

Chapter 1

2002

The Threat

Moscow Institute of Chemical Studies

Maria Elena Zelanskaya swallowed bile as she stood before the five men seated in the cramped laboratory. Her heart raced like a thoroughbred in the homestretch as she watched them eyeing her, each a picture of boredom, interest, patience or doubt. That they were all large men and she barely reached 5' 2 made her hands shake. That they were powerful members of the committee and soldiers had her near tears of self-doubt and worry.

They could make her career if they liked her presentation.

"Gentlemen," she said, almost stumbling on the word. Nothing about these five conveyed gentleness or warmth or any kind of human feeling. They were killers, all of them, trained in the fields of Afghanistan, veterans of campaigns too horrible for a chemistry student like her to comprehend. They were timber wolves roaming the frozen steppes and she was a lone hare trapped between them, offering them a tempting meal.

Maria Elena couldn't feel more naked and exposed if she was one of the cheap slut dancing girls on display at the Western-style strip clubs that now flourished in Moscow—the result of the East/West clash insuring the worst of both cultures.

She breathed deeply to calm herself and said, "There is a man in America named Nicholas Kuiper who owns a company called EnviroTech. This company is designed for one purpose, to clean up the most heavily polluted chemical waste sites in their country."

Several of them stirred at this idea, shaking their heads or rubbing thick calloused hands through full beards in amazement at the concept. Mother Russia was still hiding its own poisonous wastes, burying them like they did at Chernobyl, covering up like a cat in a sand box.

She rushed on. "This company has forty-three highly contaminated sites under contract with the American government in a project they call the Superfund." She stumbled a bit on the uniquely western word, having no equivalent in Russian. "They devise methods for how to turn their dangerous waste into safe, pure water."

"So?" Ivan Petrovsky, a hard fat man in a gray coat and beaver hat, made his displeasure known—his body language clearly stating his desire to be somewhere else. "What does this misguided foolishness have to do with us?"

"Let me explain. No, let me show you." Maria stepped behind a laboratory table and pointed at a large glass bowl filled with a yellow-green liquid. "This compound is the exact equivalent, in chemical composition, to a small lake in Pennsylvania, that EnviroTech is charged with cleaning up."

Two men sat straighter in the student chairs, making them creak a sound like someone dying, far away, in anguish. Maria Elena rushed on, trying to shake the image from her brain. If they decided she was wasting their time, she might be the next poor soul to make that sound.

She picked up a beaker filled with a sickly rust-colored liquid, the shade of a long abandoned Zil. "And this is a formula I tailored to blend specifically with the chemicals in that lake."

She paused. There was so much at stake. Her status as a student was in jeopardy due to the latest round of purges and decreasing funding of the university. She had to make them see.

A voice spoke up and she saw Alexander Krakov, a red-bearded bear of a man sitting at ease in the too-small chair, his expression guarded. “How do you know the American chemistry?”

“I...um...I asked for it. The Americans...I asked...”

“You asked for it? What are you saying? Who did you ask?” Expressions turned hard against her and Maria Elena felt like crying in fear and frustration.

“I sent a letter to a friend in America.” An exchange student named Ron Driekman she had met last summer when he was a tourist. A science student—his major was particle physics—they shared a love for the classroom and had written several times to each other, long letters from worlds so far apart.

“My friend asked the American government about the chemical composition and they gave it to him...”

Loud grumbling and sounds of disbelief flowed toward her. “They gave it to him? What nonsense is this?” Oleg Mekelovsky, a skeletal old man with a reputation that made the others fade into insignificance—some say that he once worked directly for Stalin himself when he was young and hungry—snorted. The idea that someone could ask a government for anything and the government would simply hand over the information was so foreign to Russian experience that it sounded like a fairy tale. His derision made her hear that death-shriek again.

But Alexander waved a paw of a hand, quieting them before they got too far out of control. “I want to hear this.”

Maria Elena, grateful for his interest, played the rest of her presentation directly to Alexander, ignoring the crude remarks and guttural barking of the others. Animals, she thought. But such dangerous animals. They reminded her of the massive sea lions in the frozen north.

She said, “Perhaps you should put on the masks in front of you.” Each man had a brightly colored plastic respirator. Gold, purple, red and blue, with green filters on the side, she had gotten them from her professor before staging this meeting.

Holding the beaker clumsily in one hand she picked up a small cage with the other. In it several white mice raced back and forth, whiskers twitching, noses testing the air, sensing danger. She held the cage over the bowl for a full minute before setting it back on the table.

“You see? The chemicals, which the Americans think are so deadly, are only a problem if they make direct contact with the skin. They cannot harm you through the air. However...”

Gesturing like a Gypsy magician she held up the beaker for display. She could see their attention focus as she tipped the rusty brown liquid, letting it pour slowly into the bowl. The colors merged, swirled together in unholy patterns that reminded her of the cancerous cells she’d been forced to study in biology. Sick cells all of them, twisted and foul.

She set down the empty beaker and grasped a long-handled spatula, using it to stir the mixture. With one hand she held a respirator to her own face. Then she picked up the cage and again held it above the bowl.

This time the result amazed them. The mice began to thrash around in a frenzy, clawing at the cage in a desperate attempt to escape. Then they slowed, twitched and their bodies curled as the poison they were breathing overwhelmed their lungs. In seconds all of them were dead. Ventilation fans kicked in and removed the remaining gas.

She had the men’s attention now. All of them sat upright, wide-eyed and incredulous.

“A chemical weapon?” asked Oleg, her harshest critic. “You have made a chemical weapon?”

“I have done much more than that,” said Maria Elena, her voice firm now that they’d seen her proof, her eyes glowing with triumph. “I have created forty-three chemical weapons.”

“Explain, please.” This from an intent Alexander Krakov.

“Instead of this small bowl full,” she gestured, “each EnviroTech site contains millions of gallons of waste.

“Imagine,” she told the group of feral men facing her, “What would happen if we captured those pumps that are cleaning these places and pumped in our own chemicals to convert each site into a small factory of death?”

An uproar. Four voices each trying to out-bellow the others. A cacophony of discord and dissent struggling for dominance, all directed at the idea that Maria Elena had proposed.

“Madness!” cried one. “How could it work?” demanded another. Then, “Foolishness,” and “Insane,” and “The Americans would never allow us near these places. How would we deliver the poisons? It isn’t possible.”

Finally, the verdict. “Belongs in an asylum,” said Oleg, followed by angry glares as four men gathered themselves and clumped from the room.

Maria Elena felt her shaky scholarship crumble and die, just like the dead lumps of mice lying in the cage. Her eyes stung with tears of failure but when she wiped them away she was surprised to see one man remaining.

Alexander Krakov sat watching her. On his face was an expression Maria Elena could only describe as wonder.

Chapter 2

2003

The Plan

Dacha of Mikhail Oleganov

Alexander Krakov hated Mikhail Oleganov on sight. He hated his wealth and power, his appetite for all things—women, food, business; he gobbled them all like a glutton.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many people tried to fill the vacuum of power and the country was transformed into a hideous caricature of itself. Mikhail Oleganov was the worst of them. He used his position to gain control of several oil and gas fields, two gold mines and at least three shipping companies. While he, wasn't a member of the Russian Mafia, he brokered deals between them and corrupt officials. Deals that made him even richer, his country poorer.

He was, in Alexander's tightly controlled opinion, the worst of modern Russia, all greed and no conscience, a traitor.

But Alexander was now standing in the huge man's foyer, hat in hand begging for his help.

The committees Alexander had met with, the Generals and Colonels and nameless clerks, all had said no to his plans. Most had ridiculed, some explained, all declined.

"Madness," they said.

"Couldn't be done," said some.

"Shouldn't be done," explained on old man in a dusty office in the Kremlin. "This isn't the Cold War," he said. "Your Russia doesn't exist anymore. To attack the Americans is pure foolishness."

Alexander had gone home to Maria Elena, in the tiny flat they shared, two small rooms on the twelfth floor of a common building, and seen the hope in her eyes turn to anger, then despair, finally resignation.

"You did your best, 'Lexi," she would say, but her words were like lashes to him. He hadn't. His best was to win. So he went on, day after day, month after month, begging appointments, hearing rejections. And with each refusal, Alexander's stock among his military comrades fell until, finally, he was forced to resign his commission in the Spetsnaz.

Until—

Mikhail Oleganov, a corrupt overfed viper of a man Alexander would once have spit on, who now kept him standing, literally hat in hand in the entry of his sprawling mansion. The building was as large as a palace, not the typical vacation home formerly enjoyed by the party elite, but a sprawling estate encompassing hundreds, if not thousands, of hectares.

Stolen artwork on walls covered in paneling of imported wood, ceilings twenty feet high towered over visitors, making them feel as small and insignificant as Alexander right now. Floors of Italian marble, stained glass windows; it was like being in a church dedicated to excess.

After an hour, a servant finally escorted him down long halls lined with windows that showed the white-capped Urals, the thick trees of the Russian Steppes, the cold held at bay by the power of money.

Mikhail greeted him in a rich study filled with more trophies. Animal heads high over a fireplace bigger even than Alexander's ambitions, pictures of the fat man with leaders of foreign countries, diplomats, kings, even a president, though not of America.

“Alexander Krakov.” the fat man’s voice boomed like a jovial Satan as the servant bowed himself out and Alexander walked what felt like a hundred kilometers to the ultra-modern, all glass desk, behind which Mikhail Oleganov sat like a spider at the center of his web. The entire arrangement was carefully place to make Alexander squint into the morning sun. There was no other chair. He stopped a few feet away.

“Mr. Oleganov,” he said. How had it come to this? He wondered. Had his entire country sold out to people like this obscene slug watching him with ill-concealed amusement? For a moment Alexander considered walking away, abandoning the plan, shooting this foul creature and leaving. But he considered what his country could become—would become again—once the Americans were crushed.

This must be hard for you,” Misha said into the growing silence. “Coming to me. Asking for my help.”

“You have no idea.” Alexander felt the tendons in his neck tighten, his teeth grind. No idea. “Let me explain,” he said, preparing, as he had a hundred times, to convince someone that his plan could work.

Misha waved one fat hand to stop him. “I know,” he said. “Everything.” Seeing Alexander’s confusion, he added, “Do you think I could have gotten where I am without sources of information? The Russian economy thrives on information. Besides Vodka it’s our major industry. So yes; I know of your plan.”

“You...know,” said Alexander slowly.

“Yes, of course. And it may surprise you to know that I agree with it. I want to make it happen.”

“Why?” Alexander. He waved a hand to indicate the room, the wealth it represented. “Why would you want to hurt them.” Unspoken was his belief that Misha was as much an evil as the Americans themselves.

“Let me explain.” Misha poured some drink from a crystal bottle, offering none to his guest. “How do you think I got all this?” He waved his hand, mimicking Alexander, who wanted to say, “theft, bribery, corruption,” but remained silent instead.

“Vacuum,” said Misha. “When the Soviet empire collapsed, there was a vacuum. A huge gang hole where power and money and influence once ruled, replaced by...nothing. No one knew what to do as the old ways fell apart and new ones emerged. The man—me—who could fill that vacuum became wealthier than a king.”

Alexander got it. “When I hit the Americans, poison their water and damage their country, there will be a power vacuum. And you will fill it.”

“Exactly.” Misha beamed at him, eyes bright over the rim of his glass. “I have the resources to move in and take over entire sections of their economy, buy their politicians, change their laws. In one fast strike I can leverage the damage you cause into a way to drive the Americans to their knees forever.”

Misha pressed a button and the servant appeared, as if he’d been waiting. “Bring my guest a chair,” he said. “We have things to discuss.” To Alexander, he said, “Perhaps I’m not the demon you expected, yes?”

Well, no; thought Alexander. You’re worse. But a worse he could live with.

Misha said, “How long will it take Miss Zelanskaya to prepare the sites?”

“Two years.” Alexander said. “To acquire the proper chemicals in the huge amounts required, to take over the EnviroTech labs and fill the ponds. To dig the trenches in secret and prepare each site for maximum effect while not being caught...”

“So, perhaps by July of 2005?”

“Yes, I suppose. Ideally on July 4th, their Independence Day celebration.” He saw Mikhail’s questioning look and added, “To delay their response time.”

“Good, and how much will this cost?”

“Millions,” said Alexander.

“Many millions,” agreed Misha. “But there is an aspect you’ve missed.”

“I haven’t,” argued Alexander. “I’ve thought his through. This will work.”

“Of course it will work,” agreed Misha. But not in the way you describe. How will you trigger these sites when you are finally ready?”

“Explosives,” said Alexander. “We will have timers and detonator...”

“And it will all be done by remote control,” said Misha, his tone mocking. “You will somehow synchronize forty-three remote sites, scattered all across a three-thousand-mile wide continent.”

“It will work,” insisted Alexander, though he knew this was the weakest part of his plan. Construction, he understood, as Maria Elena understood the chemistry. But how to set off forty-three custom bombs simultaneously? In fiction there would be people who could do this. In the ridiculous American movies there would be a hacker who could create a computer miracle. In real life, Alexander had no idea.

“A chair,” said Misha into a growing silence, “requires four legs. You and Miss Zelanskaya are two of them. My money and support are a third.”

“And the fourth?”

“People. I can send a team of soldiers, men who have no expectation of escaping what they have done. They can be brought secretly to America and be at your sites to set off the explosives. All forty-three will happen at once. America will never recover.”

“You would do this?” asked Alexander.

“I would. But there are conditions.”

Of course there were. There were always conditions. “And they are?”

“Secrecy,” said Misha. “You must stop talking to everyone. Only I can know what we’re going to do.”

Alexander nodded. “And?”

“You will have one of my people with you at all times.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“Of course I don’t trust you. He will be with you and report to me. His name is Sergei Kulagin. He’s my nephew.”

Alexander considered the offer, wanting the money and support, hating the idea of Misha watching over him. “Yes,” he said. “I accept.”

“Then have a drink,” said Misha. “A toast.” He poured from the decanter and offered the goblet to Alexander. The delicate glass made a tiny bell like noise as they touched.

“Here’s to America,” said Misha. “Happy Independence day.”