

# LAUNCH CODE

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**MICHAEL  
RIDPATH  
LAUNCH  
CODE**



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*for Betsy and Jim*

*‘Never, perhaps, in the post-war decades was  
the situation in the world as explosive and  
hence more difficult and unfavourable as  
in the first half of the 1980s.’*

Mikhail Gorbachev, leader of the Soviet Union, 1986

*‘We may have been at the brink of  
nuclear war and not even known it.’*

Robert Gates, Deputy Director of CIA  
and later Secretary of Defense

# PROLOGUE

## November 1983, Norwegian Sea

The end of the world looks like this.

Man creates the means to obliterate the planet: sixteen Poseidon missiles, each with their own ten independent warheads, enough to provoke a massive retaliation from the country at which they are fired. Machines transmit the order. Humans obey.

The doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction, the doctrine which preserves peace in a nuclear world, demands that humans will obey, and that the enemy knows that they will obey.

Humans like Lieutenant William M. Guth (USN), assistant weapons officer on the USS *Alexander Hamilton*, loitering one hundred and twenty miles north-east of the Faroe Islands, deep in the cold embrace of the Norwegian Sea.

The *Hamilton* was Bill Guth's first nuclear submarine. In the two years since he had joined the crew at the end of 1981, the Cold War had been steadily warming up. The rhetoric from the American president Reagan and the Soviet leader Andropov had become more heated, the Americans and the Russians were deploying intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe and in September a Korean airliner had been shot down having strayed into Soviet airspace over Eastern Siberia.

Yet Bill had become more confident in his own abilities and in the abilities of the crew members around him. They were never idle as they puttered along at three knots a few hundred feet beneath

the surface. Ever more inventive training exercises simulated all manner of disasters from fires on board, to leaks, to shutting down the submarine's nuclear reactor, to evading torpedo attacks.

And yes, to launching the *Alexander Hamilton*'s nuclear weapons.

As assistant weapons officer, Bill had an important role in the complicated launch sequence, along with the twenty or so 'missile techs' who worked alongside him, and his immediate boss, the weapons officer.

He was making his way up the ladder to the upper level of the missile compartment when the announcement echoed through the submarine.

'Alert One, Alert One!'

He scrambled to the top of the ladder, grabbed the bar over the hatch into the operations compartment and swung his six-foot frame feet first through the hole. He hurried the short distance to op-conn, the tiny room between the radio shack and the control room, where the printout of an Emergency Action Message waited for him. A few seconds later he was joined by his friend and fellow lieutenant, Lars da Silva.

Lars seemed tense, but calm. Beside them, the radio chief extracted code manuals from his safe and dropped them on the tiny desk with a thud.

'Let's do this,' said Lars.

Bill didn't feel calm; Bill felt scared.

This was their fifth patrol together. During that time Bill and Lars had decoded dozens of EAMs, real and simulated, many garbled in ingenious ways. Over the last two days a sequence of four EAMs had been received, each more concerning than the one preceding it. The most recent, received at 0512 that morning, had raised the level of readiness for nuclear war to DEFCON 2, which was only one step from launching missiles.



The whole crew had been waiting for the next message. Dreading it. And here it was.

Bill pushed the fear to one side and started decoding the string of four-letter groups.

This message wasn't garbled. This message was very clear.

Lars glanced up at Bill. 'Holy shit.'

Bill closed his eyes and nodded.

Bill had no time to think about the decoded message in his hand. He had trained for this. He knew what to do.

Followed by Lars, Bill carried the EAM through to the control room. The blood was thudding in his ears, and he was holding the scrap of paper so tightly it was shaking slightly, but he was careful to freeze the muscles in his face.

Maybe he looked as calm as the rest of the crew. Maybe they were as scared as he was.

He handed the message to the captain, who was waiting for him, a briefcase of top-secret launch manuals at his feet.

'Captain,' Bill began, uttering words he had used in training many times before. His voice sounded flat and surprisingly calm, at least to his own ears. 'We have received a properly formatted message from the National Command Authority for strategic missile launch.'

'I concur,' said Lars next to him.

Commander Driscoll was a short man with wavy iron-grey hair and round glasses. He exuded quiet authority. His voice, tinged with a slight Texan twang, was always measured and calm. He commanded with his eyes. They were blue, and by turns could be reassuring, inspiring, angry or urgent. Now they were alert, expectant, ready for the message that he knew was coming.

He reached out for it, reading it with the tall figure of Lieutenant Commander Robinson, the boat's executive officer, at his shoulder.

EMERGENCY ACTION MESSAGE  
.....

FROM: NATIONAL MILITARY COMMAND CENTER

TO: USS ALEXANDER HAMILTON (SSBN-617)

SUBJECT: NUCLEAR MISSILE LAUNCH -  
SINGLE INTEGRATED OPERATIONAL PLAN  
(SIOP) EXECUTION

REMARKS:

1. SET DEFCON ONE
2. RETARGET AND STRIKE
3. IMMEDIATE LAUNCH THREE (3) POSEIDON  
MISSILE SORTIES
4. TARGET PACKAGE SLBM 36155/4
5. AUTHENTICATION: ECHO TANGO TANGO  
ROMEO ZULU ALPHA HOTEL

‘I concur,’ said the XO.

‘Captain, request permission to authenticate,’ Bill asked.

‘Permission granted.’

Each stage of the process, from the initial receipt of the EAM to the eventual launch, was carefully scripted with procedures that were spelled out in checklists and orange folders marked ‘Top Secret’, procedures that had been refined over the years to ensure that there were always at least two officers involved at each stage or, in the case of the launch order itself, four.

The crew knew each stage intimately, but part of the procedure was that the checklists had to be followed to the letter. Nothing could be assumed. Nothing could be skipped.

The next stage of the process required an authentication code on the message to be compared to a code printed on a card locked deep inside two safes on the submarine. This was to ensure that the message had really come from National Military Command Center, and not some maniac with a desire to start a nuclear war.

The safes were back in op-conn. Lars opened the outer safe, and Bill opened the inner one. He pulled out the small package, ripped off the silver wrapping, and took the card back to the captain. Bill read out the authentication code on the card to Lars.

It matched the code on the EAM.

‘The message is authentic, sir,’ Bill said.

‘I concur,’ said Lars.

The XO glanced at the card and the message. ‘I concur.’

The captain reached for the 1-MC shipwide microphone. ‘Man Battle Stations Missile for Strategic Launch. Set Condition 1 SQ. Spin up missiles one, two and nine. The release of nuclear weapons has been authorized. This is not a drill. This is the captain speaking.’

Although he had heard the words many times before in training – with the exception of ‘this is not a drill’ – they came as a shock

to Bill. Once again he could feel fear gnawing at the edges of his consciousness, once again he banished it.

Focus. Concentrate. Do your job.

Just like everyone else.

The captain handed the mic to Robinson who repeated the message word for word. The crew would only follow launch orders if they had been given by both the captain and the XO, his second-in-command.

Immediately a loud *bong, bong, bong* reverberated through the boat. The general alarm. The submarine became alive with quiet, controlled movement, as more sailors squeezed into the already crowded control room.

This was the nerve centre of the boat. The captain stood on a raised metal platform beside the ship's two periscopes, the 'conn'. In front of him stood the diving officer overseeing a large ballast control panel and two young sailors gripping control columns with which they adjusted the submarine's attitude and direction. To the left and right of the room were panels of lamps, switches, buttons and monitors, and a small navigation plotting station with stools and a chart stand. The overhead was a mess of pipes, tubes, wires, microphones and intercom handsets. To the men quietly busying themselves, each wire, each lamp, each switch was familiar, as was its role in the smooth operation of the submarine. Everyone was wearing blue 'poopy-suit' coveralls: khaki belts for officers and chiefs, blue for sailors.

'Can you believe this, Bill?' Lars muttered quietly.

'No.' Part of him couldn't believe it, couldn't believe what the order meant. But what *did* it mean?

'Did you catch that target package?' Lars whispered. 'That was East Berlin. Moscow, Leningrad and East Berlin. That doesn't make any sense. Why East Berlin? That's gonna flatten West Berlin too.'

‘Yeah, I saw that.’

‘Well? Why? What’s going on?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Bill. Part of him was trying not to think about it. To follow protocols precisely. To do what he was supposed to do.

‘It’s the exact same target package we were given in that drill three weeks ago.’

‘Yeah, I recognized it,’ said Guth.

Bill and Lars were more than shipmates, they were friends. They had graduated in the same class from the Naval Academy at Annapolis, and had both joined the Blue Crew of the *Alexander Hamilton* on the same day.

They had talked about this, about the order to launch nuclear weapons, many times.

Lars stepped forward. ‘Captain?’ Lars was the same height as his commanding officer, but slighter. Usually the captain appeared calm and relaxed in the most stressful of situations, but now the tension showed in his clenched jaw and hunched shoulders.

His sharp eyes darted to the junior officer. ‘Yes, Lieutenant da Silva?’

Lars swallowed. ‘The target package makes no sense, sir. Moscow, Leningrad, East Berlin. It will destroy West Berlin. All those US troops stationed there. The civilian population.’

Bill was shocked at what Lars had said. It wasn’t up to a junior officer to question launch orders. That was not part of the protocol.

The captain’s eyes narrowed. Bill could feel the tension rising in the control room.

The captain paused. Paused rather than hesitated. He was taking Lars’s comment seriously.

‘The target package may not make sense to us, Lieutenant da Silva. But it is a properly formatted order. Our duty is to obey it, not to discuss it.’

Lars persevered. 'And it's the same target package we received three weeks ago.'

'It is,' said Driscoll.

'Isn't it possible that this could be a repeat of that exercise EAM sent in error?'

If this had been an exercise, Driscoll would have dismissed Lars from the control room with a crushing reprimand. And Bill knew that's what the rule book said he should do.

But this wasn't an exercise. Commander Driscoll was listening. And thinking. Double-checking his own assumptions.

The whole control room was listening too.

'The exercise target package may have been selected because the NMCC knew it was likely to be used. And now they want us to use it.'

'But why?' said Da Silva. 'Why East Berlin?'

'We don't know. But we're not supposed to know. XO?'

He turned to Lieutenant Commander Robinson. Unlike Bill or Lars, the XO had to agree with the launch orders, or nothing would happen.

Robinson was taller than his captain, balding, with intense dark eyes under thick eyebrows. This was his first patrol on the *Alexander Hamilton*, but already the junior officers and the crew respected him. As did Commander Driscoll.

'It is a properly formatted order, sir. And, as I explained before, in my opinion the likelihood of a Soviet first strike in the current situation is high.'

Robinson had come straight from a desk job at the Pentagon, where he had seen things that had troubled him. Things that he had passed on to the captain and the other officers in the wardroom the night before.

'Very well. I have listened to your concern, Lieutenant da Silva, but we have a valid order, which we will execute.' The captain grabbed

a mic. 'Weapons, conn. Shift target package to SLBM three-six-one-five-five-slash-four. This is the captain.'

Driscoll handed the mic to Robinson. 'Shift target package to SLBM three-six-one-five-five-slash-four. This is the XO.'

'But, sir.' Lars moved closer to the captain. 'We should go to periscope depth and check the EAM. What if it is an error, sir?'

The captain's eyes focused on the junior officer, burning with authority through the lenses of his spectacles. 'Lieutenant da Silva, you know that's against all operating procedures. And for very good reason. Now get back to your post.'

There were Soviet fast-attack submarines in the Norwegian Sea, constantly on the lookout for American and British boomers. It was a fruitless task, because the only real way the Soviet submarines could find the Americans was by listening for them, and since vessels like the *Alexander Hamilton* glided slowly and silently hundreds of feet below the surface, the Russians never heard anything.

While submerged at patrol depth, the *Hamilton* could only receive radio communications, not transmit. To request confirmation of the Emergency Action Message, the *Hamilton* would have to rise to periscope depth and announce to Soviet listening stations exactly where she was. If indeed a nuclear war was breaking out, then any nearby Soviet attack submarine would swoop on the *Hamilton* and torpedo her before she had a chance to launch her birds. Which was why operating procedures forbade the course of action Lars was suggesting.

Lars stood his ground, struggling to control his agitation. 'Captain. We *must* check that message. If the message is an error and we launch those three missiles, the Soviets will retaliate and there will be a full-blown nuclear war. Our country will be obliterated. The *world* will be obliterated.'

Driscoll's response was rapid and firm. 'Lieutenant da Silva. You will not question my orders. Either you go back to your post

right now, or I will have you relieved. Do I make myself clear?’

Lars blinked. ‘Aye, aye, sir.’ He turned away.

Bill, too, turned, to make his way down to his post in the missile control centre. The captain called after him. ‘Lieutenant Guth!’

Bill stopped at the compartment exit, and Driscoll moved over to him, speaking in a low tone. ‘Lieutenant Guth, unlock the small-arms locker and fetch me a sidearm. I have a feeling I may need it.’

‘Aye, aye, sir.’

As assistant weapons officer, Bill was one of two men who had keys to the small-arms locker. The other was the chief of the boat, the master chief petty officer who was at that moment the diving officer, directing the submarine’s manoeuvres.

Bill’s brain was tumbling as he made his way aft to the locker. Lars had a point.

Should Bill have stood up for him? But then the captain had listened to Lars’s point, had considered it, and made his decision. And the crew had to follow the captain’s orders without question.

Even when nuclear missiles were about to be launched. *Especially* when nuclear missiles were about to be launched.

Three missiles, each with ten warheads, thirty thermonuclear explosions. Millions dead in Moscow, Leningrad and Berlin.

A Russian response was inevitable. Soon thousands of warheads would be criss-crossing the globe. Minutes later, Washington would be obliterated. New York. Chicago. The small town on the banks of the Susquehanna where Bill had grown up. His house. His childhood bedroom. His mom and dad.

Donna.

The whole damned human race.

You could train for this, you could study for it, you could utter the commands and responses as many times as you liked, but nothing could prepare you for thermonuclear war.



A dark wave of dread broke over Bill, but he kept moving, doing what he had been ordered to do.

The captain had successfully established his authority. Lars had backed down. Bill wasn't sure it was a smart idea on the captain's part to arm himself. He needed to carry the ship's crew by his personality, by his authority, not by the barrel of a pistol. If the crew thought the captain believed he needed a gun to make his orders stand, wouldn't that suggest weakness rather than strength?

But the captain had given the order, and Bill would obey it.

The locker contained an arsenal of weapons: automatic rifles, shotguns and pistols, usually issued to the watch on deck to protect the ship in dock, although since the *Hamilton* spent most of its surface life tied up to a tender in the middle of a Scottish loch, they were seldom used. Very occasionally they were broken out during exercises simulating crews, or even the captain, going crazy.

Never for forcing an officer to obey an order.

Bill selected a Colt 1911 pistol and a holster and made his way back to the control room, receiving curious, anxious glances from sailors he passed. Bill proceeded at a rapid walk. He would be needed down in the missile centre where the three missiles were being 'spun up'. The fire control computer was feeding launch and targeting instructions to the missiles, a process that would take about fifteen minutes, at which point they would be ready to be fired, one by one.

He reached the control room, where he pushed past a petty officer examining a clipboard. Everyone had clipboards and checklists.

'XO, take the conn,' said the captain. 'I'm going to my stateroom to fetch my CIP key and the launch keys. The XO has the conn.'

The Captain's Indicator Panel key had to be inserted into the missile control panel in the control room to activate the weapon

system. That, and the sixteen launch keys, one for each missile, were kept secured in a safe in the captain's stateroom, a safe to which only he knew the combination.

The captain stepped down from the raised platform next to the two periscopes and moved toward Bill.

He had only taken one step when a figure launched itself towards him. An arm was raised, holding something metal, and in an instant it descended towards the back of the captain's skull.

'Sir!' Bill shouted.

Driscoll ducked and twisted, and let out a cry as the wrench, for that's what it was, hit his shoulder with a crack.

Lars, legs apart to keep his balance, drew back his arm for another blow, but it was caught by a chief petty officer grabbing his wrist.

Driscoll's face was contorted with pain as he ducked and tried to get out of the way of his attacker.

'Guth!' he cried.

Bill grabbed the Colt from the holster and pointed it at Lars.

'Freeze!' he shouted. 'Put the wrench down or I'll shoot.'

Lars froze, as did the chief holding him.

'Shoot him, Bill,' Lars said, his eyes desperate, pleading. 'Shoot the captain. Now. Before he gets the keys.'

Bill knew what Lars was thinking. If Bill killed the captain, the combination to the safe in his stateroom would die with him: no one would be able to open it. And if they couldn't open the safe, they couldn't get access to the launch keys. And if they didn't have the launch keys, they couldn't launch the missiles.

'Shoot him,' Lars urged. 'You can stop a nuclear war if you shoot him. In the head.'

In the head. So he died before he could utter the combination to his safe.

Oh, Christ.

Everyone stood still. The captain was wincing in pain, grasping his shoulder, but he straightened and looked directly at Bill, his blue eyes commanding. 'Don't do it, son. Do what you have been ordered to do. You owe it to your country.'

Owe it to your country? What country? A nuclear wasteland?

Bill shifted the barrel of the pistol from Lars to the captain.

Oh, Christ.

Bill Guth made his decision.



## Thursday 28 November 2019, Thanksgiving, Heathrow Airport

Toby Rosser grabbed the two large corrugated paper cups of coffee and returned to the scrum around the arrivals exit. He needed the caffeine. He was still recovering from the ridiculously early rise that morning. He and Alice had had to drive from their flat near King's Cross to Heathrow to meet an 0620 flight, and there was a two-and-a-half hour drive ahead of them, for which he had to be alert.

'Here you go.' He handed one cup to his wife. Toby knew he looked like he felt – crap – but Alice looked amazing. Even though she had gone to bed an hour after him because she had some work to finish, even though she was not working that day having taken the whole long weekend off, she looked amazing. Blonde hair cut down to her slim neck, blue sweater and jeans, both casual, both bought for a large sum the week before, cool grey eyes and the bright smile with which she bestowed her thanks. All amazing.

'Ten after seven,' said Alice. 'She should be through by now.'

'Maybe she checked a bag?'

'She's only coming for the weekend. And, believe me, Megan won't have much stuff.'

A bleary-eyed woman with a thin face, long pointed nose, curly dark hair and glasses emerged through the security doors shepherding two large roller suitcases on either side of her. Although Toby hadn't met Megan, he had seen pictures. But he wasn't sure this was her,

especially given the suitcases. But then Toby noticed her chin; the Guth chin, a long, thin jaw that came to a square end with a little notch in it. All four Guth sisters sported it.

He glanced at his wife who was absorbed with her phone.

‘Alice?’ He nodded to the woman.

‘Megan!’

The woman spotted her, the suitcases trundled up to full speed, and then the two sisters gave each other a tight hug.

‘Megan, this is Toby.’

Megan looked up at Toby, blinked, and then launched herself at him. ‘Hi, Toby.’

‘Careful, Megan,’ said Alice. ‘Toby’s English. You might confuse him.’

‘Confused or not, I’m always happy to have American women throwing themselves at me,’ said Toby. ‘Especially before breakfast.’

‘He’s cute,’ said Megan, examining Toby.

‘No he’s not,’ said Alice. ‘He looks disgusting. He hasn’t even combed his hair, let alone taken a shower.’ But she glanced at Toby with a suppressed smile of sisterly triumph.

Megan twitched her long nose. ‘Hmm.’ It was a friendly twitch.

Toby led the two women towards the car park.

‘What’s with the suitcases?’ said Alice. ‘That’s a lot for one Thanksgiving weekend.’

‘These are all my possessions,’ said Megan. ‘I’m quitting Tor Pharma and leaving Dallas.’

‘And moving to Norfolk?’

‘Temporarily. Suzy, my friend from college, has a place in New York, but her roommate is moving out in the new year. So I just need somewhere to stay until January.’

‘Does Dad know about this?’

‘No. It will be a nice surprise for him.’

‘Do you have a job? In New York?’

Alice was known in her family for being pleasingly direct.

‘Oh, yeah. Suzy says I can work with her.’

‘That’s good. What does she do?’

‘She’s an actor. But the job is waiting tables. The Belgian Beer Café is the name of it. Suzy told her boss I spent two years living in Brussels, so the job’s mine.’

‘You were twelve!’

‘Hey. I speak French. And I can even do the Belgian accent if they want me to.’

‘But what about that master’s in mathematics? You’re wasting yourself, Megan.’

‘So I can count the waffles. In French. The job’s mine.’

The two enormous suitcases barely fitted into the back of Toby and Alice’s new Golf, but eventually they were crawling along the M25 in everyone else’s rush hour.

Megan stared out of the window from the back seat. ‘Guess they don’t have Thanksgiving in this country, huh?’

Megan knew they didn’t celebrate Thanksgiving in Britain. Alice’s family had lived all over the world. Although Alice had been born in Virginia, she had attended various American schools in Surrey, Brussels, Mannheim and Saudi Arabia, from what Toby could work out, before their father had settled down in London. The three eldest sisters – Alice, Brooke and Megan – had American accents, although the youngest, Maya, sounded English: her formative years had been spent at a private girls’ school near Regent’s Park. Their father still lived in a flat in Kensington, but he and his wife had bought a house on the North Norfolk coast, and it was there that the Guth family celebrated en masse.

‘You been to a Thanksgiving celebration before, Toby?’ Megan asked.

‘Yeah. Last year, with your dad in Kensington. I like it. Lots of food. Lots of wine. Family.’

‘Sorry I couldn’t make that,’ said Megan.

‘You’re here now,’ said Alice.

‘Yeah. And sorry I didn’t make your wedding either. I got this flu bug at the last minute. Who knew they got the flu in Texas? You’d think with all that sunshine . . .’

‘You’d think,’ said Alice, clearly unimpressed with Megan’s excuse. Toby remembered her fury well. ‘I’m afraid I gave your bridesmaid’s dress to Oxfam.’

‘That’s a good cause.’

‘Brooke called. She and Justin flew in from Chicago yesterday,’ Alice said. ‘They stayed in London last night and they’re driving up to Norfolk in a rental car today. Maya’s flight doesn’t get in till midday, but she swears she’ll still make it. So that’s everyone.’

‘Not quite everyone,’ said Megan.

‘No,’ said Alice.

In the silence that followed, Toby knew they were both thinking about their mother. She would be in the minds of the sisters and their father as they sat around the dinner table.

‘Did Dad bring randoms last year?’ Megan asked.

‘Dad brought randoms,’ said Alice. Indeed he had invited a couple of American strays in London – a neighbour and some guy he had worked with twenty years before, and Alice had brought one of her own from work. That was something else Toby liked about Thanksgiving. And his father-in-law’s generosity.

‘Any randoms this year?’

‘Just Uncle Lars,’ said Alice.

‘Uncle Lars! Isn’t he in jail in Trinidad?’

‘They must have let him out and I think it’s Guadeloupe.’

‘What!’ said Toby.



‘I’ve told you about him,’ said Alice. ‘He’s a loser. But Dad likes him. They served in the Navy together.’

‘Didn’t Alice mention he was a drug-runner?’ said Megan.

‘No,’ said Toby. ‘Sounds like an unlikely friend for your dad.’

‘Dad’s loyal, you know that,’ said Alice. ‘And Uncle Lars was a long way down the food chain. He owned a sailboat in the Caribbean. Took tourists out on cruises. Or at least that’s what he said he did. Then one day Dad gets a call and Lars says he needs a good lawyer in Guadeloupe. Dad found him one somehow. Lars said he was framed, but Dad didn’t believe him. Neither did the judge.’

‘I suppose that explains why you haven’t seen him for a while?’ said Toby.

‘Not even a Christmas card.’

Megan hadn’t slept on the plane, and they had no sooner hit the M25 than she was slumped on the back seat with her eyes closed. Alice pulled out her iPad to read a document. She was a lawyer at an American firm in the City and they made her work hard. Very hard.

It rained steadily on the journey, thick dark clouds pressing down, so low that they scraped the tower of Ely Cathedral, squatting on its little island in the fens.

The phone in Toby’s pocket emitted a subdued double chirp. A text message.

Alice looked up. ‘Shall I check it for you?’

‘It’ll only be Piet.’

‘It might be important?’

‘It won’t be,’ said Toby. Piet was Toby’s partner at Beachwallet, a lanky Dutchman with whom Toby had worked for a couple of years

at a consultancy. They had come up with the idea for Beachwallet together, in the Red Lion in Hoxton Street one evening. Piet was enthusiastic but headstrong, and sometimes just a little impatient. 'It's Thanksgiving. He can wait.'

'I wish you could tell my client that,' said Alice, nodding towards her iPad.

'It's good to get out of London.'

'It is, isn't it?' said Alice.

He took his eyes off the road ahead for an instant to see that she was giving him one of those smiles that he loved so much. Alice had a brisk professional smile, she had a friendly social smile, she had a warm smile for her friends, and then she had *that* smile. Just for him.

'Thank you for letting me into your family,' he said.

'Thank you for joining us.'

He wrenched his gaze back to the road.

They skirted King's Lynn, rotating around the sequence of giant roundabouts that protected the town, and crossed low ridges of ploughed fields and lonely farms, heading towards a wide band of blue sky nudging up against the grey blanket of cloud. They topped a hill and the North Sea stretched out in front of them, glittering in unlikely sunshine. Far out in the distance a copse of wind turbines fluttered in the strong breeze.

Toby felt his heart lift after the crowded grey streets of London and the heavy grey moisture above the fens. The sky, beyond the curtain of cloud, seemed to stretch for ever ahead, above and to either side.

They drove down to the coast road, and then along it for a few miles until they came to the village of Barnholt: a flint church with a stubby round tower, a pub, a farm shop, an ancient cross in a tiny green and a ribbon of houses running along the coast road and off a couple of lanes reaching towards the sea. Above the village, a

windmill perched proudly on the low coastal ridge, its arms stretching wide in the November sun.

The house, Pear Tree Cottage, was at the end of one of the back lanes, which ran parallel to the coast road, with a view of a marsh and then a double rank of sand dunes. The building was long and low, constructed of chips of flint, its doors and windows framed in worn red brick. Originally two cottages, they had been knocked together to create a decent-sized house. Local legend had it that in the early part of the nineteenth century one of the cottages had been the operational base of a particularly successful local smuggler of Dutch gin and French brandy. A low flint wall sheltered the garden from the north wind and the pear tree, recently relieved of most of its leaves, shivered in the damp. In summer the house opened out in a riot of roses and hollyhocks. In November, it looked inwards, curled up in its flint shell, a ribbon of sweet-smelling wood smoke from its chimney promising warmth and cosiness inside.

They unfolded themselves from the car and stretched. The air cut into Toby's face, cold and bracing after the fug of the car, tinged with salt, a faint smell of marsh and the smoke from the fire inside. He opened the boot.

'Do you mind if we leave my bags in the trunk for now?' said Megan. 'Until I've had a chance to talk with Dad.'

Bill Guth met them as they approached the front door with a broad grin. He hugged his two daughters and then Toby. Although in his sixties, he was still trim, a little over six feet, with thick grey hair and kind, shrewd brown eyes.

A high-speed yelping bundle hurled itself past his legs and leaped up at Alice first, then Toby.

'Hi, Rickover!' said Alice, grabbing the fox terrier's ears. 'How are you, Ricky boy?'

Toby reached down too, and Rickover greeted him eagerly, licking his fingers. Toby and Rickover had a deal, but the dog would have to wait for a more private moment.

‘Sorry you had to come up so early,’ Alice’s father said. ‘I’ve gotten the turkey out of the refrigerator, Alice, but the rest is up to you.’ He had a deep, pleasant voice, with a rich American accent he had preserved during his decades away.

‘Did you have trouble finding one?’ Alice asked.

‘Some. You’d think it would be easy, this county is crawling with them, but it’s the old story, they’re all being grown for Christmas. I called the butcher in Burnham Market two weeks ago and he promised me one.’

‘OK,’ said Alice. ‘I’ll get to work.’ Bill was actually a pretty good cook, but a major Thanksgiving dinner was beyond him, and Alice was happy to do it. ‘You can help me, Dad. Do you mind if Toby takes a shower? He kinda needs one.’

Bill raised his eyebrows in mild disapproval – Toby thought more of his daughter than his son-in-law.

‘Or a bath?’ said Toby hopefully. Their flat in London only had a shower, and he remembered from previous visits a lovely big cast-iron bathtub in the main bathroom upstairs.

‘Sure,’ said Bill. ‘You know the way. Have you got any more bags in the car? I can go get them.’

Alice turned to her sister and raised her eyebrows.

‘Dad?’ said Megan. ‘I’ve got a little favour to ask you.’

The bath was great. Toby could extend his six-foot-long body, the water was hot, the taps were big and silver and powerful and it was placed right under a window with a view of the pale-blue Norfolk sky, framed by the dead leaves of a climbing rose knocking gently on the glass pane in the breeze.

He was going to enjoy the weekend.

Toby was an only child. His mother was a nurse in a GP's surgery in North London. Toby hadn't seen his own father for six years; he was a failed property developer who now lived in the Algarve with a third wife from Leicester who was only five years older than Toby himself. Toby was close to his mother, and saw her regularly, but since his grandparents had died the two of them didn't really seem like a family, more a partnership.

Whereas the Guth family was a real family. And a family that was happy to include him.

It was one of the many reasons he was glad to have married Alice.

'You took your time,' she said when Toby eventually appeared in the kitchen. Bill was sitting at the table with a mug of coffee. Megan was nowhere to be seen.

It occurred to Toby, not for the first time, that Alice was replacing her mother at the centre of the family, and that Bill was content to let her do it. 'Replacing' wasn't exactly the right word. And it certainly wasn't 'displacing'. It was more that Alice was taking on her mother's tasks, her obligations, in memory of her. Honouring her. Toby had

the impression that Alice and her father had developed an unspoken ritual, which Alice was happy to follow.

‘How’s it going?’ Toby asked her, kissing the top of her head as she bent over a mixing bowl.

‘Just making the stuffing. The turkey should go in in about twenty minutes.’

‘I was just telling Alice,’ Bill said. ‘There’s a guy coming to see me from Newcastle at four this afternoon. A historian. Wants to talk to me about the Navy in the 1980s.’

Toby knew that Bill had served on nuclear submarines before he and Alice’s mother had married.

‘Is that stuff still secret?’ Toby asked.

‘Most of it. I’ve told him there’s a limit to what I can say, but he still wants to meet me. Would you like to sit in on it?’

‘You should,’ said Alice. She had a small smile of pleasure on her face. ‘Dad can’t talk about it, but the historian probably can. I think you’ll find it interesting. I’d like to be there myself, but this turkey needs my attention.’

Toby felt like he was being cut into a family secret. He liked that. ‘All right, thanks.’

‘You can report back,’ said Alice. ‘Tell me all about it.’

‘What about me?’ said a voice at the door. It was Megan. ‘Can I be there too?’

Toby felt a slight pause from both Alice and Bill. An unsaid shared pause of disapproval.

Megan stared at her father and smiled. A smile of defiance. A what-are-you-going-to-do-about-it? smile.

‘Sure,’ said Bill slowly. ‘That would be great.’

Megan’s smile gained a note of triumph and she left the kitchen.

The historian's name was Sam Bowen. He was small, round and soft, with short spiky black hair, intelligent eyes behind black-framed glasses, and a Brummie accent. He was about Toby's age, maybe a couple of years older.

Toby took an instant liking to him, as did Bill, although Toby could sense a wariness on the part of his father-in-law, and he wasn't exactly sure why.

Bill had made a cafetière of coffee and he, Sam, Toby and Megan all sat in the living room. It was a bright, pretty room, even in the late afternoon gloom, its yellow walls adorned with pictures of a combination of the Norfolk coast and various mismatched paintings Bill and his wife had picked up over the years. A thick oak beam bisected the ceiling, an inch above head height, pockmarked with age, probably supporting the cast-iron bath above. Two logs glowed in the fireplace. Family photos were scattered about the room: the Guth chin on display on daughters at various ages and sizes, as it was on Alice's mother, smiling benignly on them all. That's where they had got it; not a Guth chin originally after all.

Outside, the marsh brooded, settling itself for the evening.

'Well, thank you for seeing me, Lieutenant Guth—' the historian began, pulling a notebook out of the backpack he had laid beside his armchair.

'Bill. Call me Bill.' Bill's deep voice was welcoming.

‘Bill.’ Sam smiled. ‘As I told you on the phone, I published a book last year on the Cuban missile crisis.’

‘Yeah, I read a review of it,’ said Bill. ‘*No Cigar*. Nice title.’

‘Thank you. I’m following it up with a book about the near nuclear-missile launches during the Cold War. All those times when the system would have started a nuclear war if humans hadn’t overridden it.’

‘All those times? How many were there?’ Bill asked.

‘About a dozen that we know of. And there will have been many more that are still secret.’

Bill nodded.

‘So that’s why I want to ask you about your last patrol aboard the USS *Alexander Hamilton* in 1983.’

Toby’s interest quickened. He could see where this was going.

‘And that’s why I can’t tell you very much about it,’ said Bill, apologetically. ‘Operations were top secret then, and they are still top secret now. I checked yesterday after you called me.’

There was a look of mild disappointment on Sam’s face, but he had clearly expected Bill’s response.

‘OK. I understand. Can you tell me a little about the patrol that isn’t top secret?’

‘That’s not very much,’ said Bill. ‘The *Hamilton* was operating out of Holy Loch in Scotland at the time. We were flown in and out back to Groton in Connecticut when we were off-crew. I guess it was my first tour on submarines. My fifth patrol.’

‘And your last?’

Bill nodded. ‘Yes. My last.’

‘And why was that? You were due to go out on another patrol before your tour ended.’

‘I’m impressed by your research. The official reason was that I requested to leave so I could go to graduate school.’



‘And the real reason?’

‘As I told you, I can only discuss the official reason,’ Bill replied calmly. He seemed unperturbed rather than confrontational.

‘OK,’ said Sam carefully. He made a note. ‘Let me tell you what I think happened on board the USS *Alexander Hamilton* on 9 November 1983.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘You were on patrol somewhere in the North Atlantic. For the previous couple of days you had received a series of messages from the National Military Command Center in Washington raising your readiness for nuclear war to DEFCON 2. Then you received an order to launch three missiles targeted at Moscow, St Petersburg and East Berlin.’

‘Leningrad,’ corrected Bill.

‘Are you confirming that Leningrad was one of the targets?’ said Sam, a hint of excitement in his voice.

‘No. I’m merely saying that St Petersburg was known as Leningrad in 1983,’ said Bill with a small smile.

Sam Bowen hesitated, examining Bill closely to see what the smile meant. Was it confirmation of Sam’s suggestion? Or was Bill winding the historian up? Toby wasn’t sure.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Bill. ‘I don’t mean to tease you.’ The smile went. It was confirmation.

There was silence as Sam processed this. Toby could sense that Megan was following this as closely as he was. He wondered how much she already knew about it, how much Alice knew. His wife’s smile at Bill asking Toby to join him made sense now.

This was the family secret.

‘Commander Driscoll was the commanding officer of the *Alexander Hamilton*,’ Sam continued. ‘He and the executive officer acknowledged the order as valid. And then a junior officer intervened.’

‘Go on,’ said Bill.

‘The junior officer questioned the order. He pointed out that the target package didn’t make sense and, furthermore, that it was identical to the package included in a drill a couple of weeks before. The drill had been designed to test the readiness of the crew to retarget unexpected coordinates.’

Sam hesitated, waiting for a response from Bill. He didn’t receive one.

‘There was a discussion in the control room, but the junior officer persuaded the captain and the executive officer to change their minds and not launch the missiles.’

Bill raised his eyebrows.

‘That junior officer was you.’

Toby realized he had gasped. Sam glanced at him and then returned his gaze to Bill, who was motionless.

‘What can I say?’ said Bill. ‘I’ve told you I can’t respond.’

‘All right,’ said Sam. ‘If I am correct, perhaps you could just scratch your right ear lobe. Off the record. I can assure you scratching can be off the record.’

Bill laughed at that, but stayed motionless.

Sam frowned. He couldn’t be sure whether Bill was indicating that his version of events was incorrect, or that he just wasn’t playing along. Toby felt sorry for the historian, but admired the way he kept his cool. This probably wasn’t the first stone wall he had bumped into.

Sam put down his pen. ‘Bill. We all know why this had to be top secret during the Cold War. It would have given the Soviets information about the US Navy’s launch procedures, and it would have highlighted shortcomings in those procedures. But the Soviet Union doesn’t exist anymore.’

‘We still have nuclear submarines,’ Bill said. ‘And they still go out on strategic patrol. They could still be ordered to launch nuclear missiles.’

‘Precisely,’ said Sam. ‘What my book will show is that there have been many times when governments’ controls on the launch of nuclear missiles have failed. When the world nearly came to an end. And that we are still relying on many of those same controls. You, of all people, should be able to see how important it is to demonstrate that?’

Bill was very serious now. All trace of a smile gone.

Sam continued. ‘You know that the reason the details of this patrol are still secret is to keep what really happened from the public, right, not the enemy? To stop the American people from knowing how close they or their parents came to being blown to kingdom come. It’s a cover-up. They are making you cover up a mistake that was so serious in its consequences it almost finished the world.’

Sam stared at Bill intently through his glasses. ‘And it wasn’t your mistake. In fact, you are the one who fixed it.’

Bill winced and ran his fingers through his thick hair. ‘It seems completely understandable to me that details of nuclear launch procedure are still top secret thirty-five years later,’ he replied. ‘You may be right that the powers-that-be want to cover up something that may or may not have happened then. But I am still bound by my obligation to respect that secrecy. Apart from anything else, the law is very clear. But it’s also my duty to my country as a former naval officer. As I said, I checked yesterday, and what happened on that patrol is still Classified.’

Sam was getting close. He had a mild manner and a gentle voice, but one that suggested sincerity, and a certain power.

‘Admiral Robinson?’ he asked.

Bill nodded. ‘The XO at the time. He stayed in the Navy and he’s done very well. We’ve kept in touch.’

‘I bet you have,’ said Sam, a sharp note tingeing his words for the first time.

Bill noticed it, and Sam looked down at his notes, seeming to regret his lapse.

‘Have *you* spoken with the admiral?’ Bill asked.

‘Yes. And a few others on the submarine. I couldn’t speak to Commander Driscoll, of course.’

‘No. But Lars da Silva said he had spoken with you.’

‘That’s right,’ said Sam.

‘And none of them have told you anything?’

‘No one on the *Alexander Hamilton*,’ said Sam. ‘But you can imagine the incident made waves in the Pentagon. Top-secret waves, but waves nonetheless. I have two sources so far in Washington who were tasked with figuring out how to change things afterwards.’

‘I see,’ said Bill.

There was silence.

‘Can I ask something?’ Toby said.

Bill nodded.

‘Did these “sources” tell you what the problem was?’ Toby asked Sam. ‘Presumably this message was indeed a false one?’

‘It was,’ said Sam. ‘There had been a software upgrade, and the Emergency Action Messages were supposed to be operating on a ring-fenced part of the system to test it. But they were upgrading at the same time as NATO was running a command-and-control exercise to practice giving orders to launch nuclear strikes.’

‘Able Archer 83,’ said Bill.

‘That’s right,’ said Sam. ‘Of course those messages had to be ring-fenced from the operational system too. It was all too much for the new software, and no one noticed the glitch for forty-eight hours.’

‘How could they let that happen?’ said Toby.

‘That is a very good question. You could almost use it as the subtitle of my book. It was a cock-up, of course. And the company involved was big and reputable. But something very similar had happened four years

earlier when they were upgrading the NORAD nuclear warning system. Someone ran a training cassette on the live operational network that simulated two thousand two hundred Soviet missiles heading towards the United States. For six minutes the Pentagon thought nuclear war had started. They woke up Zbigniew Brzezinski, the National Security Adviser. Fortunately, just as Brzezinski was about to call President Carter and suggest full-scale retaliation, the Pentagon called back having checked with their radar units directly. None of them had actually picked up any incoming missiles.'

Sam looked directly at Bill. 'That was what was so scary about your incident. The *Alexander Hamilton* couldn't transmit to confirm the orders for fear of giving her position away to Soviet attack submarines. And the protocols forbade it. The protocols said that the captain should follow a properly formatted order to the letter without questioning it, and should launch his nuclear missiles. So it was impossible to do a reality check.'

'That is scary,' said Toby.

'The Fail Safe Commission changed the protocols in the 1990s, partly as a result of this incident. After that, if the captain didn't understand the reason for the order or suspected it might be an error, he was supposed to delay launching until he had had an opportunity to confirm.'

'That was very sensible,' said Bill.

'Did they consult you about that?' Sam asked.

'No. I had left the Navy by then. But I am sure they spoke to Glenn Robinson.'

'So I'm on the right track, then?' said Sam. 'I've just got one or two details wrong?'

Bill shrugged.

'Can I ask you about Lieutenant Naylor?' the historian said. 'I believe he was a fellow officer on the patrol. I understand he died?'

‘Craig?’ said Megan in surprise. Everyone turned to her and she looked embarrassed. ‘Oops.’

‘Yes, Craig,’ said Bill. ‘He was a good friend of mine,’ Bill explained to Sam. ‘We still speak about him in the family.’

‘Oh, I see. Was his death anything to do with the launch orders?’

‘Oh no. That was an accident. He somehow fell down a ladder and hit his head. He died a few days after the . . .’

Bill realized he had come close to admitting there *had* been a launch order. ‘He died a few days after November ninth. His date of death will be on file.’

‘It is,’ said Sam. ‘The eleventh of November.’

‘Well then.’

The historian glanced at his notes, hesitating. ‘One last thing. Did you know a woman named Pat Greenwald? A peace activist?’

‘No. But I think my wife knew her. Back in the eighties.’

‘You never spoke to her yourself?’

Bill shook his head.

The historian sighed. ‘All right, thank you,’ he said, packing up his notebook. ‘But I *will* find out what happened that day on the submarine. I’m very persistent and I will give this project as long as it needs. There were a hundred and forty crew members on the *Hamilton*. Most of them will still be alive. Some of them will talk. And I have filed Freedom of Information requests with the US Navy and the Department of Defense.’

‘I’m sorry I couldn’t be more help,’ said Bill. ‘Genuinely.’

Sam smiled half-heartedly.

‘There is one thing I can say,’ said Bill.

‘Yes?’

‘Good luck.’

He seemed to mean it.

Sam didn't answer. If his patience had been stretched by Bill's stonewalling, he wasn't showing it, but it seemed to Toby he had come a long way for not very much.

'Hey, Sam,' Bill said. 'Are you driving back to Newcastle tonight?'

'No. I'm staying at the pub in the village. I'm going on to Cambridge tomorrow morning, and then I'm flying back to America for some more research.'

'Well, how about joining us for dinner?' said Bill. 'It's Thanksgiving.'

'Er . . .'

'Have you ever experienced a genuine American Thanksgiving?'

The historian hesitated, but then responded to Bill's warm, generous smile. 'All right. That would be nice. Thank you.'

Toby wondered whether this was just Bill's natural hospitality which was at its peak at Thanksgiving, or if he felt guilty about being so unhelpful. Or both. Probably both.

'Great. Be back here at about five-thirty. Lars da Silva will be here. But don't mention anything about Lieutenant Naylor. Craig's son will be here also, and it's a difficult subject with him.'

