

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *LETHAL AGENT*

VINCE

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TOTAL

POWER

A MITCH RAPP NOVEL
BY KYLE MILLS

PRELUDE

NEAR FAYETTEVILLE
WEST VIRGINIA
USA

A LIGHT mist condensed on Sonya Vance's windshield, turning the forested mountains around her into smears of green. Clouds had formed beneath the bridge she was driving across, dense enough that it looked like they would catch her if she jumped.

Tempting.

A vehicle appeared on the empty road behind and she examined it in the rearview mirror. A pickup streaked with rust and listing a bit to one side. She slowed to let it pass, examining the young couple and toddler inside. Nothing to suggest a threat. But then, that was how the game was played.

When her last name had still been Voronova, she'd been taught that everything was a threat. Every kindly old woman could be hiding a blade or vial of poison. Every car could be a tail. Every innocuous knickknack, light fixture, or television could be a recording device.

Those lessons seemed impossibly remote now. After so many years,

even the proper pronunciation of her real name was a challenge that demanded a few stiff drinks to accomplish with flourish. But not vodka. Never vodka.

She'd been born in the Soviet Union to a mother she knew only from a yellowed file presented to her in her mid-teens. It had depicted a hard, bony woman with deep-set eyes that suggested a life of addiction. According to the file, she'd been a thief and a traitor. Perhaps even a murderer. A vile creature willing to do whatever was necessary to get her next fix.

Over the years, Voronova had come to question whether the woman was really her mother or if that same file had been given to everyone in the program. A lie calculated to foment horror, guilt, and gratitude in whoever heard it.

She'd been taken from a Romanian orphanage so dystopian that visions of it still came to her in nightmares. Apparently, government testing had discovered early indications of exceptional intelligence and a strong probability that she would grow up physically attractive. Excellent traits for a sleeper agent.

She'd spent the rest of her youth in a purpose-built town in northern Russia surrounded by children just like her. They'd been raised on a steady diet of English instruction, Western music, and Hollywood movies—all put into ideological context by their ever-vigilant political officer. Many of the others seemed to be genuinely passionate about the endless lectures on the evils of capitalism, the inevitable chaos of democracy, and the absurdity of God. Her enthusiasm, though, had been largely feigned. The bare minimum necessary to get her in front of the latest Tom Cruise movie.

The Soviet Union had fallen in 1991 when she was still a girl, but the program had continued. The message became less ideological and more nationalist, but it didn't really matter. She was young and it was all she'd ever known. Like most kids, she'd wanted to please the adults around her, to avoid punishment, and to watch *Top Gun*.

She'd been twenty-two years old when she finally crossed into the country she'd spent her life studying. The memory of the experience still clung to her mind. The smell of it. The light of its sun. The warmth of its people. It had felt strangely like . . . home.

And so it had been for the last sixteen years. She'd turn thirty-eight next month, assuming she managed to live that long. Her survival was something that she'd taken for granted until a call had come in over a hidden app on her phone. A call she'd convinced herself would never come.

The GPS built into the rental car's dashboard demanded that she turn off the highway and she felt a surge of adrenaline not befitting a secret agent. But she wasn't a secret agent. She was a moderately above-average computer programmer who worked out of a cramped basement flat in Washington, DC. A city that was only a few hours behind her but that right now felt like it might as well have been in another galaxy.

She suddenly felt completely lost, disoriented to the point that she thought she might have to pull over to the side of the road. What was she even doing here? Everything she'd been told she was fighting for was gone. Russia was now a capitalist country run by a dictator and his court of absurdly wealthy oligarchs. The SVR didn't even pay her. What money she had came from coding.

Despite those observations, she obeyed her GPS's orders and turned onto a steep secondary road. Above all others, *that* was the lesson that had been beaten into her. Follow orders. You are nothing. A machine cog that either performs its function or is torn out and replaced.

When the pavement ended, the GPS got confused and began endlessly recommending a U-turn. Voronova shut it off, focusing on the dull hum of the motor and vague slosh of mud beneath the tires. She knew where the critical turn was. But not much else. She was to meet a lone male at a cabin situated near the end of the deteriorating track she was traveling. She was to listen to what he had to say, probe him for any additional information that might be pertinent, and report back

to Moscow. The only clue she had as to the subject matter of the meeting was her superiors' demand that she familiarize herself with the US power grid—a project she'd spent the last five days immersed in. Other than that, only one thing could be said for certain: the person she was on her way to meet was important. The risks of activating an agent like her weren't something Moscow took lightly.

The building started to appear, ominous in the mist. It was a basic A-frame that probably dated back to before she was born—a strange teepee of peeling logs and asphalt shingles, fronted by a large porch. Predictably, the shades were drawn, but a little light bled around the edges.

Voronova was carrying a knife in her boot, but that was her only weapon. She hadn't fired a gun in almost twenty years and her combat training since arriving in the United States consisted entirely of her Thursday night kickboxing class.

She felt the fear growing in her and it wasn't difficult to pinpoint its contradictory causes. First, the most likely: the SVR had decided that people like her were more risk than reward and the house contained an assassin charged with solving that problem. The second was perhaps even more terrifying: that this was a legitimate operation and she was going to survive it.

After being activated, would it be viable for her to stay in the United States? Would she be called back to Russia? And if she was, what the hell would she do there? Go to work in an SVR office building? Continue coding for US companies? Work at the new Kentucky Fried Chicken on Red Square? How would she reintegrate into a country she'd never really integrated into in the first place?

Voronova parked and grabbed a jacket from the passenger seat before stepping out in the rain.

Only one way to find out.

Everything seemed on the up-and-up, but it was hard to know that for sure when the Russians were involved.

He'd been the one who had dictated the location for this meeting and his iPhone, connected to various cameras in the area, showed nothing suspicious. Pocketing the device, he turned his attention to a gap between the windowsill and shade. He wasn't sure what to expect, exactly. Maybe a supermodel with one of those big fur hats? An East German shot putter with a tight bun and breath that smelled like borscht?

The woman coming up the steps, though, looked disappointingly normal. Mid-thirties, with a curvy figure poured into snug-fitting jeans. She had the hood of her coat up, but that didn't fully hide her attractive, no-nonsense features and a lock of blond hair blown across her forehead.

Mostly, though, he was amazed that she was actually there. He'd spent the last six months trying to set up this meeting. It had taken hundreds of anonymous exchanges over the Internet to prove that he was real and that he had something they wanted.

Finally, the day had arrived.

When she reached the porch, he pulled away from the shade and wiped the sweat from his palms. The time spent chatting up the Russians was actually just a drop in the bucket. It had taken more than five years of relentless work to get him here. But really it was much more than that. In truth, his entire life had been leading him to this place, this moment. And while he believed neither in God nor destiny, he did believe that this was his purpose. That he was meant for greatness. Terrible greatness.

The rattle of boots on the deck was followed by a knock that was more timid than he'd expected.

When he opened the door, she stepped in and pulled her hood back. The hair was indeed blond, but with dark streaks. A little edgy, but fitting with features that leaned just a little Asian. Up close, she was hotter than at a distance. Maybe she was there to ply him with her feminine wiles? Not necessary, but certainly welcome as a fringe benefit.

He realized that they'd been looking at each other for an uncom-

fortably long time but wasn't sure what to say. Maybe he should have insisted on some code like in the movies. *The wind whistles through the trees*. And then she'd reply with something like *it comes from the frozen north*.

In the end, she was the first to speak.

"What do you have for me?"

No sexy Russian accent. She sounded like she was from DC.

"What do you know about the power grid?"

"More than most. But it's not my area of expertise."

He examined her stylish down coat. "What is? Fashion?"

Her smile was polite, with just a hint of distaste. It wasn't the first time he'd seen that expression on a woman's face. Or the hundredth.

"Killing people and disposing of their bodies," she responded.

He resisted the urge to step back, trying to discern whether she was joking. Her face had become a dead mask. The only thing she wasn't able to hide was that she clearly didn't want to be there.

"Then I'll keep it simple," he said, trying to regain the upper hand. "It's been called the world's biggest interconnected machine and that's probably pretty close to the truth. Call it seven thousand power plants, fifty thousand substations, and two hundred thousand miles of transmission lines."

"When I said it's not my area of expertise, I meant I couldn't run the grid or fix a broken transformer. Not that I didn't know what it was. Now why did I come all this way? I hope not to listen to you recite a Wikipedia page."

He felt his mouth go dry and covered by walking to the refrigerator for a beer. The landlord had left a six-pack of Bud as a thank-you for renting the place in the off-season.

"What you don't know is that it's a miracle that it even works. It's made up of more than three thousand different utilities, and it's governed by more different state and federal organizations than you can count—most of which barely communicate with each other. A lot of the infrastructure is over forty years old and some has been running

for the better part of a hundred. It's an incredible balancing act. Despite all the different components, the demand and supply have to be perfectly matched. When you plug in your hair dryer, the grid has to add just that much power. When you turn it off, it has to shut down that power or move it somewhere else."

"Sure, it's complicated, but the fact is that it *does* work. Almost flawlessly. And it has for a long time. A lot of it's also redundant. If any piece—or series of pieces—fails, they can route around them until they're repaired."

"Flawless and redundant," he said incredulously. "You've been drinking the Kool-Aid, sweetheart. Think about it. In 2003, we had one of the biggest blackouts in history. Fifty-five million people suddenly lost power. Why? An attack by your friends in Moscow? A nuclear bomb? Geomagnetic storm? Nope. Some power lines in Ohio brushed an overgrown tree. That's it."

"There were other factors that kept them from—"

"Exactly!" he said, pointing at her with the neck of his beer. "That tree should have tripped an alarm, right? Some power company you've never heard of should have seen the problem and routed around it. But there was no alarm. Why? Because of a little software bug. A minor glitch that caused a cascade that shut down the whole Northeast."

"Whatever," she said, clearly unimpressed.

"That wasn't a planned, malicious attack, lady. It was a tree branch and a coding error. Now imagine the possibilities of a conscious, coordinated effort. How much damage could be done? How long would it take to get things back online?"

"I don't know."

"No? I do."

"So, you're saying that you've figured out how to take out a portion of the US grid and keep it down for a while? It seems—"

"I've figure out how to take down the *entire* US grid and keep it down for a *year*. Maybe even permanently if you figure that after about six months there wouldn't be anyone left alive to work on it."

Her expression went from unimpressed to skeptical. “That’s a lot easier said than done. Like you just told me, tens of thousands of moving parts—a lot of them independent from one another.”

He smiled. “I’m glad you say you know something about the grid. That way you’ll have some inkling of what you’re looking at.”

“I don’t understand.”

He pointed toward a laptop on the kitchen table. “Go ahead. Check it out.”

Sonya Voronova leaned back in the kitchen chair and stared blankly at the computer screen. After almost forty-five minutes of examination, she’d come to the conclusion that this scrawny sleazebag might actually be telling the truth. Not only did everything seem to be there; it seemed to be there in gory detail. High-resolution photos of more than a thousand critical substations. Comprehensive schematics of transmission systems including their interconnectivity and weak points. Analysis of software security issues in all the major power companies as well as many of the smaller operators. Exhaustive evaluations of transmission line vulnerabilities—from ones that were too close to trees to ones that had poor seasonal access to ones that were beyond their useful life.

And she’d barely scraped the surface of what was on this asshole’s laptop. The quality and sheer volume of the data was astounding. Maybe a little too astounding.

The obvious question was whether it was all bullshit. But even compiling that much convincing bullshit would have been a monumental task. Why bother? He’d have to know that Russian analysts would go through it with a fine-toothed comb before any wire transfers were made.

“The key to taking down the US grid isn’t in the hardware,” she said, speaking aloud for the first time in almost an hour. “Sure, blowing up some critical substations could do a lot of damage. But it wouldn’t last. The key is SCADA—the supervisory control and data

acquisition systems. You'd have to be able to get that level of access in literally hundreds of separate utilities. And just trashing their systems wouldn't be enough. You'd have to get control. Force their computers to provide fake data to cover up real damage, overload systems, and shut down safeguards." She turned toward the sofa he was sitting on. "That kind of access just isn't doable. Sure, you could get into a few utilities the normal way—phishing attacks and such. But hundreds? No way in hell."

"No way in hell?" he said, pushing himself off the sofa and approaching. When he stopped in front of her he slid his fingers down one side of her hair. She was too stunned to react other than to just stare. Was this his idea of a come-on? Here? Now? The very idea of touching this creep made her stomach roll over.

"You heard me," she said, scooting her chair back and moving her hair out of reach.

He frowned in a way that suggested he thought she was part of whatever payment he was looking for. "Then it's weird that I've already done it."

"What do you mean? Done what?"

"Put malware on the computers of nearly every power company in America."

"Bullshit."

By way of an answer, he leaned over and used the touchpad to navigate to a long list of hyperlinked utility companies. "Go ahead. Knock yourself out."

She watched him walk back to the sofa and fall into the worn cushions. After staring at him for a few seconds, she turned back to the laptop and followed a link to Exelon, America's largest electric company. The log-in page immediately auto filled and she was in. Ten minutes of navigating suggested that she didn't just have access to relatively unimportant areas like accounting or personnel. She had command and control authority that would allow her to do whatever she wanted.

She continued through the list at random, accessing both major utilities and tiny ones serving limited areas. Every time, the password manager auto-filled the log-in and she found herself with unfettered access.

Finally, she used a sleeve to wipe her fingerprints from the laptop and closed it. Her research for this meeting had focused on the technical aspects of the grid, but there had been no avoiding information on what would happen if this kind of attack were ever carried out. Society relied on electricity for everything. Food production. Transportation. Health care. Heat. Refrigeration. America was like a finely tuned watch—incredibly effective as long as every single gear was turning. But if even one failed . . .

“Well?” the man said, pulling her back into the here and now.

“Well what?”

“What do you mean, *well what*? Is it something your government would be interested in or not?”

“It’s possible,” she said.

“Time is of the essence, sweetheart.”

“What do you want for it?”

He laughed, but it came off as more of a twisted giggle. “I don’t give a shit about your rubles. I just want to see America sent back to the Stone Age. And if it’s going to happen, it needs to be now. A consulting firm has been working on a plan to upgrade and secure the grid for six years and they’re finally going to present their findings this week. If the government’s smart enough to implement their recommendations, this thing gets a whole lot more complicated.”

She contemplated him, trying to maintain an air of calm that she didn’t feel. “You’re telling me you want us to *act* on this?”

“Didn’t I just say that? I mean, I could do the computer stuff myself, but to really bring it off like I designed, I’d need a team of people to take out some physical infrastructure. Not a lot—just a few critical substations spread out across the country. You have people who could pull that off without breaking a sweat. The truth is that none of the

substations I need destroyed even have a guard. Mostly just chain link fences. I figure Russia has bolt cutter technology, right?”

She winced at hearing the word *Russia* spoken out loud.

“Why?”

“Why what?” he said.

“Why would you want something like this to happen to your own country? To your own countrymen?”

“What’s it to you? Are you on board or not?”

She remained silent, but her expression must have hinted at her uncertainty.

“Who better than you?” he said. “NATO’s pushing you. The world’s big economies are squeezing you. Renewables are going to trash your resource-based economy. And straight-up wars just aren’t feasible anymore. You can’t roll your tanks across Kansas. Hell, you know that better than anyone. You’re the kings of asymmetrical warfare. Why screw around trolling Americans on Facebook when I’m willing to hand you the equivalent of a million-megaton nuke? And the US won’t even be able to retaliate because they won’t know who did it. By the time they figure it out, they’ll be busy chasing possums so they have something to eat. Now’s your moment. To the bold go the spoils, right?”

“Russia is a responsible member of the international community,” she said, sounding a bit naïve even to herself. “Our goal is to be capable of defending ourselves against US aggression. This could help us do that and I imagine we’d be willing to pay handsomely for—”

“I’m already rich.”

Voronova nodded thoughtfully. It was time to punt and get the hell away from this freak. “I’m afraid I’m not authorized to start World War Three. But I’ll relay everything we discussed to my superiors and they’ll get back to you.”

“When?”

“Soon, I would imagine.”

“You’re not the only person I’m talking to, you know. The Chinese

are interested. So are the Iranians and Cubans. And there are more than a few terrorist groups who would give their left nuts for what's on that computer. But, like I said, you're my first choice. America's existential enemy. It's hard not to appreciate the historical symmetry of that, you know?"

CHAPTER 1

MADRID
SPAIN

WHEN the plane finally began to descend, Mitch Rapp turned to the window and examined the grid of runways and buildings that made up the Madrid-Barajas airport. A delay in Cairo had put his flight three hours behind schedule, but that was the least of his problems. It had taken him almost a day longer than expected to clean up one of the Saudis' many messes in Yemen and he was now a full day and a half late arriving.

Sayid Halabi was rotting in the Somali desert thanks to Scott Coleman, but much of the elite team the ISIS leader had assembled was still on the loose. The men had significant expertise in everything from social media to spec ops to science and had scattered throughout the world. Now, though, they seemed to be re-forming under the leadership of a former Iraqi army captain. He was no Sayid Halabi, but he was tough as nails and motivated as hell.

Their targets and strategy going forward was largely unknown, but what was certain was that they weren't going to just crawl under a rock

and die of old age. They were looking to inflict some pain before they finally met Allah.

Rapp coughed into his hand and checked it for blood. There hadn't been any for months, but it was a habit that was proving hard to break. He'd managed to prevent Halabi from smuggling a deadly pathogen across the Mexican border, but had contracted the disease in the process. The docs still seemed surprised that he was alive. And, in truth, so was he. He'd spent longer than he cared to remember with machines breathing for him and, at its worst, death would have been preferable. As far as he was concerned, the next time a bioterror threat raised its ugly head, the fucking FBI could handle it.

The wheels touched down, but Rapp stayed in his seat as the other passengers prepared to disembark. He turned his phone back on and scrolled through the texts, searching for anything that suggested his impending operation had run into a snag. Nothing. As of that moment, it was still a go. His plans for a shower, steak, and some shut-eye before the briefing, though, definitely weren't.

Once the plane was more or less empty, he slung a small pack over his shoulder and started up the aisle. The crew near the door gave him a quizzical look as he approached and he reflexively turned his face away, mumbling the expected thanks.

Rapp had spent most of his adult life seeking anonymity and his current state wasn't helping that quest. His dark hair hadn't completely regrown and was in the uncontrollable stage between short enough to behave and long enough for gravity to take control. Thankfully, his beard had come back more quickly, effectively obscuring his lower face and leaving only his sunburned nose visible below mirrored sunglasses.

What really made him stand out, though, was the dust. It was still clinging to every part of him from his trip across Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The loaded Range Rover he'd been promised had been on fire when he found it and there hadn't been a lot of other options. So, instead of making the trip cradled in leather and caressed by air-

conditioning, he'd made half of it in the back of a dilapidated pickup and the other half by motorcycle.

The jet bridge and corridor beyond were empty, already cleared of passengers hurrying to secure a good place in the passport control line. He kept a leisurely pace, walking toward a sign pointing him left, but instead passing through a door marked NO ENTRY. The alarm that was supposed to sound didn't and he was met on the other side by an impeccably dressed Spanish woman.

"I trust your flight was a good one," she said in more than acceptable English.

"Fine, thanks."

"We have a car waiting and I fear I'll have to take you straight to your meeting. As you requested, there is food, water, and a clean change of clothes in the backseat. Also, you'll find a brief that will bring you up to date on the situation."

"It's good to see you again, Mitch."

Jordi Cardenas, the head of Spain's national intelligence agency, held out a hand and Rapp took it. "Good to see you, too. We appreciate the assist."

"It's very much our pleasure," he said, leading Rapp into a windowless conference room. The men around the table were ones Rapp had known for most of his career—Scott Coleman was at the far end and his top operators had taken the chairs closest to him. Claudia Gould, the woman Rapp lived with and who also happened to be Coleman's logistics director, was standing near a large screen hanging on the wall. Rapp gave them all a silent nod and took an empty seat that wouldn't put his back to the door.

"Okay, I think we're all here," Claudia said with a French accent that had become a bit less pronounced over the last year. "Let's get started."

The screen came to life with photos of a number of Middle Eastern men as well as a few squares containing silhouettes with question

marks inside. “We’re in the dark as to the identities of three of the people in Sayid Halabi’s inner circle and we have very little intelligence on which of his enforcers are still alive. What we do know is that Muhammad Nahas has taken over leadership.” She pointed to the screen. “This is the only existing photo of him, taken by the US Army when he was a member of Iraqi special forces.”

It had been cropped to focus on the man’s intense eyes and hawk-like nose, framing out the smiling American and Iraqi comrades that had been visible in the original. Perhaps fitting in light of the fact that they were all dead now. Nahas had purposely led them into an ambush that only he survived.

“Based on what we know from US Army records and people who fought with him, he’s an extremely disciplined and well-trained soldier. Smart, and well respected, but not necessarily a man who commands the kind of devotion Halabi did. Also, he’s not the big thinker that Halabi was. Based on Internet activity we’ve intercepted from the group, they haven’t yet formed any concrete plans. They’re talking about everything from a 9/11-style attack, to a sarin gas attack similar to the one carried out in Japan. There’s also discussion of more far-fetched operations like poisoning a water reservoir. Overall, it comes off a bit like . . .” She paused for a moment to search for the right term in English. “. . . spitballing.”

“Is Nahas the target?” Scott Coleman asked.

“Unfortunately, no. We haven’t been able to find him.” She zoomed in on another of the on-screen photos. This one depicted a clean-shaven, bespectacled man in his early thirties. Middle Eastern descent for sure but he had the look of someone who’d lived a comfortable life in Dubai or Kuwait City.

“*This* is the target. Hamal Kattan. He doesn’t look like much, but he was actually a key person in Halabi’s orbit. His educational background is in physics but he seems to be knowledgeable in pretty much anything relating to technology. A renaissance man who Halabi relied on to keep him connected to the modern world.”

“He looks soft,” Rapp said.

“That’s probably an accurate assessment. He wasn’t particularly religious in school and his parents are secular Jordanians also involved in the sciences. The overall impression is that he was looking for a purpose in life and Halabi gave it to him.”

Rapp knew the type better than he wanted to—people who bought a copy of *Islam for Dummies* on their way to join ISIS. Some were looking for excitement or a sense of brotherhood. Others for power or to get laid. Still others just wanted to get bloody and make other human beings suffer. And finally there were the ones like this little pissant—aimless bastards in search of the meaning of life.

The slide changed to a picture of Kattan walking down a narrow cobblestone street, head down and collar up against what appeared to be a stiff wind.

“This was taken yesterday in southern Spain. Granada to be precise.”

“What’s he doing here?”

“Meeting with like-minded jihadists, it appears,” Jordi Cardenas interjected. “We’ve been following him and we’re getting all kinds of interesting information on his friends.”

“But you’re not moving against them,” Rapp clarified.

“No. Not until you give us the go-ahead.”

Rapp nodded and motioned for Claudia to continue her briefing.

“The day after tomorrow, Kattan is scheduled to fly from Granada to Washington, DC, via Barcelona and New York.”

“Do we know why? Entering the US is a pretty big risk,” Rapp said.

“Based on our wiretaps, he’s going there at the orders of Muhammad Nahas to meet someone. It’s possible that Nahas is going to be at this meeting as well.”

Rapp perked up at that. He’d love to put a bullet between that son of a bitch’s eyes. “What do you mean by ‘possible’? How possible?”

“We don’t know. The communications have been vague on that point. Call it fifty-fifty.”

She switched slides again, bringing up a seating chart from the air-

plane Kattan would be taking from Granada to Barcelona. She used a laser pointer to indicate an aisle seat near the left wing. “We’ve arranged for the target to be sitting here.”

“Does he have anyone watching his back?” Coleman asked.

“We aren’t sure yet,” Cardenas said. “We just found out about his flight yesterday and we’re working around the clock doing background checks on the passenger list. So far, we have one strong possibility—a young Muslim male originally from Morocco but living in Seville now. He’s taking a train to Granada and catching that flight to Barcelona, but not continuing on to the US.”

“Will you have looked at all the passengers before the wheels on that plane go up?”

“Absolutely. If there’s anyone else suspicious, you’ll know about it before you board.”

Scott Coleman let out a long breath. “It’s a lot of moving parts, Mitch.”

“Maybe one of the most complicated ops we’ve ever done,” Coleman’s sniper Charlie Wicker agreed. “And here we are two days out, still wondering if the target has backup.”

Rapp nodded.

“We all know it’d be easy to snatch Kattan off the street, but when he goes missing, his network’s going to find out. We’d have a few hours at the most to question him before they scatter and everything he knows goes stale. If we can do it in a way that makes them think he’s dead, then we might actually have a shot at completely decapitating what’s left of ISIS.”

“What about weapons? If he has an escort, how are we going to know if they’re armed?”

“We’re in the process of quietly upgrading the security in the Granada airport,” Cardenas said. “We should be able to find any significant weaponry going through.”

“Can I assume we’re not going to do anything about it?” Joe Maslick said.

Rapp shook his head. “If we take one of them down in security—”

“Their network’s going to know,” Bruno McGraw said, finishing his sentence for him.

“Right.”

“So we’re going to get on a plane with an unknown number of terrorists carrying an unknown number of weapons and try to take them alive.”

“That about covers it.”

“Bullets and planes don’t mix,” Coleman pointed out. “Remember Azerbaijan?”

Rapp remembered it a little too vividly. “Look, I understand that these aren’t our normal operating parameters. We’re going to be in a confined space thirty thousand feet off the ground, working with people we have no experience with, and relying on crap intel. I’ll do what I can to mitigate the risks, but if the wrong thing on that plane gets shot there’s not going to be much to do but bend over and kiss our asses good-bye. Anyone who wants to sit this one out should do it. It’s the smart move and I’m not going to hold it against you.”

None of the men at the table even bothered to look around. They were in. They were always in.

Rapp leaned back in his chair. “All right, Claudia. Give us what you’ve got.”

CHAPTER 2

MOSCOW
RUSSIA

“**K**REMLIN in your language means *fortress inside a city*, but most people don’t know this.”

Sonya Voronova scanned the strange architecture of Russia’s seat of power, feigning interest and shivering from the cold.

“The palace you see over there used to be the czar’s residence but is now the home of our president Boris Utkin . . .”

She allowed the man to press against her as he spoke, not only for appearances but for the warmth. Otherwise she ignored him, turning her attention to the snow cascading from steel-gray skies.

He was about her age, broad shouldered and good looking. They’d ostensibly met in a bar the night she’d flown in and later retreated to her hotel room a few blocks away. To anyone watching, she’d be a single female tourist looking to have a good time and he’d be a Russian local willing to provide it. As always, the truth was very different. To the degree that truth even existed in the life that had been foisted on her.

“It’s beautiful,” she said when she noticed he’d fallen silent. And it was. But what it all meant for her was a mystery. She’d been ordered back to Moscow to give a personal report of her meeting with the man in West Virginia. Why? Secure channels were abundant in the modern world.

She wondered if she’d ever see America again. If her life would end here in a country that felt as foreign to her as it did to the tourists around her. And if that was to be her fate, would it come at the hands of the beautiful young man next to her?

Whatever was going to happen, it turned out that it wasn’t going to happen there. After an exhaustive review of Russian history and architecture, they wandered back to the road, grabbed a bite from a street vendor, and hailed a cab.

She was thankful to be out of the wind, but despair set in when the driver used his cell phone to report that she was on board and to provide an ETA. Part of that despair came from the fact that she had to strain to understand his Russian over the background noise. The rest came from watching the engaging smile of the man sitting across from her fade into a blank stare.

“Where are we going?” she asked in English.

Predictably, he replied in his native tongue. *Their* native tongue. The one-word response translated roughly as *elsewhere*.

The outer office was nondescript and governmental, and had the same stale tobacco smell as the cab. A stout woman sat behind a desk on the far side of the room, working on a computer but also watching to make sure Voronova wasn’t up to any mischief.

Her despair had withered into something more like resignation—an emotional state that the Russians had elevated to an art form. She knew she had to keep her wits about her but having no idea what she was about to face made preparation impossible. In light of that, she grabbed a magazine and squinted at the Cyrillic writing it contained.

Just over an hour passed before she was ushered through the door

at the back. Despite the chill she couldn't seem to shake, sweat broke across her forehead as she entered. Her handler was nowhere to be found. Instead, she was faced with not only Pavel Kedrov, the director of the SVR, but with the president of Russia himself.

"I understand that your meeting with our contact was successful?" Kedrov said, while Boris Utkin silently appraised her. She felt utterly naked and wondered if it would have been more comforting to have worn a uniform instead of the jeans, sweater, and down jacket of an American tourist. Maybe. But what uniform? She'd never been an official part of the Russian military or even the KGB. She'd never been an official part of anything.

"It was, sir."

"He's made some very bold claims. What's your assessment of them? Does he actually have anything that might interest us?"

"I believe he has the ability to do what he says."

The surprise registered on both of their faces and they gave each other a look that she couldn't quite read.

It seemed to her that men—particularly men like these—were little more than children. They could never fully escape their schoolyard thirst for power and notoriety. They craved it. Fought for it. Sometimes died for it. The ones who possessed a great deal—like Utkin and Kedrov—became intoxicated and wanted ever more. The ones who didn't have it—as she suspected was the case with the man in West Virginia—endlessly romanticized it. Led by males like this, it never ceased to amaze her that humanity had survived long enough to crawl down from the trees.

"This seems extremely unlikely to me," Utkin said.

"Me as well," Kedrov agreed. "We've spent a great deal of money and effort penetrating the American power grid with results that are, at best, uneven. Certainly blacking out portions of the country for a limited time is achievable, but a long-term shutdown of the entire system? Are you sure you wouldn't like to reconsider your response, Sonya?"

She found herself paralyzed. Telling them what they wanted to hear was the only hope she had of returning to her modest life in

Washington. But what were those magic phrases? The ones that would get her on that plane?

“I don’t think I do, sir,” she heard herself say. “The amount of information he has is incredible. As is the level of detail. He also has full access to the mainframes of nearly every power company in America.”

“He told you that?”

“He *showed* me that. He let me use his computer to enter various systems. I chose at random and got into every one I tried.”

“At what level?”

“I had command and control access. He also says he’s uploaded malware to all those systems and that he can activate it at any time.”

“Did you confirm this as well?”

“It wouldn’t have been practical. But with the level of penetration he has it would be a trivial matter. I see no reason not to take him at his word.”

Again, they looked at each other.

“Did he tell you how he achieved all this?” Utkin said.

“No, sir.”

“And you didn’t press him on the issue?”

“Those were not my orders.”

Utkin looked over at his intelligence chief. “The path seems clear. If this man has that kind of information on offer, we’ll acquire it.” He turned his attention back to Voronova. “What does he want?”

“For it to happen, sir.”

“Excuse me?”

“He isn’t asking for money or anything else. Apparently, for his plan to work, he needs a small group of well-trained saboteurs to operate in concert with his cyberattack. He believes we can provide those saboteurs. But if we refuse, he made it clear that he’s talking with other parties.”

“You’re telling me that he asked for no financial compensation?” Utkin said incredulously.

“None,” she confirmed.

Utkin leaned back in his chair and ran a hand over his mouth. “Your people have gamed this, haven’t they, Pavel?”

“The ramifications of a widespread, long-term power outage on America?” He nodded. “It would be carnage. On par with a large-scale nuclear strike.”

“And the worldwide effects?”

“More difficult to predict,” Kedrov said. “You’re talking about taking the US completely off-line for the foreseeable future. They account for almost a quarter of the world’s economic activity.”

“But we’re less reliant on them than many other countries.”

“Unquestionably. We’re a resource-rich, relatively independent country. Still, there would be serious—”

“But if we knew the attack was coming and no one else did,” Utkin hypothesized, “could we position ourselves to weather the storm and come out ahead of our enemies?”

“In any tragedy there’s opportunity,” Kedrov said, sounding a bit hesitant. “But it’s likely that we’d be facing a worldwide depression. Not something that’s so easy to weather. Even from an advantageous position.”

They seemed to have forgotten she was there and all Voronova could do was look on in disbelief. In the time since her meeting in West Virginia, she’d done some research into the potential effects of a massive grid failure in America. Kedrov’s choice of the word *carnage*, if anything, was an understatement. How could these men be even considering something like this?

It reminded her of a joke told by one of her instructors so many years ago. It was about a peasant farmer whose neighbor saves enough money to purchase a goat. The peasant asks God to put right this injustice and God answers, asking what the peasant wants him to do.

Kill the goat.

According to her instructor, that one joke explained the Russian people better than all the history books ever written. The fall of

America could only harm Russia. The question these two overgrown toddlers were debating was whether others would be harmed more.

Of course, they could have spent their time and resources making Russia a prosperous, respected, and productive country in its own right. But that was too difficult. Instead, they'd sink the boat containing all of humanity because they believed their life vests were the most buoyant.

"America is as weak and fractured as it's been in more than a hundred years," Utkin said. "So this comes at an interesting time."

It was a true statement. The front-runner in the recent US presidential election had committed suicide, throwing America's politics into even more turmoil than usual. The eventual winner was a largely unknown quantity and conspiracy abounded. Polls suggested that almost half of Americans supported the idea of a new election, but there was no constitutional provision for one. Perhaps the era of American democracy was coming to an end. Perhaps they would finally fall back into the oddly comfortable embrace of a de facto dictator like Utkin. Certainly, that would be of great comfort to the men whispering in front of her. Nothing frightened autocrats more than a successful democracy.

She strained to make out their increasingly hushed conversation but her rusty language skills made it impossible. Or maybe that wasn't it at all. Maybe she just didn't want to know.

Finally, Utkin rose, brushed past her, and disappeared through the door. His body language suggested that his involvement in the meeting was done.

In front of her, Kedrov removed his glasses and examined her. When their eyes met, his expression had morphed into one of vague disapproval.

"You've put us in a very difficult position, Sonya."

A hint of fear escaped the façade she'd constructed but he dismissed it with a casual wave of the hand. "I didn't get to where I am today by shooting my messengers. Now tell me. What's your opinion?"

You've lived in America for years. What would happen if the American people were faced with an attack like this? If the average citizen got a taste of real desperation and suffering, would they turn to a leader of strength? Someone capable of providing order and security?"

"It's possible," she admitted.

He nodded and contemplated her again, this time staring at her leather boots and ending with her knit hat.

"What should I do with you, Sonya?"

Taken by surprise by the question, she found herself unable to answer. What she wanted was to go home and die of old age without ever being called on again. But was that wise? Based on the less-than-scientific research she'd done, she calculated her chances of surviving a long-term US power outage at pretty much zero. On the other hand, the thought of trying to build a new life in Russia was somehow even more terrifying than the thought of dying of cold or hunger in her basement flat.

"I only want the privilege of serving my country, sir."

He nodded in a way that suggested he wasn't buying her sudden patriotism. "Then you'll go back to the US."

She gave a short nod. It wasn't reassignment to Paris or Rome, but it also wasn't a basement cubicle in Novosibirsk or a bullet in the back of the head. In her line of business, that was about as much of a win as you were going to get.

"Do I have orders, sir?"

"What kind of orders?"

"Would you like me to investigate this man? Based on how extensive his knowledge is and the fact that I know what he looks like, it's possible I could identify hi—"

"You'll do nothing."

"But it could help Russia in its preparations," she said, daring to push a little. "We would be able to—"

"No," he said with utter finality. "At this moment, he's a nameless man with information that we declined. We haven't communicated

with him since your meeting and based on what you've told us today, we will never do so again. Our only concern is ensuring that there is no trail that leads back to us."

"But, sir, what if he was also telling the truth about having other countries and organizations interested? It doesn't seem so far-fetched. If we—"

"Enough!" he said, his voice rising almost to the level of a shout. "Perhaps I'm making a mistake sending you back, Sonya. Perhaps you've become a little too sympathetic to your adopted country."

"No, sir. It's just that—"

"The Americans are very good at making enemies both from within and without," he said, cutting her off again. "It's their responsibility to defend themselves against those enemies. Not ours."

CHAPTER 3

FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA AIRPORT
GRANADA
SPAIN

“**G**RACIAS,” Rapp said, handing a ten-euro bill to the woman at the cash register. She doled out his change and he wandered off to find a place to sit in the cafeteria. Only about half of the tables were full and he managed to secure one with a decent view of the people coming through security.

Jordi Cardenas and his people had delivered beyond all expectation, assembling detailed dossiers on every passenger and quietly upgrading the airport’s security. No one was getting so much as a squirt gun to the gates without them knowing about it.

Based on the information they’d gathered, there were three solid suspects in addition to the primary target, Hamal Kattan. All were youngish Middle Eastern men on trips that seemed out of the ordinary for them. One was terminating in Barcelona while the other two were continuing to the United States on the same flight as Kattan. A fourth man—from Pakistan—was a possibility but probably less than fifty-

fifty. He had a history of international travel and was headed to Paris, where he had an apartment rented for the next two weeks.

Rapp gnawed off the edge of his ham sandwich and watched the people clearing security. Kattan and his likely escorts were already through and had spread out in the gate area on the other side of Duty Free. A group of Asian tourists was causing a bit of chaos at the X-ray machine but, with the help of their frazzled guide, finally pulled it together. They were followed by some annoyed travelers who appeared to be local. Finally, the Pakistani appeared.

Rapp kept working on his sandwich as the man put his roller on the conveyor and passed through the scanner. None of the security people displayed any more interest in him than they had in the Spaniards that came before. Behind the scenes, though, high-tech images were being uploaded to Langley for analysis.

After retrieving his carry-on, the Pakistani made a beeline toward the cafeteria. Rapp turned, watching him in windows that the darkness outside had converted into mirrors. His gut said that this guy wasn't involved, but he wasn't certain enough to bet anyone's life on it. His team would keep as close a watch on this Pakistani as they did the others.

The possible terrorist moved out of view and Rapp turned his attention to his own reflection. His beard had been trimmed into something more respectable than his normal look, which Claudia disparaged as "man raised by wolves." His unruly hair had been corralled and green contacts were irritating his eyes. The straightforward disguise was rounded out by enough subtle foundation to lighten his deeply tanned skin.

He'd resisted that last one, but it was hard to complain. In order to camouflage Joe Maslick's 280 pounds of muscle, they'd had to put him in a fat suit that expanded his girth to the point that he barely fit in a premium seat at the front. The *pièce de résistance*, though, was Charlie Wicker. Claudia's sense of humor probably had something to do with the fact that she'd decided to go with a gay theme. Whatever

the motivation, it worked. No one would peg the diminutive American poured into lemon-yellow jeans as one of the most dangerous men in the world. The other two had gotten off relatively easy. Bruno McGraw naturally looked like an American tourist and Scott Coleman's blond hair and language skills made it easy for him to pass as German.

The music in Rapp's earbuds faded and a moment later was replaced by Claudia's voice. "They're all through. Jordi's people couldn't find any weapons on Kattan or the Pakistani. Two of the other men appear to be carrying custom firearms disassembled to fool the scanners. The third has a knife built into the frame of his carry-on. Take a look at your phone."

Rapp pulled up an email attachment that depicted the Airbus A320's seating chart. The tangos were marked in red with a symbol indicating the weapons they carried. His team's positions were noted in green.

"We did the best we could to seat the targets in good strategic positions, but Fred had the final word."

The Fred she was referring to was Fred Mason, Rapp's go-to pilot on any mission he could persuade him to participate in. The man could fly or fix anything from hang gliders to 747s and had nerves of steel. He'd be flying the plane that night and had seated the tangos where they would do the least amount of damage if they managed to get off an errant shot. It was an inexact science, though. Modern planes were crammed with critical wires, fluid lines, and computer circuits.

The intercom announced Rapp's flight and he tossed what was left of his food before heading to the gate. They'd added another flight that was going out ten minutes before his and the boarding area was jammed with people trying to figure out what line they were supposed to be in.

Kattan elbowed his way back from the bathrooms, coming close enough that Rapp could pick up on his nervousness. He was clutching a laptop case like it was a holy relic and there was a bead of sweat run-

ning down his cheek. The little prick wanted to play secret agent and now he was discovering the weight of that game.

Kattan put his ticket back in his pocket and pushed his way into a small room crammed with other passengers. The chaos of boarding had been amplified by the fact that the airline had for some reason added a flight that was going out nearly simultaneously with his. The weather had taken a turn for the worse and apparently the tourists who flocked to the ancient city of Granada were now trying to escape before the forecasted snowstorm hit.

He, on the other hand, was going to America to evaluate the claims of a man who said he had the ability to destroy the US power grid. It was likely a wildly exaggerated claim, but the information the anonymous Internet poster had provided was unquestionably intriguing. Whoever he was, he was very different than the other voices on jihadist sites—men willing to die for the cause but not capable of doing much more than driving vehicles into crowds or detonating home-made explosives.

A door on the other side of the room opened and the people flooded outside, rushing through the freezing rain toward a plane some hundred meters away. Kattan put his laptop case beneath his jacket and went for the stairs at the back of the aircraft. Out of the corner of his eye he could see one of the escorts Nahas had provided, but resisted the urge to look at him.

Once on board, he took his seat next to a sturdy young woman with short blond hair and an even shorter skirt. She smiled at him as he shoved his bag beneath the seat in front of him and then went back to scrolling through pictures of herself on her phone.

The crush of people fighting for overhead space gave him an opportunity to look around unnoticed. One of Nahas's men was out of sight near the back of the plane. Another was in the aisle ahead, still trying to reach his seat. The last was sitting three rows back next to a little gay man.

The woman next to him kicked off her red heels and closed her eyes. The top three buttons of her blouse were undone, revealing intermittent flashes of a lacy bra. He looked down at the tan skin of her chest for a moment and then turned away.

Western whore.