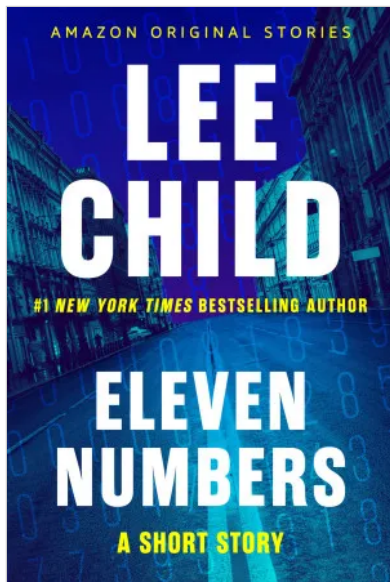




Eleven Numbers

Author: *Lee Child*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: An American mathematician's assignment in Russia spirals into a high-stakes maze of shifting loyalties and intrigue in a propulsive short thriller by #1 New York Times bestselling author Lee Child.

Nathan Tyler is an unassuming professor at a middling American university with a rather obscure specialty in mathematics—in short, a nobody from nowhere.

So why is the White House calling? Summoned to Washington, DC, for a top-secret briefing, Nathan discovers that he's the key to a massive foreign intelligence breakthrough.

Reading between the lines of a cryptic series of equations, he could open a door straight into the heart of the Kremlin and change the global balance of power forever.

All he has to do is get to a meeting with the renowned Russian mathematician who created it.

But when Nathan crashes headlong into a dangerous new game, the odds against him suddenly look a lot steeper.

Total Pages (Source): 5

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am

Nathan Tyler was warned three times on the morning of his departure. The first time was by email. He read the message on his phone, before he got out of bed. It was from the airline. The words were boxed inside the same cheerful graphic as the meal selection and the Wi-Fi options the day before. But now the tone was dour. The State Department has determined that due to escalating international tensions, travel to your destination may not be safe and is not advised. Then, as if concerned, or pretending to be, the airline had added: Passengers wishing to change, delay or cancel their plans may do so at no additional cost.

The second warning was the exact same thing, from the airline again, but this time by text message, thirty minutes later, with Tyler already showered and on his second cup of coffee. The State Department. The same words. But no graphic glamour this time. Just black letters on a gray block. May not be safe and is not advised.

The third warning was a live phone call, not from the government, but from Tyler's head of department at the university. Once a mentor, now a friend, but still his boss. His name was Ferguson, and he said, "You must be crazy."

Tyler said, "It's a math conference."

"In Moscow."

"Well, that's where it is this year."

"So go next year. You never went before. Why make this your first time?"

"Because they're doing good work there. And some of them won't travel. You know

how it is. Where else will I get the chance to meet them?”

“It’s dangerous.”

“You went to a conference in Moscow. You wrote a paper about it.”

“It was safe back then.”

“Russians respect math,” Tyler said. “They value it. They revere it, deep down. That was your conclusion. So it doesn’t matter what else is going on. The conference will be a little island of common sense, amid all the bullshit. Plus I’m a nobody from nowhere. No one will notice me. I bet they don’t even bug my room. They’ll save that for the guys from Stanford and MIT.”

“This is not a joke.”

Tyler paused a beat.

“I know,” he said. “I watch the news. The timing is not ideal, I agree. But this is math. It’s a hotel full of rational people. Nothing bad will happen.”

“You sound like you’re trying to convince yourself,” Ferguson said.

In fact Tyler had been trying to convince himself for a whole week, more or less exactly to the minute. Seven days before, he was out of the shower, on his second cup of coffee, when his phone rang. On the line was the chief of public safety at the university. Their own police department. Bigger than the neighboring town’s. The top dog on the phone. She asked, “Is that Professor Tyler?”

He confirmed it was, and she told him she had a caller on the line. Someone who wanted to speak with him urgently. She said she had followed all the verification

protocols required by the university, and she was satisfied the caller was genuine.

Tyler asked, "Who is it?"

He got no answer. Just a click on the line, then a buzz, then a hum, then a voice, which asked, "Is that Professor Tyler?"

He said it was.

The voice said, "This is the chief of staff's office, at the White House."

"What?" Tyler said.

"Washington, DC," the voice said. "The White House. The chief of staff's office."

"OK."

"I am required to inform you that you must regard this conversation, and any subsequent conversations we may have, as classified at the very highest level. These conversations must not be repeated, revealed, divulged, described, or even alluded to in any way at all. These conversations never existed. They never happened. Do you understand, sir?"

"I guess," Tyler said.

"Sir, was that a yes or a no?"

"Yes, I understand."

"I am further required to inform you there are federal laws and regulations that impose severe penalties for betrayal of classified information, up to and including life

imprisonment.”

“I understand,” Tyler said again. “But what is this? Have I done something wrong?”

“No sir,” the voice said. “Quite the opposite. We’d like your help with something.”

“My help? Seriously? What have I got that the White House wants? Are you sure you’re talking to the right guy?”

“Yes, sir, we’re sure.”

“So what is this about?”

The voice said a black car would arrive at his door in thirty minutes, and he was to get in the back.

The black car arrived dead on time, driven by a silent woman in a dark suit. She drove Tyler forty comfortable miles to the private aviation terminal at the county’s regional airport. Behind a chain-link fence was a gaggle of propeller-driven hobby planes, and behind them was a business jet with its engines running. Its door was open and its stairs were down. The car drove in through a sliding gate and stopped ten feet from the plane.

“Is this for me?” Tyler asked.

“Yes, sir,” the woman said. The first words she had spoken. “They’re expecting you.”

Tyler climbed out of the car and walked to the stairs. Three paces. He stepped up. He held the thin chrome rail. His experience of flying was about the same as any other junior academic, which was to say fairly extensive, but all of it work related and coach class. Normally he boarded by group number, through a jet bridge jammed

with shuffling people.

At the top of the stairs a man was waiting. Dark suit, standing by like a flight attendant.

Tyler stopped, and took a nervous breath.

He said, “I won’t get on board until I know where I’m going, and why.”

The man said, “Maryland.”

“Where in Maryland?”

“Joint Base Andrews.”

“Is that Andrews Air Force Base?”

“As was.”

“Why am I going there?”

“I have no information on that subject.”

“Not enough,” Tyler said. “I want to know why.”

“It’s called need-to-know. Basic security. This is a classified operation. We’re not even filing a flight plan. This trip doesn’t exist. They had to tell me where to take you, but they were never going to tell me why.”

“OK,” Tyler said. Which it was. Need-to-know. Logical and rational. He said, “But your orders can’t end with just dumping me on the apron and flying away again. Who

are you handing me over to? You must know that.”

The man said, “You’ll be met by the Secret Service. I assume they know your next move. But I don’t. That’s how it works.”

Tyler took a seat, and the man who hadn’t really answered his questions hauled the stairs up and leaned on levers until the door sucked shut with a pressure Tyler felt in his ears. The man pointed out a small refrigerated drawer and said there were soft drinks in it. Snacks in the drawer below. Then he moved up front and Tyler saw him climb into the pilot’s seat. Not a flight attendant after all. Which made sense. Need-to-know. Why involve extra people?

Tyler’s seat was a plump version of what he imagined were installed in Italian sports cars. The leather was buttery. The carpet under his feet was thick. The plane was solid and stable and its engines were quiet. What have I got that the White House wants? That had been his first question, back when it was just a phone call. Now it was a private jet. So what did he have? Or more logically, what did he have that someone else didn’t? Otherwise that someone else would be on the plane, not the nobody from nowhere.

He wasn’t sure what he had. He wasn’t falsely modest. He was a very able mathematician. But there were fifty others in the world just as good. Maybe a hundred. His publication history was competitive. He had contributed to all the important journals. But so had fifty others. Maybe a hundred. His debut had been his PhD thesis. Groundbreaking, really, but in a field no one was interested in. Nothing about him stood out.

The landing was unannounced. No instructions about tray tables or seat backs or upright positions. Just a rapid descent and then wind roar as the wheels came down. The plane rocked and bucked, stiff and tight, like a dart. It touched down and braked hard and taxied fast, to a remote apron about a hundred yards from anywhere else.

Waiting there was a shiny black Suburban. Two men in blue suits were standing next to it.

The pilot kept his engines running. He climbed out of his seat and dropped the stairs. Tyler wasn't sure whether he should thank the guy for the ride. In the end he didn't. He just ducked his head and stepped out without a word.

On the ground one of the men opened the Suburban's rear door. Tyler asked him, "Where are we going?"

"Fort Meade, sir."

"Oh," Tyler said. He had been expecting the White House. He asked, "What's at Fort Meade?"

"Many things," the guy said. "It's a multipurpose facility. Including a hundred acres to store the overspill from the Library of Congress."

"Can you tell me specifically?"

"The west gate, specifically. We hand you off to a second team of agents."

The same as the pilot. It's called need-to-know. Basic security. This is a classified operation.

Tyler got in the car.

Fort Meade's west gate had a wide blacktopped area in front of it. Waiting there was a black Suburban identical to the example Tyler was riding in. He got out of one and into the other. There were two men in the front of the new vehicle, wearing blue suits like the first pair, but with earpieces and curly wires running under their collars. They

pulled up at the security booth and the driver showed a pass. A striped barrier rose up and they drove on through.

“Where are we going?” Tyler asked, not expecting an answer. But he got one. The driver pointed ahead. A huge black building stood alone in an endless parking lot.

“What’s that?” Tyler asked.

“NSA,” the driver said. “The National Security Agency.”

“They record people’s phone calls.”

“Among other things.”

“Is this about some call I made?”

“No, sir, we were briefed that you’re here to assist with a project.”

“What project?”

“Clearly something important,” the driver said. “I was supposed to play golf today.”

They parked at an inconspicuous personnel entrance set in an otherwise blank wall. This time Tyler was not handed off like a courier package. The two agents got out with him and escorted him inside, where he was asked to step through a metal detector and submit to a pat-down search. He did the first and said yes to the second, and then the agents led him onward through a long white corridor, to a wide low space that hummed with complex equipment. The lighting was dim. The air was cold. AC on max. Like a server farm.

Dead ahead in the end wall was a set of double doors, with an agent on the left and

another on the right, both standing easy, relaxed but still threatening. Guarding some kind of inner sanctum beyond them. Tyler was led in their direction. One of them said into his cuff, “Professor Tyler is here.”

The answer in their earpieces must have been send him right in , because the agent on the left opened the left-hand door and the agent on the right opened the right-hand door, as if choreographed, like a royal house in Europe. All four agents stayed outside. Tyler stepped inside. The doors closed behind him.

In the room were desks and cables and keyboards and flat-screen monitors. And four men. Tyler didn’t know two of them. Or maybe he did, a little. Maybe he had seen them in the background, while someone else made a statement on TV.

He knew the other two. That was for sure.

The third man was Oliver Bailey, the greatest living American mathematician. Certainly the most famous, the most prominent, the most visible. The go-to guy, not that anyone went to mathematicians very often. But if they did, Bailey was their man. Richly deserved, Tyler thought. Justified by a spectacular body of work across an absurdly wide range of interests. Really a historic figure.

The fourth man in the room was the president of the United States.

The president radiated charm and charisma and power. He stepped over to where Tyler was standing and said, “I’m Jacob Ramsey.” Which was unnecessary, because Tyler knew his name. The whole world knew. Ramsey said, “We appreciate you being here, Professor,” and held out his hand. Tyler shook it, numb. Then Ramsey made the introductions. He pointed and said, “John McGinn, my national security advisor. Matthew Cash, the NSA director. And I’m sure you already know Professor Bailey. He’s in the same line of work as you.”

Tyler said, “I know of him, of course. It’s a pleasure to meet face-to-face.”

“The pleasure’s all mine,” Bailey said. A confident voice. Famous, prominent, visible. “I’m an admirer. I read your PhD thesis.”

“Really?” was all Tyler could say.

“I was impressed,” Bailey said. “I have my own copy. I like to dip into it from time to time.”

“Really?” Tyler said again.

President Ramsey said, “Let’s get down to business. Time is of the essence here. Last night these three people in this room knew a secret that no one else in the world knew. This morning I became the fourth person to know it. You would become the fifth, Professor. Is that OK with you?”

Tyler paused a beat. Are you sure you’re talking to the right guy? He said, “Honestly, sir, I’m not sure what I could contribute to a thing like that.”

From across the room Oliver Bailey said, “Come take a look at this.”

Tyler glanced at the president, as if for permission, and Ramsey nodded, as if granting it. They stepped over together. Tyler sat down in front of a monitor. The others gathered behind him in a tight semicircle. Tyler breathed in. The president of the United States, the national security advisor, the NSA director, all watching him. Plus Oliver goddamn Bailey.

On the screen was a long sequence of mathematical equations, one after the other, like sentences in a story. Simple declarative statements, each leading to the next. Clean, elegant, polished, logical. Tyler scrolled onward. Suddenly the math got

complicated. There was an unknown eight-figure value, and two side chain thickets, one feeding the other, before looping back to the main flow and creating a binary choke point. One or zero, yes or no.

“It’s a computer security algorithm,” Tyler said. “The unknown eight figures are the password. The first side chain determines correct or incorrect. The second gives you three attempts. The choke point locks you in or locks you out.”

“Excellent,” Oliver Bailey said, from behind him. “How would you rate it? Marks out of ten?”

“It’s strong. It’s sturdy. No nonsense. A little mannered. Slightly old fashioned. It’s elegant, but within limits. Reliability comes first. The password is obviously all numbers. With three attempts permitted, random hacking gives a zero-point-five-zeroes percent chance of success. So it’s lean and effective. It’s a good piece of work.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am

“Who did it?”

Tyler started over at the top. The beginning of the story. Once upon a time . Lit majors could tell Faulkner from Hemingway. Same for mathematicians. Math was abstract and eternal, unchanging, discovered not invented, but when human beings used it, they always left a fingerprint. Not exactly a voice, like literature. More like an X-ray, of the way someone’s mind worked. The cogs and the gears.

Tyler took a breath.

He said, “I think it’s Russian.”

Bailey asked, “Any Russian in particular?”

Tyler took a deeper breath.

A little mannered.

Slightly old fashioned.

He said, “I think it’s Arkady Suslov.”

“Excellent,” Bailey said, partly satisfied, partly triumphant.

Arkady Suslov was the Russian Oliver Bailey. Even more so, Tyler thought. Older, more mysterious, reputedly eccentric. The grand old man. A historic figure for sure.

“Congratulations, Professor,” President Ramsey said.

Tyler turned in his chair to face him, and realized Ramsey was talking to Bailey, not him. They were shaking hands. Bailey had a humble look on his face, like he performed miracles every day. No big deal.

But what miracle?

“Wait,” Tyler said.

What did he have that the White House wanted? His PhD thesis. Bailey’s absurdly wide range of interests. Above all, Suslov’s eccentricity. He turned back to the screen. Checked here, checked there, checked a third place.

The miracle was he had lived up to his advance billing. Bailey had recommended him, Ramsey had sent for him, and he was about to deliver, right on cue.

He said, “The password is a Kindansky number. This whole thing is built on Kindansky numbers. Suslov absolutely loves them.”

“Excellent,” Bailey said again. “This is why we called you. You, me, and Suslov are the only people in the world serious about Kindansky numbers.”

“Time out,” Ramsey said. “I’m a politician. I’m an hour into this. I need to understand it better.”

Bailey gestured to Tyler, yielding the floor.

Tyler said, “Kindansky was a leading number theorist in the nineteenth century. He proved there’s a category of numbers with unique properties. Not so much what they are, but what they can be used for. Those are the Kindansky numbers. They’re all

prime numbers, but not all prime numbers are Kindanskys.”

“Why are they important?” Ramsey asked.

“They’re not important,” Bailey said. “They’re interesting, that’s all. Except that Suslov believes they make for strong security algorithms. Which is a respectable position. Internal calculations with Kindansky numbers tend to be fast and robust. Useful for high-stress situations where speed is critical. I can’t argue with him.”

Tyler said, “There are only about ninety thousand eight-figure Kindansky numbers. Is that enough for the password?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Bailey said. “You can’t see the design from the outside. You have no option but to try all the ninety-nine million possibilities. The external odds remain the same.”

Ramsey asked, “Then why go to the trouble?”

“It’s Suslov’s personality,” Bailey said. “He likes to be cute. He likes things to rhyme. We all like to put our signature on things.”

Tyler turned back to the screen, and scrolled through, slowly, listening to the music.

He said, “This is tough and plain and to the point.”

No one answered.

He said, “It’s military, isn’t it?”

No answer.

“You have a road map into the Russian military’s computer system.”

“Look again,” Oliver Bailey said. “You’re missing something.”

Tyler scrolled through again, this time listening for the bum note.

It was in the second side chain. The three-strikes-and-you’re-out section. There was an ambiguity. It would be possible to throw the whole section into an endless doom loop. For as long as you wanted. Not just three strikes. Not anymore. You could have as many strikes as you needed. Sooner or later you would hit it right.

You could have ninety thousand strikes.

Tyler said, “You’re already inside the Russian military’s computer system.”

“Welcome to the club,” President Ramsey said. “You’re the fifth member.”

“Show him what we found in there,” the national security advisor said. “Show him why we brought him here.”

What they had found in there was displayed on another screen. Another long sequence of equations. Like the next level in an ancient computer game. You battle through one scenario, and you’re rewarded with a new one. The same but different.

It was the same in that it was another security algorithm. The same mind behind it. Clean, robust, logical. Nothing fancy. Plain and to the point. It controlled access to a separate and isolated quadrant of the network. Some kind of large and important subgroup.

It was different in two ways. The passcode was nine digits long, not eight. And there was no second side chain. You didn’t get three attempts. You got one try only, and if

you got it wrong, the whole operating system would shut itself down and replace itself with new code, which the NSA didn't have and couldn't get.

Tyler pushed back from the screen. The first algorithm was like the front door of a house, solid and sturdy, locked and bolted. But you broke through it and walked down the hallway and found the second algorithm, which was like a safe bolted to the floor in the corner of the kitchen. With a nine-digit keypad and an enter button that would either click it open or blow it up, and you with it.

Tyler said, "The nine figures make no sense."

"Why not?" Ramsey asked. "Exponentially more choices than eight figures."

"No, sir," Tyler said. "There are only eleven nine-figure Kindansky numbers."

"Eleven? How is that possible?"

"Math is weird."

"Maybe this time Mr. Suslov isn't using a Kindansky number for the passcode."

"My first thought," Oliver Bailey said. "But no. Suslov gets fixated on things. He wants it neat and tidy. The bag must match the shoes. If the passcode wasn't a Kindansky, none of it would be, and it is, all the way through."

"Then how do you explain the security implications of just eleven passcode options?"

"I believe Mr. McGinn has that answer."

Ramsey looked at McGinn. His national security advisor. Who said, "The eight-figure algorithm is general-issue field equipment. The nine-figure algorithm is

private. Our intelligence suggests it's inside a device in a secure room somewhere underneath the Kremlin. Locked door, guards outside. It doesn't really need security. The passcode is ceremonial. And cute, I guess. There are eleven time zones in Russia. There are eleven people on the inner committee. Or whatever. It's Suslov's private joke."

The room went quiet. Just the hum of electricity and the hiss of air. In the silence Tyler asked, "Why underneath the Kremlin? What is this algorithm guarding?"

At first no one answered. As if words didn't work anymore.

Then Ramsey said, "Control of the Russian nuclear arsenal."

The strategic considerations were obvious, but the president ran through them anyway. Maybe to emphasize the size of the prize. The US wasn't worried about Russian tanks or artillery or infantry. Poor quality, badly led, and most of all thousands of miles away. It was the missiles they worried about. Like every nuclear power the Russians restricted access to a tiny cadre of authorized personnel. What if they all logged in and hit the button and nothing happened? Error messages, blank screens, invalid command alerts. The Russians would be off the board and out of the game. Forever. Reduced to nothing.

Tyler found paper and a pen and wrote out the eleven nine-figure Kindansky numbers from memory. One of them was right and ten of them were wrong. One chance only. No rain check. He passed the paper to Bailey. Peer review, of a sort. Bailey sat down at a keyboard and typed out the list. He clicked a button and the list appeared on a screen on the wall.

It started with a strange little cluster of five, coming immediately after the hundred million mark. First came 100,000,007, which was followed by 100,000,037, and 39, and 49, and finally 100,000,073. A tight little span, five numbers just sixty-six apart,

out of a hundred million.

The other six were more evenly spaced. Next came 188,888,881, followed by 213,161,503, and 310,248,241, and 383,838,383, and 696,729,579, and finally 999,999,937.

Ramsey said, "Two of them read the same forward and backward."

"Palindromes," Tyler said. "We should probably keep an eye on those."

"The one with all the nines is dramatic."

"But nothing special," Bailey said. "Equally the first five, with all the zeroes. Weird, ugly numbers. The 213 is boring. As is the 310 and the 696. I agree with Professor Tyler. It's one of the palindromes."

"Which one?"

"They're both musical," Tyler said. "If one is the root note, then eight is the octave, and three is the major third. They're like trumpet fanfares, or calls to battle on a bugle."

"Which one?" Ramsey asked again.

"The 383," Bailey said. "Suslov might worry about the string of eights in the first one. You can lose track. Whereas 383,838,383 bounces along very naturally. Like a nursery rhyme. Familiar, comforting, helpful under stress."

"I agree," Tyler said.

"Enough to lay a bet?" Ramsey asked. "The biggest prize in history, win or go

home?”

Tyler didn't answer right away. Ramsey looked at the others, one by one, wordlessly asking the same question. Would you bet on it? McGinn said no. Cash said no. Bailey said no.

Then Tyler said yes. “Absent more information, it is what it is. If picking the lock is the aim, then not laying a bet guarantees failure. Whereas laying a bet gives a small but finite chance of success. Therefore laying a bet is the rational course of action.”

President Ramsey nodded.

“I believe that's the correct answer, technically,” he said. “But the odds are too long. We need to bend them in our favor. By obtaining more information. We need to talk about why we brought you here, Professor.”

The Secret Service hustled them through back corridors to a nicer room. There was daylight from a window, and a credenza with coffee and pastries, and four sofas grouped in an intimate square. They hovered a moment until Ramsey sat down. Then McGinn sat next to him, and Cash and Bailey and Tyler took a sofa each.

Oliver Bailey led the discussion.

“Eleven numbers,” he said. “Arkady Suslov chose one of them, due to practical utility, personal affection, and unconscious bias all mixed together. All eleven have characteristics. I think some are ugly and some are boring, but who knows if Suslov would agree with me? Personally I agree with Professor Tyler about the musicality. The 383 sounds like a bugle or a piper. Or the tolling of an iron bell. Mi do mi, do mi do, mi do mi. Like a funeral lament. Subliminally appropriate for its task. But who knows if Suslov hears it the same way? The best solution would be for me to go talk with him. In Russia, on his own turf, like I was just passing through. Purely social.

Two old men. Math gossip. But really aimed at teasing out his feelings. Very obliquely, of course. Very subtly aimed at understanding his choices. Which of the eleven numbers would he be drawn to, emotionally? A free pick is a decision from the heart, not the head.”

Bailey stopped and looked at Tyler, who nodded. A sound plan. Math could be surprisingly emotional, because most of the time it wasn’t. A rare moment of personal indulgence was to be savored. And celebrated. Suslov might let something slip in conversation. At least a signpost toward a preference.

Bailey said, “But I can’t go talk with him. I wouldn’t get near him. They wouldn’t allow it. They know who I am, in Russia.”

Ramsey sat forward. He looked Tyler in the eye. He said, “We would like you to take Professor Bailey’s place.”

“Me?” Tyler said. “Go to Russia? I couldn’t engage Arkady Suslov in personal conversation. I mean, I love his work, but there’s etiquette involved. He would have to speak to me first. And I don’t speak Russian.”

“He speaks English,” Bailey said.

“He speaks math,” Ramsey said.

“I wouldn’t know how to approach him.”

“We’ll help,” Ramsey said. “We’ll find a way of putting you next to each other, same time, same place. Then it’s over to you. You’ll get a feel for the man. Which number would such a man pick? Subjective, I get it. Outside your comfort zone. But you’re a smart guy in real life too. Not just math. I feel I can trust you on this. You’ll figure it out.”

“It’ll be easy,” Bailey said. “He must have read your thesis. It was excellent work on his favorite subject. People will have sent it to him. He’ll be delighted to meet you. He’ll talk all day.”

“Then you’ll come back here and tell us all about it,” Ramsey said. “You’ll lay it out, everything he told you, everything you picked up on, and we’ll discuss it. You don’t have to make the decision yourself. This is a team effort.”

“I’m not sure,” Tyler said.

Ramsey nodded, understanding.

“I get it,” he said. “This is a big step. Going operational is a big commitment. Actually it’s two commitments. One from us to you, and one from you to us. We guarantee you’ll have the entire might of the United States government at your back every step of the way and every hour of the day. In return you acknowledge the complexity of an operation like this. It can’t be stopped. If you’re in, you stay in. That’s your commitment.”

Tyler said, “Can I think about it?”

McGinn shook his head.

“No,” he said. “We have no time. The Global Math Congress is in Moscow this year and it opens in six days. That’s our perfect opportunity. Nothing could be more natural or organic. Everyone goes, from all around the world, including lots of first-timers. You won’t stand out.”

“Isn’t Moscow dangerous for Americans right now?”

“The math conference will be safe. It will be a little island of common sense in a sea

of bullshit. We can get you in as a late delegate, but we have to start right now. We should fly you in from London, probably. Less scrutiny than direct from the States. Maybe a couple days in New York too. Like you're dropping in on colleagues along the way. A plausible paper trail, if they check. Which they won't, because of the math thing. They'll wave you through. They like hosting academics. It makes them look good."

Ramsey asked, "Are you in?"

Tyler breathed in. Breathed out. And again.

Then he said yes, he was.

There were six days left, so two days in New York and two in London gave just two to prepare. They passed in a blur. McGinn's staffers handled everything. One created a phantom journey from Tyler's home to New York City, coach class air, even taxis each end. It was a trip Tyler would never take, because he was already on the East Coast, but it had to show up on the airline's system and Tyler's credit card records, just in case. A second staffer booked the real travel and lodging, under the university's name, and consistent with its budget. A third staffer went out and bought a suitcase and toiletries, and clothes, Tyler's size and style.

McGinn dropped by from time to time, for private briefings and rehearsals. He had three areas of concern. First was worry from colleagues at home, because Moscow was dangerous. McGinn suggested a number of reassurances. He repeated his earlier line about a little island of common sense amid all the bullshit. Tyler suggested a line about a nobody from nowhere, who no one would notice. McGinn approved it, very tactfully. Then he said the main message should always be the math. A hotel full of rational people. What could go wrong?

The second concern was the Moscow airport. The guys who flipped through your

passport and opened your suitcase. They were intimidating. Stone-faced and silent. Guaranteed to put a shiver down any American spine. But not to worry. Tyler's travel documents would be 100 percent correct. The airport would feel like a scary movie, but the overall experience would be friction-free.

The third concern was the talk with Arkady Suslov. Getting relaxed one-on-one time would be hard enough. Steering the subsequent conversation would be unbelievably delicate. Like pitching a perfect game. McGinn said it was vital to stay away from security or passwords. If the talk started heading in that direction, pull back someplace else. It could be Suslov getting suspicious. He could be dangling bait. Maybe find a different subject. A different kind of math, but one that allowed the same kind of preference or emotion.

Tyler said he would do his best.

Then McGinn issued a warning. Other than Suslov, Tyler was to talk to no one. Ever, anywhere. Not his seatmate on the plane, not the guy at the next table at breakfast. Nobody. Definitely no hookers or bar staff. Too easy to go a step too far with what you said. Everyone was liable. It was human nature to want to drop a hint that really you're a hell of a guy. So avoid the temptation. Talk to no one. Plus remember the laws and regulations.

Tyler said he would do his best.

McGinn wished him luck.

Which is how Tyler came to be in his London hotel room on the morning of his departure, warned twice by the State Department and once by Professor Ferguson back home. You must be crazy. Tyler had ended the call and stood up off the bed and wheeled his new suitcase out through the door. Ahead lay a car to the London airport, a four-hour British Airways flight, and a rental waiting for him at the counter in

Moscow. Probably a Mercedes, McGinn had said, but he couldn't promise.

At first the Moscow airport felt exactly like a scary movie. International arrivals meant the jet bridge let out directly into a long gray corridor that zigged and zagged, dim and featureless, burrowing ever deeper into the building. Then it opened into a brightly lit hall with eight booths, each manned by one of the promised stone-faced and silent figures. But the guy Tyler got was fine. He asked the purpose of Tyler's visit, and Tyler said the math conference, and the guy got relaxed and friendly and waved him through. Tyler found the rental counter, one international brand among many, and they gave him a car key, and walked him to a shuttle bus, which let him out in the middle of a vast parking lot, where something about the endless sky told him the lot was in fact tiny in the landscape.

The car was a Mercedes, like McGinn had hoped. A sedan, painted black, waxed to a shine. It smelled of cigars inside. Tyler set the GPS to English and tapped in the address. The algorithm found a solution. A thick blue line, through the messy outskirts on a main radial route, which became what looked like a long, wide boulevard running through the city proper, toward its distant center.

Tyler backed out of the slot and headed for an exit sign about halfway to the horizon. Beyond it came a series of wide new roads through old pitted land. There were gaudy billboards everywhere, for products Tyler couldn't decipher, at prices he didn't understand. There were traffic lights at every major intersection. The usual red, yellow, green. Every pole had a sign saying CTON . Caution, Tyler guessed. There were distant sirens everywhere, ahead, behind, to the left, to the right.

The hinterlands stopped and the city started, all within a couple of blocks. The road ran straight and formal, with a wide planter down the center and respectable buildings either side. Some of them were elegant. Like Paris. There were still traffic lights every three or four blocks. Wherever the cross street was wider than normal. Tyler looked ahead, trying to time red or green, slowing down or speeding up to meet either

one.

He got a green at a classic urban crossroads, with tall stone buildings at all points of the compass. He was aware of a siren on his left, somewhere on the cross street. The canyon echoes made it hard to tell how far away. He drove through the green. He didn't make it. The siren was a lit-up police car that barreled through its own red and smashed into the side of Tyler's Mercedes, driver's-side rear. The cop car pitched up on its side and rolled on its roof and slid away with a shriek of metal and a shower of sparks and Tyler's Mercedes was spun around like a top, with violent force, and when it bounced and lurched to a random stop it ran on forward again, still in gear, some kind of momentum, diagonally across two lanes, until it crashed hard against a pole and the pole fell down and pinned it.

Tyler sat for a long moment, battered by the airbags, bruised by the seat belt, deafened by the impact, sickened by the violent motion. He took a breath. And another. He made a list. Of things he should do. First, unclip his belt. Second, open his door. Then swivel. Then stand.

He accomplished the first item, after some thought. He accomplished the second, after a long struggle. He didn't attempt the third or the fourth. He didn't need to. The police did both things for him. They grabbed him and dragged him out. Two patrol cops, passing by. They stood him up and held him straight by the elbows. Other cops came and gathered around. They parked their cars and left the lights flashing and wandered over. Then an ambulance arrived, flashing red, with a deep barking siren.

"Thanks, but I think I'm OK," Tyler said.

No reaction.

"I'm sorry, I don't speak Russian."

No reaction.

“Do you speak English?”

No reaction.

“I’m here for the Global Mathematics Congress.”

No reaction. The ambulance headed for the tipped-over police car. People were crouched near it, looking in, looking nervous. A cop with stripes on his epaulets walked over. A higher rank. The cops around Tyler stood to attention. Tyler was jerked an extra inch upright by the men holding his elbows.

The captain or lieutenant or whatever he was asked a short question in Russian. The oldest of the other cops answered, with what sounded like a summary, dry, detailed, nothing emphasized, no conclusions drawn. Just the facts. The guy with the stripes turned to Tyler and asked another short question.

Tyler said, “I’m sorry, I don’t speak Russian.”

The guy looked back at the cop who had submitted the report and issued what sounded like an order. Then he walked away. Tyler was levered forward by the elbows. He stumbled and hustled to keep up. They were headed for a police car. For a mad second Tyler wondered if he was being offered a courtesy ride to the conference hotel.

But no. His arms were forced behind his back and handcuffs were clicked in place and he realized he was being arrested.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am

He was driven a mile to an outer-neighborhood police station that felt closer to the ring road than Red Square. He was hauled out of the car, and in through a door, and he stood mute in front of a desk, where the guy behind it asked questions in Russian, and the guys who had brought him in answered on his behalf, back and forth, while a long computer entry was completed. His name and age were taken from his passport. The rest seemed to be compiled from what the guys who had brought him in were describing about the incident, all in rapid-fire Russian that was impenetrable to him.

Then they put him in a downstairs cell. The guys who had brought him in walked away. The guy from the desk locked the cell door, like a ceremony. Through the bars Tyler mimed a phone call, thumb and pinkie, the universal gesture. He said, "US Embassy."

The desk guy said, "Yes, yes, already informed," and walked away.

The cell had three walls made of concrete blocks thickly painted many times with a high-gloss khaki color. The front wall was bars. There was a concrete sleeping shelf and a steel toilet. Those items took up most of the floor space.

Tyler waited four fretful hours, doing nothing, sitting on the concrete ledge, hunched over to ease his back, then lying flat on the unyielding surface, pressing down like yoga, trying to ease it some more. He still felt bruised and battered.

Then the desk guy came down with dinner, which was a bowl of what looked like boiled turnips, with a grudging few strings of gray gristly meat among them, all daubed with a thick sauce the color of blood. The guy slid it under the gate, with a tin mug of water.

Tyler mimed the phone again. He said, "US Embassy."

The guy said, "Yes, yes, already informed," and walked away.

Tyler ate half the food but drank all the water. He was thirsty from the plane. Then he waited again. Two hours. Three. Midevening. Late evening. A different guy came down to collect the bowl and the mug. The night guy. The day guy had gone off duty. Tyler mimed the phone. Thumb and pinkie. He said, "US Embassy."

The night guy shrugged and said, "Maybe come tomorrow," and walked away.

Breakfast was weak coffee served in the tin mug, with some kind of savory patties in the bowl. Probably last night's leftover turnips, mashed up, shaped, and fried. Tyler ate them all. He was hungry. He was sore and cold after a fitful sleep. No mattress, no blanket. No pillow. Just the hard concrete. There was a sink pressed into the top of the toilet tank, with a solitary tap. Cold only. He washed as well as he could. He combed his hair with his fingers.

He waited.

An hour.

Two hours.

Then the desk guy came down with the key. He unlocked the gate and opened it. He gestured impatiently, as if the delay had been Tyler's fault. Tyler hobbled out of the cell. The desk guy took him by the elbow and led him away. Not upstairs. Through a dogleg basement corridor to an underground room with an iron table and two plastic chairs.

In one of the chairs was a blue-eyed man about thirty, with fair hair in a floppy style,

wearing khakis and a blazer and a button-down shirt. Shiny shoes, striped tie. He looked like an advertisement in a magazine. For Brooks Brothers, maybe. The desk guy propelled Tyler into the room and closed the door behind him. Tyler heard his footsteps fade away outside.

The man in the blazer stood up and asked, “Nathan Tyler?”

Tyler nodded. The man stuck out his hand. He said, “My name is Michael Cartwright. I’m a legal attaché at the embassy. I’m here to help.”

Tyler shook Cartwright’s hand and sat down in the vacant chair. Cartwright said, “Are they treating you well?”

“Not really,” Tyler said. “The food is shit and the accommodations are lousy.”

“Ah,” Cartwright said. “Well. First let me check I have the facts straight. You were driving in from the airport and you collided with a police car.”

“I had the green light,” Tyler said. “He collided with me.”

“Lights and siren?”

“Yes,” Tyler said.

“Ah,” Cartwright said again. “Well. That’s the problem, you see. It’s what Russian law calls a crime of strict liability. You had an absolute legal obligation to yield to a law enforcement vehicle going about its legitimate business. Doesn’t matter who had the green light.”

“A crime? It was a traffic accident.”

“Legal systems are different the world over. We play by local rules. We expect the same of visitors to our country. Technically you broke the law. And the police driver broke his arm. That aggravates the offense. Legally it’s an assault now, against a police officer. You’re also charged with destroying state property. The police car, obviously, but also a traffic light. They say that after the impact, you deliberately drove across two lanes and knocked it down.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Tyler said. “The guy had just smashed into me. I was out of it. At that point I wasn’t doing anything deliberately.”

“You’re also charged with premeditation. Traffic cameras show you were varying your speed on the approach, as if you were trying to time the impact just right.”

“That’s crazy,” Tyler said. “I was trying to time the green lights. I didn’t know there was going to be an impact. It was a built-up area. I couldn’t see into the cross street. There were sirens everywhere. What was I supposed to do? This is such bullshit. I get T-boned by a guy who ran a red light and suddenly I’m the criminal?”

“We play the cards we’re dealt,” Cartwright said. “I agree, normally we expect common sense and discretion from the prosecutor. But tensions are high right now. This is like Christmas morning for them. A real-life American has committed an actual crime in Moscow. The evidence is indisputable. They don’t even have to make anything up. You shouldn’t have come. There was a State Department advisory.”

“I thought the math conference would be safe.”

“But you didn’t quite get there, did you?”

Tyler didn’t answer.

“This is a game within a game,” Cartwright said. “They don’t really care about the

police car. This is about diplomatic leverage. They want you in the bank, ready for a prisoner swap. Or to extract some other concession.”

“So what happens next?”

“We think your trial will be this afternoon. The court will provide a lawyer. Our advice is to plead guilty and offer a sincere apology.”

“And then what?”

“You’ll be sentenced and sent to prison. Then you’ll sit tight and wait for us to work the channels.”

“What’s the alternative?”

“There isn’t one.”

“Seriously?”

“Technically it was a crime. This is Russia. I have to be honest. The way things are right now, you have zero chance of walking away from this.”

“Prison where?”

“We expect Korovki. It’s a work camp eight hundred miles north of here. They like that location for foreign citizens. And troublemakers. It’s the middle of nowhere. Makes it hard for lawyers to get there. Or journalists. You’ll be making shoes, most likely.”

“How long of a sentence?”

“The guilty plea and the apology will help enormously. We’re expecting nine years. Best case six, worst case twelve.”

“Nine years?” Tyler said.

“A move in the game,” Cartwright said. “Pawn to king four. We can play too. We won’t forget you. We’ll get you out.”

“But when?”

“About ten months, probably. That’s our current average.”

Tyler didn’t answer.

The trial was surreal. No one spoke English. Not even his lawyer. The guy knew just two words, and he spoke them only once each, as the entirety of his pretrial discussion with his client. He used them as questions. First he said, “Guilty?” Tyler said yes. Then he said, “Apology?” Tyler said yes. Those were the last words he understood. There was no gavel. Someone started speaking, and then someone else, and then a third person, and a fourth, all talking fast in a bored boilerplate monotone. Then it was over. Papers were shuffled and some people left and new people entered. Ready for the next case.

Tyler had no idea what had happened. He assumed he had been convicted and sentenced. His lawyer gave him an arch of the eyebrows and a shrug of the shoulders, as if to say Oh well, never mind, goodbye. Then two guards in tan uniforms took an elbow each and walked him through back corridors and out a door to a parking lane, where a minibus was waiting. Really just a panel van with windows. Engine running, a driver in the front. The guards pushed Tyler inside. There were bus-style seats with chrome hoops where headrests would be. No other passengers. The guards handcuffed his right wrist to a hoop. They tossed the key to the driver. They climbed

back out of the van.

The driver cricked his neck, rolled his shoulders, shoved the lever in gear, and got on the road.

Seven time zones to the west the day was just beginning inside the White House. As always the president started with the daily intelligence briefing from the CIA. That morning it was delivered by the director herself. She had business on the Hill, so she dropped by ahead of time to share coffee and a three-page document stapled together. The first two pages were full of tensions here, problems there, crises brewing all over the place. The third page was a list of smaller concerns. In the middle was a minor line item: US citizen Professor Nathan Tyler arrested in Moscow for traffic violation, Foreign Service to monitor. Ramsey saw it but didn't react in any visible way. The CIA director was not a member of the club of five.

After six hours on the road the prison van had covered three hundred miles. Tyler was exhausted and uncomfortable. His seat was hard and upright, and the way his arm was cuffed to the rail meant he couldn't sleep. Couldn't doze, couldn't rest. The drone of the engine wore him down. Rough roads and hard springs shook him up. He figured eight hundred miles at the current rate of speed would take two days. Where would he sleep? In the van?

But no. Late in the evening the van stopped at a remote rural police station outside a small dark town full of wooden buildings. The driver got a cot upstairs and Tyler got a cell downstairs. Evidently an organized system. The cell was a mirror image of his first accommodations in Russia, but otherwise identical. Sleeping shelf, toilet, bars. No mattress, no blanket, no pillow. Maybe a nationwide specification.

The next day was rinse and repeat. The van, the handcuff, the endless jolting miles. They left at dawn, and drove through mist and wan light, through flat fields, birch forests, an immense dome of sky above. Six hours in, they stopped at another remote

police station for lunch and the bathroom. The driver ate upstairs, Tyler downstairs, and then they got back on the road, seemingly forever.

They arrived at Korovki as the daylight faded and a cold northern dusk clamped down. Tyler saw a wide cluster of buildings ahead, dull wood, worn and weathered. Like the occasional towns they had passed, except this one was ringed by a tall stockade fence, not tight to the buildings but some distance away, where a town's municipal boundaries might be. The place was at least sixty miles beyond the last man-made structure they had passed. There was nothing before the horizon in any direction. Truly the middle of nowhere.

The gates opened and the van drove in, along a rutted track, a hundred yards to the nearest building. The driver shuffled down the aisle and unlocked Tyler's cuff. He pulled him to the door and pushed him through.

Waiting for him was a guard in uniform who took his arm and hauled him inside. Tyler saw the van turn around and drive away. Then he was photographed and fingerprinted. He was given a blanket and a metal cup. Nothing else. No words were spoken. Some kind of trusted prisoner arrived to show Tyler to his quarters.

His quarters were inside the third workshop they came to. It was as big as a country barn, made of wood, with big windows and glass panels in the roof, for light to work by. Inside it smelled of new leather and unwashed bodies. Dozens of men were crouched over heavy-duty sewing machines, stitching soles to uppers. The trusted prisoner led Tyler through a partition door to a dormitory area. Rows and rows of identical beds. All but one had a blanket folded on it. The trusted prisoner left him there.

Tyler sat down on the bed without a blanket. It had a mattress. Just a thin pad of wadded cotton, but it felt good. So good he stayed there. He had no idea what else he was supposed to do. So he just waited.

An hour later the clatter of the sewing machines died away, and was replaced by slow footsteps and creaking floorboards. The door opened and the machinists filed into the dormitory. One by one they kicked off their boots and lay down on their beds.

Next to Tyler was a blond man about forty. Maybe more. He looked tired and worn. And thin and cold. He looked at Tyler and said, "You look American."

"Can't help it," Tyler said.

The guy asked, "What brings you here?"

His English was good, but with an accent. Dutch, Tyler thought.

"Are you from the Netherlands?" he asked.

"Yes, Rotterdam. My name is Jan de Vris."

"Nathan Tyler. I got hit by a police car. My fault, apparently."

"I took a photograph of a duck on a lake. Two miles away in the background was a military helicopter. I'm a secret agent, apparently."

"Is your embassy working on it?"

"Yes, but it turns out not many Russian spies are captured in the Netherlands. So we're a bit short in the quid pro quo department."

"How long have you been here?"

"Four years."

“Christ,” Tyler said.

“What did you do before you became a shoemaker?”

“I’m a math professor.”

“Really? That’s good. You’ll fit right in. There are always a few math people here. Russians love math people. They respect them.”

“They have a funny way of showing it.”

“It proves their importance. They can be public figures. People listen to them. So if they say bad things, they must be isolated, so they can’t be heard anymore.”

“What kind of bad things?”

“They know that two plus two is four. They don’t like it when the Kremlin says it’s five, or one, or eighty-seven.”

“What about you?” Tyler asked. “What did you do before you became a shoemaker?”

“I was a boat builder. I made yachts for rich people. Now I live a thousand miles from the sea.”

They heard a clanging sound in the distance, like an iron bar hitting an iron triangle. Clang, clang, clang.

“Dinnertime,” de Vris said.

Everyone rolled off their beds and grabbed their mugs and headed out. Tyler grabbed his, and followed them.

Dinner was a thin stew, ladled into their mugs. Standard practice among the prisoners seemed to be to drink the liquid and eat the lumps with their fingers. Tyler followed suit. There was a faint taste of meat, and plenty of turnips. Maybe some beets. But overall it was disgusting. We won't forget you, Michael Cartwright had said. The embassy lawyer. No doubt Jan de Vris's lawyer had said the same thing. Four years ago.

The dining hall was the same size as the workshop buildings. There were maybe two hundred people in it, eating at long trestles, then milling around, talking in low tired tones. Like a social hour. Tyler saw de Vris moving from group to group, exchanging news, checking on the general welfare. He seemed like a decent guy. Others were quiet and withdrawn. Some were silent, some were miserable. Some were clearly foreign. Out of place, different, restless, visibly anxious. As if they were always wondering whether tomorrow would bring a diplomatic breakthrough.

People started drifting away. Tyler tried to remember the route back to his workshop. He started to follow a guy he remembered, but Jan de Vris cut him off before the door. He said, "I brought you a math friend."

With de Vris was a young man, intense, skinny, shaved head, nervous eyes. He said, in formal English with a Russian accent, "Please do us the honor of joining us for an hour. We have a little mathematicians' club. We would like to hear the news from America."

Tyler paused a beat, and then went with him. Why not? What else did he have to do? They walked the maze of dark camp streets together, beaten earth underfoot, to a distant workshop building the same as Tyler's own, except there were no sewing machines inside. Just lasts and hammers, and bins full of heels, and tubs full of nails.

The dormitory was different. It was subdivided by extra partitions, into smaller rooms with four beds each. One room led to the next, and the next. A sequence. The last

door was closed. The nervous guy stopped six feet from it and gestured Tyler to go on ahead without him.

Tyler opened the door. The room had just one bed, not four. Plus a wooden table, and a three-legged stool. There was no mathematicians' club. No group of people. No waiting audience. Just one person. An elderly man, sitting on the bed, stooped, bent, long gray hair, seamed face, hooded eyes, a crackle of wild intelligence in his gaze.

It was Arkady Suslov.

President Ramsey and National Security Advisor McGinn had broached the subject on Tyler's second day in DC. Smooth White House timing, he thought. It can't be stopped. If you're in, you stay in. Ramsey said, "At this point we need to inform you that Suslov won't actually be at the math conference. He was arrested six months ago. Supposed to be a secret, but we heard about it. He criticized the government."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:21 am

“So where is he now?” Tyler asked.

“A penal colony in the middle of nowhere, named Korovki. So we need to find a way to get you there to meet with him.”

“Like a prison visit?”

“Not exactly,” McGinn said. “No visits are allowed at Korovki, except lawyers, and you’re not a lawyer.”

“Then how?”

“It’s where they send both high-status domestic troublemakers and high-value foreign detainees. As such, security is tight. The only sure way for you to get in is to commit a crime, in Russia, as a foreigner.”

“Are you serious?”

“Normally you would take a cab from the airport, but for this operation we think you should rent a car and drive yourself. Then have a wreck on your way to town. Damage some state property if you can. The jackpot would be to hit a police car. They hate that.”

“Are you serious?” Tyler said again, louder.

“For the biggest prize in history? Hell yes, we’re serious.”

Tyler asked, "How would I get out again?"

"A prisoner swap," Ramsey said. "We have plenty of folks they want back."

"How long would that take?"

"They'd do it this afternoon for some of them."

Tyler didn't answer.

"The entire might of the government," Ramsey said. "Every step, every hour."

"You'll have a tough few days," McGinn said. "But you'll change the world."

Which is how Tyler came to be in a labor camp eight hundred miles from Moscow, face-to-face with Russia's greatest living mathematician. Who said, "Korovki is like any small town. Full of gossip. Sometimes exciting. The Dutchman spread the word at dinnertime. A new fish is among us, name of Nathan Tyler, a math professor from America."

Tyler said, "I'm pleased to meet you, sir. It's an honor and a privilege."

"For me too," Suslov said. "I recognized your name, of course. A dozen different people sent me your thesis. Tremendous work. Such subtle understanding. Not many scholars have grasped Kindansky as thoroughly as you. Perhaps none at all."

"Thank you."

"I'm sincerely happy to make your acquaintance, Professor. But I must admit, I expected Oliver Bailey to accept my invitation in person, not send a surrogate."

“Excuse me?”

“Has he grown too grand for an arduous mission such as this? Has his desire for comfort overtaken his desire for glory?”

“I’m not sure I understand you, sir.”

“Please,” Suslov said. “Your act is not convincing. You can’t play dumb with a man who knows your work. You’re here to find out what number I used.”

Tyler stared at him. Then he looked away. He looked at the first algorithm in his mind, the eight-figure password, the faulty side chain. Kindansky numbers danced in his head. He checked here, checked there, checked a third place.

“The ambiguity was deliberate,” he said. “It was more than an invitation. You were waving your arms and shooining us in.”

Suslov inclined his head, conceding the point.

“It was beautifully symmetrical,” Tyler said. “The front door was also the back door.”

Suslov inclined his head again, accepting the compliment.

“You had to know we would find the second algorithm,” Tyler said. “Effectively that was the entire point of the invitation. Why?”

“Because I’m old enough to look back with clarity. Our nuclear capability was a Soviet achievement. As were satellites, and spaceships, and a hundred other things. We went from wooden plowshares to the hydrogen bomb. Thirty glorious years. The sordid pack of squalid gangsters we have today deserve none of it. So I’m taking away what I can.”

“And giving it to us?”

“You’ll disable it remotely. It’s of no other practical use to you. Giving it to you is the same as destroying it.”

“So what’s the number?”

Suslov paused a long moment.

“I’m not going to tell you,” he said. “You’re not Oliver Bailey.”

“Does that matter?”

“Very much,” Suslov said.

“I’m better than Bailey,” Tyler said. “With Kindanskys, I mean.”

“No question. But he’s famous. He’s one of them. He’s part of the furniture. And you’re not. You’re young and, forgive me, obscure. It would be very dangerous for you to know the number.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 2:22 am

“How?”

“Your own pack of gangsters is a little less squalid than ours, but not much. They will always want to keep the secret tight. That Bailey knows is bad enough. But a random math professor a thousand miles from Washington? They would feel profoundly insecure about that. Plus they don’t really want to trade the kind of superstar prisoner it would take to get you out of here in less than a year. So your embassy will tell you there’s a small bureaucratic issue, and it might be a couple days before they can get you out, but they need the number immediately, right now, for obvious national security reasons. You’ll give them the number, because you’re a good citizen. And then you’ll never hear from them again. They’ll betray you without a second thought. They’ll forget about you. You’ll cease to exist. You’ll die here, invisible and unheard. It will be a perfect win-win for them.”

“No,” Tyler said. “That won’t happen.”

“It happened to me. Now I hammer nails for a living.”

“That’s different. You criticized your government. I’m working with mine.”

“With them or for them?”

“They called it a team effort.”

“Was it a team plan?”

“It was the president’s plan. But he can’t leave me here. I could get a message out. I

could go public.”

“The ravings of a lunatic. Do you have proof you even met the president?”

Tyler paused a beat. These conversations never existed. They never happened. We’re not even filing a flight plan. This trip doesn’t exist. He didn’t answer.

“I thought not,” Suslov said. “Come see me tomorrow.”

The next day was all about the clang of the iron bar on the iron triangle. Like every day would be, Tyler thought. Forever. First reveille, then the call to breakfast, then the start of work hours. The sewing machines were difficult. Tyler couldn’t manage them. Jan de Vris found him a job sweeping the floor and hauling the trash. The dump was in the no-man’s-land between the last of the buildings and the stockade fence. Men were stumbling toward it, toting heavy pails the size of oil drums, tipping them out, coming back faster.

One of the men was Arkady Suslov. Tyler got in the procession ten yards behind him. Suslov looked happy to be out in the air. He was whistling a cheerful tune, like birdsong, face up to the misty sun, dragging his pail, making a scar in the dirt. Whistling was rare in a labor camp, Tyler imagined. Suslov emptied his pail and turned back. He saw Tyler and nodded a greeting, but said nothing. Maybe talking was forbidden. Tyler nodded back and they passed shoulder to shoulder, a yard apart. Suslov was still whistling. Tyler emptied his pail and headed back for more. He made three trips before the iron bar sounded lunch, and two afterward. On his return from the second, Jan de Vris stopped him at the door. He said the guards were looking for him, because two people had showed up from the US Embassy.

Tyler walked back to the guardhouse, where he had been processed the day before. The guard pointed to a hut a hundred feet away. It stood all on its own. Some kind of conference room, ostentatiously private.

Inside was Michael Cartwright, the legal attaché. The Brooks Brothers guy. With him was an older man, harder, brisker, altogether different. He gave his name as Shaw. Just that. No first name. He said he was also a legal attaché.

Cartwright asked, “How are you?”

“I haven’t showered since London,” Tyler said. “I haven’t changed my clothes. In fact I haven’t even taken them off. I eat turnips three times a day, and I haul garbage for a living. Apart from that, I’m great.”

“We have things to discuss,” Shaw said. A deep voice, confident, used to being in charge. “We got a need-to-know briefing based on heavily redacted information from a classified source. It read like a bedtime story. Apparently you have four friends in America. They send their best wishes. They’re anxious to hear your progress. They look forward to getting together again soon.”

“OK,” Tyler said.

“Separately we got an operational order to set up a prisoner swap. Involving you, I assume.”

“You’re not a lawyer, are you?”

“It’s how we get in here. Shameful, I know. The order was incomplete. Apparently the swap happens when you say the word. I assume that means when you complete your mission, which I assume means when you get the information your four friends want. But exactly how do you say the word? We’re eight hundred miles away. You can’t call us on the phone. You can’t put a chalk mark on a tree. We can’t drive out here every day, just in case.”

“We’ll figure that out,” Tyler said. “Assume you get the word. What happens then?”

“We get you out.”

“Immediately?”

“More or less. The ducks are all in a row. Finland is cooperating, so we can use the short route. Call it two hours’ flight time from there, which we would spend in the car, driving to the airfield to meet the plane. He gets off, you get on. So yes, more or less immediately.”

“I have the information my four friends want.”

“What?”

“My mission is complete.”

“Fantastic,” Shaw said. “That solves our problem entirely.”

“So let’s go.”

“You bet,” Shaw said. “I have to drive thirty minutes south to get cell reception. You wait here with Cartwright. In this room. Do not go back to work. As long as one of us is with you, it’s a legitimate legal conference, and they can’t touch you, as long as it takes. I’ll make the call, and I’ll pick you up on the way back.”

Tyler waited with Cartwright, in the room. They didn’t talk. There was nothing to talk about. Cartwright was strictly need- to-know. And don’t-want-to-know, Tyler thought. He figured thirty minutes south and thirty minutes back plus a phone call would add up to an hour and ten, maybe an hour and a quarter. He had no way of keeping track of time. There were no clocks in the camp. Just the iron triangle.

Shaw came back after an hour and twenty minutes. He looked concerned. He said, “We have a small problem.”

“What problem?” Tyler asked.

“The Russian prisoner due to be exchanged is waiting in Finland. He came down with COVID. The prison system in Finland prohibits the movement of infectious inmates. He has to isolate until he tests negative. Could be three days.”

Tyler didn’t answer.

Shaw said, “Your friends in America apologize for the inconvenience. They ask you to sit tight. They want you to rest assured they’re on it.”

Tyler didn’t answer.

“But they say the information you have is critical and urgent. A matter of national security. They need you to pass it on right now, through me.”

“No,” Tyler said.

“Excuse me?”

“Go call them again. Remind them of the arrangement we made. I go back there to discuss the information in person.”

“They won’t like that.”

“They suggested it.”

“You’re in a weak position.”

“I don’t agree,” Tyler said. “They want the information. I have it. That feels like a strong position.”

“This is national security.”

“Tell them to find another prisoner to exchange. One that doesn’t have a fever.”

“That could take days.”

“We have days, according to them. In fact tell them to find two prisoners. Tell them the price just went up. Tell them to loan the second guy to the Dutch government. To swap for a prisoner named Jan de Vris.”

“Who the hell is he?”

“A man who wants to go home.”

“You can’t do this.”

“I am doing it. Go make the call. Make as many calls as it takes. Mr. Cartwright and I will wait here. We’ll wait all night if we need to. We’ll wait all week. In this room. A legitimate legal conference. They can’t touch us.”

Jan de Vris made it home first. Helsinki to Rotterdam was a shorter distance than Helsinki to DC. Tyler was met at Andrews by the same two agents who had escorted him inside the NSA. This time they drove him to the White House. Ramsey, McGinn, Cash, and Bailey were waiting in the Oval Office. The club of five, reunited. None of them had a bad word to say. The details of his return went unmentioned.

Ramsey said, “Tell us.”

“Suslov knew we would come,” Tyler said. “The ambiguity was deliberate. He called it an invitation.”

“To what?”

“He doesn’t care for his government. He called them a sordid pack of squalid gangsters. He doesn’t want them to benefit from noble Soviet achievements. He wants us to deactivate the arsenal and let it rust.”

“So he just told you the number?”

“No,” Tyler said. “He didn’t. He was expecting Professor Bailey, not me. He thought it was too dangerous for me to know the number.”

“Why?”

“He thought you would get it out of me in bad faith and abandon me there.”

No one spoke. A long silence.

“Just Russian paranoia, I’m sure,” Tyler said.

“So you don’t have the number?” Bailey said. “You told us you did.”

“I saw him the next day. He was hauling trash to a pile. Out in the air. Korovki is a dismal place, full of indignities. To be outside was a simple pleasure. He was happy. He was whistling a tune. It sounded like it came from somewhere deep down.”

“What tune?”

“It was a piping sound,” Tyler said. “Like birdsong. Like a robin in an oak tree. All octaves. Low high high, high high high, high high low.”

“That’s the first palindrome,” Bailey said. “That’s 188,888,881. We thought it would be the second palindrome. We should go run a simulation.”

“No,” Tyler said. “I’m going home. I’m going to be a normal person. Living my life.

Doing my work. Reading the news. Maybe sometimes wondering if the pointy-heads in our three-letter agencies have hacked the Russians yet. But never actually knowing for sure.”

No one answered.

“I think you want me to be that person,” Tyler said. “Less for you to worry about.”

“May we call you if we need to?” Ramsey asked.

“No, sir,” Tyler said. “I would prefer that you didn’t.” He opened the door and stepped out of the Oval Office. One of the agents in the anteroom walked him to the street. Three hours later he was boarding a plane, by group number, through a jet bridge jammed with shuffling people.