

The Hwanung Solution – the first three chapters

By David Middleton

Chapter 1

Crawling slowly across the debris and dust littered floor, bits of wood and metal occasionally digging painfully into hands and knees, dragging his aching, exhausted body slowly towards the glassless window with its shattered, twisted, rusty frame left him drained and panting for breath. Breathing was difficult and he desperately gulped for air. But what he inhaled burned his lungs. It was so cold. The fierce, icy air penetrated not just his physical being but cut like a knife deeply into his mind and soul. Clearly he could not last much longer. But he needed reassurance his hiding place was still secure and uncompromised, that a line of hunters was not at this very moment closing in on him. It would drain his already depleted reserves of energy to take a brief look but he felt it worthwhile.

Reaching the wall he stretched out and upwards to grab the edge of the windowsill. Bugs of various sizes and descriptions, unused to such an intrusion, scurried in all directions. Slowly he heaved himself up into a kneeling position so he could see outside. There was no military line. No police. Nobody. No animals. Nothing. The abandoned town looked soulless and decayed with its rotting buildings, decomposing advertising hoardings promoting products to a long departed community, and cracked and broken roads. Only the weeds moved in the wind. It was eerie.

The nausea wracked him and the pains in his stomach were excruciating. He heaved frequently, doubling up in pain as he did so. But there was nothing left to vomit. He shivered constantly and felt burned up from within but freezing from without. He pulled the oil stained sackcloth further round him and stared at the view before him. Despite everything, this decaying world had its own beauty. It was extraordinary. It was also unnerving.

Anadyr-1 nowadays offers nothing to anyone except its place in history but it was providing him with a temporary hideaway - or a place to die.

Before him stood the long deserted Siberian town, once the centre of a Soviet military establishment with a population at one time reaching 5,000. With the collapse of the USSR the cluster of RSD-10 pioneer nuclear missiles programmed to launch towards Alaska and onwards to strategic US targets, together with its store of warheads and support equipment, were all dismantled some decade and a half ago. Now, as he could see, Anadyr-1 is a ghost town, utterly dead, sadly derelict and almost forgotten. Immediately in front of him stood a railway trolley, as rusty as the rails it stood upon. Grey, crumbling apartment blocks, houses, supermarkets, offices, disintegrating roads and surprising amounts of slowly decaying equipment, remnants of its former importance, spread before him with distant, ice and bare rock patchwork covered hills providing a backdrop to this largely monochrome scene.

The reassurance of his solitary position was reward for the exertion made in moving, but he paid a cost for the effort and fell back to the floor panting for breath.

His first response to the accident had been to escape and find nearby cover. Now the formidable challenge was to somehow get from here to Ugolny and the one airstrip that served the area. Here, hope beyond hope, he might somehow board an aircraft bound for Alaska, or perhaps find help through one of the increasing number of tourist expeditions here to explore the Chukotka tundra, or from the traffic related to the growing minerals extraction boom.

If he had been fit and well the challenge would be mind blowingly daunting and probably unachievable. In his current state he gave himself no odds on success. He had no idea how far away the airfield was or in which direction. Yet Anadyr-1 was no place in which anyone should die.

The seeming lack of attempts to find him confirmed his growing suspicion. What had happened was not official - not a police, political or military matter. If it were surely there would have been more activity around the deserted town. Officialdom would be hunting him down. There was no sign of such activity. Maybe the crashed bus had not yet been discovered. But if it was not the police or military that had dragged him and Mabel from the hospital, who was it? Now Mabel was perhaps dead and the mystery remained as to what happened yesterday in Anadyr hospital.

For four days the two of them had endured confinement in the modern hospital, a development owing its existence to the internationally renowned ex-Governor of the town of Anadyr, Roman Abramovich, who had shaken it from its past and dragged it closer to the 21st century. This included not only modernising the hospital and other key municipal elements but enlivening the drab arctic city by painting many buildings pink, yellow and blue to create a startling contrast to the grey surrounding tundra. How ironic, he thought, Mabel was a Chelsea football club supporter. Or perhaps had been.

Their visit to this extreme Eastern prong of Siberia had been strange from the outset. Both he and Mabel, highly regarded environmental geophysicists, were called in by Imperial Mining Inc. This London based former shelf company was acquired by a group of entrepreneurial speculators who wanted a corporate platform from which to explore new gold extraction opportunities in Siberia. Their forward programme had been interrupted and potentially prejudiced by the appearance in some parts of Siberia of a series of mysterious large holes. The first was found by reindeer herders in the Yamal Peninsula, sometimes known as 'The End Of The World'. It sparked widespread speculation as to what it was and what had caused it. Interest in the hole was made keener because it appeared less than 20 miles from Russia's biggest and strategically important gas field at Bovanenkovo. Opinions varied widely as to how the holes had been created and ranged from incoming meteors to subterranean explosions.

Whilst the Yamal Peninsula was some distance from the more Eastern area of Siberia in which Imperial Mining hoped to operate, consternation grew when more holes were discovered including one in the Chukotka tundra in the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug of Russia which covers an area some five and a half times the size of England. In this vast and desolate frozen wilderness is the remarkable Kupol Gold Mine, a town in which the buildings are so interconnected nobody needs to venture outside into the deep freeze. Here live some 1200 workers who extract gold and silver. The nearest civilisation is the port town of Magadan to which it is linked by a 220 mile long ice road which exists between January and April. Otherwise the mine is connected to the outside world only by air services.

The site of the mine acquired by Imperial Mining Inc. is further East than Kupol and closer to the town of Anadyr than anywhere else. Whatever was causing these holes their sudden appearance was enough to potentially unnerve investors and Imperial Mining wanted a clear, concise and independent assessment of what was happening.

Jack Bailey and William Patterson were despatched to the cold bleakness of Siberia, travelling via Alaska and then onwards to Anadyr, a port town that can only be accessed by air or sea and the latter only in the summer before the seas freeze.

Jack Bailey came from Yorkshire. He was a dry humoured, no nonsense man who delighted in quoting sayings from “God’s own county.” Ask him how he was and the inevitable response would be, “I’m as fit as a flea on a butcher’s dog.” He was known laughingly to some of his close friends and colleagues as Mabel because he ended his answerphone message saying “... I’ll get back to you as soon as I’m able.” To his initial disquiet, a distortion of the last two words created his nickname.

William Patterson, better known as Bill, originated from Glasgow. He and Bailey had worked together for a while in the London office of an international engineering consultancy. It was whilst there he had conjured Bailey’s nickname. Jack Bailey said he would never forgive him.

The journey to the newest Siberian hole, a day’s trek north of Anadyr, was fraught with problems but there was nothing unusual about that and nothing for these seasoned travellers to become concerned about . A small scientific observation camp had been established a kilometre away from the hole which was about 16 metres wide and, as far as best evidence so far could suggest, 90 or more metres deep.

The origins of the holes had by now become the subject of wild rumours and speculation. Media attention was global. In the US it was said one hole was 70 miles deep. According to one report, a microphone had been dropped down it and the sounds it picked up were like the roar of a furnace but with human screams and howling in the background. Played on American radio it created panic. These holes, it was being said, reached to hell itself. The screams were from the lost souls of Hades! Increasing numbers of people were saying the recording proved it - until an audio expert dissected it and found it to be the re-mixed sound track from an ancient sci-fi film. A con though that was, it encouraged and stimulated media interest in the Siberian holes which were real enough. Media attention in any form was definitely unwanted attention as far as Imperial Mining was concerned.

Patterson and Bailey shared a portable hut as a home for four days while they conducted their own soundings. They also continued to monitor the worldwide scientific debate about the mysterious holes. Various theories were being promoted. Some scientists thought they were sinkholes caused by water from melting permafrost or ice creating some sort of explosion deep underground caused when ice cold water hit underground hot rocks. Extreme cold meeting extreme heat was a recipe for explosions.

Alternatively, much focus had turned to the high concentrations of methane inside the first crater, known as B1. Even whilst the two of them were on location more and more holes were being found, some 20 to 30 in total. This gave rise to the theory that the explosions were caused by the release of methane because global warming is melting the permafrost. This was being countered by yet another school of thought that attributed the holes to mounds of earth covered ice in the Arctic and subarctic known as pingos. These are plugs of ice formed near the surface over time which have a small mound or hill on top. The theory proposed that as an ice plug melts rapidly - as many have done thanks to unseasonably warm temperatures in Siberia in recent times, it causes part of the ground to collapse, forming a crater.

The geophysicists were also well aware that from Alaska to Siberia, right across the planet's frozen north, climate change was causing the permafrost to melt. It was producing an array of new problems. Buildings which had their foundations locked into the permafrost were beginning to lean and even collapse and, right across the north, trees were falling as the ground around them melted. Huge amounts of forest area were being impacted. And now more and more of the mysterious holes were appearing.

The hole they were exploring was located in an area of flat tundra. It had all the appearances of not being a natural phenomenon at all. Conspicuously, nothing similar was anywhere nearby making the hole with its symmetric dimensions and smooth sides look like a vertical, manmade tube that had somehow been drilled into the land. In the same way a volcano throws materials into the surrounding area, so a circle of black rocks up to ten feet high surrounded the hole. This helped exaggerate the strange appearance in the otherwise flat, green and grey surroundings with its occasional patches of ice. Inside, at the top of the hole, rugged, vertical scars had been cut into the otherwise smooth surface of the hole, presumably made by the materials that now surround its brim. This scarred area at the top of the hole looked just like solidified lava with the vertical cuts close to each other. Below, some 20 feet from the top, the sides of the hole were smooth, giving the appearance of a vertical steel tube. But even here, the sides were marked with a pattern of vertical lines. All the visible evidence suggested some subterranean explosion had occurred, throwing material upwards to form the hole and its rim of black rock.

On day four out on the tundra both scientists started to feel ill. It developed fast and they did a rapid retreat back to Anadyr where they reported to the local hospital. The attention they received was thorough but somehow impersonal. There was not a lot of humour in Anadyr hospital. Patterson concluded this perception was probably more to do with the language barrier than anything else. Only a handful of people spoke basic English and between the two of them they had little Russian. Initial medical tests indicated the two scientists had some sort of virus. Samples were despatched for analysis. It would take two weeks to get the results.

On day five in the hospital Bill Patterson was roused from a half sleep by raised voices echoing in corridors within the medical centre. Somehow, instinctively, he knew they related to himself and Mabel. Minutes later a group of four men, rugged, stubble faced and wearing jeans and black flying jackets with a yellow flash badge or symbol on the front, marched into the side room where the two had been kept in semi isolation. They were accompanied by two nurses and a doctor all arguing furiously and loudly with the intruders.

The leader of the group snapped orders to the other three men and to the medical staff, ignoring what Patterson took to be their protests. It was a chaotic group that had descended on them with voices raised and energetic amounts of gesticulation. Two of the men, including the leader, headed straight to Bill Patterson, the other two going to Jack Bailey where they grabbed him to shake him from his deep sleep. The action generated more protests from the medical people.

“You come with us,” the man growled at Patterson. “Now!”

Patterson and a sleepy Jack Bailey joined the chorus of protests from the medical team.

“Who are you?” Patterson asked the leader. “What authority do you have? Where are you taking us?” The questions were totally ignored. The intruders were focussed on what they wanted and nothing would stop them, not even when the two geophysicists complained they had no clothes. Amidst the unruly disorder, bedlam and general confusion, their clothes miraculously appeared and nursing staff, reluctant to be party to what was going on, were ordered into helping the two get dressed.

As soon as they were fully clothed they were taken from the hospital. Virtually carried out, two men to each of them with burly hands under their armpits lifting them off their feet, Patterson and Bailey, and an entourage of medical people still maintaining their noisy protests, were rushed along crowded corridors. Onlookers, startled by what they were seeing, were rudely swept aside. At the front door there were more protests, this time from what Patterson took to be senior hospital officials. It had absolutely no impact and they were whisked out through the front door and into a wall of freezing cold air.

A dirty green, battered, well used KAvZ bus with smoke darkened windows had been reversed up to the hospital door and they were unceremoniously bundled in and onto benches either side of the bus. Their kidnappers, which is what Patterson took them to be, sat with them, Bailey opposite Patterson and two men on each side of the geophysicists. The Yorkshireman looked extremely ill and had difficulty raising his head to try and speak to Patterson. As soon as he tried to talk his face was slapped.

“Not talk,” barked the man who had slapped him.

Mabel looked forlornly and in dismay at Patterson before his head slumped down onto his chest.

The moment the door crashed shut they were off, the engine of the old bus revving to almost valve bounce degrees, wheels spinning. Sitting secure on the bench was no easy task. The bus lurched crazily on its high speed journey and in their weakened state the two geophysicists had difficulty in remaining seated. But every time they came near to falling, burly hands pulled them back.

Bailey was in a bad condition, his head rolling around uncontrollably and his eyes now shut. Patterson was not sure if his colleague was even conscious. He too felt himself slipping from being awake and he forced himself not to drift into sleep – or worse. The bus was being driven fast. From the noise of the tyres on the icy road surface they were often sliding. Sometimes an exceptionally sideways slide was followed by a crash as the bus regained all four wheels. It was manic progress. Lurch after lurch sapped his strength. Even their guards became uneasy about the ridiculous way the bus was being driven. At one stage the leader shouted at the driver, presumably urging him to slow a little. It had no effect. A bent, flattened self-rolled cigarette hung from his lips. Patterson wondered what was in it and thought he could smell the sweet aroma of cannabis.

Through the side window he caught glimpses of the world through which this crazy journey was taking them and for a while he realised they were on the ice road taking them across the frozen sea. Even in his poor state his mind pondered the question as to how long this ice road would remain and how soon climate change would mean the roadway would be replaced by the ferry that operated during the summer months. Through the haze of semi-consciousness, Patterson fathomed there could only be one reason for them being on the ice road. They were heading for the airport at Ugolny.

The Scotsman drifted close to unconsciousness and felt as if he was in some nightmare of a fairground ride. He was snapped back into awareness when the bus not only lurched violently but was suddenly at a ridiculous angle. His side of the bus was higher than where Bailey sat. But the movement went on into what became a full roll. The crashing of metal against concrete was deafening. The engine was screaming again. The men with them were shouting. And then it went on again, a second roll, then a third and – Patterson lost count.

Flung around the bus as if they were in a washing machine, the seven men inside the body of the vehicle crashed into each other and the floor, ceiling and sides of the bus. Limbs flayed out of control and heads crashed against metal – and against other heads. Adding to the mayhem was the sound of smashing glass as the shell of the bus distorted and the windows burst. The upright pillar of the windscreen detached itself from the rest of the vehicle's body and, as the driver was thrown around in his cabin, acted like a lance when the drugged man crashed down on it. It poleaxed him and he died instantly.

At last the agonising, torturous havoc stopped and the noise subsided into a weird silence broken only by human moans and the sizzle of hot fluids hitting frozen ground. The bus was upside down and its human cargo physically shredded as if it had gone through a mincer.

He had no idea how long he was unconscious. It was probably only minutes. When awareness returned to Bill Patterson he was shocked and amazed to realise he still lived. Breathing was difficult but he soon understood why. He was being suffocated by someone lying on top of him. With an extreme effort, he extracted himself from a confusion of bodies. There was some moaning but nobody else moved. Mabel was nearby, eyes open and staring blankly upwards. Patterson was no medical expert but it took no expertise at all to see his colleague was dead or near to it, his neck broken perhaps? Certainly his head was at a strange angle to the rest of his body.

Minutes passed and still nobody stirred. Gathering as much strength as he could, Patterson made his way across the carnage to the rear door of the bus which had lost its glass and burst partly open. He was able to kick it further apart and fall out onto icy undergrowth. He immediately could see and understand that the old bus had fallen down a small ravine onto the bank of a frozen river.

Still no voices came from the bus but his worries were not for those inside it but anyone who was now heading towards them. Instinct told him this was a chance to escape. From what he had no idea but there was no doubt in his mind they had been kidnapped and were under close escort and in some danger. On their way to where, and why, were matters to be resolved later. For the time being escape and survival were the priority. And now that also meant escape for himself. There was no way he could go back into the bus and try and extract Mabel. Anyway, from what he had seen Mabel might already be dead.

Looking up at the side of the ravine down which they had plunged he saw it sloped, decreasing in depth until a few hundred metres away the roadway from which they had fallen was at the same level as the frozen river. He slipped, slid and crawled his way from the crash scene, eventually making it to the road. He had no idea which direction to go but the more distance he could put between him and the crashed bus the better.

Looking back he was surprised to realise he could not see the overturned vehicle. It was in the ravine, totally hidden from sight. That was good news. The crash might remain undetected for some time.

How far he travelled he had no idea. He stumbled along the road, falling at times and lying there until enough strength came back to him to stagger on. At times it was as if he was walking yet asleep, so near to unconsciousness was he. Close to complete exhaustion, he reached a high security fence. On the other side he could see derelict and dilapidated buildings. Unknown to him, he had stumbled upon Anadyr-1. The wire mesh was bent, buckled and broken in several places and where a large hole had developed Patterson squeezed through and stumbled his way to one of many buildings scattered around. Inside he found an oil stained sackcloth which he wrapped around himself in the hope he could gain some body heat.

Now sitting on the floor, body propped up against the wall, Patterson realised that time was not on his side. He felt seriously ill and unquestionably the crash had sapped more strength from him. It was late morning now. There was some suggestion of warmth from the sun. But night time would see the temperature plummet. He doubted he would survive until the following day. Somehow he just had to get to the airport before the day ended. If he did not, it would be the end of him.

He made an effort to get up from the floor and was kneeling when he was startled by a noise from the direction of the door to the building. He looked up and was taken astounded by what he saw. There, perhaps 50 feet away, standing staring at him, rooted to the spot in a state of sheer terror matched only by his own, was a throwback to the times of ancient man. Some five and a half feet tall, he had a dark, red and weather worn face, eyes wide and bright with fear, long, ragged, black matted hair and wore what looked like an ancient coat made from animal skins and clutched a wooden staff. Patterson was taken aback - shocked. The new arrival was obviously similarly startled by the encounter. For a moment they were frozen in mutual fear.

Patterson could see it in the other person's eyes and the wooden staff was now pointed at him in a defensive gesture. He noted its arrowhead fashioned from stone. He felt he was confronting someone from an early civilisation rather than from the remnants of a nuclear town. With the initial shock fading it slowly dawned on Patterson he was looking at not a man but a woman and maybe a young one at that. Then, as quickly as she had arrived, she turned her back on him and fled. He stared after her in total disbelief.

Chapter 2

Gene Bond had chosen this journey quite deliberately. The only other concession to make this a different day to any other was a breakfast of homemade porridge enriched with a generous helping of whisky impregnated raisins. Then, rather than sit and mope alone in his retreat cottage on his birthday, he chose to drive the 60 or so miles along the north coast of Scotland to the Kyle of Durness. In itself that was enough to take anyone's mind off niggling troubles. His cherished but now venerable Porsche Carrera 911 which he religiously kept as if to hang tenuously onto links to his increasingly distanced youth, growled as he drove it aggressively. The tachometer needle regularly nudged the red line. The back end of the car frequently slipped away as he fought moments of oversteer. He pressed it fast through the many tight, narrow and twisting bends, then felt it leap as if released into freedom when they reached the few long, traffic free stretches of straight road. It was exhilarating and uplifting for his heavy heart.

He stopped twice on the journey, both places being of very special rugged beauty. On the causeway the other side of the village of Tongue, he pulled onto the small car park and sat for a good ten minutes just staring at the vast Kyle of Tongue, full of water at this time of day. It never ceased to amaze him that as low tide arrived, millions and millions of gallons of water would empty the Kyle to leave a vast area of sand. To his left and high above the shoreline stood the small but prominent Castle Varrich, while the scene ahead was dominated by the distant high mountain ranges. Nearby, the gentle sound of water lapping on the shore line mixed with calls from fishing gulls and the always busy oystercatchers. Echoing across the immense openness, the unique sounds of a distant curlew gave a measure to how otherwise silent this massive scene was. After a short stop he drove on, wondering not for the first time why the energy of the huge movement of water in and out of the Kyle each tide wasn't captured. He had stood many a time on the causeway bridge watching the fast running water pass below. Just a couple of turbines would do the trick.

Some miles on he stopped again as he always did at this point at the top of the hill overlooking Loch Eriboll. It was a crime to do otherwise. The view to the sea loch way below him and extending out into the distance, with its salmon farm and surrounding mountains, is outstanding - extraordinary. As he stood there in the sun with a blustery wind sweeping in from the sea, anger swelled within him that she was not with him to share his day and the beauty and romance of this place. He should be holding her now, feeling her body close to his as they delighted in the vast openness of this wonderful part of the world. She would have inevitably responded to him and they would have embraced with a long, lustful kiss. It would not have surprised him if she had, there and then, alongside the main road and high above the loch below, pulled her jumper over her head to reveal her bare breasts to the world and to be exhilarated by the fresh wind on her nakedness. It was the sort of thing she did. This dramatic environment would stimulate her. Inhibition was not a characteristic of the lady he sometimes called Naughty Nagriza.

As if to demonstrate his mood and his resignation to the fact she was now dead, he kicked at the grit of the layby and slammed the door of the Porsche before angrily accelerating fast down the long and steep hill that takes the road to the water's edge. He drove at speed round the far end of the loch, tyres sounding loudly as if in rebellion to the strain he was putting them to. Then the single track road was climbing again and he floored the throttle aggressively in second gear, engine unnecessarily noisy at high revs, exhaust thundering. Fast, but without being reckless on the bending and twisting single track main road, the Porsche progressed through the rock strewn wilderness of a landscape towards Durness which he drove through without stopping and soon reached this spot he loved so much.

Though this was not his ultimate destination, he sat on the dry stone wall for more than an hour just looking at the view, hoping to see the local otters in the entwinement of seaweed lapping the shoreline. Inevitably they failed to appear. The stunning scene across the enormous expanse of the Kyle of Durness with its numerous sand banks exposed before the incoming tide covered them, with the mountains of the Western Highlands in the distance, was, to him, one of several tranquil and exceptional places he knew on the north coast of Scotland.

In his opinion, the real Scotland starts north of Inverness. From thereon everything just gets that much bigger – the mountains, the lochs, the huge sweeping valleys. The whole area has an overabundance of magnificent scenery but this corner of Scotland he rated as being as good as it gets. He savoured the quality of the air, pureness personified except for the hint of peat smoke from some distanced chimney.

With the Kyle now filled he slowly drove the short distance to the car park near the ferry. The word ferry is a generous overstatement for what in reality is an oversized, outboard engined rowing boat capable of carrying only a handful of people. Its boatman is someone to have faith in! There are only two ways to access the farthest north westerly point of the UK by land and these are not always open as the area is regularly used as a military bombing range. The least popular route is via a long and testing, unmarked trek over rough, open and often boggy moorland from Blairmore on the West coast.

The much preferred route starts with the ferry. Yet crossing to the other side of the Kyle is treacherous and renowned for its shifting sandbanks. So travellers need to have faith in the boatman. That is not easy when the man at the tiller spends the whole crossing angrily and noisily remonstrating as part of an ongoing spat he is apparently having with one of the drivers of the buses that will take his passengers on to Cape Wrath. Bond was less concerned than some who sat in the boat around him. He had encountered this before and he knew John the boatman, eccentric and outlandish though he might be, could almost do this journey blindfold, local knowledge and years of experience telling him where the sand banks lay at any time just below the surface of the choppy waters.

They reached the far side of the Kyle safely and boarded the mini-bus. Bond was prepared for what came next. He had undertaken this many times before. The road journey across the eleven or so miles to the lighthouse on the high lump of rock that juts out into the sea close to where the Atlantic meets the North Sea is as manic as the boat journey. The small bus travels quickly along narrow, severely potholed roads with frequent significant drops both sides, sometimes at the same time. Progress is not slowed by the roughness of the road. The bus seems to bounce over the uneven surface and Bond, like all his fellow passengers, hung onto his seat with grim determination and felt as if his bones were being shaken to bits.

It was a relief to reach Cape Wrath. The effort to get there is rewarded by unparalleled views to the East of the rugged North coast of Scotland with its towering stacks and high cliffs disappearing into a hazy distance. Ahead lies an expanse of sea that extends to the horizon and onwards to the Arctic Circle.

The area is dominated by the lighthouse built in 1828 by Robert Stevenson. Not for the first time Bond marvelled at the men who not only engineered the near 70 feet high structure but how they got blocks of granite to this extremely remote and difficult location. It was a wonder of the ingenuity and determination of construction engineers of that age.

Bond knew he would not be able to approach the edge of the cliffs as some visitors were now doing so they could see seals on the rocks far below. The highest cliffs in the UK presented his poor head for heights with more of a challenge than he wanted to confront. He was content to sit on the grass and take in the sheer, breathtaking, colossal scale of this natural wonder. It was awe inspiring. He took his ancient, battered, silver flask from his jacket pocket and sipped and savoured his favourite single malt, the Douglas Laing's Big Peat from the Isle of Islay, more than 200 miles south of where he now sat and north of what he thought to be one of the most romantic place names in the UK, the Sea of the Hebrides.

Of all the places on the planet, he knew this was the one where he could clear his mind. The sheer scale of the natural, gigantic environment at Cape Wrath seemed to make puny his own challenges and difficulties. It put them into perspective.

His mind strayed back for the umpteenth time to a desperate moment some eighteen months ago. No sniper however skilled can be sure absolutely everything is within his control the moment pressure is applied to the trigger. So it had been when a Tajikistan military sniper thought he had a 100% clean shot at a terrorist holding Nagriza in Tajikistan in Central Asia.

For the second time in as many years Gene Bond had become unwillingly embroiled in the world of terrorism and political intrigue. This time it was partly to do with the threat of a 21st Century water war spreading across the Ferghana Valley, fuelling tension and military movement involving Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The borders of these former states within the Soviet Union have been unstable and uncertain since the demise of the political colossus of which they were all once part.

It was more by chance and good luck for the terrorist rather than a defensive move. It was certainly bad luck for Nagriza. At the very moment the high velocity bullet left the rifle at near sonic speed, the terrorist twisted his body, bringing Nagriza from behind him to be in line with the shot. At the time nobody - the sniper, the elite squad of Tajikistan marines, those watching events unfold from London via head-set cameras worn by some of the marines, was sure if the terrorist or Nagriza had gone down in the seconds immediately after the shot. Tragically it quickly became obvious Nagriza had died in the attempt to rescue her.

Gene Bond was mortified. It compounded the frustration of being dragged into what he thought to be an unreal world, utterly alien to the one in which he normally lived. A professional environmental entrepreneur, Bond earned his living promoting the principals of sustainable development in which the values of economics, social care and environmental responsibility are treated equally. He was involved in a number of projects turning theory into practice.

The life changing moment responsible for him becoming a passionate advocate of sustainable development came when he first encountered the story of the Aral Sea in Uzbekistan. Once the world's fourth largest inland sea – the size of England – today it has been described as a “toxic sump” – a pool of residual waste, chemicals from agricultural additives, and anything else people have dumped into it. It is so reduced in size that Munak, once a thriving port employing 40,000 people in fishing and related businesses, is now separated from the polluted waters by 60 miles of sand dunes scattered with keeled over, disused, rotting fishing smacks.

Bond had been appalled when he first discovered the demise of the Aral Sea was caused when Soviet engineers diverted its filler rivers to provide irrigation for rice and cotton growing. It was, he thought, as bad an example of economic ambitions dominating without thought to environmental and social consequences. As it happened, the ill thought out actions of policy makers and engineers alike caused chaos not only to the environment and to the health and wellbeing of people living near the sea, but ironically also to the economy of the area which was devastated with the collapse of two major industries. Vast numbers of people were made jobless. Munak has subsequently fallen from prosperity to now being a near ghost town.

It was a defining moment for Bond. Already concerned by examples of manmade disasters that impacted negatively on the delicate and complex nature of the planet's environmental infrastructure, the Aral Sea story epitomised everything that was wrong.

“What on earth are we doing to our planet?” he thought when he read of what had happened. “And what on earth are we doing to ourselves?”

It had served as the trigger that saw Bond commit his life to trying to do something about what he thought to be man's rape of the planet – a road to self-destruction. He became a sustainable development warrior but interpreted through a one man consultancy that sought to stimulate projects that would put some wrongs to right.

It was an extraordinary coincidence that linked the woman he had so deeply loved with the place that had inspired his environmental passion. Nagriza, he eventually learned, was born in Munak, daughter of a fisherman made redundant by the collapse of the industry as the sea receded before him. As a teenager she became involved with a Belgian scientific group researching the Aral Sea story. They eventually offered her a job – a menial one but a chance to escape poverty. Getting the necessary permits to leave her home country was challenging. After days sleeping rough in Tashkent, the capital city, and trying desperately to obtain the paperwork she needed, she was befriended by a civil servant who took a liking to her, particularly sleeping with her. It transpired he worked for the SNB – the Uzbekistan National Secret Service and he eventually secured a secretarial job for her there.

“Once in,” she later told Bond, “I worked hard, I learn quickly and I find out a lot. I find things out about some of my superiors and I get a better job. Then I start working on projects for them and that took me to meeting Georgi.”

Far out at sea Bond could see a large tanker beating its way West through a heavy swell. It reminded him of the first time he had seen whales. He had been sitting on more or less the same patch of grass some years ago, just staring out to sea as he now was or marvelling at the flying skills of the sea birds as they use the upward thermals from the huge cliffs to soar effortlessly across the wide open space of the Cape. His mind was brought back from wherever it had wandered by a shout from another visitor to the headland.

“Whale!” The cry had alerted everyone and sure enough in the dim distance a pod of whales could be seen at about the same distance from land as the tanker now was. They too were heading West, majestically powering their way through a sea of massive waves. Bond had stood to get a better view and found himself sharing the moment with a total stranger, an elderly man. Irrationally, he thought afterwards, together they had shed a tear. Why, he had no idea. Perhaps for some primeval reason it was a very emotional moment – a rare connect between one species and another and a feeling of affinity. Yet again it caused Bond to reflect on the wonders of the world in which he lived.

Georgi Patarava, to whom Nagriza had eventually gone to work for in London, had much to answer for, Bond pondered. A longstanding friend and a special drinking partner, they initially met when Georgi was a First Secretary at the Soviet Embassy in London. Through quite regular business meetings they had got to know each other well, enjoying each other's company and consuming large quantities of brandy from Georgi's home country, Georgia. As the friendship grew, so Georgi more frequently made cynical comments about Gene Bond's name.

"007 with a girlie name," he would say, winding Bond up which on this subject was not difficult.

"Piss off, Georgi," Bond would reply. It was a matter of some sensitivity to him. "There can hardly be anyone less Bond-like on the planet than me."

These were to prove to be ironic words.

And as for his Christian name, as Bond told Georgi until he was tired of doing so, he had no involvement or responsibility for his father being a Johnny Cash fan and taking some sort of weird satisfaction in emulating what Cash did in the song 'A Boy Named Sue' and giving his son the feminine sounding name of Gene.

With the ending of the Soviet Union and the Embassy closing in London, contact between the two of them was lost until a few years ago when fate brought Georgi and he back together again. A shooting on the north coast of Scotland in a pub Bond knew well led him to help Georgi confront a plot to encourage California to leave the United States of America. It transpired that Georgi now headed up the communications division of something that officially does not exist, the European Secret Service. Though based in Paris, its communications centre is in London. Georgi headed a sizeable team there including Nagriza. It did not take long before Bond had become utterly infatuated with her.

The California plot was devised by a South Korean, Sum Taeyoung, who called himself a chaos entrepreneur. This encounter with Taeyoung ended with what became known as the 'Battle on Lake Geneva' with Bond saving the life of the Governor of California and many others by throwing a bomb off a lake ferry just before it exploded. When the media realised Bond's name they had a field day, much to Gene Bond's embarrassment and consternation.

As if to compound the difficulties of becoming involved in Georgi's work, the reluctant hero became entrapped in a second battle with Taeyoung, all to do with water. Bond and Nagriza ended up in Central Asia where Bond met her family in Munak before she went on to Tajikistan and her ultimate death whilst he took the opportunity for the first time to see for himself what had caused the Aral Sea disaster.

Now, sitting on the grass of Cape Wrath, she came into sharp focus back to his mind. He recalled when he first saw her in Georgi's London apartment. She took his breath away as she entered the lounge from an adjacent bedroom. Nearly six feet of staggeringly sensual femininity with hazel hair and brown eyes, she wore a brightly coloured full length silk gown in red and yellow patterns. The thin flowing garment was tied casually at the waist by a band. Above and below the band its effectiveness in keeping the two halves of the gown together was questionable and gaps frequently appeared to offer the briefest of glimpses of the nakedness that lay beneath.

And Bond remembered her legs. Oh those legs! They seemed to extend for ever and were shaped fit for a Goddess. In fact, this vision of beauty who radiated sexuality was, thought Bond, something out of this world. Georgi eventually introduced her as "Nagriza Karimov, formerly of the SNB, better known as the Uzbekistan National Secret Service."

Once over the shock of finding she was an active member of Georgi's team of espionage experts, and especially discovering the coincidence of her being born on the shores of the Aral Sea, over a period of time the affection between Nagriza and Bond grew and they found occasions in their hectic lives to make love. It was beyond anything he had experienced before. She was generous in her love making and they both found delight as much in giving as they did in receiving.

She was a tease, a flirt, and, Bond constantly told her, “very naughty.” Both had the ability to take the other close to the brink of explosive ecstasy but then to back off so their passion could be maintained. Their love making was uninhibited, sometimes physically wild and raucous but at other times gentle, soft and caressing. Now, all this time later, he could still sense her, almost taste her.

But she was gone. No sooner had this Goddess-like woman crashed into his life than she was taken from him by a sniper’s bullet. He was having great difficulty coming to terms with it.

Sensing movement around him Bond realised people were progressing back to the mini bus. The return journey was uneventful and, in a more tranquil and thoughtful mood, he cruised the Porsche back towards the cottage located on the north coast some 25 miles West of Thurso. An hour later he was passing through Portskerra and, having decided to visit its small store, drove onto the first of the two harbours serving the small village community. He planned to park the car by the memorial to lost seamen then walk across the headland pathway with its small but steep sided hill to the other harbour and back. It would be a good and physical end to the day.

The sun was now dipping towards the horizon and a rich red sunset was promised. If his timing was right the walk back would be well rewarded. He set off down the track towards the small hill that separates the two harbours, then started up the steep incline where at the top the sea and coastline would come into full view as would the setting sun. To his right, out at sea, there was a constant two way traffic of sea gulls going out to the fishing grounds and returning with their catches to the cliff nests surrounding the harbour to which he now headed. It was another favourite place of his, somewhere from which to watch the sea birds and, in stormy weather, to spectate as huge seas crashed up the rocks. On one bitterly cold winter day, with the temperature reading minus 15 degrees in the Porsche, he had been amazed to witness the sea spray frozen. It looked like a huge ball of glistening crystal mist held static in a gravity defying mid-air act above the rocks over which the sea was crashing. It was wonderful and quite uncanny. Bond had never seen or even heard of such a thing happening.

Now he was reaching the top of the steep climb. Voices came to him from the direction of the second harbour. Though he could not yet pick out what was being said, there was a certain aggression to their tone that made him slow down, now to walk slowly and warily to the top to try and catch a view of what was going on before anyone saw him.

As soon as he caught a clear view he ducked down again. In the briefest of glances, perhaps not even lasting a second, he saw a large black van with darkened side windows and at least six men. Five of the men were all dressed the same. The sixth seemed to be under their care – or was it under their guard?

Checking behind him to ensure nobody could see what he was doing, he crawled back up to the crest of the hill on all fours and peered over the top. It seemed as if they had all arrived in the van and were now leading – or virtually dragging - their prisoner – for that is what Bond took him to be – towards the slipway heading to the harbour water and out from his sight.

“How very odd,” thought Bond. He crawled back down the hill to make sure he was not seen and now sat and waited.

The occasional voice drifted towards him and then he could hear the gurgle of a powerful marine engine. Minutes passed and the noises drifted off. All he could hear now was the sound of waves against rocks and the multitudinous mix of calling sea birds, the unique cries of the oystercatchers dominating.

It was a full ten minutes before the boat came into view. For some reason it took him by surprise and he moved quickly to ensure he was not in sight from the sea. Sneaking a look, Bond saw a long, black hulled boat, perhaps some 24 feet long and seemingly quite narrow, like an oversized canoe. It was being steered by a man standing at a wheel located in the centre of the boat's length. Towards the bows sat two men in black jackets plus the man Bond took to be their captive.

The boat creamed fast through the water. It was an unusual craft, thought Bond, with a powerful motor. Perhaps a military boat? He could hear it clearly from where he lay on the hill. He watched as it passed him, parallel to the coast and heading towards the bay at the head of which stood a solitary building, the formidable structure Bond knew to be The Mansion. Right opposite him but at some considerable distance Bond dared to take a picture on his iPhone.

“How very odd,” he thought to himself again as he made his way back down the hill towards the Porsche, any idea of completing the walk now abandoned. He was unsure if the van was still there and whether anyone was in it.

On the drive up the lane from the harbour back towards Portskerra and the main road, Bond thought about The Mansion. This large and imposing property stood in its surrounding grounds at the end of a road that went nowhere else. The property’s history in the last few decades was very chequered and Bond had lost track of who now owned it. An overwhelming curiosity to find out what was now going on saw him turn the Porsche off the main road and down the single track road leading to some of the expansive beaches that are a feature of the Scottish north coast and to The Mansion. Bond had not been down this lane for years. He had no reason to. Unless the objective was to visit someone in the solitary building at the end, or to walk on the beach, there was no point in doing so.

The Mansion, Bond recalled, stood imposingly in its own substantial walled grounds and boasted a fine, impressive if somewhat opulent wrought iron gate. He was not sure what he was going to do when he got there but any planning would have been wasted. Since his last visit a barrier had been established across the road, some two or three hundred yards from the entrance to the property. It was down. Bond quickly noted a security entrance phone by the barrier but, more importantly perhaps, a CCTV camera on a pole alongside the barrier. Assuming it was live and manned, his arrival would have already been seen and noted. Bond stopped as soon as the barrier came into site. He hardly paused before turning the Porsche round and heading back the way he had come.

“Curious. Very curious,” he thought to himself. But what to do about what he had seen? If the odd man out in the boat was indeed some sort of captive, then Bond had something of a moral citizen’s responsibility to report it. But was that what he had seen? Was the man in any way a prisoner? Or, thinking about it, were they helping him? Were they dragging him to the boat or giving him assistance? Bond was not at all sure. All he knew for certain was that what he had seen was odd.

The idea came to him slowly. He accepted it with great reluctance. There was one person who might be able to help. But the last thing Bond wanted was yet another escapade with him. Two had been enough. He paused. And paused. But eventually, driven by curiosity that outweighed caution, he reached for his phone and sent a text – and the photograph of the boat - to Georgi.

Chapter 3

Alexander Fitzpatrick looked enviously from his window down onto the bustling roads of Berkley Square and at people going about their ordinary daily lives in the oasis of green and seeming tranquillity in the central area of this famous London square. The high midday sun exaggerated colours and gave a rich greenness to the expanses of grass through which cut many pathways with their wooden bench seats, trees, sculptures and statues.

Fitzpatrick's day - and perhaps his life - had been turned upside down with the arrival of news that actions he had instigated in Siberia had gone disastrously wrong and instead of potentially helping resolve a problem now escalated it to heights he could not have dreamed of. He confronted a living nightmare beyond anything he had experienced before. He wished he was amongst those outside in the Square – living their hectic but, in relation to his own, simple lives, and coping no doubt with numerous pressures but none on the scale he confronted.

It all began days ago just after the office had opened at 0800. He had never before received a hand written envelope from Siberia. The writer had written his name and address on the front just underneath the address of Imperial Mining. It was from Pavel Galdin, Senior Administrator, Medicines, Anadyr Hospital. Fitzpatrick had never heard of him. He was intrigued. He opened the envelope not knowing what to expect. What he read was astonishing.

Dear Mr. Fitzpatrick. I write in the most serious of confidences. My subject is of great sensitivity. It is of grave concern to me, my city, my country and the industry in which you operate. Only one other knows of this letter and it is he who suggested it. He is my superior to whom I report. I therefore extend the serious request that this letter is treated with total security.

I am Senior Administrator, Medicines, at the major hospital in Anadyr, Eastern Siberia. We have confined in our establishment two employees of yours, William Patterson and Jack Bailey. I regret to inform you they are both seriously ill. We are unsure at this time as to what is causing their poor medical state.

Our concern is this. The permafrost that covers much of Siberia and the northern extremes of our planet is melting. It is believed to be the result of climate change. The impacts of this are many but one is of immediate concern to us and is why I write. It has been widely reported that not long ago a highly contagious virus dating back to the Neanderthal period of some 30,000 years ago was released from the permafrost in Siberia. Fortunately it only infects single-celled organisms and doesn't closely resemble any known pathogens that harm humans.

However, the scientific and medical community is concerned that, if climate change warms long untouched regions of Siberia, more ancient or eradicated viruses, including other Neanderthal viruses or even smallpox that have laid dormant in the ice for thousands of years, could be released.

We now have to confront an additional new threat. As you know, holes have been appearing across Siberia. It is now thought these are the result of subterranean explosions caused when melted permafrost has penetrated sufficiently deeply into the ground as to meet hot rock formations. This union of two materials of extreme temperatures causes explosions and has thrown materials into wide areas around the holes.

Your two scientists were investigating one such hole in the Chukotka territory. They were subsequently taken ill and brought to our medial institute in Anadyr. We have secured them in an isolation area.

Our problem, which is also yours, is that initial tests cannot determine what is wrong with them. Certainly they are impacted by some sort of virus but we cannot identify which.

It is easy to be too adventurous in these circumstances and ill-informed thinking can be dangerous. However, my concern, and that of the Director of this establishment, is this. If your two men have been impacted by some ancient virus released from the hole and if that news becomes widely known, it could have devastating impacts on the whole of Siberia. It could, for example, put large areas into quarantine, including where you hope to operate the gold mine on the Chukotka tundra. That could close your operation here. Other mining potential in Siberia would close. The impact on the economy of Anadyr and the whole of the nation could be severely damaged.

At the moment we plan nothing. We monitor and test the two scientists. Hopefully we will find our extreme concerns are not justified, the virus will be identified and the patients cured. But that does not look like the current prospect. We would prefer nobody to know this has happened. Ideally we hope to find an antidote to the virus. Meantime we have made the area around the Chukotka hole an isolated and militarily protected area.

We are considering our options. We would like you to do the same and to urgently advise us as to what you believe to be the best forward action in the interests of your company, the gold extraction industry of Siberia and my nation's economic wellbeing.

A handwritten signature was followed by the words Pavel Galdin, Senior Administrator, Medicines, Anadyr Hospital.

Shocked by the letter, Fitzpatrick's first action was to find out more about the viruses known to be released in Siberia, something he had not before heard about. From basic web research he found entries such as *"There is now a non-zero probability that the pathogenic microbes that bothered ancient human populations could be revived, and most likely infect us as well," according to a study by co-author Jean-Michel Claverie, a bioinformatics researcher at Aix-Marseille University in France. He had written in an email. "Those pathogens could be benign bacteria (curable with antibiotics) or resistant bacteria or nasty viruses. If they have been extinct for a long time, then our immune system is no longer prepared to respond to them."*

A telephone call to a friend specialising in rare medical diseases told him: "Some passive viruses have already been released from the permafrost after 30,000 years of freezing. There's no reason to think that viruses that affect humans could not do the same. Climate change is causing the permafrost and sea ice to melt quite rapidly. At the same time we have more and more drilling and mining going on in Alaska and Siberia for oil, gold and other increasingly rare materials. It is well within the bounds of possibility that this combination of activity will release other viruses – such as smallpox which was supposed to have been eradicated in the 1970s. Personally, I believe we are confronting a recipe for disaster."

The more he researched the more concerned he became. He also struggled with the decision as to whether or not to inform his fellow Directors at Imperial Mining. In the event he decided not to. At this stage the fewer who knew the better. But Fitzpatrick came to the gold extraction industry straight from a career in the military and that had built within him a tendency to be decisive and to take action when confronted with a problem. He also had an overwhelming conviction that he always needed to be in charge. So as he considered his options and his plans in the aftermath of receiving the letter, he believed a fast response was required and that he should take close and personal control of the situation. It was impossible to manage this situation across such a distance. Over the course of a particularly hectic day, he assembled a plan including phoning numerous people he believed would help him. He felt better now he was taking some sort of action though later even he would come to the conclusion it was misconceived from the outset. It was a typical Alexander Fitzpatrick military gung ho, shoot from the hip response.

It was late in the day when he eventually left the office with an overnight case slung over one shoulder and his laptop over the other. His destination was Wales. He had to undertake research to find exactly where it was and it would take him two and a half days to get there from London.

Two fingers of land point at each other from either side of the Bering Strait. On the Western side is Lavrentiya, the administrative centre of the Chukotka autonomous Okrug or district of Siberia, part of Russia. On the Eastern side is the small reindeer hunting community of Wales in the US state of Alaska, the largest but least populated of all the American states. Less than 100 kilometres divide the two. Fitzpatrick's research showed the Strait to be a strange, threatening geographical freak that separates two of the world's most powerful nations. A waterway that links the Arctic Ocean in the north to the Pacific Ocean in the south, he found it was first recorded in the early 1700s by Danish born Russian navigator Vitus Bering. Navigable in the summer, it is frozen during the winter and has been crossed several times with the first recorded modern crossing in 1913 when a German, Max Gottschalk, achieved the journey by dogsled.

In 1778 the English explorer Captain James Cook named the outcrop of land Cape Prince of Wales. The Eskimos knew it as Kingigin, or 'high bluff'. They called themselves Kingikmiut, 'people of the high place.' Today the single runway airport of Wales is some two kilometres north of the desolate, ramshackle settlement. It is here, in the most extraordinary of environments and surrounds, a somewhat travel weary, stubble faced Fitzpatrick met the team of five mercenaries from Eastern Europe he had flown in especially to undertake his plan. He knew these men from his military days and he held them in high regard for their commando skills and experience.

The team, and the pilot he had tasked with the job of flying them into Anadyr, had linked up in Calgary, Canada before flying to Wales to meet him. The aircraft belonged to a company specialising in flying people and equipment associated with the minerals extraction industry. It was known to the authorities in Anadyr and an application to land there and a flight plan had been accepted and authorised. Fitzpatrick planned the aircraft would remain at Anadyr whilst the five mercenaries snatched the two ill geophysicists from the hospital. They would be whisked away from Alaska before the authorities knew what was going on. From there they would be taken to a hideaway Fitzpatrick thought ideal for the circumstances. Control would then be with him, as would the fate of the two geophysicists. He would then feel more confident about the future.

To start the operation they met in the most unlikely of places and environments, the basic building that is the terminal at Wales, Alaska. There he briefed the mercenaries and the pilot in detail about what he expected them to do. It was a long journey to give such a brief but he considered it vital he did so personally rather than through any other form of communication. There was nobody he could trust to do it for him.

Now, looking from his London office at the tranquil scene outside, such a marked contrast to the monochrome ruggedness of Wales, Fitzpatrick reflected on how the commando raid had deteriorated into a farce. The crash of the KAvZ bus had been a disaster. Three mercenaries had been killed outright, one being the driver whose recklessness had caused the accident. The other two were both injured but capable of movement, as had been Jack Bailey, though how he still lived was a surprise to everyone. But of William Patterson there was no trace. The leader of the two surviving mercenaries had a choice – look for the missing geophysicist or try and get himself, his surviving colleague and Bailey back to the waiting aircraft. Time was not on his side. The aircraft could not wait indefinitely. He chose the latter, stealing a truck to drive across the ice to the airport at Ugolny. They had driven straight onto the runway, up to the aircraft, scrambled into it whilst heaving Bailey aboard, and flown out before the control tower spotted them moving. They were out of the country and over US air space before Ugolny ATC could inform the Russian military there had been an unauthorised departure. Later the aircraft owners would claim to the Russian authorities that their aircraft and pilot had been taken over by armed terrorists and they had no option but to follow their commands.

Fitzpatrick looked from his London window and contemplated the disaster. Bailey was now isolated and safely secured. He was still ill, hovering on the brink of death but hanging tenuously onto life. Clearly he was still suffering from the effects of the virus caught near the hole on the Chukotka tundra. The magnitude of the gamble Fitzpatrick was taking had by no means escaped him. Indeed, it was now a constant worry. What if Bailey had got some contaminating, unknown viral disease? He had been quarantined and isolated in the hospital at Anadyr but now he had been in close contact with the mercenaries, the pilot and, more recently, the team that had transported him to the hideaway.

And then there was Bill Patterson. Where the hell was he? Was he alive or dead? Did he too have a deadly virus that he was even now spreading wherever he was? The worst case scenario was difficult to comprehend. A lethal virus could have been released to spread and cause untold suffering.

While in London Alexander Fitzpatrick sought for new ideas to help him escape the mess he had got himself into. He explored clandestine ways of finding out precisely what Bailey was suffering from. He dared not use conventional ways like simply calling in a medical expert to examine Bailey. That would totally let the cat out of the bag. It was a nightmare dilemma.