

THE VIENNA DECEPTION

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CHAPTER 1

LONDON, ENGLAND

TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS AGO

THERE WAS NO TIME.

Engine racing, CIA Agent Seymour Hodgkins wove in and out of traffic on Hertford Street in a black BMW 3 Series. The roundabout lay just ahead. Off to the left was Seymour's destination: the Four Seasons at Park Lane. It was nearly a mile away, but traffic was already piling up.

"Damn it." Hands gripping the steering wheel, his mind raced, searching for the fastest alternative. Once he managed to get through the roundabout, police barricades would block the road, delaying him further.

The Renault in front of him slowed, brake lights flashing. With a muttered curse, Seymour wrenched the wheel to the right, barely missing the bumper of the old car as his front tire mounted the curb. He slammed on the brakes. Traffic had come to a dead stop.

No time.

Wrenching the door open, Seymour bolted from the driver's seat, weaving through traffic as cars honked.

"You can't just leave that there!" someone yelled behind him, but Seymour paid no attention. He needed to move. He had just missed Yvonne and Richard at the Savoy.

Even as he cursed himself, he knew it was a miracle he was here at all. If he hadn't decided to review the intel one last time...

How had he not seen it? He had been assigned to work with the couple by the CIA while they were in London. He had gotten to know them. He even liked them.

Maybe too much.

Was that what had gone wrong? Had his objectivity been compromised? Was that why he missed the threat?

Muscles straining, he sprinted down the street, pumping his arms, trying to gain speed. Minutes. He had missed them by minutes.

Veering left at the roundabout, he stuck to the side of the road. Just as he'd expected, police barricades blocked the street, redirecting traffic away from the hotel. Most vehicles were being funneled into a single lane, blocked off from the hotel. Only a few cars had access to the lane leading to the hotel.

A police officer on the sidewalk raised his hand. "Sir, I'm going to need you to—"

Seymour sprinted past him, not slowing down to explain.

A whistle blasted behind him, and the sound of heavy footfalls told him that at least a few officers were giving chase. He didn't stop. Weaving between stalled cars, he ignored the honking horns and shocked faces of the drivers. He knew he was causing alarm, maybe even panic.

Good. They all needed to be panicking.

"Hey, stop!" an officer yelled behind him, his voice thick with an accent.

Cars were bumper to bumper as they crawled toward the Four Seasons.

Seymour had always admired the look of this particular hotel.

The Four Seasons was a stunning five-star luxury hotel that exuded elegance and sophistication. Its exterior, with Georgian architecture and ornate stone carvings, made it an iconic London landmark. The interior was just as impressive, with a grand marble entrance hall, high ceilings, and large windows flooding the space with natural light.

It was the perfect setting for the high-powered individuals arriving tonight.

Which also made it the perfect target.

Only diplomats, their families, and other VIP guests were allowed inside. Security was tight, despite the crowd.

But Seymour felt no relief as he scanned the expensive cars lined along the front. He ignored the Rolls-Royces, Aston Martins, Bentleys, and Jaguars. Instead, he focused on the dark Mercedes sedans, looking for the one with US diplomatic plates.

Come on. Come on. Where are you?

He knew they hadn't reached the entrance yet. If they had, all of London would know. Please, don't let me be too late, he begged as he darted across the street to scan the cars from the other side.

Three cars ahead, he spotted the US Consulate car. A wave of relief swept over him. Thank God. He sprinted forward, hand outstretched. "Yvonne! Richard!"

An explosion ripped through the car.

Flames shot into the air as the blast hurled Seymour over the hood of an Aston Martin. He crashed hard onto the asphalt as shards of glass and metal fragments rained down around him.

CHAPTER 2

MOSCOW, RUSSIA

JUNE 2, 1889

TSAREVICH NICHOLAS II, heir to the Russian throne, was running late. He should have been at the home of his uncle, Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, an hour ago, but he had gotten caught up with his sister Olga.

His uncle disliked when people were tardy. To be honest, if Nicholas could avoid this visit altogether, he would. But then his aunt would be upset, and he absolutely adored his new aunt, Grand Duchess Elizabeth—or Ella, as she preferred to be called. She was young, fun, and always lively.

The grand duchess's sister had arrived earlier today. Nicholas knew his aunt was expecting him to spend some time with her. From the gleam in Ella's eye, he had a feeling she was hoping for more than just an enjoyable visit for her sister.

Nicholas, despite being the heir to the second-largest, most powerful empire in the world, had no interest in marriage—at least

not at this point. He was only twenty-one years old and wanted to see the world. He had no plans to be encumbered with the duties of a husband anytime soon.

The carriage came to a halt. Nicholas bounded out before Igor, his guard, could open the door.

A look of disgruntlement crossed over the guard's face, but Nicholas merely waved the man off as he hurried up the steps.

The door opened before Nicholas could knock. A bear of a man stood there, shaking his head at him. His uncle was his father's brother, younger by a number of years. Nicholas thought of all of his uncles as more friends than elders, but the look on his uncle's face placed Nicholas in the nephew category today.

With a grunt, Sergei stepped back, his voice deep and full-throated, sounding almost identical to Nicholas's father. "Ella is disappointed that you're running late. And you know I do not like for her to be disappointed."

As he stepped into the front foyer, it was a struggle for Nicholas not to wince. He did not want his aunt to be upset, but he also didn't want to take part in any of her matchmaking fantasies.

Giving his uncle an apologetic nod, Nicholas removed his gloves and handed them to a servant who stood waiting nearby with a tray. "It couldn't be helped."

Sergei scoffed. "Of course it could. You just chose not to. Now Ella is hoping that you will stay for dinner and perhaps take a walk around the yard with Alix."

Nicholas was already shaking his head. He had met Princess Alexandra of Hesse years ago at a wedding. Royals were always being thrown together at those types of affairs. He was actually related to both Ella and Alix—they shared a cousin in common, Prince George, the heir to the English throne.

Alix had been a pretty young girl when he last saw her at the age of twelve. He remembered standing in the church, catching her eye a few times, and trying to make her laugh. He could see the beauty she would one day become.

While curious to see how she'd turned out, he was not interested in spending more time with her than was absolutely necessary. "I'm afraid I have some pressing engagements later this evening."

A knowing smile crossed Sergei's face as he headed down the hall with Nicholas at his side. "Well, we'll just see how pressing those engagements are."

The two men's boots echoed off the Italian marble floor as they made their way to the salon. Feminine laughter drifted toward them from down the hall.

Nicholas couldn't help but smile at the sound. Ella had been a breath of fresh air since entering the Russian scene. She truly livened up his uncle's home. His uncle had always been stiff and serious, but Ella brought laughter into his life.

And Nicholas wasn't the only one who felt it. Invitations to Ella and Sergei's home were sought after like gold, as was their presence at gatherings. Having the couple at an engagement increased the likelihood of everyone's enjoyment.

Sergei stopped at the edge of the door and nodded as peals of laughter came from inside. Stepping into the doorway, Nicholas's breath caught. He had always thought Ella was a beautiful woman and had been happy for his uncle, but Alix put her sister to shame. Strawberry blond hair tucked up in a complicated do, her head was thrown back as she laughed.

Her bright blue eyes widened as she caught sight of Nicholas. She hastily got to her feet. Ella, who had been sitting next to her, glanced over, a smile still on her face. She rose more slowly and nodded toward Nicholas. "Prince Nicholas, may I introduce my sister, Princess Alix of Hesse."

Alix dropped into a deep curtsy. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

Nicholas found himself struck dumb for a moment. This couldn't possibly be the same young girl he had seen. He had known she would turn into a beauty, but he had never imagined...

His uncle tapped the back of Nicholas's boots with his own.

Nicholas snapped his mouth shut, realizing he had been silently staring for too long. "And you as well," he managed to stutter out.

Walking past him, Serge barely held back his smile. "Still have plans for later?" he murmured.

Unable to take his gaze from Alix, Nicholas shook his head. "I think there might be an opening in my schedule."

CHAPTER 3

LANGLEY, VIRGINIA

TODAY

BLOWING OUT A BREATH, Seymour slowed to a jog, tapping his watch. A glance at the timer showed he had been a little slower today than last week, which had also been slower than the week before. Only a second or two, but Seymour always looked for that moment when the downward slide toward old age began.

At fifty-three, of course, it had already begun. He woke up with mysterious aches that he couldn't identify. But he fought the ravages of time. Healthy eating was his first line of defense, along with his grueling exercise regimen—weights, yoga, biking, swimming, and, of course, his mainstay, running.

His ten-mile runs once a week were one of the ways he tested his own limits, a personal fitness test. Each week, he was pleasantly surprised to find he could still manage the run with little discomfort. But he knew, at some point, that would change.

Jogging up the steps to the CIA building at Langley, he pulled

open the large glass doors. Crossing the pale tile floor of the foyer, Seymour glanced over at the wall of stars—each one a silent testament to an agent who had lost their life in service to their country. He bowed his head as he passed. *Thank you.*

Lately, as he passed, Seymour had begun wondering if he should start planning for the next stage of his life. To be perfectly honest, he was still amazed that he even had a next stage. By now, he had well run out of his nine lives.

With another glance at the wall, he wondered—*not for the first time*—if maybe he had borrowed some extra lives from those whom fate had already claimed.

Making his way down the hall, Seymour slipped into the locker room. After a quick shower, he changed into a fresh set of clothes and was back out in under ten minutes. Eschewing the elevator, he pulled open the stairwell door and headed up.

As he climbed, he crossed paths with a younger agent on his way down. Young, with dark hair and a face that was hard to place culturally, the agent could pass for Latino, Middle Eastern, possibly East Asian, Spanish, or even Basque.

He'd be good for undercover work, Seymour noted idly. He'd seen him before one of the seminars he'd taught at the Farm, although he couldn't recall the man's name. He wasn't sure if they had ever been introduced, but he had seen the name on a roster. One of hundreds he'd taught over the years.

The agent nodded at him. "Mr. Hodgkins."

Seymour nodded back. "Good to see you."

It wasn't surprising the agent knew his name. Even after he had stopped teaching regularly at the Farm, Seymour was well-known within the agency. He had been around so long, he was practically part of the building.

For most of his tenure, he had worked in the CIA's Bureau of Russian and European Affairs. Years ago, they had offered him the chance to run the department, but he had turned it down. That would have taken his attention away from what he loved most:

Russia.

After decades of the US's Cold War enemies being his main focus, he had no interest in expanding his scope or letting someone else take over.

In his gut, Seymour knew Russia was a sleeping giant. Each year, it stirred a little more. Officially, the country had just under 6,000 nuclear weapons. While their ground forces had proven less overwhelming in Ukraine, the nuclear threat remained. Russia could destroy the world if they chose.

Even if most people didn't believe Russia would ever take that drastic step, their nuclear arsenal cast a shadow over every negotiation.

And their military, though underwhelming recently, couldn't be completely dismissed. Russian leaders had shown little hesitation in throwing conscripts into political quagmires. That alone tilted the balance of military clashes, leaving Russia in a position to make demands.

Then there was the cyber threat. Mother Russia had no qualms about interfering in elections or critical infrastructure with their skilled army of hackers. It was a miracle they hadn't yet waged a cyber attack that plunged the United States back into the Stone Age.

No, Seymour had no interest in looking elsewhere. Part of him believed that if he took his eyes off Russia, Western civilization would pay the price. It was hubris, no doubt, but it was how he felt. And while he didn't hold with superstitions, he wasn't keen to test whether there was any validity to this particular belief.

Besides, no one in the US intelligence apparatus understood Russia-US relations better than he did. With decades of experience, it would take just as long to bring anyone else up to speed.

And he wasn't the only one who thought that.

Politicians might view his reports with skepticism, placing more weight on their face-to-face interactions with Russian counterparts and what they could glean from a firm handshake, but Seymour knew the players in Russia. He knew how the game was played.

He was the guardian at the gate when it came to Russia's activities involving the United States. And he liked it that way.

Even though he occasionally considered the next stage of life, as he had just moments ago, he knew in his gut there was no next stage. This was his life.

Stepping out of the stairwell on the fourth floor, Seymour made his way to his division's central offices. Ahead, a wooden door stood in a glass wall, curtains drawn. He had never known the curtains to be open. *Whoever decided that glass walls were a good idea at a spy agency should be shot.*

Moving through the doorway, he entered the outer office of the Bureau of Russian and European Affairs. Behind the tall wooden reception desk sat Agent Juan Oliver.

Juan, forty-five, had been a field agent until he was injured on duty ten years ago. For the last five years, he had manned the desk. With dark hair always neatly coiffed and a warm complexion, Juan nodded as Seymour approached. "How was the run?"

"Good. Nice day for it."

"I'm thinking of signing up for the Ironman in Colorado this summer. You interested?"

Seymour paused, mulling it over. He tried to do at least one Ironman every year. "That's the Boulder Peak one, right? July?"

"Yup, that's it. Felix and Henderson are in."

The four of them had trained for a few Ironman competitions together over the years. "Let me check my schedule, but I think it should work."

"Good. I'll work out a training schedule."

Groaning good-naturedly, Seymour grinned. "Take it easy on this old man."

"Ha, the day you can't outrun us, I'll buy the beers. It's Felix who'll be crying. I think he put on ten pounds since the last race."

"Yeah, he's discovered the joy of home-baked bread."

"Well, he better switch it for the joy of protein shakes or he's in for a world of hurt. Let me know by Friday, okay?"

“Will do,” Seymour said, heading down the hall. The Russian offices were on the left, and European Affairs on the right.

Passing two closed doors leading to conference rooms, he stepped into the bullpen. Two dozen agents sat at desks scattered throughout the large space, separated by dividers.

Most of them were analysts. Seymour oversaw double that number of field agents, not to mention those whose activities unexpectedly led back to Russia. Altogether, he directly supervised about a hundred individuals, with indirect oversight of triple that number.

Nodding to the few who made eye contact, Seymour made his way to his glass-enclosed office at the back.

Stepping inside, he dropped his gym bag onto the couch. He had just settled behind his long metal desk—likely as old as the building itself—when there was a knock on his door frame.

A short, slim woman with dark brown hair in a pixie cut and strikingly dark eyes held up a plastic cup filled with a green liquid. “Brought you your post-run drink,” Agent Daria Cuella said.

At just five-foot-two, Daria was a tiny powerhouse in his division. Thirty-two years old, she had been with the CIA for ten years, and with Seymour for seven. Her slim build and jeans-and-Converse style allowed her to pass for a teenager, a skill she had used to slip in and out of countless locations unnoticed.

Although her fieldwork was top-notch, it was her computer skills that had first drawn the agency’s attention. She could ferret out just about anything from a system. Seymour had been mentoring her, hoping one day she would take his place.

Crossing the room, Daria set the cup on his desk. Seymour tried not to grimace as he reached for it. “Thanks.”

Daria laughed. “I still don’t get why you drink that. You hate it.”

He took a sip and winced but dutifully drank half of it. “One day, you’ll understand.”

“If you say so,” she replied, dropping a file onto his desk.

“What’s this?” he asked, setting the cup aside and pulling the file over.

“An alert popped up on a name you flagged. It’s from before my time.”

Opening the file, Seymour snorted. “I think you just called me old. What’s the name?”

“Isolde Smith.”

Frowning, he took a moment to process the name. A flash of a young woman with blonde hair and worried brown eyes appeared in his mind.

His breath hitched as he quickly scanned the file. The details of how her body had been found made him wince. *Damn it, Isolde. You didn’t deserve that.*

He looked up at Daria. Curiosity flickered in her eyes, but she knew better than to ask. “Get me everything you have on her: life history, police investigation, favorite color. I want it all.”

“Is this about a current threat?” Daria asked.

The fear, the one that had lurked in the back of his mind for twenty-seven years, stepped out of the shadows and stretched. Seymour’s chest tightened. He shook his head, his eyes fixed on the file, his voice barely a whisper. “No. It’s a very old one.”

CHAPTER 4

ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA

UP ABOVE ST. Petersburg, a carpet of clouds blocked the sun from breaking through. Yuri Petrov nodded in agreement with Mother Nature's choice. It fit that the day was gray and cloudy—sunlight didn't belong at an event like this.

Turning his gaze to the Peter and Paul Cathedral, Yuri curled his lip. It was by no means one of his favorites. Built in 1712 by Domenico Trezzini, it had the clean lines and clock towers that reminded him more of churches across Europe.

Yuri was a great fan of Peter the Great, but he couldn't understand why the ruler thought this would be a fitting church for Mother Russia. The baroque style of most churches within Russia's borders, *those* were objects of beauty.

Yuri especially admired Saint Basil's Cathedral in Red Square. Its instantly recognizable architecture made it one of Russia's most famous landmarks. The Peter and Paul Cathedral, on the other hand, merely blended in with countless European churches.

Of course, the interior was much more extravagant than the uninspiring exterior. The central altar gate, a golden masterpiece, and the

ceiling, with colorful patterns and biblical images, made it a fitting resting place for Russia's royal line.

A murmur rippled through the crowd gathered in front of the cathedral. Narrowing his eyes, Yuri scanned the thousands of attendees for threats. His people were scattered throughout the gathering, doing the same. A quick glance at multiple higher elevation points confirmed his snipers were in position.

All was calm.

As head of the Presidential Security Service, it was his job to make sure it stayed that way. More than that, it was the honor of his life to protect the president of Russia—the man who would restore the country to its former glory.

Awe once again spread through Yuri as he took in the sight of President Mikhail Kolvachuk. The thousands in attendance were equally captivated, their eyes fixed on their leader as his words wove through the air, wrapping around them like a spell.

Mikhail held the crowd in the palm of his hand. He could excite them or move them to tears with a single phrase. He had always been like that—charmingly charismatic, a natural-born speaker, and, more importantly, a natural-born leader. He could stop a rampaging crowd with only a few words.

Tall and muscular, with a broad chest and commanding presence, Mikhail embodied strength in both appearance and voice. Years ago, he had adopted a mustache and beard, styled much like Nicholas II, and kept his hair in a similar fashion. He was the very image of the tsars of old.

Now, standing before the crowd, Mikhail's face was somber. "The lost children of Tsar Nicholas II and Empress Alexandra have finally been returned to us," he said, his voice catching briefly.

He continued, "At long last, my Romanov cousins rest in peace alongside what remains of my family."

Yuri nodded at Mikhail's words. The Romanovs had all been laid to rest at Saints Peter and Paul's Cathedral, as had all Russian leaders

since Peter the Great. The first members of the last ruling family of Russia had joined them in 1998.

A murmur ran through the crowd as Mikhail lowered his head.

When the president referred to the Romanovs as his “cousins,” it wasn’t just a rhetorical flourish. Mikhail was related to the last tsar of Russia through his great-grandmother, Tsar Nicholas II’s sister, Xenia.

While Mikhail paused, Yuri resumed scanning the crowd. There was no sign of trouble. Not that he expected any. Under Mikhail’s leadership, the FSB had ensured that dissidents within a hundred miles of St. Petersburg were locked down—some permanently.

Nothing would disturb this holy day.

Anger rose in Yuri’s chest at the memory of the Bolsheviks who dared target the tsar. Tsar Nicholas II and his entire family had been massacred by them in 1918. The Russian people, dissatisfied with the country’s domestic turmoil, had blamed Nicholas.

But they had already deposed him. There was no need to kill him and his family, except for fear that the White Army might find and free them. Nicholas or his son could have reclaimed the throne. The Bolsheviks’ actions ensured that would never happen.

They hadn’t even had the courage to proclaim what they had done. At first, they claimed only Nicholas had been killed.

Cowards.

Eventually, the truth came out, but the whereabouts of the Romanov bodies remained a mystery for decades. The Bolsheviks had hastily buried the family, fearing their enemies were closing in.

It took decades before their remains were discovered, and in 1998, they were interred here. But two family members had been missing: Alexei and Maria.

It wasn’t until 2007 that amateur investigators found the bodies of Tsarevich Alexei and Grand Duchess Maria. Working from the reports of Yakov Yurovsky, the chief executioner, they knew two bodies had been buried separately to confuse any royalists searching for nine bodies.

Seventy yards from where the rest of the family's remains had been found, the investigators uncovered the charred, fragmented bones of the last two Romanovs.

Despite convincing evidence that the remains were indeed those of the tsarevich and grand duchess, the Orthodox Church refused to believe the bones were those of the Romanov children.

In fact, the Church had refused to support the burial of the rest of the family for the same reason: they didn't believe the bones were authentic.

The Russian Orthodox Church wasn't anti-Romanov. Quite the opposite. In 2000, they declared the Romanovs martyrs. Perhaps that was why they refused to accept the bones as authentic—their remains would become holy relics, making them targets for the unscrupulous.

Though the Church had eventually relented for the original burial, they remained adamant that the new remains not be interred with the others.

Mikhail, however, had overcome those obstacles with his passionate commitment to reuniting the family. Part of it was his deep love for Russia and his desire to see the family whole again.

The other part was political.

After the murder of Tsar Nicholas and his family, their bodies had been thrown into mine shafts and forgotten. When the truth of the Romanov massacre came out, Russians were horrified.

Though many hadn't been fond of the tsar, they certainly didn't approve of killing children.

As time passed, and as those who lived under the last tsar's rule faded away, the Romanov family became more revered in the public's memory. Stories of Tsar Nicholas II grew more golden, harking back to the glory of Russia and the Romanovs' God-given right to rule.

Today, Mikhail wasn't just returning the last two Romanovs to their family—he was consecrating saints into the grounds of an ancient and revered church.

Up on stage, Mikhail continued to extol the virtues of the

Romanov family and, in a more subtle way, his own virtues in reuniting them.

Yuri's phone vibrated, and he quickly pulled it out. A frown creased his brow as he read the message. Tapping his cheek, he considered his reply, then typed back a response. His heart rate ticked up as he waited for the answer.

The reply came in the form of a screenshot of a conversation between two members of the Tsarist People's Party (TPP). They were one of the many groups the FSB monitored closely. This particular group had sprung up about fifteen years earlier and actively recruited members.

His heart rate spiked as he read the transcript. Automatically, his gaze lifted to Mikhail on stage, his mouth falling open. Could it be? After all this time?

Mikhail raised his hands, emphasizing a point, but Yuri could no longer hear him. It was as if the world had shrunk around him.

They found her.

The sounds of the world returned with a roar as the crowd erupted into applause. Mikhail moved to the side of the lectern, waving as he turned toward Yuri.

Nodding to his men, who had formed a protective circle around the president, Yuri hurried forward. Mikhail smiled and waved at the crowd as they made their way to the car.

At one point, Mikhail stopped, waving his security back to allow a little boy through. The child, no more than five, had a mop of blond hair and blue eyes. He wore a faded red sweater and dark shorts. Hesitant for only a moment, he rushed into Mikhail's open arms.

A deep laugh erupted from Mikhail, filled with the joy of a father embracing his child. He whispered something to the boy, who grinned, then gently sent him back to his beaming mother, who had tears in her eyes.

Yuri noticed the media capturing the exchange. He didn't smile, but he knew Mikhail would be pleased with the coverage.

Once they were safely inside the car, the windows blocking the

view from the outside world, Mikhail's benevolent facade dropped. "Well?"

"You hit all the right notes. The international media will love this. It's going to make excellent copy."

Mikhail leaned back with a self-satisfied smile. "Excellent. But I noticed you were distracted toward the end of my speech."

Yuri nodded, impressed by Mikhail's attentiveness. "I received some information about Vienna."

Mikhail's eyes widened as he went still. "Tell me."

"Chatter between two members of the TPP. They believe they've found her."

"Where?"

"In New York. She's a history professor at Columbia."

"What does she teach?"

"Russian history." Yuri quickly pulled up the woman's image from Columbia's faculty page and handed his phone to Mikhail.

Mikhail studied the image quietly before nodding. "She'll do nicely. When do you leave?"

"Immediately."

CHAPTER 5

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

“THE CATHEDRAL OF VASILY the Blessed, better known as Saint Basil’s Cathedral, was created during the reign of Ivan the Terrible. Ivan is said to have looked upon its stunning beauty and been overwhelmed.”

Dr. Rebecca Faulkner paused for a moment, ensuring her students were focused on the image projected on the screen at the front of the classroom. The Columbia University Early Russian History class was packed with history majors and minors. Becca’s sections of this course always had a waitlist each semester.

According to her student evaluations, Becca made history come alive. As she glanced at the most recognizable architectural structure in Moscow, and probably all of Russia, she couldn’t understand how anyone could find Russian history anything but enthralling.

Turning back to her students, Becca leaned against the lectern, her tone flippant. “In response, Ivan the Terrible had the architect blinded to ensure that he could never create anything that might rival its beauty.”

A few students smiled as they scribbled notes, clearly having

waited for the bloody ending. When it came to Russian history, bloodshed was a safe bet.

“Believe it or not,” Rebecca continued, “that act was one of the tamer parts of Ivan’s rule. He came into power at the age of sixteen. In 1558 and 1560, two events greatly influenced his reign—one of which was more personal. The first was a betrayal by a friend who shifted allegiance to Lithuania, handing Russia a defeat. The second was the death of Ivan’s wife, which he suspected was due to poisoning.”

Becca waited, giving the students time to jot down the information.

Miku Okado raised his hand in the front row. Becca nodded at him. “Was she poisoned?” he asked.

“At the time, there was no proof. But in the twentieth century, her bones were tested and showed incredibly high mercury levels. So, in this case, Ivan’s paranoia was justified. After her death, Ivan truly embodied the name we know him by: Ivan the Terrible.”

For the next hour, Becca led her students through the violent reign of Ivan, starting with his initial reluctance to rule. He had only agreed to remain in power after intending to abdicate—something that, in hindsight, might have been better for the Russian people. The nobles and clergy who had begged him to remain in power would likely come to regret their pleas. Ivan was known for brutal torture, including skinning, boiling, and burning those who displeased him.

Keeping an eye on the clock as it ticked toward the end of class, Becca moved quickly. “Ivan’s rage eventually led him to doom his own line. After kicking his pregnant daughter-in-law and causing her to miscarry, his son confronted him. Ivan, incensed at the confrontation, struck him over the head with an iron staff. He regretted it immediately, but the damage was done. His son died three days later, and Ivan’s actions ushered in even more bloodshed, famine, and domestic strife. This set the stage for Russia’s longest-lasting dynasty: the Romanovs.”

Becca smiled at her class. “But we’re not quite there yet. Your

reading assignments for the next class are in your packets, and I need your papers on my desk before you leave. See you Monday.”

She turned back to the lectern, shutting down the screen and disconnecting her laptop.

“Professor Faulkner?”

Becca looked up, unsurprised to see Sharise Lund, a sophomore who had taken three of her other classes. Becca hoped Sharise would continue her studies and pursue a PhD. She was sharp, focused, and hardworking—the field needed more scholars like her.

“Hi, Sharise. What’s up?”

Sharise adjusted the red backpack on her shoulder. “I was wondering... What do you think would have happened if Ivan hadn’t struck his son? Would the Romanovs have ever come to power?”

Becca tucked her laptop into her messenger bag, straightening as she answered. “It’s a fascinating question, and you’re not the first to ask it. Michael Romanov was only sixteen when he was chosen by the Zemsky Sobor—the great assembly of the land. He was the great-grandnephew of Ivan the Terrible, through his grandfather, who was the brother of Ivan’s first wife.

“Michael’s life had been difficult, thanks to political maneuvering. When first asked to take the crown, much like Ivan, he did not leap at the chance. He had seen firsthand the dangers of power. He initially said no.”

Sharise tilted her head. “But he did take the throne?”

“He did. Eventually, they convinced him. Michael himself was quiet, unassuming, and exactly what the country needed at that time. In fact, when his father was released from a Polish prison, Michael essentially handed over the reins of Russia to him.”

“So, he was good for Russia?”

“He brought stability, but he also ushered in an era of violence. The Romanovs oversaw some of the most brutal periods in Russian history. Compassion was not a hallmark of their reign.”

Becca zipped up her bag as Sharise followed her to the desk. “But the Romanovs are all gone now, right?”

“No, there are still Romanovs out there. But none of them have an ironclad claim to the throne. Without it, the Romanov dynasty will remain part of history.”

“Huh. I guess all dynasties must end.”

Becca smiled. “So far, that does seem to be the case.”

Sharise paused. “Is there any chance the Romanov dynasty might come back?”

“Believe it or not, some people still clamour for just that. But no, the rule of a monarch in Russia is in the past. And for everyone’s sake, that’s probably a very good thing.”

CHAPTER 6

LANGLEY, VIRGINIA

SEYMOUR PACED THE ROOM, the file on Isolde sitting on his desk. He had gone through it twice, then checked the digital copy to make sure he hadn't missed anything.

He hadn't.

In the nearly three decades since he'd last seen her, Isolde had finished school, become a teacher, and married. They had two kids, both grown now. The oldest was in medical school, the youngest had gone into the priesthood.

Last week, she and her husband had taken a trip to Spain for their anniversary. According to the reports, they had talked about the trip for years—a second honeymoon to start the next chapter of their lives.

Isolde disappeared on the first night.

Three days later, her body had been found in an old warehouse. The discovery had been pure luck—prospective buyers had toured the property with the owner when they stumbled upon her.

Burn marks and water in her lungs confirmed that Isolde had been tortured. The highly detailed autopsy report documented every

injury, but one mark stood out to Seymour, making his blood run cold.

Branded into her left forearm was a double eagle.

The double-eagle insignia was well-known in Russian circles. Even if he hadn't had a tracer out for Isolde, that insignia alone would have ensured the file crossed his desk.

The double eagle, adopted in the fifteenth century, was a symbol of Imperial Russia—specifically, the Romanov dynasty. More recently, pro-tsarist groups had embraced it as their own. But it wasn't typical for the tsarists to stray outside the Motherland. They usually restricted their activities to Russia and its former states.

The tsarists' ultimate goal was to return Russia to royal rule. Seymour still struggled to understand their desire to restore a regime marred by inbreeding and corruption.

These groups, though passionate, were small and had little influence beyond their borders, and questionable influence even within Russia itself. That wasn't the most concerning part, though. No, what gnawed at Seymour was the fact that Isolde had been killed in Spain.

As Seymour glanced at his phone, the familiar urge to call Becca surged again. But old ghosts—long dead—didn't need stirring. It had been years. No one had any idea about her. He had made sure to cut all the loose ends.

Except for one, a small voice reminded him.

He shook the worry off. Becca had no clue why any of this would matter to her. He had worked too hard to ensure she remained in the dark—safe and happy, unburdened by things she couldn't control, even if she were aware of them.

Crossing back to his desk, Seymour pulled up a photo of Isolde. Instead of the ravaged corpse staring back at him, he remembered the last time he'd seen her—so young, so full of life.

Now that life had been brutally stolen.

Seymour's mind flicked to Becca again. He imagined her, not Isolde, in that warehouse. A shiver ran down his spine. Keeping

Becca from the truth had been the right call. She wouldn't know what was coming if that horrible day ever arrived.

Straightening his spine, Seymour shook his head and retook his seat. No, that day would never come. He had protected Becca her entire life. He hadn't failed her yet.

He wouldn't start now.

CHAPTER 7

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

STEPPING OUT OF HAVEMEYER HALL, Becca made her way down the long column of stairs. As she buttoned her coat against the cool fall weather, she struggled to keep her messenger bag on her shoulder. Shifting the bag to her other shoulder as she reached the bottom, she merged with the sea of people both coming and going from Columbia University along Broadway.

A smile crossed her face without her realizing it. She loved teaching at Columbia. Actually, she loved teaching in general, but teaching in Manhattan at Columbia was something special. The campus wasn't closed, so New Yorkers wandered through without restriction, blending with the students.

Moving down the sidewalk toward the 125th Street station, Becca sidestepped a group of pigeons pecking at the remains of a bagel. She didn't slow her pace—this dance was second nature by now.

A few storefronts down, two men argued loudly about the Mets' chances this season. Becca shook her head as she passed. The Mets never had a chance.

Her phone rang, and she pulled it from her pocket without needing to glance at the screen. “How are you feeling?”

Her sister Courtney’s laugh came through the line, tugging at Becca’s homesickness. “I’m fine. The cast came off this morning, but my arm looks so pale! I’m thinking of using some self-tanner to even it out.”

Becca grimaced at the thought, but knew it was best to change the topic. “Just don’t do any work on the house. I’ll be home in two weeks. Make a list, and I’ll get it done.”

“Oh, trust me, I’m counting on it. I miss you.”

“I miss you too.”

“You’re still spending winter break here, right?”

Becca winced. “Um, most of it.”

Courtney groaned. “Let me guess, your big project... Becca, you promised.”

“I know, I know. I’ll only be gone for a few days. We’re meeting right after New Year’s to finalize all the variables. Three days, tops. Once that’s done, it’ll be smooth sailing.”

Or at least, that’s what Becca hoped. She had joined two other colleagues on a massive historical examination of world leaders. They were starting with Russia, and Becca would create the variables used to analyze leaders from around the globe. Her name would be on every piece of research that came from the project—dozens of articles.

Plus, she and the other originators planned to write a series of books based on the research. If they pulled it off, tenure was a guarantee. After that, her life could really begin. Once she made a name for herself, she could teach anywhere and still have people clamoring for her.

Her plan was to move back to Indiana, near her sister and parents. She wanted to get a house, a dog, and all the things she associated with becoming a true adult.

“Just a little longer, Court, and then you’ll be sick of me, I promise.”

“Not possible. I’ll put up with not seeing you much for another year, but after that, I want you around.”

“Two years.”

“Bec—”

“But I’ll visit a lot,” Becca interrupted quickly. “I’ll come home for every break, and then I’ll apply for the position at Indiana University.”

Courtney was quiet for a moment. “Are you sure you want to come back here? I love you and want you here, but is that really what you want? You’re at Columbia.”

Becca did love Columbia—the hustle and bustle of the city, the energy. She would miss it. But some things mattered more. “I don’t care about that. You know what family means to me. I’m doing this so I can live the life I want back home—with all of you. And soon enough, that’s exactly what I’ll have.”

CHAPTER 8

JAMAICA, NEW YORK

THE EARLY MORNING crowd ambled toward the baggage claim, passing rows of restaurants, gift shops, and kiosks at JFK Airport. Most people looked like they were in desperate need of caffeine or a good night's sleep after the red-eye flights.

Despite the crush of humanity and the general lack of situational awareness, no one got too close to Yuri. He and his two men moved with a three-foot bubble of space surrounding them.

In Russia, this was common. Here in New York and during their layover in London, it was simply the reaction of people instinctively recognizing danger. It was the cold shiver crawling up a person's spine, the inexplicable urge to turn and walk in the opposite direction.

As their plane taxied to the gate, Yuri had received word that a member of the Tsarist People's Party (TPP) had registered at a hotel in Yonkers using his real name.

Fool.

Yuri already had eyes on the hotel and would be notified the moment the men were spotted. They had apparently just missed

them. Still, Yuri had a good idea of where they were headed this early in the morning.

Suppressing a sigh at their impulsiveness, Yuri shook his head. The tsarist groups had their uses, particularly during election buildup, but Yuri saw little value in them beyond that. He certainly didn't appreciate them taking matters into their own hands.

At the same time, their reconnaissance efforts might prove useful to the Motherland in this instance.

Vlad Augustine, Yuri's most loyal guard, bumped his shoulder. At six foot six, Vlad towered a full foot over Yuri. Despite his size and his perpetual scowl, Vlad had never displayed the full aggression Yuri desired. Still, his imposing figure was enough to give most people pause.

"What?" Yuri snapped.

Vlad cleared his throat and nodded to the pink-and-brown sign ahead on the right. "Dunkin' Donuts."

"We don't have time," Yuri responded.

A flash of disappointment crossed Vlad's face before he nodded. "Of course, comrade."

Despite the myriad of smells in the air, the scent of donuts wafted through the terminal. Americans, so soft. Always craving their little luxuries. A woman emerged from the donut counter, coffee in one hand, a soft donut in the other. She took a bite, and a smile lit up her face.

Without turning his head, Yuri could feel Vlad's eyes on him. The man was like an overgrown toddler—a lethal overgrown toddler.

Yuri sighed. "Fine. Get me a cruller."

CHAPTER 9

FOREST HILLS, QUEENS

BECCA GROANED as her head throbbed. “You’re a horrible influence. I shouldn’t have listened to you.” The bright sunlight made her squint. She and her roommate, fellow professor Oksana Petrov, had gotten home at two in the morning, and now, at eight, Becca was feeling the effects of the late night.

Next to her, Oksana looked as chipper as ever, her energy seemingly boundless.

Despite being one of her closest friends, Becca couldn’t help but hate her a little in this moment.

Oksana laughed, linking her arm through Becca’s. “Oh, come on. You had fun last night.”

“True, but I’m not sure this headache is worth it.”

“The ibuprofen will kick in any minute. Add a little fuel from Amir’s, and we’ll be ready for a full day of grading,” Oksana assured her.

Becca groaned again. She had only managed to get through a few papers last night before Oksana had dragged her out to a new wine bar in Brooklyn. As much as Becca had complained, she had to admit

she needed the break.

It seemed like all she did was work these days. Even when she took a “break” to watch a show, her laptop was always open. A work-life balance was something she hadn’t come close to achieving. But with Oksana around, at least she occasionally indulged in activities that fell on the “life” side of the equation.

“How many papers did you finish last night?” Becca asked as they walked down the sidewalk.

“Not enough,” Oksana replied, cutting off any hope Becca had of making a case for staying in tonight. “But we have all weekend. Maybe we can even go out tonight. I heard about this piano bar.”

Another groan escaped Becca’s lips, making Oksana laugh again. Oksana always “heard” about places to try.

“You need to live a little, my friend,” Oksana said, tucking her arm more firmly around Becca’s.

“I guess,” Becca grumbled.

“That’s the spirit,” Oksana teased with a grin.

As they turned the corner, Becca’s thoughts shifted to the research paper she was working on with a colleague. They were preparing to present it at the World History Association conference in a few months. It was an analysis of violent actions through the lens of gender, specifically within the Romanov dynasty.

Becca wasn’t sure who would come out as the more violent—there weren’t many female rulers in the Romanov line. Officially, there had only been four.

She debated whether to include Sophia, the older sister of Peter the Great, and Ivan. The two boys had ruled as co-regents until Ivan’s death, after which Peter ruled alone. As children, both had been too young to wield power, so Sophia had taken the lead.

Eventually, Sophia began acting as a third regent, going so far as to have her own throne and meet with foreign dignitaries. Peter had later sent her to a convent—an unexpectedly tame response given that she had inspired a rebellion against him.

Peter, by any account, was a depraved maniac. While he accom-

plished a great deal for Russia, his behavior was vicious and bizarre. One story always stuck in Becca's mind: Peter had an executioner kill his own mistress, and afterward, Peter had picked up her severed head, explaining the anatomy of the neck to those present. When he finished his impromptu lecture, he kissed the lips of the corpse before tossing the head over his shoulder and walking away.

Obviously, the man wasn't in his right mind.

Peter had also created and participated in an assembly line of torture for those who had revolted against him. He seemed to enjoy removing the ears and noses of his victims. A few of them had survived, though Becca wasn't sure if that was a blessing or a curse.

Even Peter's own son hadn't escaped his wrath. Peter killed him after the son had attempted to gain asylum in Austria.

Yes, there was no shortage of vile stories from Peter the Great's reign. All the Romanovs had their dark histories, any one of which could land them before the International Criminal Court if they lived in modern times.

Becca idly wondered if the curse Marina Mnischev—known in Russian lore as Marinka the Witch—had placed on the Romanov family had come true. Marina, the last tsarina of the Rurik line, had cursed the Romanovs after her son was killed, declaring that a dynasty that began with the death of an innocent child would end the same way. Three hundred years later, the Romanov reign had ended with the murder of five innocent Romanov children.

There were other eerie parallels as well. The Romanov dynasty had begun in the Ipatiev Monastery, where Mikhail Romanov and his mother had lived. Three hundred years later, Tsar Nicholas II and his family met their tragic fate in Ipatiev House.

A loud honk and a screech of brakes pulled Becca back to the present. She winced, expecting a crash, but the truck managed to swerve and avoid the yellow cab's bumper. Unfortunately, this put the truck in the path of oncoming traffic, earning more honks and the ire of a minivan driver.

New York never lacked entertainment. Becca had grown up in

the Midwest, where you could sit outside for hours without seeing a single car. Here, even in her apartment, she could hear the sounds of life below her—the voices of people on the street, the distant hum of the city.

Her sister had worried that New York would overwhelm her, but Becca found comfort in the chaos. She felt more out of place on her family's farm than in the bustling heart of Manhattan.

Oksana tightened her grip on Becca's arm. "I think we might have a problem."

Becca frowned, glancing around. "What are you talking about?"

Her words trailed off as she caught sight of two men across the street. They looked to be in their mid-twenties and kept pace with Becca and Oksana.

It wasn't their shaved heads that caught her attention—it was their matching outfits: black combat boots, jeans held up by black suspenders over bright white T-shirts.

"Are those skinheads?" Becca asked. New York had all kinds, but she hadn't encountered this type before.

"No," Oksana said quickly, her voice tight with nerves. "They look Russian. And they're focused on us."

Oksana had every right to be nervous. She was an activist, born and raised outside Moscow, and had barely escaped an FSB arrest warrant before coming to America. Returning home was no longer an option for her.

"Are you sure?" Becca asked, darting another look at the men.

"Yes. No. Maybe," Oksana muttered.

They picked up their pace, sidestepping Mr. Wong's fruit stand on the corner.

"Oh, hi, Mr. Wong," Becca greeted as they passed. He nodded but didn't smile. Mr. Wong rarely smiled.

Turning the corner at 104th Street, Becca and Oksana slipped around a group of teenagers in matching basketball uniforms, who were talking loudly and gesturing excitedly at one of their phones.

Becca glanced over her shoulder. The men had stopped walking

but hadn't taken their eyes off them. One of them nudged the other before they continued on.

Becca let out a breath. "They didn't stop."

Oksana let out a self-conscious laugh, her face pale. "Sorry, sorry. I keep forgetting this isn't Moscow."

"No harm done. Looks like they weren't interested in us after all."

"I'll just have to live with the heartbreak," Oksana said, placing her hand on her chest dramatically.

Although Becca laughed in response, she couldn't help but flick another worried glance over her shoulder.

The men were gone.

As they turned down the street, the awning for Amir's came into view, easing the tension in Becca's chest. She flicked another glance behind them—the sidewalk was empty of any threatening figures.

Letting out a breath, Becca shook her head. She had gotten herself worked up over nothing. Maybe the men had been planning to hit on them, but chickened out at the last second.

Yeah, that had to be it. There couldn't be any other reason for them to be interested in either of them.

CHAPTER 10

LANGLEY, VIRGINIA

IT HAD BEEN A LONG NIGHT. Seymour had gone through Isolde's back file and combed through the list of Russians visiting or working in Spain at the time of her death. There had been plenty. Spain was a common vacation destination for Russians, so that wasn't surprising.

He'd managed only a few hours of sleep on the couch before diving back into the investigation. Rabbit holes were everywhere, and Seymour found himself chasing down anything that might shed light on Isolde's death.

One lead seemed promising: two members of the Tsarist People's Party (TPP) had been in Spain at the same time as Isolde and her husband. They left the day before her body was found.

But what worried Seymour most wasn't that they had been in Spain—it was that they had flown directly to the United States afterward. Four days ago, they had landed in Newark. One of his agents was working to track their current location.

Rubbing his tired eyes, Seymour reached for his coffee as a knock at his door broke his focus. Blinking, he shook his head, forcing himself to surface from the depths of his thoughts.

"Come in," Seymour called.

Daria stepped into the doorway, a file in her hand. "An all-star just flew into town."

Shifting his concerns to the new development, Seymour focused on her words. "An all-star? Which one?"

"All-star" was their shorthand for a Russian of interest. Only a few made the cut.

Crossing the room, Daria placed the file on his desk. "It's Yuri."

Seymour's eyebrows shot up. There was only one Yuri on that list: Yuri Petrov, the head of security for Mikhail Kolovachuk, the Russian president. A former KGB agent, Yuri was now with the FSB, Russia's current intelligence agency. For Seymour, though, the FSB was just a new name for the same old game.

The FSB had supposedly been created to replace the KGB after the fall of communism, with the stated goal of eliminating the abuses of the old regime. Boris Yeltsin had broken up the KGB's responsibilities into various agencies, hoping to curb the sprawling influence the old organization had wielded.

The FSB had been stripped of its overseas intelligence functions, aiming to resemble Britain's MI5. But by the mid-1990s, much of the KGB's former power had been quietly absorbed back under the FSB's umbrella, including domestic investigations.

It wasn't long before the FSB reasserted itself as Russia's primary intelligence agency. By 2003, it had reclaimed much of the KGB's influence. With it came repression, the jailing of political dissidents, and the quiet "disappearances" of those who stood against the Russian state. The KGB was back—this time with a facelift.

Mikhail Kolovachuk, the current president, had publicly promised a new era of accountability, but Seymour had seen little change. In fact, he believed things had worsened. The FSB now operated as Kolovachuk's personal police force, securing his hold on power through selective repression and political manipulation.

Yuri Petrov had been by Kolovachuk's side through it all.

Seymour straightened in his chair and flipped open the file. “What’s he doing in the country?”

Yuri hadn’t been to the U.S. in two years. The last time had been for a meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations, where he had accompanied Kolvachuk. As far as Seymour knew—and Seymour made it his business to know—Yuri hadn’t left Russia without Kolvachuk since becoming head of security.

“I don’t know. None of our sources knew he was coming. He seems to have taken everyone by surprise,” Daria said.

“Well, that’s not good. Where is he now?”

“New York.”

Seymour’s eyes narrowed. “Manhattan?”

“Yeah, though I don’t know his final destination. I’m still working on it. He landed at JFK and seems to be heading north.”

“What about those two TPP members? Do we have a location yet?”

“Yup. They’re at a hotel in Yonkers.”

Seymour grunted. North of JFK.

It wasn’t unusual for Kolvachuk’s representatives to meet with the TPP. The pro-tsarist movement had helped sweep Kolvachuk into the office. He had played up his connection to Tsar Nicholas II—he was the tsar’s great-grandnephew—and had grown a beard and mustache reminiscent of the long-dead ruler.

Kolvachuk’s rise to power had fueled even more support for the Tsarist movement, which wasn’t a unified group. Seymour could name a dozen factions off the top of his head. But they shared a common belief: the Romanov tsars were benevolent, godlike rulers, and Russia had been robbed of its true heritage.

Some leaders within the movement even claimed that monarchy was the natural state of Russia’s soul. That claim wasn’t as far-fetched as it might seem—research indicated that as much as 25% of Russians supported the idea of returning to a monarchy.

The brutality, cruelty, and corruption of the Romanovs had been

swept under the historical rug. Now, the Romanov family, especially Nicholas II, had been sainted, both figuratively and literally.

Kolvachuk had positioned himself as the rightful heir to that legacy.

Intelligence agencies across the globe were watching the movement closely. In an era when most monarchies were being edged into irrelevancy, Russia's monarchist movement was heading in the opposite direction.

The idea of a nuclear power ruled by the whims of genetics was not something anyone was comfortable with.

In this environment, Yuri traveling alone to meet with TPP members set off alarm bells for Seymour. But he couldn't jump to conclusions. Yuri's presence in New York didn't necessarily have anything to do with Isolde's death.

Seymour needed more information. "Get me everything you can on Yuri's movements."

"Will do," Daria said, turning to leave.

"Oh, and Daria?"

She paused, glancing back.

"I also need you to run a check on Becca."

Daria frowned. "Becca?"

Seymour nodded. "Yes. She's staying with a Russian activist, Oksana Petrov, who's teaching at Columbia this semester. I just want to make sure everything's fine."

Daria's frown deepened. "You think Yuri might be interested in this activist?"

"I don't know. But if I call Becca directly, she'll think I'm butting into her business."

Daria grinned. "So you want the CIA to butt in instead."

"Quietly and without her knowing, yes. And keep an eye on Oksana, too. Just make sure there's no issues—no police, no emergency services, nothing like that."

"She wouldn't tell you?"

"Oh, she would. But long after the fact."

Daria clearly had questions, but merely nodded. "Give me five minutes. If I don't find anything, you can assume she's all good."

"Keep a slip on both of them," Seymour said. "While Yuri's in the country, I want to make sure they're safe."

"Got it," she said, stepping out of the room.

Technically, as CIA, they weren't supposed to monitor American citizens—that was the domain of domestic law enforcement. But there were always ways around those restrictions.

Seymour leaned back in his chair, spinning around to stare out the window. His thoughts churned.

Isolde had been murdered.

TPP members had flown to New York after her death.

And now Yuri was in the U.S.

He didn't like the direction his thoughts were taking.

Turning back to face the empty doorway, he let his mind wander through what he knew about Yuri. In the KGB, Yuri had a reputation for violence—though most agents of that era did. He had been young when the old spy agency was dissolved, but his reputation in the FSB was no less brutal.

Seymour pulled the report Daria had left him closer and flipped through it. *I don't like you being in my country, Yuri.*

As Daria had said, Yuri had landed at JFK about an hour ago without any fanfare. Seymour frowned, remembering a report he had read the previous day from one of their operatives in Russia. It mentioned Yuri, didn't it?

Grabbing his laptop, Seymour quickly pulled up the file. There it was—a report on the internment ceremony for the last two members of the Romanov family.

Yesterday afternoon, Yuri had attended the ceremony. To get to New York so quickly, he must have gone straight from the cathedral to the airport. He had flown commercial, meaning a travel time of at least sixteen hours.

Seymour pulled up a still image of Yuri speaking with Mikhail at the event and narrowed his eyes. *So, what brings you here so quickly?*

The old fear leapt from the back of Seymour's mind. His gut clenched. In all these years, the fear had never faded. It had simply waited for the moment when it could burst back to life.

If it ever did, the consequences would be felt around the globe.

Seymour had spent the past three decades making sure that moment never came. He had worried before, only to have those fears prove unfounded.

As Samuel Clemens had once said, "I've lived through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened."

This time would be no different.

Manhattan was a big city. Over 1.63 million people called it home, and an average of four million moved through it each day.

The Russian community in New York was enormous. Even with the TPP members heading there, there was no guarantee Yuri's visit had anything to do with Seymour's worst fear.

But if, by some slim twist of fate, Seymour's fears were about to be realized, he would do what he had always done when anyone got too close.

He would eliminate the threat.

CHAPTER 11

SHESHALIK, ALASKA

GREEN GRASS still poked through the white in fits and starts across the snow-covered ground. With a swing of his ax, Warren Boyd split a log in half, then bent down and grabbed the pieces, tossing them on a pile in the cart next to the stump.

The temperature had risen about ten degrees since the early morning. The sun added a little more heat to the day. He'd stripped off his sherpa-lined jacket and now wore only his thermal shirt with jeans and boots.

Stopping for a moment, he rested his ax on the stump of wood and turned his face up to the sun. It felt good.

But he knew that it was a fool's belief to think Alaska was being kind. Already the temperatures at night dipped below freezing. In another week or so, the area would be completely covered with snow, and the ground would stay frozen well into spring.

Northwest of Kotzebue and located by the Chukchi Sea shore, this was a no-man's-land, about as desolate a spot as you could get.

Which was exactly what the U.S. government wanted for him.

It had been one of the sites for the Alaska Stay Behind Plan, a

failed attempt to prepare for a Russian incursion through Alaska. Caches of weapons had been carefully hidden across the frozen tundra and monitored.

Of course, retrieving those weapons proved difficult when necessary, even when they knew where they were. Looking out over the white landscape, he wondered how many caches were still hidden out there, lost.

But all lost things, eventually get found.

Placing another piece of wood on the chopping block, he brought up the ax and sliced cleanly through it. Grabbing another log, he did the same before chucking the four pieces onto the woodpile. He'd need to have it well stocked before winter arrived. He'd learned long ago that he couldn't rely on the electricity or heat from the small system that powered his cabin.

The wood stove, however, worked regardless of what Mother Nature threw at him. In fact, he rarely even used the electric heater in the winter, preferring the smell and the feel of the wooden stove. He even liked the sound of it, with the crackling and the occasional pop. He'd taken to making his coffee and eggs on it early in the morning.

The chicken coop was close to his cabin. That first year, he'd worried, but the chickens had survived well. Their feathers fluffed out, providing them with extra insulation. Mother Nature knew what she was doing.

Even so, he'd created a windshield for them. Last winter, the wind had blown hard against the coop. He'd lost two chickens. He wouldn't let that be a problem this year.

Worst-case scenario, he'd bring them into the cabin if the temperatures dipped too low.

For some, the idea was probably repellent. But as far as Boyd was concerned, they had a productive, symbiotic relationship: they provided him with eggs, and he provided them with food. They needed each other to survive, and he saw no problem with making sure that they did.

A beep sounded from his pocket. Placing his ax in the block again, he pulled out a sat phone. It was large and bulky, not like the slim cell phones.

He grunted, reading the message. A new dispatch was coming through.

Grabbing two more logs, he cut them quickly before adding them to the pile. After lodging the ax in the chopping block, he headed back to the cabin.

Boyd pushed open the heavy wooden door and tapped his boots against the doorframe before stepping inside. The cabin was rustic, made from rough-hewn logs with a green metal roof. Over the years, Boyd had filled in the gaps between the logs, each one becoming abundantly clear in the harsh Alaskan winters. The first year, he'd gone traditional and used moss and strips of bark. But that spring, he'd redone his work with a substance created from sand, lime, and clay.

Slipping off his boots and leaving them in the tray by the door, he made his way across the room to his desk.

He took a seat, then grabbed his reading glasses and perched them on the edge of his nose as he booted up the satellite array and turned on his laptop.

It took a moment for his computer to find the signal. There was no cell service out here. But he'd set up an array a few miles away to piggyback on the satellites overhead. Checking his email, he saw the message with a simple subject line: *Daisies in season*.

Frowning, he clicked on the message, sending it immediately to the encryption program. Well, let's see what "daisy" he's talking about.

CHAPTER 12

FOREST HILLS, QUEENS

UP AHEAD, Becca spied the Queens Market and Deli halfway down the block and smiled. “Come on, I’m starving.”

The market had a little bit of everything. Markets like this could be found every two blocks or so in Queens and certain parts of Manhattan.

But Amir Akbarhi’s sandwiches made his place stand out. They were absolutely delicious. Becca wasn’t sure what exactly made them different. The reality was, they were just basic deli sandwiches, at least in terms of their names: pastrami and rye, turkey on a roll, BLTs. But there was just a little something extra. She didn’t know if it was the bread or the type of condiment he used, but whatever it was, it was something she couldn’t get enough of.

As a result, she’d started adding two extra miles to her morning run just to compensate for the extra calories. Now she was up to five miles a day during the week and then a nice long ten or twelve miles on the weekends.

That was another thing she loved: running through the streets of

Queens. Sometimes she'd head over early and run through the city instead.

There was nothing like running through the quiet streets before the metropolis was fully awake. It always felt crisp, like it was on the edge of excitement, like a theater just before the curtain was about to rise.

A man was backing out of Amir's, his arms laden with bags. Becca hustled forward and got the door for him. He nodded his thanks before heading down the street.

Waving Oksana inside, Becca stepped in after her. Breathing deep, she took a moment to smell the *tahchin*, which she could see sitting in the warming case on the back counter. The rice cake made with rice, yogurt, saffron, egg, and chicken fillets made her mouth water.

To the left was the register, with lines of cigarettes arranged behind it along with lottery tickets. In front of it were three aisles: one with candy and snack foods, the next a combination of cleaning supplies and first aid, and the last a smorgasbord of different boxed and canned food. Along the side wall was a long refrigerator case with kitchen staples like milk and butter, as well as sliced cold cuts and some pre-made sandwiches and one-person meals.

Sitting behind the counter was a sixteen-year-old African American boy in a blue T-shirt and Adidas running pants. He looked up as she and Oksana stepped inside. "Hey, guys."

"Hey, Devlin. How'd the math test go yesterday?" Becca asked.

"Okay," he said with a shrug.

Becca tried not to smile. Devlin never said his tests went well. He always felt like he would be jinxing it. But he was an A student. He'd been working for Amir since he was fourteen. During his downtime, he always had a schoolbook cracked open in his lap.

"What are you studying today?" Oksana asked.

Devlin held up the book. "The Ottoman Empire. Got a test at the beginning of next week."

“Ooh, one of my favorites,” Oksana said, leaning over the counter. “If you need any help, let me know.”

“Uh, thanks,” Devlin mumbled, not meeting her eyes. The faintest glow of pink appeared on his cheeks.

“Well, good luck. I’m sure you’ll do great,” Oksana said before turning for the refrigerated cases.

Watching her go with a wistful expression, Devlin turned his head back down to the textbook.

Smiling at the teenager’s crush, Becca headed straight to the sandwich counter that ran along the back wall. In his late fifties with dark hair, pale blue eyes, and a smile perpetually on his face, Amir stood wiping down the counter.

Born in Iran, Amir had emigrated when he was eighteen and married Amelia, who’d grown up in the Bronx. Amir smiled wide as he caught sight of Becca. “Professor. How was your night out?”

She grimaced, causing him to laugh. “Maybe a little too good. How’s the baby?”

Amir was already reaching for his phone, as Becca had known he would. “Growing so fast. Amelia and I are in love.”

Sasha, Amir’s daughter, had just had her first child, a little girl. Amelia had moved in with them to help with the early days’ learning curve.

Turning his phone so that Becca could see his latest photo, a small dark-haired baby sat in a pink infant tub. Amir beamed. “First bath. She did so well.”

Becca’s smile was genuine, only in part because of the adorableness of the child on the screen. Amir’s happiness and joy were pretty contagious. “She’s gorgeous, Amir.”

“Yes, she is. Thank God she looks like my daughter and wife and doesn’t take after my side of the family,” he said, patting his belly. “Oh, and thank you for the gift. Amelia said that she absolutely loves the stuffed bunny you got for her.”

She doubted that was true, although she hoped that one day the little girl would enjoy the rabbit. When she was younger, she’d had

one just like it, and she actually still had it tucked away in her apartment now. It had been her first friend and had seen her through some rather dark times. "I'm glad she likes it."

"Now, what can I get for you today?"

"I think I'm going to go with pastrami on rye."

"An excellent choice." Amir turned to the counter and started putting together the sandwich. The two of them chatted as he worked, discussing what was happening in the neighborhood along with a smattering of current events. Oksana joined them, asking for an identical sandwich for herself.

When Becca first moved to the city, her family had worried that she'd have no one to talk to. That people would be unfriendly and that she'd be on her own.

But that hadn't been Becca's experience at all. She found New Yorkers to be amazingly friendly. Maybe not all of them, but that was true wherever you went.

A few minutes later, Amir had finished the sandwiches and slid the tightly wrapped packages across the countertop.

"Thanks, Amir," Oksana said as she grabbed both. Becca tried to take hers, but Oksana held them out of her reach. "Nope. I'm buying these, and you can pay me back with wine tonight."

Before Becca could argue, Oksana danced out of her reach and to the register up front.

"See you tomorrow?" Amir asked.

"See you tomorrow," she promised.

Amir practically lived at his bodega. And Becca had gotten into the habit of stopping by before she went to the university and on her way home. Sometimes she'd just grab a coffee or a soda after her day was done, but she liked to stop in. Amir was her little touch of family in this big zoo of a city. She'd even gone over to his and Amelia's place for Thanksgiving her first year here, when a storm had grounded her flight.

Accompanying her up to the register, he nodded at Devlin. "I've got this," he said, waving the young man away. "There's a new ship-

ment of cookies in the back. Can you bring it out and stock the shelves?"

"Sure thing." Putting a marker in his book, Devlin made his way through the aisles to the storeroom in the back.

"Devlin's a good kid. He's going to be applying to universities next fall." Amir looked up at Becca and then Oksana from his position behind the counter. "A letter of support from a Columbia University professor or two might go a long way in helping him."

"I'd be happy to write him a letter of recommendation. When the time gets closer, I'll sit down with him and get some information, and I'll write him a great one," Becca promised.

"I'm in too," Oksana said, grabbing two of Amelia's homemade brownies and placing them next to the sandwiches.

"Excellent, excellent. For that, I will give you a discount."

Becca's jaw nearly dropped. Amir was an amazing man, but he was not someone who was generous when it came to his store. Becca didn't mind. After all, the man had to make a living. This might be the first time she'd ever actually gotten a discount.

"Fifteen dollars," Amir said as he placed everything in a brown paper bag and slid it across the counter.

He'd given them a dollar off. A huge discount for Amir. After handing over the money, Oksana gave Amir a wave. "See you tomorrow."

"Be careful out there," Amir said.

It was what he always said instead of goodbye. It reminded her of her adoptive father. He was always telling her and her sister Courtney to be safe whenever they left the house.

As she stepped out of Amir's, she noted the street was still pretty quiet.

That wasn't unusual. Amir's shop was set up on 105th Street off Liberty Avenue. It didn't get as much traffic as either of the two anchor streets. It was only a block away from her apartment over on 106th.

Now that she'd been here a while, she maneuvered through the

area like a native New Yorker. When she'd first moved here, though, she'd gotten hopelessly confused. Queens was a mess of identical-sounding streets. There was 101st Avenue versus 101st Street. She lived in an apartment on 101st Avenue between 106th and 107th Streets.

Giving directions was like a bad rendition of "Who's on First?"

Carefully tucking the brownie next to the sandwich into her messenger bag, Becca snapped the clasps in place.

"Oh, I am so hungry," Oksana said, stepping out next to her.

"Me too," Becca said, her stomach rumbling at the thought of the meal ahead.

For a moment, she looked around for any sign of the white T-shirts. But there was only a man in a suit hurrying in the direction of the subway. She let out a breath.

It had to be skinheads, not Russians. Not that that was a good thing. But neither she nor Oksana would be a skinhead's target. Or at least, not for any ideological reason.

Truth was, it wouldn't be the first time some guys had given her the creeps. The city was wonderful, but not everyone in it was.

She'd had a couple of incidents before. One guy had followed her from the 125th station all the way to Columbia. Another guy had cat-called her and then made a move for her. But two guys on the street had grabbed him and pushed him away.

Not that Becca couldn't take care of herself. She'd actually studied martial arts since she was young. Her godfather, Seymour, had insisted on the lessons. He'd even hand-picked her school. Both she and Courtney had been the beneficiaries of his generosity. The two of them had earned their black belts in Jeet Kune Do by the time they finished high school.

And it was another layer of comfort for her family dealing with the idea of her living alone in New York City. But even though she could take care of herself, she was glad to see that the guys were gone. She'd never had to actually test herself and see how well those skills of hers did in the real world. And she'd like to keep it that way.

“Okay, so we eat, we grade, we go out. Agreed?” Oksana said, her eyes bright.

“Yeah, okay,” Becca grumbled, wishing she hadn’t agreed earlier. There was no way Oksana was letting her get out of it now. But the idea of her sweatpants and a night in was infinitely more appealing than another bar.

Together they started down 104th when movement from the corner of her eye caught her attention. A guy who’d been leaning back against the wall in the alley across the street straightened, his eyes widening as he caught sight of her.

It was the same guy from before. A shiver rolled down Becca’s back as his gaze focused on her.

Averting her gaze, she hunched her shoulders and picked up her pace.

“What’s wrong?” Oksana asked.

“It’s one of those guys. He’s across the street.”

CHAPTER 13

LANGLEY, VIRGINIA

FIVE MINUTES HAD COME and gone. Daria had not reappeared, which meant Seymour could finally relax—at least a little.

Relaxation, though, had never really been his strong suit. Since he was young, he'd had trouble sitting still, letting his mind go blank. He always needed to be doing something. It was why he'd started competing in Ironman races and ultra-marathons. His normal state was to always be working toward a goal. Free time made his skin crawl.

Not that free time was much of an issue. As the head of the Russian division, he was constantly inundated with reports and intel. Whether it was Russians supporting the North Korean regime through food and arms sales or making inroads into the Middle East with Iran and Syria, the Russians were always moving, with their spies working in countries across the globe. Like all countries, Russia was constantly jockeying to get a firmer footprint on the world stage.

For the last few years, the machinations of the newly elected Russian president had been Seymour's priority, if not the U.S. government's. Every scrap of intel on Mikhail Kolvachuk and the

people in his inner circle crossed Seymour's desk, and he filed them into the recesses of his mind for later. In his spare time, he poured over the intel like puzzles.

And he'd come to one conclusion: Mikhail was not interested in simply being president of Russia. He wanted to be its tsar.

It wasn't as far-fetched an idea as some in U.S. intelligence circles believed. There was even a tsarist school in Moscow. A man named Konstantin Malofeyev financed the creation of the St. Basil the Great School. The stated goal of the school was to create patriots who would carry out the thousand-year-old traditions of Russia, not just the modern ones, and to restore the traditions cut off in 1918.

From the reports, it was clear that Mikhail's shadow, Yuri, was a true believer in the return of the tsar as well. Although the Kremlin could not be seen to provide full-throated support to the monarchist groups, they churned the waters around the groups, keeping them well fed and supported.

But Yuri never did anything without the complete approval of Kolvachuk, which meant Kolvachuk wanted him here.

Now Seymour just needed to figure out why.

CHAPTER 14

FOREST HILLS, QUEENS

BECCA GLANCED over her shoulder as she hurried along the street with Oksana. From the corner of her eye, she could see the white of the man's T-shirt as he kept pace with them.

She didn't know what to make of it.

Part of her said she shouldn't look, but she couldn't help it. She glanced over. Her heart rate picked up. The man's gaze was locked on her.

There was no question now. He was definitely focused on them. But where was his friend?

She'd just stepped past the alley next to Amir's when Oksana let out a muffled cry.

Her gaze shot to her friend. The other man had an arm wrapped around Oksana's waist—his other hand held a knife to her throat. "Get over here," he growled, his Russian accent clear.

Shock made Becca freeze for precious seconds. The man who'd been across the street appeared next to her. He yanked her into the alley as the man with Oksana backed farther into it. Stumbling, Becca crashed into a muscular chest.

The man was younger than she had thought, maybe only twenty-two or three. His eyes widened as he looked at her, the look almost feverish. His accent was so strong, she had a hard time understanding what he was saying. Gripping her, he looked down at her, his voice almost reverent. "Eh sair."

Becca had no idea what that meant, but she had no intention of getting into a conversation long enough to find out.

Bringing up her knee, she slammed it into his groin. With a grunt, the feverish look disappeared from his eyes, replaced by pain. His grip loosened, and she yanked herself back. She turned to help Oksana, only to feel two hands clasp her shoulders.

Flinging her head back, she caught the guy behind her in the nose. He let out a yell, and she managed to get enough distance to slam a back kick into his chest.

The whoosh of air from behind her told her that her aim had proven true.

"Hey!" a yell came from down the alley as Devlin burst out from the side entrance and tried to tackle the guy who had Oksana. The man whirled, burying his knife in Devlin's stomach.

"No!" Oksana yelled, throwing herself at the back of the other attacker.

Stunned by Devlin's appearance and stabbing, Becca didn't notice her guy recover. He grabbed for her, latching onto her wrist. She brought her hand up quickly, breaking free at the man's thumb before taking hold of his wrist and putting him into a wrist lock. Contorting his body to ease the pressure, he dropped to his knees as she twisted hard. He screamed in pain.

Behind her, someone roared. Amir bolted from the side door, gripping the baseball bat he kept behind his counter. He slammed it into the shoulder of the guy who had stabbed Devlin.

The next swing went to the back of the guy's head. He dropped to the ground, his eyes rolling back in his head.

Focused on Amir, Becca loosened her grip on the wrist lock. The man she held managed to yank his hands free and sprinted away.

Amir started after him, but Becca jumped over and grabbed his arm. If that guy regrouped, Amir could get hurt. "Amir, no. Let him go."

At the same time, Oksana pulled off her scarf and held it to Devlin's wound, her hands shaking. "Devlin, stay with us."

Becca fumbled for her phone and dialed 9-1-1.

Panting, his chest heaving, Amir narrowed his gaze at the retreating figure before turning to Becca. "Are you all right? Devlin saw you through the window. I thought you fell. But then I saw this, this man." Then his face paled as he looked at Devlin, who sat on the ground, red expanding through Oksana's pale pink scarf.

Her hands trembling, Becca didn't say anything, just prayed the call went through quickly.

"The city is getting more dangerous by the minute. I'll call your parents," Amir said as he kneeled next to Devlin.

"9-1-1, what's your emergency?" a dispatcher finally asked.

Quickly, Becca rattled off the address and what had happened, requesting an ambulance along with the cops. They promised they'd be there shortly.

Disconnecting the call, Becca stared at the man Amir had knocked out. She wasn't sure if he'd been the one who had watched them from across the street or if it had been the one who had fled. They looked so much alike.

A shiver rolled through her as she pictured the gleam in the man's eye. She had no idea what this was all about.

But she was glad that Devlin and Amir had shown up when they did. Apparently, she'd grown a little too comfortable in the city.

"Becca," Oksana said softly, nodding to the downed man's arm.

Frowning, Becca spotted the tattoo there. A double eagle. "What is that?"

"The tattoo of the Tsarist People's Party," Oksana said quietly.

Becca's alarmed gaze flew from the man's arm to Oksana's eyes. Fear charged through her. She knew Oksana had trouble back in

Russia. She was too outspoken for the Kremlin's liking. Had they sent these men here?

"I think this may have to do with me," Oksana said softly.

Becca wasn't sure what to say to that. *Eh sair*. The man's words and that look flashed through her mind. The man had seemed completely focused on her, not Oksana. But she must have misread it.

Whatever the reason, she was glad that at least one of the men would be in police custody shortly. And the other? Well, she just had to hope that he would be caught soon.

CHAPTER 15

LANGLEY, VIRGINIA

ALTHOUGH YURI WAS a subject of interest for the CIA, his activities within U.S. borders did not technically fall under their jurisdiction. Once on U.S. soil, Yuri was classified as a potential domestic threat, not a foreign one.

As such, Seymour's hands were officially tied in investigating the man while he was here. That responsibility fell to the FBI. But sharing information, that was something he could do. Especially if it meant someone else was keeping an eye out.

Despite all the kumbaya-ing that happened after 9/11, full-throated sharing of intel between agencies was still not standard operating procedure. But old dogs like Seymour had made enough contacts, some he even dared to call friends, to know who to call in these situations. And right now, one of the people most likely clued in to Yuri's visit was someone he considered a good friend.

Shutting his office door, he pulled out his burner phone and dialed the number from memory. The phone was encrypted and did not store numbers. If anyone got a hold of it, it would look as if he'd

never used it. A good tech would be able to pull something from it, but Seymour would never let it get to that point.

"Hold on a second," a female voice said by way of greeting.

Strolling over to the window, Seymour stood to the side of it, glancing through the slats in the blinds. The Langley campus was quiet. It was usually quiet.

Despite the fact that it was the head of the global spy network for the country, it was very rarely chaotic. It was also never empty. There was no closing of Langley. Half the staff worked through the night.

"Hey, London, what are you up to?" Heather Chisolm said as she answered.

Seymour smiled at the nickname. Heather hadn't been the one who gave it to him. He'd been handed that moniker his first day of SOPC training. Although he'd been born in the United States, when his father died, his mother, who was English, had taken him home to be raised near her family. Only two at the time, his accent had been pronounced by the time he'd joined the service after his stint at Oxford.

The fact that he'd grown up in Langholm, on the border of Scotland, did nothing to change the mind of his brothers about his nickname. And given the nicknames some of the others had been saddled with, he'd take London any day of the week.

Heather had learned of the nickname years ago when he'd had to rely on some of his Green Beret brothers for a rather dicey situation. "Oh, you know, trying to protect the world from the next red scare."

Heather's laugh was long and deep-throated, making Seymour smile even wider. She always had a great laugh. "Ah, yes, Seymour Hodgkins, defender of the universe."

"Or flailing at windmills," he replied dryly.

"So, Mr. Quixote, which windmills are you flailing at today?"

"Yuri Petrov. He's in the country."

Silence greeted his statement.

"You know," he said.

"Of course." Heather was an ASAC, or Assistant Special Agent

in Charge, in the counterintelligence unit of the FBI. Unlike Seymour, Russia hadn't been her entire career. But she'd switched over about fifteen years ago when the opportunity arose.

"Did you know he was coming in?" he asked.

"No. It seems to have been spontaneous. And it involves the TPP."

And there it was, confirmed. "I know. I was hoping you knew more."

"Not yet. I have my people looking into it."

"Mine too," Seymour said.

"You're worried it has to do with Vienna."

Answering her wasn't a simple matter. He did not discuss the Vienna situation with anyone. Heather, though, had been his backup plan if anything happened to him. He needed one other person who knew about Vienna, who knew how critically important protecting that knowledge was.

Long ago, she'd proven she was worthy of that trust. "Yes."

"If I find anything out, I'll pass it along. I know better than to ask the same on your part."

It wasn't said with rancor. Heather was one of the only people who knew why he would never leave his current position.

"As soon as I know something, you'll know," she said.

"Thank you."

"And Seymour, it's probably unrelated. Don't go making drama where it doesn't need to be."

He chuckled. "I keep telling myself the same thing." A knock sounded at his door. "Got to run. Talk soon."

"Soon," she said, before disconnecting the call.

Slipping the cell into his pocket, he walked over to the desk and hit the door lock. It buzzed, and Clark Alden rolled himself in.

Clark was one of his other top agents, just behind Daria. He'd been a phenomenal field agent as well, but a roadside bomb in Kabul had ended that line of work for him seven years ago.

Pulling to a stop in front of Seymour's desk, Clark said, "There's a problem."

"What?"

"Becca and Oksana Petrov were assaulted in Queens."

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