to the Arctic in ‘hot’ pursuit of you. I decided not to tell them they were going completely the wrong way. My boss would probably have asked the Thai police to arrest you. You are after all wanted in connection with a double homicide in England and are planning an illegal border crossing. Not to mention that trick with the screwdriver just now.’

Steve released Finn’s hand and continued, ‘Would have taken weeks to sort your story out and prove your innocence. And by then I understand that this Eagle United Energy would have removed all evidence of whatever they’re up to in Burma that would warrant an assassination attempt on the streets of London.’

Good luck, decided Finn, definitely good luck.

‘You planning on coming with me?’ he asked.

‘Yes. I didn’t come all this way just to wave goodbye from the quayside. When are you intending on leaving? You look pretty much ready to go now.’

‘That I am. Leaving in five minutes,’ said Finn, returning to something like to his normal senses after the shock. He rummaged in the pocket of his cargo shorts for a handful of Thai baht, which he offered Steve.

‘If you’re coming then you’d better go to the store over there.’ He pointed to a shop-come-café just up the quayside. ‘And buy some more water bottles, seasick tablets, and whatever else you want. As soon as you get back we’ll cast off.’

Steve looked across at the shop and then back to Finn. ‘You’re not going to disappear without me are you? I’ve come a long way to find you and wouldn’t appreciate being left here.’

Finn climbed out of the boat and lowered his hand to help Steve up onto the quayside. ‘No, I’ll come with you. I need to get bread and cigarettes. Here, you hold onto the keys if you like.’ He passed the fob with the two ignition keys to Steve and, not knowing what else to say or do, headed off to the shop.

Five minutes later, Finn cast off the bow and stern mooring lines and jumped down into the cockpit. He started the engine and manoeuvred the speedboat slowly on its way out of the marina. The engine was barely ticking over as it pushed the heavy boat on its way.

Steve swallowed a couple of the seasick pills he'd bought with some water and chewed on a hunk of bread. He didn't think he would be seasick but Finn said it was better to be safe than sorry, particularly in this heat as he would dehydrate quickly and become all but useless if he started throwing up all over the place.

Once clear of the marina, Finn opened the throttle from idle to a throatier burble. The speed rose gently as the boat fought its way out of the water and onto the plane, which it eventually managed as they passed twelve knots. Finn edged the throttle open a touch more and set a southwesterly course at a sedate twenty-knot cruise. After a morning sweating under the Phuket heat, Steve found the flow of warm air through the cockpit utterly refreshing.

'We'll hold this speed and course until we're out of sight of land,' Finn said. 'Then swing around to north and head for the Andaman Sea. Can you find a place to stow your bag and the extra water. And if you can open its door, there's some sunblock in the fridge just to the left as you go into the cabin.'

Steve squeezed out of the cabin a few minutes later, face, arms and neck smeared with green sunblock.

'You'd better not light a cigarette down there,' he said. 'It stinks of fuel. Ignite those vapours and we'll both be blown to kingdom come. And where in hell did you get this suntan lotion? I look like the jolly green giant. Does it double up as camouflage paint?'

Finn smiled. He was feeling a lot happier now he had some company and finally allowed it to show. 'Must have spilt some petrol getting the drums into the cabin,' he said. 'The sunblock is

Boots own brand for kids. Best stuff is always kids' stuff. The colour lets you see if you've missed any bits. I kind of bought it on instinct without really thinking. Anyway, how did you know where I was? I only told Liz that I was going to southern Thailand, not exactly where or what I would do once I got there.'

'Bit of a smart one, your wife,' Steve replied. 'We looked at a map and she figured the time north west of Kuala Lumpur would put you in Thailand. She knew you were trying to get on an offshore gas platform, and with Phuket being the only decent coastal town on the Indian Ocean side of Thailand she guessed you'd head for it to find a boat. Once I got here I found that Phuket doesn't have any port to speak of and only half a dozen marinas. So all I did was to start checking the marinas and asking if anyone had seen someone fitting your description. The marina I found you at was the third furthest from the airport and therefore the third one I went to.'

Finn pondered this and guessed it sounded just like he would have expected. If Liz had trusted Steve enough to tell him where to find him, then it was good enough for him. Over the years Liz had turned out to be a far better judge of character than he was. Women's instinct or something.

'So what did you tell the police?' he enquired. 'Or did they just give you a ticket to a Thai holiday resort without you having to explain?'

'Actually I haven't told them a thing since I said I was going down to Dorset to talk to your wife. You paid for my airline ticket. Thank you very much by the way. I travelled economy, but it was still over a thousand pounds. Last minute on a scheduled flight isn't the best way of getting a cheap deal.'

'I paid for your ticket?'

'Well, Liz did. She booked it over the phone as a collect ticket on departure. And whilst I remember, your daughter Victoria said to remind you to bring her back a present. She said you normally do, but that it wouldn't hurt to remind you that she really wants a new

make-up set. And she said that Christopher needs lots of Lego wheels, as he seems to have a fondness for eating them.'

The sudden reminder of his children made Finn think and reflect on the risks he was about to take for a second before replying.

'Make-up and Lego wheels. I'll add them to the list. Did Liz say what she wants?'

'I think she only wants you to come home in one piece, pal.'

'Oh? Yeah, that sounds like Liz. What about the police? Haven't you told them anything?'

'No. It was a difficult decision, but as I said, if I had told my boss he would have been duty bound to inform the Thai authorities. He follows the book to the letter.'

'So you're in this on you own?'

'Well, not quite on my own. I am with you, Mr fugitive from the law.' Steve grinned in a way that made Finn think he was actually enjoying breaking the rules. The excited grin was enough for Finn to put thoughts of his wife and children out of his mind again and refocus back into the here and now.

Steve continued, 'And I suppose even though I am about to break the law myself it would appear to be for the greater good. But I am going to need a bloody good explanation of what you're up to. And also I need to know exactly what it is that you've been up to. Other than going to an oil rig that is owned by an American company I haven't got a clue. What are we going to do when we get there?'

'By the way,' Steve added, deliberately changing his voice from policeman to friend and patting the dashboard of the speedboat. 'What's this little lady called?'

'The boat?' Finn was suddenly without words. What was the boat called? Should it even have a name? 'I don't know. How about HMS Unsinkable?'

'What was the name you said of the Sea we're going to?' asked Steve.

‘The Andaman Sea.’

‘Well then let’s name her the Andaman Express.’

Finn nodded his head. ‘Andaman Express it is.’

Bournemouth, Dorset

Torquil Ferguson, Tog to everyone that knew him, was MI6. He was as old establishment as it was possible to get. Had been since leaving a typical English upper class university all those years ago.

Tasked with collecting foreign intelligence, MI6 was essentially the British establishment's spies. They wanted to know what was going on in literally every country in the world. It was an enormous task and one they could only scratch the surface of by using their own people. MI6 therefore, often took their lead from information supplied by British nationals working or travelling abroad. The oil industry, with its global playing field and open armed welcoming of highly trained engineers by even the most hostile of anti-western regimes, had always been a prime source of MI6 information.

After forty years in the spying game Tog had seen it all. From the depths of the Cold War against the Soviet Union, through the troubles in Northern Ireland and now the current focus on Islamic fundamentalist groups.

Dealing with the Soviet Union had been a relatively safe game, despite the very high stakes. Quite literally the lives of everyone he loved or saw during the day were at stake when dealing with the heavily armed Communist regime. Both sides knew the seriousness of the game though, and both sides were playing simply to maintain their own system of government, the 'status quo'.

Then came the IRA, who although far from predictable in their daily operations, did at least have the common denominator that they spoke the same language and had a broadly similar understanding and view of the world as the MI6 operatives that hunted them down. The IRA's soldiers had been driven more by ingrained hatred passed down through the generations than by any fundamental difference in ideology. Difference in ideology! Tog doubted that most of their members, or come to think of it, those of

the protestant UDF equivalent ruled by the Reverend 'loud mouth' Paisley, could even name the differences between the Catholic and Protestant religion let alone claim to be devoutly connected to one or the other.

At the height of the troubles Tog had seriously wondered why the IRA was actually involved in a war with Britain at all. Did they even know why they were fighting and bombing? Did the UDF understand that there was essentially not an iota of difference between their unchristian and murderous tactics and those of the IRA? No, in Tog's opinion neither side knew anything other than the animosity and blinkered stupidity bequeathed to them by their parents.

After the Soviet Union imploded on itself and Northern Ireland began to wind down to a hopefully peaceful conclusion, Tog had allowed himself to relax. He was after all getting close to retirement.

But then came the fundamentalists; people that wanted not just the destruction of democracy, but to impose an archaic ideology and a way of life that should have died out centuries ago. Tog hated them, but in particular he had a special malice to those that had been born and brought up in Britain only to turn their backs on it in support of some ideological nirvana.

Tog had been a scholar of modern history and saw clear parallels between today's home grown fundamentalist and the British communist and fascist groups of the twenties and thirties. They all wanted something that if it ever came to fruition would mean as much an end to their own way of life as to everyone else's. The fundamentalists were nothing more than simple-minded idiots in Tog's view, small people trying to be big and important by the only means open to them.

Tog had increased his role in the Nichols case from casual observer to full-time follower, easing out MI5 as he did so, as soon as the trail on Virgil led to the door of Houston based Eagle United

Energy. A check on MI6's database for Eagle United had marked up a special interest flag, meaning that an active file had already been open on the company. Reading the file notes, Tog saw that MI6 had initiated loose surveillance and information collection after the company first bought into the Myanmar offshore gas network several years earlier. MI6 routinely tracked any company that had involvement with the Myanmar government. This wasn't out of any special desire or worry, but simply because the former Burma was now a rogue state. It was not to be trusted and not to be left without surveillance.

After deciding to take over as the secret services' point man, the first thing Tog had done was to relegate Maxwell, the MI5 man, to the sidelines. 'Five' and 'Six' as they were normally referred to were much like the army and navy. Both worked toward a common goal, but there was a distinct rivalry between them. Five's territory was the United Kingdom, Six's was the rest of the world. And this investigation was now most certainly focussed in Six's playing field.

They way things were developing, Tog thought, I'll soon have to put DCI Reynolds on the sidelines as well. The police would mess up any potential operation if they caught up with Nichols too soon, and Tog wasn't so sure he wanted anything to end just yet. He still had no idea what the connection was between Nichols and Eagle United. But he knew there would most certainly be a connection, and it would be something that Nichols was most probably already working toward resolving.

Right now though, Tog was hoping to add a little light to the darkness of his knowledge. He knocked on the door and waited.

'Can I help you?' the grey haired lady asked from behind the half-opened door.

'Yes, I hope so. My name is Tog Ferguson. I work for the British Government.' He handed his identification card to the lady. 'Could I see Elisabeth Nichols please?'

An hour later Tog left the house and got back in his car. He was still none the wiser as to where Finlay Nichols was or what he was doing, but he had gained three very important pieces of information that had made the drive to Dorset eminently worthwhile.

Firstly his suspicion that Mr Nichols was no traitor had been confirmed. Elisabeth had put him quite firmly right on that point. Secondly, and equally important, he now knew Nichols was a highly talented and resourceful person – someone able to look outside the envelope, see connections and opportunities that others would miss and then act on them quickly. Elisabeth hadn't said this in so many words, but after forty years of running agents, Tog had sensed it from her answers to his other questions.

Finally, and this was something that Elisabeth had also stated quite bluntly, Tog had confirmation that Nichols was not on the run. Her husband was most definitely up to something and wouldn't be back until he had finished.

Tog decided that all he need to do for the time being was to ensure Finlay Nichols was left at large and be ready to provide advice or assistance as and when it became apparent where he was and what was going down.

The Andaman Sea

Now that they were out of the sight of land Finn swung the boat around to point north and brought the speed up to twenty-eight knots. The boat felt comfortable at that speed, the hull riding the gentle swell from the Indian Ocean more or less in tune with its own natural frequency.

Steve ventured out onto the forward deck with the paint and brush. By sitting on his bum with the open paint tin held between his crossed legs and one hand on the side rails, he started covering the white top deck with dark blue matt paint.

It was now three in the afternoon. The sun would be going down at about seven and Finn wanted to cover the three hundred miles to Sittwe quick enough to have several hours of darkness still remaining once they got there. He opened the throttle further and came up to thirty-four knots.

The heavy boat wasn't happy any more. He could feel the propeller catching some air as he crested a slightly larger swell, making the engine rpm jump around. And when he came off the crest and into the following dip, the heavy bow ploughed deeply, throwing up a large cloud of spray and slowing them right down. Steve lost grip of the paint tin as he slid across the deck and shouted back a curse.

'Goddamn it, Finn! I've got paint all over me now.'

Finn throttled back to twenty-eight knots. Three hundred miles at that speed meant about ten hours before they got to the platform. That would make it one in the morning when they arrived. Allowing a couple of hours to hand fill the fuel tank before the final approach then they would have around three hours of darkness remaining. It should be enough.

Finn switched the GPS and VHF radio on. He tuned the VHF to listen to channel sixteen, the international hailing frequency, and set the dual watch facility to constantly scan through the other

channels. This would give him the maximum chance of picking up signals from any boats within its fifty mile or so range. The GPS screen lit up and after a few seconds displayed their location as a set of coordinates. A few seconds later it updated their position and gave a read out of speed with much greater accuracy than the speedometer on the dashboard.

Steve climbed back over the side of the windscreen into the cockpit.

‘Just look at me. I’m covered in paint.’

Steve had wet paint all over his trousers, arms and hands, making Finn feel guilty at having practically put the boat through a wave.

‘Sorry. You’d better wash it off with petrol and baby wipes. Have you got any spare trousers?’

‘Yeah. I’ve got a couple of pairs of chinos thank you very much. Your chinos actually. Liz gave them to me in Dorset from the stuff you keep there as she thought you’d probably start to smell after a few days. Couple of nice shirts as well.’

‘OK’ Finn laughed. ‘Fair enough. How you feeling? Seasick at all?’

Steve was wiping the paint off with a petrol-soaked rag. ‘No, I’m pretty good. I took a couple of seasick pills and they must be really working.’

‘Funny thing about seasickness,’ said Finn, ‘you either get it or you don’t. Seasick pills really make no difference at all. It’s psychosomatic. You might just as well eat Smarties for all the good they do. I guess you must come into the fifty per cent of the population that simply don’t get seasick.’

‘Lucky me,’ replied Steve, actually feeling really very lucky that he wasn’t the seasick sort after all, but still annoyed at having been covered in paint. He felt in the mood for some answers. ‘How long is it going to take to get to this platform and what’s your plan for once we get there? Oh, and could you also tell me, just for my own education, how you managed to get almost the entire

Metropolitan police serious crime squad looking for you in the Arctic whilst you disappeared across the world to a tropical beach. And whilst we're at it, just where the hell did this boat and all the gear come from? You can't have been more than a day ahead of me in arriving in Phuket.'

Finn smiled at the compliment.

'Exactly a day ahead of you. And as for the boat, well I'm an engineer. I work in a world where it's my business to cope and to solve problems quickly and efficiently. Spend any time in the middle of the North Sea on a barge costing half a million a day to run and you learn to focus damn quick on how to get things done.'

Finn laughed at his own assessment of himself before adding, 'Even doubt, at the end of the day, is just another problem to solve. Do you know how you remove doubt? You look at the other options and if what you're doing is better then you're doing it the best way. If you can't tell which is the best option, then there's so little between them that any will do.'

Finn went on to explain his plan, or at least what there was of it. Board the platform, copy the server and then see what he'd got. He thought there was a high chance of finding enough incriminating evidence to point a finger of accusation directly at Eagle United Energy and arrange an intercept of one of the border shipments. That should be enough to put the cat among the pigeons in their Houston head office and shut their operation down.

At Steve's request, Finn also explained the dual passports, the cash he had taken out of the bank and finally how and why he'd bought the boat. At the end of it he handed the controls over so he could have a wee over the side and then set about trying to find his charts amongst the mess that was the cabin.

The cabin really did stink of petrol fumes, but none of the containers appeared to be leaking. Finn opened and closed the lids on each one to let the pressure out that had built up as the cold fuel had warmed up from the heat and bumping around. He managed to get to the very bow and opened the little sky hatch to allow a breeze

to blow through. Next, he checked the holes he had punched in the boat's interior panels to see if any cracks were beginning to develop. None were, which was good, so he ratcheted the straps a little tighter to take in the slack that had developed. Finally he dug out his *Rough Guide to South East Asia* and raided the fridge for cheese and drink.

'Here,' he said, after negotiating the rearward struggle out of the cabin. 'Fancy a gin & tonic and some French bread and cheese?'

'Thanks,' replied Steve. 'Did you find the charts you were looking for?'

Finn pulled the *Rough Guide* out of his back pocket, waggled it at Steve and turned to a dog-eared page showing the Isthmus of Kra and Southern Myanmar, or Burma as they both thought of it. There was a cross marked out in the sea and a set of latitudes and longitudes scribbled next to it.

'That's a chart?'

'Good enough for us. We only need the coordinates of the platform and a rough idea of the towns and ports we need to keep clear of along the Burmese coast.'

Finn set the platform coordinates into the GPS and taped the unit in between a couple of dashboard grab handles with a cushion stuffed behind it to protect it from vibration and shocks. The LCD screen now showed a big arrow pointing almost straight ahead. Beneath that it read:

Distance to go: 215nm

Speed: 28.4 kts

Time to go: 7.6 hrs

'When we get to about twenty miles from the platform we'll stop to fill the fuel tank and check the engine is OK. Then we'll make our approach, with the last few miles at a slow speed so we stay low in the water and don't kick up a white wake that will be

visible from the platform,' Finn continued. 'I would have bought night vision goggles with me, but I didn't see any at Schiphol airport, so we'll have to rely on the light from the platform deck that makes it down to the sea. Or, of course, moonlight if it stays clear.'

Barnes, West London

Tog Ferguson and DCI Reynolds listened on the speakerphone as Sam Burton relayed the movements and background of York Kendrick, the Eagle United executive who had dropped Virgil Thomason off at Houston airport.

‘Good work, Sam,’ Tog said. ‘So he’s married with three children and a nice house. What else do you know about him?’

‘He’s been with Eagle United for ten years now. Worked his way up from a roustabout, that’s someone that helps out on the drill floor, all the way to Vice President. Before Eagle United he was in the US Marines. Again worked his way up from a specialist, that’s what we call privates nowadays, to Sergeant. And then made the jump across to being an officer. This guy has a good record. He was in Gulf War number one in ninety-one, followed by Somalia in ninety-three and then an honourable discharge in ninety-seven. The guy I followed in from the London flight, Virgil Thomason, was one of his team mates when he was first in the Marines.’

Reynolds cut in with a question.

‘What does he do for Eagle United?’

‘According to the record he is VP for HR and Offices, that’s a Vice President for Human Resources. Basically in charge of all the personnel and security matters.’

‘And where is he now?’ asked Tog.

‘He’s at Eagle United’s downtown office. We’ve got one of our units watching the building and his car, so we’ll know when he leaves. Haven’t been able to get a federal judge to authorise a phone tap though, although my captain says he will try again tomorrow.’

Tog had made his decision. Virgil Thomason had flown American Airlines to Hong Kong and then Burma Air on to Rangoon. Whatever it was that had made Finlay Nichols disappear, he was now absolutely certain it wasn’t anything to do with spying

or selling nuclear secrets. He doubted very much if the still elusive Mr Nichols had crossed into Russia at all. No he was at large somewhere else, most probably already in Houston since he'd demonstrated an amazing ability to disappear and cross borders without giving away his identity. If Tog could make contact with him before he did something reckless then he intended on turning him into an MI6 asset for this operation.

'Sam. We may have an English guy, name Finlay Nichols, turning up in Houston. My guess is that he will want to see York Kendrick and he won't be in too good a mood. I'm going to send his description over to the Houston Police. Can you keep an eye open for him and let me know if you see him.'

'OK, will do. Is he dangerous?'

'No, or perhaps yes. I'm not sure to be honest, but I would like you to treat him as a friendly. He seems to be caught up in whatever Eagle United are up to in South East Asia.'

'Is Nichols the guy the two Russian hit men tried to kill over there in London?'

'One and the same.'

'We'll treat him as most definitely dangerous then since the last two guys that tried to talk to him ended up in body bags.'

The Andaman Sea

The sun was setting into the western ocean as they entered the Burmese sector of the Andaman Sea on a perfect tropical evening. The sea had calmed almost to a millpond so Finn inched the throttle forward, bring the engine up to a little below the maximum sustained speed the dealer in Southampton had recommended.

With the heat of the sun gone, the wind from the speed of the boat felt almost chilly. Finn put his fleece on to keep himself warm.

‘You can’t seriously be cold,’ Steve enquired.

‘I hate the cold, always have and always will,’ replied Finn.

They had been chatting about nothing in particular for the last few hours, so Finn zipped up his fleece and carried on. ‘When I was a kid we didn’t have any heating so it always felt cold. Particularly I remember first thing in the morning. In fact it used to get so cold that for most of winter my bedroom windows would ice over and I used to get dressed under the blankets before nipping down to the kitchen.’

Steve thought back to his own childhood. ‘Yeah, me too I guess.’

Finn continued, ‘Did you know that nowadays, even with double glazing, better insulation and better fuel economy, our generation still manages to use double the oil and gas our parents did?’

‘Well you boys keep finding the stuff, so what do you expect?’ Steve remarked.

‘We’re not finding half as much as you’re led to believe you know.’

‘Oh really? You mean it’s all going to run out? What about windmills or wind turbines or whatever they’re called. They make loads of electricity don’t they?’

‘Steve, don’t get me started on this, but wind turbines, good as they are, will not be the solution. The wind just isn’t predictable enough, it’s either blowing a hooley or nothing at all.’

‘You got something better in mind?’

‘Yup, I’ll tell you about it one day.’

Finn thought to himself for a few minutes before turning back to Steve. ‘I guess we should go through the workings of a gas production platform so you can navigate your way around Sittwe when we get to it. The basic layout of all these platforms is more or less the same, so once you know what bits there are and what they look like, you’ll be able to guess what other bit will be around the corner.’

‘Alright, but keep it simple, I’m just a copper don’t forget.’

‘Ha! Believe me it’s the simplest thing in the world. Ten minutes and you’ll be an expert.’

Despite Finn’s assurance, after twenty minutes of explanation as to what bits did what on a gas rig, Steve still felt far from an expert. Instead he had developed an acute awareness of the dangers of being ignorant and had decided that he would remain attached at the hip to Finn as long as they were on the platform for fear he would knock one of the hundred or so things Finn had told him never to touch.

Rangoon, Burma (Myanmar)

Virgil felt good to be back in Burma. Things were far simpler here than in Europe or now Houston. Here he was well treated and respected for what he did.

He had checked into his favourite Rangoon hotel, the Strand, earlier in the day. Eagle kept a suite and a smaller single room on permanent hire in the former colonial mansion turned world class hotel. The suite was normally used by the South East Asia Operations Manager, Bill Murray, but Virgil knew Bill was offshore so wouldn't be using it for a while. Virgil checked into the suite.

The Strand rated as one of the best hotels in South East Asia and was certainly the most luxurious accommodation Virgil had ever stayed in. He loved the place, not just for its decadence in the heart of the poor country, but for the rich westerners that frequented the place. Here Virgil could act out the life he always wanted. On previous stays he had often ended up chatting to some German or English couple enjoying an expensive holiday of a lifetime. Virgil played the part of the successful businessman, embellishing his role from security advisor to Country Manager. Security advisor marked him out as an ex-soldier, but as Country Manager he could pretend anything he wanted about his background or his income. On those occasions Virgil would become more like York – a wife and children in Houston, privately educated of course, the big Mercedes S-class sedan for himself, plus a natty CLK convertible for the wife. All the things Virgil didn't have and knew he never would have he could simply invent.

It was just past sunset and Virgil was feeling fresh and relaxed despite the two long flights, ninety Fahrenheit heat and one hundred per cent humidity outside. He went down to the Long Bar, had a large Singapore Sling and thought about what he would do during his enforced time away from Houston.

Today was most definitely a day of rest, that went without question. Lunch at the Terrace restaurant had been followed by a massage, swim and then a movie on the in-house channel. After dinner he would head downtown, have a few drinks and find himself a girl for the night. The girl would be easy. If he didn't pick one up during the evening then he would simply go to the Bar Mandalay. The proprietor there spoke good English and knew Virgil's taste in women, or rather his taste for young girls.

Tomorrow Virgil thought, he would call in on his Burmese military friends at their offices in the centre of town and then maybe go over to the Sittwe platform for a couple of days to see Bill and the boys. York had told him to keep out of the way for a few weeks and that is exactly what he intended on doing. Once the hubbub all blew over he would think about going back to Houston, but in the meantime he would make the most of his enforced exile.

Sittwe Platform, Andaman Sea

By the early hours of the morning the sea and overcast sky had merged into an almost continuous jet black.

The Mercruiser V8 engine burred at a few hundred rpm, pushing the Checkmate along at six knots on the final approach to the platform. Finn was approaching from the north, so that the two knot tide the GPS said they were running would help him close the gap as quickly and stealthily as possible. The volume of the VHF set was turned down and the boat's dashboard lights were switched off.

At the refuelling stop they had put well over a hundred gallons of petrol into the fuel tank, laboriously refilling the two emptied fifty gallon drums and the three empties he already had with seawater and placing them around the cockpit and loosely tied to the fore deck. They'd also filled the bilges until they were almost overflowing to make the boat as heavy and as low in the water as possible. With only a foot or so of freeboard now showing at the bow, Finn doubted they would be visible on the platform radar.

Fuel burn had been slightly higher than anticipated, but Finn reckoned this was mainly because he had pushed the boat up to a thirty-four knot high-speed cruise as the swell had died down. The smell of petrol in the small cabin that had been thoroughly purged by the wind had come back almost as soon as they stopped. It was worrying and Steve had spent a good deal of time thoroughly checking each of the four remaining petrol drums for any signs of leaks or wet patches on the fibreglass floor. He hadn't found anything, but as a precaution had unplugged the mini fridge and suggested that they didn't turn the small cabin light on again, just in case an electrical short ignited some missed patch of fuel-soaked floor.

They still had two hundred gallons of petrol in the four cabin-stored barrels, plus now a full fuel tank. It was more than enough,

thought Finn. Once they got clear of the platform they could ditch the water-filled barrels and then, with a lighter but still well-ballasted boat they would be able to make a good speed on their getaway.

The night was hot and humid, and now without the cooling breeze they were both once again sweating. Finn gulped at a bottle of water as he munched on some bread and sweaty cheese, conscious that in the tropics you needed to drink almost continuously to avoid dehydration.

Steve was too nervous to drink or eat. Now thinking along the same lines as Finn, though, he had raised the bad weather canopy to cover the blue and white trim of the cockpit area and had even gone as far as to rip off the two small privacy curtains from the cabin and drape them over the windscreen to prevent any stray reflections from the flat glass panels. Sitting low on the foredeck and with his eyes adjusted to the dark he could make out Finn behind him, swigging on water and steering the boat standing up with his head stuck through a rip in the hood that Steve had made just for that purpose.

Boy, that guy knows how to wreck a perfectly good piece of machinery, Finn thought. I don't suppose I'll be able to sell it back to the marina in the state it's now in. He wished he had some night vision goggles as the night was nowhere near as bright as he might have hoped for. He could just make out Steve crouching low at the bow on the now dry paint, coil of rope at the ready. But beyond that all he could see was the dark sea and a large blur of light from the platform looming up in front of him.

All looked quiet on the platform as they closed in. Finn hoped it would be manned just like Luann Alpha, with a couple of sleeping Americans responsible for running the show and the remainder of the crew consisting of locally sourced cheap labour. It was two in the morning, the darkest part of the night, and the time when most

of the night crew would hopefully be skiving off in some comfortable control room or the mess rooms.

Finn was steering for the northwestern leg of the eight-legged platform, where he could make out the small green lights that indicated the topmost steps of the emergency sea access ladder.

He tried his best to judge his approach to the platform leg and, as they disappeared beneath the overhanging topsides, shifted the speedboat into reverse, and revved the engine a touch to slow it down and nose up to gently kiss the ladder with the bow. Damn! He silently cursed to himself, coming in a bit too fast. Oh Shit! Coming in much too fast!

Steve sprang into action. He could just make out the yellow painted leg of the platform and the grey ladder against the dark background approaching him quickly. As the bow thumped the platform leg he grabbed the passing ladder with one arm and quickly stepped onto it. He held the mooring rope tightly with his free hand, waiting for the snatch as it pulled tight. Finn had told him earlier that under no circumstances should he wrap the rope around his hand as a sudden surge would pull him off if the rope went taut too quickly. As the boat passed and the mooring line went tight he gripped it with all his might. The rope immediately slipped in his hand and an instantaneous heat burn made him involuntarily drop it with a curse. He could hear Finn revving the engine much more urgently now and watched as the boat quickly drifted out the other side of the platform legs, foaming water running along its sides from the reverse thrust of the propeller, all semblance of a stealthy approach lost by the noise of the big V8 engine's exhaust.

Finn kept the boat in reverse and the engine at as high an rpm as he dared. His overwhelming concern was to keep the propeller as far away from the dangling bowline as possible by pushing it downstream with the prop wash. A snarled propeller was the very last thing he wanted.

Well, that was hell of a balls-up of an operation, he thought. Certainly not one of your best, young man. The boys back in Iraq would be pissing themselves laughing if you did that at the quayside.

Finn throttled back to near idle as soon as the boat started moving backwards. Slowly he began to reverse back under the cover of the platform and up to the now stranded Steve. Once past him, Finn swung the bow around so that Steve could duck his arm under and retrieve the mooring line. As soon as Finn saw him begin to tie it to the ladder he killed the engine. The sudden silence as the exhaust note died highlighted just how loud and noisy an approach they'd managed to achieve.

'Sorry,' he said in a loud whisper.

Steve flicked his head up in acknowledgement.

'Leave some slack in the line,' Finn whispered back. 'In case the tide comes in, pulls the bow under and sinks our escape route.'

'I didn't think we were planning on staying that long,' Steve said, slacking the line off a few of feet.

Finn ducked his head back through the rip in the canopy and headed down into the speedboat's cabin, scrambling through the dark maze of rigging and dirty bilge water before he squeezed out of the sky hatch and onto the bow. He wiped his hands down his trousers to remove the blobs of sticky dark paint that stuck to them. He was on the peak on the bow now, one hand and foot on the ladder. The current had swung the boat around so it was pointing north, its thirty-foot dark length hidden perfectly between two of the platform's large steel legs.

'You better move over a bit. I'll take the lead up the ladder.'

Steve did as asked and Finn stepped off the boat and started up the ladder.

It was a long climb. Finn guessed probably five or six storeys until they reached the lowermost spider deck.

'You still there?' he asked below him in a hushed whisper.

‘Right behind you,’ came the equally hushed reply.

‘OK, the deck is right above me now, I can see quite clearly through the grated floor that there is no one on it. Personnel are not normally allowed onto the spider deck at night, but sometimes people come down here to fish.’

Finn emerged onto the steel grating of the spider deck and guided Steve onto it behind him.

Steve was glad to get onto the safety of the grating. He hated heights at the best of times and had been trying desperately to keep his voice calm and his mind off the pitch-blackness and the long fall into an ocean in the middle of nowhere. Were there sharks in the water? Yes he thought, there was probably a whole family of them circling below, just waiting for him to fall in. He was drenched in sweat and had felt his hands getting unnervingly slippery from sweat and rust flaking off the ladder during the last part of the climb.

‘You OK?’ Finn asked as he helped him onto the spider deck.

Steve took a deep breath to calm his nerves. ‘Yeah, come on let’s do it.’

‘OK. Follow me. We’re going that way and up the stairs to the wellhead deck.’

The wellhead deck was well-lit from overhead fluorescent lights. Steve could see at least a dozen of the large Christmas trees that Finn had told him would be there. The Christmas trees were, in reality, stacks of valves that performed various functions Finn hadn’t bothered to explain.

Finn disappeared off towards the Christmas tree wellheads and Steve quickly set about following him, both of them running in a low crouch.

What the hell was Finn doing? He looked like he was licking one of the smaller valves on the nearest Christmas tree.

‘Here,’ Finn whispered as Steve came up behind him, ‘Smell this.’ He indicated the end of the valve and a pipe not more than half an inch in diameter.

Steve sniffed and pulled his head back quickly in an involuntary reaction to the stink.

‘Smells awful. What are they pumping out of the ground, raw sewage?’

‘No. That smell comes from hydrogen sulphide in the produced gas. It’s highly toxic.’

‘Then why the hell did you just make me sniff in a lungful of it?’

‘If you can smell it then the concentration isn’t high enough to kill you.’

‘Thanks mate. Is this relevant?’

‘No. Sorry, no it’s not relevant. It is interesting though. They’re flowing sour wells. Let’s wait here a bit and see if anyone comes along.’

They crouched in amongst the wellheads, waiting and watching.

Steve was completely drenched in sweat. The wellheads were almost too hot to touch due to the heat of the gas flowing through them from deep beneath the earth’s surface. And combined with the lack of any breeze he felt himself sweating continuously. He was also getting a headache, which he knew to be an early sign that he was dehydrating. Should have drunk a stomach full of water before starting this, he thought.

‘Here. Have some of this,’ Finn said, almost reading his mind as he passed back a litre bottle of water that he had pulled out from his cargo pants pocket. Steve unscrewed the cap and downed over half of it in one go. He poured the rest over his head to cool him down. Screwing the cap back on, he passed it back to Finn.

‘Thanks. I needed that.’

He saw Finn shaking the now empty bottle before the hushed reply came back, 'Well don't worry about me. You have the whole lot if you want.'

'Sorry, wasn't thinking.'

Finn turned to face him and was grinning with a silly smile, obviously as nervous as Steve. Finn glanced down to Steve's feet, crouched beneath him, and with a horrified look on his face whispered somewhat more urgently, 'Don't stand on those hydraulic hoses! If you break one off the blow-out preventer will trigger. Apart from taking both your legs off it will set off just about every alarm on the platform.'

Steve quickly but very gently shuffled away from the hoses.

'Sorry.'

After what felt like an eternity but was only five minutes by his watch, Finn spoke again.

'Don't think they come here that often. Not surprising really as not much happens with the wellheads. Guess we'll have to go and look for someone.' And with that he was up and heading towards another flight of stairs at the edge of the deck.

Almost at the top of the stairs they were startled by an orange clad figure coming around the corner and heading down practically straight into them. The figure had a hard hat and heavy leather gloves which were holding a big wrench. He jumped back with a squawk that sounded like it came from a startled crow.

'Police. Police! English. Do you speak English?' Finn was saying to him in a hushed, but quite loud voice, both his hands out to show the man he had no weapons.

No way he speaks English thought Steve.

'Yes, yes. Sorry boss. I speak English,' the orange man said as he backed away and began to regain a semblance of composure. 'You policeman?'

Finn was up the stairs now, close enough to speak quietly but clearly, but still far enough away so as not to present a threat to the orange man.

‘No, we’re not police. Well, he’s a policeman.’ Finn indicated to Steve. ‘I’m not.’

The orange man was looking very confused now.

‘Look,’ Finn said, ‘I’m an engineer. From England. I need to get some information without the American boss guys knowing about it. You have Americans on the platform?’

‘Err. Yes we have several, but they all asleep now. You want me wakey wakey one?’

‘No, we not want wakey wakey any American. I want information with Americans asleep. Americans not know we are here please.’

‘Not tell Americans?’

‘No.’ Finn gently reached into his pocket and took out an envelope stuffed with cash. ‘We pay lots of American dollars so American bossmen never know we here. You understand?’

To Steve this looked ludicrous. The orange man had been scared out of his wits seconds earlier by two white men, obviously somewhere they shouldn’t be and now Finn was showing him an inch thick wedge of hard currency and overtly offering a bribe so he wouldn’t blow the whistle on them. It was unbelievable, but he had to admit the money had certainly caught the orange man’s attention, and he soon showed he understood perfectly what the proposition was.

‘How much money?’

‘Five thousand dollars. American dollars. You tell your friends. We want to go to the control room. I need access to control room computer for ten minutes. Not do anything bad. Only copy data. You watch me do it so no worry.’

Steve watched, thinking to himself there was more to the world than the strict moral principles of the Metropolitan police or the overt thievery and violence of those he dealt with on a day to day

basis. Finn, a man that obviously had to work within the confines of corporate governance in the UK, was quick to cut to the nub of the matter when needs must and do whatever was required to get the job done.

The orange man spoke into his hand held radio. He said quite a lot into it, probably repeating Finn's story.

'You come with me.' The orange man indicated to follow.

The handheld radio had burst to life, lots of different voices suddenly babbling out of it. Faces appeared from every direction. It felt to Steve that there were suddenly a hundred people emerging from nowhere, all of them orange with red hard hats and dark skins. A lot of the new faces smiled or grinned as they bowed a nod to him and said, 'Hello, sir.'

'There's so many of them. Do you think we can trust them all?'

'Yes, we should be able to,' replied Finn. 'And remember they will all be able to speak English to some degree or other. A hundred locals, two or three Americans and the platform language will be English. Don't speak English and you don't get a job. So don't go saying anything to me that you're not happy for them to hear as well.'

They entered the control room by climbing a dozen or more flights of metal grated stairs up the outside of the accommodation block and entering through a side access. Steve immediately felt the chill of the cold air conditioning on his wet tee shirt, involuntarily making him shiver. Two more Burmese were waiting for them, these dressed in shorts and tee shirts and wearing flip-flops. One of them spoke.

'You English? You pay money for information on computer? Lots of money?'

'Yes,' said Finn, 'I need to copy some information you have on the file server for the Burma, sorry Myanmar, logistics of Eagle United. We have five thousand American dollars to pay you. The

information will only be copied. No one will know I have done it. You are welcome to watch me.'

Finn handed the man the envelope. He took it, sifted through the contents and looked back up at Finn. 'OK. Use computer over there.'

Deal done thought Steve.

Finn sat down at the indicated console, opened Windows Explorer and set to work. Within a minute he had found what he wanted, took the USB memory stick from his pocket and plugged it into the back of the computer. A few more mouse clicks later he leaned back from the console and spoke.

'Fifteen minutes.'

The squawk of a hand-held radio passing outside his cabin door woke Bill Murray up.

What was all that noise? He looked across at his watch, illuminated by the fluorescent light too close outside his window. Half past two and the goddamn jinglies are clumping around babbling to each other on the radios.

He hauled his body around and sat up on the edge of the bed. Guess I'd better go see what's up, he thought, hunting around for his trousers and shirt.

The heavy internal door of the control room opened, making Steve jump and spin around to look. Another of the Burmese platform crew came through into the control room holding a tray with two mugs of tea and a platter of sandwiches.

Finn bowed his head slightly as he accepted the tea and took a sandwich. Steve was still thirsty but certainly not hungry. He copied Finn only so as not to show offence.

This was now very surreal thought Steve as he sat at a chair sipping his tea and waiting. We're in the middle of nowhere, above a shark infested ocean I've never heard of, thousands of miles from safety in a part of the world I never would have dreamed I'd be in,

doing something highly illegal, and we're sitting around drinking tea and munching sandwiches. Finn is chatting away to the control room man, not showing a care in the world and I'm sitting here smiling at the strange faces and feeling like I've gatecrashed someone else's party.

The minutes ticked away painfully slowly. Finn was now looking at some technical drawings with the control room man, who was indicating to something. Come on, Finn, Steve was urging, come on, finish and let's go.

Finn finally went back to the computer console, pulled the memory stick out, thanked the man and said it was time they left. Steve heard the control room door open again behind him. No, not more tea, I don't care about being rude anymore, I just want to go.

'Finn? Finlay Nichols? The hell are you doing here?'

An American accent! Steve turned and saw a confused and angry man about fifty years old wearing a half done up shirt and with his hair in a sleepy mess. The American looked across at him, having just noticed Steve's presence and reached behind him. He's going for a gun Steve thought, more by intuition than anything else. He lunged into action with a running dive at the body. He hit the American full on, winding him and knocking him back onto a control panel. Steve's hand immediately felt for the wrist that he had seen going for the gun. The American was surprisingly strong for an old guy, struggling to break free after the initial shock at having been run into.

As they wrestled Steve caught a movement out of the side of his eye and saw Finn's open palm slamming into the American's face, knocking his head straight back into the control panel. The body went limp and slid out underneath him.

A siren was sounding, very loud.

'Sanchan, we're leaving! Steve, give him the money you've got.'

Steve pulled out the second envelope with an additional five thousand dollars in it and pushed it into the control room man's

hand. The man, Sanchan, was shouting at the other two Burmese and hardly looked at it before stuffing the envelope into his pocket.

Steve stooped down to check the unmoving body and look for the pistol he'd been going for. The American was alive, obviously unconscious and surprisingly didn't have a gun on him. Well, your mistake pal, you're going to have one hell of a headache when you wakeup.

He stood up and looked towards Finn for a pointer on what they were going to do next. The three Burmese were already lifting the unconscious American between them and half carrying, half dragging him toward the balcony walkway.

Finn took one look at Steve, then at the Burmese carrying the American, turned and legged it for the outside door. Steve pushed past the men struggling with the heavy body and set about catching Finn, who was already halfway down the first flight of stairs.

As he reached the foot of the first flight Steve saw the American's body falling through the air to the sea far below them. Seconds later the platform Tannoy came to life, urgently calling 'Yahn at chitchita! Yahn at chichita! Man in water! Man in water!'

They were back in the darkness of the spider deck before Finn stopped running.

'Bugger, that was close,' he said. 'Did they throw him overboard?'

'Yes,' Steve gasped. 'He knew you. Recognised you even from behind. You been here before?'

'Best thing for the Burmese. The idiot fell onto the platform alarm. There will be all the remaining Yanks swarming around now, looking for their boss. Poor bugger fell overboard by accident no doubt.'

Steve could figure that one out for himself. It made a good cover as to why the alarm had gone off and it also got rid of the only American that had seen him and Finn on the platform.

‘How come he recognised you so quickly? You didn’t even turn around.’

Finn was still catching his breath. ‘I spent some time with him on a platform in Thailand a few weeks ago. Said he was the Country Manager for Thailand, but I guess he was something bigger. Come on let’s get back down to the boat.’

The ladder back down to the boat held no fear for Steve now. He positively ran down it, twice treading on Finn’s hands beneath him, who was being far more cautious on the slippery rungs.

‘Come on,’ whisper shouted Steve. ‘Let’s get back on the boat and the hell out of here.’

Once he got onto the almost invisible boat Steve reached for the mooring line and untied it by feel. He was about to push off when Finn, just visible as a faint head emerging from the rip in the canopy, called back into a loud whisper.

‘No wait, hold onto the ladder, keep us here.’

‘Why?’ he whisper shouted back. ‘We should get out quickly. Go out the opposite side of the platform to the one the body fell from.’

‘No, let’s wait a bit. The platform will launch a fast rescue craft in a minute to recover Bill’s body. We start our engine before then and they’ll hear it. We have to wait until they start up and the sound of their engine masks our own. Untie the water barrels from the deck and get ready to roll them over the side as soon as we start moving.’

Sure enough, within a minute of tensioned waiting Steve could see the orange hull of a hard framed Zodiac being winched down to the water. He heard another American voice shouting, ‘Get the engines started. You there, hit the release now. We’ll drop the rest of the way.’

‘No boss, still too high, we drop and we all in water as well.’

‘God damn it! When I give an order I expect you little yellow motherfu—’

The twin outboard engines of the fast rescue craft fired into life with a raucous snarl, and a cloud of blue smoke lit up from above, drowning out the rest of the conversation.

Finn immediately turned the ignition on and hit the starter button on the big Mercrusier, the throaty burble of the V8 was lost in the high pitched metallic cry of the outboards. Steve let go of the ladder and crouched down on the bow of the boat.

As soon as the fast rescue craft was close to the water one of the crew slammed a large hammer into the big D-ring that had held it to the lift wire and it dropped the last few feet into the ocean. Landing with a splash, it turned and tore off downcurrent. A powerful searchlight quickly homed in on the body drifting away face down.

Finn very slowly opened the throttle and headed out to the north, in the opposite direction.

As the lights of the platform began to dwindle Finn pushed the throttle further open and brought the speedboat out of the water onto the plane. He leaned over and pulled the curtains off the windshield, letting them flutter away behind the boat and ducked his head back down through the tear in the roof.

‘Think you can sew that up?’ He shouted to Steve over the holler of the engine.

Steve, who had climbed in through the bow sky hatch after ditching the water filled barrels from the deck, laughed out loud, the tension of the last couple of hours draining away from him.

‘You planning on selling this gorgeous girl?’ he quipped.

‘I don’t think anyone would take her. She looks, and smells, like a death trap! Did you leave the sky hatch open to vent the fumes?’

‘Sure did,’ Steve replied. ‘More importantly though, did you get what you wanted off the computer? Whatever you’ve got on the memory stick has just cost someone their life.’

Finn switched the dashboard lights on, casting just enough light for him to see Steve clearly.

‘I don’t know until I look at it on my laptop, but I sure hope so. Whatever I have has cost a lot more than just one life.’

‘What do you mean?’ Steve asked with obvious concern and curiosity.

‘Sanchan, the man I was talking to in the control room, told me a few things that have made everything suddenly fit into place. Remember the sour smell from the gas at the wellheads?’

‘Yes. You said it wasn’t relevant.’

‘Well I was wrong. It is relevant. In fact it’s the key to this whole thing. The smell was from hydrogen sulphide. Sittwe is a sour gas reservoir. Sanchan told me that half a dozen of his offshore crew died from hydrogen sulphide poisoning just recently.’

Finn paused to collect his thoughts and think about how to best and easily explain what he’d found out to the policeman. ‘Normally once you separate the H₂S, that’s the hydrogen sulphide. Well, once you separate it from wellhead gas you normally, no not normally but always, you always pump it straight back down a dustbin well. That’s into a geological formation that doesn’t have any gas or oil but has sufficient porosity to accept the H₂S. The reason you pump it straight back down into the ground is not because of its toxicity, it’s because it will wreck any steel it comes into contact with. H₂S causes hydrogen embrittlement, which means it makes normal steel turn into something like glass. The wellheads themselves are made from a very special and very expensive high chrome alloy that can resist H₂S, but everything else is from bog standard carbon steel.’

‘OK,’ Steve said, ‘I follow that. But what we smelt was wellhead gas wasn’t it? It was hot from having come from deep below the bottom of the sea. And it wasn’t poisonous enough to harm us, or so you said.’

‘Yes, that’s right, if you can smell it then the concentration is less than fifteen parts per million, enough to cause embrittlement given time, but not enough to kill you from the odd whiff or two.

Sanchan, the control room boss, said they were separating the H₂S on the platform as would be normal, but they hadn't been reinjecting it into the dustbin well. Instead they had been pressurising and storing it. Every so often they would offload a few tanks of the stuff to a supply boat. It was one of those transfers that resulted in the leak that killed six of his men.'

Steve thought for a moment. 'Do you think Abzu is really hydrogen sulphide and not heroin or gem stones?'

'Yup, convinced of it.'

'And it's going to Thailand? Why?'

'It's going to Luann Alpha, Eagle's only platform in the Thai offshore gas network. I think they are introducing it into the sweet gas on the platform and are deliberately embrittling the main export pipeline to the beach. If I wanted to embrittle the pipeline then that's exactly the way I would do it. Little doses at a time, let the H₂S do its stuff, it takes time you know. And then when you're ready to shatter the pipeline, send a high dose down. Wallop! It shatters like glass. They've shipped enough of the small stuff; the broken turbine blades in the power station prove that. Now it's ready for the fatal dose.'

Steve was getting lost. 'What power station?'

Finn explained, 'The whole reason I got involved in this is because the brokerage that insures all Thailand's platforms thought that someone in the network was flowing a sour well. That's one that has H₂S in it. The sour gas embrittled a turbine in one of the gas fired power stations in Thailand, causing it to shatter. Wade, the insurance broker, called me. And I went to the Luann Alpha to try to figure out who was doing the dirty.'

'And?' asked Steve.

'No one was. No one was flowing sour gas. I secretly checked the whole network and it was all sweet. But that makes sense though, if Eagle were only adding it occasionally. I checked when there was no H₂S in the network.'

‘OK,’ said Steve, beginning to understand the logic. ‘But why would Eagle United want to do that? It’s their pipeline isn’t it?’

‘Think about it Steve. That pipeline and the Luann Alpha platform would take two, maybe three years to replace if they were destroyed. Without the pipeline and the platform there is no Thai gas gathering network. Everything flows through Luann and down its single large bore pipeline to shore. Without the network Thailand loses eighty per cent of its natural gas supply. Gas isn’t like crude oil, it isn’t the same price the world over. Its price is highly dependent on local supply and demand. Disrupt a major network and the local price goes through the roof. Without the Luann to Thailand pipeline the only gas supply is that coming from Burma, from Eagle United’s Burmese platforms. Platforms that I have a sneaky suspicion are currently producing at well below capacity.’

‘Sorry?’ Steve was beginning to get lost again. ‘You’re saying that although Burma currently supplies only a small part of Thailand’s natural gas, they could in fact supply a lot more if they wanted to?’

‘Yes. Gas reservoirs are distinctly different to oil ones. With gas you can open the taps wide and literally strip a reservoir without too much concern over damaging it. The only limits to the gas flow are the number of wells, diameter of the pipeline and size of the compressors. Eagle’s southern export pipeline, the one that exports gas to Thailand, is pretty damn big and there were one hell of a lot of wellheads on that platform we were on. If Eagle destroyed Thailand’s pipeline then they would quite literally be able to dictate the natural gas price there. They’d make an absolute killing.’

Steve was suspicious. ‘Why not just blow up the platform, you know, the one in Thailand, Luann Alpha? Why go to all the bother and risk of sending hydrogen whatever it is over there and doing it secretly and slowly?’

‘They blow the platform and I can re-route the network around it. Would take maybe six or seven weeks to get the gas flowing again. Flow rate would be reduced, because Luann Alpha is a main

compression facility, but it would be enough to stave off paralysing the Thai economy until we could get big compressors onto the other platforms. But if Eagle United shatter the pipeline to shore, then that's a hundred and fifty miles of steel and concrete that need to be replaced. That's where your two or three years comes from.'

'Why not ship the gas in from elsewhere. Couldn't the Thai government do that?' If Steve was going to believe Finn's idea then he would have to resolve all his uncertainty. It was a pity really, as he'd been looking forward to uncovering a world class drugs or diamond smuggling ring, something that would make headlines, and not just a bit of corporate foul play.

'Intercontinental shipping of gas is done with it as a super-chilled liquid, at minus a hundred and seventy centigrade, in specially built supertankers. In order to turn it back into a gas you need a regasification train. Thailand doesn't have one and it takes a couple of years and a lot of money to build one. That's one reason the natural gas price varies so much around the world. It's not an easy product to ship about.'

'OK, move it across in giant balloons, already as a gas.'

'Steve! You're beginning to lose the plot here.'

'OK, OK. Look I don't mean to put your ideas down, but corporate fraud, trying to murder you, blowing up platforms and pipelines, and for only two or three years of selling gas to Thailand. It can't be worth the risk. How much money would they make?'

'Well I've been trying to work that out ever since the thought came to me. There are a lot of variables; Burma to Thai network connectivity, throughput volumes, Thai gas dependence. Connectivity I know is good and gas dependence is very high as most of their electricity and all the coastal heavy industry of a country with a population of sixty million uses it. Thailand is the next tiger economy, strong, stable government, well-educated workforce, political and economic stability, good location to emerging markets.'

‘Finn, just guess. Quit working everything out to the umpteenth degree and just make a fucking guess. How much?’

‘Say fifty plus billion dollars a year, a hundred billion over the two years’ absolute minimum it would take to replace the pipeline. Don’t forget we’re talking about the economic survival of a country of sixty million people here. Without power Thailand will simply stop. Anyway, making money is not necessarily the only endgame. Don’t forget the Burmese military are in on this. No way Eagle could do it without them.’

‘Yes?’

‘Well, their cut alone would be enough to ensure the junta stay in power for, well, for ever basically. And imagine the chaos in Thailand when all the lights suddenly go out, which they will with no gas, because as I’ve said, in Thailand no gas means no electricity either.’ Finn paused to take a deep swig from a bottle of water. ‘The Burmese army would be able to walk across the border and re-take the Isthmus of Kra practically unopposed. No electricity means no communications and no comms means complete chaos. It used to be Burmese you know, the Isthmus of Kra, before the British Empire marched in and chopped the whole of South East Asia into nice bite size chunks. And the Burmese have never relinquished their claim to it. That’s the whole of the Isthmus of Kra, including Phuket incidentally, but more importantly including the sea frontage onto the part of the Gulf of Thailand where the offshore gas fields are. And if the seafront is yours then so are the territorial waters. In this case territorial waters that contain every single one of Thailand’s gas platforms.’

‘Jeeesus!’ Steve exclaimed. ‘Burma or Myanmar or whatever they call it would be catapulted into world power status over night.’

‘Yeah. They’d become the Arabs of South East Asia if they got control of every natural gas field in the region. They’d get castigated for it for sure. But what the heck, they’re castigated for human rights issues and growing heroin poppies at the moment. And once they’ve got the energy supply for the region in their

grubby little hands then I reckon it would be only a matter of time, a very short amount of time, before they were welcomed back into the fold. Don't forget how bad the Saudis are and how much we ignore it because of the oil they sit on.' Finn paused to finish the water bottle in a couple of deep gulps, while Steve wondered what was wrong with the Saudis, before wiping his mouth and adding, 'Oh, while I remember there's one more thing.'

'What?' Steve asked with an ominous feeling he wasn't going to like the answer.

'Sanchan said they've started reinjecting H₂S down the dustbin well. They're not collecting it anymore. The last shipment was the largest yet, and it left Sittwe three days ago. We're looking at the fatal dose, the final hit that will fracture the line.'

'You're kidding? Where is it now?'

'A day to get to the Burmese coast, two or three days to get across the roads to the Thai coast, a day or so to Luann. I reckon it will be on the platform day after tomorrow. A single high dose shot of H₂S into an already fragile pipeline will shatter it along its entire length. They'll probably take the platform out as well if I know Eagle United. That way they would maximise their insurance payout from Wade while also destroying any evidence of what they have been up to. When a gas platform goes up, it makes one hell of a bang. Way worse than an oil rig.' Finn looked slightly suspiciously at Steve before continuing, 'While we're on the subject of insurance, and keep this completely to yourself if you wouldn't mind, Wade, the insurance brokers, wouldn't be able to meet the costs of a major payout. They would go insolvent and according to their board of directors drag the whole of the London insurance market and a lot of the banks down with them. It would not be a particularly good time for good old Great Britain plc.'

'Jesus fucking hell!' Steve felt like he couldn't stop swearing and immediately and illogically felt slightly embarrassed, as he had never heard Finn swear. 'We've got to get back to Phuket pronto.'

'We're not going to Phuket, were going to Bangladesh.'

‘What? Why? How far is that?’

‘About six hundred miles. When I said there was one more thing I actually meant there were a couple of things.’

‘Yes? What?’

‘Sanchan has been listening to the VHF all night. He’s got a much more powerful set than us, and a bigger aerial a lot higher up. He can hear traffic all over the Andaman Sea.’

‘So?’

‘Burmese Coastguard and Navy went onto full-scale alert a few hours ago. They’re looking for a speedboat that left Phuket earlier today. Coastal radar picked it up turning around and making a fast run towards Burma. They think we’re going for a coastal rendezvous with the Burmese liberation army. Apparently some of their top brass are on the run and looking to escape the country. The boarder back into Thailand is most definitely closed to us.’

Finn moved out of the driving seat and indicated for Steve to take over. ‘Keep heading northwest and get the speed up as much as you can without wrecking the engine. The makers of the boat say that four thousand eight hundred rpm is the maximum recommended for sustained running, let’s see if we can get a bit more out of her.’

‘While I remember, there’s one last thing. Oh, sorry, two last things.’

‘What now for Christ’s sake?’ Steve felt like he couldn’t take any more shocks. What he had originally suspected a lifetime ago in wet and windy London, that Finn was not running for Russia but was onto something else, had been proven double fold, triple fold. No, more than that. The invasion of a country by its neighbour was something that felt way out of Steve’s sphere of influence, something that would go all the way up the chain of command to the prime minister, or whichever Whitehall mandarin dealt with such things. It was very scary, but also very exciting, almost as if his whole life had been leading up to this moment and this time.

Finn, however, deflated his mind's wanderings to greater things and brought him back to earth with his next question.

'Think about who we can call in London to help us on this one. We're going to need help getting to Luann quickly.'

'Oh, OK. And the other thing?'

'Cheese sandwich and a G&T? I think we've still got some ice left in that little fridge. Provided it hasn't all melted after you pulled the plug out.'

Half an hour later the adrenaline buzz from boarding the platform had worn off sufficiently for fatigue to hit them both. It was now past four in the morning local time and as Finn had hoped, the strong drink combined with a previous night's economy flight from Heathrow had left Steve in desperate need to get his head down.

'Get your head down. I'll wake you when we need to refuel. Then we can swap over and I'll sleep for a bit.'

'You sure?' Steve replied.

'Without sleep neither of us is going to be able to do a thing. Anyway, until I look through the stuff from the Burma logistics computer, all we have is a wild story with no backing evidence.'

Houston, Texas

Mac was thinking about going home when the call came.

‘Mr McAllister, this is Jeremy Rozelli, the assistant OIM on Sittwe. Afraid I have some bad news for you sir. Bill Murray has fallen over the side. He’s dead sir.’

Mac was stunned into silence. Bill was one of his most loyal and best friends. He couldn’t just up and die on him, not now of all times.

‘Sir, I said Bill Murray is dead.’

‘Yes, yes I heard you. How did he die? You said he fell over.’

‘Fell over the side. About an hour ago now. We were asleep when the alarm went. The control room personnel say Bill came in for a chat and then went out to get some fresh air. Next thing they knew he was gone and when they looked he was in the water. The fast rescue boat picked him up, but he had drowned by then.’

‘No. Bill can’t be dead. Not like that. I don’t buy it for one minute.’

Mac pressed the intercom on his desk. ‘Katie, get York in here. It’s urgent.’

York, when he arrived and heard what had happened tried to console his boss. True he had to admit it was bad timing but it did sound very much like an accident, or perhaps Bill’s conscience had got the better of him and he’d deliberately jumped.

‘No way was it deliberate,’ said Mac. ‘Bill might have been a clean living son-of-a-bitch, but that was where his moral scruples ended. He was in on this just as much and just as happily and as committed as the rest of us. He didn’t give a damn for the locals. Used to call them a bunch of good for nothing lazy jinglies.’

‘Are there any signs of foul play?’ asked York.

‘Not according to the assistant OIM. What about our computer security though York? Don’t tell me that someone could have got

onboard and downloaded the server again. And then thrown Bill over the side to cover their tracks.'

Although he didn't say it, Mac was worried, deeply worried, that the missing Finlay Nichols was somehow behind this. If anyone was about to ruin his plans, thought Mac, it would be that damn Limey.

'If they have, we'll know about it,' said York. 'All the servers now have a tracking programme that stores details of all the activity on them, including files that have been copied or printed. I think we can access the Sittwe server download registry from here. Let me call IT and get them to look at it.'

'OK, you do that,' said Bill before turning back to the speakerphone. 'Rozelli, you still there?'

'Sure am,' replied Rozelli.

'Please tell me the last of the product is safely on its way.'

'Yeah, that's an affirmative. Product is currently in country and due for onward transit tomorrow.'

Ten minutes later Katie buzzed Mac from her desk outside his office.

'Mr MacAlister. Joe Rickman from IT is coming into your office.' As she said it there was a brief knock on the door and the fresh faced Joe Rickman entered.

'Joe, yes I remember you. Tell me the bad news.'

'Well it appears from the server that there was a complete download onto a secondary memory device, a portable device such as the USB memory stick that was used before. What ever it was took sixteen point five six minutes to download almost seven gigabytes of information.'

Mac looked at York, teeth gritted.

'That fucking Limey and his fucking car key memory stick!' He turned his attention back to the speakerphone. 'Rozelli, search the platform. You've got an intruder on board, a Brit called Finlay Nichols. Get the control room staff together and find out who

helped him, he can't have done this on his own. Or maybe one of them did it themselves and has that portable memory device with them. Search the whole platform. And Rozelli. If you find the Limey you chuck him over the side like he did with Bill. You hear me!

Mac turned back to York. 'Get that fuckwit Thomason over to Luann Alpha. If the Limey has a download of everything he'll probably figure out we're about to take out the platform. The son-of-a-bitch is turning up too frequently in just the wrong place for us to not take the utmost care from now on. I want him dead as soon as anyone sets eyes on him, you understand?'

Before York had the chance to answer Mac continued, his mind now running in overdrive, 'York, also get the Burmese army to look for him. If he's not on the platform then he'll be heading back to shore. A fishing boat or supply ship would be my guess. I want a complete shutdown of the country, all outside phone lines and all forms of communication.'

Mac flipped back a couple of pages in his desktop diary. 'Tell the Burmese government we are bringing forward operation Abzu, to...' He skimmed forwards again in his diary, obviously calculating the earliest date they could introduce the fatal dose of H2S into Luann. 'To forty-eight hours from now. Sittwe needs to shut down the export pipeline this time tomorrow and the boys on Luann need to pull their socks up and get the gas bottles rigged and ready to go as soon as they arrive.'

Mac's eyes caught the young Joe Rickman, still standing there. 'You didn't hear any of this. Understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Keep your mouth shut and I'll make you head of IT. Open your mouth and it will be the last thing you ever do.'

Rangoon, Burma

It was a pure gift from god. That's how Virgil viewed this lucky break. A chance to show himself useful once again and to get back in with the Eagle United upper management. Or to be more precise back in the favour books of Mac MacAlister and his old buddy York Kendrick. He was the man on the scene, in the right place at the right time and most certainly with all the right motivation.

As soon as he got off the phone with York he kicked the young Burmese girl out of bed and told her to make herself scarce. As she ran around scrambling back into her clothes Virgil rang down to room service to deliver breakfast for one as soon as possible. Then he phoned the Sittwe platform and spoke to Rozelli, the senior American offshore. He got the same story from Rozelli that he had got from York.

Good, thought Virgil, never did like Bill Murray. All that clean living just didn't fit in with Virgil's idea of a good time. He had been a sanctimonious shit and Virgil liked the idea he wasn't around any more. Without Bill, Virgil would be in a much stronger position in the South East Asia operation.

Virgil called down to the hotel reception and asked them to arrange a car to the airport and to call him back with the time of the first flight to Bangkok. It was only an hour's flying time between the two Asian capitals and then two or three more hours before he could get across to Luann Alpha. Virgil would be on the platform by lunchtime and would personally ensure that the final high concentration dose of hydrogen sulphide was delivered without anyone stopping them.

Virgil had the advantage that he knew what Nichols looked like, whereas Nichols didn't even know Virgil existed. Perhaps he would be real lucky and see the Limey at the airport again, or even better find him on the same plane, maybe the seat next to his. Oh, that would be good.

Breakfast arrived as promptly as ever and was set up on the balcony while Virgil took a shower. He loved this hotel, loved the decadence and service. Maybe with Bill now gone I will get to live here whenever I want, he thought.

Sitting down on the balcony in his dressing gown he watched the waiter pour a cup of hot fresh coffee and served him two eggs, toast and bacon.

Andaman Sea, Burmese sector

Finn drove the boat as fast as he dared. He was running at thirty-eight knots and a little under five thousand rpm, tearing across the still calm Andaman Sea and putting an extra hundred miles between them and the platform every two and a bit hours.

There's no way any naval vessel could keep up with this pace, he thought, although the calm sea probably means we are presenting quite a good radar target. Sitting up on its plane, with just the lower half of the hull still skimming through the water Finn reckoned that he was probably visible on the radar of any vessel that they came within twenty or thirty miles of. It's a big sea though, he thought, and no one would be looking for a boat heading straight out into the Indian Ocean. We'd be damn unlucky to run into the path of someone on the lookout for us.

Still he wanted to take as little chance as possible, so every ten minutes he stood up with his head through the ripped canopy for a thorough scan of the horizon and any ship lights that were visible. The blasting from the fast, warm wind was eye wateringly refreshing and helped him keep fatigue at bay for the rest of the night.

On a couple of occasions he spotted lights on the horizon and once saw a bright light less than five miles almost directly ahead of him. How the hell had he missed that? Must be beginning to lose it.

He altered course on all three occasions to keep as far away as possible from the boats or ships or whatever they were and then started scanning behind him more frequently to see if he was being pursued.

When not keeping a lookout Finn was busy in the cockpit of the boat. The seven-year-old engine seemed happy to take the pace hour after hour without complaint. He was talking to it every once in a while to keep its spirits up.

‘Good girl. You just keep on running for a few more hours and we’ll give you some new plugs and filters and see if we can’t change that oil of yours.’

Finn rigged up a dipstick using one of the curtain tracks that Steve had discarded on the cockpit floor and by shining a torch into the fuel tank he managed to get a half-decent level reading on the remaining petrol. The level pretty much agreed with that on the dashboard fuel gauge, so from then on he started a log of fuel used against distance travelled, the latter being a simple reading from the GPS.

The fuel burn was very high, under two miles to the gallon at this speed. By the next refuelling stop Finn calculated they would still have something like four hundred miles to go and two hundred gallons left to get them there. He would have to slow the pace at some stage or the fuel situation could otherwise become critical.

At five in the morning he dug out the Iridium mobile sat phone and called Liz back at her mum’s in Dorset. It would be very late in the evening there but Finn figured she would still be up.

‘Liz. Hi, bunny. How you doing?’

‘Finn! God, I’m fine. How are you? What’s that racket? Are you in a helicopter or something?’

‘Can’t say, babe. You know, in case anyone is listening. But I can say the job is done and your friend is with me.’

‘Oh, thank god for that.’ Finn could hear the obvious relief in her voice. ‘Are you all right? Did it go well? Is Ste... Is, was my friend useful?’

‘Yes to all three. And thank you for asking him to come. It would have been a lot more difficult without him.’

New Scotland Yard, London

DCI Reynolds was at the newly established situation room on the ninth floor of the Metropolitan Police headquarters in New Scotland Yard. The tap on Nichols' mother-in-law's phone was finally paying off and giving the police their first major lead to where he had disappeared to.

'Steve's with him! Ste... it must be Steve. That's why we haven't seen him back here. Have you got a trace on the phone he's using?'

'Not yet sir, but we've got the line feed. It will take a few minutes to trace it to source, but with the line feed we can do it even if he rings off.'

DCI Reynolds was satisfied. Things were beginning to fit together. Finn was certainly a slippery fellow and Reynolds had no idea where he was, but at least Inspector Sharpe was with him. Steve must have played the charm and concern card on the wife and used it to track down Nichols. It sounded suspiciously like the wife told him exactly where to find the man, maybe even pleaded with him to go and help. And Steve had certainly helped Nichols out with whatever he was up to. Reynolds thought this might be the final nail in the coffin of the young inspector's career. Why hadn't Steve called in with Nichols' location as soon as he knew? It was yet another black mark against the man and yet another reason for Reynolds to have him transferred out of the serious crime squad and back to a beat cop.

'Sir, the trace is coming thought now, few more seconds.'

I wonder where they are? Reynolds really had no clue at all. He would be as surprised to hear the call came from Denver as he would Denmark.

'Sir, it's a satellite phone. The call was transferred by satellite area code eight seven three. We'll get an idea of where he is, but not a definite location.'

‘Damn! How good an idea?’

‘The communications satellites cover a large area sir. This one is a circle of about a thousand miles, centred on the Indian Ocean. They could be anywhere between East India and Thailand or Cambodia.’

‘Right.’ Reynolds was surprised, very surprised, but didn’t let it show.

‘Right.’ He thought about what he should do with this new information.

‘Right.’ How come I’ve got half my staff tromping around in thick snow and Nichols is on a beach tanning himself?

‘OK then. Tog, this sounds like your area of expertise.’

‘Yes. It is my area of expertise and I think it’s now time now I took over this project.’

Torquil Ferguson, the man from MI6, had been waiting to take over the investigation. Now, with Nichols turning up in the Far East, he had the ideal opportunity.

‘I will still need you of course Mr Reynolds, as it appears you have a man on the scene. Good work that, you’ll have to explain to me how you managed it. I also want you to keep running your police investigation, as homeland security is not my remit. But from now on, everything to do with Finlay Nichols will be my decision. No one does anything or says anything about him without my express approval. Now this chap Steve that’s with Nichols. Tell me about him.’

‘Well,’ replied Reynolds, what would he say about Steve? Reynolds didn’t particularly like Detective Inspector Sharpe. He was too much a loner, not a team player.

‘Well, he went down to Dorset a couple of days ago to see Nichols’ wife. He knows her apparently, knows Nichols too. Not well, but obviously well enough to find out where he is.’

‘Well enough,’ Tog was annoyed at the tone in the policeman’s voice, ‘it would appear, for his wife to send him off to find Nichols and help in whatever that young man is up to.’ Tog

was impressed with this guy Sharpe and he could tell from Reynolds' tone that he most certainly wasn't impressed with his detective.

'Yes, it would appear so.'

'And he didn't even bother to tell you, his boss?'

Reynolds was annoyed at that, both the actions of Detective Inspector Sharpe as well as the way Tog had said it, implying that Reynolds had no control over his subordinates.

'Again, so it would appear.'

Tog was very impressed. Stephen Sharpe was obviously someone that didn't play by the rules, was innovative and able to make his own decisions and then act on them, even if it did annoy the hell out of his boss. In short, Sharpe sounded like perfect MI6 material. A younger version of Tog himself, back from the days when he was a testosterone-filled young man looking for excitement and adventure in foreign lands.

'Why do you think he wouldn't tell you?'

'Tog, I have no idea. It goes completely against every rule in the book. As soon as Detective Inspector Sharpe knew where Nichols was he should have informed me directly. Not go charging off after him alone.'

'If he told you then what would you have done?'

'We would have advised the local authorities in India or whatever country they are in and had Nichols picked up and then, provided he hadn't committed any crime there, we would have extradited him back to Britain. We have no other option.'

'Exactly. You have no other option and Sharpe knows that. Whatever it is Nichols is up to, his wife managed to convince a serving police officer that it was important enough for him to break every rule in the book and go and help with. Whatever this is, Reynolds, I can guarantee you two things. It's big, and Nichols is on our side.'

Tog turned around to walk away and over his shoulder said to Reynolds in passing.

‘Oh. By the way, they’re not in India, they’re in Burma. Send me the career record on Sharpe as soon as you can, please.’

Bay of Bengal, Burmese sector

Shortly before six the dark night began to lighten. The worst was over now, both with respect to the distance they had covered and the fatigue Finn felt. The worst time for fatigue was always the last hour or two before dawn. The rising sun brought refreshment and a clearer mind.

He had his MacBook Pro sitting on his lap, plugged into the cigarette lighter to keep the battery fully charged. Although the sea was still remarkably smooth there was way too much bumping and vibration to risk setting it down on a hard surface.

Finn was hunting through the computer files he had taken from the Sittwe server. The steering wheel was tied in a straight ahead position with one of the discarded cargo straps to leave him free to work on the computer.

As he had suspected, the entire country operations were kept on the Sittwe server and it didn't take long to find what he wanted. Abzu was originating from the Sittwe platform, which meant it was most definitely the hydrogen sulphide that the Burmese had been compressing into tanks. The last shipment of Abzu was listed as having left Sittwe three days ago, headed on a supply boat to Rangoon harbour. The departure date was the same day as Sanchan had said the last of the H₂S was shipped and the logistics manifest showed nothing but Abzu leaving on that day. The production log showed H₂S reinjection beginning on the same day. The whole was damming and the conclusive proof he needed that Abzu was indeed hydrogen sulphide and that it was going over the border into Thailand.

Finn briefly wondered if he shouldn't be heading for Rangoon instead of in the opposite direction, but quickly dismissed the idea. There would be little if anything they could do to stop the hydrogen sulphide getting across the border, even if it was still somewhere in Burma. No, Finn would have to rely on Steve calling the right

people in London and getting him over to Luann Alpha as quickly as possible on their arrival in Calcutta.

He continued his surf through the Eagle United files, copying interesting ones onto the computers desktop. Once he had enough to show a convincing case he opened Entourage, the email program, and attached the files to a blank email. Steve could fill in an address, compose a message and send it back to the UK once he was awake.

By nine the main fuel tank in the boat was on empty. Time to stop and give the engine some tender loving care. Steve had been asleep for almost five hours so should be refreshed enough for a day at the helm. Finn throttled back and slowly let the boat come to almost a complete rest before switching the engine off. He put his laptop on the driver's seat and switched it and the Iridium phone back on. The phone line would have a stable connection without the bouncing around of the fast moving boat and with several files attached to the blank email, Steve would need a good four or five minutes without a line drop to get it away cleanly.

Finn unfastened the canopy and pushed it back, opening the cockpit to the gorgeous tropical morning all around him. The brilliant sunlight and fresh air removed the last vestige of fatigue, although he knew it would only be temporary and by the time the full heat of the day was upon them he would be flagging again.

The sudden silence brought Steve out of his sleep. The rhythmic thumping of the hull on the water as it skipped across the swell and the fresh breeze through the sky hatch had been replaced by a gentle rocking motion and the sweaty feeling of stillness. He felt good from a decent sleep and looked across at his watch. Quarter past nine! I've been asleep since four, that's five hours. It had felt so good to stretch out on the small sofa. Particularly after the previous night's sleep in which he'd been forced to remain sitting almost vertical in the economy seat of a packed flight to

Phuket. Finn must have run out of fuel. Better get up and help him refill the tank with the hand pump.

Steve rolled out of the bed, negotiated his way around the fuel drums and stuck his head through the hatch into the cockpit, wincing at the bright sunlight.

‘Morning Finn.’

‘Get any sleep?’

‘Yes, plenty thanks. I need a piss though, all that water has gone right through me. Your turn to sleep next. We gonna fill the tank?’

Steve was at the back of the boat where he started to relieve himself over the edge.

‘Yes. And we’ll change the filters on the engine and see if we can replace some of this oil.’ Finn had the engine oil dipstick in his hand, ‘It’s looks disgusting. When you’ve finished have a rummage up the front of the cabin and get some more water out could you. You might also want to see about making some breakfast. I’ll have eggs and bacon with fresh coffee.’

When he’d finished Steve climbed back over the fifty gallon tanks of petrol, retrieved a new pack of water bottles and found some tinned baked beans, cup cakes and salami. With the remaining bread it would make a wholesome breakfast.

‘How far have we gone?’ he asked as he came back out.

Finn looked down at the GPS. ‘Just over two hundred nautical miles from the platform. We’ve still got a little under three hundred and eighty to go.’

‘Have we got enough fuel?’

‘Yeah, if all goes well. I pushed it pretty hard last night and made a couple of wide diversions around some shipping. We’ve got another two hundred miles of Burmese water still to get through until we cross into Indian territory for real and then we can throttle back a touch for the run in.’

‘India? I thought you said Bangladesh last night.’

‘From where we are at the moment the Indian coastline is only a few miles further than the Bangladeshi. If we aim for India then Calcutta is just inland. Calcutta’s got a decent airport, which Bangladesh certainly hasn’t. It means we’ll be able to get back to Thailand quicker.’

As they worked on the engine and ate their breakfast Finn explained what he had found on the computer and what he intended to do with the information.

‘You mean I can send an email from here? On a little boat in the middle of a tropical ocean I can email, phone and surf the Internet just like from my office in Barnes? I guess I knew it could be done, but I didn’t think you could just buy a handheld satellite phone on which to do it. I thought you meant phone from a call box last night. It didn’t make any sense at the time, but I was too knackered to question it. I really need to get myself back up to date with modern IT. How much did the phone cost?’

‘Three thousand pounds.’

‘Fucking hell! Oh, sorry. Really should stop swearing all the time.’

‘It’s fine by me, just don’t do it when you come round for lunch. You think boarding that platform was dangerous, you should see Liz if she catches anyone swearing within earshot of the kids. I once accidentally said bollocks when Victoria was just learning to speak. Do you know what the little darling did the next morning at breakfast? She sang a little song. It went something like, bollocks, bollocks..., bollocks, bollocks, bollocks.’

‘Kids, eh.’

‘Yeah, kids. Ever try to unteach a small child a word?’

‘Can’t say I have.’

‘Well take my advice and don’t bother. It’s impossible. I made a conscious effort after that little debacle not to swear at all.’

‘Where are we going to go in Thailand?’ asked Steve.

‘Luann Alpha if we can, with some help this time though. I guess the help is very much dependent on who you send the email to and what they think of it. The best option would be to intercept the H2S when it’s on a supply boat heading for Luann Alpha. Open sea and all that in case the stuff leaks all over the place. But to do that we would need to know where the supply boat is and it would take more than just the two of us to board and take it over. Supply boats are very careful about small craft approaching them because of the problem with pirates in this part of the world. They have a tendency to shoot first and not bother asking any questions.’ Finn chewed on some of the salami before continuing.

‘Anyway, to be honest I don’t think the hydrogen sulphide will still be on a supply boat by the time we can get there. I reckon it will be on the platform and they will be preparing it for injection into the pipeline. In which case a full-scale assault looks like the only option left to me, and unfortunately that is a very bad thing to do. Going in guns blazing on a gas rig is a sure fire ticket to the afterlife.

‘I wish we had more time, or at the very least some British soldiers. Do you think you could find some British soldiers? There must be some somewhere in this neck of the woods.’

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ Steve replied and started to work on writing the email cover message, two finger typing in the classic British policeman style. Every few minutes he asked Finn to repeat a bit of information or spelling for Isthmus of Kra.

‘There aren’t really pirates around here are there?’ he asked while typing.

‘You’d better believe there are,’ replied Finn. ‘Some of the small islands and villages in the Indian and South China seas are completely dependent on piracy for a way of life. Just don’t ever go pleasure boating around here is all I can say.’

‘What, like on a small speedboat like this one?’

‘Found it!’ Finn shouted up from the engine bilge in jubilation.

‘Found what?’

‘The bloody fuel leak that’s been making me piss my pants every time I light a cigarette. Damn, you’ve got me swearing now, you’re going to have to stop it or I’ll be in big trouble when I get home.

‘Look at this. The whole bilge has a film of petrol over it. We’ll need to pump it out, and then wipe it down if we get the time.’

‘Didn’t you check the boat over before you bought it?’ Steve wasn’t all that keen on the idea of undertaking repairs to a boat when they were trying to make a fast getaway.

‘Not really. I kicked the tyres so to speak, or whatever the nautical equivalent of that is. And I started the engine to make sure it sounded OK, but I didn’t take it for a test drive.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well I didn’t have time, did I. I had to buy whatever was going and then kit it out and get on my, or rather our way. Anyway I never test drive cars before I buy them so why should I test a boat.’

‘Why wouldn’t you test drive a car? Finn, that’s absolutely ridiculous.’

‘Not really. You see if I test drive a car I always love it and end up buying it. So over the years I found the best way to save money is never to go into a garage and certainly never to actually have a go in a car. Audi asked me the other week if I would like to have one of the latest A8s for a month on a free loan. Liz declined on my behalf before I even knew they’d offered.

‘Come to think of it she should have accepted. Then it would be their car sitting as a pile of wreckage at Heathrow airport. Anyway, you got that email ready to go?’

‘Yup, you want to send it for me?’

‘No, just click the send button on the top left hand side. The computer will make the phone dial up, send the email and then log off. Give it a few minutes to get the attachments away and it will disconnect automatically. Then you can phone the recipient and get them to start acting on it. Who you sending it to?’

‘My boss. Only person I can think of. He’ll know what to do.
What time is it in England?’

‘Don’t ask,’ replied Finn, ‘he’ll be asleep.’

Uxbridge, Middlesex

DCI Reynolds was not woken by the shrill ring of his phone, he was woken by an annoyed elbow in the ribs from his wife.

‘Can’t you hear the phone ringing?’

Reynolds got out of bed and walked over to the phone on his wife’s dressing table, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes as he went. He’d only got into bed a couple of hours before.

‘Yes, hello, Reynolds here.’

‘James. It’s Steve. You need to get down to the station as quickly as you can and read an email I’ve just sent you.’

Reynolds was instantly awake. ‘Steve, my god! Do you know what time it is?’

‘Quarter to ten on a hot and sunny morning here, sir. Look I’ve got to be quick, I need to help Finn. There’s a major situation about to happen in Thailand. I can’t explain now, but get to the office as quickly as you can and read the email.’

Reynolds had the phone held between shoulder and cheek. He pulled out a tissue from the box in front of him and uncapped one of his wife’s lipsticks from the dressing table. ‘Don’t go. Wait. Where are you? We know you’re somewhere in South East Asia but not exactly where.’

‘On a speedboat. And we are three hundred and eighty miles from Calcutta and two and a bit hundred from a Burmese Platform called Sittwe in the Andaman Sea. Pretty much on a straight line between the two. Hang on a moment please, James.’

There was a brief lull. Reynolds scribbled the numbers and names onto the tissue paper in lipstick. ‘Sorry, Finn says were not in the Andaman Sea, we’re in the Bay of Bengal now. Got to go, I’ve got stuff to do here. Get to the office urgently, sir. Read the email and then act on it. This is deadly serious.’

The phone line went dead.

Bay of Bengal, Burmese sector

Steve clicked the disconnect button on the phone and turned to Finn, who was sweating over the fuel pump. 'How you doing? Want me to take over for a bit?'

'Thanks, its making my arm ache. I'll get started on the filters. Chuck me another bottle of water will you. And remember to keep drinking it yourself. It's turning into another hot and humid day here in wonderland. Don't forget some green hulk sunblock either. You're looking a bit pink on top.'

They progressed like this for the next half an hour; one pumping fuel, the other changing filters and then cam belts. Finn had spare cam belts so Steve said it was probably just as well to do them at the same time, as those on the engine were looking decidedly frayed.

Once the fuel was tanked to the brim they heaved the empty containers over the side, gaffer taped up the small leak in the engine fuel feed line Finn had isolated and then set about draining and changing the oil as quickly as humanly possible.

'If I did this in the North Sea I'd be fired on the spot and then probably prosecuted by what ever company I was working for.'

'What do you mean?' replied Steve from his crouched position in the engine bay.

'Just look at that oil slick we're making!'

Steve stood up and looked. It was an impressive slick he had to admit, a large sheen on the ocean stretching out all around them.

'Guess I won't be taking a quick dip to wash the sweat off me.'

Vauxhall, London

Reynolds phoned Tog as soon as Steve put the phone down on him. The first thing Tog had asked for was Reynolds' email address, which he had given along with the rough location that Steve had told him over the phone.

Now, almost an hour later Reynolds was at the impressive MI6 headquarters overlooking the Thames at Vauxhall. The security guard accompanied him up in the lift and ushered him into a large conference room.

There were several manned computer terminals around the periphery of the room, a large conference desk in the middle and white boards on the walls, one of which had Steve's location details written down on it and then converted into a rough geographical position. A thermos of coffee, with a tray of cups, saucers, milk and individually wrapped biscuits sat on the conference table.

'Chief Inspector, good to see you. Hope you don't mind but we've opened the email your man has sent.'

'Is it good?' Reynolds asked

'Yes, I think so. Couldn't be better in fact. There's a lot of technical data and shipping logistics as attachments and a covering note detailing what it all means. Here, read it yourself.'

Tog indicated to one of the computers and Reynolds sat down at the chair and read from the screen.

James

With Nichols on speedboat in Andaman Sea. Boarded Eagle United Energy Sittwe gas rig so Nichols could copy their computer logistics server. Some files from same attached. Not in files the following:

Abzu is code work for H₂S, a toxic gas that destroys metal, see attachment about starting reinjection of H₂S on the same day last Abzu shipment left Sittwe for proof. Platform personnel also confirm H₂S had been saved and shipped off the rig in gas tanks.

The last H2S shipment left Sittwe 3 days ago. Finn reckons it will be on Eagle United Luann Alpha platform in Thailand by late Saturday.

Eagle intend to destroy Thailand offshore gas system with H2S in the pipeline that goes to shore. They own all of Burma offshore gas and have pipelines in place to ship replacement gas to Thailand.

Scenario 1 is mega profit for Eagle and Burma gov. Nichols reckons destroying Thailand gas pipeline will make them at least 100 billion dollars, that's billion with a B, in gas sales.

Scenario 2 is threat to Thailand from Burma army. Gas out means lights out and major chaos in Thailand. Nichols says Eagle couldn't have done this without the help of Burma gov. He reckons Isthmus of Kra is most likely target as this will put Gulf of Thailand gas fields under Burma control.

We are headed to India as Burma navy blocking return to Phuket.

Pls arrange for help in Calcutta. We need to get to Luann Alpha with enough armed forces to stop Eagle. British soldiers if at all possible.

Finn phone number 00 873 130 626 2825.

Sir, this is not bullshit. This is the real deal!!

Steve

‘A toxic gas that destroys metal and the Burmese army about to invade Thailand? Are we serious here?’

Tog looked the inspector in the eye, Reynolds immediately seeing the deadly seriousness of the older man.

‘Yes, I'm afraid so. This rings true. We know the man who coordinated the attack on Nichols was working for Eagle United. I know that the company has been prolific to say the least in its acquisition of all the Burma offshore platforms. The Burmese government appear to have assisted them to a fantastic degree in this, more or less to the point of forcing the other companies to sell to Eagle United. This has a ring of truth to it that we can't afford to ignore. I said it would be big and I said Nichols was on our side.’

Tog motioned to another computer screen, ‘And now we've got this. Just in from our friends in the CIA. It shows a small

speedboat with two people on board. Taken by a satellite ten minutes ago. The location matches exactly with the distances from India and Sittwe that you gave me over the phone.'

'What's that on the sea all around them?' Reynolds asked indicating the sheen he could see on the almost calm sea. 'Looks like they're having engine trouble.'

'Sir, another picture coming through,' the operative at another computer called out. 'Langley says this picture taken twenty miles due East of target one six minutes ago.'

Tog and Reynolds quickly moved to look over the operator's shoulder at the screen. A one second look and Tog picked the phone up and started dialling.

Bay of Bengal, Burmese sector

The ringing phone made them both look up in surprise. Finn wiped the oil from his hands and picket up the handset.

‘Yes, hello.’

‘Hello, am I talking to Inspector Sharpe?’

‘No, let me put him on. Call for you, Steve.’

‘Inspector Sharpe, this is Tog Ferguson of MI6. I am with DCI Reynolds and we are currently looking at a satellite picture showing a Burmese Coastguard fast craft approximately twenty miles due East of your position travelling at...’ Tog looked at the footnotes to the picture, ‘...travelling at forty-two knots directly towards you. ETA your location will be in thirty minutes. No, correction, the picture is almost ten minutes old so ETA your location is in twenty minutes, repeat twenty minutes. Do you copy that?’

‘Jesus fuck! Finn get the drain plug back in, we’ve got the Burmese Coastguard arriving in twenty minutes!’

Steve hung up the phone and started unscrewing one of the oil cans.

‘Is the plug in? How much oil do we need to put in before we can get going?’

‘Plug in. Put a couple of cans in before I start, the rest as we are moving. Did they say if it’s a boat or helicopter and what sort?’

‘Boat, doing forty-two knots.’

‘Bugger! It must be a fast gunboat. Where’s the spanner? Steve, where’s the spanner gone?’ Finn was desperately hunting for the spanner he needed to get the drain plug done up tightly. Otherwise it would shake itself out when they were moving.

‘One can in, second going in now. You got that plug done up?’

‘No, I can’t find the spanner.’ Finn was searching manically for it in the well of the engine bay.

Steve looked across and saw the spanner on a seat cover. He leaned over and picked it up, inadvertently spilling some of the engine oil as he did, and tapped Finn on the shoulder with it.

‘Here you go.’

Finn disappeared back under the engine. ‘Nearly, nearly, nearly. Yes!’ He cranked it up as tight as he could. ‘Good to go.’

Finn scrambled out of the engine bay and over to the driver’s seat. ‘Clear the engine, no hands or feet near the parts.’

‘I’m clear, get the damn thing started, Finn.’

Finn turned the ignition on and pushed the starter button. The engine turned once, turned again slower and then stopped. Finn pushed the button again. Nothing.

‘Battery! Steve, get the old one off.’ Finn dived into the cabin and heaved the spare battery up into the cockpit and over to Steve.

Steve worked with speed and precision, his mind focussed on the battery and nothing else. It was fitted within a minute, the old one going over the side. ‘Go!’

‘Clear?’

‘Yes! For fuck’s sake GO!!’

Finn turned the keys and hit the starter. The engine turned rapidly for one, possibly two seconds before firing into life with the most beautiful sound either of them had ever heard. Finn opened the throttle and the engine sputtered. He willed it with all his might to pick-up again, but it misfired and died. Damn!

‘Damn! It fired and died.’ Why would it fire and then die? Fuel starvation, the fuel in the feed line must have vaporised in the heat of the sun and forced its way out through the small split in the line he’d taped up while they’d been working on the engine.

‘It’s a vapour lock in the fuel line, Steve.’

‘OK, let me hand prime it.’ For once Steve was glad of his old Triumph motorbike and its many foibles.

This time it took a full five seconds of the starter motor whining before the engine fired back into life.

Finn pushed the throttle in a single slow and gentle action all the way to the end stop, praying as he did it that the engine would pick up to full power. The propeller dug in, the back of the speedboat driving hard into the sea as the bow lifted. He turned the boat to port, directly away from the approaching navy gunboat.

‘Get the rest of the oil in.’

Steve did as he was told, climbing around the fast-running engine and trying to wipe some of the spilt oil with the few cloths they had and when they ran out with his tee shirt.

‘Make sure everything in the cabin is stowed, particularly the last of the fuel down there. Can you get my laptop back in its bag first though, we still need it in good working order.’

Steve set about the tasks as quickly and efficiently as he could. Down in the cabin he started to get pounded as the boat picked up speed, the sea not as smooth as it had been before.

‘How fast are we going?’ Steve shouted up from the cabin, still trying to tighten up the strapping on the two remaining fuel drums properly. There were old cargo straps everywhere, mixed in with bottles of water, bits of food and cushions all strewn around over the slopping wet floor.

‘Thirty-six knots and still rising. I can see them behind us. They’re getting awfully close. If they are going to start shooting then it will be pretty soon. Thirty-eight knots now.’

Steve emerged from the cabin and looked back at the gunboat. He could just make out the single-barrelled cannon on its deck. He watched in disbelief as the barrel flashed.

‘They’ve fired at us!’

A few seconds later Finn shouted, ‘There!’ pointing to a splash in the water.

‘Ahead and to the right. Bloody miles away, but we are definitely within range. Forty knots now.’

Steve could see Finn with one hand on the wheel and one now beginning to furiously juggle the throttle. The bow of the speedboat was pointing directly into the long, low, rolling swell. He could feel

the boat fighting against the rise of each wave, followed by a lightness as they went over it and down the other side. Even with his inexperience in boats he could feel the speedboat was a lot lighter and livelier than before. A regular pattern of rise and fall every few seconds, Finn just as regular on the throttle, preventing the engine over-revving as the passing crests lifted the stern high enough for the propeller to catch some air.

Vauxhall, London

‘The satellite’s prime camera feed is coming though now.’ The operator at the console was talking back over his shoulder to Tog. ‘Ah. Here we are.’

A window opened up on the computer screen, centred on a speedboat tearing across the sea.

Reynolds heaved a sigh of relief. ‘Thank-god they’re moving. Where’s the Navy boat?’

The operator spoke into his headset microphone and the picture on the screen pulled out, tracked behind and then refocussed on another fast moving boat.

‘Looks pretty close, sir.’

They watched as a little flash of light erupted from the front of the gunboat. The operator spoke into his headset and then out loud.

‘Langley confirms target two has fired on target one. Come on guys, get that boat shifting!’

The operator again focussed on incoming communications through his headset. ‘Target two, the gunboat now running at forty-three knots. Target one is going... Confirm again Langley, speed of target one... Forty-six knots! They’re pulling away.’

Another little flash of light.

‘Another shot! They’re not going to make it. The gunboat will hit them for sure!’ The operator was almost shouting at the screen.

‘Calm down, Tim,’ Tog said, putting a hand on the operator’s shoulder. ‘We’ve seen this sort of thing before. It always looks worse than it is on the ground. Ask Langley to reacquire target one and to close in on it.’

‘Sorry sir,’ Tim replied, before pressing the transmit button on his console and leaning in to talk to CIA headquarters in Virginia on the small microphone. Almost instantly the image pulled back from the gunboat and zoomed in on Finn and Steve.

‘What’s that coming out of the engine of the speedboat?’ It was Reynolds, leaning in as much as he could, as excited as anyone in the room. ‘Have they been hit?’

A trail of white smoke was coming from the rear of the speedboat, stretching out behind it in an enormous vortex like an airliner contrail.

Bay of Bengal, Burmese sector

Finn was really fighting the controls now. The engine sounded like it was tearing itself apart running at the five thousand four hundred rpm red line. Each crested wave caused the propeller to cavitate, to catch air instead of water, and made it momentarily jump well past the red line as it lost grip and resistance. He was juggling the throttle constantly, desperate to get away from the gunboat and equally desperate not to blow the engine.

‘There’s clouds of smoke coming off the cylinder heads!’ Steve shouted above the din and spray.

‘Get the fire extinguisher ready. If it catches fire hose down the cables and anything plastic first.’

‘It’s flaming!’ screamed Steve and immediately emptied the fire extinguisher into the engine bay.

The engine spluttered and misfired as it sucked in the ice cold carbon dioxide from the extinguisher, before bursting back into full song.

Finn switched on the bilge pump, thinking he was an idiot for having forgotten to do it as soon as he started the engine. The engine bay bilges were alight and if the fire took hold in the fibreglass structure of the boat then they would be doomed. He saw that Steve had the second extinguisher in his hands now, pulling the plastic safety tag out.

‘Steve, wait, don’t use it until I’ve emptied the bilge. We’ve got to get the petrol out first otherwise the extinguisher will run out before we get the fire out. Just use it really sparingly on the wiring of the engine.’

Steve was stood practically over the fast running engine, watching the level of the burning bilge water rapidly go down. He puffed at the wires and his ankles each time the violent rocking of the boat threw more petrol up onto them.

Another cannon shell landed, this time to the left and still way ahead. It was quickly followed by a second, third, fourth and fifth; all in a messy line that was coming their way. Then the gun went quiet for a few seconds before it started flashing again, this time the cannon shells were even further to the left.

‘They can’t shoot for shit,’ shouted Steve in jubilation, still standing over the engine with the wind flickering flames around his ankles. ‘Thank you god!’

Suddenly a massive plume of fire erupted behind the boat. Finn looking over his shoulder, shouted back, ‘That’s the petrol going out of the bilge, give it a few seconds to empty completely and then put the fire out.’

‘Oh my god, they’ve definitely been hit that time!’

‘Tim! Can it!’ Tog shouted back at the console operator. ‘They haven’t been hit, look I can still see both of them in the boat. One’s driving and the other one’s by the engine.’

‘That’s the other extinguisher’s empty now. The fire is definitely out. I’m going to get some water bottles and empty them down there to cool it off and wash it out.’

Steve dived back into the cabin and grabbed a full eight-pack of water bottles and a handful of the used cargo straps. As he emptied each bottle, either into the bilge or straight onto the engine, he tied the heavy end of a cargo strap, the end with the metal cleat, onto the empty bottle and threw it over the side.

‘These straps might foul their propeller,’ he shouted to Finn.

‘Good thinking. Chuck everything you can find into their path.’

Without further encouragement Steve slung the engine cover over the back of the boat and disappeared into the cabin. He emerged with the foam mattress and back of one of the seats and threw it over the edge before going back for the next one.

It was the leather covered bench seat from the back of the cockpit that the gunboat eventually hit. The foam padding slowly filled with water after Steve pitched it over the side and it sat invisible just beneath the surface. Its metal frame dented the gunboats single propeller just enough to set up a small vibration in it. The gunboat stayed at full power, but the vibrating prop lost hydrodynamic efficiency and its speed fell back a touch to thirty-eight knots.

Still they kept the pursuit up.

As the range increased and the gun boat stopped firing Finn relaxed a little on the throttle, bringing it back to five thousand rpm. It was still above the recommended maximum prolonged revolutions, but he'd backed off enough so that the sudden blip as they crested each wave combined with his throttle jogging didn't put it over the red line. Their average speed had fallen according to the GPS to forty-one knots and the sea was beginning to pick up.

The chase continued for the best part of hour, the swell steadily worsening as they pushed deeper out into the Indian Ocean.

The pounding was becoming intolerable. The muscles in Steve's legs were burning from their constant shock-absorbing, but if he tried sitting in the passenger seat he found the shocks were even worse, running up his spine and into the back of his skull.

At least Finn had the advantage of a sprung seat, but even so, the backs of his ribs were feeling tender and bruised, his arms were aching and his hands and finger muscles felt like they were about to seize.

Still they continued, Finn gripping the wheel and throttle, focussed on nothing but the next crest and how best to ride it, Steve watching the engine and keeping it cool with more of their bottled water.

'Come on girl, keep it together, not much longer now. How far they behind Steve?'

'I can still see them, but they're a heck of a lot further behind than before.'

Finn looked around quickly in between the crests of two swells, momentarily catching a glimpse of the gunboat tailing them.

‘I’ve got to slow down. The swell is getting too big for us at this speed, the boat is going to come apart at the seams. It’s just too much for it.’

The Checkmate speedboat was now coming clean out of the water as it crested the larger waves, hanging in the air briefly before slamming back down. There was no smooth way through the increasingly erratic pattern of sea that he could find. Finn could feel a deep affinity with the boat, almost as if it were an extension of his own body. He understood the strains and the stresses in the hull and the seams and sympathised with them.

‘We’re going to have to try to lose them as the sea worsens. Hopefully the swells will make us drop off their radar and we can pull away to the north without them seeing us. They’ll start gaining on us again soon as the sea worsens. Bigger boat, better rough water handling,’ he added as way of explanation.

Neither of them had heard the Iridium phone, safely stashed in the glove box, ringing. It had been ringing for half an hour now.

Vauxhall, London

‘Still not picking up,’ said Tim as he tried the satellite phone number again. ‘Maybe they lost the phone over the side. Or threw it over, they’ve thrown just about everything else over the edge.’

‘Where are the planes now?’ asked Tog.

‘Fifty miles and closing at eight hundred knots. Interception now in four minutes.’

The little crowd once again hunched over the video feed of the speedboat, its previously uniform white wake showing as a series of splashes connected by a thin white line. The video was now of a significantly better quality and rather than from almost directly overhead, was taken from an oblique angle. Tim, the operator, had advised them twenty minutes ago that he had a feed from a Buzzard advanced warning and reconnaissance aircraft that had diverted to the area.

The Buzzard fleet were modified Boeing 707s that the US Air Force relied heavily upon for reconnaissance. Although most people assumed visual intelligence and reconnaissance was normally from satellites, this was far from the truth. The satellites merely gave an initial and often very brief and poor quality view as they orbited hundreds of miles above. The large fleet of Buzzards the US Air force had stationed around the world were still the mainstay of reconnaissance work and would be for years to come.

‘Doesn’t look too comfortable down there,’ voiced someone.

‘Well it doesn’t really matter, does it,’ Tim responded. ‘They haven’t got long now.’

Bay of Bengal, Burmese sector

Neither Steve nor Finn saw the two attack fighters until the very last second. Suddenly there was a flash of metal directly overhead and two enormous cracks.

The supersonic shock waves flung Steve off his feet to the cockpit floor and Finn halfway out of the speedboat's bucket seat.

Finn lost grip on the throttle and wheel which immediately spun to the left sending the speedboat keeling over, its starboard bow digging deep into the fast approaching crest of the next wave.

The boat burst straight through the wave, drenching the cockpit and sending Steve sliding back into the tangle of framework that used to be the rear bench seat. Finn desperately grabbed at the wheel, straightening it and the boat in preparation for the next wave.

Everything was silent. The roar of the exposed big block V8 was gone. He could see Steve, struggling to get up and then his mouth opening and closing, but no sound reached him. What was Steve doing? His arms were flailing around like a madman. Had he been hit? No not a madman, not fatally injured, he was pointing at something, back in the direction of the gunboat. Finn tried to look, but then doubled over in pain from the sudden terrible screech in his head as his eardrums came back to life and protested against what they had just experienced.

Steve was up next to him shouting into his left ear.

'SONIC BOOMS! Right above our heads!'

Steve banged him on the shoulder and pointed again behind. Finn tried to look, but was too busy trying to keep the boat on track and get it up to speed again. Anyway, he thought, why do I want to look at our fast approaching demise. If they've managed to get a radio signal back to land and have scrambled aircraft after us then we have no hope at all. He thought instead of Liz and the children, conjuring up an image of them at home and at play in the garden.

Happy smiling faces, laughter, excited voices. Anything to stop him thinking about his imminent death.

Steve shouted in his ear again.

‘F-18s! Two F-18 Hornets! They’re American planes!’

Finn returned from the images in his mind. American planes? He turned and looked intently behind him now. The grey shapes of the two fighters were circling around and making a run at the gunboat. Steve was grinning manically, slapping Finn on the back.

‘We’ve made it! We’ve made it! We have fucking made it, pal, whoopieee!’

Finn throttled back to a quarter open, the boat quickly slowing and sinking off the plane. He could take the time to relax a bit and enjoy the sight of the American fighters driving the gunboat away. His ears were ringing like mad and he realised his jaw muscles were clamped so tightly closed they hurt. Maybe even more than the rest of him hurt.

‘Look!’ Steve shouted. ‘Look! They’re firing at it! Jesus Christ, they’re firing on the gunboat!’ A stream of white fire and phosphorous ammunition tracer could be clearly seen erupting from the leading plane.

‘What’s that ringing?’ Finn’s hearing was beginning to come back and now with the engine running almost at idle he could detect another ringing, more shrill and intermittent than the white noise of his sore eardrums.

‘It’s my ears, man,’ shouted Steve.

‘No. The phone’s ringing.’

‘Sorry sir, but you’re going to have to shout; my hearing is none too good right now.’

‘Steve, get a pen and write down these coordinates. Then head for them. There is a US battle group in the Indian Ocean. They will pick you two up.’

Twenty minutes later, Steve came off the phone again. He'd been talking to the captain of a corvette that had broken away from the battle group to meet them.

'The captain says he's coming towards us at full speed. If we can keep running at thirty knots then rendezvous is in three or four hours.'

'Good,' replied Finn. After all the mental stress and physical battering he'd received, Finn had come down very quickly from his adrenaline high. He now felt dead on his feet, everything hurting from his ears to his toes, and he desperately wanted to sleep. 'Your turn at the wheel. I'm knackered. Is there anything left to sleep on down there?'

Down in the cabin it was certainly a lot clearer than before, with just two of the fifty gallon fuel drums in the narrow aisle and a lot of miscellaneous rubbish on the wet floor. Finn climbed around the fuel up to the bow of the cabin where the sole remaining triangular shaped small foam mattress remained. He curled up on it, said good night to Liz and the children and fell into an uncomfortable sleep.

Indian Ocean

The mid-ocean rendezvous with the corvette was perfect. Finn, feeling only slightly better from his short and uncomfortable sleep, and Steve climbed up a scramble rope whilst the captain sent down a couple of his seamen to fasten strops around the speedboat to lift it to deck.

The two of them stood with the captain and looked the speedboat over.

‘Nice paint job,’ the captain remarked. ‘Y’all do it yourself?’

‘No, that chap there did it all by himself.’ Finn pointed at Steve. ‘Don’t know who he is. Just strolled up to me in Phuket Marina, said he was James Bond and would I mind awfully if he borrowed my boat for a little jaunt through the Andaman Sea, Bay of Bengal and Indian bloody Ocean to meet up with the whole US Navy.’

‘Ha.’ The captain laughed, slapping Finn on the back. ‘Well we’re going to take you boys back to the battle group and then transfer you all to the *Daniel J Boone*. She’ll fly you off.’

‘Where to?’ asked Steve.

‘Don’t know, son.’

‘Can you re-spray and service my boat and drop it off in London next time you pass that way?’ Despite his bad sleep and painful ribs, Finn was in a jubilant mood; overwhelmed at having been saved so timely from what looked like certain death. ‘Something nice and subtle like an enormous Union Jack would be good. Send the bill to the Metropolitan police in London and ask them to forget about those parking tickets I have as well.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ The captain thought he had a nutcase on his hands until he saw Finn’s smile. ‘Oh, I get it. English humour. When faced with certain death on the bayonets of the hoards, brew a cup of tea and discuss the weather sort of thing, eh. Yeah, very

funny, son. We'll give the boat the once over and send the bill to your secret service. They're running this show now.

'Number one!'

'Sir.' A khaki-clad sailor stood to attention.

'Have the mess chief send afternoon tea to my ready room. These two English gentlemen and I need to discuss something about computer data that needs to be transmitted ay-sap.'

The captain, Steve and Finn were in the corvette's meeting room sitting around a squawk box. They were on a secure comms conference call with the CIA in Virginia, MI6 in London and Admiral Miller, the senior officer onboard the flagship of the battle group.

Tog Ferguson of MI6 was talking.

'Based on the information we have the PM has decided to alert the Thai government of a probable threat across the Isthmus of Kra. That's a probable threat and not a possible threat. Gentlemen, we think a better than fifty per cent chance Burma will go ahead. Six has been instructed to take the lead on all necessary measures to prevent this toxic gas from being released into the Thai offshore pipelines. Inspector Steve Sharpe is the most senior British civil servant on scene and will therefore as of now be acting coordinator for all operations.'

'Well wait just a moment there.' It was Admiral Miller's distinctive Alabama voice. 'We can't go taking orders from no British bobby. We have eight warships, two squadrons of fighter-bombers and a whole heap of US Marines out here. This is a United States battle group. Ain't no way I'm handing over control.'

'Admiral Miller,' another American voice came over the squawk box, this one more refined and calmer. Sounds like an East Coast accent though Finn, must be the CIA man in Langley.

'We are not asking you to hand over control of the battle group to an English policeman, that would be a direct violation of the Constitution. What you will do though, is provide all assistance

requested by MI6's man on the scene short of any actual act of war for their part of this operation. The British have one of their own ships currently sailing for the Gulf of Thailand, where the nub of their operation will go down. We, as allies, will provide any support that we can to them. Tog, am I correct?'

'Yes, thank you, Martin. HMS *Devonshire* is steaming at full speed for the Gulf of Thailand and expects to arrive within assault range of this platform, Luann Alpha, by zero nine hundred local time tomorrow. That is nineteen hours from now. The PM has sanctioned an assault on the platform by the Royal Marine Commandos on board. Needless to say the wanton destruction of Luann Alpha and pipeline by Eagle United Energy would put at risk a large number of British nationals as well as severely damaging the revenues of British companies operating in the area.'

The Langley man picked up the flow.

'So the Brits are in charge of taking the rig and preventing its destruction. We are in charge of ascertaining whether or not the Burmese army is about to invade Thailand, and if that is the case then doing something to stop them. To this end we have our low orbit surveillance satellites and a number of Buzzards focussing in on the long border down the Isthmus Kra to see if there is any troop build up.'

Admiral Miller's Deep South accent spoke again, 'OK then, but I'd like to remind y'all that my pilots have already committed one act of war by firing on that Burmese gunboat. Now Mr Sharpe, do you have any immediate requirements? We can arrange to get y'all to HMS *Devonshire* if you require.'

Steve spoke for the first time since the initial round of introductions.

'OK, can you hold on a moment. I need to confer with Mr Nichols.' Leaning to one side, out of earshot of the speakerphone, Steve spoke quietly to Finn.

'What do you think we should do?'

‘I like the idea of getting to HMS *Devonshire*. I can brief the team that will assault the platform.’

Steve nodded, ‘Agreed. This invading Thailand business is being run by the Americans anyway. Let’s get ourselves to the *Devonshire*.’

Steve returned his attention to the speakerphone.

‘Admiral, Mr Nichols and myself would like you to get us onto HMS *Devonshire* as quickly as possible. Once there we will advise of any further assistance on an as required basis.’

‘OK, son,’ the Admiral replied. ‘I’ll get a helio on its way to pick y’all up right now.’

The helicopter landed them on the deck of the USS *Daniel J Boone*, the last conventionally powered US aircraft carrier. From there they briefly met with Admiral Miller, a surprisingly small African American to be carrying such a deep and distinctive accent, before being suited into familiar, for Finn at least, immersion suits and survival vests. The only unusual additions to the gear were a torso harness, which according to the rigger helping them was for attaching the in-seat parachute to, and a helmet.

A young, similarly attired Lieutenant greeted them with a handshake and asked them to accompany him to the aircraft.

‘I understand you two are from England and need a lift to one of your own warships.’

‘Yes,’ Steve shouted back over the noise as they emerged onto the flight deck. ‘Are you flying us?’

‘Yeah,’ shouted back the pilot, ‘on the only bus we have onboard that will take two passengers, a Lockheed S-3B Viking, or as the crew affectionately refer to her ‘the Hoover’. We have a two hour flight time to Singapore where a helicopter from your British frigate will be waiting for you.’

The flight deck of the *Daniel J Boone* was a perfect example of completely organised total chaos. Men were everywhere, dressed in an amazing variety of boldly coloured red, yellow, green or blue

tops over their navy fatigues. Menacing-looking fighter jets were also everywhere, dressed in a uniform battleship grey, but with vividly coloured tails that displayed skulls, crossbones, grim reapers and other symbols of death.

‘We’ve got something building at the moment,’ the pilot continued. ‘The whole ship has gone onto high alert state. Couple of these Hornets you can see launched as alert fives at zero notice earlier today and came back with gun smoke trails reaching back from their Gatlings. Whole crew sees that sort of thing. They know there’s been live firing and that something’s brewing.’

He looked at the two Englishmen following just behind him.

‘Pilots said they flew into Burmese airspace to scare away a gunboat chasing two guys running hell for leather in a speedboat. You two guys wouldn’t know anything about that would you?’

Finn and Steve briefly looked at each other, the same question in each mind – admit it or deny any knowledge. Finn noticed the pilot had seen the look, so his suspicions had been confirmed anyway.

‘Guilty,’ he shouted with a smile. ‘Got lost on a daytrip. Thanks for giving us a lift home.’

‘Yeah, right. Whatever it is, you boys sure have caused of a whole lot of action right now. Ah, here we go. Meet the Hoover.’

The Hoover in question was a funny looking plane. A bit too soft and podgy amongst the sinister sharp-nosed fighters, and with high wings that had airliner like engines hanging under them.

‘We ready to roll, Greg?’

They were strapped and plugged into the two rear seats, directly behind the pilots, who ran through an exhaustive list of pre-flight checks before signalling engines start.

‘Don’t you two go pulling any handles back there,’ the pilot said over the intercom. ‘If we need to eject at anytime then one of us up front will pull the handle for everyone.’

Finn felt the mighty ship turn to port. He was sweating profusely now in the hot cabin and tightly bound rubber immersion

suit and was praying for the air conditioning to come on before he fainted.

‘Turning into the wind,’ the pilot remarked as the Hoover started moving, taxiing away from the edge of the flight deck and toward the launch catapult. A cloud of condensation came into the cabin as the air conditioning kicked in.

‘Gents, I should warn you about the launch. When you see my hands go down onto the controls brace yourselves and make sure your heads are firmly back against the headrest. Nought to one hundred and fifty knots in two seconds is one heck of a shove in the back.’

They both immediately braced themselves, heads and bodies pushed hard into the seats, although Finn admitted to himself that he was thrilled as well as nervous. Being launched into the sky off the deck of a carrier was the kind of experience he would gladly have paid for under different circumstances.

The plane stopped and the pilots ran through some more checks before the co-pilot opened the throttles to maximum and the pilot raised his left gloved hand with thumb and two forefingers extended. The whole aircraft leaned forward and started shaking and vibrating under the power. Finn could feel it itching to get underway and break its bond with the metal flight deck. The two forefingers on the pilot’s raised hand closed, leaving just a thumbs up which hung there for a second before it too disappeared as the pilot’s hand came down. Finn braced again, head pointing directly forward and pushed back against the headrest, arms down and grabbing the seat sides.

Waaahump! The jolt was incredible as the flight deck accelerated into a blur and was gone, leaving sea beneath them and the plane in the sky. Finn had a horrible sensation that they were dropping into the sea before the Hoover pulled up and pointed its nose toward the sun. He relaxed a little, feeling like his whole sweat-drenched and aching body had just been kicked from behind by an enormous football boot.

‘See what I mean,’ the pilot remarked over the intercom.

Changi Airport, Singapore

Two hours later they touched down at Changi International Airport, one of South East Asia's major commercial aviation hubs and also home to several squadrons of the Singapore Air Force.

The Hoover taxied passed a waiting Cathay Pacific jumbo jet and over to the military area, on the other side of the airport from the commercial terminals.

Just like the flight deck of the *Daniel J Boon*, the military base was a mass of intense activity. F-16 Fighting Falcons mixed with F-5 Tigers and a variety of transport, early warning and air-to-air refuelling tankers. Some of the aircraft were dressed in battleship grey, but others sported combinations of light blues or speckled browns. All, however, wore the famous Merlin logo, the symbol of Singapore, on their tails.

One solitary helicopter stood out amongst the vicious looking hardware. It stood out not so much because it was a helicopter, but because it was painted all over in wavy black and white stripes. The helicopter looked like a snow tiger, uncomfortably hot in the equatorial heat.

The Hoover was directed to a parking space next to the snow tiger by a ground controller waving ping-pong bats.

The canopy above them popped up and slid back and the cool air-conditioned environment was once again replaced with the heat and humidity of the tropics. Finn had managed to get a good hour's kip in the Hoover, despite the cold and clammy feeling of old sweat, and the tightness of the rubberneck seal against his throat. Added to the three hours on the speedboat and the best part of another hour on the US Navy helicopter, it meant he was now feeling altogether more refreshed and finally able to think clearly.

He climbed down the ladder and was greeted by a friendly English voice already in conversation with Steve.

‘Let me introduce you to Finn Nichols,’ Steve said as Finn came alongside him. Finn shook hands with the young soldier Steve was talking too.

‘Finn is the cause of all the excitement you can see happening here and also the reason HMS *Devonshire* is heading into the Gulf of Thailand.’

‘Mr Nichols,’ the soldier beamed widely as he shook his hand. ‘Good to meet you. Jon Hanks, Royal Marines Lieutenant leading the Commando detachment we have onboard the *Devonshire*. I understand you have first hand knowledge of the oil rig we are going to take. I have to say thank you for causing all this excitement. We’ve been bored silly on the *Devonshire*.’

The soldier looked impossibly young, more like a fresh faced public schoolboy excited at the thought of a rugby tournament than an officer in charge of a Commando detachment that could well be headed into a war. But then, Finn reflected, at thirty-nine he probably looked really old and cynical to the soldier.

All the fighting equipment, the planes, soldiers and guns was very disconcerting to see. Finn had the uncomfortable feeling that he hadn’t just got the lieutenant out of his boredom, but had started the build up to World War Three. It was making him nervous.

‘Lets get you two out of those rubber suits and then on our little whirlybird over to the *Devonshire*,’ Lieutenant Hanks said as he took Finn’s backpack and gestured towards the snow tiger helicopter.

‘The *Devonshire* is currently a hundred and fifty miles away from us in international water heading at flank speed for the Gulf of Thailand. Flight time to her is fifty minutes on the Lynx, if we push it.’

It was beginning to feel like a life of constant travel for Steve. He had been on the move solidly since he left Finn’s wife in Dorset and headed off in his car to Heathrow. How long ago was that? He

couldn't figure it out. The combination of fatigue, time zones, the oppressive heat. It was all too confusing.

Steve reminded himself to remain focussed. This was his operation now, and he had to keep it under control. He had a Royal Navy frigate and a team of commandos and was supposed to take over an offshore production platform and stop the release of a deadly gas into a pipeline. It all seemed relatively straightforward and easy. The overwhelming issue for Steve, though, was the consequences of failure. Because if he failed to organise this supposedly simple and easy task then two countries would soon be tearing each other apart.

The signs of impending doom were visible all around him; fighters and bombers at the airport ladened with missiles, the USS *Daniel J Boon* just the same. Young testosterone-filled men were running around, so excited and eager to get into a fight that it appeared the whole region was desperate to embark on an orgy of high tech violence.

Over on the other side of the large airfield Steve could see the international airport terminals, where life appeared to be continuing as normal with a regular clockwork of airliners landing or taking off every minute. It looked like a different world, one in which he intrinsically felt he belonged. Singapore, Thailand, Burma; these were dream holiday destinations, not places of work. The sight of normality so near made him feel the weight of his responsibility bear down on his shoulders. And all he had to rely on for support was Finn Nichols, the guy he could see animatedly talking on his phone like he didn't have a care in the world. All that had happened in the last few days was numbing. And the thought of what might unfold in the next few days was even more so.

In one respect Steve was aware he had been swept up by a tidal wave over which he had no control as he was carried along to wherever it might deposit him. But at the same time he had the feeling that everything was being slotted into place in a simple and logical manner by some unseen and unknown hand. Finn and

himself were from disparate worlds, yet they were worlds that were also fundamentally identical. Finn's steamroller approach to problem solving, where he essentially ignored the rules and distractions, originated from the same roots as Steve's increasing annoyance with the regimented rules and regulations of the Metropolitan police.

Despite the fatigue, the confusion, and the weight of responsibility, Steve admitted he was having the time of his life. Within less than a week he'd gone from dead end cop to the senior British secret service commander in an exotic land, who was about to avert a war. When it was all over he would definitely talk to Tog Ferguson about transferring over to MI6.

'Steve. Do you fancy coming for lunch next Sunday?'

'Uh? Sorry Finn. What did you say?'

'Liz wants to know if you fancy coming over for lunch next Sunday? Reckon we'll be back home by then and Victoria is keen to talk to you about being a special policeman herself. You've certainly made an impression on her...Uncle Steve.'

'Sunday lunch? Sure. What day is it today?'

'Saturday. Liz says I also need to talk to you at some point about getting a refund on my expenses. I've had a somewhat expensive week so far and since that guy Tog said you were in charge I was thinking I might put together an expenses form and get you to sign it off as approved.'

Finn was playing his favourite game of wind-up. Something he seemed to do when he was worried or nervous.

'Sure, no problem. Just make sure to attach the receipts. You do have receipts don't you?'

'Ah, well now, not really. Tend to do cash a lot when it's all a bit illegal and I'm on the run. Did you get a receipt from Sanchan when you gave him that extra five grand? How about if I attach the receipt for the cash I took out at Heathrow and then give you what's left when we get back?'

‘How much did you take out?’ Steve was genuinely curious.

‘Thirty something grand. Combination of pounds, dollars and euros. I’ll work out the exchange rates and give you an exact figure on my expenses.’

‘How much you got left?’

‘Out of the money I took out, loose change really, a few thousand at most. Oh, that reminds me. I’ve got to ring Lloyds to cancel the withdrawal I had arranged to pick up in Calcutta. I’ll tell Liz Sunday lunch is a date. Are you bringing a friend?’

And with that Finn was on the phone again.

South China Sea

HMS *Devonshire* was a modern Type 23 frigate. It was home for the Snow Tiger Lynx and the six Royal Marines from Number One Commando Assault Battalion that made up its rapid deployment force.

The vessel was steaming fast, both its Rolls Royce turbine engines turning at full speed to propel the five thousand tonne warship at thirty-three knots through the South China Sea and into the Gulf Of Thailand, headed in a straight line to Luann Alpha.

Finn had briefly dozed off again on the helicopter, making Steve wonder if he did it on every mode of transport he sat in.

On landing, Lieutenant Hanks, Johno as he'd asked Finn and Steve to call him, took them straight to the ship's situation room.

The large plasma screen display on the wall showed their position in relation to the nearby Malaysian Peninsula along with its speed, distance to go and time to go. Finn noted that time to go was shown as a little over twelve hours.

Commander Robinson, the captain, introduced himself and updated them on the schedule. 'We still have twelve hours until we can launch the strike force. The Marine Commandos have been given the plans and drawings of the platform from the information you supplied to MI6. Unfortunately they could probably do with a little help in understanding them. Lieutenant Hanks here has a degree in, what is it Johno?'

'Geography, sir.'

'Yes, geography. Not much use in understanding technical drawings, is it?'

'No sir. But good background knowledge for running up and down hills.'

'Yes, indeed. Anyway if you could brief Johno and his little gang on what to expect then that would be great. Once they have

control of the platform we'll put you two on board to do whatever it is you need to do to make it all safe again. The Thai military have been made aware of the issues going on here and have accepted that it will be us and not them taking the platform. We're a little undermanned in the combat department, but I think we'll cope.'

Commander Robinson had been directing his conversation towards Steve, but it was Finn that spoke up now.

'When were the Thais alerted to your intention to storm the platform with British forces?'

'I don't know,' Robinson admitted, 'but we were told at 0900 this morning to proceed at full speed to the Gulf of Thailand and received a flash signal half an hour ago to go to alter status red. Red means war is imminent. Ensign, pass me the flash traffic.'

A young signalman passed the captain a slip of telex paper. He passed it on to Finn who quickly scanned its contents.

FLASH FLASH FLASH

Army of Myanmar (formerly Burma) massing on southern border with Thailand – Isthmus of Kra

Intel suggests invasion imminent

Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore mobilising armed forces

All United Kingdom forces in operational Area Five (5) Alert Status Red
Message ends

FLASH FLASH FLASH

'Captain, you said maximum speed. Is that the same as flank speed?' Finn said, looking up from the telex slip.

'No, we're at maximum sustainable speed, thirty-three knots.'

'Can you increase to flank please?' asked Finn.

'No, not really, it will ruin my turbines. And I don't think the situation calls for that.'

'Captain, what you think and what I know are completely different. I am asking for flank speed now, please.' Finn turned to

Steve for help, maintaining his outwardly calm and relaxed attitude. 'Steve could you order him.'

Steve nodded. 'Captain. Flank speed now for as long as we require.'

Finn carried on.

'Twelve hours until we can launch a strike. I'm assuming due to the length of time that you are considering a water borne attack?'

Johno, the marine responded to this.

'Yes. We understand that the helicopter would be detected by radar on the platform, which would mean we would have no surprise. I only have five combat marines, so we must maintain the element of surprise.'

'Twelve hours at thirty-three knots. That's three hundred and ninety six, say four hundred nautical miles. What's the range of the Lynx?' asked Finn.

'Err.' It was Johno, the marine lieutenant, again. 'It's a one hundred and sixty nautical mile combat radius with fifteen minutes over the target and five percent fuel reserve.'

'Johno, range is not the same as combat radius. Is the range more than four hundred nautical miles?' Finn had already guessed it was.

'Yes, a little more assuming no reserve.'

'OK. Johno, get your team ready to go. Captain, get that Lynx refuelled as fast as humanly possible. We're leaving in fifteen minutes.'

'What about the element of surprise?' asked Johno.

'You'll have your surprise,' said Finn in such a confident way that no one dared question how.

Commander Robinson cut in, trying to reassert his authority.

'Gentlemen I hate to break up your little party but I am not about to release my helicopter on a one-way mission or ruin my ship's turbines without a written command from Admiralty. If you're going to go in by helicopter, then you will wait until we are

within the Lynx's combat radius, one hundred and sixty miles from the platform.'

Steve spat out his reply, having lost his temper with the Naval officer.

'Captain, as you know I have full authority over all British Forces in this region. I am giving you that command now. Verbally, as I don't have time to write you a fucking letter. And I want this vessel maintained at flank speed while we are away as Mr Nichols requested. Flank speed. Do you understand!'

Commander Robinson drew back from the fierceness of the command and grudgingly turned in silence to comply with the orders he had been given.

Steve turned to the marine lieutenant.

'Lieutenant, prepare your troops. Finn and I will require side arms. Browning's will be fine. Finn will brief you in-flight, so make sure you bring the platform drawings with you.' He turned back to the chaste Robinson.

'Captain, please arrange for water and food on the Lynx. Finn and I are hungry. We also need fresh clothes and I for one would like some deodorant.'

Steve felt good. As Finn had said to him on the Lynx shortly before he drifted off to sleep. 'It all goes COSMIC in situations like this. Just remember to treat whatever the MIC says as a COS. He will be trying to defend his position, not help you. Take facts from him, but ignore opinion. Never start a sentence with 'I think' and never believe anyone who starts that way. It means you, or they, are guessing and would be quite happy for someone else to do the thinking for them. Be polite, but be completely firm in what you want. Think about what you need and ask for it.'

Steve hadn't quite got the hang of Finn's calm but authoritative way of giving orders, but he was improving. MIC? Mother fucker In Charge. COS? Crock Of Shit. Completely COSMIC – Finn did swear after all.

'What's wrong with my clothes?' asked Finn.

Steve looked at him questioningly.

‘Dirty Bermuda shorts and a sweat stained ‘I FCUK’d it in Phuket’ tee shirt are not ideal for an assault with a bunch of Her Majesty’s commandos.’

‘Oh,’ replied Finn. ‘Fair enough. But you’ll have to show me how the gun works. Never used one before.’

Just over twenty minutes later they boarded the helicopter in fresh battle fatigues with six combat ready commandos. A cool box with sandwiches and tins of soft drink was loaded and they were away.

‘Why are we attacking now instead of in twelve hours?’ asked Lieutenant Johnno.

‘Two reasons,’ Finn replied, making Steve immediately think ‘oh shit’ to himself.

‘Firstly – and I don’t know which numbskull decided to tell them – but if you were the Thailand special forces general or colonel or whoever runs them, and you were told by a foreign government that a foreign army was going to storm and take over an offshore platform in your territorial waters in twelve hours time for your own good and that if they cocked it up – which they might well do as they know sod all about the platform – then your worst enemy would be invading across your longest and most poorly defended border – and by the way, you were to sit on your bum and do nothing – what would you do?’

‘Well I guess I would seriously think about beating them to it.’

‘Exactly. So would I. I’d get hold of some people that work on the platform. There is always one crew off-shift, back on the beach. Get them to explain the layout and how best to assault and take it over. And then I would reckon I would have a much better chance of a successful operation than the foreign army. So I would go ahead and do it myself. The Thai military probably went onto full alert at the same time you received the flash traffic signal, so their Special Forces are probably in preparation right now. Don’t forget

that generals in this part of the world quite often take little or no notice of what their democratically elected governments tell them to do. Especially in Thailand, which has a history of the military taking over when they think the government is not doing things correctly. Like last bloody year for instance.'

'OK, makes sense,' said Johno. 'What's the other reason? You said there were two reasons.'

'Oh yeah, the other reason is simplicity in itself. If we don't go now then Luann Alpha won't exist in twelve hours time.'

Finn set about sketching out the layout of Luann Alpha from his memory and then explaining it to the commandos.

Although the marines had the platform drawings that Finn had originally copied to his memory stick, these were far too detailed and complicated to give a decent overview.

The most important thing on arrival, Finn stressed, was to locate the American personnel as quickly as possible and to find the hydrogen sulphide bottles. Sanchan, the control room boss in Burma, had described what the H₂S bottles looked like and approximately how many had left Sittwe, so Finn relayed this information along with his best guess of where they would be located.

Vauxhall, London

Back in London it was ten o'clock at night, but Tog was still in the MI6 offices overlooking the Thames. It was lucky, he reflected not for the first time in his career, that he never did get married. Otherwise his wife would probably have divorced him long ago for his frequent habit of working late or straight through the weekend without getting paid for it.

Tog was very satisfied with the way things had turned out so far. His hunch on the missing engineer had been spot on. Far from a fugitive criminal, Finlay Nichols had revealed himself as a golden asset. He had been a major stroke of luck to MI6 that would quite possibly save Burma and Thailand from going to war with each other.

Thailand was one of a very few beacons of democratic light that glowed, however dimly, in South East Asia. MI6, and Tog in particular, wanted to hang onto these beacons and help them shine brighter so they wouldn't slip back into their old medieval practices.

A regional conflict though, as devastating as it would be to the combatants, would ultimately be little more than another battle in the power play of the world's greatest game. The final victory of the great game would only be won one battle at a time though, and therefore each war was as important as the one that preceded it and the one that would surely follow it.

In Tog's view, the great game had been running for nearly a thousand years now, ever since the signing of Magna Carta and with it the formation of the first Parliament and the beginnings of democratic rule. But even in Britain, true democracy didn't begin to break through the confines of rule by monarchy until five hundred years later and the bloody battles of father against son and brother against brother of the English Civil War. And even then, in the immediate aftermath of victory, Britain had very nearly slipped into

a Cromwellian dictatorship before emerging into the basic form of the modern world's first true democracy.

That was the ultimate prize. Not the perverted democracy for the rich that had developed in the United States, or the democracy for the corrupt that currently ruled in the former Soviet Union. The true prize, the one that Tog had devoted his life too, was the fair and just democracy that had first developed in the British Isles. Or to put it in its simplest form, it was the rule of law as defined by the consent of the majority and administered by a completely independent legal system, with a basic understanding of freedom and liberty.

Tog was no idealistic fool though. He knew that British democracy had only reached its current still far from ideal form in the last fifty years, more than four hundred years after Parliament came to rule unopposed. He also knew that other fledgling democracies would take time to transition to the same level. The time didn't matter though, it was simply being on the path that mattered to Tog. Keeping the beacon alight was worth fighting and sacrificing lives for, because once a country had some form of civilian elected government in operation, no matter how bad it was, then provided it stayed on the right path it would develop. The power of the military or monarchy would slowly be reined in and the population would gradually reach a level of education at which they could understand the importance and workings of a democratic society. Only then would a democracy strengthen to the point where it could not easily be broken.

It bothered Tog that the youths he saw loitering menacingly on the London streets or blasting their eardrums with tiny earphones on the tube had no respect for his life's work. But he hoped they would learn, because it was from their ranks that tomorrow's strategists of the great game would emerge.

He hoped that the current problem with Islamic fundamentalists would show itself to be a fertile breeding ground for tomorrow's warriors. It was one of life's many satisfying ironies

that their very existence on home turf would ultimately be the trigger for their eradication.

My handling of this case will look very good to the powers that be, Tog thought. But then he reflected that at sixty years old, he really didn't give a stuff what the powers that be thought about him anymore. The intelligence services had over recent years paid too much attention to political will than Tog would have liked. It meant that on occasion their focus had wandered, becoming closer to the CIA's image than they should have done.

As he flipped through Detective Inspector Sharpe's career record Tog could see the makings of a good operative, could sense how the man had felt and reacted to the situations he had been in. Mr Sharpe was definitely interesting to Tog, far more so than Finlay Nichols. He sensed that he would never be able to get Nichols to come and work for MI6. But Steve was a different matter. Steve could well turn out to be Tog's final gesture of good will to MI6. Not just a warrior of the next generation, but a future general.

Assuming, that was, that he survived the current operation.

Gulf of Thailand

Tog's view of a deadly but noble war lasting generation after generation in an ongoing battle of good over evil was the furthest thing from the minds of the eight passengers in the snow Lynx. The six commandos, one policeman and one engineer sat in two rows in the cabin. One row faced forward and the other backward, leaving feet and weapons jostling for space in the centre. The commandos were passing around Finn's sketches and trying to visualise the routes Johnno had elected each pair to take to their assigned sweep sectors.

The military spec helicopter had the same lack of soundproofing as those used by the oil industry so Finn was shouting to be heard.

'Good plan, Lieutenant. Your geography degree obviously isn't too much of a hindrance after all. However we need to modify it in one respect. Absolutely no shooting at anyone or anything on the platform. The Thai workforce are actually very nice people and they don't deserve to get shot. Importantly though, depending on the state of embrittlement of the topside pipework, we may find a single ricochet from a bullet is enough to shatter it. That would trigger a complete loss of the asset.'

'You're going to have to clarify what you mean by loss of the asset,' Lt. Johnno shouted back.

'The whole platform and everyone on-board would be CF'd.' There is natural gas at two hundred times atmospheric pressure in that pipework.'

'Oh,' Johnno shouted back. 'It would probably blow up, along with everything and everyone one on it.'

'You learn quickly. Gas platforms are way more dangerous than oil rigs.'

'Lieutenant, fifty miles and twenty minutes out. We should be showing up on their radar soon,' the pilot announced.

Finn indicated for an intercom.

‘Stephen isn’t it,’ he asked the pilot, receiving a nod in reply. ‘OK Stephen, slow us to sixty knots and bring us down to whatever altitude you pick up ground effect from.’

Ground effect was the additional lift a helicopter would receive from flying very close to a flat surface. The air that would normally be pushed away by the rotors had nowhere to go so bounced back up under the helicopter giving it the additional lift. Finn knew that ground effect was the prime reason for using twin-engine helicopters in the North Sea. If one engine failed then a fully laden helicopter could still stay airborne until it reached dry land by flying in ground effect.

‘Sixty knots and twenty feet it is,’ Stephen replied, reducing power and pushing the nose down toward the sea.

At thirty miles Finn picked up the first radio call from the platform.

‘Unknown craft location eleven degrees sixteen point three four minutes north, one hundred and one degrees fifty four minutes east. Your speed sixty five knots. Your heading three one oh degrees, directly toward offshore installation Luann Alpha. Please identify yourself. Channel sixteen. This is Luann Alpha.’

‘Luann Alpha,’ Finn replied in a terrible fake Australian accent as he pressed the transmit button on his headset microphone, ‘Beagle five seven, we have an engine burn out. Our ETA your location about twenty minutes. Will attempt landing. Please prepare for emergency landing. Over.’

‘Beagle five seven can you make it here? Over.’

‘Roger that, thank god. I’ve got a new twin instead of the Jet Ranger. Two engines are most definitely better than one. At least they will be once we get them both working properly!’ Finn’s accent was truly lousy, but he figured the Thais wouldn’t be able to spot the difference.

‘Jimmy, that you flying?’

‘Sure is. Got my hands full buddy. Can you prepare the crash team.’

‘Roger, will do. No need for you to transmit further. We will monitor your approach and be ready when you get here. Full fire team and fast rescue boat. We get you out first, Jimmy.’

‘Thanks mate. Beagle five seven out.’

Finn took his thumb off the transmit button and turned his attention back to the pilot, who was grinning.

‘When we are two minutes out then double-time it onto their helideck. I’ll talk to the control room again at that point.’

Luann Alpha, Gulf of Thailand

After several minutes of nervous inactivity the co-pilot finally leaned around and gave a five minute signal with his hand. For the commandos this meant the waiting was over. They gladly went into an automatic routine of last minute checks on their own and then their buddies' equipment. Finally each chambered a round into their assault rifle's breech, switched the safeties off and undid their seat harnesses.

At three minutes to go, and as the doors on the Lynx were being slid back, the radio came to life again.

'Beagle five seven we have you visual, we see your landing light, Jimmy.'

Finn twirled his finger in the air at the pilot and pointed directly to the platform. The pilot instantly reacted by bringing both throttles up to maximum and set about gunning for the helideck.

Finn replied into the headset.

'Copy that Luann Alpha.' He was speaking in his normal voice now. 'We are landing in two minutes. Please make an announcement over the PA that we are British soldiers under authorisation from the Thailand government and we will be taking over control of the platform. All personnel are to stand where clearly visible with their hands above their heads. We will not fire unless directly threatened. Do you copy, Luann Alpha. British soldiers, we will not shoot anyone.'

There was a startled silence before, 'Copy that Beagle five seven.'

'Boko, this is Finn Nichols. The Englishman from the insurance company. You have my word we will not fire upon you or your crew. We only need to stop the Americans doing something terrible to your country.'

Another brief pause.

‘Mr Nichols? OK sir, I make PA announcement. You want us to stop Americans doing anything.’

‘Yes please, Boko, how many Americans?’

‘Eight, four on night shift so probably in mess room now. They all wearing pistols.’

‘OK Boko, maybe you leave them alone, don’t take any risks. When we land have the helio officer direct us to them.’ Finn turned to the pilot.

‘Cabin announcement.’ The co-pilot flipped a switch and gave him a thumbs up, also indicating one minute with his finger. The lights of Luann Alpha in the evening twilight were fast approaching through the windshield.

‘Attention everyone!’

The heads of the marines looked around at Finn.

‘The Thais have assured me they will not provide any resistance. There are eight Americans on board. All have side arms. Four are in the hotel block. The Thais will direct you too them. Remember, do not shoot at any piping and please don’t kill any of the Thais.’

The helicopter suddenly pulled up from its low altitude, cutting Finn off as he grasped for a handhold. He spun his head around to look out of the windshield and saw only the bottom of a low cloud illuminated by the powerful landing lights. The cabin span to the left and he caught a glimpse of the sea and one of the platform legs out of the open side door. The sea was tilted halfway to vertical.

The helicopter was slowing rapidly, coming in feet first from the side, trading speed for the height it needed to reach up to the helideck. It felt like a bird of prey swooping to strike with both talons reaching to grab the hapless prey. Finn wondered if the pilot hadn’t overcooked it and was about to catch the main or tail rotors on the helideck or overstress the airframe. ‘Please god,’ he muttered to himself, ‘don’t let the pilot break the Jesus bolt.’

At what seemed the last possible second the helicopter levelled a little and Finn felt first the left and then the right undercarriage

thump hard onto the helideck. He tore his headphones off, thanked god that the pilot was really very good after all, unbuckled his lap belt and looked up for the way out.

The cabin was completely empty except for him, Steve and the two pilots, one of whom was turned around looking at them and indicating frantically for them to get off. Outside the helicopter Finn could just see the helmets of the first marines heading down the helideck stairway to the deck below. Jesus, that was fast he thought before jumping out as quickly as possible and immediately feeling the gale force down wash of the departing helicopter trying to push him clean off the helideck before the snow Lynx nose dived over the side of the helideck and disappeared.

‘Mr Nichols, Mr Nichols, Sir!’

Finn saw one of the Thai helios, the helicopter landing officers, on his knees with his hands behind his head, calling for him. There were five of them in a row, all dressed in full fire-fighting gear, with a single marine in a crouched guard over them.

‘Kristian? Yes, Kristian.’ It was Kristian, one of the two Thais who had caught him taking gas samples from the pig receiver on his last visit to the platform.

‘Mr Nichols. Boko say to tell you four Americans in the process plant. Rathpunda follow them there as soon as they hear PA announcement. Here you take radio.’

Kristian unclasped his hands to get the radio off his belt, the marine instantly bringing his assault rifle to bear on his head. Finn waved the gun down with his hand and took the radio. It was much quieter now, the helicopter having moved away to circle the platform at a safe distance for the ten or fifteen minutes it had until its fuel ran out and it would have to return or ditch into the sea.

Finn spoke in a loud hush into the handheld radio. ‘Rathpunda. Finn Nichols. Where are the Americans?’

The radio immediately replied back with an anxious voice in broken English. ‘Sir, all four go compressor room. Door closed.’

‘Rathpunda. Are the gas racks there that have just come in from the beach?’

‘No sir. Gas on cellar deck, but all hooked up for injection. Compressor room contain valves.’

‘Can you isolate the gas on the cellar deck?’

‘No sir. Only in Compressor room like I say. No valves on racks, all in Compressor room.’

Finn turned to the marine standing guard.

‘Tell Johnno four Americans are in the Compressor room. Absolutely imperative they are stopped immediately. Johnno must ask one of the Thais to show him the way.’

The marine held his throat mike and relayed the information.

‘Lead me to the Compressor room.’ It was Steve, pistol in hand.

‘Boko, are you on this channel?’ Finn shouted into the radio as he started running in the direction of where he guessed the Compressor room was, the oppressive evening heat making him break out into a sweat despite the lightweight combat trousers and tee shirt he was wearing. He vaguely thought of Steve and the marines, unacclimatised to the heat and running around in full combat gear with helmets and flak jackets.

‘Mr Nichols, Boko here. I hear you good.’

‘Is it small bore hard piping from the gas racks? Can we isolate it on the cellar deck by squeezing the pipes shut with pliers?’ Finn was on the top flight of the external staircase now, where a gentle evening breeze gave some relief.

‘Yes, half inch piping. You want me to try to get it sealed off. It only corrosion inhibitor though, not worry.’

‘Boko, it’s not corrosion inhibitor, it’s hydrogen sulphide. Very toxic, it will destroy the export pipeline.’

A hesitation from the other end.

‘Sour gas?’ Then the realisation as to what it meant. ‘OK boss, I get men on it right away.’

Finn turned to Steve, who, along with flak jacket and helmet also had one of the commandos radio headsets on.

‘Steve, tell the marines that we have Thais going to the cellar deck, that’s the second lowermost deck, to try and isolate the H2S with pliers under my orders. They are not to shoot them, OK.’

Ten flights of stairs, five storeys down, as fast as possible. Finn was now gasping for breath and his heart felt like it was running out of control. He didn’t know if he was just unfit or panicking. The H2S is connected up! How much have they got on the cellar deck? Are they pumping it into the pipeline right now? It was stupid, suicidal, to introduce the fatal dose with everyone still on the platform. Even more so if they are hurrying and just open all the valves at once. The platform piping would most likely crack and release not only highly explosive, but also highly toxic gas into the compressor room. One lungful would be enough, one gun shot instant destruction of everyone and everything. Maybe he was breathing it now, the H2S concentration too high for him to register the bad eggs smell?

He fought with his mind to calm himself down. Panicking won’t help a thing. Think coolly. You’re not breathing it because you would hear the screech of escaping gas through a fractured pipe. Lieutenant Johno and his men are probably already there now. He hadn’t heard any shots. Maybe though, he wouldn’t hear a shot. If someone fired and there was escaping gas maybe he wouldn’t hear or feel a thing, just be alive one second and consumed in a fireball the next. Had he told Johno about the bad eggs smell? He couldn’t remember.

Finn realised his mind was beginning to drift into an uncontrolled panic. He had to get himself back under control, to keep focussed and think coolly. What could he do right now to help?

He was still running, and still gasping for breath. Still trying not to fall down the stairs, but run down them as fast as humanly

possible. Cigarettes always would be his downfall, he knew that, but he would never have guessed that it would be because he couldn't run fast enough.

The radio Kristian had given him, the one he was still holding. Of course! It would be tuned to the platform's working channel. If the Americans had one switched on, which was more than likely, then they would have heard Rathpunda tell him where they were. They would be waiting for the commandos! None of Johnno's beloved element of surprise.

Finn was now running along the gangway leading from beneath the hotel deck past the wellhead and processing area to the platform's power generation and compressor zone. The cooling breeze was gone and he was clanging his way through intensely hot steel and piping. He brought the radio up to his mouth and breathlessly shouted into it.

'Eagle United Energy. American Eagle employees. The platform is under our control. We are British Royal Marine Commandos. Give yourselves up.' Finn gasped for breath, what would he say next?

'Give yourselves up. If you disregard this command you will be shot. Obey and you will not. Don't release the hydrogen sulphide into the pipeline. You will be shot. I say again we are British Commandos, we will kill you if you don't comply.'

He couldn't think of anything else to say.

'Finn, which way?' Steve was shouting at him as he stood there, having momentarily come to rest.

'Err.' He looked around, trying to orientate himself and remember back to his last visit and the arrangement of the various platform zones. Where was the stairway? 'Over there. Up the stairs, it's one storey above us.'

Steve was gone. Up the stairway, pistol in hand. Finn took his own gun out, chambered a round and took the safety off. Beside point at someone not friendly and pull the trigger, those were the only instructions Steve had given him.

The radio squawked into life.

‘British soldiers, we give ourselves up. Don’t shoot us.’

‘OK,’ Finn replied into the radio. ‘Put your guns down and your hands on your head. Lie down as well, face down, and wait for us. Do it quickly because the commandos will be there now.’ Finn started running up the stairs in the direction Steve had disappeared.

Safety off, hammer pulled back, the Browning held in both hands sweeping the area in his line of sight. Steve was cautiously looking around the equipment and piping. Where’s the compressor room? Where are the commandos?

‘Sir, sir,’ a hushed whisper shouted to him from the darkness of a mass of piping.

Steve turned to see a small Thai in the same orange overalls and red hard hat as those on the Burma platform emerge from behind some steelwork.

‘Sir, compressor room over there.’ Rathpunda pointed to a reinforced fireproof door.

Steve breathed deeply, ran over to it and turned the central wheel. He heard the door unlatch. Could do with some back-up here, he thought, where’s Finn got to?

Finn and two marines suddenly arrived behind him. Finn held his hand to stop the door.

‘They say they’ve given up,’ he gasped. ‘Should be on their faces with hands up. Hold your breath when we go in. If they are wearing breathing sets then shut the door quickly, follow me and don’t breathe. And for Christ sake don’t fire any guns.’

Finn lifted his head to feel for any breeze. There was none in the congested central process floor of the platform. He looked around searching for the quickest way out to fresh air. He turned back to Steve, nodded and took a deep breath, even though he knew his pumping heart would use it up within seconds.

The commandos were first into the room, moving like lightning to enter, identify, acquire a target and bring their assault

rifles to bear. Finn burst into the room right behind them, momentarily thinking he should have put his pistol away first because it was more dangerous to him than anyone else.

All four Americans were face down in the middle of the room. Their eyes were open, hands over their heads and most importantly they were alive and not wearing breathing sets. Finn released his breath put his hands on his knees and tried to inhale great lungfuls of air without throwing up.

Liz, it's over. Thank god it's over, was the only thought running through his mind.

'Lieutenant wants you up in the control room, sir,' one of the commandos relayed to him.

Finn stood up. Never another cigarette as long as I live, he promised himself.

'OK, let him know I'm on my way.'

'Safety on please, sir.' The marine indicated Finn's pistol that was inadvertently pointed at him.

'Oh, yes, of course. Sorry.'

Back across the platform and up another dozen or so flights of stairs, this time at a fast walk rather than manic run, Finn found Johno in the air-conditioned chill of the control room with three Thai controllers on their knees with hands behind heads. Four Americans, in boxers, vests, pyjamas and one with only a towel around his waist, were also in the line.

'The platform is secure, Finn. I've got the Lynx landing in a second. Pilot says he's sucking fumes. You said we could get it refuelled here, so can you sort that out quickly. I'd like to package up the Yanks and get them back to the *Devonshire* as soon as possible.

'This one here,' Johno indicated to Boko with his rifle muzzle. 'Says he needs to make the platform safe. Can you watch over him whilst he does it.'

‘Yes of course,’ replied Finn, holding his hand out to help the Thai get up.

‘Good to see you again, Boko.’

‘And you, Mr Nichols. Is it true that gas in racks really is hydrogen sulphide and not corrosion inhibitor?’

‘Afraid so,’ Finn replied. ‘It hasn’t been introduced into the pipeline, but we need to disconnect it and make it safe as quickly as possible. Also need to get your helos to refuel Johnno’s helicopter.’

‘To make safe we must shut down compressors that hydrogen sulphide tanks are connected too. Then disconnect tanks and purge sour gas from the feed lines. All my guys are OK. None of them like to work for Eagle United, but we do it, you know.’

‘Yes, I know.’

Finn turned his attention back to the lieutenant.

‘I’m going to get Boko to make a PA announcement in local that all the Thais are to gather in the mess room. Except the helos who will refuel the Lynx and the gang I’ll use to disconnect the H2S that is. We need to get things under control quickly and establish how safe the piping is. Can you let your team know what the PA announcement is going to be about?’

Less than an hour later the platform had been made safe. The H2S tanks were sitting on the cellar deck, disconnected from the topside piping. The Thais had been teamed into threes, no one allowed to do anything without their two watchers. This had been Johnno’s idea as a way of reducing the risk of sabotage. He had initially wanted anyone working to be accompanied by a commando, but he now only had four subordinates and himself, the sixth guarding the eight bound Americans who had been put on the fully fuelled Lynx and sent on their way back to the *Devonshire*.

The Lynx would return in a few hours, bringing with it ten navy ratings who would supplement the British consolidation of power.

Disconnecting the hydrogen sulphide had been done by Rathpunda with Finn's help.

Boko had turned off the air conditioning throughout the platform complex as soon as Finn had mentioned hydrogen sulphide and this had allowed the hot night air and mass of running machinery to heat the compressor room to an unbearable level. Rathpunda and Finn had both worn heavy air tanks and full face masks as the risk of poisoning was simply too high in the closed environment.

The physical effort involved in shutting off and disconnecting each gas bottle in the unyielding heat had made Finn sweat more than anything else he had ever done and really question just what the hell he was playing at. It felt like he had taken one stupid risk after another over the last few days.

Only essential work was being permitted on deck, but it still meant there were several Thai teams working without supervision. Finn trusted them, despite John's protests, as they had no reason to do anything other than what they were told. Those Thais not working were in the mess room, under the watchful eye of a commando with his SA80 assault rifle.

Vauxhall, London

The ringing phone bought Tog out of his slumber on the sofa he kept in the office just for this type of occasion.

‘Tog Ferguson,’ he said as he picked it up.

‘Mr Ferguson, Commander Robinson from the *Devonshire*. I am pleased to report that we’ve just had a call from our team on Luann Alpha. The platform is under our control. No damage and no fatalities. Eight combatants have been captured and on their way back here. A good operation.’

‘Excellent!’ replied Tog. ‘Truly excellent!’

He poured a large malt whiskey into a plastic water cup, leaned back into his chair, savoured the taste and savoured the moment. It was a quiet moment of personal satisfaction before he relayed the good news to all those that were waiting to hear.

Before relaying any news though, he wanted to talk to Nichols or Sharpe to verify that the operation had indeed been completely successful. Tog dialled the number of the engineer’s satellite phone.

Steve answered the phone with a simple ‘Hello’.

‘Mr Sharpe? Tog Ferguson here.’ Tog recognised the south London accent of the Met policeman. ‘You and I need to talk about a job when this is all over. Tell me, is it over?’

‘I think so, sir,’ replied Steve, trying to hide his excitement, then immediately remembering Finn’s advice never to start a sentence with ‘I think’ and inwardly cringing that he had just done that.

‘I mean, I’m not sure, but the platform is secure and Finn is out on deck supervising making safe the hydrogen sulphide tanks. It looks like we’ve been pretty successful so far.’

‘Ah yes, our elusive Mr Nichols. I’d like to know sometime why he decided to go to Burma and not Eagle United’s head office in Houston. When he left the country and we figured out the

connection with Houston we were waiting for him to show his face there. He certainly wrong-footed us on that one.'

'The Met police as well, sir. Finn's already told me why he went to Burma.'

'Oh really? Why?' Tog was curious.

'Well, it sounds a bit corny sir, but he said the cunning warrior attacks neither body nor mind. The cunning warrior takes the soul and with it all reason and ability to fight.'

Tog smiled. He knew where the quote came from.

'When you see Mr Nichols please tell him the cunning warrior understands that with the burden of knowledge comes the weight of responsibility. And pass on my thanks to him if you wouldn't mind.'

Luann Alpha, Gulf of Thailand

Finn was back in the control room with Steve, Johnno and Boko. A full set of platform piping diagrams were laid out on the chart table along with a couple of large bottles of water, cans of fizzy drink, fresh coffee and Styrofoam containers with various half-eaten hot meals. It was a little past five in the morning, local time, and Finn was once again feeling very fatigued. Once this was all over he promised himself he would sleep for a week.

‘So the only piping sections that we need to worry about are these,’ Finn was saying, indicating an area they had yellowed with highlighter pen.

‘Yes. This is the area where the Americans would always work,’ Boko replied. ‘They introduced the gas from racks here on the cellar deck and up to compressor number three, from where it would go along this section of piping and into the main manifold for introduction into the export pipeline. Like now, we would always have eight Americans on board when they were introducing the hydrogen sulphide. Normally we only have three.’

One of the control room men who had just come on shift glanced up at Boko in surprise and then spoke up, talking in English so that Finn, Steve and Johnno could understand what was being said.

‘Sir, we have nine Americans on the platform. The security man arrived in the afternoon whilst you were off shift.’

Steve and Johnno looked at each other for the briefest of seconds before each drew his pistol, flicked the safety off and moved into opposing corners of the room.

Boko continued, ‘I’m sorry, Mr Nichols, I didn’t know the security man had arrived.’

‘Don’t worry about it, Boko, just carry on with what you were saying.’ Finn fingered the pistol in his hip holster and looked around to identify the entry points to the room. He saw Steve drawn back

into the corner of the room, pistol out and at the ready, gave him a nod and relaxed a little. Steve and Johnno would take care of his back and deal with any shooting that might be necessary.

‘OK,’ Boko continued. ‘As I said they were introducing the gas via the number three compressor. They told us it was a corrosion preventative. If we’d known it was hydrogen sulphide then we would have done something. It is crazy that they want to destroy their own platform and pipeline!’

‘Not so crazy if you happen to own the only source of replacement gas for Thailand,’ Finn replied. ‘So, you said there have been six occasions when the gas has been introduced, and the amount we have down on the cellar deck now is many times more than before. Well, that confirms what the Sittwe control room said. This was the fatal dose, the one that would cause complete rupture of the export pipeline.’

Finn turned to Steve, still in the corner of the room. ‘Once the *Devonshire* gets here we’ll transfer these tanks onto her and she can take them away. I don’t want this stuff on the platform for one second more than we need.’

He turned back to Boko. ‘Right now, though, let’s set about isolating and taking offline compressor station three and associated piping. Johnno and his marines will take care of the missing Yank.’

‘OK, Finn,’ Boko replied. ‘I’ll get men to bring compressor station four online. Our gas import from the other platforms is too much for compressors one and two to cope with alone. Burma has technical problems and has shut in its own gas export, so we are running at close to capacity right now. We can get compressor number four up to speed in about half hour.’

‘Boko! Hu chee in chan!’ a voice suddenly shouted out.

Boko ran to the radar screen. ‘Mr Finn, many fast boat come very quickly!’

Finn looked at the radar screen, Lieutenant Johnno also appearing from his position in the corner of the room to look over their shoulders at the screen.

Johnno spoke first. 'Looks like three plus boats. They keep dipping in and out of radar contact. They'll be Thai Special Forces no doubt. Ask your radio man to make contact and tell them that the British Commandos are in full control and can they identify themselves and await instructions to approach.'

Boko signalled to the radioman who immediately started babbling away into his microphone.

The requests were replied with total silence.

'Damn,' said Johnno. 'Get all the Thais off deck and back to the mess. Everything else will have to wait until we can avert a fire fight.'

Johnno turned and started talking into his throat microphone to his men, briefly turning back to ask, 'How long Boko? How long until they arrive?'

'Maybe fifteen minutes, no more.'

Fifteen minutes, thought Finn, that will put them here shortly before dawn.

'Just before dawn,' Johnno replied.

Finn was thinking out loud now. 'We should get the platform crew at muster stations and ready to go into the lifeboats. Just in case they shoot first and ask questions later. Boko, let's initiate a platform emergency shutdown. Screw Thailand's gas supply, let's get all topside and subsea isolation valves closed. Do we have time to vent down the pressure in the topsides?'

'One hour to vent, but we start.'

Boko started talking calmly but quickly to his two assistants. Buttons were pushed, a Tannoy announcement made and the shutdown initiation checklist run through.

On the foremost assault craft Colonel Lo-Sung, commander in chief of Thai Special Forces combat squadron number one, pulled the lightweight balaclava over his face and adjusted his night vision goggles. He looked across at the other two boats making up the first assault wave, raised his clenched fist and pumped it up and down in

a signal. Both boats responded back and all three increased their speed dramatically. The radio transmission from the platform meant they had been detected and it was now imperative they strike as quickly as possible.

Lo-Sung had been briefed the previous day by General Phraya-Sataran. The General had said a British Navy frigate would arrive at the American-owned Luann Alpha platform sometime this morning and that when it did he wanted Colonel Lo-Sung there to greet them.

With these orders Colonel Lo-Sung and his squadron had immediately flown out to one of the Thai Navy's ex-Chinese frigates on two Chinook helicopters. The Chinooks were large enough to carry not only his full compliment of troops but also their Zodiacs and other equipment.

Since disembarking the frigate over two hours ago, he and his two attack waves had been under complete radio silence as they stealthily closed the distance to their objective.

Lo-Sung didn't for a minute believe the radio message saying that the British were already on the platform. His last report from the General had been that the British were almost two hundred nautical miles away and not due to be in a position to launch an attack until mid-afternoon at the earliest.

Johno couldn't see the Special Forces boats, but he could just make out the odd flash of white water they were making. It looked as if there were two waves of them, an advance guard of possibly two small Zodiacs and a following group with four or more larger boats.

Johno was on the spider deck now, the lowest deck on the gas rig. A rope hastily tied around his chest with a bowline, non-slipping knot, he started descending the sea access ladder with one of his men belaying him from the deck. He had a small Mag-lite torch in his mouth and was flashing it in the direction of the boats to try to catch their attention by wiggling his head around.

Johno had to make contact with the Thai Special Forces. They must know that the Royal Marine Commandos would have taken the platform by now. It was lunacy for them to be attempting an attack.

He stopped halfway down the ladder, took the Mag-lite out of his mouth and reached behind him for his night vision goggles.

‘Hey, Special Forces! Royal Marine! British Royal Marines! Commandos!’ he shouted pointlessly into the hot night air.

No reply came back.

‘Royal Marines! British!’ This time he could see movement on the nearest Zodiac. Maybe they had heard him. He flashed his torch directly at the boat and with his night vision goggles now on could see two Thai Special Forces Marines, also with night vision goggles on, squatting at the bow and a further three at the rear. It looked like they had seen him and recognised him as friendly. They must have done because their assault rifles were held at the readiness position and not shouldered ready to fire.

Three bright flashes above, accompanied by the loud cracks of a small arm being fired startled him. Johno looked up, his night vision goggles giving him a clear image through the grated floor above of Private First Class Batkin sprawled out with another person leaning over him. Johno reached for his hip holstered pistol, brought it to bear at the standing target and himself fired three times. The damned missing American he thought. The muzzle flashes from his pistol were intensified by his night vision goggles and momentarily blinded him. Johno blinked a few times and shook his head to try and clear his vision, pistol still pointing directly up and ready to fire again, but saw no one except the non-moving form of PFC Batkin. What should he do? Go back up the ladder to see to his man and chase the American, or wait for the Thai special forces, who would be there in less than a minute.

He lowered his gun and looked across to where the Zodiacs were. In horror Johno saw the two Special Forces men had shouldered their M16 assault rifles.

‘No, No, No!’ he shouted, waving his free hand at them to stop.

Johnno saw his Browning handgun through his night vision goggles in his still-waving hand, pointing directly at the Zodiac. Oh you idiot, he thought. You stupid idiot.

A river of bright flame erupted from one of the Thai Special Forces’ assault rifles, firing on fully automatic. Johnno watched in stunned silence as the fire spewed across the short gap of sea from the Zodiac and thumped into his chest.

The impacts knocked him back with such violence he was thrown completely clear of the ladder. He fell backwards and down toward the sea, still fully conscious and incredibly aware that he had been shot several times in the chest. Lung shots. He knew it was fatal. He thought of his sister as he fell, and also thought that it was a curious thing to think about. Why not my mother or girlfriend?

A sharp jab caught Johnno in the armpits as the safety rope cut into him and stopped his fall, half in and half out of the sea. He looked up at the Zodiac, still feeling no pain from the multiple wounds and saw another river of flame come from the Zodiac, this time running above him up to the platform where the Thais in the Zodiac had seen Private Batkin slowly moving and reaching for his weapon.

The rope unexpectedly went slack and Johnno was immersed in the water, unable to breath and unable to move. The sea enveloping him was dark green thanks to the night vision goggles, but interspersed with thousands of little sparks of bright green from the bubbles of air escaping his clothing. Johnno turned his head up to look and caught a vague shimmer of the platform lights before the goggles suddenly went black. He knew he was completely alone now, had lost all contact with the living world. In his mind though, he was happily playing as a young boy with the big sister he had always idolised.

‘Sharkman three, Sharkman two. What’s the status of one, over.’

‘Sharkman three reply, over.’

‘Sharkman four. Check one and three. Proceed utmost caution. Weapons discharged. Over.’

Steve was listening in on his marine headset.

‘Finn. I think the lieutenant and one of his men have been shot.’

Finn seamlessly and instantaneously slipped into panic mode.

‘Oh my god! You’ve got to stop them shooting. They’ll blow the whole lot of us to kingdom come. What can we do?’

‘Nothing,’ Steve shouted at him. ‘There’s nothing we can do. If we go charging in there we’ll only get in the way and attract more gunfire. We have to wait and see what the remaining commandos do.’

They could just make out the sound of automatic gunfire suddenly erupting again from below them now.

‘They’re coming up the platform legs. If the shooting gets to the cellar deck they—’

A loud screech, the sound of high pressure gas escaping a fractured pipe, came from below, immediately pulling Finn out of panic mode and straight into survival mode.

‘Boko, sound abandon platform! Steve, come on let’s get off. Tell the commandos to get the fuck off this place, we’re gone.’

Steve was on his throat mike as the control room rapidly emptied.

‘Sharkman team, this is Steve Sharpe. We are abandoning the platform. Suggest you pull out as well.’

‘Copy that! Sharkman four, do you have visual on one and three, over?’

The noise would be too loud for anyone to hear a thing down there, Steve thought.

‘Steve, tell them to get off now! This is a gas rig. Don’t you understand? It’s dangerous as hell at the best of times. Right now

it's the most stupid place in the whole fucking world to hang around on. This thing is going to blow sky high when that gas ignites.'

Finn looked at the control panel. Still too much gas was held in the topside piping, the pressure was way high. An alarm light on one of the screens indicated where the leak was originating from. Despite his desperate desire to get off the platform, Finn was drawn back to the controls. Why had he looked at the control panel? He knew he should be running like the wind, but he could see now that he had stay and help. With Boko and the Thais gone, he knew he was the only person left who stood a chance of saving the rig.

The MI6 man's words as relayed by Steve came back to him, 'The cunning warrior knows that with the burden of knowledge comes the weight of responsibility.' For an instant it calmed him. Those stupid, dumb arsed commandos weren't about to leave and he knew that he would forever consider himself a coward if he left now without doing what he had just seen he could do to help.

'Come on!' shouted Steve. 'Come on Finn, leave it and let's get the fuck out of here.'

Finn hesitated. He hesitated and was gripped by an indecision he already knew the answer to. He bit down on his jaw again as hard as he could. Why did he look at the damned control panel? Why did Tog Ferguson have to go and remind him of Hamarapi's quotation? Finn didn't want to be a cunning warrior, he didn't want the responsibility of his knowledge. He wanted to be a cunning coward and get the hell away from here. Damn it, damn it, damn it!

'Damn it all to hell!' he finally shouted out loud, turning back to the control room consoles.

'Finn!'

'You go, Steve. I'll catch up. I've got to do something.' Finn pulled a chair away from the console and sat down on it concentrating intently on the screens.

'Oh sweet Jesus, Finn! Don't do this to me. You know perfectly well I can't leave you.' An image of Finn's blonde haired,

daughter, Victoria, came to him asking him, 'But why? Why did you leave my daddy to burn, Uncle Steve?'

Finn spun his chair around to another of the other control room consoles, tracking the fractured pipework to the nearest isolation valves. He identified five open valves that if closed would isolate the leak. He started typing on the control system console, identifying each valve ident number and commanding it to close. The valves actuators started closing them, their colour on the screen changing from green, through orange and then to red, fully closed. As the fifth and final valve indicator turned red, the pressure indicator started dropping. A hundred and sixty bar to a hundred and fifty eight as he watched.

Steve was pulling at him now. The minute he had stood there had been an eternity and now he was too desperate to wait for a further second.

'Come on, Finn, stop pissing around and let's get the fuck off here. You said the whole platform will blow.'

'OK, coming in a minute, the pressure's not falling quickly enough.'

Another minute! thought Steve. What is he playing at? I'm not waiting another ten seconds, let alone a whole minute.

Finn typed the commands in for another two valves to open, diverting the leaking gas to one of the purge lines running up the platform's vent stack.

'That's it,' he said, pushing up from the chair as he took one last look at the consoles. 'Pressure in the leaking section is dropping rapidly now. Stop hanging around, Steve, let's get going!'

The bright flashes of gunfire from the decks below were clearly visible through the walkway and stairway grating as they left the relative safety and comfort of the control room, high up on top of the accommodation block and ran through the humid pre-dawn light toward the external stairwell down to the lifeboats. The falling pressure of escaping gas was quickly lowering the volume of the

high-pitched screech so that they could now clearly hear the staccato rasp from the automatic weapons.

Finn ran as fast as he could to get the lifeboats. As he reached the second landing down from the control room he saw one lifeboat release and freefall nose first to the sea. It hit the sea with an enormous splash that engulfed the whole of the fully enclosed craft before it surfaced, engine running and was on its way. The second freefall lifeboat was still filling with Thais through its open rear hatch when it too released from the platform a few seconds later. Finn saw several bodies follow it into the sea, arms and legs tumbling over each other.

‘The inflatable rafts are still left,’ he shouted.

The night sky lit up from behind them in a bright white light that was followed almost immediately with the heat wave and sound of an enormous explosion. Finn was thrown into the handrail as the stairway rocked to the blast.

‘The gas is on fire, let’s get the fuck off!’ Steve screamed from right behind him.

They got down to the level of the empty lifeboat racks and found the muster area completely deserted. The Thais that hadn’t been in the lifeboats were visible in the water beneath them. It looked like at least thirty of them had missed the boats and jumped.

‘Where are the other lifeboats?’ Steve shouted. ‘I only saw two drop, there must be more.’

Finn pulled the buckle release on the large white plastic drum of the first inflatable life raft in a racked line of five whilst shouting back, ‘Two is it. Minimum number required by regulations. Launch some more of these life rafts. There’s another rack of them over there. Pull the buckles and kick them over the side. We’re gonna need them if those lifeboats don’t turn around and come back for us.’

Finn unhooked the handrail and pushed the first white drum over the side. It dropped to the sea, momentarily disappearing below the surface before bursting to life as the salt-water switch activated

its automatic inflation. He started unbuckling the next life raft that had rolled down the rack to fill the vacant spot.

‘Nichols, you asshole,’ an American voice shouted out.

Finn was confused. What the hell was happening now? He spun around to see a man he didn’t recognise pointing a pistol at him. The missing American!

‘You goddamned asshole have caused me a whole lot of trouble.’

Virgil was fuming but delighted at the same time. This was certainly turning out to be his lucky day. First, he had managed to get the platform destroyed, because it certainly was on its way to the seabed, and secondly, of all the luck, he came across the cause of all his problems here, just as he was planning his own departure.

He wasn’t about to kill Finn by anonymously shooting him in the back. No, that wasn’t Virgil’s style. He wanted to savour the pleasure of it, to show that he had the Limeys’ life completely and utterly in his hands and was going to end it at his own pleasure.

‘I should have killed you myself in London rather than let those two Soviets balls it up. Well now I’m going to do it properly, and afterwards I want you to know that I am going back to London to hunt down the rest of your family. Just for the pleasure of it.’ Virgil had no intention at all of going to London, but he wanted to really put the shits up the Limey before he wasted him.

Finn was astonished. He didn’t know whether to believe this guy or not. It was just too unreal. He froze in indecision and as he did instantly thought back to the moment in London traffic when he’d also frozen.

Maybe it was that thought and the unconscious scream that had broken his fear, or maybe what the American had just said about his family. Whatever it was, the rage he’d felt then suddenly flooded back into him, and along with it the desire for revenge. This man had been in London, one of the Eagle team sent to kill him and now he was in Thailand, threatening to kill his family; his wife and his

children! Finn's jaws clamped together hard, his eyes narrowed and he started to move towards the American.

He knew he would never get there in time, but he still moved forward, one step then two, watching the pistol rising in slow motion toward his chest. Finn reckoned he could take one or two shots to the chest and still get to the American with enough strength to rip at his windpipe and gouge his eyes. That was all that mattered now, to inflict maximum damage in the time that was left to him.

Steve's running shoulder charge hit Virgil in the dead centre of his back. The violence of the blow and momentum threw the much-heavier American forwards and into Finn's arms. The two of them staggered backwards, Finn immediately holding on tight and pulling the man backward to prevent him from breaking away and bringing his pistol to bear again.

Four steps backward and Finn felt nothing beneath him. He'd stepped over the edge of the platform where he had just removed the handrail clips. He fell backwards, pulling the other man over with him and then pushing hard as he instinctively broke away and adopted the fall-brace position that had been drummed into him at survival school.

Finn caught a last glimpse of the American's eyes, looking straight into his with horror and incomprehension, before they looked beyond him and at the sea far below.

The drop was long and Finn had to resist the urge to open his arms from their crossed across his chest position to try to stabilise his fall. As he glimpsed the water coming up he held his breath and shut his eyes.

He hit hard, feet and the side of his bottom impacting almost simultaneously. The hundred foot drop meant he was going fast and disappeared a long way below the surface. He thought he might be upside down, the angled impact possibly having made him summersault below the surface, but he couldn't tell. All he could see was a mass of bubbles around him and then the blackness and

deep chill of the sea. Again, out of instinct and training he reached his left hand down the ribbed construction of the survival vest, felt for the toggle at the bottom and pulled it hard. The life vest inflated around him and Finn felt himself being dragged backwards and swung around, the complete opposite direction to that he believed the surface was. A few moments later he surfaced, and felt air instead of water around his face. He was spluttering and coughing uncontrollably, but fought against it and managed to breathe a deep lungful of the clear morning air.

He looked around, trying to orientate himself with the platform and look for the American who had tried and failed again to kill him.

Steve watched as the two of them disappeared over the side. He saw Finn instantly break away from the American and adopt a hunched together position, very similar to that he'd learned from a few days of parachute training, only with arms folded across his chest like an Egyptian mummy. Finn fell almost bottom first into the dark sea with a big splash. The other man was falling front first, arms and legs flailing in the air. It looked as if the American was trying to run and swim in the thin air at the same time. Just before he hit the water the man reached up and held his nose before making an even bigger splash from an almost perfect belly flop.

Steve held his breath and jumped after them; the biggest decision he'd ever made in his life, and one he deliberately didn't think about but just did. His feet were together, elbows in, forearms crossed over his chest, just like the position he'd seen Finn adopt.

It was a long drop. So long that he started breathing again and felt his body begin to rotate in air. Oh god! I'm going to face flop into the sea. Steve hit the black water almost feet first, but felt his legs immediately double back on him and pull his face forward to slap the sea. He was lucky, although didn't know it, that as his legs doubled back behind him he instinctively lifted his head back and so prevented a high-speed rush of water shooting up his nose and over-

pressuring his sinuses. He disappeared under the surface with his eyes still open looking at the foam, bubbles and stars in complete confusion.

Steve sort of surfaced after what felt like an age. He was spluttering on the salty water, trying to get his head up and find the surface for real, not just the foamy water he was choking on, when the squeeze of the lifejacket inflating caught him around the neck and an instant later in the groin strap. The life vest heaved him above the water's surface and turned him onto his back, face to the sky.

'You forgot to pull the toggle! My fault, I should have reminded you.'

Finn, maybe ten inches from his face, unhooked a lifeline from the front of Steve's vest and clipped his line to it.

'Turn your back to me and get ready to swim. We've got to get clear from the platform.'

Steve, still coughing up salt water, could do little but obey.

'Where's the other guy?' he shouted out.

'Dead,' replied Finn. 'He must have been holding his nose when he hit the water. Worst thing you could possibly do.'

'Oh.' Steve was suddenly anxious that he had very nearly held his nose when the drop had taken so long. 'Why?'

'The force of water on your arm pushes your hand up when you hit. Holding your nose means you break it and drive the bone up into the skull. You're dead before you even know what you've done. The bastard said he was going to kill my family.'

'Sounded like he was one of the team they had in London.'

Steve was now busy trying to sort himself out in the splashing and heaving water. The waves and swell, which had looked so insignificant from the lifeboat station, were anything but calm when your head was just a few inches above the surface. He was spitting out the taste of salt water from his mouth when he felt a pair of legs fasten around his mid torso from behind. Over his shoulder, as far as the life vest would allow his head to turn, he saw Finn behind him

doing an ungainly backwards butterfly stroke, both arms reaching behind, pulling through the water and then flying through the air for another stroke. Steve started doing the same.

As the two of them swam their mini caterpillar backwards away from the platform, Steve felt an unusual reassurance, much like he imagined he had felt when his long departed father had held him. It was a feeling that someone who knew exactly what to do was taking care of his wellbeing.

Swimming backwards, the two of them had a perfect view of the platform as the first glints of sunlight fell onto it. It was an ugly monolith of dark steel, fluorescent lights, orange bullet tracers and bodies running. At the centre of it all was the bright blue-yellow glare of the gas fire, emanating from a low level and fiercely licking around the floors above.

After less than four or five minutes Steve was gasping for breath. His lungs were complaining at the intake of salty water, the chill and the tightness around his chest from the life vest and Finn's legs. His arms were hurting from the awkward swimming, but Finn wasn't giving up so he wouldn't either.

They continued for another few minutes before Finn patted him on the head.

'I've got to stop for a minute, I'm completely knackered. I think we're far enough away.'

'You think we're far enough away. You told me starting a sentence with think means you don't know.'

'Yeah, it's a guess.'

As they floated together in the cold water they looked at the burning platform. It was less than two hundred metres away, so still loomed up very large in front of them. They could make out the occasional line of tracer from automatic gunfire and dark figures of the Royal Marines and Thai Special Forces running around hunting each other.

Finn didn't say anything, but he knew from the colour of flame that the fire was acting like a gas axe on the high pressure condensate separation tanks directly above it. It was only a matter of time; the dark figures he could see running around were already all dead.

Suddenly the platform erupted into a single huge fireball. The heat was so intense that they both put their arms over their eyes and faces to prevent them boiling in the intense furnace and could feel their hair and scalp crackling. When Finn looked again he saw the remains of a mushroom of orange and yellow flame and ugly black smoke curling up into the early morning sky. The platform illuminated below it had all but disappeared; a few matchsticks of wreckage and the burning hotel block slowly rolling off the remains and falling into the sea to one side.

Several Zodiac speedboats underneath the remains of the topsides were burning. The sole life raft he had managed to launch was still there, its silvered tent-like roof was blistered and charred but at least it was in one piece. How many, if any, of the commandos had escaped? How many Thais?

As the heat dissipated and he lay in the water, not moving, Steve felt the cold creeping into his legs and back, making him involuntarily shiver. Finn banged him on the head and a forearm pointed past his face towards one of the freefall lifeboats now returning toward the wreckage.

They turned and started the slow process of caterpillar swimming back towards the remains of the platform, both of them alone with their thoughts.

Houston, Texas

It was almost two in the morning in Houston and Sam Burton was feeling a buzz of excitement.

He parked his Oldsmobile up close behind the big Mercedes sedan on the driveway and got out. He deliberately slammed the door loudly, so that it would be heard through the open bedroom window where he guessed York Kendrick was fast asleep. Detective Johnston got out the other side of the car and did likewise.

This was one of the real perks of being a policeman Sam thought. The chance every once in a while to take some city slicker out of his ivory tower of corporate corruption and introduce him to the real world. The initial shocked reaction and immediate denial was what he liked most, followed by the slow dread of realisation and rising panic as the guy thought about what he was about to lose and where he was going to end up. City executives got rough treatment in jail. Resented and picked on by inmates and guards alike, they rapidly found themselves at the very bottom of the dog eat dog world of Texas penitentiaries, living a life of constant fear and taunting.

He smiled to himself as he pressed the bell at the ornate entrance to the mock Tudor house and waited.

A male voice on the intercom answered quite quickly and nervously. 'Yes? Can I help you?'

'Police,' replied Sam. 'We'd like a word with Mr York Kendrick if we may.'

The hallway light came on and he imagined Kendrick coming down the stairs, hastily wrapping a dressing gown around himself. The door opened on its chain to about six inches.

'Can I see some ID?'

Sam and Detective Johnston both showed their badges.

'What's this about?' York asked, still from around the door's security chain.

‘We’d like to talk to you about Eagle United Energy’s recent activities in London. I thought your home would be more preferable to calling on you at your office or bringing you down the station. No point running Mr Kendrick, we’ve got the house covered.’ Sam added the last bit for good measure, just to heighten the guy’s tension.

The door closed and they heard the chain sliding off before it opened fully and Sam looked up at the tall and muscularly slim African American. He was surprisingly pale looking for a coloured guy Sam noted.

‘Mind if we come in?’ It was more an instruction than a question and one that they didn’t wait for an answer to as the two detectives pushed past York.

‘Yes. Uhm. Perhaps we could talk in the kitchen. It’s this way. What’s this all about?’

York could guess from the mention of Eagle and London, but he had enough of his wits about him not to up and confess straight away.

‘You got a TV in your kitchen?’ Sam asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Then put it on. Any news channel will do.’

York did as asked and was surprised to see that the news was nothing but confused reporting on what appeared to be a major conflict that had erupted in South East Asia. The Burmese army had crossed Thailand’s borders along a narrow strip of land in the south. But it appeared that not only Thailand, but also Malaysia and Singapore were actively resisting the invasion, assisted by US Navy aircraft from a nearby carrier.

‘The situation is still very unsure,’ the anchorman was saying. ‘But it looks like the better part of the invading Burmese army has already been destroyed.’

The anchorman held his ear for a second.

‘Yes, I believe we can now go over to the USS *Daniel J Boone*, on station in the Indian Ocean.’

The screen switched to an American aircraft carrier, F-18 Hornet fighter-bombers being launched from its deck. It was the classic shot of a war correspondent ducking against the jet wash and wind and holding his big ear defenders in place as he spoke into a hand held microphone. Sam noted the microphone carried a different station logo to the one the TV was tuned into.

‘These Hornets from the USS *Daniel J Boone* are taking off again to strike at Burmese ground targets. Admiral Miller, commander of the US Seventh battle group, which is currently on station in the Indian Ocean, has told us that the Burmese air force no longer exists in any credible form. It was completely destroyed by these aircraft within thirty minutes of Myanmar launching its offensive against Thailand. And now, without any air support the troops and armoured columns are being annihilated on the ground.’

The scene switched back to the anchorman, who looked somewhat startled to have a camera on him again, before changing again, this time to an airport somewhere. Another correspondent was in front of the camera, this one with a CNN logoed microphone waiting, finger on earpiece, until he got the go ahead.

‘Yes, Michael. As you can see here at Singapore’s Changi international airport all commercial flights have been suspended whilst Singapore Air Force F-16s and a squadron of British Royal Air Force Tornados carry out precision attacks on the Burmese ground forces. The round trip time from here is less than two hours, so these planes are laying ton after ton of ordnance onto the invading army. In the background you can see Hercules transports of the Singapore Air Force loading with troops and tanks. Singapore and Malaysia are already mobilising ground forces and we understand other nations are preparing to send forces and equipment here and to other airports in South East Asia. Following the hasty UN denouncement of the invasion less than an hour ago it appears that the whole region is already in full mobilisation for a massive counter attack.’

The anchorman appeared again on the screen, this time ready for it.

‘It is still unclear as to why Myanmar’s army has invaded Southern Thailand. What is clear though, is that a wide range of forces, including those of the seventh carrier battle group were ready and waiting for the invasion and are now strongly resisting it.’

He held his ear again, indicating another announcement was imminent.

‘Just a moment, we are going back to the *Daniel J Boone* for another development.’

The screen again switched to the flight deck of the aircraft carrier, the correspondent listening for the cue to speak from his own network.

‘...thank you Tom. We now can confirm that US marines have assaulted and captured several offshore gas rigs in Burmese territorial waters. This follows an incident yesterday when two Navy Hornets attacked a Burmese gunboat that was itself firing on a speedboat running at high speed from one of the gas rigs. Two men on the speedboat were picked up by a US navy corvette, flown to this carrier then very quickly onflown to an unknown destination. As yet we don’t know what they were doing and we had been observing a strict reporting silence on the incident until now, but it sounds like this was the trigger for Myanmar’s invasion as shortly before the two men arrived on board the whole battle group turned toward the Myanmar mainland and went to battle stations.’

‘Thank you, Paul.’ The anchorman turned away from the screen and back to the camera.

‘Myanmar, or Burma as it is still often called, has long been a pariah state in the world. The military seized power in a coup twenty years ago and has been condemned time and again by the United Nations and the free world for the brutal control and suppression of its population. Leading Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi has been under house arrest since she won a landslide victory in the 1990 elections.’

A map of Burma and Thailand came up on the screen, showing the thin Isthmus of Kra.

‘The invasion appears to have been—’

Sam turned the set off and looked at York.

‘I know what those two guys were doing,’ he said. ‘They were on one of your gas rigs downloading a whole heap of sensitive information detailing exactly what Eagle United and the Burmese military are up to.’

York looked aghast. His whole world was crumbling from second to second in front of his eyes. Finlay Nichols had escaped the trap and alerted the whole world to what Eagle United had been planning. All York could think of was that he would go to jail. He would lose the house, the kids would no longer go to their private school. Marjory would probably leave him. It was all over.

‘This wasn’t due to happen like this,’ he said, ‘and not for another twelve hours. It’s all happening too fast and wrong.’

Sam looked directly at him, moving in close to ensure he was the centre of York’s attention.

‘You want to cut a deal? Save your scrawny neck in return for Eagle United’s?’

York sat down.

‘This was supposed to be a very simple operation. Only very minimal loss of life. The Burmese were going to take control of the Isthmus in a quick and decisive operation and Eagle United would end up operating all the offshore platforms in Burma and Thailand.’

He looked up at the detective.

‘I didn’t want to be part of it. But you can’t say no to Eagle United, not when you know too much. Yes. I’ll do a deal, but you’ve got to guarantee I won’t go to jail.’

Gulf of Thailand

The mission to take the over Luann Alpha, that had been so successfully accomplished by Lt Johno and his men, had become an unmitigated disaster.

The five commandos that had stayed on the platform were missing presumed dead, as were twenty-three of the Thai crew, including Boko and his control room men. Finn didn't know how many of the Thai Special Forces were dead, and he really didn't care. He'd told the captain of the Thai Navy destroyer that had picked them up exactly what he thought of him and the rest of the Thai military, for once losing his control and firing off his anger at point blank range down into the face of the much smaller man. He'd then turned and walked out, not listening to the reply, and sat on the back deck of the destroyer waiting for nothing in particular.

He was lost. He felt a deep disappointment that the commandos and Thais he'd known so briefly were dead. He wondered if he should have done something different.

Although sitting quietly, Finn could still feel his heart racing. A bumblebee of energy somewhere between his stomach and chest was trying to escape. He had to do something, anything to make it go away, but what? He was lost, out of touch, everything was gone, there was nothing to do and nothing he could do. He couldn't even ring Liz as his Iridium phone was wrecked from the salt water of the sea.

What was that feeling in him? Was it guilt? Yes, Finn admitted to himself, it was guilt he felt running through him. Guilt, remorse and sadness. Three feelings he had never really experienced and had no idea how to cope with. All he could do was put his head in his hands and cry.

Steve eventually came out onto the back deck of the destroyer. 'Hey there, how you doing?'

‘Honestly?’ said Finn, rubbing his eyes before looking up.

There was something in the tone of the reply that didn’t sound right to Steve. He sat down beside Finn, serious all of a sudden. Despite his own tiredness and elation at still being alive, he was concerned about his new-found friend.

‘Yeah. Go on, tell me.’

‘Well,’ said Finn, ‘I should never of done any of this. It’s not me you know. I’m not James Bond. I am Finlay Nichols; an engineer, a married man with two young children. I have a wife and two children who need me to come home. No restrictions, no doubts. They need to know I will always be there for them. It was completely crazy and stupid of me to have come out here. All that stuff in Burma. And then to have come back to Thailand and done the whole thing again. It was stupid, Steve, plain stupid.’

‘It wasn’t stupid’, Steve said. ‘We’ve practically saved a whole country.’

‘Have we?’ replied Finn. ‘There’s no gas going to Thailand. Boko said Burma had already shut down export so I expect the Burmese are probably already over the borders. I don’t think we’ve accomplished anything other than to start a war. And we could have, no, statistically speaking, should have been killed in the process. How do you think that would leave me?’

‘Dead?’ Steve tried to lighten the tone.

‘Yes dead, but far worse than that; a dead breadwinner suddenly removed from the scene. My wife and children by no fault of their own would be changed from a happy family to a life of regret and wondering what if. What if daddy hadn’t been so silly, what if daddy hadn’t been such a gung ho asshole?’

‘To be honest. It was, to quote Liz, a completely stupid and selfish thing to have done. And also to quote her, completely typical of that pig-headed husband of hers.’

Steve was taken aback.

‘Finn, we haven’t started a war. That was going to happen anyway. What we’ve done is give the good guys enough time to get

their act together and oppose this invasion. The loss of life will be far lower than it would otherwise have been and the final result will probably be different. We've saved the pipeline that you said would take years to replace, and if it hadn't been for the Thai Special Forces we would have achieved everything we set out to do. Quit saying you shouldn't have done any of it, and quit all this self-pity crap. It doesn't suit you. You're just tired and knackered.'

He put his arm around his new friend's shoulder and tried to console him. 'We did this together. You know, as a team. I've never really worked with anyone I felt I could trust before. My boss, Reynolds, always said I'm not a team player. His favourite phrase to me is "there's no I in team".'

Finn looked up again, his mood having suddenly lightened as he saw the opportunity for a joke. 'Yeah? Well what does he know. Try spelling it in Norwegian.'

Steve laughed at that, making Finn smile at his own joke. He would definitely have to remember that one to tell Reynolds next time he saw him.

The sound of an approaching helicopter made them both look up. They watched as the snow Lynx appeared out of the bright sunlit sky and settled onto the rear helideck deck of the Thai Navy destroyer.

Finn and Steve were the only passengers that climbed on-board before it lifted and departed.

Back on the *Devonshire*, sometime around three in the afternoon, Finn ate in the officer's mess and then asked for a cabin in which to sleep. There would be time to discuss and pull apart the mistakes he'd made later. Right now he was too fatigued to do anything but blank out the experiences of the day. He lay on the bunk and focussed his mind on Liz and the family. It would be good to go home.

Houston, Texas

Ten a.m. on a surprisingly chilly Monday morning.

York had spilled the beans all right, giving Sam a complete overview of the operation and the names and roles of everyone who was involved. But York had been smart, not saying anything of substance until he had called his lawyer over to make sure the deal was official and legally signed. This meant that Sam in turn had to call in his captain and the department lawyer. The whole deal arrangement and eventual detailed debrief had taken the best part of the night to accomplish.

York would walk away free of charge, but in return he had supplied the information that would ensure every one of the Eagle United employees that knew about or helped with the Abzu project were put away. It was in his own best interest to do this, York knew, because anyone left might come after him when they discovered he hadn't been charged.

York's wife had watched nervously as she made endless cups of coffee and listened to the drama and extent of Eagle United's illegal activities unfold in front of her. York had a speakerphone in his kitchen, so they had called Tog Ferguson in London. The phone bill for the three hours Tog had questioned and listened to York's answers must have been a heck of a lot Sam thought. But then it was nothing compared to the value of the clemency York had been offered.

Now a judge had issued a search warrant for Eagle United Energy's downtown office and Sam and half a dozen other detectives were on their way to execute it.

Vauxhall, London

Tog was once again eating his dinner at the MI6 canteen. He hadn't been back to his rather smart and spacious, and surprisingly modern for such an old duffer like him, Chelsea flat all weekend. Instead he'd lived in the office and used the canteen, showers and laundry to ensure he was fed and kept clean.

Steve's description of the ninth American, the one he had quite literally thrown off the Thai platform, matched that for Virgil Thomason. Tog had thought that with the lead hit man now dead it would be much more difficult, if not impossible, to put names to the two hit men. But DCI Reynolds had proved him wrong. Virgil's frequent use of his credit card had let him down again. A simple check on the hotels in London had shown that Virgil had stayed at the Heathrow Marriott and paid not only his own bill, but also those for two Russians, Michael Barashnikof and Gregory Slavich. Their images, automatically filmed at Heathrow when they arrived, matched the two corpses and the names, pictures and fingerprints checked out with the US Passport department as two Russians who had emigrated to the states in the last few years.

It amused Tog that the occupations of the two men were listed as plumber and electrician. If they'd stuck to those occupations they probably would have made a lot more money, and certainly have lived longer.

It was a pity that the Luann Alpha platform had been destroyed. A great pity he thought considering it was entirely due to a miscommunication between London and Bangkok. But that was life; you win some and you lose some. At least the Burmese gas platforms were secured. And the way that the invasion was being repulsed gave major hope that a significant portion of the Burmese military strength would be annihilated.

That would result in some interesting diplomatic discussions between Thailand and Burma, he thought. The former would be

desperate for gas and the latter equally as desperate for hard currency. Tog wondered if Thailand might not stop at the border, but actually take the Burmese side of the Isthmus of Kra in an attempt to wrestle control of the Andaman gas fields away from the Burmese.

Military intelligence and the politicians would deal with that possibility and any other ramifications from now on. Tog knew he would see his involvement rapidly wind down. In fact, other than writing up a detailed report, all that now remained was for him to ensure that Finlay Nichols was removed from the wanted list and the file MI6 now had on him adjusted to truly reflect the service he had provided to Her Majesty's government.

He would debrief the engineer when he returned to London, maybe even take him out for some tapas at the restaurant over the river in Pimlico. Tog thought he could justify the cost on his expenses and he would enjoy a social chat with the resourceful young man.

On the subject of resourceful young men, Tog had already set the wheels in motion to bring Detective Inspector Stephen Sharpe into the MI6 fold. Steve would make an excellent recruit, coming as he did from a background in the serious crime squad. He had shown himself quite capable of taking the lead and doing whatever was necessary to get the job done.

Tog liked agents that could work outside the envelope and had a healthy disregard for authority. Strict rule followers were the type that under different circumstances could quite willingly become the instruments of genocide.

Overall Tog was very pleased with the way things had turned out.

Financial district, London

MI6 wasn't the only building where the lights had been burning through the weekend. Two miles down the Thames and on the other side of the great river were the head offices of Wade. The men and woman on the tenth floor were anything but pleased.

'Gillian, have you completed the financial estimate yet?' David Martin asked.

'No, I haven't. I've got a preliminary estimate based on standard rates, but Eagle United still haven't come back with anything on the re-build cost of Luann Alpha or the numbers and nationalities of the casualties, let alone the cause. All they're saying at the moment is that it appears to be a complete loss of the asset due to an explosion. Unfortunately the control room personnel they need to debrief to establish what was going on appear to be among the casualties. They're very busy, David, as you could well expect.'

'Yes I know,' David replied. 'What about Finlay Nichols? Has anyone been able to get hold of him? I want him out in Thailand as soon as possible to ascertain the extent of damage and to get the gas flowing again.'

Gillian breathed an exhausted sigh before replying. She secretly fancied the pants off the rough-around-the-edges Finn, even going so far as to flash her suspenders and cleavage at him when it wouldn't be too obvious. She reckoned he knew, judging by his little jokes and the way he would deliberately embarrass her; and if that wife of his hadn't accompanied him to Thailand a few weeks ago then Gillian would have gone along to act as an 'in country' assistant. She'd even had her bikini line and legs waxed in preparation.

'No, he's not answering any of his phones, not even that satellite mobile he billed us on expenses. All his office will say is that he is currently unavailable and they don't know where he is or

when he will be back. I'm afraid at the moment he's simply disappeared.'

David was very worried. Although Wade had spent the last week placing most of the outstanding Thai gas network insurance with the syndicates in Lloyds, he knew for a certainty that those syndicates would now call foul play. It was simply unheard of to accept a long-term risk and then be expected to pay out on it mere days later. They would suspect something was up and this entire mess would most likely end up in the courts. Even if the judge came down on Wade's side, it would be impossible to keep the fact that they had held on to far too much risk out of greed from the newspapers. Wade would face a severe loss of confidence. And that was the best they could expect.

The only good news was that Professor Watkins at the Institute of Materials Testing had reported no sour gas contamination of the gaskets Finlay Nichols had brought back from Thailand, so they couldn't be accused of fraudulently selling-on the policies.

Hans Dietrickt was getting in the way again, standing almost in front of David.

'What do you want, Hans?' he snapped at the young German.

'*Force majeure*, sir.'

'What?'

'We can invoke *force majeure* on the insurance. It was an act of war.'

'How do you figure that one out, Hans?' If the destruction of Luann Alpha had been an act of war then Wade would be saved. But despite the unusual coincidence of Burma invading Southern Thailand at almost the same time, David didn't believe for a minute that the Burmese had been able to blow up a gas platform deep inside Thai waters. The old jets of the Burmese Air Force were nothing compared to the modern American fighters the Thais used. And anyway the news had reported some American admiral saying he had destroyed the whole Burmese Air Force within half an hour of the conflict starting.

Hans was smiling, which David found very irritating.

‘Well, Hans, how do you figure an act of war?’

‘Reuters have just reported that several Royal Marine Commandos as well an unknown number of Thai Special Forces soldiers were killed when the platform was destroyed. Whatever it was that caused the destruction of Luann Alpha it certainly wasn’t sour gas embrittlement. Marines and Thai soldiers being on the platform is a sure sign that there was some kind of fighting. An act of war: *force majeure*.’

Maybe the boy had something. An act of war would be excellent news. It meant Wade could simply null the insurance without an investigation, the classic *force majeure* clause that all insurance policies carried in the small print. The Thai, Burmese or maybe even British government would have to foot the bill. All Wade would have to do was coordinate the expenditures and the rebuild, something that was written into the insurance at cost plus five per cent. It would make them a tidy profit.

‘Hans. You’re a bloody genius!’ David grabbed the boy by both shoulders and almost kissed him.

Houston, Texas

At the same time that Wade were beginning to think they might actually get away with it, over in Houston the world of Eagle United Energy was descending into utter chaos.

The operations division was trying to work out what had happened to Luann Alpha. They knew, of course, that it no longer existed as news coverage on Sunday had shown the decimated wreckage that was all that now remained. Operations wanted to know how it had happened. Human Resources were flapping around trying, without any success, to establish exactly who had survived and who was dead. Finance was beginning an initial evaluation of the costs involved in the platform destruction, to be padded out as much as possible later on before submitting a final claim to the insurers.

Mac, the CEO, was concerned over the unexplained absence of his deputy and the reason why the platform and pipeline had been destroyed a full twelve hours before he was due to give the final go ahead.

‘Katie, have you been able to get hold of York yet?’

‘No, Sir. He’s still not answering his home or cell numbers. Jim should be there soon to check if everything is OK.’

It wasn’t like York to just disappear, or even to be late, Mac thought. Especially today of all days. Project Abzu was at its zenith. Luann Alpha had been destroyed almost according to plan and the whole of Thailand was without electrical power. But something was definitely going wrong with the Burmese army operation. According to CNN the Burmese army was now in a full scale rout from the Isthmus of Kra. If the army didn’t capture the seafront onto the Gulf of Thailand then Eagle United would be forced to scale back its ambitions to run the Thai as well as Burmese gas gathering systems. It would be a bitter blow to Mac’s ambitions.

And on top of it all, US Marines had occupied all Eagle United's platforms in the Andaman Sea. What was the US playing at? They couldn't just go and invade his platforms. That was undemocratic.

It was only a matter of time, Mac thought, before the feds or the CIA came to the office. It could all still go wrong. Where the hell was York when he needed him most?

His desk phone rang.

Joe Rickman, the IT boy suddenly made good was on the other end of the phone.

'Mac, all the servers have been deleted. There's nothing left on any of them. Not here and not on any of our Burmese platforms. I checked the history records before deleting the servers and no one has downloaded anything since before the marines occupied them.'

'Good lad. What cover story have you got?'

'None needed boss. I introduced a virus into our network that has done the job for us. It looks like some snot-nosed hacker has destroyed our network. We should use the virus problem as the reason we stopped gas export at the weekend. And I think the board should seriously considering firing the current head of IT for allowing such a lapse in security.'

Mac smiled, the lad was certainly ambitious. With the servers deleted he now had no need to worry about the marines being on the platforms. He might even be able to charge the US government for loss of revenue, claiming they were hindering the re-start of production. Young Joe had definitely been a good choice to bring into the inner circle of conspirators.

'And I suppose you have a good recommendation for a new vice president for information systems?'

'Certainly do, sir.'

Mac put the phone down and relaxed a little. With all computer data erased Eagle United Energy was now clean of any involvement in the Burmese invasion.

The only problem he now faced was where Finlay Nichols was and what he was up to. Nichols now possessed the only copy of the data from the Sittwe and Luann Alpha servers, so it had become even more imperative that he be located and silenced.

Burma was in complete lock-down, so there was no way the Limey could escape. And the last report from Virgil Thomason, a few hours before the platform was destroyed, had reported everything was OK on Luann Alpha and almost ready to go. That Virgil had certainly redeemed himself by doing an excellent, if somewhat premature, job on the platform. The CNN footage of the remains of Luann Alpha showed a Thai Navy Destroyer moored by the stubs of the legs. The rear deck of the destroyer had rows of covered bodies, presumably platform crew that Virgil had not bothered alerting.

Once the area settled down, and after a suitable time to mourn the loss of their men, Mac would place a call to the insurance broker, Wade, and set about claiming the money back to rebuild it and the pipeline as slowly as possible.

His intercom buzzed.

‘Mr MacAlister, front desk says there are about a dozen policemen with a search warrant asking to come in.’

‘OK, Katie. Let them in and ask whoever is in charge to come up to see me. Oh, and Katie, better ask Maintenance to have the flags outside put to half-mast. Looks like we’ve lost quite a few people on Luann Alpha.’

Sam Burton was impressed at the size of the Eagle United CEO’s office. The man himself, however, was altogether less impressive. A typical Texan, he was short, fat and manicured to the nines. He shook the CEO’s podgy hand as he introduced himself.

‘Robert MacAlister, but please call me Mac. How can I help you gentlemen? I guess this is to do with the loss of our platform in Thailand. We’re all very upset that so many of our crew appear to have died.’

Oh, this was going to be good, Sam thought.

‘Mr MacAlister, Detective Burton of the Houston Police Department. Are you aware of the latest developments in the Gulf of Thailand?’

‘Beyond the unfortunate loss of our platform and the fact there appears to be some sort of war? Beyond that, no. But please, if you know some more then enlighten me.’

Mac was a little concerned that the detective wasn’t acting the way he should. What did he know that Mac didn’t?

‘The platform was destroyed by Thai Special Forces who were trying to prevent your men from destroying it and the pipeline. The platform is obviously destroyed. The pipeline, however, isn’t, which I understand from our English colleagues was your prime objective. I am placing you under arrest, Mr MacAlister, for conspiracy in the attempted murder of a Mr Finlay Nichols, a British subject. Other charges are being compiled in connection with Eagle United Energy’s deliberate sabotage of the Luann platform and pipeline, as well as your involvement in assisting a foreign government to invade a sovereign state. Under Article Three, Section Fifteen of the Constitution, I am informing you that these investigations may result in a charge against you of treason against the United States. I suggest that as soon as I have read you your rights you might like to call your lawyer to meet you down at the station.’

As Sam read him his rights, he turned the CEO around and handcuffed him behind his back. The CEO was deathly silent. Did treason mean the death penalty? Would he face the electric chair?

The two uniformed policemen that had accompanied Sam into the office led him out, one holding each elbow. Sam wanted maximum visibility of this arrest amongst the staff of Eagle United Energy. It would help loosen tongues.

Gulf of Thailand

Finn woke after a good eight hours' sleep. The sleep had done him good. His mind felt clearer and the earlier melancholy was all but gone. Johnno, Boko and the rest of them were still dead, that he knew, but he also knew it wasn't his fault. The platform had been successfully occupied with no injuries and absolutely no loss of life or facility damage. The fault lay with the Thai Special Forces and that jumped-up little destroyer captain that had sent them on their way. He and not Finn would have to answer for the loss of the platform.

He put on the now dry combat fatigues and green tee shirt the marines had given him the day before. The Browning, in its holstered belt, was on the small bedside table. He looked at it and decided it was too heavy to carry around. Yesterday it had felt like a lump of steel bouncing on his hip. He hadn't fired it and certainly wouldn't need it anymore. It stayed on the bedside table.

Finn sat on the edge of the bunk and pulled yesterday's socks back on. At least they had dried fully, if somewhat crisply. He picked his boots up off the floor and pulled them on, the leather still damp. He thought about cleaning his teeth, but didn't bother as he didn't have a toothbrush and went to find the situation room and some coffee.

Steve was still in the situation room, sitting in the same position and wearing the same clothes as when Finn had gone to bed. The frigate's captain, whose name Finn had forgotten, was also there.

'Ah, Mr Nichols,' the captain said as soon as Finn showed his face. 'Would you like to know what's going on?'

'Not really,' replied Finn. 'I'd prefer to know where the fresh coffee is.'

The captain motioned to one of the sailors to fetch coffee before carrying on regardless. 'Well it would appear we have quite a sizable regional conflict on our hands.'

Finn looked up, concerned.

'I thought that would get your attention. Shortly before Luann Alpha went up in flames the Burmese shut their gas pipeline, stopping all natural gas flow into Thailand. They claimed technical difficulties. They then launched three all out assaults at the top, middle and bottom of the Isthmus of Kra.'

Finn was stunned. So Eagle United had been in cahoots with the Burmese army after all. Well he hoped they got what they deserved. He hoped the whole management team would end up in some horrible Texas chain gang.

'Unfortunately for the Burmese, there was absolutely none of the confusion within Thailand they had hoped for. The Thai forces were certainly not ready, but they also were not caught with their pants down. And thanks to your timely warning, there are several days of natural gas in onshore storage tanks.'

The captain handed Finn the coffee the sailor had brought. 'Thai, Malay and Singaporean air forces have complete air superiority and have cut the Burmese troops down in their tracks, ably assisted I might add by a squadron of our own RAF Tornados. American fighters from the *Daniel J Boone* are also providing some assistance.

'So I think it will be all over soon, with the Burmese army retreating with a bloody nose. Steve here has been on the phone non stop with Mr Ferguson and the American admiral in charge of the *Daniel Boone* and its fleet.'

Finn looked across at Steve. His eyes were ringed with the now all too familiar fatigue.

'Good sleep?' Steve asked.

'Yes. I needed to rest. You might want to think about doing the same. You look beat.'

‘Well, soon enough. Things are beginning to wind down a bit now. The American’s have landed marines on all six gas platforms in the Andaman Sea. I told them to use your method of coming in slow and low and then telling the crews at the last minute that they should not resist. It appears to have been completely successful.’

‘Yes,’ continued the captain. ‘It would appear you are owed a great deal of thanks from all parties concerned in this melee. Your timely early warning seems to have done the trick.’

The captain had judged the situation accurately. By later that day it was apparent that the Burmese were in a completely uncoordinated retreat. Far from gaining control of the Thai side of the Isthmus of Kra it now looked as if they would lose their side to the Thais, Malays and Singaporeans as spoils of war. Ownership of that narrow stretch of land that separated the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea would put the majority of the Burmese offshore gas platforms, and importantly the pipeline that crossed into Thailand within the hands of the Thais.

Finn doubted very much if they would readily relinquish control. He also doubted if Eagle United Energy would walk away with so much as a dollar in compensation.

A day later Finn got on a commercial flight heading out of Bangkok for London.

Steve was still in Thailand, relishing his role as area coordinator and already moulding it into the main British point of contact with the Thai military and the investigation into Eagle United Energy.

Finn had promised he would return within a week to start re-routing the Thai gas network to circumvent the now-useless remains of Luann Alpha. He had already called Wade, who had wanted him to start immediately.

Finn knew how to re-route the pipelines. His 1999 report had considered contingency spare requirements to account for the loss

of any individual platform and on his recent tour of the platforms and onshore base he had built up a good inventory of what was still available. Being the central hub, his old report had focussed on the equipment that would be needed to route the four incoming pipelines around Luann Alpha and tie them in to the single export line via a subsea completion. The export pipeline, although in a fragile state was suitable for service until a new one could be installed, so Finn reckoned it would only take a matter of weeks to get the gas flowing again.

Before starting though he needed to do three things.

First and most important, Finn wanted to get home and see his family. He felt very jittery after his experiences, an unexpected feeling of panic flaring up in him at the least provocation. His current all consuming desire was simply to go home, sit on the lounge sofa with Liz and allow the kids to use him as their favourite climbing frame again.

Secondly, and this he knew was his more mercenary mind at work, he had to cut a deal with Wade for his services to coordinate re-routing the pipelines to re-establish gas flow from the remaining Thai platforms. He would also ask Wade to honour the payments to the families of Boko and his dead colleagues, even if legally they didn't have to.

Had the destruction of Luann Alpha been an act of war or industrial sabotage? Finn thought both: act of war by the Burmese and industrial sabotage by Eagle United Energy. Either way he reckoned Wade could invalidate the insurance and not have to pay out a penny by way of compensation. Finn reckoned that would make David Martin a very happy person, and perhaps more importantly for Finn, someone who might be prepared to pay significantly over the odds for his services on the re-routing.

Finally, he wanted to meet Tog Ferguson and DCI Reynolds. There was the little matter of ensuring he wouldn't be prosecuted for killing the two hit men in London. Plus of course, expenses – all that money he'd spent and the damage to his car. That reminded

him. His speedboat, 'The Andaman Express', was still sitting on the deck of an American warship. He would have to ask Tog if he wouldn't mind getting it back.

Heathrow Airport, London

Victoria was waiting impatiently at Heathrow with her mummy and little brother. Yesterday when dad rang to say it was all over and he was coming home she had been ecstatic with delight.

They had quickly packed their bags at granny's house and driven back to their own home. A nice policeman was waiting there to meet them. He was a special policeman like uncle Steve, but was a lot older and called Tog. Christopher called him Twoggy and Victoria had also adopted the name when the policeman smiled at it.

Twoggy had made sure they were happy back at home and had even bought them some fresh milk and bread. Victoria didn't really know why he had to make sure they were happy. Why wouldn't they be happy back at their own home? Sleeping in the same bed as Christopher for the last few days had been really annoying as he was such a fidget bum.

They had all got up early that morning as daddy's aeroplane would land at eight o'clock so they had to be out of the house by seven if they were to meet him.

Now she was waiting for Finn to appear out of the big doors. Mummy said the plane had already landed and the first passengers were due out any moment. She strained to see as the doors opened and some more people came out.

'Daddy! Daddy! There!'

'Where? Where Daddy?' Christopher shouted, staring eagerly at the mass of people.

And then he was there, sweeping them both up in his arms, smiling and kissing her with his stubbly and sweaty face.

She squealed with delight.

'Welcome home, you,' said Liz.

'It's good to be back,' replied Finn. 'Didn't expect you to be here waiting for me.'

‘Well, we couldn’t have you arriving without a proper welcome home reception could we. And I happen to know you won’t find that wreck of a car of yours in the car park. The police have dumped it in my driveway where it’s happily leaking oil all over the gravel. You know I counted four bullet holes in it. Audi are going to charge a fortune to fix it.’

‘Once I agree my fee for re-starting the Thai gas system with Wade I won’t have to get it fixed. I’m going to buy something else instead. Something bulletproof.’

A look of concern crossed Liz’s face.

‘Oh, Finn. You’re not going back to Thailand are you? How soon?’

‘I told Steve to expect me back within a week. Sorry babe, but I’ve got to get back there quickly. The whole country, quite literally, will be waiting for me to get their gas supplies running again. Anyway, with any luck we’ll make enough money in the next couple of months to clear that mortgage of ours and to start saving again.’

‘Daddy, what did you bring back for me?’ Victoria couldn’t resist asking. She knew Finn would have something for her, he always did. There were two things you could guarantee with Finn. Firstly that he would always come home and secondly that he would bring a present if he’d been away for more than a couple of days.

‘Oh, well let me see,’ he said, crouching down and unzipping the top of his backpack. He rummaged inside and then pulled out two small parcels.

‘Yippee!!’ screamed Christopher, grabbing the one held out for him and immediately tearing at the paper.

Bangkok, Thailand

‘Remember you said why not use giant balloons to move natural gas around?’

Steve thought back for a moment.

‘Oh, right. The balloon idea that you said was impossible.’

Finn and Steve were sitting on the balcony of the hotel room in Thailand, having a drink while waiting for Gillian to change out of her bikini into something more suitable for dinner. It was the same hotel suite where Finn had stayed with his family what felt like a lifetime ago.

‘I didn’t say it was impossible, that would be a violation of Clarke’s first law. I just said, or meant if I didn’t actually say it, that it was not feasible in the time allowed.’

Steve enjoyed the few occasions he had met up with Finn since he had come back to Thailand. It was a welcome relief to have a beer and a chat with a good friend. He had to admit though to being surprised when Finn turned up after a week in London with the gorgeous and sexy Gillian in tow. But what the heck, it was just another example of Finn’s innate unpredictability. You really could never tell what he was thinking or what he would do next.

‘Who’s Clarke?’ Steve asked.

‘Arthur C Clarke, the chap who wrote *2001 a Space Odyssey*.’

‘Oh, an old author.’

‘Also the chap that invented the geosynchronous communications satellite. You know, the idea that allows the whole world to talk to each other. Writing books was just a sideline.’

‘All right then,’ Steve countered, ‘an old rocket scientist. What was this first law that says you can transport natural gas around the world in balloons?’

‘Arthur C Clarke’s first law,’ Finn said, taking a sip from his beer, and enjoying the moment, ‘states that when a distinguished but elderly scientist says something is impossible he is very probably

wrong. Nothing is really impossible, it's just that we never think deeply enough to figure out how to do it. Or that we don't have sufficiently advanced technology to make it work at the moment.'

'So you're going to build a fleet of balloons with all that money you're making from the insurance company?' Finn had let Steve know just how much he had stung Wade for to manage the re-routing of the pipelines.

'Well, you know that natural gas is transported in tankers as a liquid if there is no pipeline around. All that liquefaction and subsequent re-gasification uses up a third of the gas, which is one hell of a level of wastage. I've done some figures and reckon a fleet of supersized airships, supertankers of the sky if you like, would be very economic.'

'What about the danger? Didn't we stop using airships because they all blew up?'

'Tow them. Have the gas tanker as a dumb barge, pressurized so that it is just negatively buoyant, and then tow it from a helium airship with big engines. It would go at, say, fifty miles per hour, which is a lot faster than the fourteen knots a supertanker does.'

'You going to do it?'

'No, I'm into other things. Just wanted you to know it was a good idea and I shouldn't have pooh-poohed it at the time.'

'Cheers! I like the sound of Clark. What were his other laws?'

'I don't remember most of them. I know his third law states that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.'

Steve remembered feeling that sending an email to London from a tiny boat in the middle of nowhere had seemed almost like magic to him.

'And another law states that reading computer manuals without the relevant hardware is as frustrating as reading a sex manual without the relevant software. I think that's the sixty-ninth law.'

'I know Nichols' first law,' Steve said.

‘Yeah, what’s that?’

‘COSMIC.’

Finn laughed, it was a good law and one he’d be proud to put his name to.

He glanced up as Gillian emerged from the room, looking completely stunning in a long black slinky number and high heels.

‘Hi, gorgeous. Nice dress.’ It was a nice dress, showing off her sexy body and obviously bra-less breasts to their very best. ‘You’re looking at seductive as ever.’

Gillian smiled and put her arms around Steve before addressing Finn.

‘We haven’t seen you for ages, Finn. Glad you could join us for an evening meal. You been talking shop with my boy again?’

Gulf of Thailand

Finn was staring out at the sea from the co-pilot's seat, smiling to himself at Clarke's last law and Nichols' first law.

The co-pilot's seat had become his regular spot, with Jimmy and the JetRanger his regular ride. Both of them still in chinos and tee shirts, not bothering with immersion suits or re-breathers. Finn was at least now wearing the inflatable life vest he'd stolen from the British Navy frigate.

Today Jimmy was flying the old UH101, the Vietnam vintage Huey. The JetRanger was in for its annual overhaul and CAA inspection, so Jimmy had taken the Huey instead. In many ways Finn preferred the Huey. It was a bigger and more solid feeling helicopter and with the doors slid back there was a refreshing breeze flowing through the cabin.

A fishing junk flashed by underneath.

Another week or so, thought Finn, and the gas will be flowing again. It had all come together reasonably well. The most important items had all been sitting waiting at the former Eagle United Energy onshore logistics base. And the other bits and bobs he needed had been readily sourced from around the world and flown in courtesy of the Thai Air Force.

In an effort to make things happen as quickly as possible Finn had brought in four complete diving units. Each consisted of a diving support vessel containing a saturation chamber in which sixteen men lived and worked at the seabed pressure.

The divers had initially searched the wreckage around Luann Alpha and recovered all the bodies they could find, including that of the unfortunate Lieutenant Johno, still with a rope tied around his chest, and most of his team.

Finn had sat next to Jimmy on the day when Johno and his men, all zipped up in body bags, were flown back to shore. And once there he'd waited with the bodies, chatting about nothing in

particular to the dead men, until the RAF transport arrived and took them home.

Finn's thoughts were interrupted by Jimmy tapping one of the gauges in the cockpit. It was a small gauge toward the edge of one panel so probably wasn't that important, but the needle was definitely over in the red bit. He looked across at the pilot to see if there was any concern. The Ray-Bans were hiding Jimmy's eyes but he seemed casual enough about it. The joystick looked like it was vibrating a bit in his hands though. Was that more than normal? Finn focussed his attention on his bottom to feel for any new vibrations. Maybe there were, maybe not. It was difficult to tell in this helicopter as the whole thing was a bunch of different vibrations and noises.

So, he would keep an eye on things until the gas started flowing and he could demobilise the diving teams. Then he would go home for a week or two before coming back out to troubleshoot the system and try to de-bottleneck it a bit.

He might be able to get home for the weekend after next. That would be nice. Wimbledon Library on a Saturday morning, or perhaps they would go exploring in the park if the weather was good enough. He would have to remember to touch base with Steve and Gillian again before he went home as Liz and Victoria were keen for Steve to come over for lunch one day.

A violent jolt snapped Finn out of his daydreaming.

'Jimmy? What was—'

Jimmy was suddenly fighting the controls, the joystick shaking like crazy in his hands. 'Mayday, mayday. Beagle five seven. My position—'

Another, bigger jolt rocked them, accompanied a loud bang; a bang that ran right through the airframe and straight into Finn's innermost fear.

I'm not coming home this time.

‘—Jesus Christ!’

The Andaman Express

'Finn focussed again on the problems of the seven men sitting around the table rather than the chaos that would envelope a country of sixty million when the lights suddenly went out.'

Called in to investigate an unusual insurance claim, Finlay Nichols discovers something is seriously wrong with Thailand's offshore gas fields. Propelled into an ultimate stakes game with the Burmese military government, he realises that if he can't solve the problem and stop the coming catastrophe then the 21st century's second energy war will ignite within days.



The author

The Andaman Express chillingly highlights how close politics and the energy business can become in the modern world.

'Finn is a wonderfully flawed hero, driven as much by his own insecurities and conscience as by any sense of honour or duty. A stunning and gripping first novel.'

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