

## *Prologue*

*St. Petersburg, Russia*

THE SMALL MAN SHOOK his hand.

“You will see the plan is perfect. There is no need to worry.” The small man’s intense blue eyes mesmerized him, and he wanted to believe what he said. He finally let go of his hand and continued his persuasive speech. “All you need to do is focus on your family now. They need you. Let *our* family take care of the rest.”

He nodded. It all sounded fairly simple and risk-free. And the small man was right, he needed to focus on his family, put all his strength into making her better.

The small man studied him for a while and said, “As you know, the equipment has already been shipped, and they are preparing the lab as we speak. I will send you a final report in the next few days, but if everything continues to go as planned, the production will start very soon.”

He felt more and more confident that this arrangement would be for the best. He checked his watch; it was almost time to catch his flight back east to Irkutsk.

“Is there anything I can do for you in the meantime?” The small man intensified his captivating gaze.

“No.” He shook his head. He really felt good about this now. “I will wait for you to contact me with any proceedings, correct?”

A quick nod. “Yes, that would be correct. Now, please.” The small man showed him toward the door. “My driver will drop you off at the airport. Please enjoy your flight home.” With this, the small man excused himself.

He looked after the small man as he walked down the carpeted corridor; he had never met anybody more charismatic. Yes, there was no doubt in his mind that he was doing the right thing. Satisfied with his actions, he straightened his shoulders. As he turned to walk out the door, he caught a glimpse of himself in the tall wall mirror.

He adjusted his tie and looked himself in the eye. Lagunov nodded at his image and disappeared into the darkness.

## *Chapter 1*

WHEN MIA GOT THE call at lunchtime, she was thrilled.

She hadn't worked in a few months and was growing bored of just hanging out with the locals.

"When can you depart?" Simon asked. "We need you there by latest Sunday."

Mia could hardly hide her excitement. "Shouldn't be a problem, Simon. Let me get back with you by tomorrow."

As she put down the receiver, she checked herself in the little, antique, oriental mirror she had brought back from a previous job.

She would have to get her hair done before she took off. "What do you think, Blue?" she asked her bright-eyed Akita–Australian Shepherd mix. "Do we deserve a little pampering at Rosa's Salon?"

Mia wouldn't have to worry about making an appointment. Waiting in line was one of the few entertainments in Stoney Creek, a rural town of some seven hundred people. Most of them were Native Americans, but some of them were the leftovers of a generation of the gold diggers. Mia had fallen in love with Stoney Creek and its people during a ski vacation at Moose Mountain, a resort just thirty miles east of Flathead Lake in Montana and a stone's throw away from the Canadian border.

She worked for a small, but very successful, relocating company based in Seattle.

It had been almost two months since her last contract with Worldmove Incorporated had ended. Her status with the company was unique. She didn't work with a team and was therefore responsible for her own assignments once she had accepted them. As a relocation specialist, she never quite knew when the next job would come along, or where it would take her. But Mia loved to travel and adapted as easily to new surroundings as a chameleon changes color.

Being fluent in four languages, she was a professional in demand. Her responsibility was to scout out the cities where individuals would be relocated to by their employer. Sometimes her clients moved within the United States, but mostly her assignments took her overseas to Europe and beyond.

When Daimler and Chrysler had merged, she'd had to relocate several European executives to Pontiac, Michigan. Eventually it was as easy as finding the right top-floor, high-end condominium located within walking distance of—but still discreetly neighbored to—a pricey nightclub. The arrangement had been perfect for the recently divorced, golf-playing, middle-aged German engineer.

Other times Mia had to tolerate all the “what we don't want” before she could even start finding just the right flat for people like the Dunham family from Los Angeles. After a joint venture with an Asian computer company, Dunham Enterprises needed to relocate to Singapore.

Dunham Enterprises had consisted of a team of four young and dynamic software designers, the owner (Dunham himself), and his family. Mia had eventually found the perfect apartment unit in busy, downtown Singapore for Dunham's aspiring team.

The Dunham's themselves had been a bit more of a challenge.

After extensive research she had found an American-owned private school for the three little ones. Just as important as finding the right school, she'd also found a ballet instructor for the girls and little league practice for the boy. Of course the Singapore Island Country Club for Dad Dunham and the utmost modern wellness center with English-speaking staff for Mom also had to be within reasonable driving distance from their new home.

A smile tweaked Mia's lips as she remembered Mr. Dunham's inquiry about any "special services" she might provide. He'd had an itch since his wife had gotten a little too comfortable a little too quickly in their new home—thanks to her chiseled, Polynesian yoga instructor.

Sometimes she had to deal with the occasional flirty CEO who confused her job with that of a hostess. Usually her clients really appreciated her professionalism. She thoroughly researched the options a new city had to offer and made sure the right environment was found for each individual and their family. "The easier they are relocated, the happier the client and the faster they get back to work. That's what the employer is looking for," Scott Hensley, the owner of Worldmove, had told Mia during their accidental encounter two years ago at a TGI Friday's when she had still lived in Seattle.

A cold, wet nose brought her back to reality. Mia was still standing in the small front room she used as her office, wearing running shorts and a T-shirt, trying to decide about that haircut. Blue nudged her bare leg, reminding her about his promised run.

Blue enjoyed running just as much as she did. In the past weeks, Mia had concentrated on lengthening her distance and had added a weekly hill climb to develop her muscle strength. By spring she hoped to be ready for her first marathon. Today she had planned on another workout on Blue's favorite hill. He would have chased the groundhogs while Mia enjoyed the yellow blossoms of the sage brushes on this pretty, early autumn day.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Blue Eyes." Mia bent down to cuddle her dog. "I guess we need to postpone our workout for today. Looks like you're in for another vacation with Uncle Phil."

She felt a little guilty, but she knew Blue didn't mind. There were just too many squirrels to chase on Uncle Phil's huge ranch just outside of Stoney Creek. Since Mia had moved here eighteen months ago, she had known Uncle Phil as just that. Everybody called him Uncle even though he didn't seem to have any real family anymore. His rusty, 1968 Ford pickup had "Uncle Phil's Farm Fresh Eggs" painted in orange script letters on the driver's

side door. He was a leather-faced old farmer who took in everyone's pets during the occasional vacation time away.

Mia got herself a Perrier out of the tiny refrigerator in the even tinier kitchen she shared with Zulanda. Mia rented a room from the older native woman—Zulu to her friends—who taught two different grades in one classroom in Stoney Creek's only elementary school.

During her ski vacation, Mia had met Zulu browsing the local library. After a long conversation between the two strangers, Mia had fallen in love with the uncomplicated ease in which these people seemed to live their lives. Mia had needed to simplify her own life and wanted to move away from Seattle. The arrangement in Stoney Creek had sounded too good to be true. Zulu had offered to rent Mia her second bedroom with an adjoining bathroom. Zulu didn't own a car, so Mia's personal belongings could be stored in the garage.

Zulu's husband had died several years earlier and she had needed someone around the house who could take care of smaller maintenance projects, like painting and the garden work. The two women had quickly worked out the details, and despite the thirty year age difference, Mia and Zulu had soon developed a deep friendship.

The sun was setting earlier now in mid September, and cool air streamed through the open front door. The sound of Zulu's many wind chimes hanging from the white porch reminded Mia of fall. She decided to change into some warmer clothes before making her call.

Stoney Creek sat in a beautiful valley between majestic mountains. The setting was magnificent, but it also meant there was no such thing as cell phone service. When Mia had first moved here, time had seemed to stand still, and she'd liked that.

I need to get a hold of Oliver McGee before the day is over, Mia thought. She'd schedule a flight out to Kalispell with him. McGee owned and operated the local crop-dusting business. When he didn't go after bugs or assist the smoke-jumpers during the wildfire season in the nearby forests of Glacier National Park, he happily provided

flights out to the city. Getting to Kalispell on short notice was almost impossible since the drive around Flathead Lake took several hours. But the international airport in Kalispell was small, so they allowed personal aircraft traffic, and Mia liked to take advantage of the local service.

McGee was a veteran. His Korean War stories kept changing, and he recounted his past hockey days every chance he got. He was interested in talking to Mia partly because she'd grown up in the Midwest.

She went upstairs to her bedroom, took off her exercise gear, and slipped into a pair of blue, fleece-lined pants and a zip-up Michigan Spartans sweater. If she still planned on a quick visit to Rosa's Salon, she'd better be prepared for the early evening's chill. The weather could change drastically in a matter of minutes this time of the year.

## *Chapter 2*

“HONEY, YOU’RE OUT OF your mind!” Rosa exclaimed dramatically. Mia had just told her about her newest assignment. “Siberia? Like in Siberia, Russia?” Rosa could have easily passed for one of the dusky maidens from the early 1930s movie era. Gracefully she walked around Mia as she trimmed the ends of her shoulder-length, chestnut hair.

Just an hour earlier, Mia had run into Oliver McGee out at Uncle Phil’s Farm when she had dropped off Blue. Both men had been sitting on Uncle Phil’s front porch sharing a few good ol’ boy stories and drinking black coffee. They had offered Mia a cup, but she had declined, knowing from past experience that Uncle Phil’s bitter brew would tear up the lining of her esophagus. Mia had made arrangements for McGee to fly her out to Kalispell the following morning. From there she’d driven back into town to visit Rosa’s salon.

“It must be winter there by now. You better make sure you don’t freeze right to the doorknob.” Rosa placed her hands onto her wide hips and looked exasperatedly at Mia through the mirror.

“I’ll wear mittens,” Mia promised.

“Who in their right mind would move there anyway?” One of the older ladies asked, poking her head halfway out from under the dryer.

“Well nobody yet, actually,” Mia explained. “I’m not relocating a person. This job is a little different; they want me as an advisor to find a new location for their expanding company.”

“What is it they do?” Rosa sensed new gossip, eyeing Mia in the mirror.

“I’m not sure,” Mia lied. “Something petroleum.”

“Good grief! You’re not gonna help digging some pipeline are you, Mia Maria?” Rosa’s husband, Theo, joked from his seat in his barber chair, hiding behind his paper.

“Theodore, you wouldn’t know nothin’ ’bout no pipelines, now would you?” Rosa shot at him.

“No, Ma’am sure don’t.” Theo winked at Mia.

Married and in business together for over forty years, Theo had said before that the only dull moments they’d had was when his scissors had lost their sharp edges. It seemed that nobody actually knew how this black couple had found their way to the Northwest. The southern drawl never vanished from either one of them, even after such a long time away from their Georgian home.

After finishing Mia’s coif, Rosa turned her chair so Mia would face her. She cupped Mia’s delicate face in both hands and said, “Just take care of that beautiful skin of yours. We don’t want to be treatin’ no frostbites when you come home.”

Mia took a minute to look at herself in Rosa’s huge salon mirror. She did have her mother’s beautiful, fair skin and high cheekbones, typical for her Prussian roots. Her father’s side was Italian. Mia had inherited his big, brown eyes and thick hair.

“I guess I better get packing.” Mia got out of the chair.

“Send us a postcard ‘from Russia with love,’ or something,” Rosa said and gave Mia a hug. Rosa was a big lady and almost crushed Mia and her slender, five-foot-six frame.

“See you soon,” came from behind the paper as Mia left the salon.

It was still dark when Mia woke up the next day. She had always been an early riser and enjoyed the quiet time before nature came alive. With a fresh brew of a Columbian blend, she turned on her

computer to print out her itinerary. She had made the reservation with Delta the night before. Seattle's time zone was an hour behind hers; there was nobody in the office yet. To pass some time, Mia took care of her personal correspondence. An e-mail from her sister Corinne in New Hampshire was waiting for her.

"Geez, Cora," Mia muttered out loud. "Ed needs to take that camera away from you." Corinne and her husband, Ed, had a new baby boy. Mia got showered with picture attachments of her new nephew on a weekly basis. With only dial-up it took Mia some time to download all the photos. Her sister took the modern city amenities, including high speed internet, for granted and seemed to forget about Mia's limitations out here in rural Montana.

A little agitated, Mia thought about how many times she had asked Corinne to keep the e-mail files smaller. But as Mia watched her new nephew appear on her screen, she laughed out loud. The eight-month-old sat in a high chair, his mouth grinning toothlessly into the camera with enough chocolate pudding around it to feed the whole family.

Mia forgave her sister. Obviously it was just too tempting to keep shooting away.

She decided to give her mother in Michigan a quick call to let her know she would be out of the country for a few weeks.

"Yes, Mom, don't worry. Of course I will call you as soon as I return. I love you too. Hugs to Dad." I should just call them when I return, she thought. Her mother always worried. Mia was younger than her sister and would always be the baby to her Mom

She went back into the kitchen to pour herself a refill of hot, steaming coffee as her roommate Zulu came down the stairs. In her pink, flowered nightgown and with her black, unruly hair a total disaster, she made Mia laugh.

"I'm sorry, Zulu, but you have a serious case of bed head," Mia teased.

"If you had to deal with a bunch of third graders like the ones I've got this year, your hair would be the least of your problems, Darling!" Zulu sat next to Mia after helping herself to a cup of coffee. "Hmm, I don't know where you got this stuff, but it sure is the best coffee I've ever had."

“Leftover from what I bought in Rio. I found it way in the back of the freezer the other day.”

The two women’s casual morning conversation went on for a little while until Zulu had to get ready for school.

“Do you know when you’ll be back, Mia?” Zulu gave her a hug good-bye.

Mia shrugged. “They suggested two weeks, but you know how it goes sometimes. Would you check on Blue for me?”

“Of course, don’t worry about him. I’ll ride out to see Uncle Phil in a couple of days. You just make sure to take care of yourself.”

It was eight thirty by now in Seattle. Time to check in with Worldmove headquarters.

“Change of plans, Mia,” Simon, Team Coordinator and her boss’ right hand, informed her. “Scott wants you to come out to Seattle before you head back east.”

“West, Simon, I’m heading west, even if Russia is considered an eastern country.” Mia rolled her eyes, not knowing if she was more annoyed by Simon’s ignorance or her boss’s request. “Why do I have to re-schedule?”

“I don’t know, Mia. But I’ve got you booked on Alaska Airline at 11:35 this morning.”

“Geez, Simon, a bit more notice would have been nice.” Mia hated complaining, but was struggling with the aggravation of having to go to Seattle. Not her favorite place in the world. In fact, if she never saw the Space Needle again, it would be just fine with her.

“He just notified me about it. Scott would like you to be here for a two o’clock meeting,” Simon said and quickly hung up, not wanting to deal with Mia’s mood.

Mia called McGee to confirm her flight out to Kalispell. She would have to hustle now, and as she finished up her packing, she wondered what in the world could be so important that it couldn’t be discussed over the phone. Mia would have to cancel her mid-afternoon flight to Los Angeles. Her plan had been to fly from there to Beijing and continue on to Irkutsk, Siberia the following day.

Scott Hensley usually didn’t throw her a curve ball like that right before meeting a new client. And from the bits and pieces

Simon had told her, this was a big client who seemed to be in it for the long haul. If this company expanded and built new facilities, housing would have to be found and people would have to be re-located.

Mia went back upstairs. She would have to change her travel attire from a comfy pair of beige, linen slacks and a matching blouse, to a smart, dark blue Ann Taylor suit and black Roberto Cavalli pumps to be presentable for her meeting. After applying a touch of makeup, she gathered her things and fixed a last cup of coffee to-go.

At Stoney Creek's municipal airport, Mia boarded McGee's PAC Cresco, secured herself in her seat, and closed her eyes. She was a little nervous, as usual, starting a new assignment. She loved meeting new people but never knew what to expect.

McGee was saying something about the NHL and his blown-out knee in college, but Mia signaled him that she could not understand. It was too noisy for civilized talk in the small airplane.

Mia leaned her head on the glass and enjoyed the view of their thirty minute flight. McGee had flown her several times from Stoney Creek due northwest to Kalispell. They would cross the deep blue waters of Flathead Lake, and Mia loved the relaxing effect the huge Lake had on her.

It was surrounded by deep, green forest and the roads snaked their way through the rolling hills. Sometimes Mia would catch the mirrored image of McGee's plane on the lake's smooth surface. A few boats looked like tiny white dots followed by white, wavy streaks.

Mia was on the lookout for her favorite place. Down below, a small group of islands came into her view. The biggest of them was at least several hundred acres in size. It had a hill right in the center, and nestled on top, surrounded by trees, sat a huge villa.

Breathtaking. It's gotta be the size of a freakin' football field, Mia thought as she looked at the light-colored, Mediterranean-style mansion. Mia imagined the peace and quiet it must provide. Someone had told her once who it belonged to. Some fashion designer? She couldn't remember.

Unfortunately, the fun part of the trip was over too soon, and Mia had to focus on reality. She thanked McGee, who helped her unload her luggage before he took off again.

“How are you today?” a friendly member of the ground crew greeted Mia as he arranged for someone to pick her up at the runway and drop her off at the terminal. Mia knew he was checking out her rear end as she walked away from him. She hated chauvinists, and this one was not even trying to hide it.

The terminal was not too busy, and after Mia had checked her bags, she went through security surprisingly fast. All seventy seats on the small turbo prop to Seattle were taken, and Mia wrinkled her nose after she had taken her seat. The guy next to her obviously didn't believe in personal hygiene. She sighed and thumbed through a magazine from the pouch in front of her. Her carry-on was unreachable above her. She would have liked to retrieve it and nonchalantly spray a little of her lavender-scented Panhaligon's on him.

## *Chapter 3*

DOUGLAS FARLAND WAS EARLY for his one-thirty meeting. He sat in a bistro on the ground level of the old Sears Building. Worldmove Inc. had their office on the sixth floor, above a trolley stop on Elliott Avenue, just north of the port of Seattle.

He had been offered this job a couple of weeks back and now the time had come to meet up with his new employer and the associate he'd be working with.

"Can I get you a refill, sir?" This pretty, blond waitress had started flirting with him the minute he'd stepped into this place. She was young—too young. He declined and left a rather generous tip. Douglas took the black, Armani suit jacket he had casually draped over the back of his chair, gathered his leather Louis Vuitton briefcase, and avoided the elevator; he liked the stairs.

The wall clock in the bright, roomy reception area showed 1:25 p.m. Perfect timing. He walked down the white, marble-tiled hallway. The receptionist gave him a genuine smile. "Of course, Mr. Farland. Mr. Hensley is expecting you. Please, it's all the way down the hall."

Douglas nodded thankfully, smoothed his pale orange, silk tie, and proceeded toward the heavy, oak door with "Mr. Scott Hensley, CEO" engraved in gold letters on it.

He entered after a short knock and found his new boss with his

back to him on the phone. Douglas eyes went to the eight-foot-tall windows, which offered a breath-taking view of the sea.

Scott Hensley swiveled his black, overstuffed leather chair around, and used his free hand to signal Douglas to take a seat. Douglas sat opposite of the man and let his eyes wander over the beautiful, hand-carved antique desk. He was surprised to see a guy not older than himself in a casual, white cotton shirt and designer jeans. With neck-long, reddish hair and a five o'clock shadow, Scott Hensley looked more like a musician than the owner of one of the most successful relocating firms in the U.S.

He finished his phone conversation with a few words, put the receiver down, and looked at Douglas.

"Well, Mr. Farland, welcome to Worldmove. We're glad you are here." He paused and then added, "I think."

"Thank you, sir, for the opportunity. I'm glad to be here." The two men shook hands.

"Mr. Farland," Hensley continued, "I have only a few minutes to explain something very important to you." He leaned back with his elbows on the armrest. He folded his hands in front of him and pointed both index fingers onto his lower lip with a thoughtful look.

"Since we have discussed your job description thoroughly over the phone, I'm gonna cut right to the chase."

Douglas listened. He liked it when people didn't waste time. "As I explained, you will be working with an individual who is a huge asset to this company. Frankly, outside this office this person is the company. I need to make it very clear that you both will be working together as a team. I can not allow any competition between the two of you that would hurt our relationship with our clients."

"Understood." Douglas looked straight at Hensley.

Hensley paused, looked at Douglas, and grimaced a painful smile. "I have no doubt that you understand. It's not you I'm worried about."

Douglas was a bit confused. "What are you saying?"

"For the last two years your future team partner has been, shall

we say, alone in the field—very comfortable traveling all over the world to relocate our clients' employees and their families. Now that our little company is growing, I've found it necessary to add someone like you to make the job more efficient. I believe this assignment in Russia would be a perfect start."

Hadn't he said he was going to cut right to the chase? "Mr. Hensley, you could just tell me what my hurdles are," he said and sensed trouble. Douglas wasn't sure from which direction it might be coming.

Hensley studied him for a long moment and then he explained. "The hurdle, as you put it, is to introduce this idea to the lady I just described." Douglas raised his eyebrows. What was this guy? Nuts? Douglas thought and asked, "Am I understanding this correct, sir? The person I'm going to work with doesn't know of my existence?"

"I'm afraid not," Scott exhaled, "but she's going to be here in about twelve minutes and I've gotta come up with a plan." He looked more serious as he added, "You have to understand, under no circumstances do I want to lose her."

"May I offer a suggestion, sir?" Douglas analyzed the situation in his head.

"Shoot." Hensley seemed hopeful.

"Why don't I step out of your office for you to have a private meeting with the lady?"

Now Scott Hensley showed some wrinkles around his youthful blue eyes as he laughed. "You don't understand, man. She's half Italian—I might need protection."

They laughed and Scott went on, "Seriously, I hope you don't find this unprofessional, but you'll see, it's the best way to handle things."

Unprofessional? "It's your company, Mr. Hensley, I certainly think you know best."

"I like to believe so, Douglas. And please, call me Scott."

## *Chapter 4*

MIA'S MOOD SANK AS fast as her plane descended once she saw the city of Seattle from above. Everything looked gray, even the Pacific, and she hated the color gray. Maybe her demeanor had something to do with her past in Seattle? She bit her lip. Hardly, she thought sarcastically.

Mia had first come here four years ago with the ink on her master's degree in business administration still wet. Fresh out of Michigan State University, she scored a job as a business developing manager with Boeing, starting a promising career. During the initial job interview they had told her they were looking for someone more experienced but couldn't pass up her linguistic skills. She was fluent in German, Italian, and Russian.

As a teenager Mia's focus was on sports. She'd still had one grandparent from either side who had been speaking with her in their native languages all her life. She had proven herself on the track and swim team in high school and it had not been a surprise when she got a scholarship at MSU.

Mia had been very close to her family, and it was hard for her to move as far away as Washington State. Despite feeling a bit lonely on her own, she had fallen right in love with the city's cosmopolitan flair, the pulsing downtown, and its world-famous Pike Place market. She had spent hours at the harbor watching

the sailboats heading toward the horizon, letting her imagination run free.

The job with Boeing had worked out to be just what she wanted. She had moved into a beautiful, downtown apartment and introduced herself to the social circle of Seattle. The city had so much to offer to a young woman. Mia had often visited the Burke museum, she loved cultural heritage. Once in a while she had gone with a group of people to watch a Seahawk game and had the occasional beer afterward at the Blue Moon. Sometimes she had roamed the jazz clubs downtown; her favorite had been the one on Pioneer Square.

Eventually she started dating, and after a few disappointments, she fell in love with a fellow coworker at Boeing, an aviation engineer. After just six month of dating, Mia moved into his house and they got married. She would have liked a low-key ceremony, but Thomas' extravagant mother insisted on a lavish wedding.

Now Mia wished she had been more sensitive to the early warning signs of Thomas' conning and manipulative behavior, but by the time she had finally realized that her very intelligent and handsome husband was turning out to be a control freak, it had been too late.

Mia had kept herself busy with her work schedule and had tried to work on her marriage, but when she had caught Thomas lying about some messages her friends had left for her, she began to investigate further. It had not taken her long until she discovered that he had been reading her personal e-mails on their shared computer in their home. Thomas had also gone through her paper mail regularly, throwing away letters from her mother and grandmother in Michigan.

When Mia had confronted Thomas he had shown a new and very frightening side. After his yelling finally died down, he had pinned her against the refrigerator, and with a cold demeanor, he had made it very clear who was to be obeyed in his family. It was only a couple of hours later that Mia had packed some of her belongings and moved into a local motel.

She had been toying with the idea of returning back to Michigan, but she had not been quite ready to give up her life in the Northwest. Just a week later she had bumped into Scott Hensley at

a restaurant during lunch. After an interesting offer, a little negotiation, and not much to lose, Mia took the job.

She quit Boeing and dove headfirst into a career filled with adventure. Her first assignment took her to Sydney, Australia. She had spent several weeks far away from abusive husbands, nasty mother-in-laws, and Seattle with its sad memories. When Mia returned from her first successful assignment, she had divorced Thomas and treated herself to the ski trip to Montana where she'd found Stoney Creek.

All this had happened about two years ago. In the beginning Mia had worried about Worldmove's headquarters being located in Seattle, but she very rarely had to come out for a meeting like today.

Hello, old demons, Mia thought as she stepped through the glass door at SEA TAC International Airport after collecting her bags. The cool autumn air caressed her skin and a shiver overcame her. Was it the wind or was it the city? Mia couldn't tell. But one thing was for sure, the funny feeling she'd gotten in her stomach after the call for the meeting this morning had started to intensify.

She checked her platinum, Dior wristwatch. If she wanted to be on time for her two o'clock meeting, she'd have to skip lunch.

Damn, it was breezy. Mia wished she hadn't packed her Eltro wool coat in her suitcase. She would have much rather had it now instead of being uncomfortable in her very chic, but very thin, business suit. She took a deep breath, squared her narrow shoulders, and waved down a cab. Of course the driver talked the whole way on a cell phone, to her surprise in English. He didn't help her with her luggage and barely paid attention when she gave him her destination.

Mia leaned back in the cab seat. No voice or text messages on her cell phone. She thought about checking in with Simon at headquarters but quickly changed her mind.

What's wrong with me? Mia wondered. Usually she was a very easygoing person. Today, she felt frazzled. Was the last-minute meeting really throwing her off this bad? Or did Seattle still have this strong an influence on her? It was time to get her act together. This was an important day, and she was not going to mess up a meeting

with her boss. Scott Hensley could always count on her, and she had never disappointed him. She certainly was not planning on starting now.

Mia relaxed a little. She actually felt good after eight weeks without an assignment. She had used the downtime to study a certain Russian dialect. And she had been running—her passion. She had expanded her distance to fifteen miles and she got stronger by the workout.

Relax and expect anything, she told herself. Mia made the decision that whatever it was that had brought her here today was not going to compromise her composure, nor her job, in any way.

## *Chapter 5*

AT WORLDMOVE INC. THE fax line rang and Simon retrieved the documents off the tray. He mustn't forget to make copies, he reminded himself and startled when Mia stepped into the room.

"Oh, hi, Mia. Good to see you. I'm just finishing up your paperwork for Russia."

"Thank you, can I have it now? I'd like to review things before my meeting," Mia asked patiently.

"Well, I'm not quite done. Can you give me another minute?" Simon seemed a little nervous. Mia knew him to be a geeky but very organized person. She had only met him in person once before, since he handled all her company business over the phone.

Today he almost seemed comical behind his messy desk, with his round glasses and his beige slacks a few sizes too big. Simon was only her height and seemed skinnier than she remembered.

"I'll wait." Mia watched him curiously, wondering if his behavior had anything to do with this short-notice meeting.

After shuffling papers around and doing some clicks on the computer, Simon handed Mia a yellow file folder about half an inch thick. "Good luck, Mia. Have a safe trip." He didn't even look at her.

Weirdo, Mia thought as she left his office. She leafed through the file. Everything she needed was right here, including her airplane tickets.

She decided to use the ladies' room to freshen up before she met with her boss. She wanted to powder her nose, but had left all her luggage with the receptionist, including her purse. A thin strand of hair came loose, and Mia tucked it behind her pearl-studded ear. There was no time to undo the knot she wore her hair in, and her comb was with the rest of her makeup kit in her purse.

Her tailored suit jacket had a few wrinkles from the trip, but Mia was glad she had chosen the light purple, silk blouse with her dark attire. It gave her a classical, feminine look. And her makeup was still meticulous—even her natural-colored lipstick had lasted through two cups of coffee.

“Not perfect, but it'll do,” Mia thought and stepped out in the hallway.

“Ah, there she is. We thought you must be hiding.”

Mia froze. Startled, she looked up at Scott Hensley, who was leaning casually against the hallway wall, both arms behind his back. He was accompanied by a tall, dark-haired man dressed in an expensive looking business suit and an orange tie.

Mia stood in the ladies' room doorway, feeling caught off guard. For a bizarre moment she wondered if they were considering whether or not she had washed her hands. She smiled at her strange thought and briskly stepped forward. With her chin up, she stuck her right arm out to greet her boss with a firm handshake.

“Scott, how are you!” Mia said, sincere. She couldn't help herself from eying the orange tie standing next to Hensley as she exchanged some short pleasantries with her boss.

“Mia, I would like you to meet Mr. Douglas Farland, a new associate with Worldmove. He will accompany you to Siberia.” He studied Mia for an instant and added, “But here, why don't we step into my office?”

Mia was baffled. To accompany her? Did she just hear correctly? So that was what this meeting was all about. She felt a quick heat flush her cheeks but immediately suppressed the feeling that her territory was being endangered. Be nice, she warned herself and turned to greet the orange tie. He seemed taller now as he shook her hand, and Mia noticed that his eyes were the same color as his bright blue

shirt. Whoever had talked him into buying that suit should be arrested.

“It’s my pleasure, Ms. Trentino.” His deep voice matched his physical size and she detected a bit of a drawl. Mia ignored the tingle on the back of her neck and stepped ahead of the men into Hensley’s office. Scott wouldn’t have to explain it to her. She had wondered in the past if there wouldn’t be some sort of addition to her in the field.

Her boss’s move to just casually bump into her in the hallway was pretty smooth. Mia was surprised he thought she had to be introduced this way. Strangely, it pleased her, too. Scott seemed to fear her—at least a little.

“Mia, you look fantastic,” Scott complimented on their way into his office. “Have you been running a lot? What’s your distance now?” Mia could appreciate his interest. As far as she knew, Hensley ran the annual Seattle half marathon himself. But she didn’t like her private matters being brought up in front of a stranger. She could feel the men’s eyes on her, but she was too confident to let them intimidate her.

“Oh, a few miles a week, to exercise the dog,” she answered vaguely and then steered the conversation toward the assignment.

Four, comfortably deep-seated chairs surrounded a large, hardwood coffee table in one corner of Scott’s huge office. Hardly the right environment for a serious business discussion, but Scott was a laidback character who loved having his meetings held in such a manner.

Mia was glad she had chosen a pantsuit. She would have shown way too much leg and never been able to get up elegantly out of this chair in a skirt. Scott took the seat next to Mia to discuss the assignment. There was sexual tension in the air and she wasn’t sure which side it was coming from. Scott was in an awfully good mood. He must be excited about the new contract.

While Mia went over the details with Scott, the orange tie mainly observed. He asked a few intelligent questions, and by the time the conference call came from Russia, she felt in her element. Mia handled the dialogue between the Chairman of Yukoil, the Siberian Oil Company they would be working with, and Hensley very well. She went back and forth with the translation like she had never done anything else.

The Russians seemed a little vague about the exact dimensions of their situation. Mia thought that they seemed a bit unorganized and they didn't have answers to a few of Hensley's questions. By the time the call was over, Scott was very pleased with their meeting. Mia seemed to be taking it quite professionally that, from now on, she had to be a team player. Simon had been extremely efficient with research and flight schedules, so they could head out to their destination in Russia the following day. Mia respectfully declined her boss' invitation to a casual business dinner, wanting to get some rest and study her workload before heading out to Los Angeles on an early morning flight.

After Hensley dismissed them, it was clear to Mia that she had done well in keeping her composure. She had managed to handle the last two hours gracefully.

Of course, she was infuriated!

Her boss didn't seem to have noticed. He was too busy talking about Worldmove's great future, now doing business with the Russians. Mia was not so sure about the orange tie. He had been watching her during the entire meeting, his penetrating, blue eyes rarely leaving hers. He had not had much to say.

Mia couldn't wait to get the hell out of there. She felt betrayed and yearned for a long, hot shower. She would regain her composure in her hotel room with a nice glass of Chiles Canyon Red Zinfandel.

"Ms. Trentino, may I help you with your luggage?" Orange tie stood close behind her, invading her comfort zone, as Mia spoke with the receptionist.

"Why, no." Mia unconsciously stepped aside and straightened her shoulders. "I mean, no, thank you. A cab has been called and they will take care of it." She had to be careful not to lose her tact.

Her attention focused back on the receptionist. Douglas hesitated for a moment, letting his eyes linger on her. As he turned away from her, he lightly touched the sleeve of her left arm. "I am looking forward to working with you." Then, as he was walking away he added, "Please call me any time I can be of service."

## *Chapter 6*

SEATED NEXT TO EACH other in coach, Mia and Douglas left the U.S. and headed to Beijing, China the following morning. Simon had not had much time for their travel arrangements, and on such a short notice there had not been any business class tickets available. Hensley always made sure Mia had the best treatment during her travels. “The job in the field is tough enough, so getting there should be a breeze,” was Scott’s motto.

There wasn’t a time when Mia would have appreciated it more than now.

It wasn’t just the duration of the flights—from Los Angeles, over Beijing, China, to Irkutsk, Siberia was going to be ungodly long—but having extra room between Farland and herself would have given her some comfort.

Mia had managed to stay off of his radar at SEA TAC International Airport and during the flight to Los Angeles. But once he had spotted her at LAX, he hadn’t left her side.

Farland wasn’t a man of many words. He stepped in when necessary to lend a hand with Mia’s luggage. She had watched him as he quietly observed his surroundings. To Mia he radiated a strange authority. He seemed overly confident, and frankly just his presence was overwhelming.

During the first hours, thirty thousand feet above the pacific,

they kept the conversation purely business. Mia tried hard not to show her annoyance and patiently explained the most important aspects of her job. Douglas seemed to catch on rather quick. “In the End, Mr. Farland, this isn’t rocket science. It’s all about moving people from A to B with the smallest amount of disturbance to their careers as possible.”

As the conversation changed from business to a bit more personal, Mia was pleasantly surprised when Douglas revealed that he had been a faculty member at a private college for almost a decade, teaching geology and biochemistry. He also spoke French, which was another asset to the Company.

“May I ask what made you decide to leave?” Mia’s curiosity finally got the best of her.

“Just like every other job, I guess I grew tired of it.” He avoided a more thorough explanation. Then, he leaned his seat back and closed his eyes.

In the middle of a conversation he was going to take a nap? God, he was rude! Mia wondered darkly if the real reason he’d left was because he had gotten in trouble with one of his female students.

Glancing over and studying his features, Mia thought there was no doubt; he was handsome. He must be at least six foot two. His dark hair was neatly trimmed and showed some gray around the temples. He had a good nose and a strong jaw. His neck was muscular and through his taupe, Prague suit he wore for the day’s travel, Mia thought he looked athletic. The only jewelry she could detect was a stainless steel Breitling on his left wrist, and his big hands did not look like the ones of an academic.

His age was difficult to guess. He seemed like to take good care of himself, but there were some deep lines in his face revealing a rougher past. She had to admit he was a pleasure to talk to. He knew when to speak and when to let her talk. And he spoke with a little bit of a southern twang. Very soothing, Mia thought.

He was very confident and seemed to have a solid character. However, Mia knew he was a threat to her career. She wouldn’t lose her job to him, but she would have to fight for her status at World-move. During the meeting the day before, Mia had been aware of

the mutual approval between her boss and Farland. The two men addressing each other on a first name basis had clearly shown that.

Of course Mia was not Worldmove's only employee. There were several other Relocation Specialists who took care of business within the United States and Canada, but Mia, because of her linguistic skills, had the status of being the only one on an international level. For two years she had been working on her own, and now Mia had to be a team player. She thought about that for a long time and then decided she also needed to be careful not to let Farland in on all of her secrets about the business. It was going to be a challenge, and she was not sure if she liked that.

And there was one more thing bothering her besides that orange tie he had worn yesterday. Sometimes, when Mia had shown some attitude, his jaw muscles had flexed in irritation.

Douglas needed to close his eyes. He wasn't tired. Actually he hadn't felt this awake in weeks. But to keep his head clear he needed to review his thoughts so he could make sensible decisions on how to proceed.

Yesterday afternoon he had started a new job as a relocation specialist, a title he had no idea existed until just a few weeks ago. Douglas had done his research about the company. He was impressed at how much Worldmove had accomplished with this little man power. Now he was looking forward to being a part of it after finally meeting Scott Hensley, an easygoing guy. And then there was Mia Trentino;

Scott had described Mia in a way that showed a little more than just respect. He had seemed to be intimidated by her. Calling her a business-savvy woman with a feel for the needs of individuals, he had explained that she would focus on the spouses and families of the mostly male clients. Mia had explained to Hensley that it would be much easier for executives or CEOs to focus on the job when their wives were comfortable with their new homes and surroundings. He had also mentioned that Mia was very strong-willed, and that he had learned to trust her by herself in the field.

Scott and Douglas had stepped out into the hallway at World-move Incorporated after ending their initial meeting. After all that talk about Mia, Douglas had been a little anxious about meeting her. He had wondered what kind of feminist he would have to deal with. But when Mia had stepped out of the Ladies' room, Douglas had felt anything but intimidation. He had taken one good look at her and realized that this new job had come with a very pleasant surprise. Understandably, she had been reserved toward him. This Scott guy sure knew how to run his business, but Douglas didn't agree with how he had handled the situation with Mia. It would make it harder for Douglas to gain her trust. But he had no doubt that it wouldn't take him long.

This morning he had given her time. He had kept an eye on her, studying her first at Seattle International airport, then during the flight to Los Angeles, seated several rows behind her. At LAX Douglas had made some last necessary phone calls before checking in. He arranged meeting up with Mia before boarding the plane to China, hoping she would be easier to handle.

Manipulating the conversation from business to personal matters, he had woken her interest about himself, but Mia had carefully avoided sharing too much information about her own life. She had shown confidence, and those pretty, dark eyes had sparkled when he cornered her during their dialogue. She was intelligent, almost street-smart, but she was no match for him.

Douglas opened his eyes. He looked straight ahead to the screen at the front of the aircraft where the little airplane on top of the world map showed passengers their travel location. Out of the corner of his eye he could see from Mia's deep and steady breathing that she had fallen asleep. He turned his head to study her. Her head leaned slightly toward him, and the dim light above her played with coppery highlights in her shiny, auburn hair. The soft, lace trim of her pale violet-colored blouse only allowed a glimpse of the outline of her chest. The sleeves reached just below her elbows and exposed the flawless skin of her slender forearms. Her delicate hands were resting in her lap. She was not very tall, but her legs were long for her height.

She had one leg crossed over the other. Her ankle-length, light brown, suede skirt had parted where the side slit came up to just below her knee and gave a glimpse of a beautifully shaped calf. When he had walked behind her he had noticed that her strides were long and powerful, and that the shape of her body was slim but nicely curved. A runner, Scott had mentioned. That's exactly what she looked like.

The overnight flight into Beijing would have thrown any world traveler off. Mia was used to dealing with jet lag, but she had never gone against the time zones for such a long distance. They had served some sort of breakfast, but Mia had declined. She was sipping a cup of excellent Chinese tea as the captain greeted the sleepy passengers first in Chinese, then in very heavy accented English. The airplane started the decent and it would only be a matter of thirty minutes until arrival.

Douglas was not in his seat. Mia gladly stretched her legs over into his legroom and tried to wake up her aching muscles. She would have liked to get up but the fasten seat belt sign had already come on. She wondered where he was, but didn't dare turn around. She wouldn't want to be caught looking for him.

As Mia finished her tea, Douglas reappeared and looked clean shaven and rested. He glided back into his seat and looked at her. With his deep voice he asked "Did you get some rest?"

Mia just nodded. She still felt dazed and did not want a conversation. Turning her head toward the window, she could make out Beijing's early morning lights in the darkness far below.