MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE

 Preston Phelps picked up his Hertz rental car at LAX airport. The attractive blond female desk clerk recognized him, and discretely reached under her counter for the key.

 After fighting the usual traffic on the 405, he made his way south until he exited for Newport Beach, then took Route 1 to Corona del Mar State Beach. This being a weekday afternoon in March, his silver Tesla easily found a parking place at the deserted far corner of the lot.

 Reaching under the front passenger seat, Preston found what he was looking for: a small flash drive which had been affixed with a magnetic sleeve. Slipping off the sleeve, he plugged the flash drive into a USB port in his car's dashboard computer and turned on its auxiliary power. He listened carefully.

 "Good Morning, Mr. Phelps.

 As you know, Russian President Vladimir Putin is currently reviled as the world's top pariah for his unprovoked and deadly attack on the innocent people of Ukraine. In serious discussion with our NATO allies, it has finally been decided that Putin must be permanently eliminated as soon as possible, by whatever means necessary. His unstable frame of mind could have him considering using either tactical or even strategic nuclear weapons to achieve his goals -- possibly triggering World War III or Armageddon itself.

 Your job -- should you decide to accept it -- will be to put the increasingly deranged Vladimir Putin in his grave, and save both Ukraine and Russia from this escalating and unnecessary bloodshed.

 As always, should you or any of your IMF team be caught or killed, the Secretary will disavow any knowledge of your actions.

 This flash drive will self-destruct in ten seconds.

 Good luck, Preston."

 The flash drive soon gave off a sizzling sound, and a whiff of mist floated from it. Phelps would incinerate the now inert object in his home fireplace later that night, so he tucked the tiny device in his pocket.

 Next, he dropped off the Tesla rental at nearby John Wayne Airport, and took a taxi to his house in Laguna Beach.

 Once home, Preston poured himself a splash of Grey Goose over ice, and changed into a more comfortable outfit of simple dark track sweats. Then he got down on his knees at the hardwood floor near his bookshelves until he found the hidden panel. When he removed it, he exposed his secret vault. After dialing the tumbler combination, he pressed his right thumb on an adjacent electronic keypad. This secondary step afforded him extra security. Once the sturdy metal vault was opened, Phelps removed a thick binder and carried it to his couch. He glanced at a photo of his grandfather, Jim Phelps, who had been the IMF team leader back in the 1960s during the days of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Next to Jim was Preston's father, Reilly, likewise an IMF team leader during the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Preston Phelps was a third-generation man in the secret Impossible Mission Force.

 He went through the binder, carefully perusing page by page. Each file had a detailed dossier with photos of an IMF member. Preston needed to decide who would be best suited as a team member for this particular and probably very dangerous job. A native of Thousand Oaks, now at age thirty-eight, Phelps had been in his leadership position for seven years now. Three members from his various teams had sadly perished in the line of duty over that time, a fact he deeply regretted and inevitably recalled. But such was always the risk in this highly-specialized line of work. Choosing the right crew for a specific mission was always important to him.

 Preston quickly dismissed from his mind using any Asian, Hispanic, or Black agents this time -- simply because all team members would be working together deep within Russia, an overwhelmingly Caucasian country, and no one could afford to 'stand out' in any crowd or draw unwanted notice. He next focused on which agents were fluent in Russian, or could at least do a plausible Russian accent in several critical phrases.

 After an hour, he had his choices: a team of five including himself -- four men and one woman. He arranged to have them meet together at a secure 'safe house' in nearby Rancho Santa Margarita.

 Preston's team consisted of:

 Rod Maxwell, age 41, from New York; a master of disguises and voices, also trained in slight-of-hand magic and cheating at cards. Proficient in five languages.

 Nick Sharp, age 27, from Washington state; technology and computer expert, skilled in covert electronic communications, as well as being a master document forger.

 Elena Marnay, age 29, from Georgia; highly attractive brunette actress specializing in the often needed role of 'femme fatale,' she was also an expert in martial arts, chemical poisons, and emergency first aid.

 Zack Dunmir, age 30, from Texas; weapons and explosives expert, high-speed driver, mechanic, and especially proficient in hand-to-hand combat. At 6'4'' and 275 lbs. of solid muscle, he was formidable in any fight.

 Once his team assembled and coffee was served, Phelps went over the preliminary plans for the mission. All five members already knew each other from previous missions, and each was currently available at a moment's notice, by way of living in the greater Los Angeles area.

 "First, we need to know everything we can about our target, Putin. Then we need to know where to find him and how to get close to him. Next, how exactly should we terminate him? And lastly, how can we get away safely after the job's done?"

 Elena began. "I have been reading quite a lot in Putin's files ever since he invaded Ukraine late last month. He was born on October 7, 1952 in Leningrad. Vladimir was secretly baptized into the Russian Orthodox Church by his parents, which was counter to the official Soviet position against religion at that time. He still wears a silver cross on a neck chain under his shirt. He married Lyudmila Shkrebneva in 1983, and has two daughters, Maria and Katerina. The couple divorced in 2014. He attended St. Petersburg State University and the St. Petersburg Mining Institute. Putin was once a KGB intelligence agent, largely stationed in Dresden, Germany. He begins his Kremlin work day late, around 5:00 p.m. He rises at noon after going to bed around 3:00 a.m. every night. For breakfast, he always has plain Russian porridge or an omelet made from quail's eggs, with a side of cottage cheese and some fruit juice, followed by coffee. Putin is a non-smoker and virtually a non-drinker, unless he is toasting at an official banquet. Oh...and he especially likes pistachio ice cream, and even sent a supply of it to Chinese President Xi as a gift. Putin also enjoys playing with his four pets dogs -- Buffy, Yume, Verni, and Pasha. That's about all I can remember off the top of my head. So...who has some more information to share?"

 Rod then detailed the various residences that Putin used. "His main residence is in the western part of the Moscow region, about a twenty-five minute ride from the Kremlin. It is called Novo-Ogaryevo. His President's office is, of course, inside the Kremlin. Putin also has a government-leased apartment in Moscow. He uses the Konstantin Palace in St. Petersburg for official state events, especially with foreign dignitaries, but does not live there. Next, he has a deluxe dacha called Bocharov Ruchey in Sochi, on the Black Sea. Finally, there is Putin's newest extravagance, a 190,000 square foot Italianate-style villa dubbed 'Putin's Palace.' This mega-mansion on the Black Sea cost $1.4 billion, and features an underground ice-skating rink, an 'aqua-disco,' a helipad, a lap-dancing lounge with pole, and Louis XIV-style furniture throughout, which is Vladimir's preference. Putin is probably the richest man in the world, having siphoned off billions of rubles and stashed them in various undisclosed banks around the world. His minimum worth is estimated to be $200 billion. Plus, he has fifty-eight aircrafts at his disposal day or night, and he is the owner of a $700 million super-yacht called 'Scheherazade,' which is moored in Italy. It features a spa, a swimming pool that can be covered with a retractable dance floor, a wood-burning fireplace, a helipad, a pool table that is able to tilt in rough seas, and even an array of gold-plated toilet roll holders. Talk about ridiculous excess!"

 Nick spoke next. "We know that Putin doesn't trust computers, emails, or cell phones. He only uses a specially secured land-line telephone while in his Kremlin office. He's a total paranoid. As a youngster in school, he was bland and barely noticed by his teachers. Likewise, as a politician early in his career, he was totally unremarkable. Yet he kept his head down and made no enemies, so by sheer luck and stubborn perseverance, Putin rose to the top, to the surprise of practically everybody. Curiously, he enjoys the unwavering support of the Russian Orthodox church. They overlook his multitude of grave sins in favor of him being the world's last traditional 'savior' against such decadent rising Western values as liberal progressivism and gay marriage."

 Zack next added, "The man is actually small in stature -- only 5'5'' and 140 lbs. -- but he is a physical fitness fanatic who swims two-hours a day, then hits the weight room to beef up his muscles. He has a black-belt in the martial arts from his days back at the KGB, and he enjoys playing ice hockey and horse-back riding, the latter oddly often shirtless. He feels the need to prove to the Russian people that he is continually fit and strong. But in photos taken within the last two years -- during and after the Covid-19 pandemic -- Putin's face has looked puffy, a possible sign that he is taking steroids to combat pain from some undisclosed illness. But who's to say?"

 Preston wrapped it up by stating, "It's clear that Putin trusts no one. He kills anyone who stands in his way, or anyone who questions his judgment, just like Stalin did. We are dealing with a dangerous psychopath who will never admit a mistake, and who will fight to the bitter end, especially when he knows he's cornered. He could order a nuclear strike at any time, or unleash biological or chemical weapons on hundreds of thousands of innocent Ukrainian civilians. He is in a 'lose-lose' situation, which means we have to eliminate him as soon as possible -- especially as he is showing signs of becoming increasingly desperate and irrational."

 Phelps looked around at his expectant team. They nodded and agreed with his stark, dire assessment.

 "First step: We have to get inside Russia. I think Putin is likely staying close to home, both to control his own military generals running the war, and to have the Russian people rally near him. So I doubt he would currently be in the Black Sea area or on his yacht in Italy. I believe we could enter Russia by posing as a sympathetic independent U.S. news crew, promising to cover the Ukraine invasion from Vladimir's distorted point of view. We could film any supportive Muscovites in Red Square, then promise to share the interviews with any agreeable news agencies in the state-controlled media. For the crew roles, I would pose as the producer and director, Rod would be the cameraman, Elena would be the interviewer, Nick would be the soundman, and Zack would drive the van and set up all the necessary equipment... Nick, do you think you can forge us the proper permits and other fake passports and documentation?"

 "Sure, Preston...I'll get right on it," Sharp replied.

 "Great. Next step...what do you think about poisoning Putin, Elena? Would it be possible to do it totally undetected? Could we somehow get close enough to him? Maybe try a lethal dose in one of his breakfast foods or even in some of his favorite ice cream?"

 "Probably not, Preston. I remember reading that all of his foods are carefully tested before he takes a mouthful. Plus his foods come specially prepared for safety and purity from the nuns and priests of the farmland estate of the Russian Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow, Kirill," she noted. "Still, maybe there is a way. Let me work on it."

 "Well, Zack, how about a standard car bomb instead, or a roadside ambush with machine guns or rocket-propelled grenades, or perhaps a high-powered sniper's shot when our target is giving a public speech?"

 "Possible, but very, very tricky...but I'll brainstorm some possibilities," the big Texan promised. "It may be our only option at this point."

 "Now Rod, you are too tall to try and impersonate Putin if we tried a 'snatch and grab' switch-off kidnapping and later murder of the thug. But your proficiency in Russian on this particular job will be invaluable," Preston remarked. He knew that Rod Maxwell was also fluent in German, Mandarin, Spanish, and Turkish. "Think about other ideas we could use."

 "O.K...Let's have everyone meet back here in seventy-two hours, and see where we're at," Phelps concluded the meeting. "Be sure to keep an eye on all the news coming out of Ukraine. As you know, things are changing by the hour. Ukraine President Zelenskyy is bravely rallying his people and his fighting forces in a brilliant way. World opinion is absolutely on his side. He knows how to work the media and is very charismatic. Meanwhile, the Russian forces are stalled, and appear to be demoralized and in serious disarray. Seven of their top generals have been killed so far. Russian soldiers are defecting or being captured every day. 20,000 Russian troops are reported dead by last estimate. We can only guess what Putin's dangerous and unraveling state-of-mind is at this point."

 The IMF team discreetly split up. It was early evening now, and it would soon be getting dark after a soft pink and purple sunset in the calm southern Californian skies.

 When the team regrouped three days later, Nick Sharp had the forged documents needed to enter the Russian capital. Preston would get the airline tickets and required visas once they decided to move. That was when Elena announced a possible breakthrough scenario which could afford them the best opportunity to kill Russian President Vladimir Putin.

 "I learned from the Kirill farmland estate that our target is scheduled for a televised appearance at the Dormition/ Assumption Cathedral, inside the Kremlin, for the Russian Orthodox Easter afternoon service on Sunday, April 24. He will publically be taking communion bread at this service to show his solidarity with the faithful, who have been the largest supporters of his murderous and unprovoked Ukrainian invasion. This cathedral is the mother church of Muscovite Russia, and hence is a very important symbolic act. Last year, Putin attended Midnight Easter Service at the larger and more modern Christ the Savior Cathedral, located a few miles away from the Kremlin. This is the home church of Patriarch Kirill, but Vladimir's security forces insisted that the celebration be switched to the Dormition/Assumption venue instead."

 "Can we somehow get in this ceremony and lethally poison his communion bread cube?" Phelps asked, with growing interest and excitement. "What do you think, Elena?"

 "We would have to figure out exactly how to get in, but the poisoning part would not be very difficult to do. I can whip up a deadly dose of thallium and arsenic. Both are water-soluble, colorless, odorless, and tasteless. I could inject it into the bread cube with a hypodermic and let the mixture dry for a few hours so that the cube itself is not soggy upon ingestion by Putin, " Marnay explained. "Death within hours and no known antidote will take him out permanently."

 Rod spoke up next. "What if I dress up as Patriarch Kirill and be the sole distributor of the communion bread at the service? We could somehow temporarily switch him out while in his sacristy before the ceremony. I could wear his robes, wear a fake white beard, and use a perfect facial mask to realistically resemble him. I could study his voice patterns and believably duplicate those too. With slight-of-hand, I should be able to get the exact poisoned bread cube into our target's mouth without being noticed."

 Preston was intrigued. "That might work. What details do we know about this Patriarch Kirill?"

 Nick pulled out his Apple 13 iPhone and quickly shared some answers.

 "Kirill was made Patriarch and Orthodox Primate of all the Russias in February, 2009. He is seventy-five years old. He totally supports Putin's invasion of Ukraine, seeing it as more a metaphysical battle of traditional, non-Westernized Russian 'Good' over anti-family values and supposedly neo-Nazi riddled 'Evil' Ukraine. But some of his dissenting priests refuse to invoke his name during holy services as a sign of protest against his support of this latest military carnage."

 Zack pulled out his phone next, and searched: Eastern Orthodox communion rituals. "It says here that all Orthodox sects, including Russian, use a golden or silver spoon to administer communion. The blessed bread cube is lightly dipped in the blessed chalice of wine and served together, being placed in the recipient's mouth by the priest. It goes mouth-to-mouth without cleaning. So, Rod, doing your 'slight-of-hand' cube trick might not work as easily as you hoped."

 Rod Maxwell thought for a moment. "Can you find me a photo of the Patriarch serving communion in his Easter vestments?"

 After two minutes of suspense, Zack found what Rod asked for.

 Rod studied the image, and enlarged it on the phone screen with his fingers. Kirill was wearing an all-white outfit with gold-embroidery and fringing, with a circular, white, religious crown-hat topped with a cross. Around his neck were three necklaces: two with round icons, and one -- in the middle -- bearing a large silver crucifix.

 "That's it...the crucifix. I've got an idea. Nick, can you exactly replicate that item, but add a hollow chamber at its base, just big enough for our little poisoned bread cube? And rig it so that when I press Christ's feet on the cross, the secret chamber will open?"

 "I see what you are getting at, Rod...I know a trusted and discreet craftsman in Irvine who can make what you want, but it might him take a week. What do you think, Preston?"

 "That could work. We are still a month out from April 24. I want us 'in-country' by at least the 10th. So go for it, Nick."

 In the meantime, Elena said she would work up the poison mixture. Plus, she had another idea.

 "Instead of my usual 'sexy woman' pose, how about me dressing up demurely as an Orthodox nun?"

 The team was momentarily startled, but the four men recovered and simply smiled, and asked what she specifically had in mind.

 "In the background of one of the Patriarch's photos was a nun, covered in all black folds, with a rounded black head cowl. Only her face -- from eyebrows to chin -- was visible. If I wear no makeup and look as plain and unsexy as a typical nun, I can try to be as near as possible to our target during the administration of communion by Rod, posing as the Patriarch. Putin is sure to be surrounded by heavy security guards, so if they balk at their leader ingesting a specific bread cube out of safety concerns, I will speak up and volunteer to take it instead. Rod can do a slight-of-hand and give me a normal bread cube. Satisfied, Putin can then be slipped the poisoned cube from the secret bottom of the crucifix. What do you think?"

 "That's ingenious, Elena! Let's run with that idea. As part of our fake news team with our cameras, I, Zack, and Nick will be at the far side, filming. After the deed is done, we will all meet outside at the rear of the cathedral and hopefully make our safe getaway. We still need to plan our detailed escape out of Russia, of course."

 "And we still need to plan on how to get inside the cathedral and switch out the real Patriarch with Rod, then back again," Nick reminded everyone.

 "I've been thinking on solving that problem too," Zack admitted. "Because we are dealing with a church, we automatically think of baptisms, weddings, sacred holidays, and...funerals. So how about this...we arrange to have a fictitious 'important person' funeral scheduled for the day after Putin's big Easter photo-op. We rig a fancy bronze coffin with hidden bottom ventilation holes and put a fully-Patriarch-costumed Rod inside with the lid down. We bring it into the sacristy, then grab the real Kirill when he is getting ready for the Easter service and knock him out with a harmless sleep hypodermic. Elena, you can fix that up and Rod will have it with him. After the service, Rod sheds his disguise and changes clothes as we leave Kirill behind in the coffin, peacefully snoozing. Preston, Elena, Nick, and Zack can meet back at the van as Rod slips out and off we go. What do you think?"

 "Wow, that's some excellent thoughts from everyone here today! It's an honor to work with such a clever team, Preston praised. "That would have to be our 'Plan A' , Zack." All grinned in agreement.

 Over the next week, while the tricked crucifix was being made, Rod arranged for Kirill's Orthodox Easter white vestments to be duplicated by a trusted costume designer. With Nick's help, he used a special, high-tech, facial mask replicator, which rendered a perfect latex model of the Patriarch's features. It could be peeled off and discarded when the job was finished. Rod also worked on getting an exact white beard attachment. He carefully watched YouTube videos to learn how to mimic Kirill's speech patterns, voice, and body movements. Rod rehearsed these over and over.

 Elena, meanwhile, worked on the poison mixture. She obtained the special religious bread recipe from a local Eastern Orthodox church, and experimented with several cubes of it until she got it perfect. She also obtained an Eastern Orthodox nun's black outfit from a Hollywood movie studio's wardrobe department, and whipped up the hypodermic with its sleep drug.

 Zack and Nick got the TV news camera gear assembled, and they discreetly practiced with it in out-of-the-way locations. They would get a rental van and the bronze coffin once they were in Moscow. Preston got their airline tickets and visas, and added those to Nick's forged passports, alternate credit cards, and other documents. Preston Phelps would be known as 'Bruce Geller' from here out, and the other team members also bore new names. The date for the squad to leave home would be April 9th.

 With all of their equipment, the IMF group flew in a military aircraft from nearby Vandenberg Air Force Base to Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, D.C. From there, they switched to another military plane and flew to the U.S. base in Frankfurt, Germany. Next, they switched to a commercial Finnair jumbo-jet and headed to Helsinki, Finland. Finally, they connected with their concluding flight to Moscow, and arrived at SVO safely.

 Each IMF team member had been in the Russian capital before -- on other, separate missions -- and each knew either a high or adequate amount of the language, so the routine was familiar: They would be randomly monitored as any foreign visitors were, with the usual listening devices secretly installed in their hotel rooms. Security cameras would be ever-present as well. If they were deemed suspicious, they would be then be covertly followed and photographed.

 At their turn in the customs line, the crew assembled with their luggage and multiple containers of TV camera equipment. Their disguises and poisons and specially-rigged silver crucifix were carefully hidden in 'false bottom' compartments in their roller suitcases, should they have their luggage inspected.

 A pasty-faced customs agent with the name tag "Ivan" asked to inspect their stack of documentations and permits. He asked 'Bruce' if he spoke Russian. "*Da*," Preston replied. So they held the rest of their conversation in that language.

 "So you and your group are American TV news film crew? Why was I not informed of this in advance? These papers are not in order. *Nyet, nyet...*You must wait until I contact my supervisor at his home and verify them."

 Phelps remained calm. "These authorizations and permits are totally genuine, my friend. So I doubt if your boss wants to be bothered by you calling him now. He's probably at his country dacha screwing his mistress anyway, don't you think?." He chuckled and winked at Ivan. The customs agent barely covered a smirk as he reacted. "Well, then, maybe we can come to some sort of mutual agreement instead," he proposed, raising his eyebrows coyly.

 From endless experience, Preston knew this was the shakedown start for a cash bribe, so he played along with the game. He turned his back so that the room's security camera couldn't see what he was doing. He said in a lowered Russian voice, "I see...well, Ivan, have you ever met my good friend Benjamin Franklin? He would be happy to meet you." Preston slipped out a crisp $100 bill and flashed it. Ivan's eyes lit up. He cleared his throat.

 "Um...does your friend Benjamin Franklin also happen to have a twin brother?" Ivan innocently and quietly asked. Preston instantly understood the gambit, and offered another similar crisp bill to the greedy agent. "Yes...I believe we are done here now, Mr. Geller," Ivan declared with a sly smile, stamping the documentations. "You and your crew may go now. I hope you enjoy your visit to Moscow."

 Zack had previously reserved a rental vehicle for them, so the crew went with their gear to the rental counter. They got a dark grey, late-model, high-top Mercedes van. It was expensive, but exactly what they needed. They loaded up and Zack drove them to their lodgings -- the historic, now deluxe five-star Hotel National, currently run by Marriott, located just a block from bustling Red Square.

 They each had their own room, but connecting doors made it simple to get together to converse. They used standard silent IMF hand and body signals to communicate, or innocent-sounding code words or phrases, when they knew they were being audio-recorded by their Russian hosts. The team also utilized specially encrypted texts on their cell phones, then deleted the evidence.

 So for the first few days -- in brisk, winter-like weather, even though it was almost mid-April -- they recovered from jet lag and did the typical tourist sites, knowing that they were being casually monitored by the local authorities: St. Basil's Cathedral, a visit to Lenin's Tomb, a stroll along side the Moskva River, shopping for souvenirs at the enormous GUM department store, a stop at the Tretyakov Gallery art museum, a look at Moscow's amazing subway system, an evening Bolshoi Ballet performance, and, lastly, a guided tour inside the walls of the Kremlin -- paying extra-close attention when inside the gold onion-domed Assumption Cathedral, for here the killing would take place.

 Built in 1479, the dramatic cathedral interior was completely covered with remarkable religious icons and precious holy artworks. Even the rounded pillars were highly decorated. Lighting was provided by enormous and ornate hanging chandeliers. This is where Putin would be fatally poisoned -- ironic, or perhaps fitting, seeing as this was where most Russian czars had once been crowned. All the church Patriarchs were also buried here too, so this was where Kirill himself would someday be laid to rest.

 Their typical 'innocent' touring complete, it was time to set up filming in Red Square as part of their cover operation. This was done every day for three hours unless it was raining, and would continue up until the day before Easter. Under the ever-watchful eyes of the metro police, who examined their various permits and authorizations, the IMF team parked their van near St. Basil's and got out their electric cables, video camera on a wheeled stand, microphones, sound boom, and reflective lighting panels. Power sources and other electronics were tucked away inside the van, connected to the master digital recording console by the cables. The TV crew asked local passersby in Russian if they supported their President's invasion of Ukraine.

 The crew was rather surprised at the level of support for Putin's brutal actions. Seven out of ten Muscovites volunteering their opinion said the invasion was a good thing, and that Ukraine was always, and should again be, a part of Mother Russia. They felt that it was not an independent, democratic nation in its own right. The IMF team attributed such opinions to the incessant propaganda and iron-fisted control of Russia's state-run media -- obviously scripted by Putin and his minions, and steadfastly re-enforced by the Orthodox Church. Preston knew that many Russians yearned for a return to a mythical, pre-Communist era of traditional Imperial Russian power, culture, and world prestige. And Putin cleverly tapped into that longing. Meanwhile, three out of ten passersby who were randomly asked if they wanted to be interviewed either refused to be interviewed (perhaps out of fear of retribution of some sort for speaking out in public), or simply stated that they wanted peace, and were against any such senseless killing and bloodshed.

 Zack soon found a discreet garage to rent in the rural outskirts of the city. Its needy owner happily took American cash, with no questions asked, and never came back to snoop. After purchasing the expensive bronze coffin needed for their planned 'switch' of Rod for Kirill on April 24th, Zack and Nick transported that item to the garage, then bought an acetylene torch and used it to bore hidden ventilation holes in the coffin's undercarriage. They were now set for that aspect of their upcoming operation.

 With a few days to go until Putin's planned elimination, while still keeping a wary eye on the daily dramatic events unfolding in Ukraine, Phelps gathered his crew at Moscow's Gorky Park and brought up possible options for their final hurdle: a safe escape out of Russia immediately after the job was complete.

 "Our usual choice would be dropping off our rental van and exiting through the same airport we arrived in, SVO, with all of our gear. Another would be to abandon the van and gear, and take the express train from Moscow to St. Petersburg, then hop on the quick ferry to Finland. But after Putin is declared dead -- Elena estimates 2-3 hours after he ingests the poisoned bread cube -- those avenues might be temporarily sealed as the nation grapples with the undoubted chaos and uncertainty that occurs until a new President is sworn in. So another idea is to rent a motorboat in advance, and take the rivers-and-lakes waterway which connects Moscow and St. Petersburg. Once at the Gulf of Finland, we ditch the motorboat and procure a car, and make our way to the nearby border of Estonia. So...do any other creative suggestions come to mind?" Preston inquired.

 "Well, we might consider driving our Mercedes van west to a particular lake area near the Estonian-Russian border," Elena offered. "I have been carefully studying various maps. This locale is called Lake Peipus. Its northern shore empties into the Narva River. The actual Russian border, just south of the small town of Skam'ya, is very narrow there. All we have to do is procure a boat and row or motor 100 meters or so, and we would be instantly on the secure Estonian side. The Estonian town of Vasknarva is our goal. Once safely there, we can make our way with the help of our Estonian NATO allies to their capital, Tallinn, and fly from there back to the U.S. military base at Frankfurt. From there, we are home free. What do you think?"

 The IMF team liked Elena's proposal, mainly because it offered the most privacy and independence away from public transportation, and possible security snafus with the Russians. "That's our exit plan then," Preston decreed. "Let's go with that. Nice work, Elena."

 Easter Sunday, April 24, dawned windy and chilly, with dour, leaden-skies. The IMF team was primed and ready for the big show. The fate of the world might well hinge on whether they would be successful or not.

 The afternoon service at the cathedral inside the Kremlin would begin at 3:00 p.m. The earlier traditional Easter Midnight service had been its usual spectacle, with singing, a candle-lit procession into the church, and wafting holy incense and prayers -- all presided over by Patriarch Kirill and six assisting priests. "Christ has risen!" he proclaimed in a booming voice, and blessed the worshipful throng crowded inside the cathedral. The people stood for two hours -- there being no pew benches in any Orthodox churches -- for the long holiday service.

 Getting ready at 2:00 p.m., Zack and Nick pulled the Mercedes van around the back of the Hotel National. Rod Maxwell and Elena Marnay got into the crowded back of the vehicle. Overlooking the TV filming gear and bronze coffin, the van interior resembled a mini- dressing room, with two small chairs and two compact mirrors with theatrical-type lighting. Rod donned his white Patriarch gown and crown-hat outfit, then carefully placed his Kirill latex face mask over his own and attached the fake white beard. Elena produced the special bread cube laced with lethal thallium and arsenic, and inserted it into the hidden levered base of the silver crucifix that Rod would place around his neck. Maxwell had earlier practiced many, many times in front of his hotel room mirror with an ordinary cube of bread, making sure he could open the rigged cross smoothly, and then cleverly palm the deadly cube when the time came. Elena dressed in her all-black Orthodox nun costume with rounded matching cowl. She added some subtle pale color on her otherwise make-up-less face to appear more 'cloistered-looking' and plain. She also handed the hypodermic with its sleeping drug to Nick Sharp. He would inject it into Patriarch Kirill's neck when the time came.

 Preston, meanwhile, had checked them all out of their hotel and walked with all of his necessary forged documents to the main Kremlin gate beneath Spasskaya Tower. Beneath its huge clock face, Phelps would wait for the dark grey van to pull up.

 When it arrived, he got in and the IMF team drove to the security checkpoint. Papers were examined and found in order. "There are other TV crews from around the world already here to film our beloved leader at the Easter church service," the proud military guard proclaimed. "Belarus, Syria, North Korea, Pakistan, and others. You are the only USA film crew allowed in, so be sure to show the truth to your countrymen. President Putin is a great man!" He then saluted and waved the van through without the bother of further van inspection.

 The dark grey Mercedes pulled up to the back of the cathedral. Rod climbed into the specially-vented coffin inside the van. Before the lid was closed, Preston smiled and added. "Good luck, Rod. See you soon." Driver Zack and Nick next discreetly unloaded the secured coffin and carried it inside the delivery doorway, which was adjacent to the sacristy -- the quiet room where the Patriarch dressed in his special religious vestments. Preston and Elena got out of the van next, and walked around to the front of the church. They entered through a heavy security presence and its metal detectors. As a nun, Elena was easily passed through. Preston had his necessary documents checked yet again. He then informed the guards, in crisp Russian, that his TV filming crew would be arriving momentarily with their equipment. He entered the church and found a good filming position off to the side of the huge and colorful main iconostasis wall. Behind this wall of painted religious saints were two bejeweled golden doors, which led into the recessed altar area where the sacred holy communion rite was held.

 Zack and Nick patiently waited beside the coffin inside the sacristy until the Patriarch arrived around 2:30 p.m.

 "What is this? Who are you?" he asked in thick Russian, surprised.

 "Your Holiness, we are sorry to disturb you before your important service, but we were asked to bring the remains of this important government official here today, even though his funeral is not until tomorrow morning. We were told we were unable to do so tomorrow," Nick Sharp blandly explained.

 Kirill seemed suspicious, so as he approached the coffin, Zack gently pinned him from behind while Nick removed his hidden hypodermic syringe and jabbed the Patriarch in the neck. "Don't worry, your Holiness...you will simply drift off into a deep sleep for a few hours, then wake up," he soothingly explained.

 Zak then tapped on the coffin lid. Rod Maxwell pushed the bronze lid open and climbed out. He was wearing his trick silver crucifix, but he also removed the two circular icon pendants from Kirill's neck and placed them around his own. Rod added his own duplicate, ornate white hat as the finishing touch to his costume. "How do I look?" he asked. "Perfect," Zack replied. "Good luck. See you soon, Rod." Nick wished. Then the unconscious Patriarch was gently lowered into the coffin, and the lid was closed. The switch was complete! Nick and Zack left and made their way around to the front of the church carrying minimum TV camera equipment. They passed quickly through security thanks to Preston's earlier permits, and joined their other IMF teammate. The three set up for filming, while noticing that Elena was praying and kissing various flat, glass-topped holy icons near the front of the cathedral near the looming iconostasis wall. She correctly remembered to make the sign-of-the-cross -- after each previously rehearsed prayer, in Russian -- with three fingers, in the correct Eastern Orthodox style.

 The crowd reacted with hushed excitement as Russian President Vladimir Putin was swept inside the church with a heavy entourage and maximum security. A path was made for him to move to the very front at the altar rail. He was shorter than his surrounding protection detail, but people could catch a glimpse of Putin's expensively tailored dark-charcoal suit, with white shirt and solid red tie. It was a few minutes past 3:00 p.m.

 This special 'Pascha' service would be shortened to just under an hour. The Patriarch (Rod) greeted and blessed the congregation, saying in a thrilling voice, "Christ has risen!" The faithful assembly heartily responded, "Truly He is Risen!" The Patriarch then recited the traditional Easter last paragraph from St. John Chrysostom:

 "Let us take part in this fair and radiant festival. Let no one be fearful of death, for the death of the Savior has set us free...O Death, where is thy sting? O Hades, where is Thy victory? Christ is risen and Thou art overthrown. To Him be glory and power from all ages to all ages."

 Rod-as-Kirill next expertly acted to be in deep contemplation while sitting on a golden throne before the altar until the consecration ritual of the holy communion bread and wine began. If he was nervous, he never showed it. Meanwhile, traditional prayers and songs were conducted by four other priests, with the assembled worshipers joining in the singing, and giving the formal prayer responses.

 So far, the IMF ruse was mercifully working according to plan. But could the crucial assassination of Putin likewise be smoothly pulled off?

 The bread and wine were at last consecrated and prepared. So, with a golden spoon, Rod, in his impressive Patriarchal vestments made ready to serve communion to the faithful. An assisting priest on his left held the golden chalice of blessed wine, while another assisting priest on his right held the golden platter of blessed bread cubes. Elena moved with demure stealth through the crowd towards the front, so as to be as close as possible to Putin as he took communion, just in case she was needed to prove its safety from any suspicious security men.

 As previously arranged, Vladimir would be allowed to take communion first. Because the spoon was not wiped clean after each use, this would help guarantee that no potential germs infected the Russian President.

 Patriarch Rod Maxwell took the biggest gamble of his life with his next move. If he guessed wrong, the entire mission would fail, and Putin would not be terminated today.

 Rod took a regular bread cube from his right, placed it on the spoon, then lightly dipped it in the wine chalice on his left. He solemnly offered it to Putin. Seen up close, Rod noticed that Putin's face looked strained and puffy, his skin rather sallow and less than robust. His blue eyes, however, were still vital and icy and emotionless. These were the evil portals of a man with his mind forever elsewhere, constantly scheming, a cruel chess-player with human lives. This was a killer without remorse. A man who had deliberately separated himself from humanity...

 Suddenly, a beefy bodyguard blocked the Patriarch's communion-filled golden spoon. "I must taste first for safety," he declared.

 That was when Elena the nun moved closer, and a announced, in a loud voice, "I will take our Lord's body and blood without fear or hesitation. God will protect. Allow me, your Holiness..."

 Patriarch Rod dismissed the bodyguard by urging the nun to step forward, where she was given the sacrament. "Thank you, my child," he uttered. She did the sign-of-the-cross and gave a respectful bow, then stepped back.

 While Putin asked for the golden spoon and was occupied wiping it off using his lapel pocket white handkerchief, Rod casually folded his hands on his lower chest over his silver crucifix and carefully pressed the feet of Jesus. He felt the hidden compartment hatch open and the poisoned bread cube drop into his fingers. He professionally palmed it between the third and fourth fingers of his right hand. Putin bowed and return the golden spoon to the Patriarch, which Rod received with his left hand. When Rod reached to his right for a cube from the regular golden bread platter, he slipped the lethal cube into his thumb and index fingers and grasped it. Next, he placed the cube on the golden spoon, and dip it lightly into the wine chalice on his left. The IMF fake Patriarch lastly spooned the now unholy mixture into the unsuspecting mouth of the world's #1 villain. "Die, you bastard," Rod thought as he gave a respectful (yet phony) nod to the doomed President as Putin made a show of piously crossing himself for the benefit of the various international TV cameras. Others in the congregation lined up and waited next for the sacrament, as Rod expertly maintained his performance. But an exit path for the Russian President was instantly secured, and Putin and his entourage immediately left the cathedral. Swarms of Russian photographers outside the church snapped his picture before Putin got into his armored limousine and sped off.

 Watching these dramatic actions, Preston Phelps checked his watch: it was 3:47 p.m. He signaled to Elena, Zack, and Nick to head right to their van. They would simply abandon their TV equipment where they used it.

 After the Easter service ended, Rod thanked his four assisting priests in the sacristy and blessed them, and told them they could go. Alone again, Rod removed his fake white beard and peeled off his latex Kirill mask and his white vestments and carefully folded the latter, leaving them on a table with his crown-hat and two borrowed necklaces on top of the pile. Next, he opened the bronze coffin and pulled out a change of clothes from under the peacefully sleeping true Patriarch. He left the lid open as a courtesy. Finally, he walked out of the sacristy and through the back delivery door where he joined his friends in the waiting Mercedes -- his mask and beard stuffed in his pockets, but still clutching his trick crucifix. With Zack again at the wheel, the IMF team departed the Kremlin grounds, and were soon on their way west towards Estonia. They felt exhausted yet triumphant! But they were not out of danger yet.

 The crew would be driving from Moscow to Gdov, the closest city to the little town of Skam'ya, where they would try to cross the Narva River. "845 km. or 525 miles away," Elena explained. "There are two ways to go: the toll road heading northwest towards St. Petersburg, then west to Gdov, or straight west then north on the M-9/E-22/E-95 with no tolls. That choice is more remote and offers less traffic. Both routes take about eleven hours. Zack already filled up our gas tank, so we can go half way before we need to stop for fuel and food." She then slipped out of her nun's habit and changed back into more casual traveling clothes.

 "Let's do the second choice," Preston decided. Looking at a map on his cell phone, he spotted a town half-way on the chosen route named Nelidovo. "Let's shoot for that for gas and a quick meal."

 While they drove, Phelps praised his entire crew for their cool professionalism, courage, and hard work. "A really fabulous job, everyone...And, Rod, your entire act was totally convincing! When we make it safely to Estonia, the drinks are on me. Then we have all earned a nice, long vacation once we get Stateside."

 Nick Sharp, who always had a high-tech, portable communications unit with him on any mission, was soon listening in on any uncensored 'chatter' regarding Putin or his whereabouts -- as well as keeping tabs on the latest events coming out of Ukraine. "Nothing critical to announce yet," he remarked when asked.

 The area they were motoring through, once they left the urban sprawl of Moscow, was heavily forested with pine, cedar, spruce, and birch trees. The weather was still dreary, with scattered patches of drizzle. The team had several bottles of mineral water and some energy bars to munch on until their meal stop. The warmth of the van's heater and the hum of the road soon had Rod, Elena, and Preston taking some badly needed naps.

 At 6:00 p.m., Nick alerted everyone that he heard unconfirmed reports on a shortwave band that Putin had been rushed to the hospital with an undisclosed medical condition. "Bye-bye, Vladimir," he quipped. "I hope you enjoy your new dacha, burning in Hell!" The others applauded his remark.

 By 7:30, night had fallen. They stopped around 9 p.m. for food and gas in Nelidovo as planned, and remembered to speak and act Russian while inside the truck-stop-style casual restaurant. The meal was mediocre but it was served fast and was filling. After they finished and left, Nick took over for Zack Dunmir at the wheel so the big Texan could catch some sleep.

 Around midnight, while listening to the van's satellite radio, the official word from Russian media came out that Vladimir Putin had died -- supposedly of a heart attack.

 The IMF crew didn't whoop and holler, however. They simply looked at each other and nodded with relief. "Well... that's that," Preston Phelps finally allowed, breaking the silence. They were still three hours out of Gdov. Zack switched back as driver, with Nick again monitoring the airwaves and the internet for more domestic and international reaction to the unexpected death of the Russian dictator. Ukraine President Zelenskyy was naturally first to comment. "Our sincere condolences to Vladimir's two daughters on the loss of their father. But we must now pray for a new Russian leader to emerge who will offer a cease-fire for this senseless war, and stop all untoward aggression against my country. We have never been Russia's enemy, and we long to welcome our Russian brother and sister 'cousins' again soon, with the open arms of peace."

 Around 3 a.m., the van arrived in Gdov, a dismal town mostly deserted at that hour. It was only a short distance further north to Skam'ya, with its crucial, and potentially dangerous, river crossing.

 Once in Skam'ya around fifteen minutes later, they noted it was an even smaller town, but also fast asleep. It was hard to believe they were near a border area between two very disagreeable neighbor countries. The team cut the van's motor but left the keys in the ignition, then grabbed their forged passports and other documents and headed for the river. They could see the lights of Vasknarva, Estonia, and their freedom and safety very close now, just across the dark waters.

 Preston spotted a fishing trawler moored at a dock. "We need to 'borrow' this boat, Zack. Can you hot-wire and sail it? If its rightful owner doesn't get it back, he can keep our Mercedes in a fair trade -- providing he never tells the rental company how he got it...Let's move!"

 Dunmir got to work, and soon the trawler's engine sputtered to life. Mooring lines were released, and slowly, off they went.

 Suddenly a man emerged from his house and began cursing and shouting in Russian. Moments later, two police cars with sirens screaming arrived. A military truck with soldiers came seconds later. A spotlight was shined on the boat, with serious commands of "*Ostanovka! Ostanovka!*" ("Stop! Stop!") Shots were fired, a few rounds splintering the wooden sides of the battered fishing vessel. "Keep going, Zack! Don't stop! We are almost across!" Preston urged. They had passed the estimated 100-meter mark that Elena had previously researched. They were now on the Estonian side of the Narva River!

 Estonian soldiers were waiting for them on their shoreline with rifles drawn. With empty raised hands, the IMF team explained that they were Americans who recently completed a special forces mission. Preston asked to be taken to their commander at once.

 Once their story was explained to the Estonian authorities and the U.S. State Department cleared them, the five operatives were taken to a hotel outside Tallinn to clean-up, eat, and rest. Next, the team was booked on a flight the following afternoon to Frankfort. At the American base there, they were debriefed. They then learned that a new Russian President had been sworn in, ending Vladimir Putin's nearly twenty-two year authoritarian strangle-hold on power. The man now in charge of Russia was Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, a moderate, age fifty-six.

 While waiting for their military transport flights back home to California, the Impossible Mission Force was informed that Mishustin had ordered an immediate cease-fire in Ukraine, and had set up immediate peace talks. He offered a total withdrawal of all Russian forces from that country's soil, including Crimea, which had been illegally occupied by Russia since 2014. In return, Ukraine was asked to abandon any rights to forcing reparations from Russia to rebuild their battered country, nor to hold trials for any Russian military leaders for accused war atrocities. President Zelenskyy was expected to agree to these reasonable terms. Meanwhile, the United States formally pledged a new cash and equipment "Marshall Plan" to help rebuild Ukraine's destroyed cities, towns, and infrastructure -- a process that unfortunately would require decades.

 The world breathed a huge sigh of relief. Frozen Russian bank assets were soon released, Russian boycotts were lifted, and Russia was once again welcomed into the world economy and the more cooperative 'family of man.'

 Yet an ever-watchful China still stayed silent, having said virtually nothing during the past three months about the bloody events in Ukraine.

 Thus, thanks to the incredible clandestine efforts of the Impossible Mission Force -- and its highly-specialized band of brave men and women whom the public would never know -- a possible World War III was narrowly averted.

 At least, that is, for the time being...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

 March 29, 2022