

PROLOGUE

Near the border between Transnistria and Ukraine. The longest night.

Across the frozen steppe a girl is running, trailing a ragged shroud of her own breath. Her eyes search the moonlit expanse for something—a shed, haystack, or bush—to give protection. She wears a baggy sweater and her best skirt, torn from the hem halfway to the waist. The cold has numbed her feet and hands. Her lungs burn.

The girl runs without a notion where. Her only thought is escape from the long, low building somewhere behind her, where soldiers demand passports and poke ugly guns. Where the fat driver with his fat neck, creased in back like a loaf of bread, grins his stubby teeth. Where the American slides his heavy-lidded stare along her body like a knife peeling off her skin.

Stomach cramps bring back the memory of boiled potatoes and beans she had to leave uneaten when the driver showed up at her house. Her weakening legs remind her of the water buckets she fetched for Baba from the village well before that, and the hour she spent cleaning the slimy debris from Baba's cabbage patch. In between those chores and this running? She remembers the driver's advice: "Girls who have troubles fare not so good," he said. "If you think you have troubles, take care of them inside here." He tapped his bulging brow. "It is better no one will ever know."

The girl's legs wobble now with each stride. She trips over nothing and falls, but continues, throwing herself forward on hands and knees. If the fat man with tiny teeth has come after her, maybe he won't notice a body that keeps low.

Her mind slides all over the place—to the bread and cheese the men never offered to share, to the American who dragged her into the other room, the impossible weight of him. The images swirl into an irresistible need: she must curl into a furrow and sleep. She is closing her eyes, when a glowing face appears within inches of her own. The girl jerks alert. "Cristina?" she calls, as the face fades.

She drags herself along the icy earth, inch by inch, for long minutes, maybe hours. She can feel no pain, but her eyes weep, and the tears freeze her cheeks stiff. Then a tremulous voice urges her to lift her head. "Cristina?" The girl she left behind is nowhere in sight. What she does see in the moonlight could not have been there before: a pale strip of road, coming down from the sky and widening as it curves across the fields to her right.

With a reserve of strength she didn't know she had, she pushes herself up and staggers toward that road, but it seems to retreat as she approaches. She can never reach it. Cristina will have to understand. She must lie down again for a little while. It's only sleep that waits to embrace her: sleep, her body's need, heart's desire. Her bones melt. She is settling one cheek against the sharp ground, when a sputtering startles her. She pushes up again, and peers at the silver road. A vehicle has breached the horizon.

She can only watch the headlights brighten. She has no will to move. Then all at once, when the vehicle is directly below her, when it is probably too late to intercept it, that force inside her again thrusts her upright, waves her arms. She slips, grabs at the stiff grass, plunges down the slope, half-running, half-falling then catching herself. The beat-up truck stops. If only she could fly! Her heart screams, *Save me, save me*, but her mouth doesn't utter a sound.

Kiev, Ukraine. The same night.

Anton Loboda, Director of the Kiev Institute for Nuclear Research, is not prepared for a female.

In the past they have always been men—some unshaven in shabby clothes, some well-dressed and smelling of cologne. Each with a slightly different accent. But men.

The physicist's first reaction when the tall young woman steps into his hotel suite is relief. A slender beauty, she looks harmless. These meetings usually stretch his small stock of courage to its limit. He goes into them with little prior information about his clients beyond their desire to wreak massive destruction somewhere, and all that stands between such maniacs and him has been his personal aide, Bogdan Traktor. The younger man has martial arts training and a weapon, to be sure, but if he were ever called upon to use these things . . . well, the Director's career would never survive the messy aftermath.

His second reaction to the woman is to wish that Bogdan were not there at all. The round table in the corner with its caviar sandwiches and bottle of champagne might then serve as prelude to an entirely different sort of evening than the one on the agenda. Beyond the draped window a full moon glows like a platinum coin.

A black scarf bound to the woman's head hides all but a glimpse of dark hair. A belted, navy blue raincoat hugs a shapely body but reaches well below the knees, where dark stockings cover the remainder of her calves. The modesty of her appearance is accented with surprising shoes—shiny black, with pointed toes and very high heels.

An absence of makeup lends her features a soft, blurry quality, as if she might be on the verge of melting into tears. The Director, with his strong nose and full head of steel-gray hair, knows he has grown more attractive with age. He's become an accomplished comforter of women. It is an art that has brought him many rewards, an art that young Bogdan, muscle-bound and deaf to emotional nuance, will never understand even if he lives for a hundred years.

Like a machine, his aide has stopped the woman just inside the closed door, set her black rolling suitcase aside, and is now trying to pat her down. She emits delicate sounds of protest and flinches from his indelicate touch.

"That will be sufficient," the Director says. "Any fool can see there is no weapon attached to her body. I suggest you investigate the bag." He shifts to English, the language of the international black market. "Come in, my dear, please." Bogdan's eyebrows question his boss's decision, but he backs off and sets about swabbing the suitcase with his nitrogen sensors and checking for wires or telltale sounds.

"Let me take your coat. What a shame we do not meet on social occasion where exchange of personal information is appropriate," the older man goes on, silently approving of her clingy sweater and fitted skirt. "But if you would care for drink, a bite to eat . . ." He gestures toward the table.

"I do not consume the spirits," the woman says in a whisper.

"To be sure. Well, but you must have a seat." He waves her over to the gold damask sofa. On the low table in front of it sits a leather case.

The woman perches on the edge of one cushion. "You have special material?"

"Of course," the physicist says, spreading himself out on the cushion beside her. "Why else would I invite you here?"

"I must see it."

"Ah! Why is the world today in such hurry?" He infuses his voice with wistfulness, but sees that it is lost on her youth. Her eyes seem focused beyond him. He claps his hands, and Bogdan scrambles to unlock the leather case. He flips back the top, opens a box within, and withdraws a plastic bag taut with gray-green metallic pellets.

"That's it? That's all?" Her voice droops, but her look remains distant, almost bored.

“A sample. I assume your people will wish to test for enrichment.” With a gentle hand to her chin, he makes her meet his gaze. “But you know nothing about this, do you? You are just the innocent go-between.”

She nods, her tawny eyes wide. And blank. Maybe that’s a blessing in disguise, he thinks, her seeming indifference. Might she be less likely to resist?

“Eighty-percent Uranium 235. Go ahead. Handle it all you want. It’s perfectly safe in this form.”

“What is price?”

“Fifty thousand U.S. dollars per gram. You have twenty grams there.”

“One million dollars.”

“Excellent arithmetic. And now it is for you to show me, what is in *your* bag.”

The young woman rises slowly, then lays her suitcase flat on the floor. She bends her long legs into a crouch to unlock the zipper. As she does so, the Director glimpses a blue tattoo on the inside of her wrist, the shape of a cross. Surprising. He assumed from her clothing she was Muslim. She lifts the canvas top, revealing stacks of banded U.S. bills.

“Splendid,” sighs the Director, shoving himself up from the couch. “Bogdan, you will take this bag down to the car now and wait for me. I am coming shortly.”

Another insubordinate look from the younger man, but his boss grasps him by the rock-hard arm and ferries him out the door. Then he slips the chain lock into place. He turns to the woman standing behind him and lets his eyes caress her body. “Now, my dear, you must tell me something. Why do you look so . . . sad?”

“I?” She presses a palm to her bosom. “I am not sad.”

“Let me order you some mineral water or a Coca Cola.”

“My people are waiting.”

“Surely they will permit me a few minutes of your enchanting company. Indeed, suppose we make it part of the deal?” He eases toward her and rests his fingers against the flush of her cheek then drags them lightly across the scarf around her neck onto her breast, where they remain like a question. She doesn’t move. He takes that as an answer, and ventures another step, pinning her against the back of the damask easy chair, her lips a few centimeters from his.

The keycard clicks in the door, followed by an angry clank of the chain lock forced to its limit.

What an idiot, the physicist thinks, just as Bogdan calls out his name. “Go away,” the older man orders in Ukrainian. “I will be downstairs shortly.”

“It is extremely urgent.”

The Director heaves an angry sigh, strides to the door, and slams it shut so that he can unlatch the chain. He has just pressed the handle down enough to reopen it when it swings at him, smacking his face. With a groan, he folds forward, hands over his handsome nose, helpless with pain.

When he recovers enough to take in what has happened, he beholds a woman in dark glasses, a black fur coat, and high heels. Crowned by a wavy mass of black hair, she towers over him.

The Director straightens his posture. He addresses his personal assistant, who is darting back and forth behind her. “Bogdan, what is meaning of this?”

Before Bogdan can answer, the woman removes her glasses. “Do you pretend you don’t know me, Anton Loboda?”

“Of course, I know you. But I have no idea why you have come to me this way.”

Her famous cobalt blue eyes smile at him. “To say hello.”

“For that you break into my private room?”

“I wanted to extend my greeting in the most persuasive fashion. Sonia?” She nods to the younger woman, who lifts her sweater up to her armpits and leans forward.

For a moment the Director stands transfixed by the dark nipples showing through the lace of her brassiere, before he notices the tiny microphone deep in her cleavage. “Why do you do this?” he asks the older woman.

“I have done nothing. Now, if you are finished here, I will give you and your bodyguard a ride to your home.”

The Director shoots a glance at Bogdan, who answers with a shrug.

“Your personal assistant has found me *disarming*,” says the woman in the black wig.

The Director gives her a small bow. “Transportation to my home would be most appreciated.”

The young woman drags the suitcase, and Bogdan carries the leather case with its pellets. The woman in the black wig slips her hand through the Director’s arm, and the foursome exit the suite for the elevator where the door is being held by a giant of a man, bald and broad-shouldered, with a patch over one eye. He has to duck in order to enter the car, then stands hunched by the door. The Director figures that Bogdan’s weapon has joined another underneath the man’s bulky overcoat.

“Please understand,” the Director begins, when they have started to descend, but she frowns and gives her wig a vigorous shake, pressing a finger to perfect lips.

It’s only when they have taken their places in an anonymous black Mercedes, the one-eyed man driving, that the woman twists around in the passenger seat to address the Director in back. “We can speak safely now, Anton,” she says. “And please, I am not your enemy. If anyone should understand the need for creative ways to augment our government salaries, it is I. There is a greater issue at stake here, however. Thanks to the recent election, it is only a matter of time before the uranium you have become accustomed to converting to an income subsidy will be gone. Returned to Russia, correct? *Our* uranium. For how many years did *Mother* Russia exploit her Ukrainian stepchild in order to build a nuclear arsenal? How many million Ukrainians live still in poverty thanks to the curse of *collective sacrifice*?”

The Director feels these rhetorical questions are beneath him, and doesn’t reply. Besides, his nose is swollen now to the point where he can’t breathe through it.

They have left the city and head south along the moonlit bluffs of the Dnieper River’s right bank, approaching the suburb of Koncha Zaspá: “luxury living, secluded and quiet,” the advertisements promise. The forest to either side looks impenetrable at night. Occasional driveways punctuate the wall of evergreens, driveways that lead immediately to heavy, well-illuminated gates, evidence of the security fences that protect the privacy of those individuals who snapped up Ukraine’s assets for a pittance when Mother Russia was forced to let go of them. Protected from the impoverished masses, these fortunates erected their grand houses, garaged fleets of luxury cars, and continue to do whatever it takes to increase their wealth.

The woman frowns at her passenger. “Would you please stop looking as if I intend to hurt you? We are neighbors—we are on the same side, correct? We must rescue for our country its rightful inheritance. I ask for nothing from you but cooperation.”

The Mercedes turns right and stops in front of a wrought-iron gate, the tips of its bars twisted into points. The driver’s window sinks into the door.

“Well?” the woman says.

“I will get out here,” the Director says.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Tell him the security code.”

“235238,” the Director grumbles, vowing to change it as soon as possible.

The Mercedes follows the driveway for one hundred meters into the woods. This is the less-prestigious side of the suburb, not the river side. Where the driveway circles back on itself, a three-

story mansion of mottled brick and wood looms in the silver light, encrusted with balconies and gables. Stone steps lead up to a massive double door. The Director has to will himself to climb out of the vehicle. Suddenly it seems safer to remain where he is. Neighbor this woman may be, but friend never, and he remembers the old adage, *Keep your enemies closer*.

“Nothing will change for you personally,” the woman is saying. “You keep this splendid house, your respected name, your position as Director of Nuclear Research. But I will begin sending you a few strongly qualified men to fill positions at the Institute.”

“What positions?” the Director asks in a flat voice.

“You may find there are members of your current security staff whose performance is not up to your high standards. Do you understand me?”

The Director’s jaws tighten.

“Good,” she goes on. “Your first applicant has an appointment for an interview with you at ten tomorrow morning. Now go.”

The Director’s limbs feel heavy as uranium.

“Have your housekeeper fix you something hearty and patriotic for dinner,” she suggests. “And relax. The tape goes into my private safe, never to appear again, unless you do something foolish. Such as change the security code on the gate, correct? We take Bogdan with us back to the hotel. He will pick up your Porsche and return it here.”

Bogdan, squashed in the middle of the backseat, throws his boss a look, eyes round and red-rimmed as a rabbit’s.

“Courage, my two comrades, you are going to live forever,” the woman says, then lets out a short, loud laugh.

One month into the new year.

The apartment resembles every other mid-level American diplomat’s in Kiev: a basic five rooms appointed with U. S. government-issue furnishings: beige tweed upholstery, teak tables and chests. Kitchen, primitive by stateside standards; bathroom, functioning. Stacks of moving boxes have turned the bare floor into an obstacle course.

The tall man in wire-rims, who was introduced to his Embassy colleagues today as Jonathan Deare, Third Political Officer, tosses a delicatessen bag onto the kitchen counter and heads for the bedroom, where he sheds his gray trousers, starched, light blue button-down, and rep tie. From a footlocker he pulls out a white linen suit, then a tuxedo, threadbare Levis, and a Muslim dishdashka. Finally he finds the sweat pants and ragged Naval Academy T-shirt he was looking for.

Dressed for work, he moves to a door off the dining room, pulls out a ring of keys, and inserts one into an inconspicuous slit below the adjacent light switch. Then he isolates another and unlocks the safe room.

Inside, a wooden conference table fills most of the space, along with a quartet of chairs. Bookcases line one wall. The single window is concealed by floor-to-ceiling drapes of heavy, metallic cloth. He carries in two cardboard boxes designated BATHROOM and slices them open with a Swiss army knife. Each holds thirty-six disposable phones. One after another, Deare lugs in cartons with domestic labels and unpacks lap-top computers, two desk-tops, a package of bugs, one of transponders, a radio spectrum analyzer for bug detection, wire-tapping equipment.

He unwraps a framed photograph from a box of office supplies and, without a glance, sets it on an end table in the living room. It’s a wedding portrait of him and a slim young bride, draped nonchalantly around his arm. Stephanie. There are grins on their faces, though his is half-masked by

dark glasses and hers, by the forward fall of her shoulder-length chestnut hair. Deare looks forward to Stephanie's arrival tomorrow with neither excitement nor dread. What will be will be.

He removes the packing from two brand new flat-screen TV's, hooks one up, and surfs in search of an English language news channel. No luck. He grabs his foot-long bratwurst sandwich from the kitchen, and flops in one of the chairs, heisting his sock feet onto the conference table. Halfway through the sandwich, the screen shows a clip of a mansion, a loaded stretcher being carried out the front door and down a flight of stone steps to a rescue van. Police swarm. A scowling old woman in a maid's uniform speaks to a reporter, something about a sauna.

The bratwurst is delicious, and Deare's Ukrainian is pretty rough. Headquarters deemed it more critical to get the Chief of Station replaced than to complete the language intensive of his successor. Deare can't really grasp what the reporter is saying, but the words *Loboda, Doktor Anton Loboda* snap him bolt upright. He knows that name all too well. It's scrawled at the top of his list of people to contact ASAP. Loboda—Director of the Kiev Institute for Nuclear Research. Deare reaches for a laptop, logs onto the BBC website, scrolls down. There it is: Loboda was discovered this morning by his housekeeper in the sauna off a basement natatorium. He had baked to death. Probable homicide. Bogdan Traktor, who served as Loboda's personal assistant, is the main suspect, though he hasn't been seen in several weeks.

OK, the dead body was discovered around 0800; it's now almost midnight; and we're talking a third of Ukraine's stockpile of highly enriched uranium stored at that Institute under questionable security. Deare signs into his encrypted email account 99% sure of what he *won't* find: any sign of solid intelligence. He's got his work cut out for him.

He scrolls down his list of emails, bureaucratic stuff from the Embassy. Until his eyes hit the familiar moniker—OlsonDI. His heartbeat stumbles over the past. Then he reads the message, and it begins to race.

Wanted to let you know, our mutual friend will be arriving in Odessa sometime in the next three months from wherever in Europe she decides to visit last. Identity: Perry Vance, taking a year off from the University of Iowa. NCS is currently in process of finding her work under non-official cover, preferably something that lends itself to monitoring outgoing traffic from the harbor. She will be assigned to you, of course, for management. More later. Maud

Deare sits back stunned, punched by dismay, then hit with an intolerable thirst. He fires the remaining hunk of sandwich into an empty carton. His head begins shaking so hard he has to grab it in both hands to make it stop. He stomps out to the kitchen, opens the midget refrigerator, then slams it shut: empty, of course.

Perry Vance? Another name for trouble, spelled P-I-E-R-C-E. It can't be coincidence that this *mutual friend*, who still haunts his sleep, whom he wants never to see again, has been placed in his charge once more.