# CHAPTER 1

Dulles Airport in Virginia teemed with people. The hazel-eyed man boarded the flight to San Francisco. He folded his six-foot, athletic but tired body into a business class seat for the six-hour trip to the West Coast.

After a grueling train trip from Kyiv to Poland, Alex Curtner flew from Warsaw to Washington. Then, following a set of long meetings at Langley, he finally headed home for a few days.

He gazed out the window. The ground service crew readied the plane for departure from DC. As usual, he marveled at them flinging suitcases from carts into the cargo hold and wondered how luggage remained intact. He only had a carry-on.

Alex had swiftly risen through the CIA ranks. Sometimes, he thought, too quickly. Highly unusual. Yes, he had the background. But what he thought had really made it happen was that he had gotten lucky in successfully organizing, managing, and completing two very challenging ops in the last couple of years. Of course, he hadn't gotten lucky – he had done an excellent job – but that's how he saw it. His time in the Army Special Service, extensive knowledge of history, culture, and native-level fluency in Russian all contributed. But despite his accomplishments, a sense of humility and perhaps even self-doubt formed a part of this strong man's character, as he always downplayed his achievements.

Because of the war, the CIA combined the Russian and Ukrainian stations and placed them in a safe location near Helsinki, Finland. Alex became the CIA's COS (Chief of Station) with so-called 'undeclared status' and a State Department DSS (Diplomatic State Security) officer as cover.

Flight attendants greeted the passengers. Alex leaned against his backrest. His sharp, intelligent eyes reflected the fatigue of his intense career. He stretched out his long legs and, ignoring the noise of passengers boarding the plane, slipped into a light slumber. He had learned to find rest whenever and wherever he could, a necessary skill in his life.

Someone tapped him on his left shoulder. Groggy, he turned around and looked up. "Brad!" Alex rose and man-hugged his old buddy from his Stanford University years.

Brad's dark hair had grown a little, and he had started to grow a beard. It suited him well.

"How are you doing, man?" Brad asked.

"Tired. But glad to get home to see my family for a few days."

"How long has it been since we last talked?"

"Three months, I think."

"We need to get together for lunch or something. To catch up. Do you have some time when you're in Palo Alto?"

"Yeah. I do. We should."

Passengers tried to pass in the aisle, and Brad said, "I'll see you when we're in the air." He walked forward ahead of people looking for their seats.

When Alex had studied electrical engineering and computer science at Stanford, he was a part of a tight group of several friends. Brad Nicholls had been one of them.

They attended classes, played soccer, and spent most of their free evenings together. Then, as sophomores, they developed their high-tech investment strategy after taking a microeconomics course. Starting out with a couple of thousand dollars of small loans from their parents, they did pretty well – so well, in fact, that by the time Alex graduated, he had $50K to his name. Being in the middle of the Silicon Valley start-up craze didn't hurt. He had kept up his investments ever since.

One thing Alex had done that was different from the others in his group. Unusual for a Stanford student, he had worked through the Santa Clara University ROTC program while doing his other studies. The group hadn't entirely understood his decision to become a military officer. But … they had been an eclectic bunch and respected everyone's choice.

When the plane reached cruising altitude, Alex and Brad hung out by the divider between the business and coach classes.

As always, they had a lot to chat about. The guys, their families, and the Valley.

"You know, I'm glad I ran into you," Brad said.

"Beyond my wonderful personality, why is that?" Alex smiled.

"Partially, it's your wonderful personality, and partially, I need some help with a project. Do you have some time for lunch in the next couple of days?"

They agreed to meet the day after tomorrow for lunch at their favorite restaurant, and Alex headed to his seat to catch some Zs.

He couldn't sleep. He thought of Oksana and the eventful last day in Kyiv.

Alex and Oksana had enjoyed walking in the woods near the Dnipro River that day. When the air raid siren sounded, they quickly left the wooded area near the Green Theater. They crossed Parkova Road to return to the Arsenal metro station. They didn't reach it.

Something swished over their heads, fast.

"Against the fence!" Alex yelled in English, pushing Oksana towards the tall metal mesh to the left of their path.

Fragments of an intercepted missile or drone struck a five-story residential building a hundred feet in front of them. Huddles of people crouched here and there, and the acrid smell of charred cement and wood filled the area.

When the noise of falling debris ceased, they saw a gaping hole in the place of a third-floor balcony door. Alex was almost certain he had seen them – an older woman and a boy pulling clothes off a balcony line right there moments before the projectile hit.

Alex switched languages. “Are you alright?” He looked at Oksana.

“I’m okay.”

“Please wait here,” Alex addressed his security detail. He turned to Oksana. “Let’s see if we can help.”

He started running. Oksana followed. As they ran up the stairs, disheveled people appeared, coming out from their apartments. Men and women, holding small children to their chests, looked terrified. Alex kept looking over his shoulder to make sure Oksana followed.

On the third floor, an apartment door had been blown open from a projectile impact. A large, twisted piece of metal lay on the landing’s floor.

They ran inside. An older woman on the floor lay bleeding from a large laceration on her thigh. She tried to press her hand over the wound, but blood spurted out. A teenage boy was struggling to get off the floor. He only had minor cuts and rapidly forming bruises from the glass and wood pieces that had struck him. Judging by the size of the missile fragment in the hall, they had been incredibly lucky.

Alex helped the boy up.

Oksana quickly pulled a sheet from a laundry basket on the floor and tore off a long piece. Using all her force, she tied a tourniquet on the lady’s leg above the cut to stop the bleeding. “Just stay down,” she said in a soothing voice.

The bleeding subsided. Most likely, a tiny part of the projectile had struck the woman’s leg. Oksana tore another piece from the sheet and started bandaging the wound. The woman winced in pain.

Oksana looked at Alex and said, “She needs an ambulance now.”

A man rushed in.

“Call the ambulance,” Alex instructed him.

The man pulled out a cell phone and started dialing.

They were fortunate. The ambulance arrived quickly, and the paramedics took over.

Outside, other ambulances blared their sirens – just another day of Russian missiles hitting Kyiv’s residential areas.

“Why didn’t you guys go to a bomb shelter? The metro station is right there,” Alex asked the boy.

“Grandma says she can’t get there fast enough. It’s difficult for her,” answered the boy. His eyes gleamed with tears. “I don’t want to leave her here alone.”

Alex reflected on all the horror stories he had heard in Kyiv about the elderly people trying to get to a shelter. He put his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “You are a brave young man and kind not to leave your grandma.”

The ambulance took off. The all-clear siren sounded.

Oksana and Alex walked towards the metro station. People who had used the subway as shelter streamed out onto the street. Many carried backpacks or bags with their belongings. Alex holding Oksana’s hand, the two descended on the long escalator to the tracks.

Squeezing Alex’s hand, Oksana blurted out, “When will it end?!”

“No one knows, but it will probably last for a long time,” Alex said, a grim expression on his face.

When they reached the crowded platform, they hugged.

“It has been a good couple of days,” Oksana said in a soft voice. “Even if they turned out too short.”

“Yeah, you don’t get much time off, do you?”

Her striking blue, vivid eyes became contemplative. “Not really. Between my military trauma surgery work and teaching a course at the medical school, I’m pretty much consumed. No breaks.” She shrugged. “Oh, almost forgot, every couple of months, I go to help at one of the field hospitals. So, yeah. It’s war.” A fleeting look of sadness crossed her face. Silent momentarily, she added with a smile, “They almost had to force me to take time off this week. I’m glad they did.”

“It was good to spend what little time you had together.”

“Yes, it was.” Oksana pushed her pale-yellow shirt into her jeans and fixed her blue scarf around her neck. Her outfit had become completely undone during the ordeal.

“Tomorrow, I start my trip home,” Alex said.

“For the holidays?” She looked up in his face.

“Partially. First, to my headquarters in DC for a day and then to California for a short visit with my folks.”

Alex told anybody who asked that he worked at the State Department’s DSS. He usually added that he assisted overseas embassies and consulates with their security.

“But first, the train to Poland. Right?”

“Yes. Long ride to Warsaw.” He sighed.

They heard a metro train arriving at the station. Soon, it stopped on the platform.

“And this is my train,” Oksana said. She slung her backpack over her shoulder.

“I’ll call.” Every moment with her seemed fleeting, and he hated that.

“You better!” She laughed and turned to run towards the train car. Her blond hair swung as she jumped up between the doors, ready to close.

They had waved as the train began to move. Alex’s hand had lingered in the air for some time after she disappeared from sight.

*I should have kissed her*.

Alex stared out the plane window. His thoughts drifted back to the blast, the woman’s leg wound, and the boy’s trembling voice. He could still hear the sirens and still feel the dust in his lungs.

He wondered how many more people Oksana had treated since that day. How many more families had been torn apart in the days he had been on the road?

*When will this end?*

He contemplated, knowing the answer wouldn’t come.

He barely noticed when his phone buzzed with a message. Pulling it out, he saw Oksana’s name on the screen.

‘Miss me already?’ it read, accompanied by a winking emoji.

Arriving, he made his way through the airport, feeling a sense of relief wash over him at the thought of finally being home for a few days. He hailed a cab and settled into the backseat. He watched the familiar sights as he left SFO, passing through several Valley towns before reaching Palo Alto.

His phone buzzed again as they pulled up to his parents’ house. Oksana’s message remained on his screen.

*I’ll call her tonight*.

# CHAPTER 2

The Fish Market, one of the favorite haunts for Palo Alto locals, had a simple décor and warm atmosphere. It had been a town fixture since four fish food lovers opened it in 1976, a few blocks from Stanford University. Not just a restaurant, for Alex and Brad, the Fish Market had become a time capsule of their youth – it held so many memories.

During their college days, their group of friends frequented it often. They liked the relaxed vibe of the place. For a bunch of young men, the hearty bowls of clam chowder and fresh grilled Pacific red snapper had been very enticing. The cooks grilled the fish on a strange contraption. They used large grilling wheels over burning coals.

Brad sat on an outside bench against the wall under the green-and-white striped awning as Alex rolled in and parked in a lot behind the restaurant. Brad's bodyguard stood a respectful distance away.

"Gotta love a beautiful, sunny day in December." Alex greeted Brad with a nod towards the bodyguard. "I see you've got some extra company these days. Silicon Valley heavyweight life, huh?"

They both chuckled as they headed inside. The familiar scent of blackened fish and simmering chowder filled the air. They asked for a patio table. It being early, the room looked nearly empty. The relatively warm weather turned the plastic windows into little greenhouses, warming the large, prolonged space.

They settled into their favorite corner table and reached for the familiar menus.

Brad said, "Feels like we never left."

"It does." Alex took a sip of water. "So, tell me more about this new venture you're working on."

Unlike Alex's military service, after computer engineering, the rest of his friends had made the typical move of a Stanford graduate. They had all gotten involved with high-tech start-ups. Brad, a serial entrepreneur, had done very well.

Before Brad answered, Alex looked at his friend and said in the manner of an art critic, "Oh, by the way, I wanted to tell you that this beard of yours adds just the right touch of rugged sophistication. It suits your entrepreneurial lifestyle."

"Get out of here. I like the beard."

"No, really, I like it too. Never mind that. Back to my question about your venture."

"Yeah, the venture. Right now, I'm helping a couple of young guys get an AI gig off the ground. They have started something quite unusual. They've got a new take on a creative process in a software development environment."

"Ambitious."

"Yeah, they're in the early stages. Let's see how it goes." Brad glanced at the menu. "Hasn't changed. Good!" Then he asked, "And what about the State DSS work in Ukraine you mentioned?"

The waiter, a college-aged guy with flaming red hair and a nose ring, approached to take their order. He ran down the specials.

"I think we know what we want."

"Absolutely," Brad said. He flashed a smile at Alex.

They ordered.

Alex returned to where they left off, saying, "Ukraine is tough going. After the embassy reopened in May, in addition to the frequent air raids the embassy has worked under, the Russians doubled their efforts to target our Ukrainian staff."

"Recruiting spies?"

"Yeah. But we deal with that. It's not easy, but with the help of Ukrainian security agencies, we manage to do reasonable vetting."

"Right." Brad dipped a piece of newly baked bread in the olive oil the waiter had brought. "And how is the environment in Kyiv in general?"

"It's a war in the middle of Europe – a war between two fairly technologically advanced countries. As you know, I've seen the like up close in Iraq and Afghanistan. But this is more like WWII, and Kyiv is like London under German V-2 rockets."

The waiter returned with the chowder. They raised their glasses of Sauvignon Blanc and said, 'Salute,' a ritual from their Stanford days.

They both took time to savor the chowder.

"We read all sorts of different opinions here. But when you're there, what do people say about their government?"

"They like how Zelenskyy responded after the invasion and his work since. But a good part of the population also thinks that what led to it had been foolish on the part of the Ukrainian government, and some of it outright treasonous."

"How is that?"

"They think when the Russians started amassing in the north, Zelenskyy should have declared general mobilization without concern for provoking Putin or frightening the people."

"They obviously didn't get scared when it all started."

"They did, though. Anybody would. But they've united to defend their country in every way possible."

"And treason?"

"Some people reason that not boosting defenses near the Crimean Isthmus and then ordering the troops to retreat had probably been the work of traitors among some local military commanders. It let the Russians gobble up the area within a week or so. They lost a huge part of

their territory in the South. Zelenskyy's administration dismissed and demoted some of the commanders. He said, 'I don't have time now to deal with all the traitors, but they'll all face punishment,' or something to that effect." Alex took a sip of his wine.

Brad's eyes darkened as Alex spoke about the war. He swirled the wine in his glass before setting it down with a quiet thud. He leaned back. "I asked because, in addition to killing a lot of people, I believe this fight will have grave repercussions for Europe and around the world. Especially grave if Ukraine loses or doesn't regain its territory."

"You've been following this closely, haven't you?"

"Yeah, I have. But here at home, Americans have an easier time understanding our fight with terrorists in the Middle East. They know the US military will vanquish them in short order."

"But then get stuck in the country building," Alex added.

"Yes. But war in Europe? That's something entirely different. It took Churchill several cross-Atlantic visits to convince even the well-educated FDR to get involved with arms support before Pearl Harbor. Now, our so-called elite is educated in American schools and contemporary Ivy League universities, which are, as we know, but a poor copy of their past selves. The history courses in K12 are atrocious, and as far as I know, our public schools have no explicit geography classes in most states. So, how do we even find the countries on the map? Everyone was surprised to hear that Ukraine is the largest country located entirely in Europe."

"You are right." Alex enunciated every word.

"Better still, many in our Congress shout about the US sending billions of dollars to help Ukraine while not stopping our Southern border invasion – as if those issues are connected, and the amount of money involved is comparable in any way. What they can't understand, or pretend not to for our internal political reasons, is that most of the equipment America sends over would never be deployed by the US anyway. So, money would never leave the States. The government will use the allocated bucks on contracts with the US defense companies for new equipment."

"Right," Alex said, astonished by the emotions displayed by his friend about this war. "You talked about some project on the plane. Remember?"

"Yes, the project. A couple of my friends and I, who are doing early-stage investing in the Valley, discussed helping the Ukrainian efforts."

Alex lifted his head. "What kind of help?"

"Helping with military hardware they might need. We hear the Brits may provide their Challenger 2 tanks. No doubt, there will be more from others. Many more. But we also know that they'll arrive too late, and it won't be enough for this type of war."

"Really," Alex looked at Brad, unsure of what he had just heard. "You guys are serious?"

"Dead serious." Brad had a determined look on his face. "We're trying to find a way to do that. And do it without running afoul of our own government. Our government with their overly cautious, 'how not to provoke that sensitive boy, Mr. Putin,' strategy."

"You don't think much about our national security team either, do you?"

"No, we don't!" Brad said. "Oh yeah, and we're equal opportunity critics. We think even less of the foreign policy ideas of the guy who in 2024 will most likely run for the top spot from the other party."

Alex thought for a moment. "Okkay. Let's see. How much are we talking about?"

"The guys think we can put together a hundred mil or more."

"Damn!" Alex put his spoon down and sat back, absorbing the number. "A hundred mil?!"

"Yeah. Yeah. First, it's the right thing to do – to help people fighting for their freedom. Second, it might rule out our boys and gals fighting Russians in Poland or the Baltics in three or five years. Third, it might eliminate the need for our boys and gals to fight in the Pacific in a couple of years. Should I go on?"

"No, I got the picture."

"Alex, you definitely know more than a bunch of guys here in the Valley. Where do you think we should focus?"

"Focus? As you said, a lot depends on how one can avoid crossing this Administration you admire so." Alex gave a sarcastic, wry grin.

"And?"

"I'm thinking."

Alex absentmindedly touched the light-brown hair on the crown of his head. He knew his friend remembered that when Alex made this gesture, he already had an idea – he was just putting the finishing touches on it.

Brad smiled, sipping his wine. He waited.

Finally, Alex spoke. "Alright, here it is. Many countries around the world have a good number of Soviet and Russian Federation-made battle tanks and SPAs (Self-Propelled Artillery). Their militaries either currently use the equipment or have mothballed it."

"I get your drift. How does one buy them?"

"That isn't as difficult as you might think."

"Yeah?" Brad sounded hopeful.

"Some governments would love to sell this hardware to buy more modern stuff. Some just have corrupt guys who would sell anything, given a chance."

"So, it isn't complicated."

"I said it isn't as <u>difficult</u>. I didn't say it isn't as <u>complicated</u>." It was Alex's turn to smile.

"What's the scheme?"

"You understand, this is just off the top of my head. I would have to give it some more thought."

"Shoot."

"Okay. First, for security and deniability reasons, you would have to set up an offshore company with an easily accessible bank account. Set it up to insulate you guys from the company."

"Right."

"Next, you'll need someone familiar with dealing in gray areas and shady customers, but who is clean legally. A trusted guy. One who plans to do profitable business with you in the future. Preferably, not American. Let's call him Pedro."

"Why Pedro?"

"I like that Spanish name."

"Alex, you're an entertaining conspirator, but I think I know just the guy that fits the bill."

"Good. Next, when you guys are positive you want to proceed, I can put you in touch with a security firm in Virginia. You can hire them to protect your project abroad. These guys are different from the people you use here in the States. I'll also point you to some people in Ukraine Pedro should take along on his trips. They'll check out the equipment and help you value it before the purchase."

"I see why all those things, so far," Brad said.

"Then, you would need to hire a good DC lawyer to ensure that all deals are on the up and up with regard to US laws, if they're applicable in any way. You'll be buying used Soviet/Russian equipment abroad and donating it to an American friend, not an adversary. I don't see many problems there. Although, one must be sure."

"Okay."

The waiter brought their grilled whole red snappers, carved open and sprinkled with olive oil, with some new potatoes and small tomatoes.

"Nice," Brad said. He displayed a ravenous look and quickly picked up his knife and fork.

"Let's hold on to our scheme here until we eat our delicious fish."

After they finished their snappers, Alex picked up their conversation, "Where were we? Oh yeah, the scheme, as you call it." He looked straight at Brad. "Next comes the 'fork in the road' decision."

"Oh, oh."

"Yeah. You guys need to decide whether you want to get US acquiescence for this or do without it."

"Where would this acquiescence help?"

"With contacts in different countries that have the hardware. With transit through Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania. One needs to avoid Türkiye; they have pliable allegiances."

"Yeah, that so-called NATO member, the Turks," Brad said with derision. "Can't the Ukrainians help with the transit?"

"They'll certainly put in the effort, but our government can be very helpful with that."

"Okay."

"The next issue is the speed. You need to aim for a speedy and secretive operation before the Russians can react. They'll find out anyway from some of the people you buy from, but the speed would prevent them from interfering. That's where the skills of your Pedro and the security teams come in."

"You're right. It's complicated."

"Yeah. One more thing."

"The shipping?"

"Yeah, the shipping. Plus, the storage for accumulating the hardware in Greece if using a single transport by rail. Alternately, the special trucking platforms, if transporting it piecemeal."

"I assume a single transport is better."

"It depends on how one can store it in Greece."

Brad smiled, a mixture of determination and admiration on his face. "If all of this is off the top of your head, I'm afraid to hear what's inside."

Knowing his friend as he did, Alex sensed Brad realized this had been only the beginning – and whatever came next would be far more complicated and dangerous than he initially expected.

"You've definitely heard a lot of similar mumbo-jumbo doing your high-tech deals," Alex said.

They laughed.

"I would need to talk to the guys who wanted to do this. I'll let you know what their thinking is."

"Yeah. Do the talking in person, not on the phone, okay?"

"I will."

"You would need to arrange for a secure communication setup during this deal."

"Yes."

As they finished their wine, Brad asked, "When you were there, what did you see or hear that was most unusual or shocking?"

Alex thought for a moment and then said, "You probably read about the atrocities in the Russian-occupied areas, like Bucha, right?"

"Yes."

"It's that way in most places liberated by the Ukrainians. The bulk of the Russian forces fighting there is from the lowest strata of their population."

"I read about the convicts and others."

"Yeah, there are horrible cases of torture, rape, and executions of civilians. Ukrainians now call the Russians 'Orcs' or sometimes 'Ruscists.'"

"Ruscists? Orcs? As… in Lord of the Rings 'Orcs'?"

"Yeah. The FSB (Russia's Federal Security Service), the new KGB, is also in the area." Alex cleared his throat and clenched his square jaw, remembering. "One story haunts me."

"Tell me."

"Ukrainians have this Russian-language YouTube channel called 'Freedom 24/7.' They set it up for Russian-speaking people abroad, including people in the Russian Federation. It's a well-run news operation. I saw one interview there I can't forget."

"About the war?"

"Everything there now is about the war."

Brad shook his head. "Right."

"So, two anchors interviewed a big, strong, forty-something man, a town mayor in the Kherson region. He spoke about his fifteen-year-old son being held in a jail cell by the Russian occupiers in the area east of the front line."

"How did he end up there?"

"The boy was visiting his grandmother when the Russians invaded."

"Why would they hold a fifteen-year-old?"

"Only because his father served as the town mayor in the free territory. The Russians allowed the boy to call his father. They asked him to tell his dad that if he wanted to continue talking to his son, he should stop posting messages on social media directed to his town's residents. The jailers let the father know that his son's treatment depended on his dad's compliance."

"I can just imagine the atmosphere of the interview."

"Yeah. The dad said that compared to the people being tortured and executed all over the place, his son's predicament hadn't been the worst. But the way this large man told the story about this boy, his only child, barely holding it together, made the interviewers, both grown men, freeze.

"The interviewers didn't seem to be able to ask a single question or say anything for what seemed like a whole minute or more. They just sat silently. I had a feeling that everyone in the studio and beyond felt the horror of this tragedy."

Alex and Brad finished their lunch and left the restaurant. They parted, with Brad telling Alex he would call him in a day or two after he had spoken with his group about the project.

# CHAPTER 3

In the best tradition of Northern California's December, that year's winter came gently. The rains would come soon, but for now, the last month of the year felt sunny, vibrant, and warm. Everyone loved the beautiful holiday season.

That Sunday afternoon, Alex and his dad walked their usual route at Stanford. The same route they had walked since Alex was a child. He always enjoyed these strolls with his dad. Walking side by side with the sun on their faces, one could easily see their resemblance. They shared the same height and hair coloring, and his dad's hazel eyes gleamed like Alex's.

They parked on El Camino Real and strolled along Churchill Mall Street between the soccer fields on the left and Masters Grove on the right. The winter sun bathed Stanford's red-tiled rooftops in a warm glow, casting long shadows on the lawns. The hum of traffic from El Camino faded slightly as they neared the familiar woodsy aroma from the eucalyptus and redwood trees.

They saw the pickup games in full swing. It was so inviting. Alex decided he must find time to play a couple of soccer games while at home.

"For quite a while now, I've been meaning to ask you something," Alex's dad said.

"What's that?"

"With all this travel around the world, do you miss your home, Palo Alto?"

"I do, Papa."

In both Russian and Swedish, Papa and Mama meant dad and mom, so that's what Alex and his sister called them since childhood.

"It's good to miss one's home," his dad said. "It grounds a man."

As they walked, they passed the place where his dad had first let go of Alex's bicycle, and Alex eventually realized he had been pedaling by himself. He had been terrified but very proud to accomplish this feat. "I just thought of the day you let go of my bicycle here."

His dad chuckled, a deep, familiar sound. “I knew you could do it. You just didn’t believe in yourself yet.” That had always been his father’s way – gentle encouragement, quietly believing in his son’s strength before Alex could see it for himself.

“I’m glad you and Mama don’t worry about my assignments anymore, as you did during my tours in the service.”

“The State Department isn’t the Green Berets in Afghanistan. Plus, your sister ensures we now always have something to worry about.”

“Katherine will settle down. It’s time,” Alex said.

Alex’s phone buzzed, a subtle reminder of the world waiting for him. He stopped to check the message. It came from Matias Heikkinen on his Helsinki team. Heikkinen wrote, ‘There is a new message from Rider. Please connect.’ Heikkinen classified the message as ‘low urgency.’ For a fleeting moment, he considered responding, but the rare comfort of walking with his father held him back.

“Work?”

“Yeah.” Alex waved it off. “It’ll wait.”

“Are you sure?”

“It’s okay. I’ll handle it later.”

They resumed their walk, and Alex changed the subject. “I know you came to the States as a twenty-five-year-old and probably feel more American than most people born here, but do you ever miss the place of your childhood in Ukraine?”

“Odesa?”

“Yes, that beautiful city by the Black Sea.”

“Miss – no, remember – yes.”

“Tell me.”

“Alright. What I remember?”

“Yes.”

“Odesa was a city of contradictions,” his father began, his voice softening with memory. “A place where history clung to every stone – Renaissance architecture, the grandeur of the old port – yet always changing, always moving forward. Even under Soviet rule, the spirit in Odesa couldn’t be crushed.” His eyes sparkled. “It had remained a city that never quite let go of its independence.”

He continued, “Now, I mostly remember my teens as a sequence of summers. The rest of the seasons at first shrunk and then vanished from memory. Every day felt bright and full of things happening around me.”

His dad paused and then asked, “Do you recall that Renaissance-style building on Gogol Street I showed you when I took you guys there for a visit?”

“I was in my teens and more interested in the beach in those days, but yeah, I remember. The street that runs to the edge of the two-hundred-foot drop with the view of the sea and the port below.”

“Yes, that’s the one. Being too young to remember our previous place across town, that’s the place I remember as my childhood home.”

“What was it like?”

“The apartment?”

“Yeah.”

“In the 1800s, Italian architects designed palatial buildings in the city’s center. In the Soviet times, the authorities divided every floor of those buildings into several apartments. Our

second-floor communal apartment was in one of those three-story buildings. We shared it with another family – a doctor, her mother, her husband, and her daughter, who also became a doctor. We shared a huge kitchen and a large bathroom with them. From what I remember, with twelve-foot-tall, elaborately crowned ceilings and late 19th-century marble fireplaces, our three rooms had large French windows. As kids, we would sit on the windowsills of the open windows and gaze at and smell the sea."

"So, my grandparents, two of my aunts, and you lived together in those three rooms."

"Yeah, but in three gorgeous rooms!" Alex's dad laughed.

"Originally, the whole building probably belonged to a single wealthy family," Alex surmised.

"You're right. It did. You understand that compared to what many others had, our place was a privilege. As a decorated WWII non-commissioned officer, my dad somehow managed to get this beautiful place. He must have known one or two important people in the city."

"Yeah, I remember seeing those medals you showed me."

Alex's dad continued in a melancholic manner, "As kids, we loved that street. Part of the street and the buildings' courtyards had fruit trees where we could just climb up and gobble the fruit until our bellies hurt. They probably planted those trees when the original owners lived in the buildings. The trees survived, and some other trees people planted much later."

"Fruit trees on the streets?"

"Yes. I remember apples, pears, apricots, cherries, and something we seldom eat here called sweet mulberries. We also loved it because of the proximity to the port and local ferries, which took us to the beaches."

"But I recall beaches close to the city's center."

"Yeah, there were a couple: Lanzheron and Arcadia. But they were nothing like the ones we could get to on a ferry in thirty minutes."

"Sounds like fun."

"Yes, it was."

As they walked around Stanford, Alex pointed to several new buildings around them. "But, here at Stanford, they have put up more and more buildings where the grass fields used to be. Pretty soon, there will be no room for students to play frisbee or soccer anymore."

"The Bill Gates types keep donating money, so they keep building. You still have a good few left here to play soccer on." Alex's dad smiled.

"Papa, Odesa was quite a large city even when you were there, but what about outside the city?"

"Yeah, we were city kids, and we mostly had two opportunities to see and feel the countryside."

"What were they?"

"The first one was when we traveled by train, bus, or on one of our friends' mopeds to places like Karolino-Buhaz."

"Mama told me about her trip there with you. The miles-long beach between the Dniester River estuary and the Black Sea?"

"Yes, where the river flows into the sea. To get there, we had to pass through miles and miles of fields, through the corn, watermelons, vineyards, and, of course, sunflower fields. You know, when your mother and I spent time in Andalucía, in Spain, we saw gorgeous sunflower fields. There, they grew on the rolling hills. The Ukrainian Steppe is flat, and sunflower fields

look like a yellow sea flowing into the horizon. It's something to behold. If you can, you should see it when you're there."

"'A sunflower sea!?' I'll make sure to see that." Alex pictured the image of his favorite flower. "But you mentioned two opportunities?"

"The second was very Soviet."

"How is that?"

"Every fall, university students had to spend several weeks working on collective or state farms called 'kolkhoz' and 'sovkhoz.' We lived in awful dormitories and worked the fields. Everybody hated it. But, looking back, this is where we all 'touched' the earth, and I learned to tend the vineyards – I loved that. I guess, in my next life, I would want to grow grapes and make wine."

Alex laughed. "You think it's better than starting and building companies in Silicon Valley, as you did?"

"I don't know about better, but it's something I've always wanted to do. Remember how the wine country here looks and smells during the harvest in the fall?" Alex's dad asked, a voice full of wistfulness. "I love the intoxicating aroma of the grapes and the oak barrels."

"Yeah, Napa and Sonoma. I remember it very well. This reminds me, on the way back, let's stop by the store. I want you guys to try one of the Napa winery's wines I've come to like."

"That would pair well with Mama's dinner tonight." Alex's father stopped abruptly. "Oh yeah, almost forgot to tell you."

"What's that?"

"I'm not positive. Do you remember my childhood friend Dima Shevchenko?"

"I do."

"Remember his son, about your age? We met them in Odesa. Remember?"

"Yes. Sergey was his name. Right?"

"Yes, that's right. So, Sergey is now leading, I think, a company-sized military drone unit. He often comes to Kyiv. Would you like to see him?"

"If my schedule allows, of course."

"I'll let Dima know."

They returned home just in time to help with dinner. Alex joined his mother and Katherine in preparing the meal as he always did when home.

Their large kitchen in Old Palo Alto often teamed with people enjoying his mother's delicious food and good conversation.

Alex's mother liked to cook and instilled in her children a love of good food and cooking. Alex and his sister often wondered how this beautiful, tall, reddish-blond woman who spoke four languages, got an MBA, and had a successful career in the Valley while raising two children with Alex's dad, prepared such great food. They playfully attributed it to her solid Swedish Viking roots.

They didn't have to do much. They just helped with the Greek salad and assembled a three-cheese lasagna before it landed in the oven.

"Have you met any beautiful girls over there? Some Ukrainian girls are gorgeous," Alex's mother said, a gleam in her eye.

"Mama, he doesn't have time for any of that. Right, Alex?" Katherine teased. She added a grimace.

Alex chuckled. "No, you're right. No time for that. But there are many attractive girls there."

“Shame,” his mother chimed in, her eyes twinkling. “I had hoped for a charming Ukrainian daughter-in-law one of these days.”

“Mama!” Alex groaned, though a smile tugged at his lips. “You’ll have to wait a little longer.”

His dad just grinned.

At the table Alex asked, “What do you guys think of this Merlot? Sterling calls it ‘Vintner’s Collection.’ Not as excellent as the one they make with only Napa grapes, but pretty damn good for just fourteen bucks, in my opinion.”

Everyone around the table agreed.

“And how’s the wine in Kyiv?” Alex’s dad asked. He took a sip of the Merlot.

Alex swallowed a mouthful of lasagna and said, “Pretty good, actually. The Kyivans tell me that the wines from Crimea before the Russian occupation were very good, but we don’t see them anymore. We do get some good wine from Odesa’s wineries. Then, there is the cherry wine from Lviv.”

“Cherry wine!” Katherine exclaimed, giggling. “Sounds wonderful.”

“It is,” Alex agreed. “And also, despite the war, several wine bars are still open. I visited one and talked to the owner. He said four in ten Ukrainians now opt for Ukrainian wines, up from 2 in 10 before the war. The war seems to have boosted people’s demand for local wines – a show of national pride.”

“Interesting that the wine bars are continuing to operate. What about restaurants?” asked Alex’s mom.

“Ahh, you would be surprised how much dining out continues. It seems it has become an act of defiance and patriotism for the Ukrainians. I discovered that Kyiv has just as many restaurants open now as before the Russian invasion. Everyone wants a sense of normalcy. I used to visit a restaurant that took a direct hit one day. Thankfully, since it was early morning, no one was hurt. They reopened in a different location.”

More questions about the current state of Ukraine ensued while everyone enjoyed their meal. The wine’s warmth and his family’s laughter wrapped around Alex like a blanket. For a moment, everything felt right. But as the conversation shifted and he remembered Heikkinen’s message, Alex couldn’t ignore the pull of the world beyond their table – the world that waited for him across the Atlantic. The peacefulness he felt in his hometown was fragile, like the calm before the next storm.

✧ ✧ ✧

Later, Brad called his friend about Ukraine’s hardware.

To take the call, Alex stepped over to a quiet side of the backyard where his dad had installed a small fountain and a bench. Preparing for the winter, his mom had trimmed all the roses. He loved that his parents took such good care of the house.

“They all agreed the plan is good, and if possible, they do want the US acquiescence, as you put it.”

“Good deal, Brad. I’ll be in DC in a few days. I’ll talk to some people and see if they agree to help with this project.”

“Oh, yeah, and your ‘Pedro’ is actually Sebastián Diaz from Argentina. He calls himself Seb. A very good guy. I’ll send you his detailed info.”

“Great. Meanwhile, let’s think about any other details that need attention,” Alex said. “I’ll let you know if there is anything else I can come up with. Of course, you’ll do the same.”

“Will do. If I haven’t talked to you before then, enjoy Christmas with your family. Tell your mom I still remember her Lussebullar – am I saying it right? You know, those Swedish saffron buns she makes in December.”

“Yes, December 13th. That’s for the Lucia festival. When Swedish kids walk in a row with candles in their hair, it’s quite a sight.”

“Yeah, those buns were fabulous.”

“She’ll be happy to hear that,” Alex said, glancing back toward the house, where warm light spilled from the windows. “Happy Holidays to you and your family as well, Brad.”

✧ ✧ ✧

At night, around eleven, Alex sat alone in his room when the evening wound down at the Curtners. The dim light from his desk lamp cast long shadows on the walls.

He clicked his secure app and messaged one of the officers at his Station in Helsinki. ‘Good morning, Matias.’

Back came. ‘Well, good evening to you.’

‘How’s the snow? Falling?’ Alex’s smile was almost audible through the message.

‘Don’t tease me, you Californian you.’

Alex ran a well-oiled CIA operation in Finland. He had built it from the ground up, and every piece had to fit perfectly. His Station dealt with political, military, and economic HUMINT (human intelligence).

A few years ago, he recruited one of his most valuable assets – Russian colonel Gregory Panchev, code name Rider, who served in the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces. Alex built a small team to handle this critical asset. They gave the Russian General Staff the code name the Club.

He had set up the Helsinki Medical Trading Company, providing Russia with Western medical equipment and pharmaceuticals. The company had an office in Moscow staffed with locals. This completely legit operation made a small profit. Of course, the Helsinki employees and the Moscow office didn’t know about the CIA connection. The CIA officer on his team, Matias Heikkinen, worked in the Helsinki Medical Trading Co. A local support asset at the Medical Trading Company’s Moscow office, Sergey Nestov, code name Mover, helped the team run the colonel.

Rider had two comm methods with Alex’s team in Helsinki: a SecureDrop and a dead drop. SecureDrop, a software suite that allowed placing and retrieving encrypted files to/from several secure servers and sites, provided the primary form of communication. Rider used a special phone via VPN (Virtual Private Network) and public Wi-Fi. He rarely used a dead drop in a secret location to pass an encrypted file on a micro flash memory card. Mover handled these drops with Rider and frequently traveled on business from Moscow to Finland.

‘What’s the message, Matias?’

‘Russian Defense Minister, read Putin, will appoint Valery Gerasimov (Chief of the General Staff of the Russian military) in place of Sergey Surovikin as overall commander of the war against Ukraine. Surovikin will serve as Gerasimov's deputy.’

‘Hasn’t Czar heard the English idiom ‘Don’t change horses in midstream?’

‘He doesn’t speak English.’ Back came a smiling emoji. ‘But they’re getting serious.’

‘Yeah, Gerasimov is the best they have, that’s for sure.’

‘Thanks, Matias. I’ll pass that to the Association (Alex’s team’s codename for the Ukrainian General Staff).’

*This time – no earthquake.*

# January 2023

## CHAPTER 4

At his home in DC, Alex received a comm from Heikkinen in Helsinki. ‘There is a message from Rider. Please connect.’ This came as ‘low urgency.’

Alex responded, ‘What’s the message, Matias?’

‘Rider says that it seems the Fox,’ the team’s code name for the Russian FSB (Federal Security Service), which also handles CI (Counterintelligence), ‘is setting up a small on-site group close to the Club’s top brass.’

Alex’s mind kicked into a higher gear. ‘Interesting. And the reasons?’

‘Rider doesn’t know yet.’

Alex paused, thinking through the implications.

‘Are you there?’

‘Yeah,’ Alex replied. ‘Matias, this one has a much higher classification than ‘low urgency.’’

The Station valued Heikkinen for his attention to detail, reliability, and adherence to procedures. The bright young officer had grown fast into this demanding function, but some multi-move sequences still required Alex’s support.

‘Sorry.’

Alex texted, ‘It’s okay. The messaging today is going to be verbose. We should slow down.’

‘Okay.’

‘Let’s see. There are two possibilities here. The first one – it’s just a reorganization. The higher-ups decided the Club needed more security, so they set up a shop there. Doubtful since

there is no love lost between the Club and the Fox. In such a case, the Club would, most likely, have used their own security team. The second one is much more serious – the Fox guys suspect or are sure that the Club has been compromised.'

'The only way they can be convinced of that is if the Association or we also have a breach,' messaged Heikkinen, 'and their asset reported that we know about their plans.'

'Agree,' Alex responded. He collected his thoughts.

Heikkinen didn't type anything.

Still getting used to the weight of handling such a critical operation, Matias conveyed his anxiety through the pauses in his replies.

'Matias,' Alex messaged, 'I know this is heavy, but you've got good instincts. We'll get through this. We'll develop the plan and follow it – step by step.'

Matias's response came after a moment. 'Thanks. It's just… this is bigger than anything I've handled before.'

'I know. But that's why we've got procedures in place. We'll adapt. Stay sharp, and don't hesitate to reach out.'

'I will.'

'Okay, let's get back to the analysis.' Alex's training and experience kicked in. 'So, this is a little convoluted, but here is my reasoning.'

'Yes.'

'The most likely breach on our side is in the Association.' Alex worked through the logic. 'And we know the other side has one. It's our Rider.'

'Right.'

'The source in the Association could be among the top group of generals or on the team of one of the top generals.'

'Or a low-ranking officer familiar with most info across most of the Association teams,' inserted Heikkinen.

'I know their organization – they keep everything below the top brass strictly compartmentalized.'

'Okay, then it's someone from the top brass or one in a team.'

'If it were one in the team of a top general, only a few plans within a particular responsibility of that top general would get known to the Club. It would happen infrequently, most likely not triggering the Fox to start the breach hunting. So, my money is on one of the top generals themselves,' Alex concluded.

'Many 'ifs,' but it sounds reasonable.'

'Here is what Rider has to do,' Alex typed.

'Yes?'

'Tell him to keep his cool, strictly follow our procedures, and reduce the number of his comms to only important events. In addition, only pass something to Mover when it's absolutely necessary. And I mean in exceptional situations only. He also needs to inform us about the access size of any particular intel.'

'The number of people who know the info?'

'Right.'

'Is that it?'

'No. Actions on our and the Association's part will be a bit more complex,' Alex messaged. 'We need to comm our intel only to the very top brass of the Association. I'll ask that this select group not disseminate Rider's intel.'

‘I’m still thinking about the timing of all of this. I mean, why now?’ Heikkinen asked.

‘Yeah. Let’s break this down,’ Alex wrote, touching the crown of his head. ‘If the Fox is already sniffing around, they only now acquired their source in the Association, who reported the Association’s knowledge about the Club’s plans. Or… what’s more likely, the Fox finally placed an experienced CI analyst on the intel coming from their mole in the Association who connected the dots.’

‘But we always present our intel from Rider as though it’s based on our satellite or another form of signal intelligence gathering,’ Heikkinen texted.

‘Yes, but a good analyst at the Fox could see that only HUMINT could provide some of this info.’

‘Right.’

Alex knew the Fox wouldn’t make empty moves. Once they had a scent, they hunted ruthlessly. He had seen it happen before. He wrote, ‘At some point soon, if the Fox doesn’t uncover Rider, God, I hope it doesn’t, it will start parsing the Club into small access groups. It will then feed each group with a different piece of disinformation or, alternatively, with insignificant real info. Then, suppose the mole in the Association, despite our precautions, still somehow gets one of the bait pieces. In this case, this method will potentially localize the mole within one group of the Club. So, our Station team’s ability to discern the bait among the real intel is Rider’s insurance.’

‘Wow! What a mess!’ Heikkinen wrote.

‘It is.’ Alex began to feel concerned. Very. That wasn’t the first time a critical operation faced compromise. It wouldn’t be the last. But a closed loop with two moles on both ends – it felt like new territory, even for him.

‘What if the mole is in the Company (commonly used employees’ term for the CIA)?’

‘We’ll restrict access here too, although I think it’s the Association’s breach.’

‘I’ll instruct Rider.’

‘Right.’

Heikkinen paused and then messaged, ‘Not good.’

‘No. Now, this has become one of our main tasks. The Club will try to change their tack every time the source in our midst informs them that we know their plan.’

‘Yes.’

The danger level of Rider’s situation had increased significantly. It had entered a delicate dance with no missteps allowed.

He had come to trust the Russian colonel, and the idea of losing him hadn’t been something he wanted to entertain. But it had always been there, gnawing at the back of his mind. Every time he sent a directive, every time they received intel, the stakes rose. Rider had put his life on the line. Alex had to ensure Rider didn’t misplace his trust in the Company.

‘Okay then. We’ll review this again when I’m back. Keep me posted. Thanks, Matias.’

S*ooner or later, it had to happen. It makes it a bit more complex. A bit? No, a lot more.*