

PROLOGUE

On a warm evening of the second day of Autumn in the year of our Lord, 2015, Supervising Agent Donald Trinder, of the Office of Special Clearances and Records (OSCAR), went out to catch him a goddamned Russki.

Trinder's Russki was a colonel of the GRU no less; the *Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye* or Main Intelligence Directorate of the Russian Federation. Not just an agent, but an in-field controller of deep cover agents and a femme-most-fatale. Trinder insisted on belt and braces, and safety pins all around, to ensure it was not he who ended up pants down and red-faced at the end of the night. He didn't care that the FBI and local law enforcement assets under his control thought him a pompous ass. Neither the feeps nor local law enforcement had found this woman. OSCAR had.

He had.

And now she was his.

Right on the knocker at 1930 hours, nine government fleet vehicles rolled out of the underground car park at 26 Federal Plaza, bearing thirty-three special agents, including twelve heavy hitters from Manhattan's FBI SWAT team, all of them under the temporary authority of the Office of Special Clearances and Records. Also known more simply as 'The Office', or even just 'Clearance'.

The convoy moved west on Chambers for five blocks, escorted by two police cruisers. By prior arrangement with Metro Transport their progress through the thick, early evening traffic was hastened by staging a pulse of green lights between Federal Plaza and the target address on W27th Street. The two cruisers did not power up their flashers. The long train of heavy black vehicles did draw the attention of some New Yorkers as it passed, some of whom used their phones to take photographs of the convoy, doubtless posting them immediately to Instagram or Twitter, and causing Trinder to wonder for the umpteenth time how anybody in his line of work was expected to get anything done in secret these days.

The soft warmth of the summer just gone still lingered in the evening air, and in the lead vehicle, a black Chevy Tahoe, Supervising Agent Trinder was sweating. He rode up front on the passenger side – the shotgun seat as he liked to call it – with the climate control pushed all the way down to Antarctic, but his bespoke three-button blue suit was a heavy wool blend that he had had tailored at a very reasonable price in Hong Kong. It looked smart, but did not breathe well. The heavy ballistic vest he wore over it did not breathe at all. Every special agent rolling in convoy toward the small art gallery in Chelsea was similarly attired and weighed down by armour. Boss's orders.

The twelve tactical operators riding in two anonymous commercial vans just behind Trinder's Chevy were kitted out in armour, helmets, combat goggles and tactical black. They too looked the part but Trinder still worried about their combat load-out and readiness. They were not the Hostage Rescue Team (HRT), which he had requested. Twice. They were part-timers. Amateurs, really.

The FBI's New York office, like all regional offices, maintained a tac squad of part-time volunteers. Certainly, they received extra training, MP-5s, M4 carbines and specialised equipment. The very name of the squad – Special Weapons and Tactics – would otherwise be a misnomer. But Agent Trinder worried that his twelve borrowed operators were not quite

special enough. OSCAR did not have its own strike team, in spite of Trinder's tireless bureaucratic scheming toward that end. OSCAR was a clearing house, not a barracks, as he had been told so many times. Reassurances from higher up that many of his operators this evening had military backgrounds, some within the United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM) community, did not allay his concerns. They weren't going after a bunch of broken down insurgents in some Afghan slum. This was one of the GRU's top field operatives. This lady had game, probably been to Afghanistan, or worse, Ukraine or Chechnya. She wouldn't just be familiar with the playbook. She'd have authored some of the best chapters.

Supervising Agent Donald Trinder had thus seen fit to remonstrate with the FBI's Assistant Special Agent in Charge Malcolm Preston, the part-time commander of New York's part-time SWAT team, that he was mistaken if he thought this would be some sort of cake run just because the target was a woman and her intention tonight was not to openly subvert the United States of America, but rather to launch an art exhibition. The art, after all, was part of her cover.

And anyway, were you to ask the opinion of Supervising Agent Donald Trinder, when he was off the clock and entitled to a private opinion, he would definitely tell you that as threats to the long-term survival of these United States went, artists and communists (all Russians being commies at heart) were not a thousand miles removed from each other, or Ay-rabs or gay marrieds or that damned Rachel Maddow woman.

As the police cruiser ahead of him swung off Chambers for the quick run up West Street, Trinder could only wish that his request for a full HRT squad had been approved. Or even his request for a couple of backup NYPD SWAT teams in BearCat armoured vehicles. Or a helicopter. Just one lousy helicopter.

It wasn't that he thought they couldn't execute the mission with the assets to hand. It was that he had been thwarted in his wishes and when the mission was done, he would be forced to plan a terrible ass-fucking on everyone who had so thwarted him.

He sighed and shook his head.

There just weren't enough hours in the day to get to everyone he needed to ass-fuck.

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Special Agent Rudy Comeau needed to take a piss – badly needed to take a piss. The empty Big Gulp bucket of Fanta on the bare wooden floor of the small room hadn't helped. But maybe it could now. If Special Agent Dee Madigan didn't object to him pulling out his Johnson and relieving himself in front of her. Or even behind, in the corner, perhaps.

Of OSCAR's four stakeout teams on this job, Overwatch Three – Madigan and Comeau – had the prime location. They were comfortably seated on the top floor of a five-storey walk-up on W27th, with a God's eye view of the target address, a couple of surprisingly comfortable 1950s vintage office chairs from which to conduct their surveillance and, blessed be the Great Pumpkin, a thin trickle of sweet, sweet chilled air from a rumbling unit hanging precariously from one of the room's two sash windows. What they didn't have was a toilet. That was down on the next floor and with Trinder rolling on them Comeau didn't want to abandon his post just to take a leak.

Well, he did, but he wasn't going to, because that puckered asshole seemed to have eyes everywhere.

Rudy Comeau frowned. That hadn't come out right.

'What's up?' asked Madigan. Like him, she had decided to hazard the wrath of Trinder by removing her jacket to enjoy just a little bit more of the cool air leaking out of the old, groaning ventilator. Unlike him she wasn't full of fizzy orange soda. Special Agent Madigan kept her eyes on the prize, training a small pair of Zeiss binoculars on the entrance to the renovated warehouse across the street. Already 143 guests (she had counted them) had been ushered along the small red carpet by two dark-suited attendants.

'Four more,' she announced, without taking the binoculars from her eyes. 'You get that, Rudy? You sound like you're doing a riverdance back there.'

'I'm gonna be pissing a river in a minute,' he muttered.

'Oh for fuck's sake. I told you not to drink so much. Just go in the goddamn cup, will you. You got another ten minutes before Trinder turns up. Go on. Doesn't bother me. I got five brothers, you know. Grew up in a goddamn sausage factory.'

'Thanks, Dee,' he said, with relief. It was funny how you could hang on and on and on when you had to, but as soon as you were offered the prospect of deliverance it was like the floodgates had to open right the fuck then. He grabbed the oversized soda cup and hurried into the farthest corner to relieve himself, groaning with the pleasure of release as he let go.

'Holy shit, Rudy,' said Madigan. 'It sounds like you're hosing a kettle drum with a fucking firehose back there. Keep it down, would you?'

'Sorry,' he said even though he wasn't. But he did direct the stream down the deep, steep side of the Big Gulp container. That set up a whirlpool effect that he couldn't help but find a little bit fascinating.

'What's happening now?' he asked to draw attention away from his bathroom visit. 'Any sign of the target?'

'Clocked her twice through the windows on the second floor, workin' the room. She's really good. I don't know whether she takes her cover super serious, or whether she actually needs a second gig because the GRU pays like shit . . . Overwatch Three,' she confirmed, reaching up to thumb the button on her headset. 'Another four entrants, two Caucasian female, one Asian female, one African-American female. I make that 147 civilians. Over.'

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Shosanna Nguyen was getting nervous. She had been a special agent of the Office of Special Clearances and Records for only two months and she didn't feel very special at all. Two months and one week ago she had been a brand spanking new agent trainee at OSCAR's small Boston campus. Truth be known, she still thought of herself as being on probation. They could put you in the field and they could call you special but nobody

would believe it until you had proven yourself. Special Agent Shosanna Nguyen had been perfectly content with the idea of putting her hard-working ass to the grindstone for however many years it would take to prove to her more experienced colleagues that they could depend on her.

But all that went out the window the moment Donald Trinder laid eyes on her.

Oh, it wasn't like that. Trinder was a legendary asshole, but not in some busy-handed creepy uncle kind of way. No, the moment he'd seen her hurrying through the New York offices, carrying two fat folders full of complaints about hate speech on Facebook that absolutely nobody wanted to deal with, he had reached down from on high and plucked her from the obscurity of noob status to raise her to the exalted realms of Special Clearances.

Why? Because she was Blasian, the daughter of an African-American father and a Vietnamese mother, blessed with just the right mix of 'exotic' looks that Supervising Agent Donald Trinder deemed critical to 'infiltrate the target function' on the Varatchevsky case. Translation? Trinder thought a little Blasian girl would slip in sideways to an art gallery opening where a big dumb white bastard, like Donald Trinder for instance, would 'stand out like dogs' balls'.

'Although you might want to think about getting yourself a face tattoo,' he suggested. 'Just a temporary one. Your arty crowd, they go in for that sort of thing.'

And here she was, Special Agent Nguyen, way out of her depth, rocking a black leather pant suit and Maori design henna tattoo that obscured half of her face, trying not to be too obvious about not drinking the champagne she'd been nursing for twenty-five minutes, and trying even harder not to keep hitting up the waiter with the shrimp cocktails. Because they were delish, and she'd look mighty funny trying to waddle at high speed after an escaping Russian spy if this all went wrong.

She mingled with the crowd, avoided being drawn into conversation with anyone, kept her distance from the target, and tried not to be too obvious about what she was doing. She

wasn't there to take this Warat or Varatchevsky chick down. Trinder and her overwatch team leader had been red hot on that point. She was simply there as a pair of eyes to warn of any last-minute problems. She bobbed her head, pretending to listen to music which she could not hear in the Skullcandy earbuds she wore, the cord with an inline mic running down inside her jacket. Occasionally she would talk as if chatting to a friend at the other end of the call, just giving her the goss on the fabulous night she was having in the Big Apple.

'Yeah, it's pretty cool, there's lots of cool people, gotta be about 150 people here now, and man, you should see the security guys, they're as big as houses, they're cool but . . .'

In this way, keeping up an inane line of chatter, she fed details back to the overwatch team about what was happening inside the gallery, and received occasional terse updates on what was heading toward all of these beautiful, rich, fabulous Manhattanites. And she was not worried about the security guys, such as they were, given that her Glock 27 loaded with Hydra-Shok .40 S&W party favours was snugly tucked away in her Hello Kitty purse.

'Strike team, seven minutes out.'

To this information, she reacted in character.

'That's awesome, bitch.'

It was not hard to track the target. Karen Warat was a striking blonde woman. She would have drawn the eye in any room. But here, at her own event, everywhere that Karen Warat – or Colonel Ekaterina Varatchevsky – went, her presence was signalled by a discernible rise in delighted chatter and the click of phone cameras. Some people were even toting digital SLRs to capture the magic. Thankfully they were not photojournalists, as best Shosanna could tell. Not even freelancers. The reviewers had all been in for a pre-show earlier that afternoon. There were probably a dozen or more bloggers in the crowd, of course, but Trinder was not much fussed about them.

'They can be contained,' he'd said.

Special Agent Nguyen pretended to admire a pair of twelfth century fighting knives from what was now Vietnam. The long,

curved daggers looked brutal, and not nearly as decorative as most of the other ancient weapons and armour on display. Keeping Warat on her radar, she glanced briefly at the small card explaining the provenance of the pieces. They had been captured by the forces of Kublai Khan when he invaded the northern reaches of Vietnam and were taken as booty by one of his soldiers, probably a Korean. The knives had disappeared for a few centuries after the collapse of the Mongol empire, before reappearing in a museum collection in the seventeenth hundreds. Looted during the Boxer Rebellion, they had fallen into the hands of an American collector, who was showing them tonight as a personal favour to Ms Warat. She was, in addition to being a full-blood white Russian agent of the GRU, a successful dealer specialising in rare weaponry.

Recalling her briefing notes, Special Agent Nguyen could not help but wonder if Varatchevsky's early, and officially curtailed, career as a champion fencer might have had something to do with her obvious fascination for this sort of martial ephemera.

She realised with a start that while she had been wondering about her target's early teenage years, the Russian colonel had slipped out of sight.

And then the screaming started.