



CHAPTER ONE

The gentle rhythm of the tracks click clicking at times lulled Jack to sleep and at others kept him awake. The scenery changed outside the carriage window in the way stations changed on TV: click, click. The room was small but first-class: two beds instead of four bunks. Click, click. The little table even had a flower. And the second bed, a lover.

“You up?”

“Do I ever sleep?”

“Believe me, you sleep.”

Valeria threw a pillow at him. “I don’t snore.”

“How do you know?”

“I would have heard.”

“From your sister?” Jack had an innocently sly smile.

“You’re an asshole sometimes, you know?”

Valeria flushed.

“Val, I’m sorry. I think I’m getting stir crazy.”

“Then stretch your legs at the next station and don’t bug me.” She turned her back to him.



Jack sat up. “The beds aren’t bad at all. I was expecting greater privation.”

Val turned to him and sat up. “Privation? Who talks like that?”

“I thought you said you spoke English,” Jack said.

“I do. Pretty good, too. But sometimes you speak prat.”

“Where’d you hear that word?”

“The ticket office. Lots of English and Aussies.”

“I’m jealous of how quickly you pick up languages. Why didn’t you become an English teacher?”

“You’re envious, not jealous. And I didn’t because there’s no money in it and we already have too many teachers. Why didn’t you become an investment banker? You, with your fancy MBA.”

“Long story. Another time.” He paused. “Vodka?”

“It’s too early,” Val said, her nostrils flaring slightly.

“I thought all Russians could drink vodka,” Jack said.

“Yes, and they die before they turn fifty.”

Jack poured himself a one-inch shot in his coffee mug. “I’ll take my chances.” He paused. “I’ve been looking at the map and the train schedules. I don’t see anything that takes us up to where we need to go.”

She was silent, head lowered just enough to shield her eyes.

“Val?”



“There’s a slight problem,” she said, slowly.

“Uh-huh?”

“There’s no train or road to Uelen.”

“What?”

“There’s no . . .”

“I heard you. But you said you knew the way.”

“Yes, but not by train.” She was starting to make Jack’s blood boil.

“Hang on a bit. We’ve been travelling four bloody days on this, this *thing*, and there’s no connection to Uelen?”

Val was silent, biting her bottom lip. Despite his growing frustration, Jack thought she looked particularly striking at that moment. “We need to fly to get where you want to go,” she said finally.

“We could’ve flown from Moscow. Why endure this train?”

“Because you wouldn’t have taken me.”

The logic was sound in a way. He wasn’t going to argue.

“OK. No harm. We’ve enjoyed ourselves.” He smiled at the memory of the night before. “So, how do we get there?”

“There’s a problem. The area is like the old USSR and heavy with military. The ground isn’t even suitable



for trucks. We have to fly in, and we need permission to do so.”

“We? Fly? Permission? Too many red flags. I wanted to cross without the authorities, and I thought that’s what you wanted.”

“I know, and I do. But your plan was crazy. You can’t cross the Bering Strait. And definitely not on foot. It’s suicide.” Her voice was strong, defiant. She looked at him straight in the eyes.

“You didn’t think to tell me that earlier?”

“You wouldn’t have taken me. I don’t believe you would have taken this trip without knowing that first and I needed to take this trip with you.”

“And I’m happy that you did, but I need to get back to the US and I can’t go from Europe. I figured I’d go all the way east and figure it out from there.” Jack realised how ridiculous that sounded. *I’m a cliché*, he thought.

Valeria was quiet, waiting to see what Jack would do. She reached for his mug and took a sip. Then another.

“I can get us to the US,” she said.

“Then why did you need me?”

“I don’t have the money and I thought maybe you’d share your plan with me during our trip. I assumed you had one.”

Jack took a sip and handed the mug back to her. He smiled. “OK, so what’s the plan?”



“I wouldn’t turn on a computer much less open the internet without operating through an encryption service.” Jack Harding said it casually, but was dead serious. He hadn’t stayed alive these last ten years as a wanted man by luck. “If spam can find you, anyone can find you.”

“Aren’t you being just a bit paranoid?” Valeria Polzin was rubbing a towel against her head, knowing it would take an hour for her hair to dry. The rest of her was wrapped in another towel. *Men are so easy to manipulate if you’re prepared to have sex with them*, she thought.

“When you turn on your computer or phone, it searches out connections with the network. It’s like starting a bonfire in the middle of a starless night. If there’s anyone around, you’ll be noticed.”

“OK, Mr. Bond,” she said, smiling. She could see that Jack had forgotten about any deceptions. “But I don’t know how else to contact him. I don’t have a phone number and it’s been years since I’ve seen him.”

“And I don’t have a computer here.”

“I have a phone. You can use that,” she said.

“But there’s no security on it.”

“Get over it. This guy’s our best chance.”



Jack thought about it. He didn't like it. It was rushed and he was developing a sense of something inside him. A warning. Val wasn't telling him something, he knew. Maybe he should just disappear in China or Mongolia for a while. Finally, he shook off his anxiety and took her phone.

“What's the address? OK. Name? OK. Message sent. Now we wait.”

“Vodka?”

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Andre was escaping the madness of the house by retreating into the garage. He was to prepare the propane cylinders for the BBQ and fill the small stainless pots with a special lighting fluid for the warming trays and fondues. It wasn't hard work. The garage was detached from the house and only a couple of dozen paces from the front door. The propane was stored along the back of the garage, outside. Checking was just a matter of retrieving and putting the cylinder in the backyard where the BBQ was located. The tricky part was the fluid. It was a very fine, light fluid that was flammable but not in the way gasoline or propane would be. It burned slowly with a blue flame. He rubbed it between his fingers to get a feeling of it.



Sitting on an empty paint can near the wall of gardening tools, Andre began filling the little pots. Each had a lid that could be adjusted, allowing more or less fluid access to the oxygen it needed to burn. He carefully poured the fluid in, put on the lid, and set it aside on the concrete floor. It was important that he didn't spill any.

After he had done his fifth pot, the house party burst into his garage sanctuary. Doron, Nicki, and Vlad each had a girl on their arms that Andre didn't recognise. They stumbled a bit on the door's threshold as they walked in. A handful of children followed them.

"Is the chocolate hidden in here, Uncle Nicki?" a little voice said. It belonged to the grandchild of the owner of the house, who was currently in prison. Only a short stay, but he was missed.

"Only the best goodies are kept here. Let me see what the secret fridge is hiding." Nicki opened the old fridge and pulled out a beer. There were no sweets there.

"Nice set-up. No wonder you come out here to spend time by yourself. Peaceful." He was rummaging around the tools and making Andre uneasy.

"Stop messing around, Nicki. Let's get back to the party," Doron said. The girl on his arm was getting cold and whispering in his ear.



The children were holding little candles that looked like miniature lanterns. They weren't much larger than what you would put on a cupcake. *Probably some party favour handed out to the children to keep them occupied*, Andre thought.

Vlad was a bit further into the party spirit than the others. He found another empty can and sat next to Andre, his friend on his knee.

"Andre, my brother. What's taking you so long? You left ages ago. People are asking where you went. Mom is asking where you disappeared to."

"Just getting the fuel ready for the BBQ and fondues," replied Andre.

"Let me see that," Vlad reached for one of the little pots. He moved the lid and laughed to himself. "Do you like that Anna? Do you think it'll work?" She nodded obediently and got up to get another drink from the garage fridge. He reached for her bum but just managed a little pat.

"Thomas, what do you think about this little bomb?" Doron was getting into it.

"It's not a bomb, Thomas. It's a little pot of fuel that will keep the food warm. It's dangerous. Be careful." He was busy filling the last of the containers. The sooner he finished and returned, the sooner he could be rid of these guys.



Thomas put down his little lantern and examined the pot Vlad was holding and Doron was pointing to. He picked it up and moved the lid back and forth. “What else does it do?” he asked.

No one answered because at that point, the lantern must have lit the spilled fuel and a blue flame started glowing faintly from the concrete floor. It was a small disaster, easily fixed with a foot or a bit of sand. Instead, the girls let out a shriek. Andre couldn’t remember if it was in fear or excitement. Vlad leapt to his feet and located the fire extinguisher. He pulled the pin and began spraying everything and everyone with the white powder. It was an industrial-grade fire extinguisher liberated from one of the government offices Vlad protected during his day job. The room was covered before the little blue flame was remembered and extinguished.

“What the hell, Vlad!?” Andre didn’t want to breathe or talk with all of the fire retardant in the air. Worst of all, he didn’t like sudden movements.

In return, the others were laughing and cackling like the drunks they were. The girls began to twirl to maximise their exposure. Vlad turned the nozzle on himself to ensure coverage. The little boys laughed and screeched after they realised it was safe and when they saw the adults enjoying themselves. Only Andre fumed.



“Let’s get a picture,” one of the girls said. It was Anna. She was laughing and stomping her feet, bent over with the scene. She pulled out her phone and directed all of the parties to stand together so she could take a picture. “This’ll be our Christmas card this year!” she howled.

Andre looked at the mess. The white covered the fridge, the gardening tools, the workbench, the vice—everything. “You know this’ll take me forever to clean up,” he said to no one in particular.

“I’ll help you, Andre,” Vlad said, sincerely. “But not today. Today, we party.”

“Don’t you think we should stay sober long enough to see him arrive?” Andre asked.

“Dad would take it as an insult,” Doron said. He was already outside and wanted to be part of every conversation.

“Dad’ll just be happy to be home,” Nicki said. “And I don’t think his mind will be on that anyway.” He pulled his girlfriend closer, a little rough, and gave her a long kiss. She obediently kissed back and moved her hands onto his, which had grabbed her front.

The children had run back into the house as soon as the picture was taken. They wanted to show everyone inside how much fun they were having with their cool uncles.



“I’ll be happy to see him back in one piece,” replied Andre. “I won’t believe it until I see it.”

“Enough of all this misery,” Vlad said. “Let’s get back into the house and enjoy ourselves. Do you need any help?”

“I’ll take the fondue pots, you and Nicki can take the propane to the BBQ. Thanks.”

“With pleasure, Andre. With pleasure,” said Vlad. They all made fun of Andre but he was the youngest and they still protected him, too.

Amidst the jostling of bodies, Andre felt his phone vibrate. He put down the fondue pots and looked at his phone. It was a message from Valeria. She needed to see their father.

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CHAPTER TWO

When the train came to a halt, Jack gathered his few belongings. He had learned to live with very little. He didn't carry a phone or a watch. Just a good pair of shoes, which he wore, three pairs of underwear, socks, and T-shirts, a spare pair of jeans, a fleece with a zipper and pockets, and an outer leather jacket. He stored these in his knapsack along with a Swiss Army knife, water bottle, passport, and money. Today, he carried his money in a pocket sewn into the inside of his jeans, inaccessible unless they were off. He put the passport in his outside pocket.

Valeria had a knapsack three times the size of his as well as a handbag, some plastic shopping bags, and her phone, watch, and jewellery. Jack put his bag on his back and helped carry hers onto the platform.

“What do you have in this thing?” he said, beginning to breathe heavily.

“Just the bare necessities,” said Val.

Jack shook his head. “Any sign of your friends?”



“They’ll be just outside the station waiting for us. Look for a yellow van with a green stripe.”

“Sounds interesting.” Jack picked up Val’s knapsack and heaved his way through the crowds. Most of the people were just stretching their legs and he found the station relatively empty.

“Mr. Jack,” a thick accent said. Jack turned to see an outstretched hand.

“Hi, you must be Valeria’s friend,” Jack said.

The man paused slightly and nodded to Val. She smiled at him. “Yes, my name is Vladimir. But please, call me Vlad.”

“Thanks for picking us up, Vlad. I don’t know what I’d have done without Val.”

Vlad picked up Val’s bags and carried them to the van. Inside were two more guys. They moved over to allow Jack and Val to sit down. Vlad went around to the driver’s seat and got in.

“We’ve been having some trouble with the police lately. They’ve been checking passports at checkpoints on the highway. Do you mind giving me your passports just in case?” Vlad put his hand out in anticipation, driving with his left.

Val put her passport in Vlad’s hand. Jack hesitated until Val put her hand on his thigh, reassuring him that



everything was OK. *I don't like this*, he thought, but then handed over his, as well.

The checkpoints never happened and they arrived at a farm after almost an hour's drive. Jack lost track of where he was. He had tried to remember road signs along the way, but he couldn't see much out of the van and his Russian was patchy at best.

The van stopped and the doors opened. Jack was escorted into a building just off to the side of the house. The two extra men walked behind him and Val as Vlad led the way.

"Vlad, how do you know Val?" Jack asked. They were holding the door open for him as he walked in. He saw a white powdering covering everything. Inside, there were four large men, all in leather. He stopped cold. Then he backed out of the door but came up against the two men who were walking behind him and Val.

"Val? Vlad?" Jack tried to see them but couldn't. "Val? What the hell did you do to her?"

"Don't worry about her. Worry about yourself." The speaker pushed him inside and the four men grabbed him. The man behind Jack pulled out what looked like a video recorder. When it was on, he nodded to the others.

Jack resisted and tried to determine what was happening. It was happening so fast. Memories of Joe



and that night with his parents flooded back. He started to shake and his body became cold.

Three of the men held him firm. They were each built like a brick house. Jack squirmed, lunged, and pushed. At 6'2" and 230 pounds, he was no weakling, but these men were hard. And they didn't say a thing.

The fourth man approached Jack with a knife. He lifted it above his head and slowly brought it down, allowing him to see the futility of resistance. A hand pulled at his shirt and the knife went behind. It was sharp and the fabric fell away, pressure ever downward, exposing his flesh. There was a faded scar along his abdomen where Clog had him stabbed ten years earlier. There were other cuts and scratches from Valeria but those were mainly on his back, out of sight for now. Jack felt a totally different level of terror as the knife reached his waist.

The man with the knife unbuckled the belt, undid the button, and unzipped Jack's jeans. *What the hell?* His mind screamed in terror as he saw himself from outside his body. He saw the man with the video recorder, the three men holding him like statues, and this thing with a knife about to open him up like a rabbit for stew.

The fourth man barked instructions to the others. Jack was thrown to the ground and his jeans were removed. One man held his shoulders and head



while the other two grabbed his legs. The fourth man approached with the blade. Jack lay on his back, on his jacket, front exposed. The two men held his legs up so he was spread in the most vulnerable manner. The knife and the sheer terror of what it was going to do to him froze Jack to his core.

He felt the punch and the taste of blood without seeing who did it. They hit him again. The fourth man, satisfied at the terror induced, kneeled and pushed himself into Jack. At this point, Jack wanted to die—of terror, of pain, and of shame. The fifth man continued to record, but Jack had lost notice of him long ago.

The second man was rougher. He wanted Jack to cry out. He wanted to hear the pain as well as see it. Jack was punched, slapped, and eventually whipped before the second man raped him mercilessly. There was no laughter, no music, and no joviality. Jack grit his teeth and his eyes rolled into the back of his head. Soon, his body could feel no more. He had reached sensory overload. He had become a piece of meat to be consumed.

The third man was not as rough but made up for this with depravity. He made Jack move into different positions, pushing his head into the powder on the concrete floor. The room smelled of lighter fluid and



something burned. For Jack, it was hell. His mind and body cried out for it to stop.

It was a full hour and twelve minutes, according to the video taken, before the fourth man finished. Jack was bleeding internally and had sustained burns, whips, and fists to his body. *At least they didn't kick me when they finished*, he thought.

The men left and Vlad returned.

“Do we understand each other or do I need to provide another lesson?” he said in his thick English accent.

Jack couldn't speak. His face was swelling up and he curled into a fetal position and shook violently. Vlad brought a blanket for him.

“It's time to take you to your quarters,” Vlad said. He helped Jack up. All of the clothes were left on the floor and he was moved to a building beside the garage. Between the buildings, Jack struggled to breathe in the fresh air and feel the warmth of the sun on his face. He feared he would never feel it again.

When Vlad opened the door, Jack could see a row of bunk beds and mattresses on the floor. More than thirty bodies lay in various forms of sleeping and cowardice as they saw Vlad. He was walked over to a lower bunk bed and pushed onto it.



“This’ll be your place. It is a lot better than being on the floor. These are your roommates. Don’t get any ideas. You’ve had your first day. This can go easy or hard. If you resist, I’ll bring your friends back tomorrow and the next day and the next day until your body is ground into dust. You’re a little older than we like but it provides variety. Don’t make me regret helping you.” He left and the door locked from the outside.

Inside, there were no windows. There was a dull yellow light in the corner next to what looked like a toilet. Jack could see girls and boys, but mainly girls, ranging in age from eleven to seventeen.

Do any of you speak English? he said to himself. He couldn’t make a sound. The pain and the swelling made that impossible. Instead, he turned his back to the silent eyes looking at him and tried to make himself fall asleep. His last thoughts were about Val. *If this happened to me, what did they do to her?*

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He learned nothing of Val. His days consisted of cleaning himself and being raped by men. *Why is it always men?* he thought. *Why can’t I have a woman rape me? What’s wrong with us men?* After a month, he stopped thinking anything whatsoever. He knew he had it better than



the young girls and boys. They were forced to have sex twenty or thirty times a day with men older, fatter, and more perverted than he had thought possible. He saw their bleeding bodies and the shame, the vacant look in their eyes, and the absolute lack of laughter. *If I don't get out of here soon, I'll become just like them.*

“What do we have here?” The voice belonged to a distinguished gentleman with a wedding ring and polished shoes. He wore a tie and had a cross pinned on his lapel.

“Who would you like tonight?” Vlad asked, adopting his best manners.

“I'll have the old boy and those two girls.”

“Excellent. I'll send them right in.”

The man disappeared and Vlad grabbed an eleven- and a sixteen-year-old. They looked like sisters, both blonde and slim with a similar nose. He jerked his head to Jack to follow. They were directed to the main house and up the stairs. *The master bedroom. VIP,* thought Jack.

As he walked between their quarters and the main house, he realised it was dusk already. Early and getting cold; October in the middle of Russia. He stole a glance and looked again across the empty fields surrounding the compound. It was miles from anywhere and each time he saw it, he tried to figure out how he was going to run away. Five men escorted the boys, girls, and



himself to the rooms next to their quarters. This was not the first time he had been to the main house or seen the hopeless expanse of land around him. But it was the first time when, after seeing again what he was up against, something inside him broke into an even smaller piece. *I'm never getting out of here.*



He guessed it was almost three months later when he was summoned by Vlad and told he was going on a trip. Andre was going to take him to his new master, who would decide what he wanted from Jack. Doron went along to help.

“Did you father get back safely?” Jack tried to get Andre to talk.

“Yeah, almost four months ago.”

“No, I mean I heard he went to America.”

“Oh that, how did you hear that?” Andre became suspicious.

“Shut up or I’ll make you shut up,” Doron said. He motioned to slap Jack but didn’t.

“I’m sorry. I just wanted to say that I can pay more for my freedom than whoever is paying your father for me.” Jack had played his only card.

“You don’t have a say in this,” Doron said.



“I agree. That’s why I was asking about your father. Maybe you should run it past him?”

Doron looked unsure and Andre just blinked.

“How much?” Andre asked.

“How much did you pay for me? How much are you getting for me? How much can you earn from me? If you let me know that, I’ll better all of it.” Jack saw hope. He knew he couldn’t run. Either they or the winter would kill him. Greed was the answer.

“You want to know the economics behind our business?” Andre asked.

“I guess so,” said Jack.

“We got you for free. We get everyone for free,” Doron said. “But we get a lot renting your ass out. We must be selling you because you’re not bringing in enough.”

My sale could be my death sentence, thought Jack. “But the others. They must bring you in quite a lot.”

“Of course. We’re not Communists. We’re not a charity.” Doron laughed.

“Do you ever ship people to America?” Jack asked. He held his breath. *Was it too soon to ask?*

Both Doron and Andre paused. Jack could feel the foot come off the accelerator. They were thinking of how to answer that.

“Yes, but only for virgins, young children, or special orders. You would never be shipped. Besides, the market isn’t worth it. American has its own supply.” It seemed like Andre forgot himself for a while and spoke to Jack like a real person. “Say a child goes missing,” he explained. “Within forty-eight hours, a quarter of them are snapped up by the pimps and operators. That kid’ll be earning money for his master within the day and should last a few years if they are handled properly. Costs nothing. So why should they pay for foreign imports?”

“OK,” Jack said, trying to focus on getting to the States. “What if I wanted to pay for my voyage to America, alongside these special delicacies, what would that cost?”

“I would need to ask my father. And he’ll be mad. He already sold you,” Andre said.

“You can tell the buyer I escaped and you had to shoot me. The new guy will understand. Besides, the next piece of meat is as good as or better than me, presumably.” Jack was sweating. He didn’t like the way the conversation was turning.

Silence. Then a phone came out and Andre talked to his father.



“A hundred thousand US dollars will get you to America on the next shipment. Can you do that?” Andre was genuinely interested, as was Doron.

“Yes,” Jack said without hesitation. His gut told him that it was ten times the going rate, but it didn’t matter what they asked for. It was his neck and he needed to live to fight another day.

“How are you going to pay? I can’t say yes to my father without payment.”

“I need to be in America before I pay in full. If you get me onto a computer here, I can wire half now and the rest when I am standing on American soil.”

Andre looked at Jack. He had to pull the truck over. Doron was silent. This time they both talked to their father but Jack didn’t catch much of it. When they finished, Andre turned the truck around.

“Father said if your payment doesn’t arrive you will be dead by morning.”

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