

Prologue: Garabil Plateau, Turkmenistan, *twenty-four hours earlier*

A helicopter crested the hill, flying high and fast. Spotting two figures hunched below, the young recruit drew them to the pilot's attention. The helicopter banked sharply and swooped across. Hooking a protective arm around Yana, his daughter, Batyr dragged her down and shielded her from the downward draught with his own body. The helicopter hovered above while the recruit inspected them. Apparently satisfied, he waved the pilot onward.

Batyr remained crouched until the helicopter reached the far side of the valley, then clambering to his feet, he brushed the grit off his daughter's faded tunic.

“We need to get a move on, Yana, your mother will be worried.”

But she slipped his hands. Something had caught her attention, and his eyes shifted towards a herd of Saiga, long-nosed antelopes, grazing on the slope above them, the adults in a protective circle around the young. The startled animals pressed closer to one another, their bulging eyes combing for danger.

To their left, a Caracel cat, laying low in the scant undergrowth, edged furtively forward. Its elongated, tufted black ears twitched as it bided its time for an unsuspecting youngster to stray from the herd. In a flash the antelopes picked up its scent and raced off, huddled together as if glued by shared panic, leaving no straggler open to attack. As another helicopter clattered into view on the next loop in the meticulous circuit that had raked the Garabil Plateau all day, the cat veered off, abandoning its pursuit.

What the hell's going on, Batyr grumbled, grabbing his daughter's hand. The helicopters and patrols had been out since dawn, an unwelcome intrusion into this remote region's usual stillness. What were they looking for?

The path wound along the contours of the hill. Below them lay the fragmented rockbed of a stream, dry now in the middle of summer. Its banks were covered with mandrakes, their tiny blue flowers framed by ragged teeth-like leaves. Beyond them, the Paropamisus Mountains loomed across the Afghan border, etched precisely in the late afternoon sun.

As they rounded the bend, they stumbled straight into a team of conscripts searching the hillside under the local commandant's stern, unforgiving glare. Batyr knew the man a little - sometimes they shared a bottle of bootleg vodka together - but he harboured no illusions about him. The commandant was an out-and-out bastard. As a young subaltern in the Afghan War, he'd learned his craft at the notorious interrogation centre at Tagtabazar where Afghan prisoners were questioned before they disappeared, and he never tired of boasting of the tortures he'd inflicted. Nonetheless, out here on the plateau, Batyr knew, it paid to keep on the right side of the military, so from time to time he bit his lip and raised a glass with the man.

One of the conscripts moved to block their path, but the commandant intervened.

"I know this man," he growled. "Move on, Batyr. Nothing for you here."

A bang at the door. Batyr threw a quick glance towards Tania, his wife, then shooed her and Yana to the back of the room. He waited until they were both out of sight before opening the door just a crack, his left foot rammed against the inner edge.

Outside a lean-framed man slumped against the stone wall, chest heaving as he struggled for breath, his bloodied shirt in shreds. He turned his head as the door opened and Batyr took in the angry scratches crisscrossing his haggard face.

“Let me in . . . Please . . . They’re after me.” He pleaded in Russian, his voice rasping like an athlete after a race.

Batyr drew back, in no doubt that this was the soldiers' quarry. As if to rub it in, search dogs lower down the valley picked up the scent and began to bark furiously. It was only a question of time before they closed in.

“Please, man, let me in . . . They’ll kill me . . . ”

Batyr glanced back at his wife. Her eyes stabbed his, hard and unrelenting. No, she mouthed, pointing at Yana, you can’t. A moment of indecision, then he gave a resigned shrug.

“I’m sorry.” He squeezed out the words, sounding as if he meant them. “My family . . . ”

And heaving the door shut, he slammed the bolt across.

A shot echoed, followed by shouts of excitement, brutal in the heavy silence. Batyr's shaky hand poured another vodka, his fifth.

“We should have taken him in, woman.”

His wife stared at the table, as if she hadn't heard.

“You know what’ll happen,” he continued.

Another shot, and this time a scream.

Batyr sprang up, his chair toppling behind him. “I’m going out,” he grunted.

Outside he covered the ground nimbly, moving towards the sounds in the valley. Catching the glimmering of light from the soldiers' torches, he stalked them with a hunter’s ease as they headed for the track that ran between the new factory and the village of Garkent. Two army jeeps were parked on the verge, and Batyr watched as they heaved the wounded man onto the back seat and set off towards their barracks. Pausing until they were out of sight, he crossed the track and took the shortcut over the hill.

By the time he caught up, the two jeeps had pulled up outside a low-lying building in the barracks thirty metres from the sleeping quarters. In the faint moonlight, he could just discern

the outlines of the soldiers dragging the wounded man inside. They looked far too preoccupied with their prey to notice much else, and slipping under the wire, he darted towards the rear of the building. Cautiously, he peered at an angle through a window, slightly ajar.

Batyr watched as the soldiers tied the man to a chair, his head bowed, blood seeping dark on his shoulder. A moment later Batyr's muscles tensed as the commandant came into view and, grabbing the man's hair, jerked back his head.

"Who sent you?" the commandant asked, almost in a whisper.

No reply.

Placing his hand on the man's injured shoulder, he pressed down until the man convulsed in pain. Easing back, he repeated the question: "Who sent you?"

The man tried to twist away, his face taut but resolute.

"You will tell me," the commandant told him. His voice was soft but his eyes were hard. "Everyone breaks in the end."

The man stared back defiantly.

Almost in slow motion, the commandant removed his pistol from its holster and, with careless ease, put a bullet through the other shoulder. Stepping back, his eyes displayed the perverse pleasure he took in his handiwork.

Leaning against the wall, the commandant waited for the man to break. When he didn't, he muttered something that Batyr didn't catch, and one of the soldiers disappeared through the door and across the compound. The commandant waited in silence until he returned a minute or two later. Placing a petrol can just inside the room, the soldier handed over a white, plastic container. The commandant extracted a small canister, like a miniature fly spray, and held it out for his victim to see. His next words were softly spoken, like parents talking at night trying not to wake their children.

"Let me explain how this works. This can is filled with liquid nitrogen. Applied to your eyes, it will take twenty seconds to freeze the eyeball so that it blisters and cracks. Do you get the picture?" His lips curled into a sick smile.

The man shook his head violently and struggled to lean back. Two soldiers sprang forward to clamp down the chair.

"Fix his eyes," the commandant ordered, tossing over a roll of tape.

One of the soldiers prised open the man's eyelids while the other fastened them in place with the tape.

"Your last chance," the commandant warned.

Moscow

PART ONE

Chapter 1

Moscow, Russia

Alex Leksin stood at the far end of the vast room, his tall figure outlined by the soft evening light of the Moscow summer that streamed through the high windows behind him. No stranger to the Kremlin, he was unfazed by the splendour of his surroundings. They may have renamed it Pobeda (or Victory) Chamber, as his companion had just informed him, but in all other respects the room stood testimony to the corruption and double standards of the Soviet era. The long Hepplewhite table and chairs came from London, the spectacular crystal chandelier had been hand-crafted in Venice, and, as Leksin surveyed the walls, he attributed each of the paintings of ancient woodlands and shining steppe to leading Russian masters.

He looked around as the floodlights suddenly flicked on outside in Cathedral Square to find a line of well-groomed guests pouring through the checkpoints for the evening's high profile event.

Checking his watch, Leksin turned back and glanced questioningly at Nikolai Koriakov, Deputy Minister at the Department of Overseas Development. Nikolai shrugged back with the ease of a long friendship that stretched back to their student days in Cambridge. The son of an apparatchik, Nikolai had won a State scholarship to study abroad. Leksin, the product of English schools but the son of Russian émigrés, had immediately recognised another outsider. He'd empathised with Nikolai's predicament and admired his tactics in dealing with it, affecting a love of things English and swiftly adopting a tweedy dialect culled from public school acquaintances. It was part of a jovial routine, a trick developed to disarm others and not to be swallowed whole, as Leksin had soon realised. From the start the two men had taken to each other. Even now, though they'd both been Moscow-based for several years, they still spoke in English when they were alone.

The heavy double doors swung open, and the two men turned as Saidov entered. Bald head tilted forward by a distinct stoop, his dinner jacket accentuated the downward slope of his shoulders, and the lines on his face betrayed the stress of years at the top of Russian political life. He wore an easy, no-nonsense smile, but his almond eyes were a survivor's, steely and unwavering.

"Prime Minister, allow me to introduce - "

"Mr Leksin," Saidov interrupted, finishing Nikolai's sentence. He shook Leksin's hand a fraction too firmly. "I'm so pleased to meet you. Your reputation precedes you. I count myself very lucky you might be available to help us with our little problem." He took a seat at the head of the table, and one eyebrow stretched upwards as he added: "Forgive the get-up. President Karpev's hosting a birthday party for his swimmer this evening."

Leksin suppressed a smile. The President had recently ditched his wife of twenty-five years in favour of a member of Russia's synchronised swimming team half his age. It had been grist to the Moscow gossip-mill ever since.

Moscow

"Nikolai's told you about the pipeline deal?" Saidov continued, getting down to business.

"Yes, I've got the fundamentals."

"Then I'm sure you understand the implications."

Leksin hesitated, sifting the issues, while he framed his response. The proposed oil pipeline would extend via Turkmenistan and Afghanistan down to the Indian subcontinent, for the first time giving Russia access to the markets of the Far East. It was a crucial link, he acknowledged. In today's world military might was no longer where power really lay. Energy was today's battleship - and Russia's vast oil and gas resources positioned her perfectly. Physical control over distribution - in particular, the pipeline supply network - was the key. Through the exercise of that control, Russia intended to bludgeon her way to domination. Georgia had been an early trial run for this strategy: a tourniquet around the country's energy sources had quickly cowed her government back to the negotiating table. More recently, when Russia advanced on Crimea, all attempts to form an effective, European response had been stymied by the continent's dependence on Russian gas. Even after Russian-backed separatists shot down a Malaysian airliner, its leaders had found it hard to agree on sanctions for fear of damaging their own self-interest. And still the trap tightened: Gazprom and other Russian giants continued to buy up Europe's own energy companies.

"Russia's been utilising her massive weight in the energy market for some while to rebuild her influence in Europe," Leksin replied at last. "Control over this new pipeline would enable her to extend this concept to the east."

"That's one consideration, yes," Saidov agreed. "But there's a much more important aspect, Mr Leksin. The attitude of Europe's leaders is changing. Their nightmare scenario is that, as a result of any action we might take, the lights go out all over the continent. Consequently, largely prompted by the row over Ukraine, they've started exploring ways of reducing reliance on Russian energy. It's a long process, they're not going to find alternatives overnight. But, of course, in the end they will, and as things currently stand, the effect would be to drastically shrink the market for our oil and gas. The resulting drop in revenue would plunge the country into a recession that would blow the economy apart. Karpev could never survive the fallout."

"So the new pipeline does much more than give Russia the chance to extend her influence eastwards," Leksin interrupted, seizing the point. "It reduces her own exposure to the whims of Western leaders."

"Exactly. As you'll have read, we've already started to take protective measures. We recently entered into a massive deal to supply gas to China. Within Europe itself, we're actively spreading disinformation about the dangers of fracking. We've also been exploring possibilities of installing new pipelines that by-pass the former Soviet republics, but the costs look prohibitive and we'll still end up being exposed to Europe. No, neither of these solutions work long-term. To my mind, the real key is to open up new eastern markets for our oil, just as we're doing with our gas and, quite frankly, this proposed pipeline deal is a heaven-sent opportunity to do so. We can't afford to miss out." Saidov paused. "Did you explain, Nikolai, that the detailed planning's been handled by Chestny Kombinat?"

Moscow

Nikolai flushed a little as he shook his head.

"They're putting up a sizeable chunk of the financing," Saidov continued, reverting to Leksin. "They're also responsible for bringing in other investors. You'll need to start there."

Leksin shifted uneasily in his chair, surprised that Nikolai hadn't mentioned this earlier. The conglomerate, Chestny Kombinat, had been the corporate vehicle of the late Lev Usenko, one of the most powerful oligarchs to emerge out of Yeltsin's ill-fated privatisation programme. And Leksin had once been engaged to Vika, his daughter, who was now at the helm of the business. Their breakup hadn't been easy, as Nikolai was aware.

"I've been helping the company with the project from the outset." Saidov's tone was imbued with heavy significance. "We're nearly there. Max Usenko's lined up for me to meet the oil company bosses shortly, then President Karpev's due to fly down to Turkmenistan in twelve days time to sign the contract with his opposite number."

"It sounds like a done deal," Leksin commented, his frown deepening at the mention of Vika's brother. "So where do I come in precisely?" Aware that time was short, he was keen to get to the heart of the matter. Time enough later to work out how to handle Vika and her brother.

Saidov glanced across at Nikolai, who returned the cue by pushing across the table the thin file that Saidov had earlier requested. Saidov skimmed through it. Cambridge . . . MBA at Harvard . . . Forensic financial unit . . . Freelance corporate troubleshooter . . . 1 million euro non-negotiable success fee . . . He gave Leksin a hard look. "Karpev tells me you did a good job for us with that mining business in the northern Siberia." He paused. "I want you to check the pipeline deal's above board, nothing there that's going to rebound on us later."

"But if you've been involved yourself since the start - "

"All of us have masters to satisfy," Saidov observed, forestalling the question without actually answering it. "Karpev should stick to he-man stunts or bullying punk rock groups." He shook his head disapprovingly before adding: "I want you to give the project a clean bill of health. The all-clear from a man of your reputation would help silence the doubters."

"Of whom President Karpev's one?" Leksin probed.

Saidov gave a meaningful shrug.

"There isn't much time," Leksin pointed out. Even if, as Saidov seemed to be hinting, he was just looking for a whitewash, it was tight.

Placing a hand on Leksin's arm, he looked him straight in the eyes. "That's why I've chosen you, Mr Leksin. I understand tight timetables are your speciality." He rose to his feet. "Now I must go or I'll miss roll-call for this evening's charade. It's a front really, though I suppose we all have to make an effort." He raised his eyebrows again. "Nikolai, you report direct to me on this one. Just me, understand?"

Nikolai's awkward grunt was not lost on Leksin. The two men stood up.

Moscow

"I'll clear the lines in Turkmenistan," Saidov said as he strode towards the door. Pausing, struck by an afterthought, he turned around. "Mr Leksin, please be careful. Turkmenistan's a dangerous place for an outsider. Russians, in particular, are not currently flavour of the month there."

Leksin waited for the sound of Saidov's footsteps in the corridor to fade before looking across at Nikolai.

"Interesting, though I'm not at all sure what he's after," Leksin commented, slipping back into English now the two of them were alone. "Seems like a decent chap, though."

Nikolai looked surprised. "You haven't met him before? Oh yes, he's very affable and charming. I could see you falling for his flattery," he joked. "But don't let that fool you. Underneath lies a real tough nut. There's a rumour from his days at Defence. Some accident at an underground chemical weapons plant in Krasnodar. As soon as Saidov learnt there'd been a leak, he ordered the whole plant permanently sealed. Over two thousand people interred and left to die. A few made it to the surface, but they were immediately shot and their bodies burnt. Saidov, apparently, didn't even break sweat."

Leksin pursed his lips, a sign of admiration or disapproval, and asked: "So what's his power base?"

"Good question, old boy," Nikolai commented. "In practical terms, his main contribution is his close contacts in Central Asia. His mother was Kazakh, and he did much of his education in Almaty. Karpev, as you know, has always been paranoid about what he regards as Russia's soft southern underbelly – all the more so with the spread of ISIS - and he relies on Saidov to keep an eye on things down there." Nikolai paused, gave a little chuckle as he led the way into the corridor. "And of course he kept the seat warm for Karpev when he stood down temporarily. Karpev definitely owes him one for that."

Moscow

Chapter 2

Moscow, Russia

"This way," Nikolai told Leksin as they came out of the lift on the ground floor. "I told my driver to meet us at the rear entrance."

Leksin followed Nikolai along a wide, discreetly-lit corridor that led away from Cathedral Square towards a central lobby. As they crossed the lobby, their footsteps on the marble floor echoed in the silence under the high ceiling. Continuing towards the exit, Nikolai suddenly slowed down and, without knocking, opened the door to one of the offices and ushered Leksin in.

"What's going - ?" Leksin stopped in mid-sentence as he recognised the tall, blond-haired figure in a dinner jacket who stood the far side of the large mahogany table that swamped the small room.

President Karpev pointed to a chair. "Sit down, Leksin. I've only got a few minutes."

Leksin sat down, concealing his surprise at a turn of events he hadn't anticipated. As his eyes lifted to the President's face, he caught the knowing look and barely perceptible nod that Karpev exchanged with Nikolai.

"So what's Saidov said?" Karpev demanded, pulling up a chair.

"About the pipeline?" Leksin questioned, testing the ground.

"No, about your role," Karpev corrected him. "I assume he told you to do fuck all, just go through the motions and give the project your blessing. Perhaps not in so many words, but . . . " - starting to mimic Saidov's voice - " . . . something to silence the doubters. Is that right?"

Leksin nodded, non-committally. The phrase was spot on, almost as if Karpev had been listening in.

"Well, let me make one thing quite clear," Karpev began, raising his forefinger in warning. "That's exactly what I don't want, do you understand?"

Leksin threw a glance towards Nikolai, searching for guidance. Whatever was going on here, there was an undertone he didn't as yet fully comprehend. What exactly was the message Karpev wanted to convey? Did he have reservations about the pipeline? Was he looking for an excuse to abort the deal? It seemed to Leksin that he might have walked headlong into a turf war between the Russian President and his Prime Minister and, if so, this was neither a comfortable, nor a safe, place to be.

"Don't get me wrong," Karpev continued, aware of his predicament. "I'm every bit as keen as Saidov on expanding the market for our oil eastwards, and for all the same reasons. We have to reduce our reliance on the West, so that we can take the next step."

"Next step?" Leksin asked, seeking further clarification. Was this where the conversation was leading?

Moscow

Karpev nodded and crisply outlined his agenda, his face hard with determination. "Ukraine was just the tip of the iceberg, Leksin. With that behind us, my focus is turning towards other former Soviet States, particularly those around the Baltic. If we're truly going to reassert ourselves as a world power - and dominate - then we have to re-establish our hold on these territories. But before I make my move, we have to find new markets for our energy, so that when the storm comes - and believe me, the storm will come - the West's in no position to hold us up to ransom."

"Which makes this pipeline deal a perfect fit," Leksin prompted.

"Exactly."

"But?" Leksin asked, figuring this was where he came in.

"*But* something smells." Karpev leant forwards, and his harsh voice lowered to a conspiratorial tone. "The three key movers in the pipeline deal are Max Usenko from Chestny Kombinat, the Turkmen and the Afghans. Personally I wouldn't deal with any of them if they were the last people on earth. They're all utter shits. The three of them combined . . . well, God knows what we're letting ourselves in for. The whole idea gives me nightmares."

"But Saidov himself has been involved from the outset," Leksin pointed out. "Surely you can take comfort from that?"

"Hell no!" Karpev retorted firmly. "If anything, that just adds to the problem. The man's staked his reputation on this pipeline deal, he's completely incapable of looking at it objectively." Standing up, Karpev started to pace the room. "Look, Leksin, let me be perfectly honest with you. I don't have to tell you, Russia's currently a pariah throughout the world. Crimea, Ukraine, the Malaysian jet, our support of Assad, you name it, we're damned for it. Under normal circumstances, of course, I couldn't give a shit for world opinion. You couldn't ask for a more gutless bunch of losers than the present rabble of Western leaders. They're all empty threats and chit-chat " - Karpev clicked his fingers repeatedly against his thumb " - and they can't agree a bloody thing. Look at the way they've dithered about Syria. No, it's not their sanctions that are hitting our economy, in themselves they're just a minor irritant. It's the sudden crash in the oil price that's screwing us."

"But these are not normal times?" Leksin prompted.

"Too damned right, they're not - or, more accurately, they soon won't be. We may not currently be in the middle of a new Cold War, despite Gorbachev's unhelpful claims to the contrary. But think about it. Once I make my move in the Baltic, we bloody well will be - there's going to be hell to pay. In the run-up to that, I can't afford to pick another fight, at any rate not until we're properly prepared. Do you get where I'm going, Leksin?"

Leksin nodded. "You need some space to minimise the inevitable fallout once you start to implement your planned expansion," he said, careful to keep any note of recrimination from his tone. Karpev's expansion was a dangerous, egotistical strategy, but Leksin's job depended on him remaining neutral in such situations. "In particular, the whole of Central Asia's a powder keg, and the last thing you need at present is a crisis down there that sets it off. The pipeline deal has to be completely above board."

Moscow

"Too damned right it does. There can be nothing whatsoever there that's going to come back and bite us in the arse." Karpev paused in front of Leksin and fixed him in his glare. "I'm relying on you to tell me whether it's safe to proceed. You're the backstop."

Leksin ran his fingers through his thick, brown hair, brushing it back in a series of short, sharp movements, allowing himself time to work through the implications of what Karpev had just told him. Then, standing up, he faced the President.

"I have to ask the obvious," he said. "The deal's been in the making for the best part of two years. Why wait until now to check it out?"

"Circumstances change," Karpev replied cryptically, without elaboration. A guarded glance at Nikolai, then he added: "Presumably Saidov told you the FSB agent we sent down to Turkmenistan to investigate went AWOL twenty-four hours ago?"

Leksin blinked at this new information. No, no one had thought to mention this. So he wasn't the first. Another surprise - as always, the best news left to last . . . A dangerous place for an outsider - was this what Saidov had meant?

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Chapter 3

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

The hamlet lay between the towns of Chirchick and Gazalkent to the east of Tashkent. Once a powerhouse of Soviet manufacturing, based around a giant tractor factory, the region now languished in sluggish destitution, a victim of the industrial decay that had set in after Uzbekistan's independence. Much of the former workforce had been drafted in from Russia and the Ukraine and, uprooted to an alien state, they had built themselves wooden houses in the traditional style to remind them of home. All those who could had now left, returning to their roots in the motherland, leaving behind the rump too old or too poor to escape.

An elderly woman jammed shut the door of her tumbledown wooden dacha and shuffled with the laboured steps of a chained convict along the lane. A battered shopping trolley jangled behind her as she dragged it along the unsurfaced, potholed track. The early morning light etched the details of her shabby cotton dress and patterned scarf knotted tight at her chin.

At the fork, she trudged left towards the station. A milk-cart drawn by a scrawny donkey blocked the centre of the road, doing the rounds before the unrelenting sun took hold. Waiting his turn to fill his jug, an elderly man, hands clasped behind his hunched back, watched a group of thin children playing hopscotch. Here the old games were the only ones: no one had the money to buy sophisticated toys like city kids. The babushkas kept watch, huddling closer as the old woman approached.

One of them sucked her teeth and frowned as she passed. "Where's your grandson? He should be pulling that trolley, not you."

The old woman shrugged her sagging shoulders. "In bed. No work for him round here, might as well stay there." She lifted the flap of her bag a fraction to show the meagre stock of vegetables inside. "I'm off to the city to sell these."

She continued slowly down the lane to the junction with the asphalted main road to Chimgan, Tashkent's chief resort in the foothills of the western Tien Shan mountains. The ramshackle station lay on the far side, and the train was due soon. As she stepped out, a gleaming black Lancia Voyager hurtled towards her on its way to some flash weekend retreat in the mountains. The brakes screeched as it swerved around her, horn blaring as she stuck to her path. The world order had changed, she grumbled into the air, but she wouldn't let that get in her way.

Eleven o'clock and the temperature already topped 40C. The horizon shimmered, even the dust had trouble moving. The old woman turned into Broadway, a tree-lined avenue in the centre of Tashkent, free of traffic and straddled at either end by a giant statue of Tamerlane and state security headquarters. She shuffled slowly through the lines of street traders, inspecting the paintings displayed on makeshift easels, sniffing hungrily as she passed the giant vats of yellow-rice plov. When at last she found an empty space, she extracted the scrawny home-grown vegetables from her bag and laid them out on the ground. No one stopped to buy, and after half-an-hour she repacked and trundled off.

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

The sun pounded off the cracked surface of the road as she plodded past the vast white mass of the SNB building, headquarters of one of the world's most infamous security forces. A scar showed its pale line on her cheek as she stopped to wipe the sweat off her face with the ends of her scarf. She rested for a moment before turning into a broad boulevard, shady with chestnut and chenar trees. She continued past a parade of sizeable, intricately carved, stone houses surrounded by elaborate gardens, set back from the road. Shielded behind tall railings, the top prongs wound with barbed wire, in Soviet times living here had been the perk of party officials. Now Tashkent's most influential oligarchs had taken over possession.

A little further, she left the patchy shelter of the trees and entered a newly-developed estate where the grey, faceless houses with their bare gardens were already fissured by the corrosive heat. Hauling her trolley over the sun-cracked pavement, she approached a group of women gossiping over tea outside a street cafe. Their voices hushed as she passed, and their eyes followed as she moved on.

She turned into a quiet, deserted lane where wild cannabis and spearmint sprouted along the verge. The trolley stuttered on the rutted surface, and she was forced to pick it up. She panted as she progressed and, halfway along, she paused, supporting herself against a fence. Through its cracks, she inspected a wrecked car rusting in the garden amid brightly coloured toys scattered amongst the neat vegetable beds. Pushing at the gate, she lugged her trolley slowly up the steps to a little terrace. Inside children fell silent when she knocked.

The door opened a fraction, and the harassed face of a young woman appeared. "What do you want?"

"A drink of water, please. It's so hot." The old woman flapped a dirty hand in front of her face.

"Clear off!"

As the young woman tried to push the door shut, it slammed back on her, knocking her to the floor. As she struggled to get up, the old woman brushed past, suddenly swift and upright, grabbed her daughter by the hair and flashed a knife to her throat. The other child screamed.

The scarf slipped back, revealing her short-cropped, jet-black hair. "Get the boy!" Nadia ordered. "Shut him up or this one dies."

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Chapter 4

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Nadia forced the woman and her two children over to the kitchen table, then extracting a roll of heavy-duty tape from the bottom of her shopping trolley, she started to bind the mother's hands and legs to a chair. The two children sat on the opposite side of the table, sobbing.

"If either of you make a move, I'll kill your mother," Nadia warned them, moving the knife to their mother's neck, wanting to make sure they understood.

The children stared back through terrified eyes, blinking back their tears.

"Get it?" Nadia growled at them, banging her fist theatrically onto the table.

They nodded their heads nervously.

Nadia checked their mother was tightly secured, then moved across to repeat the process on the little girl. Focusing on applying the last strip of tape, she missed the second when the girl's brother slid off his chair and made a run for the front door.

"Come back, Husan!" his petrified mother shrieked after him as she saw Nadia reach for her knife.

Too late. Husan's hand was already on the door catch when the knife spun through the air, thudding against the back of his head. The boy slumped to the floor.

His mother screamed, her face contorted in grief. Rushing over to her, Nadia slapped her hard across both cheeks, first with her palm, then with the back of her hand. "Shut up!" she ordered savagely. Her voice softened as she added: "The boy's alive, it was only the butt of the knife that hit him."

But the woman's hysterics were beyond her own control, and Nadia tore off a strip of tape and placed it over her mouth. She finished securing the girl, then went over to where Husan lay still and picked the boy off the floor. Carrying him next door, she trussed him up before leaving him on his own to regain consciousness.

Back in the kitchen, Nadia taped a hexogen cartridge to the leg of the kitchen table, then connected it to an electronic detonator fixed underneath. She tugged gently at the wire to check it was secure. Then, taking up her position behind the front door, she settled herself to wait it out.

Footsteps outside. Her muscles tightened, a predator's reaction. Her eyes fixed on the back of the man in his mid-thirties who let himself in. His white shirt tucked loosely into synthetic grey trousers, he carried a parcel.

"Hey kids, come and see – " he began, but broke off at the sight of his wife and daughter bound and gagged around the kitchen table.

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Nadia pounced swiftly from behind. Placing her left hand on his shoulder, she thrust the tip of her knife where his jaw met his ear. Together they shuffled towards the empty chair at the head of the table.

"Sit down, Alisher!" Nadia ordered.

"Who are you?" Alisher demanded through clenched teeth, his anger yet to be overcome by fear. "What do you want?"

Nadia remained silent, allowing him time to take in his new situation. Alisher stroked his forehead with nervous fingers, looking to his daughter, then to his wife, catching the terror in their eyes, feeling the weight of their lives in his hands. He noticed the explosives taped to the table leg and gasped for breath, opening and closing his mouth ineffectively as he tried to figure a response.

"What's this for?" he asked, rising from his chair and steadying himself against the table. "There must be some mistake. I . . . we . . . haven't got anything."

Backing slightly away, Nadia held out the detonator and indicated the chair with her eyes. Alisher sat down again, his eyes circling without focus around the cluttered room, searching for something that was not there.

"Where's Husan?" he asked, a new terror in his eyes. "What have you done to my son?"

"He tried to escape," Nadia replied, piling on the tension. She let a few taut seconds tick by before she added: "He's next door, he's going to be all right."

Alisher's face flexed with relief, and he stared at Nadia in dumb silence. For some moments, their eyes locked, then all at once his shoulders crumpled and the tears came. This was the moment of submission for which Nadia had been waiting.

"Your family will be fine if you do what I tell you, understand?"

Alisher raised his head, still snivelling, and his eyes blinked at her. "What choice do I have?" he asked, knowing the answer.

Nadia retrieved her trolley and wheeled it towards the bedroom. "Come through here. I'll explain."

Alisher jumped off the tram just before Gulyamov Street and strode towards the British Embassy where he worked. He now wore a traditional quilted robe of faded blue cotton over his loose trousers. Underneath, a layer of plastic-covered hexogen strips was strapped to his body. A hole slashed through the pocket gave access to the detonator. The image of his wife and children burned in his mind. He knew what he must do.

The embassy was set back off the road within a compound whose walls were crammed with sophisticated monitoring devices. A solid, beige and brown building, it represented a

Tashkent, Uzbekistan

mixture of styles: the faded grandeur of imperialism crossed with traditional Uzbek architecture. A small, detached hut stood at the compound's entrance, housing the security staff who checked the papers of those who wished to enter, or opened the security barrier for those about to leave. Alisher flashed his pass to the guard at the entrance, who waved him past. Then, keying in a code, he let himself into the security hut.

"You're late," his colleague snapped as he entered, then looking him up and down, continued: "What's with all the gear?"

"It's my wife's birthday," Alisher replied. "I'm going straight to the party after this shift."

"Well in the meantime, keep your guard up. The ambassador's due out at any moment. Be ready to open the gate."

Alisher sat down in front of the bank of screens and waited for his colleague to leave. His eyes drilled Screen I which covered the entrance where the ambassador's car waited. Not long now. His pulse pounded in his ears as he steeled himself.

He felt a knot in his stomach as the main embassy door opened and the ambassador climbed into the Range Rover. Pressing the switch to release the lock on the security barrier, Alisher walked unsteadily out of the hut as the car eased forward. Sweat trickling down his face, he waited for the car to reach him. As it closed in, his eyes zeroed in on his target. Launching himself forward, he grabbed the cord in his pocket and tugged.