

Prologue

St. Petersburg, Villa Skrjegora

One by one, his practiced fingers reassured him that he'd thought of everything. He had five silver fakas attached to his tactical belt; Brazilian throwing knives famous for their perfect balance. An obsidian bayonet in a black leather sheath came next, then the holstered M9 with silencer, and stowed in one of the pouches was a small flashlight. A few extra magazines were tucked into the large pockets of his black cargo pants. He wore a tactical hunting backpack, also black, containing climbing gear, bandaging material, a digital night-vision device, and his laptop. Inside the left side pocket were two stun grenades and an American Bushmaster ACR, while an assault rifle equipped with a silencer and red dot laser sight was strapped securely on the right. Just in case he was discovered and had to shoot his way out. He had reluctantly taken the ACR with him, as it considerably restricted his freedom of movement. After making sure his gear was all there, he slipped on a thin pair of tactical leather gloves and a black balaclava with a wide slit for both eyes. He checked one last time to make sure his vehicle couldn't be seen from the river and was well hidden by the dense trees, and lastly, turned his gaze to the landscape ahead.

St. Petersburg's great river, the Neva, made a sharp bend at this point, about three miles outside the city. Most people didn't usually stray that far outside the city anymore, especially at this time of day. In fact, the majority of the residents generally stayed away from this area; the nearest suburb of the old czarist city was a little way further upstream. A dense, but narrow forest stretched along the bank of the Neva River, and beyond it, the ground, planted with lush tulips, rose steeply for about another five hundred yards. And at the top of this sprawling hill stood the target: Skrjegora. The enormous villa belonging to Sergey Kurchenov. The man who would be slain tonight. The compound was guarded by a good two dozen heavily armed and highly trained security guards, which made the job considerably more difficult, but by no means impossible. The assassin, dressed all in black, set off and crept, as silent as a shadow, up the tulip grove. Halfway up, a dense spruce forest began at the edges of the grove.

The assassin floated along in the darkness of the trees and approached the villa. It was a vast, two-storied, U-shaped building with a white façade. A large pool in the back was flanked by the two wings of the building, and a massive park surrounded the property, complete with miniature maze, marble

statues, and boxwood sculptures. The advantage of this terrain was of course obvious—it offered him endless cover. Particularly because the property had no fences, no motion sensors, or even lights. The villa itself would most likely be different, but apart from the security guards, the property was exposed and vulnerable.

In the shelter of a group of trees, about fifty yards from the property line and three times as far from the villa, the man in black took his night-vision device out of his backpack and held it to his eyes. For a quarter of an hour, he squatted motionless, leaning against a spruce trunk, watching the guards, trying to determine their pattern of procedures and identify routes of the individual security men, only to see that they moved without any discernible pattern and followed random routes. A sure method of preventing any undetected infiltration. Only the entrances to the villa—of which there were a total of four on this side of the property alone—were permanently guarded by two guards each. Nothing was going to help; he'd have to take them out one by one. With his night-vision device back in his backpack, he ventured out from under the trees. Lying on the ground, he crept closer to Sergey Kurchenov's home until he finally stood up behind the first marble statue of a Greek goddess and peered around the corner. Six-foot-tall hedges stood to his right, the west side of the labyrinth. And just as he was about to look away, a guard emerged from the maze, turned right, and away from the intruder.

Seeing his chance, he drew his dagger, its matte black blade nearly invisible in the darkness, and crept up behind the security guard, crouching. The guard's light clothing and gait suggested that he was not particularly heavily armed, although the automatic rifle in his hands was formidable. Once he was within arm's length from his target, he straightened up, took two determined strides forward, and rammed the blade into the man's neck. He died instantly, dropping the rifle and falling backward, where his attacker gently lowered him to the ground. The assassin then took the man's weapon from the ground and pulled his dead body by both arms into the shadow of another statue. No one would notice him there anytime soon. He searched the victim's pockets and found a blue magnetic keycard, which he pocketed. He would need it later to gain access to the electronically secured front doors. Then, ducked down, he turned around to continue further ahead and froze. A second security officer stood next to the same Greek goddess statue he'd hidden behind a few moments ago. Apparently, he had left behind footprints; the guard crouched down and scanned the manicured lawn. Without further hesitation, he pulled out one of the silver fakas and waited. After a few seconds, the guard stood up again, turned around, and immediately collapsed when the knife silently logged into his throat. As he approached his second victim, who lay twitching on the ground, the assassin drew his bayonet and rammed the blade into the man's carotid artery as well, causing instant death.

Continuing on his mission, he worked his way forward, creeping closer and closer to Skrjegora, going from cover to cover, staying in the shadows. His sharp blade in the moonless night silently struck down one opponent after another. After depositing the seventh dead guard next to a statue of Zeus, he huddled against the wall of the pavilion and took stock.

There were now no security guards patrolling this side of the villa, which would certainly not remain undiscovered for long. He didn't have much time. It was now a quarter to midnight. Sergey Kurchenov's wife and son were not at home that evening—one of the main reasons he'd chosen tonight of all nights to take out Kurchenov. The man pressed himself against the wall of the pavilion and cast a hasty glance around the corner to the side of the villa. Two particularly tall, broad-shouldered uniformed men stood on either side of a glass door equipped with an electronic security lock. They'd be nearly impossible to defeat in hand-to-hand combat, and he had no cover from which to strike. Even if he did manage to quickly take out the one, the other would surely fire an entire magazine clip at him from his heavy PK machine gun. And that would be the end of it for him.

No, he needed to work from a distance here. He opened the holster tab on his belt and withdrew his silenced M9. With one last glance, he made sure of the exact position of his targets, a distance of about fifteen yards. Then he took a deep breath, stepped out from his cover, and took aim. Within the space of less than two seconds, he fired two shots. Both guards collapsed to the ground with bullet holes in the center of their foreheads. The gunman breathed a sigh of relief, put the pistol away, and ran to the door with long strides. The security lock, a small, black box with a red LED and reader for the magnetic card, was located just to the side of the door. He pulled the card out of the pocket of his cargo pants and held it to the scanner. The LED strip switched from red to green, and he heard a soft click. He put one hand on the door handle and pushed it down gently. The door opened. He was in the house.

The glass door gave him entry to a kind of drawing room with solid wooden tables and shelves filled with books, an inviting bar with a selection of the finest vodkas and whiskies money could buy, massive leather armchairs, and a fireplace where a fire had been blazing until about an hour ago. The intruder closed the door behind him and listened for a few seconds. Absolute silence reigned throughout the house. According to his client, there were no security guards or other personnel in the villa, so he could move freely. Silently, he crept from room to room, looking for Kurchenov's study. On the rest of the ground floor was a kitchen, a semi-formal living room, and two bathrooms. All the rooms, as well as the numerous windows, were of massive proportions, and filled with a lot of glass furniture. In the living room, an elegant modern spiral staircase led to the second floor, which, the intruder noted, was almost the exact opposite of the modern, bright style of the ground floor. The hallways were narrow, the floor thickly carpeted, and the walls covered with wood paneling and oil

paintings. Here, too, the man cautiously peered into each room—and caught a glimpse of Sergey Kurchenov himself, sleeping soundly in his bedroom. Behind a heavy, wide, solid oak door, he finally found the study. A massive, wooden desk, several bookshelves, and at last, the thing he'd been looking for all along: the would-be murder weapon. The one gadget that was supposed to guarantee Kurchenov's safety would put an end to his life in only a few minutes. The irony of it all was obvious. It was his smart home's main server, which controlled all the electronic operations and processes in and around Skrjegora. A narrow, white box with a large touchscreen and several connections and cables that disappeared into a wall panel behind the display case. One of the newest and most secure models ever developed by Smartex, a pioneer in this field. In the whole world, there were maybe ten people capable of remotely hacking this server, and most of them worked at Smartex itself. The hardware, though, just like pretty much every computer, was vulnerable. The hit man stripped off his black backpack and took out his laptop and a USB cable. He booted up the laptop, connected it to the smart home server via the cable, and called up the file he needed to bring Kurchenov down—a simple Trojan horse.

The server willingly installed the virus disguised as an update from Smartex. The program was designed to override the default settings of the smart home system and switch on all the gas-powered appliances in the house at full blast, causing them to overheat. The aim was to create a gas explosion, and considering the three-thousand-pound LPG tank in the villa's basement, with a 2,000-gallon capacity, it was certain that no one on this property would survive the blast. And in the investigation, the official cause of the explosion would be put down as either a technical failure in the Smartex system or a simple gas leak, depending on how well the server survived the explosion.

That was actually the brilliant thing about this tactic: it was an assassination that would be impossible to identify as such. The man unlocked the touchscreen lock screen with the help of the magnetic card, which was part of the smart home system, waited for the server to recognize the update file, and pressed *Start Download*. All the while, he listened into the silence of the night, just waiting for the bodies to be discovered in the garden of the villa. So far, luck had been on his side. He kept his gaze fixed on the screen of the laptop; the upload took only a minute. Then he pressed *Install Update* on the touchscreen. The critical phase of his plan now began. Immediately upon installation, the heaters, stoves, and ovens in the house would be turned on to operate well above their maximum capacity, inevitably causing a fatal overheating, and finally ignite the gas. He had maybe fifteen minutes to leave the property and gain land. No more. He hurriedly packed up the laptop and cable, shouldered his backpack, made sure he hadn't forgotten anything, stepped out of the office, closed the door, turned to retreat down the hallway—and froze in shock.

Sergey Kurchenov was standing just a few feet in front of him. A prematurely graying giant of a man,

over six feet in height, and naked. Presumably driven out of bed by his enlarged prostate. Confused, he eyed the stranger, alternately looking at him and the door to the study. His sleepy countenance immediately turned to anger. Kurchenov said something to him in Russian.

At the same moment, the assassin pulled a faka from his belt and threw it at Kurchenov in a lightning-fast movement. Kurchenov cried out in surprise, but his reaction caught the intruder off guard. In a fluid motion, Kurchenov lithely bent backward, as if he were about to dance under a limbo pole. His arm shot up, caught the faka by the blade, whipped his arm downward in a circular motion forward, and flung the knife back at his attacker as he returned upright. The attacker threw himself to the right just in time. The faka whirred past his face, leaving a fine cut on his cheek through the fabric of the balaclava. He fell against the wooden paneling and was immediately snatched by Kurchenov with one hand. The assassin reacted on instinct. While Kurchenov pressed his assassin against the wall with one arm and used the other to take hold of the grip of the M9 on his belt, the hit man pulled out his bayonet and rammed it just behind the Russian's ear all the way up to its shaft. Kurchenov instantly sank to the ground, but was amazingly still alive. He lay on his side, his fingers twitching uncontrollably, his bloodshot eyes darting back and forth as if in a frenzy. Back on his feet and panting, the assassin bent over to Kurchenov, pressed the Russian's face against the floor with his boot, and pulled the knife out of his skull with a jerk. Blood gushed from the slit in the side of his head, and after a few seconds Kurchenov closed his eyes. He was dead.

The Russian had stolen a good two minutes of precious time from him. He wasn't going to die here just because this fucking Russian had needed a piss. He sheathed the knife and ran through the maze of narrow hallways, jumping down the spiral staircase to the living room. As he raced through the kitchen, he saw that the oven light was on and all the burners on the stove glowed red in the dark of the night. He reached out to open the same glass door he came in through and tugged in vain at the handle. It would not open, not even with the card he had taken from the guard. What the hell...? The update!

It would have reconfigured all the locks on the doors leading to the outside. He wasn't going to be able to escape easily and was again losing precious time. He felt the house heating up as all the heaters were on full blast. Without any further thought, the man unfastened the strap around his Bushmaster ACR on his backpack, aimed it at the center of the pane, and fired the entire magazine at the glass. He didn't care if he set off the alarm. He needed to get off the property as quickly as possible. The glass was astonishingly strong; the bullets only managed to leave a fist-sized hole in the center of the door. Two powerful kicks with his combat boot were enough to break the rest of the pane and slip through. Standing between the bodies of the two men who had previously guarded the door, he switched out the magazine as shouts reached his ears. The shots and the breaking glass had apparently not gone

unnoticed despite the silencer. Two guards came running around the corner to his left, fifty yards away. He shot them with his rifle and ran back through the gardens the way he came. The shouts behind him grew louder and more urgent—apparently the rest of the security team had now started to find their colleagues' bodies. But he had no time to savor it. All that mattered now was getting out of there.

He swiftly reached the edge of the forest and out of view of the villa, disappearing behind the line of trees and down the hill, leaping through the underbrush and ducking under low-hanging branches. Finally, he arrived at the Neva River and to his van, hidden between a group of trees. He opened the passenger door, ripped the balaclava off his head, and threw it and his backpack onto the passenger seat. Just after he'd closed the door, he heard the explosion. A deep rumble, followed by a deafening bang that could not only be heard, but also felt. He turned his gaze to the top of the hill where Skrjegora stood just a few seconds ago. It was now one giant column of flames shooting up toward the sky.

Minutes later, the black van turned onto the highway that would take him back to the city. His pulse gradually returned to normal. He had been trained, among other things, for just such operations, but the fact that it was that close didn't leave him unaffected. He glanced in the side mirror. The fire swallowing up Skrjegora and its inhabitants lit up the horizon a handful of miles behind him. After another few minutes, the first fire trucks and several ambulances flew past in the opposite lane. Of course, there would be no one to save. Time to report his success. He called his boss using the speaker function.

"Yes?" Antonio Puzzaro answered.

"Voltano here," the man said. "The job is done. Sergey Kurchenov is dead."