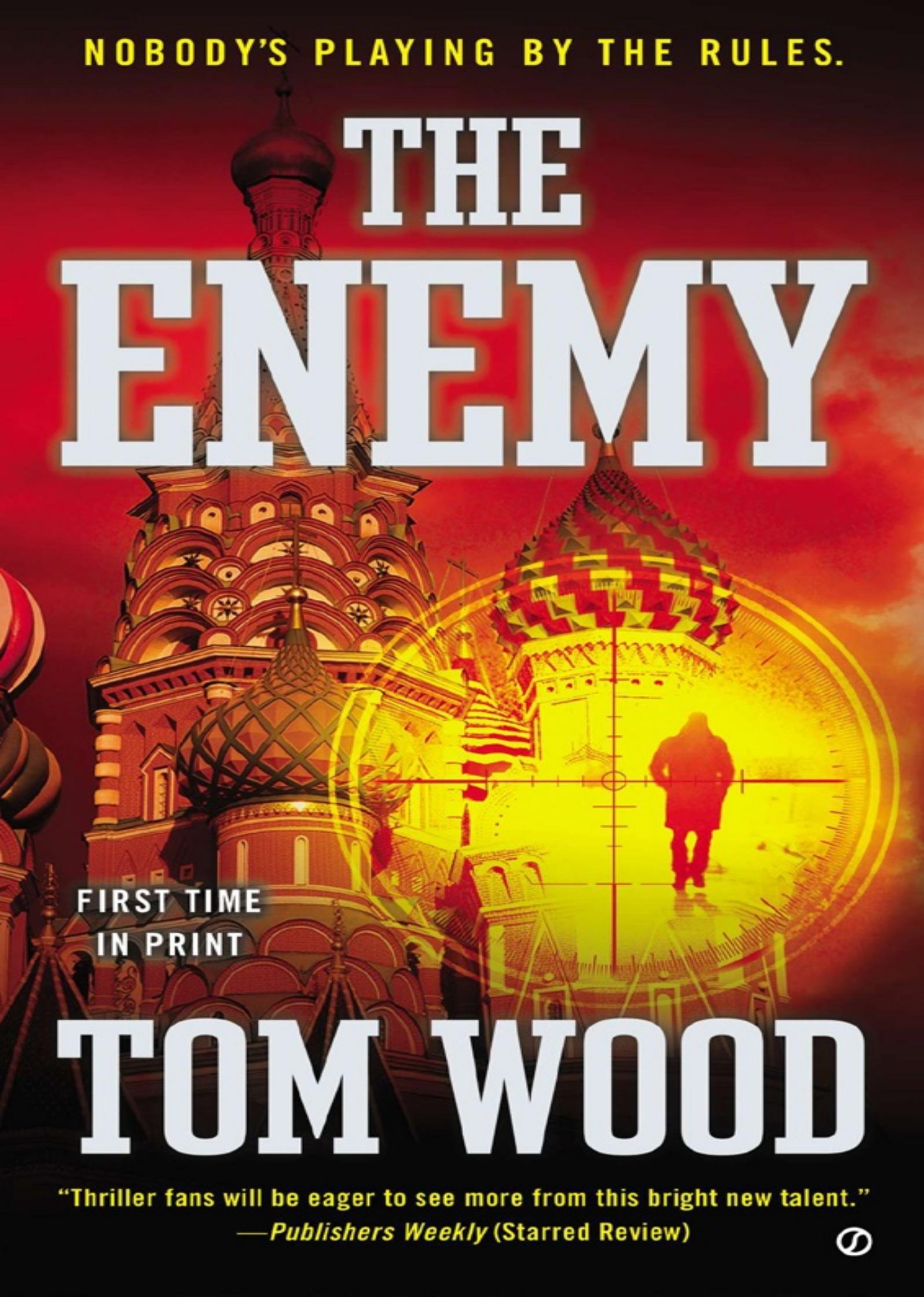


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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

*For Michael,
brother and friend*

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Acknowledgments

Excerpt from *The Game*

• Chapter 1 •

Bucharest, Romania

It was a good morning to kill. Impenetrable gray clouds obscured the sun and the city beneath was dark and quiet. Cold. Just how he liked it. He walked at a relaxed pace, in no hurry, knowing he was making perfect time. A fine rain began to fall. Yes, a particularly good morning to kill.

Ahead of him a refuse truck made its slow way along the road, hazard light flashing orange, windshield wipers swinging back and forth to flick away the drizzle. Refuse collectors followed the vehicle, hands buried under armpits while they waited to reach the next pile of trash bags on the sidewalk. They chatted and joked among themselves.

He interrupted the group's banter as he passed through the spiraling cloud of exhaust fumes condensing in the spring air. He felt their gaze upon him, taking in his appearance for the few short seconds before he'd gone.

There was little for them to note. He was smartly dressed—a long woolen coat over the top of a dark gray suit, black leather gloves, thick-soled Oxford shoes. In his left hand he carried a metal briefcase. His dark hair was short, his beard neatly trimmed. Despite the cold, only the bottom two of his four overcoat buttons had been fastened. Just a businessman on his way to the office, they would assume. He was a businessman of sorts, but he doubted they would guess the nature of his uncommon profession.

Behind him, a trash can clattered into the road and he looked briefly over his shoulder to see black bags split open and refuse spilling across the asphalt. The garbagemen groaned and rushed to gather up the trash before the wind could spread it too far.

After a short walk, the businessman arrived at a large apartment complex. It stood several stories taller than the surrounding buildings. Balconies and satellite dishes jutted out from the dull brown walls. He made sure not to appear rushed as he took the half-dozen steps up to the front door. He unlocked it with his day-old key and stepped inside.

There were two elevators, but he opted for the stairs, climbing twenty-two flights to the top floor. He reached his destination with little trace of fatigue.

The corridor beyond the stairwell door was long and featureless. Spaced at regular intervals were numbered, spyholed doors. Dirty linoleum lined the floor. The paint on the walls was faded and chipped. The cool air smelled of strong detergent. Somewhere a baby cried softly.

At the end of the corridor, where it intersected with another, was a door marked *maintenance*. He put his briefcase down, and from a pocket removed a small packet of butter taken from a nearby diner. He unfolded the wrapper and carefully smeared the butter onto the hinges of the door. He placed the empty wrapper back into the same pocket.

From inside his coat, he removed two small metal tools: a tension wrench and a slim, curved pick. The lock was significantly better than most, but the businessman unlocked it in less than sixty seconds.

A door opened behind him.

He slipped the lock picks back into the pocket. Someone said something in gruff-sounding Romanian. The man with the briefcase spoke several languages, but not this one. He stayed facing the door for a moment in case the speaker was talking to someone inside the apartment. A slim chance, but one he had to play nevertheless.

The voice called again. The same guttural words, but louder. Impatient. His back still to the speaker, the businessman reached inside his coat. He withdrew his right hand and kept it out of sight by his hip. He turned side-on, to the left, to look at the resident, keeping his head tilted forward, eyes in the shadow of his brow.

A heavysset man with several days' worth of stubble was leaning out of his front door, fat fingers white on the frame. A cigarette hung from thick lips. He looked over the man with the briefcase and removed the cigarette from his mouth with a shaking hand. Ash fell from the end and on to the marked linoleum.

He swayed as he spoke again, words slow and slurred. A drunk, then. No threat.

The businessman ignored him, picked up his briefcase and moved down the adjoining corridor, walking away from the drunk before he made any more noise. When a door clicked shut behind him, he stopped and silently retraced his steps, peered around the corner, saw no one and placed the 9 mm Beretta 92F handgun back inside his overcoat. He reset the safety with his thumb.

Total darkness enshrouded the room on the other side of the maintenance door. Water dripped somewhere unseen. The businessman flicked on a slim flashlight. The narrow beam illuminated the room—bare brick walls, pipework, boxes, a metal staircase along one side. He negotiated his way across the space and ascended the stairs. His shoes were quiet on the metal steps. At the top, a padlock secured the rust-streaked roof access door. The lock was marginally harder to pick than the previous one.

Eleven stories up, the icy wind stung his face and every inch of exposed flesh. It subsided within a few seconds as the pressure equalized between the stairwell and roof. He crouched to reduce his profile against the sky and moved across the roof to the west edge. The wind was pushing the clouds northward, letting the glow of the rising sun spread across the city. Bucharest extended out in front of him, slowly awakening. Present location aside, a particularly beautiful city. This was his first visit, and he hoped his work would bring him back before too long.

He turned his attention to his briefcase, unlocked it and opened it flat. Inside, a sheet of thick foam rubber surrounded the disassembled Heckler & Koch MSG-9. He removed the barrel first and attached it to the body of the rifle. Next, he fixed the Hensoldt scope in place, followed by the stock and finally the twenty-round box magazine. He folded down the bipod and rested the weapon on the roof's low parapet.

Through the scope he saw a 10x magnification of the city—buildings, cars, people. For fun, he positioned the crosshairs over a young woman’s head and, anticipating her movements to keep her reticule in place, tracked her as she sipped her morning coffee. She passed beneath the branches of a tree and he lost her. Lucky girl, he thought with a rare smile. He took his eye from the sight, repositioned the rifle and looked through the scope once more.

This time he saw the entrance to the Grand Plaza Hotel on Dorobantilor Avenue. The eighteen-story building had a modern façade, all glass and stainless steel, appearing both strong and sleek at the same time. The businessman had stayed in several hotels of the Howard Johnson chain while plying his trade around the globe, but not this particular one. If the Grand Plaza met the reasonable-to-high standards of the rest of the franchise, he imagined the target would have enjoyed a pleasant stay. He thought it only fitting that the condemned man should get a good night’s sleep before his morning execution.

The man with the rifle took a laser rangefinder from his briefcase and aimed the beam at the hotel entrance, finding it exactly six hundred and four yards away in central Bucharest. Well within acceptable range, and only six yards under his estimate. He rotated the elevation wheel to correct for the distance and elevation.

Outside the hotel entrance, a craggy-faced doorman revealed his bad teeth by yawning. Close to him, tied to a nearby streetlight, a purple ribbon fluttered in the breeze. The man with the rifle watched it for a moment, calculating the wind speed. Five, maybe five-and-a-quarter miles per hour. He adjusted the Hensoldt’s windage wheel, wondering how long it would be before someone realized the significance of the seemingly innocuous ribbon. Maybe no one ever would.

He adjusted the scope’s power ring, decreasing the magnification to see a wider view of the hotel. There were few other people nearby. Some pedestrians, the occasional guest, but no mass of people. This was good. His marksmanship was excellent, but with just seconds to make the kill, he required a clear line of sight. He had no compunction about shooting whoever was unfortunate enough to stand between the bullet and its true mark, but such killings tended to give targets advance warning of their own impending demise, and as long as the target wasn’t mentally deficient, they moved.

The man with the rifle checked his watch. Today’s unfortunate subject was due to appear shortly, if the itinerary included with the dossier was accurate. The businessman had no reason to doubt his client-supplied information.

Another adjustment of the scope and he saw the entire width of the hotel’s front side and two-thirds of the way up its single tower. Light from the rising sun reflected off the windows of the top three floors within the scope’s view.

The rain had ceased by the time a limousine pulled onto the hotel’s drive from the adjoining road and stopped outside the main entrance. A large white guy dressed in a beige overcoat and dark jeans climbed out and ascended the steps with the brisk efficiency of a bodyguard. His head swept back and forth, fast but efficient, gaze registering every nearby person, assessing for threats and finding none.

The man with the rifle felt his heart rate begin to speed up as the time grew rapidly closer. He breathed deeply to stop it climbing too high and negatively affecting his aim. He waited.

After a minute, the bodyguard reappeared and took up position midway down the steps. He looked around before gesturing back up at the entrance. In a few seconds the target would come into view. According to the dossier, the target—a Ukrainian—typically traveled with several bodyguards who would naturally have stayed at the same hotel. The bodyguards were all ex-military or ex-intelligence, who would no doubt surround the Ukrainian and make an otherwise completely clear shot difficult.

The man with the rifle had selected the MSG-9 because it was semi-automatic and would allow him to fire several times inside of just a few seconds. The 7.62 × 51 mm full-metal-jacketed rounds carried enough power to pass through a human body and still kill someone standing behind, and these particular bullets incorporated a tungsten penetrator to account for the body armor the target and his guards would likely wear. A wall of flesh two-armed-men thick could shield the Ukrainian and he would still die.

Before the businessman could zoom in closer to prepare for the shot, a tiny flicker of light from a window of the hotel's thirteenth floor caught his attention. He quickly raised the barrel of the MSG-9, angling up the scope to check out the light source. He feared a guest was better enjoying the view of the city through a telescope or pair of binoculars. From an elevated position they might inadvertently spot him, and if so, he would have to forget about the contract and make a quick escape. No point completing the kill if the police apprehended him afterward.

Once the reticule centered over the window he increased the magnification of the scope, and saw the source of the flicker was not the reflection of sunlight on the lenses of binoculars or a telescope but a rifle scope like his own.

A suppressed muzzle flash transformed the businessman's surprise to alarm for the two-thirds of a second it took for the bullet to reach his head.

Pink mist swirled in the air.

• Chapter 2 •

Victor watched the body fall out of sight and took his eye away from the scope as the crack of the shot slowly faded into nothingness. The rifle's long sound suppressor had negated the muzzle report but could do nothing to stop the sonic boom emitted when the bullet broke the sound barrier. Though a person with the right ear would know a shot had been fired, without the accompanying muzzle blast and flash its point of origin would be all but impossible to decipher. Subsonic ammunition would have eliminated most of the sound, only it was windy in Bucharest, and at a distance of six hundred yards, Victor didn't trust the slower round's accuracy.

The hotel room window hadn't opened far enough for his purposes so Victor had unscrewed the pane. As a result it was cold inside the room, but the flow of air would help disperse the tang of cordite. Shooting with the rifle barrel outside of the window would have helped with the smell, but it would also have helped give him away. Only amateurs operated like that.

Quickly, but not hurrying, Victor unscrewed the suppressor from the rifle's barrel and disassembled the weapon. He placed the individual parts back inside the foam rubber insert of a leather briefcase. The process took less than fifteen seconds. Using a handkerchief, he retrieved the hot brass shell case from the floor and placed it in a pocket. He then moved the armchair he'd been sitting on away from the window and back to its original corner. With his foot, he rubbed the depressions from the carpet where the chair legs had rested near the window.

He screwed the windowpane back in place and used a small piece of sandpaper to smooth the heads of the screws. He surveyed the room for signs of his presence. It was contemporary, neat and very clean. Neutral colors. Lots of stainless steel and lightwood. No personality in the décor but no offense either. He saw nothing to be concerned over. He hadn't used the bed or the bathroom, or so much as turned a tap. Hard as it had been to resist the pull of 300-thread-count sheets, the room was a strike point—nothing more—and tasting its comforts wasn't worth the implicit risk. Sleeping in the same place where he fulfilled a contract was simply not how Victor conducted business.

Happy he'd left no physical evidence to tie him to the room, Victor placed the briefcase inside a larger suitcase, closed it and exited the hotel room. His pulse was two beats per minute above his resting heart rate. He didn't have to worry about fingerprints as a clear silicone solution covered his hands to prevent oil from his skin leaving prints on anything he touched.

He walked to the stairwell to avoid the security camera near the elevator and descended to the first floor. He passed through the lobby, ignoring the commotion, with his head angled slightly downward so the cameras there would only see his forehead and hair.

Near the hotel entrance, a tall, wide-shouldered man in jeans and a beige overcoat was speaking frantically to a similarly sized but older man. Both looked Eastern European, Slavic—Russians or Ukrainians maybe. The older man appeared to be in his late forties, clothed in a fine black pinstripe suit that was perfectly cut across his large, muscular frame. He had short-cropped black hair that was gray at the temples, and a clean-shaven face. He stood left-side-on to Victor and the jagged line of scar tissue forming the bottom of the ear was clearly visible. There was no earlobe.

Four other men surrounded the two Slavs. All were pale-skinned Eastern Europeans, all in dark suits, all muscular but not overly so, all with the bearing of ex-military high-end bodyguards. They formed a tactical screen around the man in the beige overcoat and the older man in the pinstripe suit, each looking in a different direction—overlapping fields of vision, alert, good, primary hands hovering near their waists, ready to earn their paychecks.

As Victor approached the desk he heard the large man in the overcoat explaining in Russian why the man in the pinstripe—the VIP—needed to wait inside. Victor pretended not to understand the topic of conversation as he reached the front desk and stood at an angle so the nearest camera would only catch the back of his skull.

The receptionist behind the desk looked flustered, staring at the group of Slavs, and didn't notice Victor's presence until he held a hand across the guy's line of sight. "Sorry, sir," he said in Romanian-accented English. "How can I help you?" "I'd like to check out early, please."

Victor gave his details, handed back his keycard, and waited for the receptionist to finish doing whatever receptionists had to do, all the while listening to every word of the conversation between the head bodyguard and his VIP.

As he checked the bill and starting signing the paperwork, he heard heavy footsteps approaching. Normally, Victor never allowed anyone to walk up behind him, but conscious of the security camera, and in the process of signing out, he couldn't reposition himself without drawing attention to what he was doing. And the bodyguards looked observant enough not to let such telling movements go unnoticed.

As a result Victor stood still as he finished putting his alias's signature on the bottom of the form, and received a predicted shove to the shoulder from the bodyguard as he arrived at the desk to bark orders at the receptionist. Victor didn't dodge and he didn't resist the shove—again to preserve his cover as a forgettable guest—but the bodyguard had to weigh two hundred and thirty useful pounds and Victor stumbled. He recovered his footing easier than a surprised businessman might have, but only to stop himself crashing to the floor.

Before he could make an expected angry—but not too angry—comment, he heard the man in the pinstripe suit shout, "*Nikolai.*"

The guy in the beige overcoat turned from the front desk to look at his boss. Victor looked too.

The forty-something VIP stormed toward his head bodyguard, the other four guards rushing to maintain a full screen around him, five paces out, no corner of the

lobby not covered by at least one set of eyes.

“Nikolai, you disrespectful brute,” the man in the pinstripe said as he drew near, “apologize to this man immediately.”

He gestured to Victor, and Victor recognized the rural Ukrainian accent.

The bodyguard called Nikolai looked at Victor and said, in inflectionless English, “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Victor said back.

The Ukrainian in the pinstripe suit turned to him. “Forgive me, please. My friend here has yet to be civilized. More primate than human. I do hope you’re not hurt.”

“I’m okay.”

Victor took a step away, eager to end the interaction with the man whose life he had saved. Each second here increased his risk of exposure exponentially. The Ukrainian looked at Victor with a curious, almost intense gaze.

“Oh, no,” the Ukrainian said as his gaze dropped, “your suit.”

Victor looked too, seeing the small tear in his right jacket sleeve. It must have caught on the corner of the front desk as he stumbled.

“It’s okay,” Victor said. “It can be fixed.”

“No, it’s ruined.” The Ukrainian turned to Nikolai, and said in Russian, “You stupid fuck, look what you’ve done.” He faced Victor again. “I’m so sorry. And that’s such a nice suit too. I can see you are a man who cares about how he dresses, as do I. I would give you money for a replacement, only I don’t carry any quantity of cash, and who has a checkbook these days?”

“There’s no need, really,” Victor said, thinking he’d have drawn less attention to himself if he had back-flipped out of Nikolai’s way.

“There’s every need.” The Ukrainian reached into his inside jacket pocket and produced a business card. He handed it to Victor. “I’m afraid I’m in the middle of a crisis at the moment, otherwise I would take you for a new suit, but here’s my card. Call me and we can work something out. If you are ever in Moscow I will have my tailor make you a suit so fine it will make you weep.”

Victor took the card. In both Cyrillic script and English, it said: *Vladimir Kasakov*. There was a phone number and a Moscow office address.

“That’s very kind of you, Mr. Kasakov,” Victor replied.

“Now, before my employees can do any more damage, you must excuse me.”

Victor nodded and headed to the front entrance. He didn’t turn around, but he felt eyes watching him the whole time.

•••

Outside it was cold and the doorman looked far too frail to be still doing the job at his age, especially in this weather. Victor’s gaze drifted to the eleven-story building whose ugliness was all too apparent even at over six hundred yards. The assassin had been right to shoot from there. Other buildings were closer, but not as well positioned to command an uninterrupted view of the hotel entrance. Victor would have used it himself, had their roles been reversed. He would have been more careful not to die there, however.

Victor saw his reflection in the hotel’s glass doors and noted that he didn’t look too

dissimilar to the man he'd shot. He wore a charcoal gray suit with a white shirt and sky blue tie underneath his black overcoat. Perfect urban camouflage. His dark hair was short and not styled, his beard trimmed short. He looked like a stockbroker or lawyer, one that kept a smart but unremarkable appearance. He blended into the background, seldom seen, rarely noticed. Unremembered.

In a taxi, he unwrapped a stick of peppermint chewing gum and folded it into his mouth. He'd read gum made a good substitute for cigarettes, but no matter how much he chewed he couldn't inhale any smoke from the stuff.

He had the driver take him to Gara de Nord station where he purchased a ticket to Constanta and boarded the train seven minutes before it was set to depart. He left his seat six minutes later and disembarked five seconds before the doors closed and locked. He left the station by a different exit, climbed into another taxi and told the driver to take him to Heraștrașu Park, where he walked leisurely through the park before exiting and entering the Charles de Gaulle Plaza. He took a seat in the lobby and read a complimentary magazine while he watched the main entrance.

With no one registering on his threat radar after five minutes, he stood and descended the stairs to the lowest level of the underground parking garage. One of the high-speed elevators then carried him to the top floor. He went back down in a different elevator to the fourth floor and used the stairs to return to the lobby. He left the building by a side entrance.

He walked to the closest metro station and stayed on for thirty minutes, switching trains and doubling back on himself before changing routes and leaving at the University of Bucharest station. After a pleasant walk through the campus, a taxi took him to Elisabeta Boulevard near City Hall and from there he walked the short distance to the entrance of the Cis,mișiu Gardens.

The park was quiet and peaceful. He passed few people as he made his way to the circular alley of the Rondul Român where he spent some time looking at its twelve stone busts of famous Romanian writers while he finished his countersurveillance. His precautions were as essential a part of fulfilling a job as squeezing the trigger. The successful execution of a contract depended on remaining unnoticed and untraced. Nearly anyone could kill another person, but few people could get away with it once, let alone time after time.

For years, Victor had plied his trade with complete anonymity. Working freelance, he'd killed quickly, efficiently, silently. Those who employed him had no idea who he was. No one did. He had lived in near isolation—no friends, no family—no one who could betray him and no one to be used against him. It hadn't lasted, and in hindsight, it was inevitable. He of all people should have known nobody could remain unfound forever.

When Victor was satisfied he was not being observed, he left the Rondul Român and walked to the center of the park where a man-made lake was located. He paused on an ornate footbridge, removed the briefcase from within the suitcase, looked around to make sure he was alone, and discreetly dropped the briefcase into the lake. The rifle weighed just less than fifteen pounds and sank straight to the bottom.

Victor left the park via the southeastern exit and caught a bus. He took a seat on the top level, at the back, disembarking after half a dozen stops when he was sitting alone with no other travelers nearby. The suitcase remained on the floor by his seat.

His thoughts turned to the man whose life he had saved. When Victor had received the contract he'd been given no information on the assassin's target, only that he had to survive. Had the incident in the hotel lobby not taken place, Victor would have thought little else about him. But now Victor knew his name, and it was a name he had heard before. Few people in Victor's profession would not have known it. Vladimir Kasakov was one of the biggest arms dealers on the planet, if not the biggest. He was an international fugitive. Normally, Victor cared little about the motives behind his jobs, but he couldn't help wondering why his CIA employer would be so keen on saving the life of such a man.

It started to rain again and Victor increased his pace to match those of commuters around him. No one paid him any attention. On the surface, he knew he seemed just like them—flesh and blood, skin and bone—but he also knew that was where the similarities ended.

You know what makes you special? someone had once told him. People like you, like me, we take that thing inside us others don't have and we make it work for us, or we stand by and let it destroy us.

And he'd spent his life doing just that, making it work for him. But his carefully maintained existence had fallen apart six months before and in the following maelstrom he'd fantasized about retiring, about trying to make a normal life for himself. A fool's hope, but that had been then. Now, even if Victor wanted to, there was no chance he could walk away from what he did for a living.

He knew his new employer would retire him permanently if he tried.

• Chapter 3 •

Tunari, Romania

Steam rose from the washbasin. Victor turned off the hot tap and lowered the razor into the water. He'd already used scissors to trim his beard, and he shaved with the grain of his stubble—neck first, then cheeks, chin and finally upper lip. He was slow, careful. He couldn't afford to walk around with a cut or shaving rash. After smearing his skin with aftershave balm, he used a set of clippers to cut his black hair to an even half inch.

When he'd finished he looked notably different from the man who had supposedly stayed in room 1312 of the Grand Plaza. The blue-colored contact lenses and non-prescription glasses he'd worn had been disposed of before checking in to his current hotel. It was a busy establishment located near to Otopeni International Airport. Far too busy for anyone to notice one particular guest had checked out with shorter hair and minus a beard. Victor didn't put much faith in elaborate disguises. Unless prepared by a makeup artist they were seldom completely convincing, especially at close range. Wigs and peeling latex were more likely to draw attention than divert it.

He performed an intense thirty-minute workout routine consisting of bodyweight exercises and stretching. After he'd bathed, Victor sat down at the bedroom's small desk. He picked up a 9 mm P226 SIG Sauer and stripped it down, cleaned it methodically, and reassembled the weapon. The gun was already clean, had never been fired, but it relaxed him to do something so familiar.

His CIA employer had supplied the SIG, like the rifle—a Dakota Longbow. Both had been waiting in the trunk of a plain sedan left for him in the long-stay parking lot of Otopeni International.

Though Victor had to admit it made his work considerably easier not to have to source and move his own weapons, he found the convenience outweighed by the sense of control he relinquished in doing so. For years he had answered to no one but himself, completely self-reliant. Now, being dependent on any person or organization felt like a weight chained to his ankle.

More important, it put him at far greater risk. His employer not only knew whom he was going to kill and when, but also how and where he picked up the tools to do so. With such information a route could be cut straight through his defenses.

For the time being he had little choice but to do things their way. The terms of his employment required him to do exactly as told, when told. In return, he was well paid and his CIA handler created a barrier between Victor and certain parties, including the rest of the CIA, who could make his life extremely difficult before extinguishing it.

Victor was also prohibited from taking contracts from other sources and had so far honored that condition. His freelancing days were over. He was now a CIA contractor. An expendable asset. Nothing more than a slave with a gun.

His left arm ached and he rubbed it gently. He had two thin scars—his most recent additions—one on top of his forearm, and one below, where a blade had plunged through his flesh. It had healed well, with no loss of dexterity, and a cosmetic surgeon had ensured the scarring was minimal, but occasionally the wound still caused him pain.

Protocol dictated that windows remained shut and locked, and shutters, blinds or drapes closed at all times. Therefore, to look out the window, Victor gazed through the slim opening between the drapes. It gave him a narrow view of the world outside—a glimpse of what he had given up and could never recapture.

When he realized he was thinking about someone he'd told himself he had to forget, he removed a small bottle of vodka from the minibar and downed it. It took all his willpower not to have another.

Victor moved the SIG to one side and got out a compact laptop computer. After it had powered on, he entered his password and opened an Internet connection to check his Cayman Islands bank account. He was pleased to see a very large sum of money had recently been deposited. Victor had been paid the same amount two days prior, when he'd received the contract. It was the way he always used to operate—half before, half afterward. This time the fee was higher than the initially agreed terms of his employment to compensate for the job's short notice.

Up until two days ago, Victor had been preparing for what should have been his first assignment for the CIA. He had been told to expect a second and maybe third job soon after the first's completion, but then the Bucharest contract had arrived unexpectedly—killing an assassin before he could kill a man his employer wanted to keep alive—with its strict deadline. Victor hadn't hesitated in accepting it, glad for the chance to get back to work and shake off the rust. It had gone perfectly. His first job in half a year.

In less than a second the gun was in his hand and he was out of the chair.

He'd heard a scream. Female. Victor moved to the door, checked the spyhole. No one. He remained absolutely still, listening intently. He waited ten seconds, hearing nothing further. Keeping the SIG out of his sight down by his side, he opened the door, looked left then right. Clear.

After a minute he sat back down, surprised by the strength of his reaction. The scream could have been for any reason; someone in an adjoining room spilling coffee on their lap or startled in the shower by a spider. Either that or it had only been in his head and he was one more step along the road to insanity.

Keeping the gun in his right hand while he used the laptop's touch pad with his left thumb, he navigated to the e-mail account created to receive and send communications from his employer. Untraceable, he'd been assured. He had no reason to think otherwise. His employer didn't want the NSA or GCHQ intercepting his e-mail to an internationally wanted contract killer. If nothing else, the account seemed to be immune from spam and that alone was enough to make Victor happier than he'd been in a long time.

A message from his employer sat in the inbox. He memorized the number it