

CHAPTER ONE

Dead ahead the Manhattan skyline loomed above the docks and roadway at the edge of the Hudson, the morning spring air whipping across the deck of the ferry cold enough to keep all the passengers inside except for the colonel, the sergeant and Haines.

Haines looked at the wheelhouse above them and said, "Make our move?"

The colonel knew it was time to start, but still he hesitated. He looked from the skyscrapers in mid-town south to the flats of Soho and Tribeca where the bedrock plunged below the surface to leave glacial till too soft for tall buildings. Somewhere in that low-rise jumble was the ramshackle loft he and Tatiana struggled to pay for each month. If they pulled this off, that would change, he thought. A lot would change, and for the better.

Further south at the Battery, the city ended in another burst of imposing glass and stone, the new World Trade Center marking the spot of that wound. Beyond, the blue waters of the harbor glinted in the sunlight, the Statue of Liberty thrusting her torch into the pristine morning sky.

Peaceful and lovely and the last minute to pull back, the colonel thought. No one knew what they were about and they could still turn around, go home and live out their lives free of all the unknown going forward would bring. For a moment it seemed still possible to keep from stepping over the edge; but then he caught the sergeant looking at him quizzically, his ancestral Mongol eyes hooded, and the colonel knew that going back

was impossible, that it could never be smoothed out. The trusting sergeant would probably forgive him, but he might lose Tatiana and that was intolerable. He would rather die than attempt to survive that loss.

“Wait for our signal,” he said to Haines who flicked his cigarette into the river and slapped his hands together, always eager for action.

The colonel and the sergeant climbed the stairs to the upper deck as if just tourists interested in the view, the captain behind the glass in the wheelhouse glancing at them with little interest as they went past.

Out of sight behind the wheelhouse, they took out the ski masks and pulled them over their faces then unhooked the Uzis from beneath their coats and chambered the first round, each weapon making an ominous metallic clang. Holding the guns brought up many memories for both of them, battles they didn't care to remember but would never forget. It helped that they shared such a history and didn't have to question if they could count on one another.

“Good luck, colonel,” the sergeant said.

“Good luck to you, S,” the colonel said emphasizing the S as a reminder to the sergeant to use their code names from that point on.

He brought up his machine pistol and nodded to the sergeant who took a deep breath and let it calmly flow out then swiveled and lashed out with his foot at the wheelhouse door, the jam splintering as the door crashed open.

Inside, the startled ferry captain stumbled backwards as he spun around, his eyes going wide staring at the two hooded men aiming guns at him.

“Don’t move, stay away from that radio,” the colonel said stepping in. “Do what we tell you, no one will be hurt.”

An older man who could have used a bit more exercise to keep off the beer belly, half-a-head shorter than the colonel, the captain stared with a mixture of fear and confusion on his face, quivering as if about to bolt.

“You’re going to do what you’re told, you understand?” the colonel said. When the captain didn’t respond, the colonel put the gun close to his face and repeated, “You understand?”

The frightened man swallowed with difficulty then nodded too vigorously, the colonel thinking that they wouldn’t have much trouble from him.

“I want you to take Lady Liberty here out in the harbor right by its namesake,” he told him.

“The Statue of Liberty?”

“That’s right. Take the ship there and do what S here tells you. Clear?”

The captain nodded again but stood frozen with fear until the sergeant put his hand on the wheel. That seemed to rouse the captain who took over, saying, “Okay, all right. But you won’t get away with this. You know what we’re doing to terrorists.”

The colonel heard the bravado in his words and wondered if he’d been wrong about him, thinking that once he got over this initial shock, he might be the kind to try something.

“We’re not terrorists and don’t want to hurt anyone, so don’t be foolish,” the colonel told him. “You keep quiet, do what you’re told, no one will get hurt. On the

other hand, you try something you will die.” He pushed his machine gun barrel against the captain’s head to emphasize his point. “Believe that.”

The captain swallowed with difficulty, the colonel satisfied he was under control with the sergeant’s gun trained on him.

The colonel went back out to the top of the stairs and whistled down to Haines who looked up, smiled, and reached for the guitar case at his feet. The colonel stepped back, took the walkie-talkie from his coat pocket and pushed the chirping call button, hearing Tatiana respond, “T here, over,” her voice tense, fast and high.

“It’s going well,” he told her. “We’re in control up top and I’m heading down to help H in the cabin. Start in but wait for confirmation before coming alongside.”

“Good news, over,” she said.

He smiled at the way she kept saying ‘Over’. He crossed the deck to the rear stairs and went down to the small deck area, startled to see the guitar case floating behind the ferry, half-submerged in the water. It was a stupid mistake from Haines. Someone might have noticed it, gone out to investigate and started things before they were ready.

The colonel pulled up his ski mask and looked into the cabin through the window in the door. Middleton and the countess were sitting on the bench seats in the center talking to one another, the half-dozen other passengers scattered about the cabin. Surprisingly, no one was using their cell phone, one man typing away at a laptop computer. Haines appeared at the window of the other door and the colonel nodded slightly, Haines acknowledging and moving back out of sight to get his mask in place. The colonel pulled his mask down again to cover his face, took a breath and steadied himself, then stepped through the door into the cabin with his gun raised. Haines came in

through the other door just a second later brandishing his combat shotgun. As they'd practiced in the loft, they kept between the passengers and the doors while moving slightly to the same side to avoid a crossfire if they had to shoot.

A buzz of fear began instantly, and at that moment the door from the engine room opened and the young deckhand stepped into the cabin, freezing as he saw the guns.

"Sit down in the middle seats," the colonel told him, gesturing with the barrel as he pushed the door closed with his foot, the deckhand doing as he was told.

The colonel then moved in front of the man with the laptop and pushed the lid down and took it from him. "You can finish up later," he said, the man not looking comforted as the colonel gently laid the computer on the floor out of the way, wanting everyone to see he meant no unnecessary violence.

Some of the passengers were whimpering, others whispering to one another.

"Be quiet!" he called, satisfied as they stopped immediately. "We are seizing this ship in the name of the Chechen Freedom Front."

"You've got to be kidding," one man mumbled, a thin young executive type.

The colonel stared at him. "This is a machine pistol modified to be fully automatic. My colleague's weapon is a combat shotgun."

"Streetsweeper they call it, you can guess why," Haines said, smiling.

"There is a third man above us with another machine pistol and we are in complete control," the colonel went on. "In seconds we could cut to pieces everyone in this room and we won't hesitate to do that if necessary."

He paused to let that sink in then said, "Understand and believe this—we do not want to harm you. We are not fanatic terrorists. We are a simple people fighting for our

lives against the might of Russian tyranny. We want to hurt no one, but in our homeland innocent children, women, the old are dying every day at the hands of the criminal Russians. Our actions are to help our people, and you must help by being our hostages in this effort. We believe we can get a large ransom from doing this that will save thousands and thousands of lives in our homeland. We know how dangerous this is. But if everyone does what they're told, at the end of this day you'll go home safe and sound with a story to tell your grandchildren."

"A nice fairy tale," the executive mumbled.

"One that can come true," the colonel said. "I want you all to bunch together on the center seats."

Haines motioned with his gun to the ones on the outer seats to move into the center, the people scurrying across.

"Get closer together," the colonel told them. When they'd complied, he said, "Everyone take off your coats and throw them on the floor in front of you then empty your pockets, turn them inside out, and drop your things onto your coats."

When they'd all done that, he motioned to the two men closest to each end of the seats. "You and you, pick up all the things and put them in these bags." From his pocket he drew out a half dozen black plastic trash bags and dropped them in front of the men. "When they're full, tie the tops and throw them down through the door the deckhand came out of, then go back to your places," the men hurrying to do what he said.

When they were finished, the colonel said to the passengers, "Everyone stand up and raise your arms above your heads, all the way up."

Raggedly, they all stood with their arms raised and he went around checking to make certain there was nothing on the seats. One man, an overweight fortyish executive, fumbled at his pants a moment and the colonel stopped in front of him.

“Step forward,” he ordered, the man pretending not to know the colonel was talking to him. The colonel raised his gun and pointed it at his face and the man stumbled forward looking very frightened.

“Step out of your pants.”

The man hesitated a second before loosening his belt and letting them fall.

“I hate boxer shorts,” Haines said, the man glancing at him worriedly as if he might be shot for the offense of his underwear.

“Kick the pants away from you,” the colonel told him.

The man shrugged them off and kicked them up onto the outer bench seat. The colonel picked them up and shook them, a wallet falling out onto the floor, nothing else in them. He threw the pants back to the man and told them to put them back on, then kicked the wallet over by the engine room door, opened it and punted the wallet through, shutting the door. He turned to the passengers.

“This man did not do what he was told and he put everyone in danger. If it was a weapon he was hiding instead of his wallet, I would have executed him. We have killed many men and will not hesitate to kill any of you who threaten us. But if you sit in your seats quietly and do what you’re told, we will all get through this with no one harmed.”

Through the window he saw the powerboat approaching, Tatiana turning it onto a parallel course. He nodded at Haines then went back out onto the rear deck and called her on his walkie-talkie.

“Come alongside.”

“I’m bringing it in, over,” she responded, the boat turning in towards them. He pushed the send button again and said, “S.”

The sergeant responded and the colonel told him that T was coming up.

“I see her,” the sergeant said, the ferry’s engines slowing then going into neutral.

“Don’t use any gender words,” he reminded the sergeant. “The less information anyone has, the safer we are.”

“Yessir,” the sergeant said, falling back into their military roles the colonel noted.

The thirty-eight foot Chris-Craft maneuvered alongside, the two ships bumping lightly. Tatiana was already in her ski mask the colonel saw, no need to remind her of things. She shut down the engines and threw a rope over, the colonel tying it off on a cleat on the rear rail of the ferry.

“How is it going, what’s happening, any problems?” she asked, her voice anxious.

Even with the ski mask over her face he could see her teeth were clenched tightly, outlining the square cut of her jaw line. It was understandable. She was an organized person, an engineer by training and temperament who didn’t much like indeterminate things. She’d never been in this kind of pressure situation and he wanted to put her at ease.

“Everything is smooth, don’t worry, it’s going just as planned.”

She nodded shortly and waved him off, moving forward to throw a rope from the bow.

He went inside and through the cabin, the passengers staring nervously while Haines paced back and forth at one end keeping his gun on them, enough to put anyone

on edge he thought. Out on the front deck, he picked up the line Tatiana had thrown forward from the powerboat and tied it to a cleat then radioed the sergeant to get underway again. He hurried back through the cabin to the rear deck where Tatiana already had begun moving things onto the ferry.

“The new course with this boat tied alongside is a dead giveaway,” she said. “We’ve got to get everything transferred and set before they realize what’s going on.”

“It’s already too late for them,” the colonel said. “The ferry is under our control. With what you’ve brought, it’s impossible for them to retake it unless they’re willing to lose a lot of lives.”

She didn’t look convinced and impulsively he leaned across the rail and kissed her through the mask, saying, “Just for luck.”

She took a deep breath and straightened slightly, her shoulder muscles unclenching, her brow and jaw relaxing. She leaned over and said, “Just for lust,” kissing him hard.

And he thought again, she was why he was doing this.

CHAPTER TWO

“Lou, you’re the only jewel thief I know who works mornings,” Amos Brod said to the man across the counter from him.

Lou Holtzer smiled broadly. A thin man in his fifties, silver-haired and tanned, impeccably dressed in a conservative suit, he looked for all the world like a successful businessman though he’d never worked a legitimate day in his life.

“I invented morning jewel robberies,” he said proudly. “Nine-thirty, ten o’clock in the morning the old man’s at work, the wife out shopping, nobody expects to get ripped off. Besides, I’ve always been a morning person.”

Amos, a large and somewhat ruffled man, agile and strong despite the deceptive first impression he usually made, gave Lou his most ingratiating smile. “It’s good to see the sun come up sometimes.”

“It is. You feel like you got the drop on the world.”

As if on cue, a young woman with short straight brown hair, not tall but athletically built, came out from the back room carrying a glass of tea which she set down on the counter next to Amos, casually resting her hand on his shoulder.

“Thanks honey,” Amos said.

“I turned up the thermostat,” she said, the signal that the videotape was rolling nicely.

Lou was quiet, saying nothing about her sudden appearance, but Amos could see he was spooked.

“She’s okay Lou, my new partner, Colleen Londrigan.”

Colleen smiled her most innocent smile and put out her hand, saying sweetly, “Nice to meet you, Lou.”

Lou hesitated a moment then relaxed and shook hands with her, saying in an almost courtly way, “I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.” For a thief, he was always polite.

“Well, I’ll get back to work,” she said, glancing down at the gems on the velvet tray on the counter. “Pretty stones if they’re real.”

“Top of the line, darling,” Lou said, glancing at her breasts.

She smiled at him, patted Amos and disappeared in the back again, Lou staring after her as she left.

“Jeez, you horny old bastard, that is one good looking woman,” he said. “How’s an old fart like you rate a piece like that?”

Amos didn’t have a clue why he deserved having someone like Colleen in love with him, but that’s what she said she was. He knew he was in love with her even if he was too old for her, maybe. He was forty, she was twenty-eight, sometimes the twelve years between them seeming a lot, other times not existing at all. In either case, he knew that their relationship had gone well beyond that question and would succeed or fail on issues far more intimate to the heart.

“She’s a family friend, the daughter of an old partner of mine, the guy who taught me the business,” he told Lou.

As far as it went, the explanation was true. Colleen’s father had been Amos’ first partner, his mentor on the force, a treasured friend who Amos sincerely hoped wouldn’t be lost when he learned the identity of the man with whom his daughter had foolishly

fallen in love. She hadn't told her parents anything about them yet because she herself didn't know what was to happen. She knew what she wanted to happen, but she didn't know about Amos because he didn't know himself.

"I'm returning the favor, showing her the ropes."

"Yeah, I can imagine," Lou said with a leering laugh.

Amos laughed with him though he didn't think it was funny. He fit the loupe in his eye and bent to examine the stones.

The small jewelry shop they were in was located in the Bowery just off Canal Street, the old diamond district of New York before it moved uptown to 47th street near the elegance of Fifth Avenue, an area more suited to the retail peddling of diamonds. But in Lou's less legitimate end of the business, this more out-of-the-way establishment suited his paranoia far better.

Amos was thrilled as he looked at the stones under the magnification of the 10x loupe. They were a magnificent matched set, Lou having pried them out of their setting in a useless attempt at disguise. Amos was almost certain they came from the necklace stolen in an early morning burglary from the elderly heiress Mrs. Grayson Hemet of Chautauqua, New York. It was no wonder she'd taken the loss rather badly. One stone had to be close to five carats, four of three carats or near to it, a number of one carat stones, all round cut, fine white, grade F to E, few blemishes and only two of the smaller stones showing an inclusion, both from the rear. Top quality stuff. Lou should be a rich man, poor guy.

"Well, that's a sight," Amos said, removing the loupe from his eye. "You got any more or is this it? I may be able to give you a better price if I see everything you have."

“I’ve taken it easy this winter, that’s everything for now,” Lou said. “Maybe in another month or so. I got some places I’m lining up.”

“You sure you have nothing more you can show me?”

Lou shook his head. “That’s it, take your best shot. What can you do me for?”

Amos considered a moment, glanced up at the back wall as if he was thinking, nodded to signal Colleen then smiled at Lou and said casually, “Seven to ten.”

Lou looked puzzled then alarmed as Colleen appeared in the doorway from the back room, her badge hanging from a lanyard around her neck, her 9-millimeter Glock-15 pointed directly at Lou’s chest.

“Police! Put your hands on your head, now!” she barked.

What impressed Amos the most was that Lou took the time to scoop up a couple of the larger stones before turning and bolting for the door.

Erin jumped forward just as Amos did, the two of them colliding at the counter like some slapstick routine, Amos backing to let her through.

“Played that like real pro’s,” Erin said holstering her useless gun as she ran for the door swinging shut, Lou sprinting down the street.

“Never a dull moment,” Amos said.

CHAPTER THREE

As the colonel went into the cabin to get some men to move things, he heard the deep rumble of a blast from the shore they'd left. Haines moved over with him to look out the window back towards the ferry building up-river where a cloud of oily dark smoke rose from the unseen parking lot, the stolen van they'd come in incinerated by Tatiana's homebrewed time-bomb, typically effective the colonel thought. They'd purposefully parked the van in a deserted far corner of the large lot, and he trusted no one had been around to be hurt.

"That's a beautiful sight," Haines said. The passengers were all staring at the smoke and suddenly Haines turned to them. "We did that. Any crap from any of you and you'll burn the same way."

The colonel wouldn't have said it, but if that was Haines's way of keeping them in line, well, that was his job. He motioned to the two men who'd collected the passenger's belongings. "We need you to move items from our supply boat. Go out on the back deck and do exactly as you're told."

They moved quickly to follow his orders, nervously eager to please. He'd seen that with prisoners before. Those given some privilege do everything they can to keep from jeopardizing it, knowing that being useful to a captor gives them an edge. It actually helped, he thought, that the passengers were an above-average group. The passenger-only ferry to Manhattan across the Hudson from New Jersey was expensive and those who used it were wealthier and better educated, unlikely to risk their lives for little perceived gain.

He checked to make certain Tatiana had the two men under control, keeping them covered with her Uzi as they strained to lift a large plastic drum from the rear deck of the

powerboat to the ferry, one of two filled with diesel fuel. The ferry would be in constant movement and they didn't want to depend on a tricky refuel operation involving the authorities which would be a prime moment for some sort of surprise rescue attempt.

After they got both drums onto the rear deck, the colonel had them take each inside the cabin and then maneuver them down to the engine room which was surprisingly neat and clean though hot and noisy. When they'd managed to get both drums down the stairs and stowed away including an electric pump bought in Florida, all its identifying numbers obliterated, the colonel herded them up the stairs and back out again. Tatiana directed one man to pick up the three duffel bags, the man straining with their weight, while she had the other man get the two hardshell suitcases. The colonel escorted them to the upper deck of the ferry where he had them stack the stuff by the wheelhouse, the sergeant watching through the open door as he covered the captain.

"You have it down?" the colonel asked the sergeant who nodded.

He turned to the captain and told him, "You go down with us now."

"I can't leave the bridge, it's against regulations," the captain said.

The colonel had to smile. "We'll be doing a lot of things against regulations." He gestured with his gun. "Move."

Reluctantly, the captain let go of the wheel and stepped out, the sergeant taking over.

The colonel took the men down to the lower deck and had them cross to the powerboat where they picked up another group of bags and carried them up to the wheelhouse. Back on the powerboat for the final trip, he directed them to take the large roll of roofing tarpaper and another duffel bag, having them bring the things back inside the cabin of the ferry.

“We’re going to paper over these windows,” he told them. He directed the captain to take a roll of duck tape from the duffel bag and follow the other two as they unrolled the bolt of tarpaper across the windows, the cabin growing darker as the light was shut out. Haines moved around the cabin to keep ahead of them, making certain he menaced everyone at least once, the passengers clearly afraid of him. The colonel glanced at Middleton and the countess but purposefully paid no special attention to them.

When the captain and the two men finished, the colonel had them sit back down. Tatiana came in carrying the aluminum case holding the explosive charges and she took it down to the engine room. When she came back up, she unstrapped her Uzi and the colonel told her that she and Haines should have the passengers use the little restroom at the front of the cabin. He picked up the roll of remaining tarpaper and the duck tape and went up to the bridge.

“Everything’s quiet, not a word,” the sergeant said. He gestured with his head towards the shoreline at the emptiness of the World Trade Center site. “You’d think with that we wouldn’t be almost in the harbor with nobody paying any attention. It’s like a Sunday sail on the Dnepr.”

“Lovely river, but let’s not mention anything like that again,” the colonel said.

“Remember, we’re supposed to be Chechens.

“There’s nobody to hear us, C.”

“Not yet, but there will be.”

The sergeant smiled. “Long live Free Chechnya.”

Sergeant Boris Meqtar, a squat tartar of solid muscle, had been one of the finest soldiers the colonel ever had serve under him, no question of his courage or loyalty. Without him, the colonel never would have agreed to the operation.

“This is a nice ship,” the sergeant said, the electronic arm of the radar sweeping back and forth on the screen, the river a void between the solid green of the banks. “It’s a shame what we’re going to do to it.”

Having come from a fishing family on the Caspian, the sergeant had an appreciation for boats. The colonel didn’t feel so attached, but then he’d never been a sailor, mountain climbing his recreation.

From one of the cases, the colonel retrieved the small wide-angle lens camera on a motorized swivel base, its monitor and the two connecting cords. Using a couple of the hardshell cases for a ladder, he climbed up and attached the camera on its base to the top of the wheelhouse, double-sided tape holding it in place. He connected the cords to the base and camera then ran them down the side into the wheelhouse where he set up the monitor, inserting the cord from the camera up above. He plugged the camera and base into a multiple-plug power bar connected to the ship’s outlet and turned everything on.

A sharp color picture of the skyline of the city appeared. Using the electronic controller, he panned the camera around a full circle with the zoom control bringing the picture up close and then distant again, pleased that everything appeared to be working fine. He pointed the camera downriver for the sergeant to navigate.

“Help me put this up over the windows,” he said, picking up the tarpaper.

The sergeant took the roll and held it up while the colonel taped it, going all around the windows of the wheelhouse which grew dark as they finished.

“Complete privacy with a full clear view,” the sergeant said, pulling off the ski mask and checking the screen of the monitor.

“Anything appears, any calls on the radio, let me know immediately.”

He saluted and the colonel headed back down. In the cabin, he found everyone in their seats, the bathroom break completed.

“You want to go below and take care of that now?” he asked Tatiana who nodded then headed down to the engine room.

He got the two men who’d assisted him before and had them retrieve packets of plastic tie-wraps from the duffel bag. “Put one around the ankle of every person, not too tight but enough not to slip off either. Then put another through that and leave half of it in a loop.”

When the men had put one on each passenger, he had one sit down while the other got a light chain from the duffel. “Put it through each loop then sit down again,” he told him. The man did as he was told and the colonel then handed his gun to Haines who kept close watch while the colonel bent and secured the two ends of the chain with a padlock. He then made a quick check of each passenger’s ankle chain, finding them secure.

One more speech should hold them, he thought. He took back his gun and said, “Listen to me. My colleague in the engine room is setting up a series of explosive charges. This man watching you will have a hard-wired detonator and another will be on the bridge where we will be conducting negotiations. The authorities will be fully informed of these explosives and hopefully they won’t try any foolish rescue. As I’ve said, we are simply trying to obtain a great deal of money for you. But we are willing to give our lives for Chechnya. If you don’t feel the same, keep quiet and seated and you won’t be asked to make this sacrifice.”

Other than the throbbing of the engine, there was no noise and the colonel was satisfied they were adequately cowed. Haines nodded to him and the colonel went back out and up to the wheelhouse.

“They’re finally wondering where we are,” the sergeant said.

The radio crackled as a male voice with a nasal accent asked, “Lady Liberty, what the hell is going on. Come in Lady Liberty, over.”

The sergeant turned down the volume not to be bothered by the calls, making no move to answer.

Leaving on his ski mask as he worked, the colonel laid down his gun and from the bags took out an electric drill, lengths of telescoping aluminum tubing pre-fitted with baseplates and screws kept in place with scotch tape, black plastic sheeting and a thick roll of duck tape. Working quickly following the routine he’d practiced, he constructed what amounted to a large tent on the back of the wheelhouse, giving them more room to work while concealing them from prying eyes.

He then put an extra long and thick bit in the drill and went to the bench seats in the middle of the deck, drilling two holes completely through the seatback several feet apart, working the drill to enlarge the holes. From one of the duffel bags he got another length of chain, tie-wraps and a padlock, leaving them on the bench as he went back inside the tent.

To one side of the doorway to the wheelhouse, he drilled a wide hole down through the decking into the cabin below, feeling the drill break through so that when he pulled it out he was able to see down into the cabin. He got out a battery-powered reciprocating saw and inserted it into the pilot hole he’d made and started to cut in an angled circle with a diameter of some three feet, one meter as he thought of it. When he’d cut all the way around, he drilled a small hole in the center of the circle then screwed in an eyelet to which he attached one of the tie-wraps, making a loop of it for a handle. He tugged on it once hard and the makeshift hatch popped free, the passengers below looking up wonderingly.

“How’s the weather up there?” Haines said.

The colonel gave him a thumbs-up sign then dropped the plug back into place and stood up. It strained him to work bent over and he stretched his aching back, thinking that after today he'd never need to do manual labor again unless he chose to which he didn't think he would. For the first time in his life he'd have more than enough money to hire others to do the crap-work.

The radio made a slight noise of static and it reminded him about the stereo, going into one of the duffel bags and getting out a small portable radio. He plugged it into the power bar in the wheelhouse then set it up in a corner of the tent, tuning it to a soft-pop station, just loud enough to mask their conversation from any monitoring equipment without interfering with the conversation.

As he went into the wheelhouse again, he raised his ski mask onto his head to get some air, noting on the monitor that they were out of the mouth of the Hudson and into the harbor itself. The sergeant pointed to the large ferry moving to their left. "The Staten Island ferry outbound."

"Take a heading midway between Governor's Island and the statue and we'll stop there to get the fireworks started."

As the sergeant changed course slightly, the colonel picked up the drill, dropped his ski mask back into place and went out and down the forward stairs and into the cabin. The passengers looked glum, Haines cradling his gun as he sat in the corner of the darkened room watching over them, already looking bored.

The colonel went down into the engine room, removing his ski mask. Tatiana was at the bow end working on setting in place the final of the shape-charges that would open the entire right side of the hull below the waterline when detonated. The ship would roll on that side within minutes of setting off the charge.

Tatiana stood up and surveyed her handiwork, pleased with the way it looked. The colonel leaned close to be heard over the engine. "You're sure it's not too much?"

She shook her head and raised her thumb. She was smiling, her skin gleaming with sweat. He pulled her against him and kissed her, Tatiana responding then suddenly pulling away.

"When it's finished," she said.

He touched her lips lightly with his fingers once, and they went back to work.

While he drilled a hole through the decking approximately where Haines was sitting up above, Tatiana cut a length of wire and stripped it bare at the end. Haines poked his middle finger through the hole and wiggled it obscenely, and she whipped it lightly with the wire. He quickly pulled it out and she pushed the wire through the hole, Haines pulling it up. She taped it in place and left the free end lying on the floor.

The colonel had drilled another hole farther forward, outside the cabin, a thin beam of sunlight streaming down. Tatiana brought the spool of wire connected to the charges, stripping off the insulation on the end and pushing it through, taping it lightly in place.

She picked up her pack as they headed back up, the colonel pulling her ski mask back into place on the stairs. "Don't want them getting a look at your beautiful face."

He pulled his own down and they went up. In the cabin, while the colonel went on out to the front deck, she went to the wire sticking up next to Haines and from the pack took out a switch fitted with a locking cap, fitting it to the useless wire.

"This is set now so be very careful," she warned Haines.

“Listen up,” he called out. “Anybody tries any fucking thing and I can’t shoot you dead—which I can—I flip this switch and we all go up. I don’t give a fuck one way or the other, so be good.”

No one said anything, avoiding his gaze, and Haines grinned as he turned to her. “Guinea mafia my ass, Lennon’s center of the universe. This boy’s going to top of the world, Ma.”

She didn’t have the faintest idea was he was babbling about, but she felt the familiar disgust of looking into his flat dead eyes, like some sort of mindless fish. Nervous and twitchy, with his nails bitten to the quick, he was repulsive to her and she thought again how glad she’d feel to be gone from the likes of Arthur Haines.

Out on the front deck, she found the colonel—Vassi in her mind—already up by the wheelhouse and she stretched the wire up to him then went up and ran it beneath the tent. She taped it securely to one side of the wheelhouse door then took out the second detonator switch and carefully wired it in.

“That’s going to be live in a few minutes so leave it alone,” she said to the sergeant who frowned.

“Good thing you told me. I was going to play with it.”

“I didn’t mean that,” she said.

The sergeant let it go. “We’re all nervous.”

The colonel and she went back down to the cabin, she going below to the engine room to connect the charge to the detonator while the colonel stayed in the cabin to take care of the next item on the agenda.

He gave his gun again to Haines and then walked in front of Middleton and the grandly named Countess Ariana Oppenheimer de Renzy. From his pocket, he pulled out the bone-handled switchblade he'd had since his first mountain climbing trips in the Urals and flicked it open, the countess pressing backward into the seat.

"I'm not going to harm you, madam," the colonel said, bending down and cutting through the tie-wrap holding her to the chain, doing the same to Middleton.

"You will accompany me to the upper deck, please," he told them.

"Why are you taking us up there?" the countess asked.

"I thought you might enjoy the view." He gestured towards the door with the knife.

"Shall we?"

Middleton stood up and helped the countess get up and the colonel retrieved his gun from Haines before taking them up the rear stairs to the upper deck where he directed them to the bench seats at the rear where they couldn't see or hear anything going on in the tent or wheelhouse. He picked up the length of chain he'd left earlier and fitted it through one of the holes he'd drilled in the seat then back through the other, securing the two of them to it with the tie-wraps and padlock.

"These benches are hard," Middleton complained.

The countess looked scared. "Why have you singled us out?"

She'd find out soon enough, the colonel thought. "All in good time, madam."

He went back through the tent into the wheelhouse, glad to raise the stifling ski mask.

"Aim us at the tip of the city and hold us steady," he told the sergeant.

The sergeant swung the ship around and cut back the engine. In front of them rose the skyline of the city, magnificent even though scarred by the earlier terrorist attack. They had

questioned if that terrible event perhaps should deter them. But they had only this one opportunity in this one place. It was either seize it or see the window of opportunity slam shut on instant millions to satisfy every desire. One chance to grab the golden ring.