

The Acronym:
White Nights of St. Petersburg

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In loving memory of Ivey

I miss you

Acknowledgement

Inspirations come in many forms. As a writer, I find them pretty much everywhere. Often, those inspirations are obvious to me, and I can't wait to spin them into my story. Other times, it's not always clear which person, or what kind of situation or experience, carries the weight needed to be an inspiration.

One thing's for sure though; this page wouldn't be long enough to give credit to everyone who has inspired and helped me to write this book.

A few stand out, however; and deserve a very special thank-you.

Of course my biggest thanks goes to my husband, Troy, who without complaint keeps our life in order while this writer's existence is wrapped around fiction, and whom without, none of this would really matter. Marna, Linda, and Sigrid, whose editorial guidance goes beyond the simple fact of dotting the i's. Bill, for his sharp tongue when jotting through the first draft. Suzanne (E), for always being there. The people at Langdon Street Press, for kindly ignoring my ignorance. And my horses, for providing much needed therapy.

In my debut novel, *Relocating Mia*, I acknowledged the United States Armed Forces for keeping us safe and allowing me to pursue my dreams. I wouldn't want to write another acknowledgment without continuing my appreciation for our troops.

I cannot hasten Truth,
nor keep it long at bay,
It sings within each breath
and rises with the day;
I cannot hold my breath,
nor give it up to die,
It sings within the Truth
and so, therefore, must I.
—Shaman's poem

Russia, ten months prior

Mia's eyes flew open in a panic. *Oh, my God!* I can't breathe! Something was across her mouth, and as a small amount of spit ran down her throat, she gagged reflexively. Her insides screamed. She tipped over onto her side, struggling to break free from whatever was confining her, but her restraints wouldn't budge.

Why is it dark? A cloth obstructed her vision. She hoped it was only that she was floating between nightmares, but the throbbing pain in the back of her neck told her otherwise.

Why can't I breathe? She tried desperately to inhale through her mouth, but the duct tape across her lips did not let through the smallest amount of air; immediately, her nostrils flared open.

"Easy, easy," a male voice said. He spoke in Russian as he lifted the cloth sack from her head. She blinked a few times. The room was dimly lit from a source somewhere above her. His voice had come from behind her, so she couldn't see him. A strong hand pushed her throbbing head onto the filthy ground. The Russian spoke again. "Promise to behave, and I will take off the tape."

Mia tried to scream, but only her muffled voice penetrated the tape. Immediately, the hand went over her nose, robbing her of precious air. Her scream died and panic set back in. Her hands, tied behind her back, balled into fists as she tried to jerk her head away, but it was no use.

"Behave, if you want to breathe," the Russian commanded.

Mia lay still, understanding that she could not fight this. The hand moved away from her nose, and she drew in deep, labored breaths. She squeezed her stinging eyes shut, trying to suppress the urge to gag.

"That's better." He ripped off the tape in one quick stroke, stinging Mia's lips and cheeks. "Don't make a sound."

She wretched and coughed. He reached toward her and she thought he was going to tape her mouth again, but instead, he helped her to sit up. She could breathe more easily in this position, and he held her by the shoulders until she regained her balance.

"Too bad the boss told us not to touch you," he sneered. "I've been eying you all week."

Mia didn't recognize the voice, but his lust was clear, and his words made her shiver in disgust. She tried to understand where she was. She guessed that she was inside the cargo area of one of Yukoil's big trucks. Green canvas was draped over the freight it carried, obscuring the contents. The road on which they were traveling was bumpy—that was easy to tell from the number of times she was jostled around—and she could smell the exhaust from the diesel engine.

She looked up, blinking rapidly several times. She fought back tears as the truth ran like ice water through her veins. "I've been kidnapped," she whispered, almost stupidly.

"Smart girl," the Russian said laughing.

Colorado, present day

Smart girl ... smart girl ... smart girl ... The words echoed so vividly through her mind that Mia had to shake her head to get rid of them.

She reached over to Douglas' empty side of the bed and pulled his pillow close. With time, she'd learned that the best way to free herself from the lasting horror of the nightmares was to inhale his scent—at least, it worked

when he was away on a mission, like now. If he'd been there, he'd hold her close and talk to her until she fell back asleep, peaceful and safe.

"Breathe, just breathe," she whispered and closed her eyes again. Why was she always plagued by the same scene? She had plenty of bad memories from her time in Russia that could fill any number of horrific dreams, but no, it was always the same damn picture. "Crap," she muttered and pushed the sheets away. It was just after four in the morning, and sleep wasn't an option anymore.

She stepped into the bathroom and switched on the light. Squinting at her image in the mirror, she saw tension clearly displayed there. Not a good sign. The crease between her eyes seemed to have deepened in the last few days. Chris O'Neil, her boss and agent-in-charge at the Acronym, hadn't yet notified her, but Mia knew it wouldn't be too long before she'd be sent back to Russia.

"You can handle it," she told herself and splashed cold water on her face. Of course she could; that wasn't the issue. After all, justice had to be meted out, and nobody deserved punishment more than Piotr Lagunov, the former chairman of Yukoil, Russia's largest oil-producing company. Mia had been working as a relocating specialist and was sent to the Lake Baikal region to assist in Yukoil's project that would relocate its refinery and find housing for hundreds of employees near the company's oil fields. It hadn't been long before she'd stumbled across some suspicious dealings involving Sergei Selkin, one of the most powerful kingpins of the Russian Mafia, and a drug-manufacturing ring hidden behind Yukoil's legitimate façade.

Her abduction by the Mafia was thwarted by a very dangerous rescue. Douglas, working as an undercover agent for the Acronym, had led the mission; it was successful but Mia was shot in the process.

Dabbing her face dry, she looked herself in the eye. Yes. Without question, she was going to return to Russia and take the witness stand. Without question, she was going to face Lagunov, the man responsible for the horror she'd endured. But one question remained, and she couldn't force it out of her head: what if the Russian Mafia tried to stop her from testifying?

Chapter 1

Utah

Who do you have your money on?” Brian Secona asked his partner as he brought his binoculars back to his eyes. “The boys from San Antonio,” Douglas Farland answered without hesitation.

“Texas. Of course, you’re prejudiced.”

Douglas laughed. “Because I’m Southern? No, I just think these guys can handle this damn heat the best.” He glanced at the SUV’s digital display of the outside temperature. “It’s not even July, and it’s already into the nineties.” He watched as the seemingly endless wind blew tumbleweeds the size of small trees effortlessly across the Great Salt Lake Desert. The previous night had been cold, but as the sun rose high in the sky, it mercilessly broiled the bone-dry region.

Douglas’ focus returned to a point in the distance, where men were fighting their way through the dusty heat in full combat gear, including gas masks and rifles. Twenty-two American and international SWAT teams, consisting of six men each, conquered individual exercises that simulated various task-force drills during this year’s annual SWAT World Challenge. “The target-retrieving system is new,” he noted as he spat his toothpick out the window.

“I know,” Brian agreed. “They completely redesigned the obstacle course as well. It looks much more demanding than in the previous competitions.”

Douglas lowered his binoculars again and sighed heavily.

“What’s the matter, Doug?” Brian asked. “You want to go play with the young and spry?”

“Well, watching these young guns, don’t you want to be twenty again?”

“Hell, no!” Brian didn’t have to think twice. He lifted a hand as big as a bear’s paw to his face and wiped the sweat off his colored skin. The Rover’s engine was running, but the air conditioner wasn’t doing the job. Brian’s eyes swept over the rugged terrain that bordered the U.S. Army’s Dugway Proving Ground. The ten-foot fence was reinforced by razor wire on top, and the security cameras were hard to miss.

Brian rubbed his hand through his coarse salt-and-pepper hair and asked, “Why would I want to be twenty years younger? What’s wrong with aging gracefully?”

“Nothing, brother. You see, you too have aged—just not gracefully.”

“Yes, well, maybe we *are* getting too old for this shit.”

“That’s funny.”

Brian arched a brow. “What?”

“You sound just like Danny Glover in *Lethal Weapon*.”

“I do?” Brian mimicked the actor’s wide smile. “I love that movie.”

Grinning, Douglas shook his head and focused his binoculars on a member of the New York Police Department’s SWAT team, who seemed to be mastering the tough course of the Three-Gun Challenge with ease.

From just inside the barrier, Brian and Douglas followed the event. The Acronym had provided them with

identification to visit the venue; their security clearances read “Ocean City P.D.,” which were fake.

Douglas changed his focus to an area with several camouflaged tents, where vendors offered everything from Ghillie suits—used by snipers to blend into their natural environment—to tactical armor. A medium-built man caught Douglas’ attention. Standing by a small group of spectators, he wasn’t wearing camouflage and field boots like most of the others. He was dressed in jeans, a black T-shirt, and tennis shoes. He looked their way.

“I got a visual on our new friend,” Douglas said as he zoomed in on the man’s face. He seemed to be staring directly at Douglas.

“I see him,” Brian said. “Let’s not make this too easy for him. I want to push his buttons for a while.”

“All right. I’m curious to see why O’ Neil was so excited about this guy.”

After a moment, the man shouldered a slightly battered olive-green duffel bag. He separated from the group and walked toward the Rover. The climb up the sandy hill, overgrown by knee-deep sagebrush, did not cause him to expend much effort. His stride was long and powerful. As he approached the Rover, the determined look on his face didn’t soften. When he was just fifteen feet away, Douglas lowered the passenger-side window.

“You’re the guys O’Neil sent,” the man stated in a distinct German accent. His physical appearance was impressive—not quite as tall and broad as Douglas, but about six feet tall and a few years younger.

“Hirsch,” Douglas acknowledged the man, “Step inside the vehicle.”

Uwe Hirsch ducked into the back of the Rover. The truck rocked slightly as he took a seat and shut the door.

“I’m Farland,” Douglas said perfunctorily. “This is Secona.”

Brian nodded at the mention of his name. His face was expressionless as his dark eyes spied the German in the rear view mirror. Douglas took a green folder off the dashboard and opened it. He knew its contents by heart, but he pretended to study it to give them time to study Hirsch’s demeanor. There were several eight-byten photographs of the German, along with some other documents.

Hirsch stole a glance over Douglas’ shoulder and saw a photo of himself in tactical gear that he recognized as having been taken after an exercise about eight years ago, when he still lived overseas. In the photo, he wasn’t wearing a mask to conceal his face.

“Confidential doesn’t mean anything anymore, does it?” Hirsch asked drily. He wondered how in the hell these guys got the pictures. The undisclosed identity of his unit was, until today, crucial for the effectiveness of the team and the safety of its members.

“Confidential? You gotta be kidding,” Brian commented as he eyed Hirsch for a while longer through the mirror. Then he turned around to face him. “Why the Acronym? Why did you choose to work for us?” Hirsch leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms over his chest. He returned the question. “Why me? Your people came to me.” With his jaw set, he held Brian’s stare.

“I know, but why did you accept? You must understand what’s involved.”

Hirsch relaxed a bit and shrugged. “Of course I understand what’s involved. It sounded like a good offer at the time.”

“At the time? What about now?” Brian asked. “How will we know that you won’t tuck your tail between your legs when a situation gets sticky?”

Hirsch gazed out the windshield. He didn’t care for the black man’s sour and judgmental attitude. “You see the team that is up next for the Scott Entry?” he asked.

“Yes, I see them.” Brian followed Hirsch’s gaze, and so did Douglas.

The German set his timer on his wristwatch as the team was getting ready to storm through doors and secure a room that was provisionally framed with four-by-four lumber. Without walls, the room’s interior was visible

from all four sides. Two judges on each side observed the team's efficiency, technique, and time during the exercise.

"You gentlemen care to bet? I'll go with a minute twenty," Hirsch offered.

Brian shook his head. "One twenty? No way! Let's see what these guys have in store."

Wordlessly, the three men watched until a faint beep came from Hirsch's watch as he stopped the timer. He smiled. "Excellent! 1:18:35—not even a minute twenty. I believe they were the last team in this event. Fastest time; they should take the overall lead with this." Hirsch couldn't suppress a strong note of pride in his voice. He leaned back again and looked at the two men in the front seat with a challenging grin.

Douglas focused on Hirsch as he repeated Brian's question, "So, why us? Why do you think you should belong to an operation like the Acronym?"

"You've just seen their capability. As you both know, I used to be one of them. After I left my unit at the German border police and came to the States, I still wanted to be part of the best."

Douglas nodded, but he didn't let Hirsch off the hook quite yet. "Tell me what you know about us."

The German was beginning to get annoyed. Of course, Secona and Farland knew about the briefings he'd received at the Acronym's headquarters in Maryland, and he realized they didn't think he was trustworthy yet—not to them, anyway. "I can tell you what I *didn't* know about you."

"Oh, yeah? What's that?" Brian asked.

"That you guys get off on a two-dog ass-smelling exercise."

Douglas bit his lip to contain his laughter. He managed to stay stone-faced. "Actually, we're just trying to find out what kind of asshole you are."

"Absolutely," Brian agreed. "So quit dickin' around and answer our questions."

Hirsch nodded agreeably. "The Acronym is a top-secret configuration of carefully selected former members of the FBI, CIA, and military. It was established by the government to assist official agencies with unofficial tasks. The success rate of these missions was extremely high until a few agents got a little carried away when questioning a Middle Eastern detainee. They killed him—accidentally, or so the word is."

Douglas frowned. "Go on."

"After somebody leaked the information and it got a bad squeeze from the press, the Acronym had to be distanced from the government before the public could learn about it; the Acronym, essentially, was privatized. Since then, certain agencies from overseas have joined the force as well—Interpol in France, the British SIS, and the BGS—my former unit—in Germany. Weapons and equipment are supplied by the army. If it's a joint case, the Acronym has full support of the government and has seniority over other agencies. Lately, your main focus has been counter-terrorism within the United States, but you also support operations abroad. I believe that included a few major drug and weapon busts just last year." Hirsch paused, scratching the stubble on his square jaw and smiling as he added, "I certainly like the idea of a task force that is private and unknown—at least to the general public. I imagine that not being restricted by a federal agency's protocol means you guys are able to bend the rules a little, without having some fucking reporter watch what you do and bother your unit with unqualified comments and uncomfortable questions."

Douglas arched a brow. He was beginning to like this guy. "Why do you think you'll fit in?"

"You seem to know as much about my past as I do myself. You understand that my training has been—"

"That's not what counts, Hirsch!" Brian interrupted harshly. "I'm sure you're very good with a rifle, and you know how to negotiate situations in a tight spot, but that has nothing to do with getting friendly with some scumbag and putting a tab on him while you're anticipating his next move. You will get eye to eye with the worst thugs imaginable and have to smile at them."

"I understand that."

“Good. I hope you also understand that your commitment to us is indefinite.” Brian pointed his index finger at Hirsch to emphasize his words. “*No* contracts, *no* benefits for your family, *no* rescue mission if you get captured, and especially, *no fame!*” He paused to see if the German showed any sign of concern, but he kept his calm. Brian continued, “I want to know what really makes you think you’ll fit in. And don’t give me some bullshit story about pride and honor and your love for this country.”

Hirsch’s eyes narrowed. These guys were busting his balls. He dug deep down and remembered a line from one of his favorite pieces of literature, a shaman poem: “It sings within the truth, man. It sings within the truth.”

Chapter 2

An hour later, the three men were on their way, heading northwest toward the Salt Lake City International Airport. From the driver's seat, Brian asked, "What time's your flight, Hirsch?"

"Just after five."

"You're going back to Maryland, I suppose?"

"Yes. O'Neil ordered me to stay at HQ until you guys have completed your upcoming mission. He said you're going to Mexico. So, who's this *El Pirata* guy, anyway?"

Brian shot a quick look at Douglas. He didn't like the fact that O'Neil had shared this information with Hirsch before the German officially joined the Acronym, but O'Neil obviously saw Hirsch as a full-fledged team member already.

The men shared a strange silence as Hirsch's question hovered in the air, unanswered. Douglas, trusting his intuition, decided that they should give Hirsch a chance. "The Pirate is a ruthless piece of scum. He's involved in human trafficking and leads a very tight drug cartel throughout South America."

"Lovely," Hirsch said drily. "What is he? Mexican?"

"No. Originally he's from Peru, but he operates out of Mexico."

"I see. O'Neil said the guy got shot in the face?"

Douglas nodded. "Yes. Someone took his left eye out a few years back, and ever since he's worn a black eye patch. That's how he got his name—the eye patch makes him look like a pirate."

"So the feds haven't shared all their facts with you yet? Is that how it works with you guys?"

"Hey, that'll do," Brian said, clearly exasperated. "Quit being so damn nose-y, Hirsch."

"I'm just making conversation. I'm not asking you anything O'Neil hasn't brought up."

Annoyed, Brian cursed under his breath and then asked, "What else did O'Neil say?"

Hirsch shrugged. "He just mentioned that the FBI has received a tip from a young female who managed to escape an alleged prostitution ring that *El Pirata's* group is running. To be honest with you, I'd love to join the hunt and grab this squirrel by the balls myself."

Now Brian had to smile. He understood the feeling. "Well, you never know. You might get a chance sooner than you think."

Hirsch raised a brow. "What is that suppose to mean?"

Douglas explained, "I know you won't join us in South America, but after they're done with you in Ocean City, you'll be sent to our training facility in Colorado. As far as I know, your first assignment will begin soon after."

Hirsch felt excitement creeping up his spine. "Sweet. Can you tell me what's involved?"

"You will accompany another agent to Russia," Douglas said.

"Russia? Where in Russia? And with whom will I be teamed up?"

Douglas watched the white salt flats along Interstate 80 fly by as he said, "You're going with a team to St. Petersburg to protect a witness who will testify against a member of the Russian Mafia."

"The Russian Mafia," Hirsch repeated thoughtfully. "I've dealt with them before."

“We know that.”

“Oh, of course you do. Can you tell me more about my team? Are you and Secona part of it?”

“Yes,” Douglas said. “Didn’t O’Neil explain the Acronym’s configuration to you?”

“Briefly.”

O’Neil’s priorities are screwed up, Douglas thought. “The Acronym consists of several teams, each of which, depending on their expertise, has four to six members. We very seldom have more than two agents at a time working the same case. Besides Secona and me, you will be grouped with a very capable man from Cambodia, Bao Shuang, and Ludvika Bogdan, a female agent from Eastern Europe.”

Female? Hirsch frowned.

Douglas sensed his doubt and warned, “Don’t let her gender fool you, Hirsch. She is more capable than some of the men you have worked with in the past. She’s been with Interpol for years and brought a long list of combat experiences from her native Bosnia.”

“Okay.” Hirsch said, although he didn’t look convinced.

Douglas continued, “Besides security and the caretaker, there is one more person you will meet when you get to Colorado. She usually stays at the facility and works intel. She is also responsible for anyone in need of protective custody. She’s fluent in four languages but has never been engaged in any field missions, nor has she worked for a governmental institution prior joining the Acronym.”

“A civilian?” Hirsch asked.

“At the Acronym, we are all civilians. I’m sure that’s been explained to you at headquarters,” Douglas said. He remembered his own recruitment by the Acronym. Douglas had been with the bureau’s hostage-rescue team at the time, and it’d been a tough decision to give up the status of a federal agent.

For the past five years, Hirsch had been a cop and SWAT team member with the San Francisco Police Department, and very soon he’d lose that status as well. “I understand that you guys don’t want me to nose around,” Hirsch said, “but tell me how someone who hasn’t worked in the field ends up with this agency.”

Douglas pursed his lips. Unwilling to recap the past in detail, he simply offered, “Mia Trentino is a great asset to the Acronym. Our paths crossed while I was on a mission in Siberia. Circumstances got her involved, and she’s been working for us ever since. While in Russia, she’d witnessed a great deal of the Mafia’s business.”

“So she is the one testifying in St. Petersburg, then?”

“You catch on pretty quick, Hirsch.” With that, Douglas ceased his flow of information. He didn’t want to go deeper into Mia’s involvement with the Acronym, or with himself, for that matter. Hirsch would figure it out in time.

Shortly afterward, Brian stopped the Rover next to the entrance of terminal two at Salt Lake City’s International Airport. Hirsch scooted to the edge of his seat and placed his hand on the door handle. “I guess I’ll see you guys in a couple of weeks.” He grabbed his bag and got out. They watched him disappear through the sliding glass doors. Brian maneuvered the SUV away from the curb and merged into traffic.

“So what do you think?” Douglas asked.

“I think you have a hard time talking about your woman in a professional manner,” Brian joked.

“Ah, shit. Am I that obvious?” Douglas asked sheepishly. He shrugged. “What can I say? She has total and utter control over me.”

Brian laughed. “Is that so? Then let’s get the hell out of here so I can get you back quickly to where you belong.” He accelerated, and the Rover shot east toward Bangerter Highway and southbound Interstate 15.

After a thoughtful minute, Douglas observed, “Hirsch will fit in really well.”

“Yeah. I just hope he ain’t gonna have a problem with Bogdan.”

Douglas kicked his seat back and closed his eyes. They had a six-hour drive ahead of them before meeting up with a second team in Las Vegas and flying to Mexico. He knew what Brian meant, but Ludvika Bogdan had a way of changing people’s opinion about her if she wasn’t immediately accepted.

Anticipating the trouble Hirsch could cause himself, Douglas grinned, “I can’t wait to see what happens if he does.”

Chapter 3

St. Petersburg, Russia

Look at this garbage! Is that the best you can do?" Sergei Selkin's fist slammed hard onto the top of his exquisite mahogany desk.

Dimitri, one of the youngest members of Selkin's organization, didn't dare make eye contact.

"I asked you ... a question," Selkin said pointedly.

Dimitri fumbled nervously with his glasses. He seemed almost fragile as Selkin continued to stare him down. With the back of his hand, Dimitri wiped the sweat from his brow and finally lifted his head. "This is just my preliminary work." His voice trembled. "The pictures still have to be digitally enhanced, and I will be able to clean them up a lot more. I have been told that you would like to see the first set as soon as I have them done."

Stepping quickly around his desk, Selkin impatiently raised one hand to silence the young man as he approached him. Now, he stood close enough that Dimitri could feel Selkin's breath on his face. Dimitri kept his eyes fastened on the dark hardwood floor, unable to withstand his boss's piercing eyes.

Selkin smiled. If he were to say boo, the man would piss in his pants. He placed the pages Dimitri had brought on top of his desk. "The next set will be better." It was an order, not a question.

Dimitri nodded fiercely. "Yes, absolutely."

"That's all," Selkin said briskly.

Dimitri turned around and walked quickly out of the room, careful not to step on the hand-woven, pale blue Berber rug. He exited through the wooden pocket door that separated Selkin's office from the large entry hall of the highly secure headquarters. Dimitri wondered briefly where the Mafia boss actually lived, but he assumed that nobody in the organization had that information.

Selkin refilled his water glass from a crystal carafe. Through the open door, he could see his maid watering the array of houseplants down the hall. Her sneakers squeaked as she rushed from one plant to the next. The sound annoyed the hell out of him. *I should make her walk over hot coals*, he thought, *so she learns to walk more quietly*.

Snap.

Snap.

Snap.

What was she doing now? Selkin ran one hand through his short, sandy hair. Wasn't it possible to get some peace and quiet around here? "Tatjana!" he bellowed, and the maid stopped in her tracks.

"Yes?" she answered, poking her head around the door frame.

"Whatever it is you're doing, do it later."

"Of course," she said obediently. She returned her attention to the English ivy. It cascaded from the mossy hanging basket all the way down to the cast-iron radiator. The many hours of daylight during the long summer days had invigorated it. She'd wanted to trim the tendril-like stems, but obviously her boss was in no mood for her work. She quickly folded up the household ladder and left, squeaking with every step.

Selkin took a seat and closed his eyes for a moment, hoping to soothe his irritation. The first set of pictures Dimitri had presented was acceptable. Perhaps he should've been satisfied with Dimitri's preliminary work, but

things weren't going as smoothly as predicted. Selkin opened his eyes and focused on the evening issue of the *St. Petersburg News*. The article he'd been reading certainly didn't help his temper. The trial's story of Siberia's oil tycoon, Piotr Lagunov, did not reveal anything new. It seemed that Selkin's contact had been correct, and the prosecution still chased its tail. Maybe the investigators had withheld vital information from the press—as well as from his informant. Maybe this was just a lie. It was hard to tell.

After his last conversation with the prosecutor general, the case had changed to Selkin's advantage. Selkin knew just how much pressure was enough. He was, after all, one of the most significant *businessmen* in western Russia. It just seemed that once again, the Americans had found a way of obstructing his plans. Leverage would have to be applied in the United States in a very serious way. Someone would have to make it clear that the days of playing these stinking cat-and-mouse games were over.

Goddamned Americans!

Pure enmity roiled in his stomach as he continued to study the article. It talked about the kidnapping victim, Mia Trentino, and the possibility of her being called by the prosecution to testify. Selkin pictured the woman, and more loathing filled his mind. He'd met her in person. He should have gotten rid of her when he'd had the chance. Then his focus fell back on the pictures Dimitri had left.

Stroking his chin, Selkin grinned. Normally, he wasn't easily excited—he was a calculating man with a cool demeanor—but his heartbeat quickened as he thought about the upcoming events. With Dimitri's work, Selkin would be able to turn this operation around, and if the final product was anything near what he'd been promised, he'd be a significant step closer to complete success.

Chapter 4

Northern Colorado

Ten days later

Douglas stepped out on the rustic porch of the Acronym's ranch.

His eyes wandered over the several hundred acres of lush, green pastures that spread out in front of him. The mountains in the distance still had snowcaps, and the bright mid-afternoon sun was blinding. A light breeze and a temperature that was comfortably in the low eighties made for a perfect afternoon.

Blue Eyes, an unusual mix of Australian shepherd and some undetermined breed, jumped up onto the porch to greet his master, vigorously wagging his tail and licking Douglas's hands.

"Hi, Buddy," Douglas greeted the dog, giving him a few moments of his attention. Then, his gaze went to the small herd of horses grazing the sweet, early-summer grass. The sorrel mare had given birth to a beautiful filly a few days back. He watched as the filly encircled her mother, running and bucking and trying to entice her to play.

The man called *El Pirata* had been captured and his dirty money seized. His source of income had turned out to be, as was suspected, young women who'd been promised work and a prosperous future in the United States, so they could support their families in Mexico. Instead, they had been forced into the dangerous and filthy business of street prostitution. The U.S. border patrol had been investigating for months, but a shooting at the border and a dead illegal immigrant gave the border patrol bad press, and the government had asked the Acronym for assistance.

Douglas shook off the memory of what he'd witnessed and focused on the reason why he'd hurried back here. He took a seat in the big hammock, a favorite place he had shared with Mia many times. And there she was, standing in knee-high grass, several hundred feet away, with her back to him. Her shiny, auburn hair was gathered in a ponytail, and her slender frame was dressed in a pair of worn-out sweat pants and a T-shirt.

She was in the middle of a martial arts training session with the Cambodian agent Bao Shuang. They did a series of quickly executed high kicks, followed by a sequence of slow, flowing movements. The small Asian man seemed to be Mia's shadow; there was no delay in his motions. He stood behind her and they moved in total unison.

Bao focused on Mia's position. He silently stepped closer to assist her in a deeper stretch through her lower spine. There was no need to touch her. He just guided her wordlessly with his presence.

Mia felt the light breeze on her sweaty face. She focused on the horizon, not allowing her thoughts to trail off. She let her mind and body become one as she took every breath in harmony with her movements.

As Douglas continued to watch, the last bit of tension eased out of his body. He kicked off his boots and relaxed in the hammock, enjoying the view and letting his thoughts wander.

Eight months ago, he'd met Mia during one of his overseas assignments. During the execution of the operation, Mia had been shot by a Russian sniper—she'd almost died—and he'd brought her to the ranch to recover, as well as to protect her from further retaliation of the Russian Mafia.

The location of the ranch was unlikely to be discovered by an enemy, but nobody could guarantee safety a hundred percent. Normal procedure would have been for Mia to learn how to shoot, and Douglas had tried very hard to convince her that the best chance of survival in case of an encounter was a firearm, but she'd never handled a gun in her life, and so she refused.

Still today, Douglas remembered the conversation vividly.

“No weapons for me,” she’d said. “One close call is enough. I’m not going to connect myself with guns and bullets now.”

“I want to make sure that you can protect yourself,” Douglas had argued. “I can’t always be here with you. You know that.” “Of course I know that. But you need to understand that I’m not a combatant like you or the others are.” Pointing to his gun, she’d added, “No matter what. I will not use one of those.”

“Depending on the situation, one of *those* is your only chance!”

She’d crossed her arms over her chest, ending the argument with a simple “I don’t care.”

Right from the beginning, he’d been attracted to her—not only because of her pretty dark-brown eyes but also because of her thick-headedness and flaring temper. Sometimes, however, that temper got in the way of her being sensible. Working for a clandestine operation without knowing how to shoot was certainly one of those situations, but no matter what his argument, Mia rejected target practice.

Her involuntary involvement with the Acronym was his responsibility, and at the time, he hadn’t had much of a choice. It’d been either that, or he’d have had to hand her over to the FBI. They would have stuck her in protective custody, and his experience had taught him that the Fed’s safehouse was anything but.

Then one of Douglas’ partners, Bao, had voiced an idea: he’d introduced Mia to the ancient Oriental art of T’ai Chi, which taught her to open up her senses. He explained to her that she needed to trust herself and then, maybe in the future, she’d be more receptive to the idea of using weapons. The five-foot-two Asian was a master of close combat and all kinds of self-defense techniques. He’d beaten Douglas many times in practice, and slowly, over the past several months, he’d been teaching her his seemingly endless knowledge of Eastern philosophy, yoga, and martial arts.

A satisfied smile came over Douglas’ face as he watched her now. How beautifully she moved—she looked powerful and very graceful. The intense training had turned this woman, once so afraid, into someone who radiated confidence and calm.

Mia was exhausted. She finished today’s exercise and closed her eyes for a moment. Her elevated heartbeat slowed momentarily, and the warm sun on her body soothed her aching muscles. She turned around to face Bao; he said nothing. He just nodded in approval, proud of his student.

Then she turned toward the porch and all her calmness disappeared. *Douglas! He’s home!* Her face lit up and a joyful scream escaped her as she took off running across the pasture. Douglas rose and opened his arms, and Mia threw herself into him. God, how badly she’d missed him!

He laughed and hugged her tight. She let him embrace her for a moment and then raised her head to look up into his bright blue eyes that she loved so much.

“Hey, stranger,” he drawled before kissing her passionately, starved for her touch. It had been almost two weeks—not a very long time for a mission like the one he’d just wrapped up, but when a man like him had a woman like her to come back to, two weeks was almost unbearable.

Breathless from running, Mia felt like she needed to stop this kiss or she’d pass out. She peeled herself away from him, just a little. “Sweetheart, you are crushing me,” she teased. She wrapped her arms around his waist, sinking her head against his chest and inhaling his marvelous, masculine scent. He loosened his hug but didn’t let her go. His mouth was buried in her hair, and he wondered how someone could go through a rigorous workout and still smell as nice as she did.

Mia lifted her head to study his features, as if he could have changed in the past few weeks. His strong jaw, thin lips, the small dimple in his chin, and his dark eyebrows that contrasted with his bright eyes. His short dark hair that always seemed to be freshly cut was now in boyish disarray.

“I’m so glad you’re back,” she murmured. “You have no idea.”

“Hmm. I think I do. And I brought a surprise.”

“Really? What is it?”

“Brian is here.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful!”

Douglas nodded. “Yes, I know, and with Bao and Ludvika already here, our team is complete.” Gently he stroked her cheek. “You looked amazing out there. You must have been working very hard.”

Mia rolled her eyes in playful complaint. “Four hours a day for the last two weeks. Bao is a slave driver, but I bet I’ll be able to take you down, one of these days,” she bragged.

Douglas chose to interpret her words a different way. His voice instantly became husky and his Southern drawl intensified. “Well, Sugar, I certainly hope so. I’d be happy to be your sparring partner a little later on.” His hands caressed her back and when she saw the mischievous sparkle in those ocean-blue eyes, her knees weakened and her heart missed a beat.

Chapter 5

Agent Ludvika Bogdan had to adjust her stance as she aimed. The vision in her right eye still gave her a little trouble with focusing. She held her breath. Her weapon did not move as her right index finger added pressure and finally pulled the trigger.

Bull's-eye.

Quickly she emptied the remaining twelve rounds of her Browning Hi-Power, and the time it took her to reload was close to her personal record. Not too long ago, she'd switched weapons, and Ludvika liked how the Browning balanced in her hand as compared to the Ruger she'd been using for years.

She exhaled and straightened her shoulders. By pushing the button to her right, she activated the target retriever, and it raced toward her. Only the solid black center of the paper target had holes in it. She noticed with some satisfaction that all thirteen rounds had hit within half an inch.

A deep, familiar voice praised her as she took off her ear protection, "Nice! Looks like you still got what it takes, Bogdan."

Ludvika smiled, but she didn't turn around. Earlier, she'd sensed Brian standing behind her but kept her attention on the target. Yes, she still had what it took, and she couldn't wait to put it to good use. She was ready to return to Russia and face the evil that had almost destroyed her.

"Thanks, Secona," she acknowledged in her heavy Eastern European accent. Turning around she greeted him with a firm handshake. Brian studied her face and saw the evidence of the assault—while on a mission with Douglas in Siberia, a member of the Russian Mafia had caught her and beaten her almost to death. Tied up for hours in the poisoning air of an underground meth lab, Ludvika experienced brutal force and unimaginable pain as her captors pressed for answers. But she hadn't broken her silence; she'd protected the anonymity of her mission and then had been able to overpower a guard and escape.

"How's your eye?" Brian asked.

She touched the pink scar, the only remnant of where her cheekbone and eye socket had been repaired after being crushed to pieces. "It still gives me grief. Not as bad as it was, though." Ludvika stood six feet tall, but she still needed to lift her head to face Brian. "Did you and Farland come in together?"

"Yeah, we returned from Mexico last night and decided to drive back here early this morning." Brian smiled and added, "As protocol calls for, I wanted to stay in Denver for twenty-four hours, but you know Farland. There ain't no way to keep him away from his woman longer than absolutely necessary."

"Well, I guess you are going to be my date for the evening," she joked.

She let Brian take her by the arm. "My pleasure. Let's go. Our briefing is about to begin."

The team gathered around the large oak table in the great room. The rambling, two-story log lodge was an architectural masterpiece and easily provided living space for fifteen people. The five bedroom suites upstairs each was the size of a small apartment. Three large bedrooms on the main floor with attached living quarters offered additional room and privacy. The shooting range was located in the basement, next to the fully equipped gym. The kitchen was large enough for someone to prepare food for an entire football team.

Colorful hand-woven Native American rugs accented the high walls, along with big-game trophies, including a massive mount of a Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep. A wide pine staircase led to the upper floor. Its steps and hand-carved railing was detailed with stunning two-tone inlay work. A brown L-shaped leather couch reached from one end of the downstairs living room to the other, and its many seats were littered with a dozen overstuffed cowhide pillows.

The lodge's generous floor plan would have been a favorite subject for any interior design magazine, but this place was top secret. None of the agents actually knew who owned it. Rumor had it that it used to be a wealthy politician's hunting retreat, and he had provided it to the Acronym after the agency's privatization. The ranch

was located in a narrow valley, deep in the heart of the Colorado Rockies. Shaped like a horseshoe, the valley bordered Rocky Mountain National Park and protected the ranch and its surroundings with rolling hills and thick forests of pine trees, white aspen, and fir.

One could reach the ranch only by helicopter or on a rough dirt road from Estes Park. Several checkpoints and a very sophisticated security system made sure that no one would intrude, not even by accident. Orbiting surveillance was blocked by a private satellite.

“Okay, everybody, take a seat.” Douglas stood on the head of the table. After uploading the latest data, he arranged the high-definition holographic projector so that everyone could see what needed to be discussed. The Acronym’s symbol, an impossible triangle that was configured as the letter A, hovered three-dimensionally just above the tabletop. It looked like it was suspended from invisible strings. Transparent, it slowly spun around its axis, to be replaced by a new image as soon as Douglas activated the remote.

Brian took a seat to Douglas’ left, and Mia was opposite of him, with Ludvika next to her. Bao joined in as well. He folded his hands on top of the table and looked expectantly at Douglas. “I will come to in a minute.”

The slightly enlarged head shot of a man with a blond buzz cut appeared in the holographic space. His jaw was firm and square, and his cheekbones were pronounced and high. His alert blue eyes were set close together, giving him the overall appearance of a very determined person.

Douglas began, “You all have been informed about a new agent. This gentleman here will join our happy family very soon. His name is Uwe Hirsch, a former member of the Special Forces Unit of the German border patrol. After moving to the United States, he joined the San Francisco Police Department and later became a member of their SWAT team. We’ll introduce him here in a day or two. HQ has included him in our next mission, which I will come to in a minute.”

Ludvika spoke up. “He will join our team right away? Without being checked out first?”

“Your concern is a point well taken,” Douglas allowed. “I understand that as part of your team he could jeopardize the Acronym if his credentials are in question.” She nodded and opened her mouth to speak again, but Douglas simply held up his hand. “We have to trust that O’Neil knows what he is doing. He ran several extensive checks on Hirsch, in California as well as overseas. Hirsch is 100 percent motivated. Brian and I met with him in Utah a few weeks ago.”

Crossing her arms in front of her chest, Ludvika leaned back in her seat and held Douglas’ gaze. She pursed her lips in disapproval. As a former Interpol agent, she’d assisted the Acronym in a few top-priority cases until she’d been recruited herself. She was very protective of the agency. New agents, even though all were required to successfully complete the Acronym’s intense screening process, still had to work hard to gain Ludvika’s trust.

Douglas switched his attention to Mia. He hoped she’d be able to digest what he had to say. “Here is the subject of our next mission.” He removed Hirsch’s image and in its place appeared the ruthless face of Sergei Selkin. Mia’s stomach turned. The memory of her encounter with the Russian Mafia boss jolted her like high voltage. She stared at the latest photos of him and saw the same detached look in his cold eyes that she’d seen when they’d met face to face.

The virtual-imaging system instantly converted the photos into three-dimensional images of Selkin. His head hovered, ghost-like, in front of Mia, as if its sole purpose was to burn deeper into her already troubled mind.

Douglas continued, “As we all know, despite our intelligence in Russia and our own repeated attempts of his capture, Selkin is still at large.” Ludvika’s face got hard. She narrowed her eyes and tightly clenched her fists. “This is not your fault, Bogdan,” Douglas assured her. “We all know that. So stay calm.”

She’d been after Selkin while still with Interpol. She had clipped his heels several times, but never got close enough to take him into custody. Sergei Selkin had always seemed to be just in front of her nose, yet unreachable.

Douglas placed his hands on the back of his chair and leaned slightly forward. He looked intently at Ludvika as he went on. “The opening statements for Lagunov’s trial in St. Petersburg will begin on Monday, and we just got notified that Mia is scheduled to meet with the prosecutor before she takes the stand.”

“When are we leaving?” Mia asked.

“Wednesday.”

“I hoped this day would never come,” she whispered.

Douglas nodded. “I know,” he sighed. “We also have received several ... warnings.”

“Threats?” Ludvika asked. “From whom? Selkin?”

“Yes. Selkin made it pretty clear that if Mia sets foot in Russia, she’ll be ... punished.”

“Punished?” Mia spoke up. “I guess *punished* is their way of telling me that I’m dead meat if I talk.” She tried to smile, but Douglas saw the fear in her eyes.

“However you want to call it, it’s obviously a serious threat,” he said, “but despite the way it sounds, it’s a good thing.”

“Excuse me?” she asked, exasperated.

Douglas held up his hand. “I know that sounds crazy, but Selkin is worried he’ll be exposed if Lagunov gets convicted. Apparently, Selkin is vulnerable enough to make those threats himself—which means that he’ll have his eye on you personally.”

“And that’s a *good* thing?” she asked.

“Yes, because Selkin and his Mafia friends will try to keep this under their control, and we’re anticipating his coming out of his hidey-hole.”

Ludvika said flatly, “We’ll need assistance.”

“The feds have promised full support. On top of that, we have an insider in St. Petersburg. So we might have an opportunity to strike and arrest Selkin ourselves.”

Ludvika stared at Douglas. “Arrest him? I would rather see him taken out. That bastard doesn’t deserve—”

“I’ll leave that up to you, Bogdan. You’ll be in charge anyway.”

“Why is that?” Mia asked, confused, “You’re the team leader, Douglas.”

He smiled thinly, wishing he could have explained this to her in a private moment. “Bogdan, Hirsch, and the FBI will take good care of you, Mia.”

“But I thought ... I thought you would stay with me. What are you saying?”

“That I’m not going to St. Petersburg with you. O’Neil is sending me somewhere else.”