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# Red Sparrow

Written by Jason Matthews

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# RED SPARROW

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# 1

**Twelve hours into** his SDR Nathaniel Nash was numb from the waist down. His feet and legs were wooden on the cobblestones of the Moscow side street. It had long since gotten dark as Nate ran the surveillance detection route designed to tickle the belly hairs of surveillance, to stretch them, to get them excited enough to show themselves. There was nothing, not a hint of units swirling, leapfrogging, banging around corners on the streets behind him, no reaction to his moves. Was he black? Or was he being had by a massive team? In the nature of The Game, not seeing coverage felt worse than confirming you were covered in ticks.

Early September, but it had snowed between the first and third hours of his SDR, which had helped cover his car escape. Late that morning, Nate bailed out of a moving Lada Combi driven by Leavitt from the Station, who, as he calculated the gap, wordlessly held up three fingers as they turned a corner onto an industrial side street, then tapped Nate's arm. FSB trailing surveillance, the Federal Security Service, didn't catch the escape in the three-second interval and blew past Nate hiding behind a snowbank, Leavitt leading them away. Nate left his active cover cell phone from the Embassy economic section with Leavitt in the car—the FSB were welcome to track the phone between Moscow's cell towers for the next three hours. Nate had banged his knee on the pavement when he rolled, and it had stiffened up in the first hours, but now it was as numb as the rest of him. As night fell, he had walked, slid, climbed, and scrambled over half of Moscow without detecting surveillance. It felt like he was in the clear.

Nate was one of a small group of CIA "internal ops" officers trained to operate under surveillance on the opposition's home ground. When he was on the street working against them, there was no doubt, no introspection. The familiar fear of failing, of not excelling, disappeared. Tonight he was running hot and cool, working well. *Ignore the cold that wraps around your chest, pushing tight. Stay in the sensory bubble, let it expand under the stress.* His vision was acute. *Focus on the middle distance, look for repeat pedestrians and vehicles. Mark colors and shapes. Hats, coats, vehicles.* Without thinking

much about it, he registered the sounds of the darkening city around him. The zing of the electric buses running on the overhead wires, the hiss of car tires on wet pavement, the crackling of coal dust underfoot. He smelled the bitterness of diesel fumes and burning coal in the air and, from some unseen exhaust vent, the loamy aroma of beet soup cooking. He was a tuning fork resonating in the frosty air, keyed and primed, but strangely calm. After twelve hours he was as sure as he could be: He was black.

Time check: 2217. Twenty-seven-year-old Nate Nash was two minutes away from meeting the legend, the jewel in the tiara, the most valuable asset in CIA's stable. Only three hundred meters from the quiet street where he would meet MARBLE: sophisticated, urbane, in his sixties, major general in the SVR, which was the successor to the KGB's First Chief Directorate, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, the Kremlin's overseas spies. MARBLE had been in harness for fourteen years, a remarkable run considering that Cold War Russian sources survived an average of eighteen months. The grainy photos of history's lost agents clicked behind Nate's eyes as he scanned the street: Penkovsky, Motorin, Tolkachev, Polyakov, all the others, all gone. *Not this one, not on my watch.* He would not fail.

MARBLE was now chief of the Americas Department in the SVR, a position of colossal access, but he was old-school KGB, had earned his spurs (and general's star) during an overseas career spectacular not only for its operational triumphs, but also because MARBLE had survived the purges and reforms and internal power struggles. He did not delude himself as to the nature of the system he was serving, and he had grown to loathe the charade, but he was a professional and loyal. When he was forty, already a colonel and serving in New York, the Center refused permission to take his wife to an American oncologist, a mindless display of Soviet intransigence, and she died instead on a gurney in a Moscow hospital corridor. It took MARBLE another eight years to decide, to prepare a secure approach to the Americans, to volunteer.

As he became a foreign spy—an agent, in intelligence lexicon—MARBLE quietly and with courtly grace had spoken softly to his CIA case officers—his handlers—apologizing self-deprecatingly for the meager information he reported. Langley was stunned. Here was incalculably valuable intelligence on KGB and SVR operations, penetrations of foreign governments, and, occasionally, when he could, the crown jewels: the names of Americans spying for Russia. He was an uncommon, inestimable asset.

2218. Nate rounded the corner and started down the narrow street, apartment buildings on either side, the uneven sidewalk lined with trees now bare and blown with snow. At the far end of the street, silhouetted in the light from the intersection beyond, a familiar shape turned the corner and began walking toward him. The old man was a pro: He had nailed the four-minute window.

Nate's fatigue fell away and he could feel himself rev up. As MARBLE approached, Nate automatically scanned the empty street for anomalies. *No cars. Look up. No windows open, apartments dark. Look back. Cross streets quiet. Scan the shadows. No street sweeper, no lolling bum.* A mistake, despite all the hours of his SDR, of provocative maneuvers, of waiting and watching in the snow and cold, a single mistake would have one inescapable result—the death of MARBLE. Not, to Nate, so much the loss of a source of intelligence or the beginning of a diplomatic flap, but the death of this man. Nate would not fail.

MARBL448E walked unhurriedly forward. They had met twice before. MARBLE had been assigned a succession of CIA handlers—had educated every one. Some of them had been accomplished. In a few MARBLE had suspected galloping stupidity. And one or two had displayed a terrifying *langueur*, a potentially fatal disinterest in being professional. Nate was different, interesting. There was something, an edge, a focus, an aggression in pursuit of doing the thing correctly. A little raw—a little compulsive, MARBLE thought—but not many had the fire, and MARBLE approved.

MARBLE's eyes narrowed with pleasure at seeing the young American. Nate was average height and thin-framed, with straight black hair over a straight nose and brown eyes that kept moving, glancing over the older man's shoulder as he approached, watchful rather than jittery.

"Good evening, Nathaniel," said MARBLE. Slight British accent from the assignment in London, leavened by his time in New York. A whim to use English, to be closer to his case officer, despite Nate's nearly fluent Russian. MARBLE was short and stocky, with deep brown eyes separated by a fleshy nose. He had bushy white eyebrows, which matched his full head of wavy white hair, giving him the appearance of an elegant boulevardier.

They were supposed to use aliases, but that was ridiculous. MARBLE had access to the SVR foreign diplomatic mug book and knew Nate's name perfectly well. "It's good to see you. Are you well?" MARBLE looked care-

fully at Nate's face. "Are you tired? How many hours did you spend tonight?" MARBLE's questions were perfectly polite, but he still wanted to know. He never took anything for granted.

"*Dobryj vecher, dyadya*," said Nate. He had begun using the familiar "uncle," part tradecraft to show respect, part a display of real affection. He checked his watch. "It's been twelve hours. The street feels loose." A patois they both understood, and Nate knew MARBLE was checking to hear how thorough his SDR had been.

MARBLE did not comment. The two began walking together in the shadows cast by the trees along the sidewalk. The air was frosty, still, there was no wind. They had approximately seven minutes for the meeting.

Nate let MARBLE do most of the talking, and he listened carefully. The older man spoke quickly but without haste, a mix of gossip and politics in MARBLE's service, who was up, who was down. A summary of a new operation, a successful SVR recruitment in a foreign country. Details would be on the discs. This was as much a conversation between two human beings as a debriefing. The sounds of their voices, the eye contact, MARBLE's low chuckle. That was the point.

As they walked they both resisted a natural impulse to link arms, like father and son. They both knew there could be no contact, a bitter necessity, for fear of contamination with *metka*, spy dust. MARBLE himself had reported on the secret program to pollinate suspect CIA officers in the US Embassy in Moscow. Yellow, yeasty, powdery, the chemical compound nitrophenylpentadienal, NPPD. Pockmarked Russian techs squeezed the rubber bulbs and it was spritzed on clothing, floor mats, steering wheels. NPPD was designed to spread like sticky pollen from a daffodil, from a handshake to a sheet of paper to a coat lapel. It would invisibly mark anything an American CIA officer touched. Therefore, if you were a Russian official under suspicion and your hands or clothes or desk blotter fluoresced with NPPD, you were cooked. MARBLE had traumatized Langley by subsequently reporting that different batches of *metka* were tagged with distinct marking compounds that could identify the specific American host.

As they walked and spoke, Nate reached into his pocket, pulled out a sealed plastic bag. Replacement batteries for MARBLE's covert communications equipment: three steel-gray cigarette packs, inordinately heavy. They used covcom to transmit fast-breaking news and to keep contact

warm during the gaps between personal meetings. But these brief encounters, mortally risky, were infinitely more productive. It was during these that MARBLE passed volumes of intelligence on discs or drives, and equipment and rubles were replenished. And there was the human contact, the opportunity to exchange a few words, time to renew the almost religious partnership.

Nate carefully opened the plastic bag and held it out to MARBLE, who reached in and extracted the prewrapped brick of batteries, which had been packed in a sterile lab in Virginia. MARBLE then dropped two discs into the bag. "I estimate there are about five linear meters of files on those discs," he said. "With my compliments."

Nate noted that the old spook still thought in terms of linear feet of file folders even as he was stealing digital secrets. "Thank you. Did you include the summary?" The intel hacks had begged Nate to remind MARBLE to include a summary of the take, to prioritize translation and processing of his raw reports.

"Yes, this time I remembered. I have also included a new office directory in the second disc. A few changes of personnel, nothing too startling. And a schedule of my foreign travel plans for the next year. I am looking for operational reasons to travel, I included the details," he said, nodding at the disc in the bag.

"I look forward to seeing you outside Moscow," said Nate, "at your leisure." Time was ticking and the two had already reached the end of the street, had turned and were walking slowly back to the other end.

MARBLE grew pensive. "You know, I have been thinking about my career, about my relationship with my American friends, about life ahead of me," he said. "I probably have several more years before retiring. Politics, old age, the unthinkable mistake. Perhaps three or four, perhaps two years. I sometimes think it would be pleasant to retire in New York City. What do you think of that, Nathaniel?" Nate paused and half turned toward him. What was this? His street hum faded. Was his agent in trouble? MARBLE raised his hand as if to squeeze Nate's arm, but stopped it in midair. "No alarm, please, I'm just thinking out loud." Nate looked sideways at MARBLE: The old man was confident, calm. It was natural for an agent to think about retiring, to dream about the end to the danger and the double life, to stop listening for the knock on the door. The Life eventually causes great



fatigue, and that leads to mistakes. Was there fatigue in MARBLE's voice? Nate would have to report the nuances of this conversation carefully in his ops cable tomorrow. Inexorably, problems in a case always rebounded to the handling officer, problems he didn't need.

"Is there anything wrong, a security problem?" said Nate. "You know your bank account is waiting for you. You can retire anywhere you want. We support you in every way."

"No, I'm fine. We have more work to do. Then we can rest," said MARBLE.

"It is an honor working with you," said Nate, and he meant it. "Your contribution is impossible to measure." The older man looked down at the sidewalk as they walked along the darkened street. Their meeting was stretching now to six minutes. It was time to go.

"Is there anything you need?" asked Nate. He closed his eyes and concentrated. Batteries passed, discs received, summary included, foreign travel schedule. The only thing remaining was to schedule the next personal meeting three months from now. "Shall we meet again in three months?" asked Nate. "It will be dead winter by then, December. The new site, EAGLE, near the river?"

"Yes, of course," said MARBLE. "*Orel*. I will confirm in a message the week before." They were approaching the end of the street again, moving slowly toward the brighter lights of the intersection. A neon sign marked a Metro station entrance across the street. Nate suddenly felt a wash of alarm running up his back.

A battered Lada sedan cruised slowly through the intersection, two men in the front seat. Nate and MARBLE flattened themselves against the wall of a building, completely in shadow. MARBLE had seen the car too, the old man was every bit the street pro as his young handler. Another car, a newer Opel, crossed in the opposite direction. Two men inside were looking the other way. Glancing behind him, Nate saw a third car slowly turning into the street. It was running only with its parking lights.

"It's a sweep search," hissed MARBLE. "You didn't park a vehicle nearby, did you?"

Nate shook his head no. No, no, fuck no. His heart was pounding. This was going to be a close thing. He looked at MARBLE for a beat, then the two of them moved as one. Forgetting spy dust, forgetting everything else, Nate helped MARBLE take off his dark overcoat, turning it inside out as he

pulled it off his arms, transformed into a light-colored coat of a different cut, stained and frayed at the sleeves and hem. Nate helped MARBLE shrug it on. Reaching into an inside coat pocket, Nate unfolded a moth-eaten fur hat—a part of his own disguise—and jammed it on MARBLE's bare head. MARBLE took heavy-rimmed eyeglasses, one stem wrapped with white tape, out of his front pocket and put them on. Nate reached into another pocket and removed a short staff that he shook lightly downward. An elastic cord inside the staff snapped the three lengths together to create a cane that he thrust into MARBLE's hand.

The middle-aged Muscovite was gone, replaced in eight seconds by a creaky old pensioner wearing a cheap cloth coat and hobbling along with a cane. Nate pushed him gently in the direction of the intersection and the Metro station. This action defied the catechism, it was dangerous to use the Metro, to trap oneself underground, but if MARBLE could get away from the area, the risk was worth it. His disguise would have to be enough against the multiple surveillance cameras on the platforms.

"I'll get them away from here," said Nate, as MARBLE bent over and began shuffling to cross the intersection. The old spook looked at him once, grave but cool, and winked. *This guy is a legend*, thought Nate. But now his only priority was to distract the surveillance cars and get them to start vectoring on him, away from MARBLE. He must not be detained, however. MARBLE's discs in his pocket would kill the old man as surely as if surveillance arrested him.

Not on his watch. The icy burn started in his head and throat. The collar of his coat was up, and his guts were set, and he quickly crossed in front of the surveillance car slowly cruising up the street toward him half a block away. This would be the FSB, the thugs working internal espionage inside the Russian Federation. Their turf.

The 1200cc Lada engine screamed and they caught him in the reflected light of the high beams off the glistening street, and he ran to the next block, ducked into a basement stairwell that reeked of urine and vodka, and behind him came the sound of wailing tires, so, *Wait, wait, now move again*, sprinting through alleyways, ghosting across pedestrian overpasses, pounding down stairs to the river. *Use barriers, cross railroad tracks, change vector and direction once out of physical sight, make them guess wrong, squeeze past their picket line.* Time check: nearly two hours.

He was shaking with fatigue and he ran, then walked, then crouched behind parked cars, hearing engine noises all around him as they converged, then spread out, then converged again, trying to get close enough to see his face, close enough to tackle him facedown in the street, to jam their hands into his pockets. He could hear the squeal of brakes, hear them yelling into their radios, they were getting desperate.

His first surveillance instructor had told him, *You will feel the street, Mr. Nash, it doesn't matter whether it's Wisconsin Avenue or Tverskaya, you will feel it*, and Nate was fucking feeling it, but there were a lot of them, even if they did not know exactly where he was. Car tires squealed on the wet cobblestones as they sped back and forth, and the good news was that they didn't have enough of him yet to deploy feet, and the bad news was that time was on their side. Thank God they were beating up on him, which meant they had not focused on MARBLE. Nate said a prayer, that the old man had been missed as he limped into the Metro, and that this surveillance had not been on him from the beginning, because that would mean that a second team was now following MARBLE. They weren't getting his agent, *his agent*, and they weren't getting the package of MARBLE's discs, volatile as nitro in his pocket. The squealing tires died away and the streets were quiet.

Time check: Two-plus hours, leg- and spine-weary, with vision gray around the edges, and he went down a narrow alleyway, hugging the wall in the shadows, hoping they were gone, imagining the dented cars all back in the garage, ticking hot metal and dripping mud, while the team leader screamed at them in the ready room. Nate hadn't seen a car in several minutes, and he thought he had slipped outside their search perimeter. It had started snowing again.

Up ahead a vehicle screeched to a stop, then reversed and turned into the alley, its headlights catching the snow. Nate turned toward the wall, trying to reduce his outline and the contrasts, but he knew they must have seen him, and as the lights swept over Nate the car accelerated toward him, edging over to his side of the alley. Nate watched in fascinated disbelief as the car kept coming, its passenger-side door inches away from the wall and the two intent faces straining forward, wipers going full tilt. These FSB animals, didn't they see him? Then he realized they saw him perfectly well, they were trying for a wall smear. *It is an unwritten rule that surveillance teams follow-*

*ing a foreign diplomat never, ever offer violence to a target*, the instructors had said, and really, seriously, what the fuck were these guys doing? He looked back and saw the entrance to the alley was too far away.

*Feel the street, Mr. Nash*, and the second-best option was feeling the cast-iron drainpipe running down the building a foot away from him with the rusty metal straps bolted to the brickwork, and as the car bore down, he leapt up and grabbed the drainpipe, using the metal fasteners to clamber higher, and the car slammed into the wall, splintering the drainpipe, the car's roof just below Nate's lifted-up legs. With a heavy grinding sound, the car scraped along the wall and came to a stop. They had stalled the engine, and his grip was gone, and Nate fell onto the roof of the car and then to the pavement. The driver's door was opening, a big man in a fur hat was getting out, but they never, ever offer violence to a target and Nate shouldered the door back onto the head and neck of the thug, heard a scream, saw a face contorted with pain. Nate slammed the door on his head two more times, very quickly, and the man fell back into the car. The passenger door was pinned shut by the wall and Nate could see the other goon trying to climb over the front seat to get at the rear door, so it was time to run again and Nate sprinted down the alley into the shadows and around the corner.

Three doors down was a grimy soup kitchen, open at this late hour, its lights spilling onto the snowy sidewalk. Nate could hear the car in the alleyway backing up, engine whining. He ducked into the tiny, empty restaurant and closed the door. A single room, nothing more than a service counter at one end with several well-worn wooden tables and benches, stained wallpaper, and grimy lace curtains over the window. An old woman with two can-opener teeth sat behind the counter listening to a scratchy radio and reading a paper. Two battered aluminum pots of soup simmered on electric rings behind her. The aroma of cooked onions filled the room.

Fighting to keep his hands from shaking, Nate walked up to the counter, and in Russian ordered a bowl of beet soup to the woman's blank stare. He sat with his back to the curtained window and listened. A car roared by, then another, then nothing. On the radio a comedian was telling a joke:

*Khrushchev visited a pig farm and was photographed there. In the village newspaper office there was a heated discussion about the photo caption. "Comrade Khrushchev among Pigs"? "Comrade Khrushchev and Pigs"? "Pigs*

*around Comrade Khrushchev”? None will do. The editor finally makes a decision: “Third from left—Comrade Khrushchev.”* The old lady behind the counter cackled.

He had not eaten or drunk anything in more than twelve hours, and he began wolfing down the thick soup with a shaking spoon. The old woman stared at him, got up, and walked around the counter to the front door. Nate watched her out of the corner of his eye. She opened the door and he felt the blast of cold outside air. The old woman looked out at the street, up and down the block, then slammed the door shut. She returned to her stool behind the counter and picked up her paper. When Nate finished his soup and bread, he walked up to the counter and counted out a few kopeks. The crone gathered the coins and swept them into a drawer. She slammed the drawer and looked at Nate. “All clear,” she said. “Go with God.” Nate avoided looking at her and left.

In another hour, drenched with sweat and trembling with fatigue, Nate stumbled past the militiaman’s booth at the front entrance to the Embassy housing compound. MARBLE’s discs were finally safe. It was not the approved way to end an operational night, but he had missed by hours the pickup in the Station car. His entry was noted, and within a half hour the FSB, and instantly after that the SVR, knew that it was young Mr. Nash of the Embassy’s Economic Section who had been out of pocket for most of the evening. And they thought they knew why.

#### OLD LADY’S BEET SOUP

Melt butter in a large pot; add a chopped onion and sauté until translucent; stir in three grated beets and one chopped tomato. Pour in beef stock, vinegar, sugar, salt, and pepper. Broth should be tart and sweet. Bring to a boil, then simmer for an hour. Serve hot with a dollop of sour cream and chopped dill.

# 2

**The next morning**, at opposite ends of Moscow, in two separate offices, there was unpleasantness. At SVR headquarters in Yasenevo, First Deputy Director Ivan (Vanya) Dimitrevich Egorov was reading the FSB surveillance logs from the previous night. Watery sunlight filtered through massive plate-glass windows overlooking the dark pine forest that surrounded the building. Alexei Zyuganov, Egorov's diminutive Line KR counterintelligence chief, stood in front of his desk, not having been invited to sit down. Zyuganov's close friends, or perhaps just his mother, called the poisonous dwarf "Lyosha," but not this morning.

Vanya Egorov was sixty-five years old, a major general with seniority. He had a large head with tufts of graying hair over the ears, but otherwise he was bald. His wide-set brown eyes, fleshy lips, broad shoulders, ample belly, and large muscular hands gave him the look of a circus strongman. He wore a beautifully cut dark winter-weight suit, an Augusto Caraceni from Milan, with a somber dark blue necktie. His shoes, glossy black, were Edward Green of London, out of the dip pouch.

Egorov had been an average KGB field officer in the early years of his career. Several tepid tours in Asia convinced him that life in the field was not his preference. Once back in Moscow, he excelled in the internecine politics of the organization. He mastered a succession of high-profile internal jobs, first in planning positions, then in administration, and finally in the newly created Inspector General's position. He was active and prominent in the changeover from KGB to SVR in 1991, chose the right side during Kryuchkov's abortive 1992 KGB coup against Gorbachev, and in 1999 was noticed by the phlegmatic First Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, a blond scorpion with languid blue eyes. The next year Yeltsin was out and Putin was, remarkably, implausibly, in the Kremlin, and Vanya Egorov waited for the call he knew must come.

"I want you to look after things," Putin had then told him in a heady five-minute interview in the elegant Kremlin office, the rich wood of the walls eerily reflected in the new president's eyes. They both knew what he meant,

and Vanya went back to Yasenevo first as Third Deputy Director, then Second, until last year, when he moved into the First Deputy Director's office, across the carpeted hallway from the Director's suite.

There had been some anxiety leading up to the elections last March, the goddamn journalists and opposition parties unfettered as never before. The SVR had looked after some dissidents, had discreetly operated at polling places, and had reported on select opposition parliamentarians. A cooperative oligarch had been directed to form a splinter party to siphon off votes and fracture the field.

Then Vanya himself had risked everything, had really taken a chance, when he personally suggested that Putin blame Western—specifically US—interference for the demonstrations leading up to the elections. The candidate loved the suggestion, eyes unblinking, as he contemplated Russia's comeback on the world stage. He had clapped Vanya on the back. Perhaps it was because their careers so resembled each other, perhaps because they both had accomplished little as intel officers during brief overseas assignments, or perhaps one informant recognized a fellow *nashnik*. Whatever it was, Putin liked him, and Vanya Egorov knew he would be rewarded. He was close to the top. He had the time, and the power, to continue to advance. It was what he wanted.

But the handler at a snake farm inevitably is bitten unless he exercises great care. Today's Kremlin was suits and ties, press secretaries, smiling summit meetings, but anyone who had been around for any length of time knew that nothing had changed since Stalin, really. Friendship? Loyalty? Patronage? A misstep, an operational or diplomatic failure, or, worst of all, embarrassing the president, would bring the *burya*, the tempest, from which there would be no shelter. Vanya shook his head. *Chert vozmi*. Shit. This Nash episode was exactly what he didn't need.

"Could surveillance have been more poorly managed?" Egorov raged. He was generally given to mild theatrics in front of his subordinates. "It's obvious this little prick Nash met with a source last night. How could he have been out of pocket for more than twelve hours? What was surveillance doing in that district in the first place?"

"It appears they were looking for Chechens doing drug deals. God knows what the FSB is doing these days," said Zyuganov. "That district, it's a shit-hole down there."

"And what about the crash in the alley? What was that?"

"It's not clear. They claim the team thought they had cornered a Chechen and believed he was armed. I doubt it. They may have gotten excited in the chase."

"*Kolkhozniki*. Peasants could do it better. I'll have the director mention it to the president next Monday. We cannot have foreign diplomats harmed on the streets, even if they are meeting with Russian traitors," said Egorov with a snort. "The FBI will start mugging our officers in Georgetown if this happens again."

"I will pass the word too, at my level, General. The surveillance teams will get the message, especially, if I may suggest, if some time at *katorga* could be arranged."

Egorov looked at his CI chief blankly, noting that he used the czarist name for gulag with wet-lipped relish. Jesus. Alexei Zyuganov was short and dark, with a fry-pan-flat face and prominent ears. Tent-peg teeth and a perpetual smirk completed the Lubyanka look. Still, Zyuganov was thorough, a malevolent minion who had his uses.

"We can criticize the FSB, but I tell you this, this American is meeting someone important. And those idiots just missed him, I'm sure of it." Egorov threw the report on his desk. "So, can you guess what your job is going to be from this point onward?" He paused. "Find. Out. Who. It. Is." Each word was punctuated with a tap on Egorov's desk with a thick index finger. "I want that traitor's head in a wicker basket."

"I'll make it a priority," said Zyuganov, knowing that without more to go on, or without a specific lead from a mole inside the CIA, or without a break on the street, they would have to wait. In the meantime he could begin a few investigations, conduct an interrogation, just for art's sake.

Egorov looked again at the surveillance report, a futile piece of work. The only confirmed fact was the identification of Nathaniel Nash at the Embassy gate. No sighting or description of anyone else. The driver of one of the surveillance cars (a photo of him with a sticking plaster over his left eye was included in the report, as if to justify the incident in the alley) positively identified Nash, as did the militiaman at the US Embassy compound entrance.

*This could turn sweet or sour*, thought Egorov. A splashy spy case solved to his credit while mortifying the Americans, or an embarrassing debacle displeasing the Kremlin and Egorov's testosterone-fueled patron, resulting in the sudden end of his career. Depending on the president's ire, this could



include a bunk next to that ruined oligarch Khodorkovsky in Segezha Prison Colony Number Nine.

Morbidly contemplating the potential opportunities while recognizing the political consequences, Egorov that morning had called for and read Nate's *liternoye delo*, the operational file: *Young, active, disciplined, good Russian. Behaves himself regarding women and alcohol. No drugs. Diligent in cover position in the Embassy Economic Section. Effective while on the street, does not telegraph his operational intent.* Egorov grunted. *Molokosos. Whip-persnapper.* He looked up at his KR chief.

The hairs growing out of Zyuganov's brain tingled and he sensed that he had to show more enthusiasm. First Deputy Director Egorov might not be a street operator, but he was a well-known species in the SVR zoo, a politically ambitious bureaucrat.

"Mr. Deputy Director, the key to finding the bastard who is selling our secrets is to focus on this young Yankee *geroy*, this hero. Put three teams on him. Wrap him in onionskins. Twenty-four hours a day. Order—better yet, ask—FSB to increase coverage, let them rattle around behind him, then put our own teams out at the margins. Give him a look, then take it away. See if he's re-casing meeting sites. There will be another meeting in three to six months, that's certain."

Egorov liked the bit about onionskins, he would repeat it to the Director later today.

"All right, get started, let me know what your plans are so I can brief the director on our strategy," said Egorov, dismissing the chief with a wave.

*Brief the director on our strategy,* thought Zyuganov as he left the office.

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The US Embassy compound in Moscow is located northwest of Yasenevo, in the Presnensky District near the Kremlin and a sweeping bend in the Moskva River. Late that afternoon, another unpleasant conversation transpired in the office of the CIA Chief of Station, Gordon Gondorf. Much like the Line KR chief who had not been invited to sit down, Nate stood in front of Gondorf's desk. His knee throbbed from the day before.

If Egorov's imposing bulk made him look like a circus strongman, Gondorf's small frame and pinched features made him look like a whippet in

a circus dog act. Only about five feet six, Gondorf had thinning hair, pig's eyes set too close together, and tiny feet. What he lacked in stature he amply made up for in venom. He trusted no one, and was unaware of the irony that he himself instilled trust in no one. Gondorf ("Gondork" behind his back) lived in a secret hell known only to a certain type of senior intelligence officer: He was in over his head.

"I read your ops report about the run last night," said Gondorf. "Based on your write-up, I suppose you think the outcome was satisfactory?" Gondorf's voice was flat and he spoke slowly, waveringly. Nate's gut flipped in anticipation of the impending confrontation. *Stand your ground.*

"If you mean do I think the agent is safe, yes," said Nate. He knew where Gondorf was going with this but left him to get there on his own.

"You almost got the Agency's most prolific and important asset arrested last night. Your meeting was busted by surveillance, for Christ's sake."

Nate tamped down building anger. "I ran a twelve-hour SDR yesterday. The very SDR you approved. I confirmed my status. I was black when I got to the site, and so was MARBLE," said Nate.

"How do you explain the surveillance, then?" said Gondorf. "You can't possibly think it was random surveillance in the area. Tell me you don't think that." Gondorf's voice dripped with sarcasm.

"That's exactly what it was. There is no way they were searching for me, that bullshit in the alley, they weren't following me from the start, no way. It was random and they reacted, no attempt to be discreet. MARBLE got away clean." Nate registered that Gondorf wasn't even concerned about the attempted wall smear. A different chief would have been in the ambassador's office, raising hell, demanding the Embassy file a protest.

Switching barrels, Gondorf said, "Nonsense. The whole thing was a disaster. How could you have directed him to go down into the Metro? That's a mousetrap. You ignored procedure when you pawed him to change his overcoat. He is supposed to do that himself. You know that! What if he's fluorescing under a light wand right now?"

"I made the determination and the decision. I thought changing his profile and getting him out of the area was the priority. MARBLE's a pro, he'll know to get rid of the coat and cane. We can send him a message, I'll verify with him at our next meeting," said Nate. It was agony to argue this way, especially with a chief who didn't know the street.

"There's not going to be a next meeting. At least not with you. You're too hot now. They ID'd you a dozen times last night, your Econ cover is gone, you'll have half the surveillance directorate in Moscow on your ass from now on," said Gondorf. He was visibly relishing the moment.

"They always knew this cover position. I always had coverage, you know that. I still can meet assets," said Nate, leaning against a chair. Gondorf had a dummy hand grenade mounted on a wooden base on his desk. The plaque on it read COMPLAINT DEPARTMENT. PULL PIN FOR FASTER SERVICE.

"No, I don't believe you can meet agents. You're now a shit magnet," said Gondorf.

"If they put that many resources on me we can bankrupt them," argued Nate. "I can drain their manpower by driving all over town for the next six months. And the more coverage I get, the better we'll be able to manipulate them." *Stand your ground.*

Gondorf was unimpressed and unconvinced. This young case officer stud represented too much of a risk to him personally. Gondorf had his sights set on one of the big component jobs in Headquarters next year when he returned to Washington. It wasn't worth the risk. "Nash, I'm recommending that your tour in Moscow be curtailed. You're too hot and the opposition will be looking for a way to pick you off, catch your agents." He looked up. "Don't worry, I'll make sure you get a good follow-on assignment."

Nate was shocked. Even a first-tour officer knew a short-of-tour expulsion submitted by a COS—whatever the reason—could derail a career. He also was sure that Gondorf would use back channels to hint that Nate had fucked up. Nate's unofficial reputation, his "hall file," would take a hit, it would affect his promotions and future assignments. The old feeling of standing in black quicksand started coming back.

Nate knew the truth: He had saved MARBLE last night with quick and correct action. He looked down at Gondorf's impassive face. They both knew what was happening and why. So to Nate there didn't seem to be any point not to finish the conversation with a flourish. "Gondorf, you're a gut-less pussy who's terrified of the street. You're fucking me to avoid your responsibility. It's been an education serving in your Station."

As he left the office, Nate noted that the absence of a screaming tirade from his chief was indeed the measure of the man.

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Kicked out of Station short of tour. Not as bad as getting an agent killed, stealing official funds, or fabricating reports, but still a disaster. How it would affect future assignments, promotions, Nate couldn't tell, but the news would get around the minute the cable from Gondorf hit Headquarters. Some of his classmates from training were already on their second tours, making their bones. Rumor had it that one of them already had been offered a chief's job in a small Station. The additional months of training for Moscow had put Nate behind the curve, and now this.

Even as he told himself not to fixate, Nate fretted. He had always been told to keep up, of the necessity of not falling behind, of the absolute requirement to win. He grew up in the genteel southern equivalent of a cage match where generations of Nashes had been raised in the Palladian family mansion on the bluffs along the south shore of the James. Nate's grandfather and his father after him, respectively founder and reigning partner of Nash, Waryng, and Royall in Richmond, had sat in green-shaded studies, and sucked their teeth, and shot their cuffs. They had nodded approval as Nate's brothers, one implausible with Julius Caesar curls, the other sweating and outrageous in a gamine comb-over, wrestled in their suits on the carpet, and learned just enough of the law, and married chesty belles who stopped talking when the men came into the room, blue eyes searching for approval.

But what y'all suppose we do about young Nate? they had asked one another. Graduated from Johns Hopkins with a degree in Russian literature, Nate sought refuge in the spiritual, ascetic world of Gogol, Chekhov, Turgenyev, a world that brick-paved Richmond could not invade. His brothers howled and his father thought it a waste. It was expected that he would attend a law school—he was preapproved for acceptance at Richmond—and eventually fill a junior partner's chair at the firm. The graduate degree in Russian from faraway Middlebury was therefore a problem, and the subsequent application to the CIA a family crisis.

"I believe you'll find the life of a civil servant less than fulfilling," his father had said. "I frankly cannot see you happy in that bureaucracy." Nate's father had known past directors. His brothers were less circumspect in their criticism. During a particularly riotous holiday meal, they started a family

pool to predict how long Nate would last in the CIA. The high field was three or fewer years.

His application to the Central Intelligence Agency had nothing to do with escaping the suspenders and cuff links, with the crushing absoluteness of Richmond, or with the inevitability of the colonnaded mansion overlooking the river. It had nothing to do with patriotism either, really, though Nate was as patriotic as the next person. It had everything to do with the hammer in his chest when he at ten years of age *made himself* walk along the ledge of the mansion three floors up, level with the hawks over the river, to beat down the dread, to confront the raptors of fear and failure. It was about the strain between him and his father and grandfather and omnivore brothers, raucously demanding compliance from him while practicing none themselves.

It was the same hammer in his chest during interviews as he applied to the CIA, the heartbeat he had to still as he dissembled and jauntily affirmed how much he liked talking to people and meeting challenges and confronting ambiguity. But as the heartbeat slowed and his voice steadied, he had the quite remarkable epiphany that he actually could be coolheaded, and he could confront things he didn't control. Working in the CIA was something he needed.

But real alarm slammed through him when a CIA recruiter informed Nate that it was unlikely his application would be accepted, mainly because he had no postgraduate "life experience." Another interviewer, more optimistic than the other, confidentially told him his excellent Russian test scores made him a very attractive candidate. It took the CIA three months to decide, during which time his brothers noisily revised the family pool predicting the date *of his return* from the CIA. They were no less noisy when the envelope arrived. He was in.

Report for duty, sign the endless forms, file into a dozen classrooms, the months in Headquarters, cubicles, and conference rooms with the uninterested briefers and the eternity of projected presentations. Then finally the Farm, with the macadam roads running straight through the sandy pine forests and the linoleum dorm rooms, and the stale homerooms and the classrooms carpeted in gray, and the numbered students' seats which belonged previously to last year's heroes, to heroes forty years ago, faceless recruits, great spies or not, some gone wrong, the traitors, some long dead and remembered only by those who knew them.

They planned clandestine meetings and attended mock diplomatic re-

ceptions, mingling with loud, red-faced instructors wearing Soviet Army uniforms and Mao suits. They walked wet-to-the-knee through the piney woods, peering through a night scope and counting paces until they came to the hollow stump and the burlap-wrapped brick, the owls in the branches congratulating them for finding the cache. They were laid over the hot ticking hoods of their vehicles at pretend roadblocks, as instructor “border guards” shook sheaves of papers in their faces and demanded explanations. They sat in swaybacked American Gothic farmhouses along lonely country roads and drank vodka and convinced gibbering role players to commit treason. Through the pines, the slate-black river was furrowed by the talons of dusk-feeding ospreys.

What instinct enabled Nate to excel in practical exercises? He didn’t know, but he left the drag of family and Richmond behind and ran effortlessly on the street, under surveillance, coolly meeting instructor-agents bundled in coats and wearing implausible hats. They said he had the eye. He started to believe it, but the jackdaw challenges of his brothers hung over his head like a blunt instrument. Nate’s nightmare was failing, getting kicked out, showing back up in Richmond. They dropped people from training without warning.

“We look for integrity from you students,” said a tradecraft instructor to the class. “We send people home for trying to G-2 the scenarios for upcoming problems. Just to max the exercises,” he said loudly. “You get caught with an instructor notebook, or any other restricted course material, it’s an immediate drop from the program, people.” Which, to be perfectly honest, thought Nate, meant, *Try it*.

They were a class, but of individuals, all dreaming of first assignments, first tours to Caracas, Delhi, Athens, or Tokyo. The ache for class standing and first choice of assignments was acute, and culminated in excruciating receptions in the student center hosted by various Headquarters divisions, a bizarre sorority rush week for fledgling spies.

At one of these end-of-training cocktail parties, a man and a woman from Russia House took him aside and told him he was preapproved and accepted in the Russia Division, so he didn’t have to request assignments elsewhere. Nate mildly asked if he couldn’t use his Russian language to chase Russians in, say, the Mideast or Africa Divisions, but they smiled at him and said they looked forward to seeing him in Headquarters at the end of the month.

He was through, and provisionally accepted. He was part of the elite.

Now came lectures about modern Russia. They discussed Moscow's Damoclean politics of natural gas, hanging plumb over Europe, and the Kremlin's chronic inclination to sponsor rogue states in the name of fairness, but really to make mischief and, well, to prove Russia was still in the Game. Furry men lectured about the promise of post-Soviet Russia, and elections and health reforms and demographic crises, and about the heartbreak of the curtain being drawn closed again, and behind it the icy blue eyes that missed nothing. The *Rodina*, sacred Motherland of black earth and endless sky, would have to endure a while longer, as the chain-wrapped corpse of the Soviet was exhumed, hauled dripping out of the swamp, and its heart was started again, and the old prisons were filled anew with men who did not see it their way.

And a flinty woman lectured about a new Cold War, about the sly disarmament negotiations and the new supersonic fighters that can fly sideways but still show Red Star roundels on the wings, and Moscow's rage over a Western missile defense shield in Central Europe—oh, how they resented the loss of their elegant slave states!—and the sabers scraping in the rusty scabbards, familiar music from the days of Brezhnev and Chernenko. And the point of it all, they said, the point of Russia House, was the unceasing requirement to know the plans and intentions behind the blue-eyed stare and the smooth blond brow, different secrets nowadays, but the same as ever, secrets that needed stealing.

Then a retired ops officer—he looked like a Silk Road peddler, but with green eyes and a lopsided mouth—came to Russia House for an informal presentation.

"Energy, population decline, natural resources, client states. Forget all that. Russia is still the only country that can put an ICBM into Lafayette Square across from the White House. The only one, and they have thousands of nukes." He paused and rubbed his nose, his voice deep and throaty.

"Russians. They hate foreigners only a little less than they hate themselves, and they're born conspirators. Oh, they know very well they're superior, but your Russki is insecure, wants to be respected, to be feared like the old Soviet Union. They need recognition, and they hate their second-tier status in the superpower stakes. That's why Putin's putting together USSR 2.0, and no one is going to stand in his way.

“The kid who pulls the tablecloth and smashes the crockery to get attention—that’s Moscow. They don’t want to be ignored and they’ll break the dishes to make sure it doesn’t happen. Sell chemical weapons to Syria, give fuel rods to Iran, teach Indonesia centrifuge design, build a light water reactor in Burma, oh, yeah, people, nothing’s out of bounds.

“But the real danger is the instability all this creates, the juice it gives the next generation of world-stopping crazies. People, the second Cold War is all about the resurgent Russian Empire, and don’t kid yourselves Moscow is gonna sit back and see how the Chinese navy handles itself when—not if—the shooting starts in the Taiwan Strait.” He shrugged on a shiny suit coat.

“It’s not as easy this time around; you men and women will have to figure it out. I envy you.” He lifted his hand. “Good hunting,” he said, and walked out. The room was quiet and they all stayed in their seats.

Nate was now in the vaunted Moscow pipeline, dipped in specialized training, compartmented internal ops training, and as the Moscow tour loomed, he studied operational vocabulary in Russian, and he was allowed to review the “books,” the agent files, read the names and examine the flat-faced passport photos of the Russian sources he would meet on the street, under the nose of surveillance. Life and death in the snow, the tip of the spear, as big as it comes. His Farm class was dispersed and largely forgotten. Now there were other lives at stake. He could not—would not—fail.

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Three days after his talk with Gondorf, Nate was sitting in a small restaurant in Moscow’s Sheremetyevo Airport, waiting for his flight to be called. He ordered a “sanwitz Cubano” and a beer off the greasy menu.

The Embassy had offered to send an admin facilitator with him to help with tickets and passport control, but he had politely refused. The night before, Leavitt had brought out some beers at the end of the workday, and they sat around talking quietly, avoiding the obvious subjects, certainly not mentioning what all the other officers thought, that Nate’s career in general and reputation in particular were going to take a hit. Good-byes were strained.

The only bright spot was that two days before, in response to Gondorf’s short-of-tour notification, Headquarters cabled that a case-officer position in neighboring Helsinki had suddenly come open. Given Nate’s nearly flu-



ent Russian, the abundance of Russians in Finland, his instant mobility as an unmarried officer, and his unexpected availability, Headquarters inquired whether Nate would consider a lateral assignment to Helsinki, effective immediately. Nate accepted, as Gondork bridled at the reprieve, but concurred. Helsinki Station's formal assignment cable arrived, followed by an informal note from Tom Forsyth, his soon-to-be new Chief of Station in Helsinki, simply saying he was glad to welcome Nate to the Station.

Nate's Finnair flight was called and he walked out onto the tarmac with the other passengers toward the plane. High above him, from a glassed-in observation room in the control tower of the airport, a two-man team cranked frames with a long lens. FSB surveillance had followed Nate to the airport to say good-bye. The FSB, the SVR, and especially Vanya Egorov were certain that Nate's sudden departure was significant. As Nate mounted the aircraft stairs and the cameras clicked, Egorov sat in his office immersed in thought. A shame. His best chance to find the spy the CIA was running was fading away. It would take months, perhaps years, to develop a better lead in this case, if at all.

Nash was still the key, thought Egorov. He presumably would still handle his source from outside Russia. Egorov decided not to let up on Nash, and the lateral assignment to Finland was an opening. *Let's work him a little in Helsinki*, he thought. The SVR could operate virtually at will in Finland, and better yet, they had primacy in the foreign field. No more FSB bum-boys to coordinate with. *We'll see*, thought Vanya. The world was too small a place to hide.

#### MOSCOW AIRPORT CUBAN SANDWICH

Slice a twelve-inch loaf of Cuban bread partway through lengthwise and fold flat. Drizzle olive oil on outside and slather yellow mustard inside. Layer glazed ham, roast pork, Swiss cheese, and thinly sliced pickles. Close and press for ten minutes in a plancha or between two hot foil-wrapped bricks (heat bricks for an hour in a 500-degree oven). Cut in thirds on the diagonal.