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Opening Extract from...

The Silent Man

Written by Alex Berenson

Published by Arrow Books

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The Silent Man

Alex Berenson

arrow books

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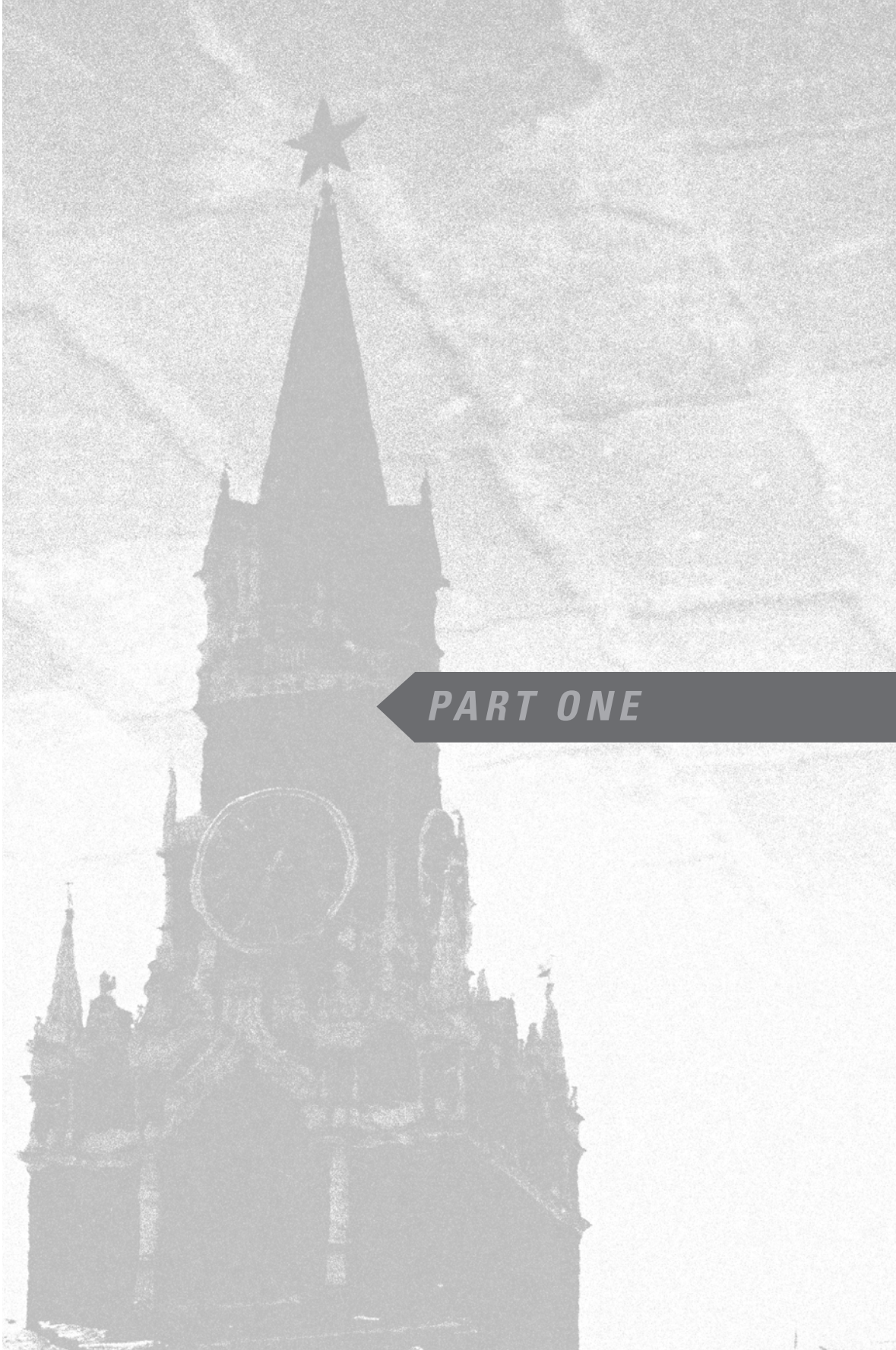
There rose from the bowels of the earth a light not of this world, the light of many suns in one.

—*The New York Times*, September 26, 1945,
describing the first nuclear test

A small group of people, none of whom have ever had access to the classified literature, could possibly design and build a crude nuclear explosive device. They would not necessarily require a great deal of technological equipment or have to undertake any experiments . . . The group would have to include, at a minimum, a person capable of searching and understanding the technical literature in several fields, and a jack-of-all-trades technician. Again, it is assumed that sufficient quantities of fissile material have been provided.

—United States Congress,
Office of Technology Assessment, 1977



PART ONE

1

CHELYABINSK PROVINCE, RUSSIA

A weaker man would have found Shamir Taghi's pain unbearable. The average American, used to popping Tylenol and Advil for every ache, would have found Shamir Taghi's pain unbearable.

But Shamir wasn't American. He was a Kazakh who lived in Russia, and he was fifty-eight years old, and he was dying of cancer. Lung cancer that had reached his bones. He felt as though he were being cut open from the inside out, tiny claws tearing apart his ribs.

Yet every day Shamir faced his pain. No morphine or hydrocodone for him. Those were expensive drugs, and he was a poor man. Instead he gobbled down aspirin, brought by his son Rafik from the pharmacy in Makushino in big white bottles with peeling labels. For all the good the pills did him, they might as well have been filled with sugar.

Before the cancer came, Shamir had been a strong man, 200 pounds, his muscles swollen by a lifetime of work. Now he weighed 140 pounds. He couldn't eat, couldn't bear to swallow. He couldn't even smoke anymore, his only sin.

The pain. There were no words for it.

But it would be ending soon.

A week before, his son had brought a man to see him. A light-skinned Arab who came recommended by the imam of the local mosque. A quiet man, well schooled in the Book, which meant more

and more to Shamir as his death approached. The man knelt on the concrete floor of Shamir's apartment and took his hand.

"Father," he'd said, and Shamir had looked at Rafik before realizing his mistake. "Father, do you want the Prophet to smile on you at your death?"

Shamir nodded.

"Then will you do something for me? For all Muslims?"

THE KAMAZ TANKER TRUCK roared down the two-lane road at sixty-five miles an hour, its driver's-side wheels exactly on the centerline. A quarter-mile ahead, an oncoming Lada pulled to the side, giving the tanker plenty of room to pass. High in the cab of the Kamaz, Nikolai Nepetrov smiled as the Lada moved over. Nepetrov was used to playing highway chicken, and winning. What driver would take on a tanker loaded with eight thousand gallons of gasoline?

For five years, Nepetrov had run gas from the massive Sibneft refinery at Omsk to stations in Chelyabinsk, five hundred miles west. He was thoroughly sick of the trip. On maps, the Omsk–Chelyabinsk road looked like a four-lane highway. In reality the road was two lanes most of the way, clogged by army convoys that rattled along at thirty miles an hour. In fact, Nepetrov had been stuck behind a convoy this morning. He'd finally passed it a few miles back, on a short stretch where the highway really was four lanes.

The Lada disappeared behind him, leaving empty pavement ahead, two lanes with thick firs on both sides. Nepetrov popped in the clutch, downshifted, stomped on the gas. The hardy hum of the engine rumbled through the cab. He put his hands high on the truck's oversized wheel and began to sing, loudly and well: *Po ulitse mostovoi, shla dyevitsa za vodoi . . .*

"Along the paved road, there went a girl to fetch water, there went a girl to fetch water, to fetch the cold spring water." A Russian folk tune, one of his favorites. His voice echoed through the cab. *"Behind her a young lad is shouting: 'Lass, stand still! Lass, stand still! Let's have a little talk!'"*

Nepetrov felt a pleasant itch in his crotch as he imagined the young woman, wearing woolen tights against the cold. She held a wooden bucket as she bent over the well, her legs slightly apart . . . Perhaps when he dropped off this fuel he would reach into his pocket for a few hundred rubles, find a woman for his amusement. Though his lass would be wearing too much makeup and stink of all the other men she'd had that day.

Outside, thick gray clouds blocked the sun. The temperature had fallen since morning, the first real cold snap of the long Siberian winter. Nepetrov wore a hat and leather driving gloves. He preferred not to use his heater. The cold kept him awake. He put aside the lass with the bucket and slipped into a new song.

"Down the Volga, Mother Volga, over the wide sheet of water, there rises a thunderstorm, a huge thunderstorm. . . ."

The road was still clear, aside from a big tractor dragging a load of bricks toward him. Nepetrov upshifted and feathered the gas pedal, watching with satisfaction as the speedometer rose to 120 kilometers—75 miles—an hour.

"Nothing is to be seen on the waves, there is only a small black ship."

SHAMIR GRIPPED THE WHEEL of the tractor, watching the big tanker truck rumble at him. Even the wind couldn't soothe his burning bones. With every rut in the road, the claws inside him dug deeper.

Whatever came next, he'd be leaving this pain behind.

Five . . . The big truck was about three hundred meters away and

steaming along. Shamir edged the tractor toward the center of the road, real estate that the truck had already claimed. "Now's the time, father," the Arab had told him a few minutes before, after getting a call on his mobile phone. "We'll be with you. We'll all be watching you."

Four . . . The truck could have moved back into its lane to give Shamir room. Instead it veered toward Shamir, bearing down on him, trying to force him to the edge of the road. Its air horn fired a long blast in warning.

Three . . . Shamir pulled the tractor slightly to the right as if he were getting out of the truck's way. The air horn blasted again.

Two . . . *"Allahu akbar."* God is great. The words emerged in a whisper from Shamir's ruined throat.

One . . . He twisted the wheel hard left.

***"THERE IS ONLY** a small black ship—NO!"*

Suddenly the tractor blocked the road ahead. Nepetrov had only bad choices. Jerk the wheel hard left and skid into the trees. Stamp his brakes and jackknife the tanker behind him. He chose to do nothing at all, hoping that he might somehow smash the tractor into pieces and survive. Perhaps he would have, if not for the bricks the tractor was hauling.

The crash killed Shamir instantly. Nepetrov wasn't so lucky. The force of the collision split the cab from the tanker. The cab rolled forward, and for a wild moment Nepetrov saw the pavement coming up at him through the windshield. Then the cab flipped onto its side, bouncing down the road, breaking apart. It trailed metal and glass and coolant for seventy-five feet before finally it stopped.

Behind the cab, the tanker slid forward, its undercarriage grinding

against the road, kicking up a sea of sparks. It smashed into the back of the cab and stopped. For a moment the two pieces of the truck rested beside each other, a parody of the vehicle they had once been.

Inside the cab Nepetrov tried to get his bearings. Still alive, though he couldn't understand how. His seat belt had saved him. That crazy farmer on his tractor. Why hadn't he moved? No matter. Now . . . he needed to get out. He reached for the belt. But his arms weren't working. In fact, as he looked at his right wrist he saw a bone poking through his skin. Though it didn't hurt, didn't bother him at all. What about his legs? He tried to wriggle in his seat, but he couldn't move. Caged like a chicken. A chicken on the way to the slaughterhouse.

Bang! The cab jolted forward as the tanker hit it. "No," Nepetrov whispered.

The tanker didn't have an automatic fire protection system or the other safety equipment standard on its cousins in Western Europe and the United States. It was a Molotov cocktail on sixteen wheels. Now it was lit.

Hanging from the seat, coughing blood, awaiting the inevitable, Nepetrov began to sing. *"There is only a small black ship with glistening white sails—"*

Behind him, the tanker blew up, over sixty thousand pounds of gasoline. The blast wave swallowed Nepetrov and his next verse forever, tearing him apart instantly, or as close to instantly as possible, a death merciless and merciful at once. He never knew he'd been part of anything but a freak accident.

A TIGER, a Russian Humvee painted camouflage green, led the convoy. Two uniformed men sat in front, faces tense, breath visible in the cold.

A BTR-80, an armored personnel carrier, followed the Tiger. The BTR was wide and tall, with eight oversized wheels and an angled front deck to deflect rocket-propelled grenades.

Then a truck, a Ural 4320 with a special cargo compartment, its walls made of inch-thick steel. Two men shivered inside the unheated cargo hold, their AK-47s held loosely at their sides. Beside the men, two big steel boxes lay on either side of the hold, twenty-four feet long, four feet high and nearly as wide. Chains connected the boxes to the floor of the truck. Each box held a short-range SS-26 missile, called the Iskander by the Russian army, a nuclear-tipped weapon with a range of about three hundred miles.

During transport, the Iskander's nuclear bomb was removed and boxed separately, in a steel case about the size of a small trunk. The cases were carried alongside the missiles in the cargo hold. The warheads they held were the most precious and destructive treasure ever created, weighing just three hundred pounds but with the power to tear the heart out of a city.

The men in the back of the Ural knew that the warheads were engineered to be impervious to fires, earthquakes, meteorites, and everything else the universe might throw at them. If terrorists put a bomb under the road and blew a hole in the Ural's cargo compartment, the explosion might kill the soldiers. But the warheads would not go off, not without first being armed—a procedure that required codes that no one on this convoy had. The safeguards were as close to perfect as human beings could devise. In the two generations since the United States detonated the first nuclear weapon, nations around the world had conducted hundreds of nuclear tests. But no bomb had ever exploded by accident.

And still, as they sat shivering under the fluorescent lights of the hold, the men wondered: How would it feel? If a dozen somethings went wrong, and the trillion-to-one odds came to pass? If one of the warheads blew, exploding with the power of 200 kilotons of explosive? Two hundred kilotons . . . 200,000 tons . . . 440,000,000 pounds. Exploding not ten feet from where they sat. How would it feel? *What would they feel?* The answer, they knew, was that they would most likely feel nothing at all.

But somehow that fact provided little comfort.

BEHIND THE URAL, the convoy continued.

Ten vehicles in all, carrying forty men and eight missiles. They rolled slowly, a concession to the weak winter light and the lousy road. The convoy's commander, Major Yuri Akilev of the 12th GUMO, the military unit responsible for the security of Russia's nuclear weapons, knew this route well. He had budgeted eight hours to cover the three hundred miles from Ishim to the Mayak nuclear plant, their destination. They'd made fine time until early afternoon, when the road ahead had filled with traffic. After a few minutes of waiting, Akilev sent up a sergeant to find out what had happened. The man reported that there'd been an accident ahead. A tanker truck was burning and blocking the road.

Akilev wasn't surprised. Like many Russians, he saw life as a series of meaningless accidents laughed at, if not actually encouraged, by an angry God. But he wished the crash hadn't happened on this stretch of highway, too narrow for him to turn his vehicles around.

For hours, he and his men waited, passing the time by cursing the drunkenness of Russian drivers, the foolishness of Russian engineers,

and the ugliness of the local women. Akilev warned his men to remain alert, on the tiny chance that the accident was somehow a setup to block the road so terrorists could attack his convoy. But he wasn't overly worried. His men were well-trained, and his BTRs were equipped with 14.5-millimeter machine guns that could stop anything short of a tank. If he truly needed help, he could get reinforcements by helicopter in two hours at most. He could defend himself for two hours.

Anyway, where would terrorists go even if they did manage to steal a bomb? The whole of the Russian army would be chasing them. In the last year, Akilev had led convoys down this road a dozen times, so often that his cargo almost seemed routine. Russia moved its nuclear weapons far more frequently than the United States did. The Russians had no choice. The chemical propellant that fueled their missiles was toxic, prone to corroding warhead shells. So Russia constantly needed to refurbish its arsenal, moving weapons from bases to the giant plant at Mayak, the heart of the Russian nuclear complex.

Yes, the trip almost seemed routine. But not quite. Akilev was always happy when he reached Mayak and his cargo became someone else's problem.

Finally the tanker fire burned out and the local road crews roused themselves to clear the highway and free his trucks. The sun was already down by the time the convoy began moving again. Akilev had hoped to reach the Mayak plant by sunset. Instead, he and his men would ride well into the night. They had to move slowly after dark. The highway was unlit and they couldn't chance an accident.

Akilev would rather have stopped for the night, but he had no choice. There were no bases between here and Mayak. Anyway, the convoy was due by midnight. Never mind that the plant would effectively be closed by then. The convoy was due, and as long as it arrived by 11:59 p.m., Akilev would get credit for a job well done. If he crossed the gate at

Mayak at 12:01 a.m., on the other hand . . . Akilev shook his head. No one had ever accused the Russian army of having sensible rules.

GRIGORY FARZADOV SAT in his decrepit kitchen, sipping peach brandy from a chipped glass, watching the LCD timer on his microwave count down toward zero. He wore no pants or shirt, only gray underwear that billowed around his giant haunches. The temperature outside had fallen close to zero, but a film of sweat covered his belly and legs.

Grigory was a hulking shambles of a man, a cross between Frankenstein and Mr. Potato Head, with big soft hands and pitted skin. He'd never been married or had a girlfriend. He'd never even had sex without having to pay for it. He had been cursed with a fine mind and a fiercely ugly body. He wished every day for the reverse, but the choice wasn't his to make. Fate made fools of men. He'd been born alone, and he'd surely die alone.

Beep. Beep.

Dinner was ready. Grigory lumbered up and extracted a pepperoni pizza from the microwave. He cut the slices into small bites, savoring each forkful. His movements were oddly dainty, in sharp contrast to his size—and his surroundings. Leaky pipes had discolored the kitchen's walls and loosened the plaster from the ceiling. The rest of the apartment wasn't much better. The electricity cut out sporadically, always when Grigory had just settled in to watch television. At least the heat worked, but too well. From November through April, he kept the windows open, and still he sweated.

Worst of all was his next-door neighbor Mikhail, a worthless drunk who divided his time between watching pornography and battering his wife. One particularly ugly night a year earlier, Grigory had knocked

on Mikhail's door and threatened to call the police. A half-hour later, he heard Mikhail outside his door, shouting, "Out, you fat coward!" The ranting continued until Grigory made the mistake of opening up. When he did, Mikhail pulled him into the hallway and jammed a pistol under his chin.

"If you ever interfere with me again, you elephant—" Mikhail shoved Grigory down and launched a glob of spit at his face. As Grigory curled on the concrete floor, Mikhail kicked him, his steel-tipped boots leaving bruises that didn't fade for weeks.

But Mikhail wasn't a problem anymore, Grigory thought. No. His new friends had taken care of Mikhail. Grigory shivered, suddenly cold despite the overheated apartment, and poured himself another glass of peach brandy. Very soon he would need to make his decision. Though it was really no decision at all. He tossed the brandy down the sink. He would need to be sober tonight.

FOR THIS LIFE Grigory had trained in operations research for six years at Ural State University in Ekaterinburg. He hadn't been at the top of his class. Those men went to energy companies like Gazprom. The middling students, like Grigory, weren't so lucky. They became engineers for Rosatom, the ministry that controlled Russia's nuclear weapons plants and storage depots. Grigory worked at the weapons depot at Mayak as a manager in the PC&A unit, responsible for the protection, control, and accounting of nuclear material. He lived in Ozersk, the "closed city"—protected by checkpoints and a barbed-wire fence—that surrounded Mayak.

Grigory didn't have many friends. But for most of his life he'd been close to his cousin Tajid. Like Grigory, Tajid lived in Ozersk and worked at Mayak, as a security guard. On the long cold nights when the very

walls of his apartment mocked his loneliness, Grigory often found his way to Tajid's. He always took a bottle of Stolichnaya and a fresh orange for Tajid's wife by way of apology for the intrusion. He and Tajid sat in Tajid's kitchen and drank until Grigory staggered home.

But over the last three years, Grigory had become less welcome at his cousin's apartment. Tajid had fallen in with a bunch of Kazakhs. They claimed to be taxi drivers, but they hardly worked, from what Grigory could see. They spent their time drinking coffee and reading the Quran. Tajid and Grigory had both been born Muslim, but they'd never practiced the religion growing up. In their youth, the Communists had frowned on organized religion. Today, the Russian government still discouraged Islam, though it wasn't illegal. Employees at Mayak were warned against becoming overly involved with "foreign religious groups," which everyone knew was code for Islamic fundamentalists.

"What do you want with those peasants?" Grigory asked his cousin one winter night. "They aren't even Russian."

"They follow the true path, cousin. Come, see for yourself."

"Look at me. You think I have any reason to believe in God?" Grigory laughed. "A drink, cousin?"

"I told you I don't drink anymore."

"Suit yourself." Grigory threw back a shot of vodka.

The next time Grigory showed up at Tajid's apartment, Tajid wasn't alone. One of the Muslims was there, too. Tajid looked at the bottle of vodka Grigory held. "Give me that," he said, his voice low and angry.

Grigory handed the bottle over and watched in horror as Tajid tossed it out his window.

"Never bring alcohol to my home again."

"Cousin—"

"Go. Now. You bring me disrepute."

Grigory hadn't known what to say. Tajid was his oldest friend. His

only friend, really, aside from the old men at the city chess club, who were as lonely as he.

He'd left Tajid alone for a few months. Then, finally, he'd worked up the courage to return to his cousin's apartment—this time carrying no vodka, only a bag of dates. When he knocked on the door Tajid hugged him, surprising him.

"I was just thinking of you, cousin."

Over a cup of strong sweet coffee, he'd told Grigory why.

At first, Grigory had believed, wanted to believe, that Tajid was joking. But after Tajid insisted he was serious a second time, and a third, Grigory had stopped arguing.

"It's impossible," he'd said to deflect his nervousness. "Can't be done."

"Of course it can," Tajid said. "You've said so yourself many times."

Indeed, Grigory and his cousin had often talked about the problems at Mayak. Rosatom had dramatically improved the defenses of its nuclear plants since the 1990s, when guards didn't show up and warheads were stored in warehouses protected only by cheap padlocks. But weaknesses remained, especially in the hours after new warheads arrived. Having finished the dangerous work of moving warheads, convoy commanders were eager to sign over their shipments and leave. Sometimes too eager.

"I don't want to be involved in this."

"But my friends already know about you. Your job at the plant."

"Tajid." Grigory felt a sinking sensation in his belly, a hopeless feeling that would become uncomfortably familiar. "What do they know?"

"Only your name and your job."

"My name?"

"My cousin, you can do this."

"Even if I could find a way—" Grigory broke off, hardly able to believe he was even pretending to consider the suggestion. "How do you know the men proposing this aren't agents of the FSB"—the Russian Federal Security Service, the successor to the KGB—"or the GUMO?"

"My sheikh vouches for them."

"That might be enough for you, Tajid, but I need more."

"Your neighbor Mikhail, does he still bother you?"

"Today and every day. Worthless scum. Why do you ask?"

"We'll talk soon, cousin."

A WEEK LATER, Grigory came home to find his apartment unusually quiet. He soon realized why. No porn actresses were screeching in fake pleasure next door.

Mikhail's body was found the next day, dumped on a back road outside Chelyabinsk. He'd been shot between the eyes. Worse, he'd been stabbed over and over, his ears and tongue cut off, or so the rumors went. Grigory heard the news and poured himself a glass of vodka, waiting for the phone to ring. He didn't have to wait long.

"You heard what happened to your neighbor?"

Grigory was silent.

"When can we meet?" Tajid said.

"Whenever you like."

"An hour, then. At the Moscow"—a rundown café on the edge of Ozersk.

Tajid hung up and Grigory threw back his vodka. The drink warmed his belly but his mind was still cold. Tajid's men had proved in the most emphatic way possible that they weren't police agents. They'd also sent Grigory a lesson in what might happen to him if he didn't cooperate. Two doves with one arrow.

TAJID SAT IN A CORNER of the Moscow with another man, a light-skinned Arab, small, clean-shaven, and neatly dressed, his only distinctive feature his almond-shaped brown eyes. He wore a black leather jacket and a thin gold bracelet. In all, he looked more like a junior member of the *mafiya* than the jihadi Grigory had expected. But then this man would want to blend in, Grigory thought.

"Your cousin speaks highly of you," the Arab said in Russian, extending his hand. "I am Yusuf."

Grigory couldn't pretend he was a brave man. Nonetheless he screwed up his courage. "Yusuf. This thing you propose to take . . . what will you do with it?" Even now, Grigory could not make himself say *bomb.*

Tajid frowned. "Cousin, you've only just arrived and already—"

"Let him ask," Yusuf said. He looked at Grigory. "Truly I don't know. But I promise you this. We won't use them inside Russia. Part of my job is to get them out."

"Them?"

"We need two."

"Madness."

"Madness or no, we need two."

"Let me ask you something else, then." Grigory spoke with bravado he did not feel. "Since we are friends now, speaking frankly as friends do."

"Go on."

"You understand these devices have locks? What the Americans call permissive action links? They cannot be used without the proper codes, and the codes cannot be broken. Not even by the most skilled cryptographer. So you must know that whether you steal one of these, or two,

or a hundred, they're useless to you. Unless you have some way of breaking into the Kremlin for the codes."

"Grigory, you're very smart. I'm merely a technician. I have a shopping list. And I would like your help in filling it."

"I don't think it's possible, Yusuf. I would tell you, I swear."

Yusuf patted Grigory's shoulders. Despite himself, Grigory flinched. "Consider all the alternatives. There's always a way. Meanwhile—"

Yusuf reached into his jacket and slid a thick white envelope across the table. Grigory peered inside. A wad of green hundred-dollar bills, the new kind, counterfeit-proof, secured with a red rubber band. Grigory tried to hand the envelope back to Yusuf but the little Arab raised a hand.

"Yours," he said. "Whatever you decide. If you help us I promise ten times more."

"Very generous of you," Grigory said. "Now I can buy all the vodka I like." His tone was ironic, but Yusuf didn't seem to notice.

Yusuf stood, touched Grigory's arm. His fingers were as weightless as the devil's. "We'll meet again soon. I hope you can work with us."

SURE ENOUGH, A WEEK LATER, Grigory heard the knocking on his door, a light rapping, so soft that at first he hoped he was dreaming. But the knocking continued, and Grigory opened the door, knowing what he'd see.

"Cousin," Tajid said. Yusuf stood beside him, holding a leather satchel.

They came in and sat around the plastic table in the kitchen. "Would you like coffee?" Grigory said. He poured himself a glass of vodka. Let them watch him drink.

"Your cousin says you're an excellent chess player," Yusuf said.

"Mediocre at best."

"I'm sure you're lying. We must play."

"Whenever you like."

"So have you given any thought to my proposal?" Yusuf opened his satchel and extracted two oranges and a long curved knife with an ebony handle in a leather sheath. He slid the sheath off, revealing the sharpest blade Grigory had ever seen. Under the fluorescent kitchen lights the blade gleamed silver.

"Tajid tells me you like oranges," Yusuf said.

"Doesn't everyone?"

"Not me," Yusuf said. "They're too fleshy. Something almost human about them." He worked the blade through the first orange, slicing it in half, then quarters, his movements fine and careful.

Then a frenzy seemed to come over him and he cut faster and faster, turning the fruit into a pulpy mess, not recognizable as an orange at all, its juice dribbling off the table onto the crackled linoleum floor. "I get excited," he said. "It was the same with your neighbor." He stood and moved behind Grigory, the knife poised in his hand.

"Please," Grigory said.

"May I use your sink?"

"I'll help. I promise."

"I can do it myself." Yusuf washed the blade gently, humming to himself.

"I mean with your project. I'll help."

Yusuf dried the knife, sheathed it. "This is wonderful news."

"You don't have to pay me."

"Of course we'll pay, Grigory," Yusuf said. "We keep our word."

"But—" Grigory hesitated. "Shall we talk about this now?"

"Why not?"

"So. I don't want to disappoint you"—Grigory looked at the knife—"but this isn't as simple as you imagine. We've tightened security, switched to the American system. No one enters the warehouses alone. Ever. Always two men, with a third watching on a camera. And you need a reason to enter."

Yusuf swept up the mess of the orange, threw it in the sink, and sat down beside Grigory. "Even you? Your cousin says you're very senior."

"Not so senior. Why do you think I live here? Anyway, the president himself must have a partner when he visits the depot."

"Depot."

"What we call the warehouses where we keep the weapons."

"Do you always have the same person with you? Someone for me to talk with?"

"To improve security, the pairings are random. Also—" Again Grigory hesitated. He didn't think he'd ever feared anyone as much as this man.

"Yes," Yusuf said.

"I work nights now. Along with Tajid. I audit the work we've done the previous day. It's paperwork. The plant is basically closed. There's no reason for anyone to be inside the depots. The guards check them at the beginning and end of each shift. Otherwise they're not touched. We figure the less they're entered, the better."

"But you could go inside. If you had a reason."

"Perhaps. But I'd be watched."

Yusuf idly peeled the second orange. "Surely there's another way."

Tajid coughed. "What about when the convoys come, cousin? Didn't you say—"

"I know what I've said. But the convoys never arrive at night."

"But if they did?" Yusuf popped an orange slice in his mouth.

"I thought you didn't like oranges."

"Who doesn't like oranges? Especially in this miserable cold."

Now the devil can laugh about his joke, now that he's won, Grigory thought. Aloud he said, "The same rules are supposed to apply when a convoy arrives and we move warheads in or out of the depots. Always two men. But sometimes we get sloppy. The pairings aren't always random. The convoy commanders want to hand over the material and be gone."

"So if a convoy came late, you would receive it?"

"It's not my job. But the man who would, he's a drunk. He sleeps all night."

"So you could receive it. And you could pick your partner."

Grigory drank down his vodka and poured himself another glass. "But none of this matters, you see. The convoys arrive during the day. Always."

"The convoys, do they always take the same route?"

"In theory, no, for security reasons. But effectively, yes. In winter there's really only one road they can use."

"And you know when they're due to arrive?"

"For production purposes, we must. You aren't thinking of attacking a convoy, are you? It's impossible. You'd need hundreds of men."

"No. Delaying it."

"But how?"

"Leave that to me."

"In that case. If you could. It's possible—" Grigory turned over the scene in his mind. "Not guaranteed. I would need some luck. But it's possible."

"Can you find the dates of the next convoys and show me their route by tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Until tomorrow, then." Yusuf flipped his satchel over his shoulder

and stood. Tajid followed. When they'd left, Grigory sat at his kitchen table. The devil had left a stink of oranges and Grigory knew that for the rest of his life, which he feared wouldn't be long, the fruit would never again cross his lips.

Grigory grabbed a rag from under the sink, wiped furiously across the kitchen table, hoping to rid the kitchen of the sweet orange smell. What was he doing? How could he consider helping these men steal a special weapon? No, no euphemisms now, no pretty names. It wasn't a special weapon. It was a nuclear bomb.

But then, what choice did he have? He would be signing his own death warrant if he told the police what Yusuf planned. Even if the police believed him and arrested his cousin and Yusuf, Yusuf's friends would find him afterward. They would gut him front to back and toss his innards in the trash.

Anyway, what he'd told Yusuf was true. Without the codes, the weapons were useless. And Yusuf couldn't possibly get the codes. Could he? No. Impossible. The codes were more heavily guarded than even the weapons themselves.

Grigory finished mopping and tossed aside the rag. He wouldn't say anything to the police, not yet. Perhaps later, when he had more evidence . . . but he knew he was lying to himself. This was the moment to go to the police, not later. The further this went, the harder it would be for him to get himself out.

Fine. He would help. He would hope that Yusuf stuck to whatever bargain they made and didn't kill him as soon as Grigory handed over the warheads. In the worst of all cases, if he learned that Yusuf had somehow gotten the codes, he would tell the police everything he knew.

"Only a fool trusts the devil," Grigory said to the empty kitchen. He took another slug of vodka, but this time the drink was bitter in his throat.

THE DAYS HAD GONE quickly after that meeting, too quickly for Grigory. He gave Yusuf the dates when the next five convoys were scheduled to arrive. The little Arab disappeared for a few days and Grigory hoped he might be gone for good. And one night he looked at the envelope filled with hundred-dollar bills. He put on his best black shirt and covered himself in cologne, a new bottle he'd bought a day before. Hugo Boss, it was called. Grigory didn't know it, but it sounded fancy. Then he extracted twenty of the bills and made his way to the Paddy O'Shea, a knockoff Irish bar that had somehow become the fanciest nightspot in Ozersk. The Russians felt a kinship with the Irish, their cousins in heavy drinking, gloomy novels, and depressive behavior. The Paddy played true to every Irish stereotype imaginable, throwing in a few Scottish stereotypes for good measure, like the set of fake bagpipes hanging from the ceiling of the bar. Grigory ordered shots of Jameson at 100 rubles—about $5—each for everyone at the bar. He pulled the wad of hundreds from his pocket, making sure the women in the place saw it. They did, and they forgot his pocked skin. For one night, he felt beautiful.

When he woke the next morning, the two hookers he'd brought home were gone. So was the envelope with the rest of his money. He'd hidden it, but not well enough. When he staggered into the bathroom to vomit, he discovered that they'd even taken his bottle of cologne. He knelt over his toilet, throwing up whiskey and Guinness, a thick brown ink that rolled down his chin and stuck to the sides of the toilet. He knew he should be ashamed, but he wasn't, not a bit.

In the next month, convoys came and went. Grigory allowed himself to exhale. Maybe Yusuf had seen the difficulties he faced.

THE KNOCK CAME on a quiet afternoon. Outside, the sun had set. On the concrete plaza of the apartment complex, kids were playing in the dark. Grigory expected to see his cousin, but when he opened the door, Yusuf was alone.

"Is there still a convoy this Thursday?"

"I'll double-check tonight, but yes. But the convoy is due in the afternoon."

"Inshallah"—God willing—"it will be late."

"The later the better."

"I understand. Now explain again how you will do this."

Grigory did. Even as he said the words, he wondered if he'd have the courage to go ahead. Yusuf must have sensed his uncertainty, for when Grigory finished he was silent. Finally he sat next to Grigory on the lumpy couch. He was much smaller than Grigory. And yet he radiated a strength that Grigory couldn't hope to match.

"After you're finished, I'll meet you here. We'll go on from there."

"At best you'll have only a few days. After Tajid and I don't show up at work, they'll open the boxes as a matter of course. Certainly, by the middle of next week they'll sound the alarm. We'll be the most wanted men in Russia."

"That will be plenty of time. *Inshallah*." Yusuf stood. "You aren't a believer, Grigory. I hope one day you will be. In the meantime, this will prove our sincerity." He reached into his pocket for an envelope like the other one he'd given Grigory. He tossed it beside the chess set where Grigory traced out positions from his books. "Go with God," he said.

In return, Grigory said . . . nothing. This man takes my tongue

along with everything else, he thought. Without a word he reached out for the envelope.

NOW THURSDAY HAD COME, far too quickly. Maybe he'd be lucky. Maybe the convoy would already have arrived, and the steel boxes would be locked in the depot where he couldn't get to them.

Yet somehow Grigory knew he wouldn't escape so easily. He wasn't a superstitious man, and he certainly wasn't religious. He was a scientist. But a demon had tapped his shoulder and asked him for a game of chess, and he had no choice but to play. He had to see this through.

He finished his microwaved pizza and cleaned his plate. He pulled on his pants and found a clean blue shirt in his closet. He turned on the taps to wash his face and found the usual trickle of lukewarm brown water. He clipped on his badge, grabbed his thick winter coat, laced up his boots. And as he walked out the door, he felt almost relieved. What would be would be.