

# **18 Minutes**

**Max Thorne, prequel**

**by Ethan Jones, ...**

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*To God and my family.  
Thank you for your wonderful love.*

## **Chapter 1**

### **Two Months Ago FSB Headquarters, Lubyanka Building Downtown Moscow, Russia**

FSB operative Maximillian Thornichinovich rushed up the stairs of the FSB headquarters ready for his new, as yet unknown, mission. Ten minutes ago, while he was still driving to work, he had received a cryptic note from his supervisor. It was a brief text message sent to his encrypted agency-issued phone that said: *Change of assignment. My office. As soon as you get to HQ.*

So Maxim, as his friends called him, had floored the engine of his brown-gray metallic UAZ Patriot SUV, the vehicle assigned to him by the FSB, Russia's internal intelligence agency, and had reached the headquarters in half the usual time. He worked as a "transporter," a transport and escort agent for high-risk transfers of detainees, prisoners, and, occasionally, high-level government officials. He had spent the last three years in this high-paced, adrenaline-fueled position, which had no fixed hours, routine assignments, or regular time off. Maxim could be called at any moment, to transport anyone to any place in Russia. In his years of service, no one had ever escaped from his custody, no matter how hard they'd tried.

The initial assignment was supposed to take him to Podolsk, a small industrial city about an hour's drive south of Moscow. Maxim and his partner were supposed to pick up a Chechen man, who was suspected of having ties to extremists and terrorist groups operating inside Russia. However, the supervisor's message had thrown Maxim's plans up in the air. He couldn't wait to learn about his new mission.

He reached his supervisor's floor and made his way toward the office, but the supervisor's assistant stopped him when he reached the antechamber. She stood up from her desk and said, "Director Yezhov is in a meeting and has requested that no one bother him."

Maxim nodded and smiled at the middle-aged woman. He had dealt with her in the past, and the tone of her voice left no room for objections. Still, he didn't want to disappoint his boss. So Maxim pulled out his phone and brought up Yezhov's message. "The boss asked me to come and see him as soon as I arrived."

The woman gave him a grin loaded with mischievousness. “I didn’t know they made you executive director...”

Maxim returned a puzzled look. “I... they haven’t...”

“All right, then, since you don’t outrank our boss or the man in the meeting, and he said *no interruptions*, take a seat.”

Maxim tried very hard to keep the upbeat look on his face. “Do you know when they’ll finish?”

“No idea. They’ll be done when they’re done.”

He looked at the black leather sectional sofa and two armchairs across from her desk. He hated doing nothing, so he shrugged. “I’ll come back in a few minutes. They just started, right?”

The assistant nodded. “About five minutes ago.”

“Thanks.” Maxim returned the nod and walked toward the elevator. He had decided to return to his office and work on finalizing the report on his last assignment, transporting three detainees from a safehouse to a new location. There had been rumors of a leak, which had prompted the last-moment move. Thankfully, no one had made any attempt against Maxim’s vehicle, and the detainees were subdued and resigned to their fate. Maxim wasn’t certain if that was because of the charges of “subversion”—a softer kind of crime than terrorism or outright rebellion—or because they knew any resistance was of no use. He didn’t care; as long as they reached the new destination without a problem, his mission was accomplished.

As he walked down the hall toward his office, he passed by the desk of Helena, one of the data analysts working on the same floor. Helena, or Lena as he imagined calling her, was twenty-five, about five years younger than him. She was a petite blonde with a gorgeous smile and great taste in clothes and hairstyles. Her hair flowed down her neck one day, was turned into stunning curls the next, and was arranged in a bun the day after that. Maxim had worked with Lena on a few assignments when he had needed analysis about buildings, routes, or people assigned to the detainees’ transport. But Maxim had never built up the courage to ask her out. *She’s way out of my league*, he kept telling himself, afraid of her rejection. So he was content to only steal glances whenever they’d pass one another in the halls. *One of these days, one of these days...* But the day hadn’t arrived yet.

Lena wasn’t in, and he wondered if she had a day off. He shrugged and turned at the kitchen, a few doors down. The strong aroma of coffee filled the space, but when Maxim glanced at the coffee pot, there was only about a finger left, not enough for even half a cup. “Oh, come on, people, how hard is it to be kind?” He shook his head and filled the pot to the maximum twelve-cup level, and began to brew a fresh batch. He waited for a few moments, until he could enjoy the first cup, and made his way to his office on the other side of the floor.

The blinking red light on the fixed-line phone indicated there was at least one message waiting for him. He checked it and smiled as he heard the warm voice of his adoptive mother. She reminded him of the opera performance they were scheduled to enjoy the next evening. His mother also promised that the charming comedy *Le Comte d’Ory* by Rossini would have him laughing throughout the show. Maxim doubted it, but still smiled. He couldn’t stand operas, ballets, or live

theater performances in general. But his mother loved them, so he went along with her.

The second message was from one of his best friends, Sasha. He used to work for the FSB, but, about a year ago, had transferred to the SVR, the Russian foreign intelligence service. They knew each other from childhood, having grown up together in the same neighborhood, in the eastern part of Moscow. Sasha had been the one to encourage Maxim to join the FSB, not only for the badge of status, the symbol of authority and power that it represented. Maxim needed some direction at that time in his life, and Sasha had been there at all times.

When he moved to the SVR, Sasha had hoped he'd be involved in field operations in the role of a covert agent, but he had ended up in a position similar to Maxim's. Sasha's message was all business. He had heard about Maxim's new assignment and wanted to compare notes. *How did he hear about this, and what more does he know?* Maxim frowned as he sipped his coffee, then dialed Sasha's office number.

He waited for a long moment, and the phone rang and rang, then came a click and Sasha answered, "Maxim, I didn't think you'd call..." He sounded distant, and his voice was weak, with background noises that suggested Sasha was in traffic.

"Are you driving?"

"Yes, I'm coming over to the FSB HQ."

"What for?"

"Our assignment, what else?"

"*Our* assignment... What is that?"

"You don't know?"

"No, I haven't talked to Yezhov yet."

"Well, in that case, I can't tell you much—"

"Come on, Sasha. You're better than that..."

Sasha groaned. "And you know how Yezhov is... He doesn't like anyone stealing his thunder, and you're not good at keeping a poker face."

Maxim nodded. Sasha had worked for Yezhov for a short time while he was at the FSB. Their relationship had gotten worse, since Yezhov had a way of bringing out the worst in people. Sometimes he'd assign or reassign his subordinates to menial tasks or assignments they weren't trained or prepared for, then use them as scapegoats to cover his own wastefulness and incompetence. He had been a great field agent, but just wasn't manager material.

So Maxim sighed and said, "Have you talked to him?"

"No, but he talked to my director, who briefed me first thing this morning."

"Well, you've already told me we're working together—"

"And that's all I'm going to say. Sorry, Maxim, I just don't want any trouble..."

Maxim nodded. He understood Sasha's situation. Plus, they were having a conversation on an open line. Although safe and encrypted, considering he was calling from his FSB headquarters office phone, one could never be certain who might be listening. There were always rumors that calls were routinely monitored, and several FSB employees had been fired or demoted, in part, as a result of their phone conversation "indiscretions."

Maxim said, "All right, then. Drive safe, and we'll talk when you get here."

"Should be in ten, fifteen minutes."

“See you.”

He placed down the phone and thought about what Sasha hadn't said. *He didn't sound concerned or excited, so this must be a run-of-the-mill assignment. But why bring in the SVR? If this is a normal transfer of one or a few detainees, why do we need someone from outside the agency?* Maxim shrugged, but he had no more time to think about the assignment, because his phone beeped with a text message. It was Yezhov: *Meeting's over. Where are you?!!!*

Maxim frowned. He never liked exclamation points, especially when there were three of them in a row and when they were being used by Yezhov. He stood up and dashed through the hall, rushing toward his boss's office.

As he reached the antechamber, the assistant lowered her glasses to the tip of her nose. She made a tsk-tsk-tsk sound of disapproval and shook her head. “You should have taken a seat.” Her voice dripped with self-satisfaction.

Yes, and you should learn some manners, Maxim thought. Instead, he said, “Is the boss in?”

“Yes, and he's furious.”

“I gathered that from the message.” Maxim waved his phone at her. “But thanks.” He headed toward the brown wood panel office door.

“You're welcome.”

Maxim knocked on the door and walked in when Yezhov called for him.

“Good morning, boss,” Maxim said in a sincerely apologetic tone. “Sorry about the wait. I didn't want to sit there and waste time—”

“Waiting for my orders is *never, never* a waste of time...” Yezhov's face was full of wrinkles, and his eyes gave Maxim a harsh gaze. He shook his large head and ran his hand over his thin combed-over gray hair.

Maxim nodded. “I... yes, yes, sir.”

“Sit down.” Yezhov pointed at a brown wooden chair across from his desk of the same color. His office was spacious, but crammed full of metal filing cabinets, and shelves and boxes. “They're transferring me to a new office, just across the hall. Thus, the mess.” He waved his hand around. “But let's talk about your new assignment.”

Maxim nodded, but said nothing. He had learned that with Yezhov, the fewer words he said, the better off he was.

Yezhov found a thin manila folder at the top of a pile of documents. “Your initial assignment is scrapped. The police will escort that detainee. You need to focus on this operation.” He tapped the folder, but didn't hand it over to Maxim.

Maxim nodded.

Yezhov said, “This needs your utmost attention and all your skills. It's top secret. An *extremely* high-value detainee. And he's coming from abroad.”

“Where?”

“London, UK. He's a banker, a loser who thought he could betray his country.”

“What did he do?”

“Embezzled money. He's being brought back for trial, to answer for his crimes.” Yezhov's voice had an almost solemn tone, as if he were the judge rendering a guilty verdict about the banker.

Maxim wanted to ask about the SVR's involvement in general and Sasha's participation in this operation in particular, but didn't want to tip his hand. So he said, "Where do I pick him up?"

"Before we get to that, let me explain something about this operation. Some very important people have an extreme vested interest in this man, this banker. This operation is highly classified, and only a handful of people know about the banker's arrival." Yezhov held Maxim's gaze for a long moment and continued, "However, not everyone's happy with the banker's homecoming. He knows a lot of secrets that can bury many people. Some violent opposition is to be expected, but hopefully not before he's been taken to the safehouse."

"I understand, sir."

"I know we have the talent and the resources to handle this in house, but the folks from the SVR insist that we have someone from their agency working with us. SVR agents uncovered the embezzlement, then connected the banker to the missing money. They want the credit."

"Naturally."

"But the SVR also wants discretion. Against my better judgment—and I'm certain yours as well—the SVR is dispatching only one agent. He used to work for us and is a good friend of yours. Sasha Nikonov. The two of you will pick up the banker at the Sheremetyevo Airport, then take him to a safehouse. The address and all other details are in the folder." He slid it across the desk.

Maxim picked it up, but didn't look at it. He said, "I agree that we need a larger crew. But if the order, your order, is to get this done with just two people, we'll get it done."

"*You* will get it done." Yezhov pointed his finger at Maxim. "Your job is on the line, along with the reputation of our agency, if this operation goes haywire."

*And yours, of course.* Maxim nodded and offered a small smile. "As always, I will do my best."

"That you'll do. Now, talk to Nikonov and update him on the assignment. His director should have briefed him already, but we're the ones that have the files and are the lead on this operation."

"Right away."

"We still don't know the time of the airplane's arrival. The SVR is keeping things under wraps. Once they call me, I'll let you know, and you can head to the airport."

"I'll do that."

Yezhov nodded, then waved his hand toward the door. The meeting was over.

When Maxim walked into the antechamber, he flipped open the folder, not only to avoid the sarcastic look of Yezhov's assistant, but also to begin studying the file. Usually, the first page was a sheet of information about the detainee, along with his picture. The name of the banker was there, but his picture was missing. Maxim heaved a deep sigh as he rounded the corner. *No picture of the detainee. Unknown opposition. Rushed preps and just a two-man crew. What else can go wrong?*

## Chapter 2

### **Outside the FSB Headquarters, Lubyanka Building Downtown Moscow, Russia**

Maxim walked at a brisk pace toward the meeting point with Sasha, which was a small café on Zlatoustinskiy Bol'shoy Street. It was about ten minutes from the FSB headquarters, which made it the perfect location for those situations in which Maxim didn't want to run into anyone from the office. Few of his colleagues would venture this far for just a cup of coffee or sandwiches, which, truth be told, were just above average. Besides, winter had arrived in Moscow as it usually did: without a warning and with a vengeance. Maxim was still in denial and was wearing only a white t-shirt, gray cargo pants, and a gray windbreaker. He still wore his black aviator shades even though a thick and depressing grayish layer of clouds had blanketed the city, hovering just above the tip of the skyscrapers.

When he came to the intersection across from the café, Maxim lowered his sunglasses to the tip of his nose. He had a nose that belonged in a Rembrandt painting, the one that showed Jesus with long flowing hair and a long narrow nose. Unlike Jesus, though, Maximilian had short, clean-cut brown hair. The sharp wind gusts were toying with his hair, so he brushed it back.

Then he fixed the collar of his jacket and glanced at the mirror-like glass of the nearby store, pretending he was window-shopping. In fact, he was checking over his shoulder. He had noticed a couple of men who seemed to be following him as soon as he left the headquarters. He could be mistaken, because this was a busy street. Perhaps they were simply going about their own business, which was taking them in his direction. Or perhaps they were after him, surveillance from the opposition, whoever that might be: the CIA, MI6, or a host of agents from other foreign intelligence agencies operating in Moscow.

There were two types of surveillance: covert—where the objective was to stealthily follow the subject and gather as much intelligence as possible, like where he was going, what was he doing, or who he was meeting with—and overt—where the objective was to make known their presence and unnerve the subject, spooking them into irrational actions. They might decide to make a phone call, which could be intercepted and monitored, or call in for backup, with damning consequences.

Maxim thought about the possibilities for a long moment. What were the chances that the people who wanted the banker dead were capable of following him minutes after he had received his assignment? His line of work had made Maxim extremely suspicious, “paranoid,” if one asked Sasha or Maxim's other friends. He didn't believe in coincidences. As the saying went, Three people can keep a secret, if two of them are dead. If Yezhov was correct in his assessment that powerful people wanted to silence the banker, then, in his own words, Maxim was to expect “violent opposition.”

*But will it start right away?* He shrugged. *I've got to keep my eyes open, as always.*

Then he nodded to himself, because in this case, there might be a third option. The FSB operatives were occasionally known to play tricks on transporting agents or other employees they despised, ones who, in the operatives' eyes, were below them. The operatives—the ones who liked to call themselves “true spies”—would follow an unsuspecting employee and give them a good fright, or cause them to start an avalanche of paperwork reporting false sighting of foreign agents. In turn, this wild goose chase would validate the FSB operatives' claims that the rest of the agency was “good for nothing.” Of course, none of these allegations were ever proven, but Maxim knew he lived in a world of half-truths, gossip, and rumors.

Maxim didn't know what to make of the situation. One of the men was still there, about twenty yards behind, staring at his phone and lingering in front of a clothing store. Then he raised his phone and seemed to be taking a picture of the store's window. He was a young man in his twenties with an anchor beard, and he was wearing a dark blue sports coat and black jeans.

Maxim smiled. *This totally smells of FSB jerks.* He shrugged and crossed as the traffic lights switched. He didn't mind anyone from the FSB knowing he was meeting with Sasha. If the operatives or suspicious individuals entered the café, then all bets were off.

Sasha had already arrived, but he must have parked behind the café, since his silver BMW sedan was nowhere in sight. The SVR agent was sitting next to the window, dressed in a black jacket and matching pants. His style was to overdress. People always complained about someone dressed too casually for the occasion, not the other way around, Sasha used to say, and he always carried a tie and a gray jacket in his car, just in case.

Maxim waved at Sasha, then studied the almost empty café. Most of the business had been taken by a Hooters across the street, and a few other eateries around the area. But the eighty-six-year-old man who owned and ran the café couldn't care less. Operating the business kept him alive.

“Morning, Maxim.” Sasha stood up, and they exchanged a hug, even though they had seen each other just three days ago. The poker game at the house of one of their friends Sunday night had left Maxim's pockets about 1,000 rubles lighter. It was barely enough to buy him a decent lunch, so he hadn't minded paying the price to have a great time with the guys. “You look worn-out.”

“I didn't sleep well last night.” Maxim sat across from Sasha. “Too much gel, my friend.” He gestured at Sasha's medium-length strawberry blond hair, which he kept in a slicked-back style. At the base of his neck, a few strands had flipped up in rebellious wisps.

“I take after my father. In a few years, I'll be completely bald. So I do what I can, while I can.”

Maxim's brown eyes studied Sasha's clean-shaven face, then glanced at his dark blue eyes, but didn't find any sign of mischief. Sasha's voice had rung with true regret. “What do the French say? *C'est la vie...*”

“What does that mean?”

“That's life. Things are the way they are...”

Sasha shrugged. “That's true. On the topic of this... *selavi* stuff... did you notice the FSB jokers following you?”

“I did, but what if they're not FSB?”



“Then who?”

“The people who want our target.”

“And they moved on us so fast?”

“Do you find that impossible?”

“No, just very unlikely. Unless they’re well-connected.”

“The banker is extremely well-connected, and has friends in high places.”

“And enemies in even higher ones. Coffee?” Sasha pointed at his empty cup.

“Yes.”

Sasha picked up his cup and gestured with it to the young woman behind the counter. She nodded her understanding, and Sasha said, “How’s your mom?”

“She’s very well, but misses you. When was the last time we went over to her place for supper?”

“I don’t know. A month or so.”

“Yes, so plan for tomorrow night. She’s making borscht and rye bread, then we’re going to the opera, but you can come for just the supper, or just the opera.”

“Oh, opera, enticing.” Sasha dragged out his words, and his voice indicated he was anything but excited. “Tell me more about it.”

Maxim decided to play along. “It’s a comedy by Rossini. Lots of laughs.”

Sasha shook his head and frowned. “I’m more of a tragedy kind of guy. Rossini is not my man.”

Maxim grinned. “Do you even know who he is?”

“Some dead Italian dude who didn’t have to work, had nothing but time, and made music to entertain rich people who didn’t have to work and had nothing but time.”

“Exactly. That sums it up very well. But why can’t you come for supper?”

“I might be out of town for an assignment. Can’t tell you more about it.”

“Oh, I thought you were going out with a girl...”

“No, not yet. After Natalya, I’m taking some time off.”

“Too bad it happened that way.”

“Eh, it’s all right. She wasn’t the right one. And *you*, have you talked to Helena...”

“She wasn’t in today...”

“What about yesterday? The day before?”

“It’s not the right time, Sasha. One of these days—”

“One of these days, you’ll find out she has a boyfriend, or is engaged to some dimwit, when it could have been you.”

“I don’t know.” Maxim shrugged. “Maybe she’s not the right one...”

“How do you know?” Sasha leaned closer to the table. “Have you asked her out?”

“What if she says ‘no’?”

“Then you’ll know, and you can move on.”

“I’m not sure I want to move on.” Maxim sighed.

The red-headed waitress with tattooed hands and a silver nose-ring walked toward their table, and they ordered black coffee. When she was gone, Sasha said, “What does our assignment file say?”

“Thin on details.” Maxim brought it out of his brown leather briefcase. “Take a look.”

Sasha opened the manila folder. "Where's the photo?"

"Like I said, thin on details. But we have a name, Rabinovich. He worked as executive manager for UBS Financial Services, a multinational company that operates in over fifty countries."

Sasha nodded and read from the file in a voice barely above a whisper, "UBS is a multinational company that offers a host of financial transactions for individual and corporate investors, such as securities and commodities brokerage services, and portfolio management products and services. Rabinovich is suspected of defrauding MoscOil..." His voice trailed off. "This guy has signed his death warrant. And the FSB is sending just the two of us?" He shook his head.

Maxim didn't answer right away. Sasha's incredulous voice made it clear that he wasn't expecting an answer. He cursed under his breath, then looked at the waitress bringing their coffees. After a minute's silence, Sasha sipped from his cup, then said, "My director told me I was to help you and the FSB with a routine pick-up... I had no idea who this guy was, or what he had done."

Maxim grinned. "Is my little Sasha scared?"

"Stop it. I'm not scared, but I'm also not stupid. We can't do this on our own. We'll need reinforcements."

"We're not getting them. It's just the two of us. This is supposed to be discreet."

"Discreet? The file said he embezzled twenty million dollars from MoscOil, one of the largest oil and gas companies in all of Russia. Do you know who owns MoscOil?"

"Not really. I know that it's a private company..."

"Right, but these guys, these oligarchs, they didn't build their companies by playing nice and stressing forgiveness. They'll come after the banker and everyone who tries to stop them..."

"What are you saying, Sasha?" Maxim gave him a look full of concern.

Sasha sipped his coffee again and shook his head. "I'm not saying I'm deserting you or this mission. I can't. But we need to be smart here."

Maxim nodded. "We are, and we will be. We can't have more people, but we can have more weapons, so that we're prepared. And we'll keep our eyes peeled, triple-check everything."

"Like that slimeball that's still out there." Sasha pointed at the man who had been following Maxim.

"I'd pay no attention to him. He's FSB, trying to play a trick on us."

Sasha gave Maxim a sideways glance. "Didn't you just say that we need to triple-check everything?"

"Yes, but you've already done that, and so did I..."

Sasha gave Maxim an exaggerated look as if he had said something outlandish. Then Sasha raised both his hands and turned them toward Maxim. "Let me teach you some math, Maxim. One plus one equals two—"

"Don't be a smart-aleck. It's a figure of speech. But since you like math, let's go check again."

"How?"

"We'll get in your car and see what happens."

"I like that."

Maxim had a sip of his coffee, then looked at the folder. He thought about Rabinovich and what was going through the man's mind when he thought he could defraud MoscOil and live to enjoy the misappropriated money. Perhaps he wasn't thinking. Or he was in debt to someone else, or something. Maxim had seen people do even more outlandish things to feed their addictions or hide their vices.

He finished his coffee and said, "Where did you park?"

"At the back."

"Let's go through the kitchen."

"Good plan."

They walked to the counter and paid for their drinks. Maxim noticed the man moving toward the front entrance of the café. Now, he could no longer see Sasha or Maxim.

The FSB agent began to wonder whether the surveillant was a prankster or a member of the opposition, someone dead set on stopping, or at least following them. Maxim nodded to himself. *It makes sense. A reconnaissance mission, to determine our numbers.*

He looked at Sasha, who had already entered the kitchen. Loud voices came for a moment, then the sound of a pan—or a pot—slamming against another metal object. When Maxim stepped through the door, he was met by the angry stare of the old man. "This is not right." He waved his finger in Maxim's face. "What are you doing here?"

"Running for our lives," Maxim said. "Sorry, we have to go through here."

The old man's fury subsided, but concern lingered in his gray, beady eyes. "Who's after you?"

"Don't know."

"I'll stop them. No one harms my guests."

"No, don't do anything. They will not—"

"I fought the Germans when I was twelve. I'll take care of them."

Maxim felt bad for exaggerating and sincerely wished the man outside the café was an FSB operative. "Look," he said to the old man. "There's a slight chance he might be one of us, a good guy. So go easy on him. Don't kill him, okay?"

Maxim's words startled the old man. "You're running away from a friend?"

"It's... I can't explain it. Just stand there and cook some beans or something." He ran through the kitchen and toward the back door.

"We don't serve beans here," the old man shouted as Maxim bolted through the open entrance.

Sasha had already started the car. "What happened?"

"Nothing, it's all good now. Go, go, go."

Sasha shifted into gear and stepped on the gas. The tires squealed, and the BMW shot out of the small parking lot. It almost collided with a van coming from the other direction, but Sasha turned the wheel. The BMW fishtailed and entered the next road, disappearing past a row of vehicles along a small park.

Maxim looked over his shoulder. No vehicles were following them. A few moments passed, and he still kept his head turned around. Then, a blue Audi SUV swung into the road. The driver took the turn a bit too fast. The Audi drifted and

almost hit a bench on the sidewalk. The driver regained control of the vehicle, straightened the wheel, and began to gain on Maxim and Sasha.

Maxim looked at Sasha and said, "Bad news. They're following us."

## Chapter 3

### **Northeast of Zlatoustinskiy Bol'shoi Street Moscow, Russia**

"Who are they?" Sasha said.

"Too far to tell. Let's lose them."

"What if they're FSB?"

"What if they're not?"

"All right. But no shooting, unless we're fired upon."

"Got it."

Maxim pulled out his MP-443 Grach 9mm pistol from the waistband holster on his left side. He cocked the weapon and held it next to his thigh. He hoped the people in the Audi were FSB tricksters, and he wouldn't have to fire his pistol. He detested writing after-action reports, answering inquiries, and explaining all his actions, instead of being in the field and running operations. However, if the opposition was here to draw blood, they had no idea what was coming their way.

Sasha made a right turn, followed by a left, which brought him onto a wide street. He swung around a city bus, then slowed down and stayed in front of the bus. As expected, the annoyed driver honked the horn. Sasha changed lanes, but kept the same speed as the bus. The maneuver put a few vehicles in between their BMW and the Audi.

Maxim looked at the side mirror, then over his shoulder.

No Audi.

"I think we lost them." He peered and sat up straighter in his seat. "No, they're still there."

"If I can get in front of that truck, they might miss us." Sasha gestured at a ton-and-a-half flatbed truck up ahead. "Then, we can see who they are."

Maxim nodded. He liked Sasha's strategy of not trying to evade surveillance by leading them on a high-speed chase through the city. If these were FSB agents, they'd give up easily. Plus, the license plates would give Maxim and Sasha the information they needed to discover the identity of the surveillance team.

Sasha shifted gears, stepped on the gas, and yanked at the wheel. He drove in front of the bus again, then, before the driver had even reacted to the dangerous maneuver, Sasha sped up and moved into the next lane, in front of the truck. Its driver was a middle-aged woman, and she showed no signs of irritation. She stepped on the brakes, and Sasha slowed down to fit in the flow of traffic.

They came to an intersection just as the traffic lights changed from green to amber. The bus driver stopped alongside the BMW, blocking their view of the next lane. Sasha had to stop as well.

A loud honk came from the back, followed by the sound of screeching tires. The blue Audi SUV rocketed up the third lane and shot through the intersection, then made a sharp left turn. Its driver must have thought the BMW had gone in that direction.

Sasha stepped on the gas, and the BMW went after the SUV.

Maxim was caught by surprise. "What are you doing?"

"Going after them. I saw two men inside."

"Yes, same here."

"But I didn't catch the license plate. Did you?"

"Partially. B21 and something."

"Yes, insufficient. I'm tired of this game. Let's catch them red-handed."

Maxim didn't like Sasha's approach, but he wasn't about to argue with his best friend and partner.

The Audi driver realized the tables had turned, and now they had become the target. The SUV picked up speed and turned right. Its driver miscalculated the distance, and the vehicle's side hit a traffic sign post. The SUV seemed to be stuck for a moment, but then it zoomed forward and onto a side street.

Sasha hit the brakes before they came to the turn, and followed the Audi. It was now maybe thirty yards away. A large truck was coming from the other direction. The truck was taking up more than its lane, since a motorcycle was parked on the opposite side of the road.

The Audi driver honked, and the truck driver replied with a honk of his own.

"They're stuck," Sasha said.

"I hope so."

He kept the pistol to his side, again hoping he wouldn't have to use it.

The Audi driver began to accelerate. He moved as far as he could to the left, trusting he could squeeze in between the oncoming truck and the streetlight post on the side of the road.

He was wrong.

The front of the Audi hit the post. The hood flew up and over the Audi, going straight for the BMW.

Sasha swerved, almost on instinct, and the hood missed their car. Then Sasha swerved again, returning into his lane, as the large truck whirled inches away from them.

"Now they're stuck," Maxim said.

The Audi was stalled and hadn't started to move as Sasha parked the BMW behind the Audi SUV. Maxim jumped outside, his pistol aimed at the front passenger. "Get out of the car. Now! Out, out!"

The door opened slowly, and the man who had been following Maxim stepped outside. He held his hands up in the air. His facial expression showed no fear, but rather a sense of embarrassment. "Put that gun away. I'm FSB, just like you."

"Shut up," Maxim said. "Get down, down on the ground."

"Didn't you hear—"

"I heard you." Maxim was now a couple of feet away from the man. "And you heard me. On your knees, and hands behind your head."

Maxim stepped slowly and cautiously around the passenger and disarmed him.

Sasha was already shouting at the driver, and he seemed to follow orders without any objections. A moment later, Sasha brought over the unarmed driver and shoved him so he could kneel next to the passenger. “Who are you?” Maxim said and kept his pistol trained at the man.

“I told you: we work for the FSB.”

“You got ID?”

“Yes, in my pocket.” He tipped his head toward the left side of his sports coat, then began to lower his hand.

“Stop, stop. I’ll check.”

Maxim searched the driver, then the passenger, and found their IDs. They looked just like his and seemed to be genuine. Maxim tossed the IDs in front of the men and said, “Why are you following us?”

The passenger didn’t answer. The driver, who was a few years older than the passenger—considering the grayish two-day stubble covering his face—shook his head and said, “Gentlemen, there has been a serious mistake here. No one was following you.” His voice was calm and steady, and the words sounded rehearsed.

“A mistake?” Maxim lowered his pistol and stood right above the passenger. “You were outside the café. You’ve been following me ever since I left HQ.”

“No, I was... just going for a walk around the area.”

“A walk?”

“Yes. Is that alright with you?”

Sasha’s pistol was still aimed at the driver. “I have no problem with people minding their own business. But when they stick their noses into ours, that’s when I don’t like it.”

The driver shrugged. “Like I said, this is a mistake and—”

Maxim’s phone rang. It was Yezhov. “I’ve got to take this,” he said to Sasha, who nodded.

Maxim walked beyond the FSB agents’ earshot and answered the phone. “This is Maxim...”

“Are you in the office?” Yezhov sounded displeased and impatient.

“No, I’m discussing the assignment with Sasha... I mean Agent Nikonov.”

“Yes, okay, about the assignment. I have an update. The plane will land in an hour. Rush to the airport right away.”

“Got it.”

“And I’m sending you the banker’s photo and the complete file with the landing information and everything else we have. The SVR director just sent them to me.”

“Okay.”

“That’s all. Good luck.”

Maxim pocketed the phone and returned to Sasha. “We have to go.”

“What about them?”

“Do you have handcuffs?”

The driver shook his head. “Hey, no—”

“Shut up.” Sasha waved the pistol at him, then said to Maxim, “Glove compartment.”

“Let’s cuff them to their Audi and call the police. They can sort this out.”

The passenger said, “No, you can’t—”

“Of course I can, and I will. This will teach you not to bother your colleagues,” Sasha said, while Maxim ran to the BMW.

“But we told you—”

“You told me lies, and I’ve had enough. Shut up, just shut your mouth. And stay down.” The driver had started to get up, so Sasha tapped him on the head with the muzzle of his pistol.

Maxim returned in a moment, and they handcuffed the driver and the passenger around the steering wheel. They cursed and swore and threatened Sasha and Maxim, but it was all in vain.

Maxim took the Audi keys, while Sasha called the police and gave them the location of the scene, along with a description of the suspects, who had committed the crime of following two FSB officers. When he was finished, he said, “They’ll be here in five minutes. So, don’t go anywhere, boys.”

“You will pay for this,” the driver said.

Sasha shrugged.

Maxim was already walking to the BMW. “I’ll drive now, since we’re heading to the airport.”

“Package is ready?”

“Arriving in sixty.”

“We can get there in forty.”

“How about thirty?”

Sasha gave Maxim a sideways glance. “You’re pushing your luck.”

“Let’s try it.”

“Sure, just don’t kill us.”

“We’ll go get my SUV at HQ, then straight to the airport.”

Sasha nodded.

Maxim threw the car in reverse. *The FSB is out of the way. Now, let’s hope there’s no opposition, at least not right away.*

A feeling deep in his gut told him that he was mistaken.

## Chapter 4

### **Dmitrovskoye Road Moscow, Russia**

As he turned the steering wheel of the brown-gray metallic UAZ Patriot SUV, Maxim’s mind focused on the operation. While it was still just him and Sasha, they now had a photo of the detainee. Or it was supposed to arrive soon. Maxim was checking his phone every thirty seconds, but his boss hadn’t sent it or the complete file yet as he had promised. Maxim shrugged. *At least there’s no opposition.*

*Not yet.*

He tried to suppress that thought, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was going to go wrong. Yezhov had warned him, but still had only sent a small team. *Does he expect, no, want us to fail?*

“Maxim, what’s going on?”

Sasha’s voice interrupted Maxim’s deep thinking. He shook his head and drew in a deep breath. “What if this is a set-up?”

“What?”

“Yes, we’re sent in, just the two of us, so that we can fail.”

Sasha took a moment to process the thought. “Do you realize what you’re saying?”

“I do, and I have no evidence for it. But there’s something here that just doesn’t seem to fit. The short notice. The missing intel. Small team.”

“All normal to me. We’ve done such missions in the past.”

“Not when dealing with such high-level detainees.”

“SVR doesn’t want to attract attention.”

“I get that, but still, two more people wasn’t much to ask. We’d be in the same vehicle.”

Sasha shrugged. “It’s what we have, and we’ll get this done.”

“No doubt about it. Just might be tougher than expected.”

“Isn’t it always?”

Maxim nodded. His phone pinged with the arrival of an email. He glanced at the screen. “It’s Yezhov. We got the file.”

“Forward it to me.”

Maxim had begun to tap the phone when it started to ring. “Oh, now the boss wants to talk to me. Yes, this is Maxim...”

“Why are you and Sasha out of control?” Yezhov shouted.

“What? I don’t—”

“What’s there not to understand? You called the police on your colleagues?”

Maxim bit his lip. He wasn’t expecting the word to go around so fast. “They were following us, director, endangering our operation—”

“They say they were on an assignment, looking for a contact, whom they missed because of you.”

Maxim shook his head and gave a look to Sasha, who made a gesture with his hand, indicating that Director Yezhov was crazy. Maxim sighed and said, “Director, at the time it looked like a good idea, but in hindsight—”

“Yes, hindsight, but the damage is done. You should have called their supervisor, checked their story, seen if what they were saying was true. But you wanted to be the tough guy.”

“No, it’s nothing like that—”

“That’s all I have to say now. We’ll discuss this when you return from your assignment. And, for your own sake, don’t mess it up.”

“I won’t, director, I—”

Yezhov hung up on Maxim.

He bit his lip again, this time to stifle some swearing.

Sasha said, “The man has gone mad.”

“Yeah, well, he’s still my boss. He said we should have called the office, not the police.”

“And their boss would have covered for them, or given them an easy way out.”

Maxim slammed his fist against the steering wheel. “This... this is infuriating.”



Sasha placed a hand on Maxim's shoulder. "Man, have you thought of a transfer? Somewhere a little less frustrating?"

"What, the SVR?"

"Perhaps, if you must... Or another section within FSB, or maybe you can be reassigned to work with another—"

"That wouldn't look good on my record. I can get along with Yezhov."

"But can he with you?"

Maxim shrugged. "He needs to show off that he's the boss. I get it."

Sasha's eyes lingered on Maxim's frustrated face a moment longer. "I can put in a good word for you... if that's what you need."

"I'll let you know. Now, let me forward you those files."

He sent to Sasha the email received from Yezhov and scrolled through the screen. The PDF file started with a picture of the detainee. Rabinovich was in his late fifties, maybe early sixties. The photo showed him well-groomed, wearing a crisp white shirt, a brown wool vest, and a bowtie. He had a handlebar mustache and goatee and resembled an aristocrat of days gone by.

Maxim shook his head and glanced up ahead. The traffic was smooth with few vehicles and no erratic drivers. He could keep up with just one eye on the windshield. *I guess he messed with the wrong guys*, he thought as he scrolled through the file. *He must have been at a tight spot if this was his only way out...*

MoscOil was supposed to be private, but Maxim knew that nothing was really private in today's Russia. The company's executives had close ties to the current government. It was very likely they had pulled strings and had received the assistance of SVR's operatives in London to nab Rabinovich. Perhaps they played the "treason" card, asserting that Rabinovich was defrauding the country. They wouldn't be completely wrong, since the Russian national oil company Rosneft owned an eleven percent stake in MoscOil. *Yes, Rabinovich sealed his fate when he took this wrong turn...* The banker had crossed some extremely powerful people, who had twenty million reasons to get even.

Maxim looked through the windshield, then at Sasha, who said, "This banker, he's a dead man walking..."

"Yes, and we need to make sure he keeps walking..."

"For how long, though? How much did you read?" He tapped his phone.

"Skimmed through the first couple of pages, but it's enough..."

"Agreed. We've got to be extremely careful."

"Well, those will be some tense eighteen minutes. The detainee's transfer will take eighteen minutes, from the tarmac to the safehouse. Provided there's no interference..."

"Do you really think this will be an in-and-out job, just like that?" The SVR agent snapped his fingers.

"No, but I'm glad it's a short trip. Imagine if it were an intra-city transfer, taking hours."

"They would have given us more people."

"I don't think so. More weapons maybe."

Sasha laughed and looked over his shoulder toward the SUV's trunk. Before leaving the FSB headquarters, they had stashed two AK-105 rifles—the shortened

carbine version of the famous AK-47 rifle designed by Mikhail Kalashnikov back in 1947—in case things got out of hand.

Maxim said, “Is someone behind us?”

“Lots of people, but none that we need to worry about.”

Maxim inhaled deeply and stepped on the gas. He tried to relax as the SUV picked up speed. He swerved around a couple of slower-moving vehicles, then zoomed through an intersection just as the lights turned red. He kept his foot on the gas, as if they were on a high-speed chase.

One of the crucial parts of the job of a transporter—Maxim believed the most crucial one—was to know how to drive. Not just aggressive or defensive driving techniques, or advanced tactical maneuvers. It was more important to know the exact timing of *when* to employ each skill. Reading and interpreting every situation, assessing and deciding when and how to act, those made the difference between a mediocre and a great transporter.

“Do you think you’ll draw them out?” Sasha said.

“What?” Maxim replied absentmindedly, immersed in navigating the heavily-armored SUV.

“The high speed. We’ll see who breaks ranks and follows us.”

Maxim smiled. “That, plus we need to make good time...”

“Just don’t try to break your record.”

About a month ago, Maxim had completed the trip in thirty-seven minutes.

“That was different,” he said. “An emergency, and I was driving a police car.”

“Still. Let’s just get there in one piece.”

“Yes, Mother.”

They drove for the next few minutes in silence, broken by Sasha’s reading relevant excerpts from Rabinovich’s file. Maxim mostly nodded. The more he knew about the case, the more he began to expect a hostile intervention. However, a feeling of calm had engulfed him. Maxim was no longer concerned if the opposition was going to appear. He knew they were going to, and when they did, Maxim and Sasha would be prepared.

He kept glancing over his shoulder, checking the rear-view and the side mirror. Nothing suspicious. His high-speed driving had prompted a few drivers to try to replicate his maneuvers, with limited success. At one point, when Maxim squeezed in between a couple of vans, the right corner of the hood almost clipped the back of the leading van. He tapped on the brakes, then slid to the side and turned the steering wheel. The SUV drifted around the corner and went straight into the path of an oncoming taxi. Maxim didn’t even flinch, but yanked at the wheel. The SUV climbed onto the sidewalk, swerved around a couple of metal benches, then dropped down onto the street.

Sasha let out a nervous laugh. “You’re gonna kill us.”

“Either the SVR work has softened you up, or you have a very short memory. You drove like this only minutes ago...”

“The SVR hasn’t softened me up, and that was different. We were being chased, albeit by juvenile delinquents.”

“I’m just warming up.”

“Right, just don’t have too much fun.”

“What did I say earlier, Mother?”

Sasha shook his head. "That wasn't funny even the first time you said it..."

Maxim shrugged and eased up on the gas as they came to the merging point with the M-11 Highway. He joined the flow of traffic rushing down the five lanes and drove the regular speed for a moment. Then he turned the wheel, switched to the high-speed lane, and flattened the gas pedal.

The half-unexpected maneuver threw Sasha against the seat. He cursed out loud, while Maxim grinned. "Hold on, brother."

Sasha's eyes went to the side mirror. A newer model black Mercedes-Benz sedan was gaining on them, driving in the same lane. "Maxim, check that out." He gestured with his hand.

"What is it?"

"Someone's following us."

Maxim looked at the rear-view mirror, then turned in his seat. The Mercedes was coming up fast behind them. If he wasn't tailing them, he was in quite a hurry to get to his destination. "Don't think this is FSB."

Sasha shook his head. "No. This is about the banker. Someone doesn't want us to do our job."

Maxim shrugged. "They'll be sorely disappointed when they find out *they* won't do their job."

## Chapter 5

### **M-11 Highway Moscow, Russia**

Sasha had already pulled out his pistol, but Maxim shook his head. "No, we won't turn this into a gunfight."

"Unless they fire first..."

"If they start it, we'll end it. But I don't want to miss the banker. If we're disabled, and someone makes an attempt on the banker at the airport..."

Sasha nodded. "Yes. So, what's the tactic?"

"First, let's make sure they're really after us. Once we're positive, we'll try to outrun them, and in the process, put them out of action."

"I like that."

"Hold on to something."

"Hit it."

Maxim switched gears and flattened the gas pedal. The SUV rocketed forward, then Maxim changed lanes. He put a few vehicles between them and the Mercedes and kept accelerating. The tactic was fully formed in his mind, and he was looking for the right moment and the right vehicle before he could execute it. It had to be a large vehicle, a tractor trailer, a bus, or a cement truck, something that could take a little bump.

"There." Sasha pointed at a tractor trailer about sixty yards in front of them.

Maxim nodded. "That's perfect."

The Mercedes pulled up from behind the stream of vehicles. The driver seemed dead set on not losing the target.

Sasha held his pistol over his lap. "Now we know they're following us."

Maxim nodded. "Let's make things harder."

He weaved his way through traffic. As he passed a small white hatchback, the young woman behind the wheel was startled by the unexpected presence of the twice-as-large SUV coming at her. Maxim was still about a foot away from her, and he was going to go past her and to the front of her vehicle, without making contact.

The woman panicked. She turned the wheel to the left, toward the SUV. For a moment, the hatchback scraped against the side of the SUV. Maxim drove away from the hatchback, but there was nowhere to go. The other side of their armored vehicle sideswiped a van. Its driver lost control and drove into the next lane. The hatchback spun around, and the sedan coming behind it crashed into the hatchback's side.

Maxim cursed under his breath as he stepped on the brakes and switched lanes. He looked over his shoulder. The Mercedes-Benz driver had swerved around the crash scene and was still behind them. Maxim changed gears, and the SUV shot along the fast lane. They began to gain on the tractor trailer, and when the SUV was almost near the tractor's cab, Maxim decelerated to match the tractor's speed.

The Mercedes-Benz had caught up to them and was right behind the SUV.

"Now," Sasha said.

Maxim hit the gas and swung right in front of the tractor. Its driver was caught by surprise, but only for a moment. The front of the truck hit the back of the SUV.

The collision sent the SUV skidding forward and to the right. Maxim had expected it, so he turned the steering wheel to correct their course.

The tractor's driver, however, jerked the steering wheel to the left, to avoid crashing again into the back of the SUV. There was a bone-chilling screech of brakes as the tractor trailer's wheels locked up. The abrupt braking and the high speed caused the tractor trailer to jack-knife. The tractor hit the concrete median, while the trailer swerved like a snake across all the lanes, then rolled onto the side. The trailer was uncoupled from the tractor and blocked all five of the highway lanes.

Maxim had slowed down and was looking toward the flipped-over trailer. He didn't expect the Mercedes-Benz to appear. Its driver wouldn't be able to go through the shoulder lane, as the remaining gap was too small for a car to squeeze through. It was barely enough for a couple of men to walk comfortably next to one another. The driver and passengers would have to leave and find another vehicle, and there were no vehicles around.

"They must have crashed into the trailer," Sasha said.

"It seems so. Let's go before they start shooting."

"Do you think they will?"

"I would. The chase is over. What do they have to lose?"

Maxim stepped on the gas and glanced at the rear-view mirror as the trailer grew smaller and smaller.

"We should call this in," Sasha said.

"I'll do it. Yezhov won't like it, but he'll have to deal with it."

Sasha shrugged. "We chose the less risky option for our operation and for their lives, whoever they are. Yezhov has no reason to get mad."

"Does he *need* a reason to get mad?"

Maxim sighed and dialed Yezhov's number. When the director picked up, Maxim explained the situation, starting with what had just happened. Yezhov listened patiently for about twenty seconds, before cutting Maxim off. "How did they find you?"

"I'm not certain. They must have followed us, but we didn't see them until a few minutes ago."

"Where are you now?"

Maxim looked at a highway sign coming up to the right. "Four and a half ks from the airport."

"All right, all right. Keep going with the assignment and try not to kill anyone else..."

Maxim wanted to say that not only hadn't they killed anyone, but they also hadn't opened fire. The team had simply responded to the escalating situation. A well-calculated response. But Maxim felt Yezhov wasn't in the mood to argue, and Maxim didn't want to argue either.

Yezhov said, "I'll send someone to clear this matter out with the local police. Hopefully, we'll find out who these people are."

*I doubt they're still there.* "Good idea, sir."

"Call me once you have the banker in custody. And again, keep a low profile, and don't kill anyone..."

"I'll do my best."

When Maxim had returned the phone to his pocket, Sasha said, "Well, he sounded reasonable enough..."

"Unusually so. Maybe he knows something he's not telling us, or he understands our position."

"I think it's the former."

"So do I." Maxim shrugged and looked through the windshield. He steadied his shaking hands and took a series of deep breaths. He leaned on the gas pedal as the SUV sped along the highway.

"Maxim, you're still so tense..."

"Considering what just happened, it's normal."

"Yes, yes, but it's over now. There won't be any more interference..."

"How can you be certain?"

"I doubt they'll try something again."

Maxim said nothing. Sasha could be right, but Maxim knew that some people were determined to death. He felt there was going to be a new attempt to stop them or to release the banker. He glanced through the windshield, then checked the rear-view mirror. Because of the rolled-over truck, all five lanes were empty.

In a few moments, Maxim slowed down as they neared the yard entrance of Jet Solutions, a private air cargo company that operated out of the airport. Sometimes, as in this case, the company served to transfer detainees wanted by Russian state authorities from Europe back to the motherland and to their

looming fate. He looked at Sasha and said, "Do you think there's more to this story?"

"What, besides the banker's treason?"

"Yes, what if there are other players?"

Sasha shrugged. "I doubt this is open and shut. There's an international angle here, and who knows in what else Rabinovich has been involved. He's Russian, but he operated in Switzerland and the UK. There could be another connection..."

"So we don't know what to expect at the airport..."

"We never know what to expect. But look, if you're thinking of foreign agencies, there would have been issues while he was in London. But he was bagged and loaded, and now he's here. The worst is over."

Maxim nodded back, but the look of concern remained on his face. He scratched his chin and ran his hand over the left side of his face. His skin was darker than that of most Russians. Despite the long, cold, sunless days of winter, he always had a tanned look.

He stopped when they came to the guards' shack at the yard's entrance. Sasha lowered the window and nodded at the big burly man who stared at him from behind the glass. The guard raised his landline phone to indicate he was busy, then made a shrugging gesture, indicating they'd have to wait.

Maxim asked, "Did the banker ever operate in America?"

"If he did, it's not in the file. He worked in London and Switzerland; that we know for sure."

Maxim nodded and drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

Sasha grinned and shifted in his seat. "You know something interesting about America?"

"Yes, you know I can read minds..."

"Not with that attitude. If you worked in America, Maximillian Thornichinovich, and you were a CIA agent, or worked for the FBI, you know what they'd call you?"

"The Russian?"

"No, that's too easy, and there are dozens of Russians working for those agencies. I mean your name. It's too long and too complicated for the average American to pronounce."

Maxim nodded. "You're right."

Sasha said, "First name is pretty easy, they'd call you Max. The last name... they'd probably shorten that to Thorne."

Maxim smiled. "Max Thorne, yeah, it has a good ring to it."

"Anyway, how would things be if you were actually an American spy?"

Maxim shrugged. "We wouldn't be riding in the same car, working on the same op. I mean, we might be assigned to the same op, but we'd be on opposite sides."

Sasha grinned. "Then I'd have to kill you..."

"I wouldn't be so sure. Those CIA agents, they're quite good. Some of them are hard to kill."

"Nothing's impossible for the SVR."

"I didn't say impossible, but close to it."

"I still say I'd kill you. I'm a better shot than you are."

"First, you'd have to get close to me."

Sasha nodded. "I'll grant you that. Behind the wheel, you're extremely fast."

The guard ended his call and gave Sasha a curious glance.

Sasha said, "We're here to pick up a package." He didn't want to say "someone," so that he wouldn't tip off the guard. The fewer people who knew about the purpose of their operation, the better it was for everyone.

The guard opened his window a couple of inches. "What are your names?"

Sasha gave them to the guard, then he flashed him the agency's ID card.

The guard scrutinized it, then waved at Sasha, and he put the card away. "What about you?"

"What, that's not enough?" Maxim said.

"Not if you want to go through that." The guard gestured at the white wrought-iron gate.

Maxim peered at the man, then pulled out his ID card slowly. The guard studied it, then said, "FSB and SVR. Must be a special package, the one you're picking up..."

Maxim nodded. "You're very observant."

"Let me check my list," the guard said in a throaty voice as if his mouth was full of nails. He took a few long moments, then said, "You're not on my list."

"Check again," Sasha said.

Maxim said, "This all happened this morning. It's a rush. Maybe they didn't have time to—"

"If you're not on my visitors list, I can't let you through."

Sasha opened his mouth, but Maxim held him by the arm. "Look," he said to the guard, "I understand that. Can you call someone? Maybe your supervisor is aware of our arrival, and of the package."

The frown on the guard's face looked like he didn't want to lift a finger to help them. He closed the window without a word, and his facial expression didn't change. However, he did pick up a phone from the desk.

Sasha leaned closer to Maxim. "You said this was going to take eighteen minutes, right?"

"That was from the pickup time. But don't get me started about this guy..."

The guard talked to someone at the other end of the line, then held the phone close to his ear. He nodded a few times, then spoke and looked at Maxim and Sasha. The guard shook his head and turned around.

Another long minute passed while they waited.

Sasha said, "I should go out there—"

"No, we'll wait. He'll figure it out."

"And if he doesn't?"

"We're early anyway. If he doesn't figure it out in a couple of minutes, then I'll talk to him."

Sasha sighed, but showed no other sign of displeasure.

Maxim sat in silence, observing the guard. He was still on the phone with his back turned toward the glass window. Maxim thought about that kind of job and how long he'd last working day in and day out in such a small box. He didn't like enclosed spaces. He wasn't claustrophobic or anything like that, but he liked to be out and about, to drive, go places, do things.

Another long minute dragged on, then the guard finally turned around. The earlier frown was still on his sweaty face. He said nothing, but he must have pushed a button or turned a lever, because the gate began to roll to the side.

“Have a great day,” Maxim said.

The guard did not respond.

Sasha cursed the guard under his breath, then glanced at Maxim. “What a jerk...”

“He’s just doing his job—”

“Yes, and so are we. Who would drive here and say they’re agents if they’re not?”

Maxim shrugged and looked around. He drove to the left through the sparsely filled parking lot. The sun was now in their eyes and glowed brightly, although it gave very little warmth. It was still early October, but the temperature had dropped to below zero during the night.

The UAZ Patriot SUV rounded the corner and made another turn, as they came to the back of the building. They drove past a greenbelt, where the grass had turned yellow, and onto a heavily-packed gravel strip leading to a ramp.

A Gulfstream G200, painted all blue with a peacock plume near the back, sat at the edge of the ramp. Further away was a Bombardier Challenger 300 with a red cross on its tail.

Maxim drove alongside them and stopped when he came to the other end of the ramp. A white Lada SUV was parked about fifty yards away. Three men armed with submachine guns were smoking and chatting near the back of the SUV. They had noticed the UAZ’s arrival and were following it with their attentive eyes.

“Who are they?” Sasha asked.

Maxim didn’t reply right away. He studied the men dressed in black suits. The Lada had no markings.

Sasha had already pulled out his pistol.

“Careful, let’s not provoke them—”

“They could be here for Rabinovich...”

“They could. We’ll have to check.”

“Can’t be airport security, or customs.”

“Dressed too nice for that.”

“I’ll find out who they are and what they want.”

“I’ve got you covered.”

## Chapter 6

### **Sheremetyevo International Airport Moscow Oblast, Russia**

Maxim pulled out his wallet with the ID card and flipped it open. Then he stepped outside and walked to the Lada at a brisk pace. When he was about ten feet away, he held it up for the men to see it and said, “My name is Maximillian Thornichinovich. I work for the FSB. My colleague is back there.” He gestured toward the UAZ with his hand. “And you are?”



The tallest of the group, a curly-haired redhead sporting a full, bushy beard, smiled at Maxim and walked toward him. "My name is Darko Olenev, but call me Darko."

Maxim glanced at the man's face through the mist forming in the cold air. Darko's handshake was firm. He was about a couple of inches taller than the five-foot-ten FSB agent and was better built than Maxim. Darko's muscles were bulging under the tight, shiny suit, and he was wearing a bulletproof vest underneath.

*Mercs, Maxim thought. Former army troops turned mercenaries.*

Maxim said, "Who do you work for, and what are you doing here?"

"We're with AP, Absolute Protection, a security company for high-end clients. You've probably heard of us." Darko spoke in a warm, friendly tone and gave Maxim a sincere look.

Maxim nodded. AP was famous for taking some of the most difficult security assignments inside and outside Russia, especially in the former Soviet republics. They accompanied money trucks, or provided protection services for celebrities and oligarchs. AP was also notorious for hiring the most brutal thugs, people who had washed out of the armed forces or had been dishonorably discharged. The worst people to mess with.

Darko's hand went slowly to his inside jacket pocket. He pulled out an ID card and handed it to Maxim. The FSB agent studied the card, especially the AP logo, stamp, and holographic sticker. Everything looked genuine. It was either the real thing, or an extremely good forgery.

Maxim returned the ID to Darko and drew in a deep breath, stifling the frown that had begun to wrinkle his face. "I've heard of AP. Drop-off or pick-up?"

"Pick-up. And you?"

"Can't talk about it."

Darko smiled. "It's pick-up. Too little security for a drop-off."

Maxim frowned, but Darko was right. He was familiar with FSB protocol. "What did you do before AP?"

Darko shrugged. "Can't talk about it. Want to meet my crew?"

"No, thanks. I've got stuff to do."

Darko pursed his lips, seemingly disappointed by the refusal. "I hope your op goes well."

Maxim thought he sensed a veiled threat in Darko's voice. The way he said the words, it reminded Maxim of the hissing of a snake. "Same for yours."

He kept his eyes on Darko as the man waved with his left hand, the one holding the PP-19 Bizon 9mm submachine gun. It was a compact weapon, just sixteen inches when the metal stock was folded. It fired from a cylindered magazine drum with a sixty-four-round capacity. Maxim hoped Darko wouldn't need to unleash the wrath of that beast of a weapon.

When he returned to the UAZ, Maxim said to Sasha, "We might have a problem."

"Security contractors?"

"Yes. AP."

Sasha spat out of the vehicle. "What are those rats doing here?"

"Waiting for a client."

“Whose name starts with ‘R’ and who works in banking?”

“I didn’t ask, and they didn’t say.”

“Did they say when?”

“No.” Maxim glanced at his wristwatch. “I hope it’s not at the same time as our friend.”

“Which is ten minutes.”

“Unless they’re late.”

Sasha grinned. “They’re SVR agents operating in Europe. They’re never late.”

“There’s always a first time—”

“Not for these guys. The first time they make a mistake is their last time...”

Maxim spent a couple of minutes skimming through Rabinovich’s file, but nothing caught his attention. The file was prepared in a hurry and so was the entire operation, but Maxim had participated in assignments that were thrown together at a moment’s notice. He shrugged and glanced at Rabinovich’s face in the file’s picture. *What happened that your life took this turn?* Maxim sighed and glanced at his wristwatch, then at Sasha.

The SVR agent said, “They’ll be here on time. Relax.”

“I *am* relaxed.”

“You are?”

“Yes.”

Sasha groaned. He opened his mouth to say something, but then Maxim’s phone beeped.

He looked at the screen. It was a brief text message from Yezhov: *They’re landing in 5.* He showed the phone to Sasha, who said, “What did I tell you?”

“You want me to tell you that you’re right?”

“Only if you want to.”

Maxim groaned. “Let’s get ready.”

A few minutes later the airplane, a mid-sized Cessna, appeared like a dot over the horizon at the far end of the airport. It seemed to hover there for a few seconds, then the dot grew larger and larger as it began its approach. It descended quickly over the southern runway and landed without any issues. It taxied toward the ramp, having already been cleared.

Maxim and Sasha were standing next to their UAZ when a sleek black Jaguar slid close to them, and stopped about twenty yards away. Maxim turned his head just as a woman stepped out of the driver’s seat. She was wearing a long blue coat and matching leather gloves. Her long blond hair flowed down her neck. She was slender and tall and not just because of the four-inch heels of her black boots.

Sasha elbowed Maxim. “Who’s the woman?”

“Don’t know. A girlfriend of one of the agents onboard?”

“Yeah. I wish *I* had a girlfriend like that.”

Maxim shrugged and nodded at the woman. She looked a bit like Helena, the analyst working on his floor at the FSB headquarters. *My Lena is prettier and younger.* He shook his head slightly. *Stop referring to Lena as yours, and focus.*

The woman did not return the nod. She pulled out a phone and began to tap its screen.

Maxim said, “How come the AP guys aren’t checking her?”

“Not sure. Maybe she works with them.”

“Or maybe they think she works with us.”

“They’re looking at her, but don’t seemed to be bothered by her presence. Oh, here they go.”

One of the contractors hurried toward the woman. He kept his AK rifle at a low ready position. At a moment’s notice, he could open fire, especially if the woman presented a threat.

She didn’t.

When he drew close to her, they exchanged a few words, then she showed him an ID card. Maxim was too far away to see what agency she belonged to. The ID card must have been impressive enough, because the man didn’t ask her to leave. He seemed to gesture to her to stay there and not come any closer. Then the AP contractor ran back to his position.

Maxim shrugged and turned his attention to the white Lada. Darko and his crew had spread out around their vehicle. *Is their man in the same plane?* Maxim peered at the Cessna, which was moving slowly because of the ongoing construction on one of the ramps closest to the runway. A large section of the tarmac was being replaced. A couple of rollers and a dump truck were parked next to a large heap of gravel and other heavily-packed debris that reached higher than the airplane.

“The mercs are on high alert,” Sasha said.

“Yes. I hope their man is not in the Cessna.”

“It could be. Maybe they’re picking up someone we’re unaware of.”

Maxim thought about it. The SVR wasn’t known to transport detainees and hand them over to private security companies. But then, AP wasn’t your run-of-the-mill contractor. If an oligarch paid enough money, they could get a seat even in the presidential plane. The president had four Ilyushin IL-96-300PU airplanes at his disposal. Maxim had read somewhere that one of them cost almost half a billion dollars. *Two billion dollars just so a man can travel back and forth.*

Maxim shrugged and said. “Let’s go check.”

When they were about ten yards away from Darko, he turned around. “Don’t come any closer.”

“Why, is your guy there?”

“He is, and so is your banker.”

Maxim’s eyes turned into slits as he frowned at Darko. “How do you know?”

“It’s my job to know things. Your guy is coming out first.”

“Is he now?”

“That’s what they told me.” He waved his phone at Maxim.

Darko’s other hand held the Bizon submachine gun. It was muzzle down, but still dangerous.

Maxim said nothing. He glanced at Sasha, whose eyes were locked into an evil stare-down with Darko. The contractor grinned at Sasha, then broke the stare. “Go pick up your banker.” He spat out the words with contempt.

Maxim didn’t move. The Cessna pilot was turning the airplane around. Then someone lowered the staircase. The first man who got out of the plane was wearing a grayish suit. He had short-cropped hair and was holding his pistol next to his body as he looked for Maxim. When their eyes met, the man gestured with his hand for Maxim to come forward.

“I’ve got your back,” Sasha whispered.

He had pulled out his pistol and was holding it in front of him high enough for everyone to take notice.

When Maxim was a couple of steps away from him, the man said, “We have the package, but he might be in bad shape.”

“What happened?”

“He badmouthed one of my men.” He gestured with his hand above his head as if he was ordering a drink at a bar.

Two men appeared at the airplane’s door holding someone between them. Maxim couldn’t tell who he was, because a black hood was placed over the man’s head. His hands were cuffed in front of him, and he was wearing a black felt coat and blue jeans.

Maxim’s left eye twitched. *Is that really Rabinovich?* “Who is that?”

“Who do you think?”

“I’m not paid to think.”

The man’s face twisted into a mischievous grin. “You wouldn’t be good at it. That’s your banker.”

“Rabinovich?”

The man groaned. “Are you expecting another banker?”

Maxim shook his head. “No. Remove his hood.”

“No, not here. Too many witnesses.” He gestured with the hand holding the gun toward the men standing by the Lada.

The two men had shuffled the hooded detainee closer to Maxim. He glanced at the detainee’s shoes. They were dusty and beat-up brown ones. *Rabinovich wouldn’t be caught dead wearing those.* He remained calm, keeping the blank look on his face. Maxim couldn’t have anything betray him now. He was surrounded by gunmen: the ones who were trying to pass off this poor man as Rabinovich and the AP crew, who was probably here to pick up the banker. If he was on the plane.

Maxim ran his fingers along a thin silver necklace with a small angular cross for a pendant hanging around his neck. He did this almost instinctively whenever he found himself squeezed into a tight corner. The necklace was one of the few things he had inherited from his mother, who had died while giving birth to him in Berlin. The necklace gave him peace, helped him think, and make important decisions that could mean the difference between life and death.

The gray-suited man said, “Take him and go.” He tipped his head toward the vehicles as if his words were not clear.

Maxim nodded. “Right away.”

He took hold of the man’s right arm and pulled him forward. “This way.”

The gray-suited man said, “He can’t speak, because we’ve gagged him. And he can’t hear you. Earplugs.”

Maxim said nothing but hurried his steps toward the UAZ. A disquieting feeling was boiling up in his stomach. His heart banged harder in his chest. He had never been in such a situation. This was not his first transfer, and he had been in firefights before. But not like this, when he didn’t know who he could trust...

## Chapter 7

### **Sheremetyevo International Airport Moscow Oblast, Russia**

As he passed by Darko and his men, they seemed to give him a look as if Maxim was a loser, a dumb loser. He shook his head ever so slightly. *I'll show all of you.*

He turned his head toward the blonde woman, but she was gazing over his shoulder with an indifferent look on her face.

When he neared the UAZ, he whispered to Sasha, "He's not our guy."

"Why? Let's go and—"

"No, we're outgunned—"

"It doesn't matter—"

"No, we'll play this smart. Get in the car."

"But—"

"Just get in the car."

Maxim gave a final glance at the gray-suited man, who waved a negligible goodbye with his left hand. The FSB agent opened the UAZ's rear door, then pushed the detainee in.

Sasha said, "Who's this schmuck?"

"Don't know. Let's ask him. But after we're out of sight."

Sasha started the UAZ.

Maxim kept his eye on the side mirror. He doubted the men would bring out Rabinovich until Maxim and Sasha were gone. But he had to check.

The gray-suited man was chatting with his men, but no one came out of the airplane.

As soon as Sasha turned the corner of the nearest building, Maxim said, "Stop, stop, right here."

Sasha hit the brakes.

Maxim slid out of the SUV. They were still watching, so he couldn't come out in the open. He took out his phone, switched the camera on, then crouched near the wall. He placed the phone close to the ground, then moved it slowly around the corner, hoping it wouldn't be noticed.

It wasn't.

Maxim saw clearly what was happening around the airplane. The gray-suited man had turned around and was shouting something at the two men who were climbing the staircase. A moment later, Rabinovich appeared at the door of the airplane. It was just for a split of a second, but Maxim saw his face clearly.

"The banker's here," Maxim said.

"And this guy is the co-pilot," Sasha said.

"Yes, they weren't expecting us and had little time to improvise. Secure him, and let's go back, pick up our guy."

Before he could get up, a bullet shot the phone out of his hand. Glass and metal slivers cut into his left hand as more bullets thumped against the wall.

"Pop the trunk." Maxim walked to the back of the UAZ.

He removed his jacket and picked up one of the AK-105 rifles, checked the magazine, then cocked the weapon. He repeated the same actions as he readied the second rifle. He took them both, then jumped into the front seat. "Go, go, go."

Sasha needed no further encouragement. The tires spun over the gravel as the UAZ drifted around the corner.

Maxim opened up with the rifle. He wasn't aiming at anyone in particular, but his shots were intended to stop or slow down Rabinovich's transfer to the white Lada or the black Jaguar.

A barrage of bullets hammered their vehicle. The gray-suited man was firing from a position he had taken next to the Cessna's staircase.

The UAZ was armored, but Maxim wasn't. Sasha jerked the wheel, so that the driver's side would take the hits.

"Stop, stop," Maxim said.

He got out, crouching, and opened up over the hood, this time concentrating the fire at the Lada. One of the AP contractors was firing from the rear. His bullets shattered the UAZ's headlights, sending a spray of shards over Maxim's head just as he'd dropped behind the hood.

Maxim then turned his AK rifle toward the gray-suited man, but he had disappeared behind the staircase.

A scream came from the woman, who was lying on her stomach by the Jaguar. Its windows had burst open and pieces of glass covered her back. One of the AP security contractors was targeting her.

Maxim looked at her. "You're hit?" he said.

The woman returned a puzzled look, then shook her head. "No, I... I don't think so."

"Stay there. I'll come to get you."

She nodded and didn't move.

Maxim shouted, "Sasha, cover me."

"Where are you going?" He stopped his barrage.

"To get that woman out. Then I'll go for the plane. You take the Lada."

"Got it."

Sasha stood up near the driver's door and began to lay suppressive fire to cover Maxim's advance.

He tore across the ramp as bullets zipped around him and whizzed overhead. He dropped next to the woman and checked her. Bullets had missed her, but she had cuts on her arms and the left side of her face. "Can you get up?"

She returned an uncertain nod.

"Good. Get in the back seat. I'll turn the Jag around."

He opened the door for her and helped her inside. The volley of bullets had subsided as the shooters had turned their attention to Sasha and the UAZ. Maxim fired a few rounds until he emptied his magazine. His bullets didn't hit anyone, but gave Sasha some breathing room.

"You're all strapped in?" he said to the woman.

"Yes, yes, I'm good," she replied in a weak voice.

Maxim slammed a fresh magazine into the AK rifle and squeezed off a short burst. Then he slid into the Jaguar's driver's seat. He threw the car into reverse as one of the AP contractors turned his submachine gun toward Maxim.

Maxim pulled the trigger. The AK's bullets cut through the man's body, and he fell face first into the tarmac.

Maxim went for a few seconds in a straight line, then lifted his foot off the gas. He yanked hard at the wheel, turning it as far as it would go, keeping his left hand down. The maneuver threw him against the door as the Jaguar began to spin around.

More bullets pounded the side and the back of the car, but none hit Maxim.

About halfway through the spin, Maxim slammed the gearshift forward. It was perfect timing, for what he lacked in shooting skills he more than made up in driving. He straightened the wheel and accelerated, as the Jaguar shot forward.

A couple of rounds clipped the back, but he was able to round the corner of the building. He came to a slow stop and looked at the woman. She was still shaken.

Maxim said, "You'll be okay. You'll be fine."

She nodded slowly.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I... I work for the GRU. I'm here to observe the transfer."

Maxim frowned. "GRU? What's the army intel service doing here?"

"I... I can't tell you. Not now, anyway."

Maxim nodded. He jumped out and ran toward the building. When he came close to the corner, he stopped, waited for a moment, then stole a peek. No one fired at him, but there was no sign of Sasha firing from the UAZ toward the Lada or the airplane. The Cessna had started to roll onto the ramp and was heading toward the nearest runway.

Maxim ran toward the UAZ, but didn't call out to Sasha, not wanting to bring attention to himself. When the FSB agent was about halfway, Darko stood up from the right side of the Lada and fired a quick burst at Maxim. One of the bullets grazed his left arm right above the elbow.

He dove into the grassy patches next to the building and rolled away from the bullets. He ignored the stabbing pain and the blood oozing from the wound and turned his AK toward Darko.

He was gone.

A moment later, the Lada's tires screeched. The driver—Maxim suspected it was Darko, or the other remaining contractor—swung the vehicle around, then sped away toward the furthest runway.

Maxim fired the last of his magazine at the Lada, then tossed the AK to the ground. He sprinted toward Sasha and found him sitting on the gravel next to the back of the UAZ. A pool of blood was forming next to him. Maxim looked at the wound about six inches above Sasha's knee. "How bad is it?" he asked Sasha.

"I'll live."

"Of course you will."

"The bone's broken."

"Where's the co-pilot?"

"In the back seat. Dead."

"How?"

"A bullet hit him."

Maxim popped the trunk, then pulled out his rucksack. "I've got the clot kit, so I can patch your wound—"

“No, I can do that. Go after them. Don’t let them leave.”

“You’re sure?”

“Stop wasting time and go.”

Maxim looked at Sasha’s tired eyes, then at the AK rifle next to his feet.

Sasha said, “There’s maybe a couple of bullets in there. No extra mags.”

“I’m out too, but I’ll take it.”

“Stop them. At any cost. And make them pay for this,” Sasha said in between gasps.

Maxim stood up. “Let’s start those eighteen minutes.”

## Chapter 8

### **Sheremetyevo International Airport Moscow Oblast, Russia**

Maxim jumped into the driver’s seat. The heavy UAZ shot forward as he kept his foot on the gas. Spiderweb cracks had formed across the windshield, so he used the metal buttstock of the AK rifle to push it away. The Cessna had a considerable lead. It had already reached the runway. The pilot was turning the airplane around.

Maxim gave a cursory glance at four dead bodies strewn about the ramp. The gray-suited man wasn’t among them. *He must have gotten on the plane.*

Maxim cursed out loud and glanced at his rifle. Even if he were the greatest sharpshooter, the likelihood of stopping the airplane with only a few bullets was very slim. Besides, his arm was injured. *What can I do? I can’t let them get away...*

The Cessna had straightened out and was picking up speed. It was going to take off at any moment.

Maxim had a few seconds to make a decision. His eyes went to the construction site and rested on the large heap of debris. He nodded to himself. *Yes, this might work, or it might end up killing me.*

He flattened the gas pedal, and the heavily-armored UAZ barreled toward the sloped heap. Maxim opened the door, and, when the UAZ was a couple of feet away from the mound, he jumped out. He bit his lip, ignoring the pain coming from his shoulder’s hitting hard on the sandy tarmac.

The UAZ climbed the mound, shooting upwards toward the sky.

The Cessna had just taken off.

Maxim glanced up, praying the trick would work.

The UAZ flew in a large arc, heading toward the climbing airplane. He wondered if the vehicle would fall short of the target. As the UAZ began to drop down under gravity’s pull, the pilot tried to maneuver the Cessna out of the way.

Too late.

The nose of the UAZ came crashing into the engine on the starboard side of the plane. The Cessna exploded into a gigantic orange fireball. Metal and plastic shards fell all around him, and Maxim crawled close to the mound to protect himself from the fiery hailstorm.



A few moments later, he stood up and observed the wreckage. Black smoke was billowing from two large hulks, while tall flames were eating up remains scattered over a large area. Maxim shook his head. No one could have survived that explosion.

He turned his head in the other direction. The white Lada had turned around and was headed toward him. In the distance, a few police cars were giving chase to the Lada.

Maxim grimaced as pain seared through his shoulder and his entire body. He glanced at the blood dripping from his arm wound, then his eyes went to the dump truck parked next to the debris mound. Maxim smiled. *That should be able to stop the Lada and that dog, Darko...*

He limped to the truck and struggled to climb up to the driver's seat. He looked for the keys in the sun visor, but they were not there. He glanced at the center console and found them. He turned on the ignition; it took a few moments, but the truck roared to life. Maxim pulled the seat belt across his chest. *It's going to be a rough ride.* He began to steer the heavy beast around as he hit the gas and turned to meet the Lada.

He let up on the gas as the heavy truck swung onto the runway, straightening the wheel as he headed directly for the Lada. Darko, or whoever was driving it, was now perhaps two hundred yards away. The two vehicles were coming fast toward one another, the distance closing with every passing second.

That's when the first bullet pierced the truck's windshield. Maxim was lucky; the bullet missed his head by a couple of inches. He flinched and thought about pulling his pistol. Considering the distance, his wounded arm, and the erratic driving, he doubted firing would do him any good. He shook his head. *No, I'm going to win this fight if I keep driving.*

The opposition thought otherwise.

A couple of rounds lifted sparks off the truck's grille. Maxim lowered his head, but never let his eyes off the target. More bullets shredded the windshield. Maxim pulled his pistol and used it to clear the remaining pieces of windshield glass.

The shooting stopped.

*Perhaps they ran out of bullets, or gave up,* he thought.

It was neither.

Darko had changed tactics. Half of his body appeared through the large roof opening of the SUV. He was swinging a rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

Maxim glanced at the pistol. He knew he wouldn't be able to stop Darko, not before he pulled the launcher's trigger and fired the fatal shot.

So Maxim did the next best thing.

He pulled hard on the steering wheel. The truck turned to the left.

The 40mm grenade shot out of the launcher's mouth at a hundred and twenty-five yards per second, hiding the Lada behind the light gray-blue launch smoke. The projectile screamed through the air toward Maxim.

He saw it out of the corner of his eye as it slammed into the side of the dump truck. The explosion took out the hopper, detaching it from the rest of the truck. The impact was so powerful that Maxim almost lost control of the truck. It tipped to the side, threatening to roll over.

Maxim threw his weight to the other side, fighting with the steering wheel, trying to bring the truck's front left wheel back to the tarmac. He jerked the wheel one way, then the other, until the truck returned to somewhat of a straight line.

A line toward Darko, who had reloaded his launcher and had aimed it again at Maxim. At the short distance of only seventy yards and closing in quite fast, Maxim doubted Darko would miss. The grenade exploding inside the cab would either kill Maxim on the spot, or severely wound him and cause the truck to roll over.

So he decided to do it for Darko.

Maxim leaned onto the wheel, turning it right, then sharply cutting to the left. The dangerous maneuver swung the truck around, lifting one of the back wheels off the runway. Maxim threw the steering wheel in the other direction, then braced for what was coming.

The truck flipped onto its side. The window's glass shattered and sharp pieces cut into Maxim's arms, which he had raised to protect his face and his head.

Then the truck rolled over.

Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion, but Maxim knew both the truck and the Lada were going at full speed. The top of the cab caved in slightly, but the hard metal frame remained in place. The crumpled roof brushed against Maxim's head, and he felt the sharp metal cut into his skin. The crash tried to throw him around like a sock in the dryer, but the seatbelt mostly held him in place.

The dump truck rolled again onto the other side and slid toward the Lada. Maxim pushed his body as far as he could from the window. The side of the truck scraped against the runway, lifting sparks. A couple of them burned against Maxim's face.

Those were the least of his worries.

The Lada slammed into the truck's chassis.

A great explosion came from outside, perhaps three yards away from the mangled cab. Flames tried to lick at the door, so close to Maxim's face that he felt the heat. A series of smaller explosions followed as the truck slid across the runway a few more feet, and the flames began to chew at the plastic window seal.

As soon as the truck stopped, Maxim tried to unfasten his seat belt. He pulled hard, but the clip was stuck in the buckle. So he wiggled his body away from the seat, then crawled out of the front window. He stood up, but only for a moment. His knees failed him, and he collapsed onto the tarmac. Maxim lay there for a brief moment, then gathered the strength to climb onto his shaky knees. He turned around and looked at the wreckage. The Lada was engulfed in flames, and black smoke spiraled from the side and the back of the dump truck.

Maxim sighed and glanced at the bruises and cuts on his arms. The left-arm wound was the worst one. Even though it was a flesh wound, it was bleeding a lot. Then his eyes went to his wristwatch. He smiled and nodded to himself. *The package is gone, but he had that coming. The opposition is eliminated. Sasha is safe, and so is the witness. And all that took way less than eighteen minutes...*

## Chapter 9

### **Sheremetyevo International Airport Moscow Oblast, Russia**

Maxim drew in an easier breath when he saw a white-and-blue police sedan approach the scene. He wasn't sure if they were friends or foes, but at this point, it didn't really matter. He had accomplished his assignment, although far from as expected. However, considering the alternative of Rabinovich's escaping, stopping the Cessna from taking off was the best available option, and Maxim had taken it.

He thought about it for a moment, then a wave of angst zipped through his mind. *What... what if the banker was never on the plane? Would the AP mercs and the SVR agents have acted the way they did if the plane was empty?* He shook his head. *I know what I saw. That was Rabinovich. He was in the Cessna. The DNA tests will confirm everything.* He looked at the burned wreckage. *Yes, forensics can associate any body parts with the banker.*

Maxim then turned his gaze to the other side. An ambulance was going in that direction. Maxim nodded. *Yes, Sasha... I hope he doesn't lose his leg, or part of it. If he can't run, his career is over.* Maxim cursed out loud at the turn of events. This was supposed to be quite easy. He shook his head.

The police car stopped a few yards away from him. Two police officers stepped outside, guns drawn, and pointed them at Maxim. "Hands up. Up in the air."

"I'm unarmed," Maxim said. "And I work for the FSB."

"Doesn't matter. Get your hands up."

Maxim shrugged and obeyed the order. The gestures caused a ripple of pain to shimmer through his upper body. He thought about his agency ID card. It was still in his jacket, which he had thrown by the UAZ right before the shooting had started.

One of the police officers dashed to Maxim and twisted his arms behind his back.

Maxim bit his lips as the rough hands of the officer made the wound to his shoulder worse. But the FSB agent wasn't going to complain about the treatment. He had gone through much worse and could handle a bit of police "love."

"Where are your papers?" asked the second police officer, who was still keeping his pistol aligned with Maxim's head.

"In my jacket. Should be there, with my partner." He gestured with his head.

A second ambulance with its blaring siren was driving along the tarmac and coming toward them.

"You made a big mess here," said the first police officer.

Maxim nodded. "It was necessary. Call my boss, Director Yezhov at FSB HQ. He'll explain."

The police officer gave Maxim a cockeyed glance. "You're really FSB?"

"Would I dare you to call if I were bluffing?"

"No, but—"

"Just make the call."

The officer shrugged and pulled out his phone. "I'm going to call *my* boss. Don't move."

Maxim shook his head. "I have nowhere to go."

A couple of young paramedics jumped out of the ambulance as soon as it stopped behind the police sedan. One of them rolled a gurney, while the other carried a first-aid kit. The paramedic asked the officer to uncuff Maxim, and when the officer refused, the paramedic insisted, claiming the restriction would cause arterial occlusion or nerve damage to the subject. Maxim didn't think the handcuffs were that tight around his wrists, but he wasn't about to complain. When the police officer reluctantly removed the handcuffs, the paramedics placed Maxim on the gurney and rolled him to the ambulance. The officer stood a couple of steps away from the vehicle, in case Maxim decided to make a run for it.

When the paramedics began to clean and dress his wounds, Maxim asked, "How's Sasha?"

"Who's that?" said one of the paramedics, the one who had convinced the police officer to allow the medical treatment.

"My partner. He's shot in the leg. Another ambulance is there with him..."

"Let me check," said the second paramedic and stepped outside.

He returned a minute later. "They're stabilizing him and will take him to the hospital."

"And his leg?"

The paramedic shrugged. "We'll see how it heals. You never know with that sort of wound..."

Maxim nodded and muttered a brief prayer for Sasha. *I hope the bone's only fractured...* He sighed and drew in a deep breath, while the paramedics bandaged his wounds. They were almost finished when the second police officer came to the ambulance. He pointed at his phone, then handed it to Maxim. "It's your boss..."

"From the FSB?" Maxim grinned.

The officer wasn't amused. "Take it before I change my mind..."

*You're not going to.* Maxim decided not to push his luck. He took the phone without another word to the officer, then said, "Yezhov, this is—"

"Yes, Maxim, now why is the airport turned into a battlefield?"

"I can explain what—"

"You'd better have an exceptionally good explanation for the mayhem you've caused. What part of *discreet* was unclear?"

Maxim moved the phone away from his ear as Yezhov's shouts grew louder. He looked at the paramedic still working on the gauze on Maxim's left hand and said, "Can you give me a minute? This is important..."

"And so is this..."

"Yes, but it can wait."

The paramedic shook his head and dropped the rest of the gauze in the first-aid kit. "Fine, if you want to keep bleeding..."

"Close the doors."

The paramedic slammed the ambulance doors as he stepped outside.

Maxim said, "Director, I had little choice in the matter." He told Yezhov about the AP security contractors and the SVR agents and how they had opened fire.

When he came to the part where he saw the banker at the door of the plane, Yezhov cut Maxim off. “Rabinovich was there, and you saw him?”

“Yes, of course I did.”

“Are you certain?”

“Absolutely. Why?”

“We’ve received a report that the banker never boarded the plane.”

“And that is accurate?”

“The source is the SVR.”

“The same SVR that tried to kill me.”

Yezhov sighed. “Things really got out of hand there.”

“If they did, it wasn’t my fault. Perhaps I overreacted, but Rabinovich would have disappeared. I couldn’t let that happen...”

“Your assignment wasn’t to eliminate him or stop him from escaping, if he was on the plane—”

“He was on the plane.”

“As I was saying, your job was to transfer him to the safehouse. The way you’re telling the story, the banker was never in your custody. But you were fired upon, and, instead of calling for backup, you decided to take charge of the situation. In the process, you killed everyone aboard the Cessna and on the ground. Is that a fair summary?”

Maxim shook his head. “No, it’s not. There was no time for backup. The detainee, my detainee was being whisked away, before my eyes, by the people who were supposed to hand him over. They tried to kill me, and Sasha is badly wounded.”

“Is he?” Yezhov’s voice rang out without much concern.

“He is, but you never let me tell the entire story. It’s easy to reflect now, or later, about how things could have gone. But at the time, I only had one moment to react, and I did. The consequences are what they are, but it would have been worse if I sat there and did nothing.”

“I don’t think so,” Yezhov said in a somber tone. “There will be an inquiry on what happened, your role, and how this entire mess could have been avoided.”

Maxim bit his lip. He moved the phone away from his mouth and cursed under his breath. He felt the ground sinking underneath his feet. Yezhov and the FSB and SVR superiors would lay the blame on Maxim and Sasha. Since this was Maxim’s assignment, and because of his major role in the gunfight, he would be the fall guy.

He said, “Sure, I’d welcome an inquiry,” even though he didn’t. “And I’d like the investigators to interview a witness, a woman who was here and saw everything.”

“What is her name?”

“I don’t know. I never asked her for her name. But I have a description. She said she worked for the GRU.”

“Really?”

“That’s what she said. She had some kind of ID that she showed to one of the AP guys. Then they tried to kill her.”

He gave Yezhov a description of the blonde woman. Maxim knew it wasn’t much, but he had high hopes that she could be found. That is, if she hadn’t lied about working for the GRU. Or maybe she was somehow related to Rabinovich.

When Maxim was finished, Yezhov said, “All right, Maxim. Get better now, and we’ll discuss this when you return to the office. Investigators will want to talk to you as soon as you can.”

“Anytime—I have no problem talking to anyone, anytime.”

“That’s good to hear.”

Yezhov ended the call, and Maxim sighed. *When I thought this mess was over, I find out it has just started...*

## Chapter 10

**Three weeks later**

**FSB Headquarters, Lubyanka Building**

**Downtown Moscow, Russia**

Maxim flattened the front of his gray jacket and tightened the knot of his black tie. His hands had begun to tremble, and he tried to steady them by holding onto the black briefcase resting on his lap. His left foot tapped almost involuntarily, and he forced himself to stop it. Maxim drew in a deep breath, but didn’t feel his lungs fill.

He stood up and paced to the end of the hall. He was waiting outside a conference room at one of the corners of the headquarters that he had never wanted to visit. Some people called it “The Dead Wing,” since that’s where careers—and sometimes operatives as well—died, or received grave news. The FSB’s internal inquiry had been completed three days ago. Maxim hadn’t asked around about the results. He knew they weren’t good.

The FSB forensic team ran the DNA analysis, and it was confirmed that one of the bodies burned beyond recognition in the airplane wreckage belonged to Rabinovich. The owners of MoscOil were furious. They’d wanted to interrogate the banker and extract punishment from him, opportunities that Maxim had taken away. Besides, the entire airport cock-up had cost a total of fifty million dollars in damages, not including the lost revenue from downed airplanes, cancelled flights, and the clean-up expenses.

The investigators hadn’t been able to locate the woman. There were no records that she worked or had ever worked for the GRU. Whatever ID she had shown to the AP security team was either a forgery or not a GRU agency card. Maxim wasn’t convinced the investigators had looked hard enough. She had no connections to anyone involved in this matter, and, as far as they were concerned, she was there at the wrong time and at the wrong place. Maxim didn’t believe in such things. *There was a reason she was there. But what was it?*

The security cameras along the walls of the Jet Solutions building had not provided anything of use. The largest part of the interactions had happened outside the frame of the security cameras’ lenses. And, as expected, not one of the company’s fifty employees, who had been in the building at the time, had seen or heard anything.

Maxim shook his head and returned to his uncomfortable leather chair. He glanced at the puncture holes the stitches had left on his right hand. The left-arm wound and most of the cuts had healed well, and he considered himself very fortunate. If one of the glass shards had severed a muscle, and he had lost the use of a finger—especially the index finger—or the thumb, his career in the FSB would be over.

He sighed and shook his head. *My career might be over as it is.*

He thought of how long this meeting was going to last and about the visit to Sasha at the hospital. He had fared much worse than Maxim. The bullet had fractured the femur of Sasha's left leg. The surgeons had been able to reset the bone, and the initial recovery was going well. It would be at least a couple more weeks before the doctors could ascertain that Sasha had regained full range of motion. And it wasn't a safe bet. Physiotherapy was looking promising, but if there was a setback... *I hope that doesn't happen.*

At least Sasha hadn't been reprimanded, since he had played a limited role in the fighting. When he'd be able to return to the office at full capacity, he would be welcomed back to the fold of the SVR.

Maxim had been put on restricted duty for the length of the inquiry. Instead of transporting detainees, he was now shuffling paperwork from one FSB department to the other. He had to plow through skull-numbing intelligence reports, which had already been combed through by teams skilled in this type of analysis. He had been sent to a couple of boring training sessions and conferences, but he hadn't learned anything he couldn't read out of a good book. Coupled with the embarrassment he had caused to the FSB operatives that had followed him and Sasha as part of a prank, as they were briefly detained and interrogated by the police, Maxim's situation had gravitated from bad to worse.

"Maybe the inquiry conclusions won't be that bad," he whispered to himself, but he didn't believe the words that left his mouth.

He drummed his fingers on his briefcase, then looked at the conference room door, just as it opened. A deeply frowning Yezhov stepped outside and tipped his head, gesturing for Maxim to come inside. When he did, Yezhov motioned toward the man sitting at the head of the square, black table. "This is Director Izhutin from Internal Investigations. He led the inquiry team, and he'll inform you of the results."

Maxim nodded and offered a small smile at the sitting man. He didn't get up, or offer to shake Maxim's hand. Izhutin didn't even look up, but lowered his silver-framed spectacles to the tip of his nose. He studied the black folder in front of him for a long moment, then sighed and glanced at Maxim. The man was probably in his sixties, with salt-and-pepper receding hair that he had cut very short, in almost a military buzz cut. His small gray eyes seemed to carry a tinge of despair mixed with regret.

Or maybe that's what Maxim wanted to see.

Izhutin said, "Mr. Thornichinovich, thanks for meeting with us, and I wish it was under different circumstances." His steady voice rang with genuine concern. "I will not take a lot of your time, as I know you're as busy as we all are."

Maxim said nothing and did nothing, but kept his eyes glued to Izhutin's face.

Izhutin looked at Yezhov, then at the folder, then at Maxim. “It was a difficult decision, but we had no choice. The commission unanimously decided on a written reprimand.”

A brief, tense pause followed.

Maxim held his breath. If this was it, then it wasn’t bad. A reprimand on his file would slow down his career advancement, but he would return to doing what he loved. He might not be receiving promotions or pay raises, but they mattered little compared to the joy Maxim attained from serving his country.

Izhutin said, “Moreover, the commission recommended a demotion from your current position...”

Maxim closed his eyes and tuned out the director. The rest of his words held no meaning. If Maxim lost his job as a transporter, then it didn’t matter much where the agency reassigned him. Yezhov would more than likely uphold the disciplinary action. He had already severely rebuked Maxim about what he had deemed “a serious error in judgment.” Maxim felt the air leave his lungs, as if someone had dealt a heavy blow to his gut.

Izhutin held Maxim’s gaze for a moment, then said, “Do you have any questions, Mr. Thornichinovich?”

Maxim shook his head.

“There is an appeal period of five days from the date of the notice, if you choose to go that route,” Izhutin said.

Maxim nodded. “Are we finished here?”

Izhutin shrugged. “Sure, if you have no questions.” He looked at Yezhov, who shook his head.

Maxim stood up and turned around. Before he had left the conference room, Yezhov called out at him, “Tomorrow morning, we’ll discuss steps forward with regard to your future work assignments.”

Maxim nodded and stepped outside the conference room. He loosened the knot and unbuttoned the first couple of buttons of his shirt. He still couldn’t believe what had just happened and how he had lost everything. He shook his head and cursed Yezhov and Izhutin.

When he reached the elevator, he changed his mind and decided to take the stairs. He ran down the narrow staircase, yearning to leave “The Dead Wing” as soon as he could. When he came to the third floor, he stopped. It didn’t matter. The inquiry’s decision had sucked out his soul.

Maxim made his way to the parking lot and found his battered 2014 Lada. When he was reassigned, he didn’t receive an agency-issued vehicle, so he had to rely on the Lada—or the bus, when the car refused to start during subpolar mornings. Maxim had also lost his office with the window overlooking Lubyanka Square. And he had also lost all hopes that Helena would give him a second glance. Why would she want to go out with a loser?

He stumbled into the driver’s seat and rethought his plan about visiting Sasha. *In this mood, I can’t be of any help to him, or myself for that matter.* But Maxim had made a promise. *I have to go. If I don’t, Sasha will call, and that will be worse. In this way, we can commiserate.*

He drove to the Central Clinical Hospital on the west outskirts of Moscow and found Sasha at the Physiotherapy Rehabilitation Clinic. He had just finished an



exercise session and was sitting on a bench inside an area that looked like a small gym. It was filled with treadmills, elliptical machines, and all sorts of training equipment. Sasha looked like he had been run over by a train, twice, but he tried to smile when he saw Maxim. "Hello, my friend, how's life treating you?"

Maxim gave Sasha a tight embrace. "I shouldn't complain too much. How are you doing?"

Sasha shrugged and wiped some of the sweat from his forehead with a towel placed next to his crutches. "I should get better, and better, but I can't seem to get used to these stupid things." He gestured at the crutches, then turned and pointed to the bump on the right side of his head.

"What happened?"

"I slipped and fell. Landed on my face, thankfully, instead of my leg."

Maxim smiled. "Yes, you were lucky. When can you go home?"

"Eh, they don't know about that. Between you and me, I don't think doctors know much. These things are unpredictable, they say."

"They are."

"Yes, so all I can do for now is the exercises and hope for the best." He used one of the crutches to tap against the cast. "The fracture was mid-shaft, so they had to fix it with a long rod, nail, and bolts."

Maxim nodded. *My worries are so small, they can't even start to compare to his. And he's in such good spirits.*

Sasha said, "It will be a long, painful road to recovery, but I'm hopeful I can start to walk on my own soon. The therapy is working."

"That's very good."

"But enough of me. How's the inquiry coming along?"

Maxim wondered whether he should tell Sasha about the results of the inquiry. He didn't want to lie to his best friend, but also didn't want to wreck his mood. Maxim hesitated for a brief moment and decided to do the right thing. "The inquiry is over—"

"And, what are the results?"

"Not good. Not good at all. They're holding us, well, mostly me, responsible for what happened—"

"But you, we, we were just doing our job."

Maxim shook his head. "They don't see it that way. I got reprimanded, and demoted."

"What? They can't do that."

"They did."

"Now what? You've got to appeal."

"Do you think that will change anything?"

"It might not, but it will get their attention. You can't just accept this lying down. You've got to make a ruckus."

"I think I've already done a lot of that."

Sasha gave him a measured glance. "You sound resigned to your fate..."

"I'm tired of fighting, Sasha. This is a lost battle."

"If you want it to be, Maxim. This could be just the beginning. You've got to show them that this isn't over. They can't get rid of you that easily."

Maxim shrugged. “I wish I could believe all that. But I’m all alone. The people I thought were my friends, they don’t even answer my calls. Once I was reassigned, everyone knew I was spiraling down to the bottom, so they avoided me like I was a leper. And now, I’ve hit that bottom.”

Sasha shook his head. “No, this isn’t over. You’ve got me, man. We’ll fight this. We, well, you mostly, have got to hope. That will keep you going.”

Maxim sighed. “At this moment, I don’t know. One part of me tells me to lower my head, and bide my time, wait for a better opportunity. I mean, they haven’t thrown me out. Just a demotion, which is temporary.”

“And what does the other part tell you?”

“To fight like it’s the last thing I do. To find allies and to show Yezhov and all the other lackeys that they can’t blame me for what is their fault. It’s still not clear how we were discovered along the highway, or how the AP operatives knew exactly when Rabinovich was going to land and where.”

“Yes, that’s why you can’t give up, Maxim. Not now, and not ever.”

Maxim sighed. *Easier said than done*, he thought, but didn’t share it with his friend. Instead, he said, “I will think about it. Now, I have to go back to the office.”

“I share your pain.” Sasha tried to climb to his feet.

Maxim stopped him. “Take it easy, easy.”

“I’ve got to get up and get going.”

“Not right away. Sit down and relax. Someone will come to get you.”

“I don’t want someone—”

“But you need them. If you tell me that I need people, you need them too.”

Sasha nodded, but his eyes revealed the truth: He was going to try to get up as soon as Maxim left. So Maxim said, “Promise me you’ll wait here for one of the nurses.”

“They take forever—”

“Promise me, Sasha. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I’m already hurt.”

“More than you already are. Promise.”

“All right, fine. I’ll wait for the nurse. But, on your way out, remind them I’m still here.”

“I’ll do that.”

“And be strong now. Stay in the fight.”

“Always.”

He exchanged a hug with his friend and left the clinic. At the reception desk, he asked the nurse on duty to send someone to assist one of the patients in the clinic.

## Chapter 11

**FSB Headquarters, Lubyanka Building  
Downtown Moscow, Russia**

When he returned to the office, Maxim spent the rest of the day working on a plan of action to fight back. He was going to combine the two options he had discussed with Sasha. On the one hand, Maxim was going to accept the demotion and give his best at any assignment he'd receive. He'd give Yezhov and his superiors no reason for complaints or other disciplinary measures against him. While at the same time, Maxim was going to amass as much intelligence as he could against Yezhov. No man was without sin, but Yezhov was an expert at hiding his wrongdoings. Maxim had to outsmart his boss and find anything he could use against him, so that he'd be reinstated to his old position.

*And if everything else fails, there's always compromising material,* Maxim thought. He could try to stage a set-up and take pictures or video of Yezhov in a compromising situation. A woman, drugs, unscrupulous people... The possibilities were endless. *Yezhov, you'll curse the day you decided to make me your fall guy.*

Immersed in his vengeful plans, Maxim didn't realize it was evening until he went to the office kitchen for a cup of coffee. He finished reviewing a couple of intelligence reports and drafted up his findings. He glanced at his wristwatch before sending the document to Yezhov. 6:25. *Yes, time to end the day.*

He walked to his Lada through the dark and the thin haze that had enveloped the parking lot, giving the vehicles and the entire area an eerie feeling. A couple of cars followed behind Maxim as he drove down Novaya Ploshchad, heading south, but he didn't think much of it. The street always had a lot of traffic, no matter the time of day or night.

However, when he continued on Staraya Ploshchad, one of the cars, a gray Hyundai, passed a few vehicles and drove right behind Maxim. The Hyundai followed Maxim's Lada as he turned left onto Ulitsa Varvarka. He readjusted the rearview mirror, but did not recognize the face of the driver, the only one in the Hyundai. Maxim glanced over his shoulder, but that didn't help. *Who is he, and what does he want?*

Maxim pulled out his pistol and cocked it. He didn't think this was one of the FSB pranksters trying to settle the score: payback for the embarrassment he had caused them by having them detained by the police. No, the FSB were discreet, slithering like snakes. The man—whoever he was—was too careless. It was very obvious he was following Maxim.

*Let's see what he wants.*

When he came to a small roundabout, Maxim slowed down and drove near the sidewalk as if he were going to stop. Then he quickly jerked the wheel and turned the car. The Lada blocked the path of the Hyundai, which came to a screeching halt.

Pistol drawn, Maxim bolted out of the car and ran toward the Hyundai. "Show me your hands! Your hands," he shouted at the driver.

The man raised his hands. He was in his late thirties, maybe early forties, wearing a black beret and black-rimmed square glasses. He was clean-shaven and didn't seem a bit alarmed by the gun pointed at his face. If anything, he looked annoyed.

Maxim reached the door and placed the muzzle of the gun against the window glass. "Roll it down," he shouted at the driver and made a hand gesture.

The driver obeyed the order. When the glass was halfway down, he said in English, "I'm sorry I startled you, Mr. Thorn—"

"You didn't startle me," Maxim replied in English, a language he spoke fluently with barely a hint of an accent. "I saw you since you turned onto Staraya. Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Can we talk somewhere private, and without that gun pointed at my face? It's making me nervous."

"Not until you tell me who you are..."

The man shrugged. "Stubborn. I like that. My name is Myron King."

"Who do you work for, Mr. King?"

"I'm a senior policy advisor on cultural matters at the US Embassy."

Maxim grinned. "Cultural advisor... That means you work for the CIA?"

King shrugged. "If that's what you want to—"

"No, it's what you want, CIA man..."

"A few minutes of your time. Brief chat. If you don't like what I have to say, we part ways..."

"Why shouldn't I just take you in, have you accused of espionage and trying to recruit an FSB agent?"

"You can do that, of course. And I will say that I was just minding my own business when you came at me. Or that I was lost and was trying to find my way back. Or worse, that you reached out to me, to give me intel about your agency." King shook his head. "Look, you don't need all the hassle. You're already in so much trouble..."

"What do you know about it?"

King waved his hand toward the pistol. "The gun, please."

Maxim lowered it a couple of inches, but kept it pointed at King's chest. "What do you know about my situation?"

"I have some information that might be of use. It comes from a friend, and it's about Director Izhutin from Internal Investigations. You remember him?"

Maxim said nothing, and his face showed no expression.

"Can we go somewhere private?" King tipped his head to the left. An old couple had stopped and were curiously observing the scene unfolding in front of their eyes.

Maxim put the pistol back into his holster. "Follow me to the Church of the Conception, in Zaryadye Park. Do you know where that is?"

King nodded.

Maxim said, "Park as far away as you can from me, then meet me at one of the benches behind the church."

"Got it." King rolled up the window.

Maxim returned to his car and drove along Smolyanskiy Proyzed. He thought about what had just happened and what King was doing. *Is King really a CIA agent? What am I doing even meeting with this guy?* He had heard stories and had read about cases of disgruntled FSB agents lured by the CIA and other foreign intelligence services. These agencies promised money, assistance, and safety abroad for the recruits and their families. Instead, most of the time, the traitors got a bullet to the back of their head, dragging their family's name through shame and disgrace. *Am I going to become a traitor, like all those people I despise?* Maxim

shook his head. *Never. I'll have to report this encounter, although Yezhov might draw the wrong conclusions...*

He was still curious to know about Izhutin. *What information would the CIA man have? And who is this friend?* Maxim sighed. So many questions were rattling through his mind.

He parked along Kitaygorodsky Proyezd and walked toward the edge of the Moskva River. The haze was stretching across the waters and the city's skyline glowed unnervingly behind a blurred curtain of mist. Maxim turned around and glanced at King, who was walking toward the white-walled church. He stopped when he came to the nearest bench at the back and sat there.

Maxim studied the narrow pathways zigzagging around the church, the nearest street, and the area. He didn't notice anyone observing the benches, and there was no one else in the park. The area was dark, without any streetlights in the vicinity. It would make it difficult for anyone to take pictures or record their meeting. *But King might have a recording device on him...*

When Maxim came to King, the FSB agent said, "Stand up."

"Why?"

"Just get up. Hands up."

King did as he was told, while Maxim gave him a thorough pat-down. King had no weapon, but Maxim retrieved two phones and his wallet. He rummaged through it and found King's driver's license, and other identification documents. He seemed to be who he said he was, but documents could be forged, especially by CIA agents.

Maxim turned the phones off, then handed everything back to King. "You have five minutes," Maxim said as he sat next to King.

"It will be enough. Like I said, I have information for you about Izhutin."

"What kind of information?"

"You'll have to see it for yourself."

"Just tell me..."

"I don't know. I can venture a guess that it's some damning intel to give you some leverage. But I haven't seen the file. I'm sent to simply deliver it."

"Sent by that friend... Who is he?"

"I don't know."

Maxim gave King a look of suspicion. "What do you mean 'you don't know'?"

King shook his head. "I have no idea who the friend is. My boss dispatched me to follow you and hand you the information."

"Your boss? Who is he?"

King smiled, and his row of bright white teeth shone against the dark. "The cultural counselor, of course."

"No, your CIA boss."

"I don't know what you're talking about." King grinned.

Maxim decided not to push. "How did your boss—whoever that is—get this information?"

"No idea. Look, my job here is very simple. Deliver the package, just like you do..." He grinned again.

"All right. Where is the package?"

“My pocket.” King reached slowly inside his front jacket pocket and retrieved a business card. It had only a series of numbers. He held it up for Maxim to see and said, “Memorize the number.”

Maxim read it a couple of times, then nodded. “I’ve got it.”

King returned the card to his pocket. “When you’re ready to receive the intel, dial the number. An automated message will give you instructions.”

“Why don’t *you* just tell me?”

“Because I don’t know. Compartmentalization. You know how that works. If I’m captured and interrogated, I never had that information, so I can’t reveal it.”

Maxim grinned. “Now, that’s interesting. Why would someone capture a ‘cultural advisor?’”

King returned the grin. “I don’t know. Stranger things have happened. We’re done here, unless you have questions...”

“How long is the offer valid for?”

King shook his head.

“You don’t know much, do you?”

“No, and I like it that way. Now, if there’s nothing else...” King stood up, nodded at Maxim, and walked toward the back of the church.

Maxim waited for a long moment, processing his thoughts. He didn’t like the situation that was being thrust upon him, but he also felt a sense of calmness wash over him. It was as if he held the solution in his hand. Well, in his mind, in that series of numbers. *Maybe I will dial the number, and check out the file.* Then he shook his head. *Dealing with the CIA is like playing with fire. No, there has to be a different way.* He thought hard and long, but came up with nothing.

Eventually, he stood up and made his way to the Lada. He drove along the Moskvoretskaya Embankment, heading toward his mother’s apartment, where she was expecting him for supper. He tried to push the work worries to the back of his mind and get into the mindset to enjoy the evening with his mother. Maxim glanced at his face in the rearview mirror and nodded to himself. *Yes, with or without the CIA, I will do everything I can to get my job back... even if it kills me.*

