

CHAPTER 1

YEKATERINBURG, RUSSIA—MAY 8

No one noticed the shiny black dot on the lapel of Viktor Smirnoff's coat as he strolled inside the compound's eight-foot walls. He wandered along a dirt path that connected three gray buildings. Cameras were so easy to hide. He had visited the research lab twice on assignment for the Federal Security Service known as the FSB. It previously served as part of the KGB and was restructured in 1991 by Boris Yeltsin. Regardless of its name, the organization allowed Viktor to kill, but today he worked for a new employer, and he didn't have to kill anyone. The facility must have made a monumental discovery for the CIA to pay him two million dollars for some photos.

Viktor knew that by completing this task, he would add fuel to the contentious relations between the United States and Russia. If either country acted on what he was doing, national pride would dictate more than the invective now filling the print media and airwaves.

He didn't know that five scientists had discovered a new process using the element thorium, a discovery that had the potential to alter the energy calculus of the planet. If viable, it could affect the balance of power between these two nations.

If he didn't accept the CIA's offer, he rationalized, someone else would. Besides, his best friend, Anton Morozov—his boss at the FSB—insisted that he had do it so Russia could establish better relations with the United States.

Viktor knew that Anton had created ingenious schemes to benefit Mother Russia in the past, but this statement made no sense. If the FSB discovered him sending classified photos to the US, he'd be shot for being a traitor. If the US decided to steal the thorium plans, war could erupt. So Viktor questioned his comrade's sanity. No way could his effort benefit both nations.

Sneaking photos of the buildings, fences, hallways, interiors, and even sensitive laboratory areas seemed easy enough. His new client needed hundreds of shots. Best of all, no one would challenge his presence in the high-security complex. The people knew he belonged to the FSB and suspected he was investigating the recent death of a junior researcher.

The secret lab was located adjacent to a Russian military base that was sixteen miles southwest of Yekaterinburg on the eastern side of the Ural Mountains. The camouflaged gate displayed a small metallic plaque embossed with the words RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES #17. The guards wore civilian clothes and appeared as locals, except they served in the Russian infantry.

Viktor accepted this assignment intending to make it his last. The substantial fee would make his retirement to a distant country more comfortable. He was tired of assuming large risks on a moment's notice, especially when nothing changed in the overall intrigues of government and international relations. He served as a tool for one side to flex its power over another. And he had realized that killing dissidents and even evildoers did not improve the world.

After Viktor completed his photo shoot, he walked toward the main office. Fedor Buryshkin, the nervous administrator, waited in the foyer ready to greet his visitor.

Both men's features bore a typical influence of Eastern Slavs. Buryshkin had thin lips, narrow eyebrows, gray eyes, brown hair, and a straight protruding nose. Viktor had similar traits without the nose and possessed an athletic torso. His prominent cheekbones came from Tatar genes, the fearsome Golden Horde from Central Asia.

Seeing the FSB gunman come toward him, Buryshkin worried that the death of the researcher who sold secrets about the lab would reflect badly on his performance. Viktor's imposing presence did little to subdue the administrator's apprehension.

"Mr. Smirnoff. Good to see you again." Buryshkin's eyes looked away as he spoke.

"I'm here to ask about the death of your junior scientist."

Viktor didn't reveal that he'd been ordered to kill the junior scientist because he'd leaked information to the CIA. Viktor saw the irony that he now worked for the same clandestine organization, but he kept that twist of reality to himself.

"I'm ready to answer your questions," said Buryshkin, although he didn't feel ready.

"What secret did the junior scientist reveal?"

Despite Smirnoff's soft voice, Buryshkin felt as though he faced the Inquisition. "Our lab discovered breakthroughs in the use of thorium. I can't say any more since the discovery has the highest classification. Very few know about it."

“Who are they?”

“The science commissar, his deputy, and three high government officials have clearance in addition to the five scientists in the lab.”

Viktor said, “Apparently more people outside of Russia know about it than inside.”

Selling of government secrets in Russia was a national pastime. The Moscow billionaires, who were known as the oligarchs, paid exorbitant fees for them. In this case, the junior researcher sold them twice, once to the CIA and the second time to a Russian businessman.

During the previous week and in disguise, Smirnoff plied the young scientist with vodka to get him to sell the secrets, and the man agreed. Then Viktor closed the trap and revealed that he was a government agent. The young man did not even apologize. He justified his illegal behavior as though Russia owed him big money. His arrogance without remorse made Viktor’s job easier.

At the end of the evening, Viktor escorted the wobbly young man to his apartment and walked him up the seven flights of stairs. Viktor recalled his anxiety and perspiration as the fatal moment drew near. At the top floor, he pushed the junior researcher over the railing. As he fell, Viktor sweated more intensely, saw the image of his father, and looked at his hands for blood. The police attributed the death to intoxication.

Viktor’s thoughts returned to the lab. “Any other information about the death I should know?”

“No. The police did a thorough job. A drunken man fell over the railing. That’s their conclusion.”

“Then I agree, too.” Viktor paused and sensed that the apparatchik felt a huge reprieve as blood returned to his face.

“Then I’ll close the file,” said the administrator.

“One more question.” Buryshkin’s body snapped to alert. “Have other people visited for a briefing about your thorium discovery?”

“Only President Bolodenka accompanied by Anton Morozov, and on another occasion the head of counterintelligence.”

“What’s his name?” asked Viktor, already knowing the answer.

“Dmitri Chirkov.”

Upon returning to Moscow, Viktor rushed to his safe house and checked his Swiss bank account. Guaranteed funds of two million dollars were deposited the day before. With this welcome news, he downloaded the photos of the secret laboratory onto discs.

That afternoon, in yet another disguise, he took the bus to Sokolniki Park, where the CIA had informed him about the location of their drop-off site. FSB agents had known about this spot for months, and Viktor expected that they had positioned hidden cameras nearby.

From the bus stop, he entered through the main entrance and waited until two people had walked past the children’s merry-go-round. Moving around it and taking a side pathway, he observed a maintenance shed at the far end of a grassy field. Without checking to see if anyone was watching, he approached the shack and dropped the discs into a slot on the far wall.

As he turned and exited the park, he showed tension but inside felt confident in his role. He knew his actions were being recorded.

CHAPTER 2 NEW YORK—MAY 9

Wyatt Paxton returned to his New York office from Moscow after closing the sale of a research company. Speaking Russian fluently helped in the negotiations. During his teenage years, he studied the language in Moscow when his father was assigned to the US Embassy. Wyatt owed much of his language skills to his best friend, a Russian named Anton Morozov.

As a financial analyst with Blueblood Capital Limited, a private equity firm, Wyatt was afforded more opportunities to travel to Russia. He hoped to reconnect with his childhood friend, but most visits found Anton too busy. After many excuses and frustration, Wyatt quit trying to link up.

Wyatt knew that five medium-sized coal companies owned Blueblood Capital. Normally he wouldn't be associated with this group of polluters, but his boss assured him that their goal was to invest in renewable, nonpolluting energy sources. Wyatt had never met any of the owners; the closest he had gotten was seeing from afar Herman Turcotte, president and CEO of National Resources. His reputation as an intimidator was enough to discourage Wyatt from introducing himself.

At a husky five foot six inches, the sixty-two-year-old Turcotte's management style relied on a loud voice and threats. In his spare time, he tinkered with his gun collection. Aside from his bluster, Turcotte knew how to schmooze legislators when his industry needed tax or regulatory breaks. His company's large political contributions gave him clout.

Back in his office, Wyatt assembled all the documents and patents from the Moscow closing and forwarded them to Blueblood's eco-friendly research institute in Morgantown, West Virginia. Wyatt didn't know that the facility consisted of one warehouse operated by National Resources, a company employing one person to watch over the weathered building.

After waiting for Wyatt to get settled in, Dominick Golosi, managing partner and a street-smart ex-trader who'd made millions at Merrill Lynch, poked his head through the doorway.

“Forget whatever you’re doing. We need to talk.”

“What’s up?” asked Wyatt.

“Let’s go to my office. We got an offer.”

Overweight from too much junk food and no exercise, Golosi adapted with difficulty from being a fast-paced bond trader glued on his seat to the slow pace of finding companies in which his firm could invest. In his new position as president, he only watched two computer screens instead of four at his trading desk, reduced his penchant for swearing at everyone, and modified his habit of screaming on the phone.

He forced himself to dress the part of an investment banker with a dark gray pinstripe suit, blue starched dress shirt with a white collar, and a green print tie. His clothes and office trappings of original art, mahogany furniture, and photos of him with celebrities were the only exceptions he made to conformity.

His desk was an avalanche of paper. Other people would call it clutter. Dominick called it the layered look and could retrieve from the mess any paper he needed without delay.

Growing up in a poor section of the Bronx, he developed gambling instincts at an early age, be it cards, the ponies, or boxing. He knew how to beat the odds and play fearlessly. Disliking the monotony of college, he left CCNY after one year and fell into the mailroom of Merrill Lynch. After advancing to the trading floor, he capitalized on his gambling prowess by earning top bonuses for his performance.

His gruff manner was tolerated since he produced exceptional profits—tolerated until 2008 when he went long on subprime mortgage bonds imbedded in collateralized debt obligations or CDOs, and lost millions. After his firing, Dominick accepted Blueblood’s offer not because he needed the money, but to get back into the financial game and save face.

Golosi hired Wyatt at twice the salary of his old firm because he had expertise in corporate analysis, negotiation, and perspective that the former trader lacked. They were direct opposites. Golosi had a short fuse, looked ruffled even in a pressed suit, was becoming bald, was unhealthy in personal habits—especially eating—and had accumulated a war chest of fifty-three million dollars.

Wyatt possessed diffidence, thinness, medium-length brown hair that always seemed uncombed, a healthy lifestyle that included a workout regimen and diet. Golosi admired that Wyatt had developed a small following in the energy industry focusing on renewables. Wyatt could make Golosi look good as a CEO.

As a result, the boss never yelled at Wyatt, delegated most tasks in the investment area to him, and left him alone to his duties. Calling Wyatt to his office did not occur frequently.

“A Russian government enterprise wants to buy Corbett & Company, and the board wants you to close it,” began Golosi.

“But I just returned from Russia. I have a vacation planned.”

“We can’t ignore this deal,” said Golosi.

“Why sell? Corbett’s doing promising research in thorium,” said Wyatt.

Thorium was Wyatt’s baby, the next green energy source people dream about. Its slight radioactive nature was a big selling point in 1955. With the Cold War causing paranoia in military and government circles, the United States decided to use uranium to obtain plutonium for nuclear weapons even though thorium was two hundred times more efficient and four times more prevalent than uranium.

In today’s environment, American scientists believed that a thorium reactor was too expensive to build. They accordingly relegated the subject to their outbox. Conversely, Russia, China, Norway, India, and other countries had poured vast amounts of funds into research because the thorium reactor emits no pollution and because there is no chance of a meltdown.

Wyatt knew that if Russia developed a commercial thorium reactor, they would revolutionize the planet’s energy industry. Corbett would play a significant role in this sector due to its many patents.

Golosi, always the numbers guy, said, “They offered seventeen dollars per share. We invested at four. It’s a tidy profit.”

“But Corbett is making progress in this field.”

“Blueblood’s owners have found another opportunity in thorium that has more potential than Corbett.”

“Better than Corbett?”

Golosi asked, “Do you still maintain contacts at the Ministry of Education and Science?”

“I visit them whenever I’m in Moscow. Why?”

“See them on this trip. Get updates on Russia’s progress with thorium. I received information about a discovery and want to know more about it.”

“What discovery?”

“Just a discovery. Find out what you can.”

“Then we should keep Corbett,” said Wyatt.

“The directors don’t think Corbett will succeed.”

Returning to his office, Wyatt set up business appointments but didn’t email his friend Anton Morozov. He had no hope of seeing him on such short notice.

After Wyatt left, Dominick made a phone call. “He will leave for Moscow day after tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 3 MOSCOW—MAY 9

As head of counterintelligence for the FSB, Dmitri Chirkov knew plenty about Viktor Smirnoff, their top man. Dmitri monitored the careers of elite assassins, but he took special interest in Smirnoff who intimidated with his presence as well as with his rifle.

Yegor Dvorkin, Chirkov's executive aide, entered the office. "Here's the video."

Chirkov gloated. "Get the player."

"Too bad. He's our best shooter, a great agent."

"He's not an agent, just a sniper. He wants to kill from a distance and will only kill bad guys. You have to convince him about the wicked nature of his victim before he'll accept the mission. It's a hang-up."

"How do you know so much about him?"

"Rasputin brought him to my attention," said Chirkov.

"You mean the Rasputin? I thought he defected to the CIA."

"He didn't defect. The CIA paid him more to kill. I still maintain contact," said Chirkov, who had thought about hiring Rasputin to kill Smirnoff. That wouldn't be necessary now, not with this tape.

Dvorkin prepared the video player and said, "Morozov will be upset that his friend betrayed Russia."

"With this proof, he'll have to accept that Smirnoff's a double agent," said Chirkov.

The aide inserted the disk and hit PLAY.

The video showed a man approach the drop-off point. The aide said, "That's not Smirnoff."

"Yes it is. He's an expert at disguises. You have to look more closely."

“I still can’t tell, but if you say so.” The underling would never question Chirkov’s eye for detail.

“Smirnoff can assume an assortment of disguises, body postures, and identities. He holds many passports and aliases, most hidden from the FSB.”

As the video ended, the trusted assistant removed the disk.

Chirkov said, “I’ll inform Mr. Morozov that he’ll need to eliminate his friend. We’ll see if he has the guts for it.”

Entering Anton Morozov’s office, Chirkov flung the DVD on the desk and said, “Play it.”

Anton looked up. His office was soiled by Chirkov’s presence. Anton’s boyish looks, light brown hair, long legs, and skinny frame might cause people to underestimate him. They would make a serious mistake if they did. He possessed keen judgment, shrewdness, and toughness along with intelligence.

After Anton viewed the video, he sat back and looked troubled.

“What are you going to do about him? You’re his boss,” asked Chirkov.

Anton showed an impassive face to the person he knew was corrupt. Each harbored contempt for the other.

Anton said, “Enjoying yourself, aren’t you?”

“I’m only trying to root out spies. I advise you to choose your friends with more care.”

“I don’t need you to advise me about anything.”

“So I repeat. What action will you take?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll handle it.”

Chirkov smirked, believing that he’d crushed his nemesis.

Anton thought, The plan is working.

The next day, Anton put a bomb under Viktor's car. When he drove into the countryside, Anton followed with an FSB driver at a distance and out of sight. He grabbed a case from the backseat, put it on his lap, opened it, and flicked the switch to "on." One minute later he pushed the button that ignited the explosive device.

As they had rehearsed the day before, when Anton activated the switch, a light in Viktor's auto blinked. He quickly pulled his car onto the shoulder near a cluster of boulders knowing he had sixty seconds to act. After throwing personal effects into the car including his watch, belt, and wallet, Viktor dashed behind the rocks. He hid in a natural recess of the outcrop and covered his ears. When the bomb detonated, his body felt the shock.

When Anton heard the explosion, the driver pulled to the side of the road and waited for the smoke to dissipate. Once clear, the driver proceeded to the inferno.

Anton got out and looked at the blaze. Amidst the fire and ashes, Anton thought to himself, I hope my plan works. He took a big breath. My only problem is that it depends on an American.

Getting back into his auto, Anton departed.

Hearing the vehicle accelerate from the scene, Viktor stood up and hiked the back trail along a ravine to a secluded grove of trees where a car was parked.

Viktor needed to be killed so his movements would not be monitored. Anton agreed to let Viktor retire at age forty-one, but his assignment for the CIA would be his next to last. Anton needed his friend for one more mission.