

Chapter One

Never in his wildest dreams or expectations had Alexei Roshenko imagined himself a father.

A lifetime of numbing his emotions, of becoming the most efficient human weapon possible, did not bode well for caring for a brand new life. His hands were used to handling guns and explosives. Could they hold a baby without dropping or breaking her?

Jenny seemed to think so. She handed the child over with a smile of trust. Once he held his daughter and gazed at the tiny face, he loved her so much his heart might burst.

Lindsay lived, thrived, and grew.

The joy she brought made it difficult to imagine an evil world lurking outside, but he didn't forget. Reality haunted his mind every single second, but he saw no reason to bring it up. Each day in peace was a blessing and should be treated as such.

One day, he answered the phone and heard one of those voices from the past, one he hoped never to hear again.

He listened and answered. "Yes. I understand."

Jenny watched him from the other side of the kitchen.

How could he tell her?

She came over and snuggled into his arms. She knew. Of course she knew.

No matter what might happen he must never forget the feeling of holding her, and the smell of her hair.

"I must go. No matter what happens, remember I love you."

As much as he tried to hide his feelings, the words had a ring of finality. She shuddered but didn't plead with him to stay, and he was grateful. Leaving was difficult enough as it was.

"You take care of yourself, you hear. You have to come back to us." Her voice wavered and made him feel like the worst husband in the history of the planet.

"I will try. And you must do the same."

He went to kiss Lindsay goodbye, told her to be good and obey Mommy, grabbed a jacket, and disappeared out the front door. If he didn't go at once he wouldn't be able to do it at all.

He watched the house disappear in the rear view mirror. It looked like something from a dream. Maybe the rest of the world was crazy, and this was the last place on Earth where peace and harmony still ruled.

He pulled over at a rest stop and brought out an envelope hidden under the carpet under the passenger seat.

Who should I be? Sven Andersen, that's a good name. I don't think I'll be able to sound Norwegian, but it might not be necessary.

He parked his car, walked to a gas station, and took a taxi to Hertz. The fake ID and credit card gave him a rental car in no time. No one questioned the authenticity of Sven.

The airport was both large and busy. Could he claim not to have found the mark and go home? No. They would know he was lying.

The voice on the phone mentioned a blond man with a briefcase, gray slacks, and a tan sports jacket, and he was easy to spot. Alex hadn't expected anything else; the KGB had at one time been the most successful intelligence agency in the world, and not much had changed.

He followed the man, and making contact became easy when Mr. Briefcase stopped for a drink. Alex knew all he needed to know and chose a seat by the counter, opening the top buttons in his shirt. When Mr. Briefcase came closer, Alex stretched across the counter for a handful of peanuts, taking the chance to show off his well-toned muscles.

"Hey, can I buy you a drink?"

He looked up, pretending to be surprised, and looked the other man over.

"Yes you can."

"Great. I'm Martin."

Alex shook his hand.

"Great to meet you Martin. I'm Peter."

A few minutes later he ran a hand over the other man's arm, and bent over to brush a lock of Martin's hair away.

I hope no one I know will see me.

He could explain, sort of, but didn't want to hear the words, "Did you really leave me here alone to go pick up a guy in a bar?" from his wife's lips.

A few drinks later, Martin said, "I have a hotel room not far from here. If you're interested..."

Alex pretended Martin was Jenny to get the right warmth in his smile.

"Sounds great. I have a car just outside."

He led the way to a dark corner of the garage, where the security cameras had a dead spot.

Martin said, "I like the tinted windows."

"Yeah."

"It's like we're in a cave."

Alex nodded and Martin leaned in for a kiss. A moment later, he didn't want anything at all; he slumped on the seat with a broken neck, held up only by his seatbelt.

"I'm sorry about this. I really am."

The dead man didn't answer, so Alex grabbed the briefcase and picked the lock.

Please contain anything but blueprints.

The piles of documents made him curse. He had hoped it would be nothing, hoped he would be able to phone in a report and go home. Martin hadn't been innocent, but his face would still be one more to visit nightmares.

It's a moot point. I pulled Jenny into all this, and it's my duty to keep her safe.

He propped Martin up a little to make him look less dead, put on a baseball cap and sunglasses, and drove off to get rid of the body. Two hours later, he was on a plane to Chicago.

A man met him at O'Hare, just as promised. He had silver temples and cold blue eyes, and Alex smirked when the other looked about to make a military salute.

As they left for the car, the man said, "Comrade, it is an honor to meet you, your reputation is extensive. Everyone wonders why you have been laying low for so long. I'm sorry, it's not my meaning to pry. My name is Cristoph."

Alex wanted to roll his eyes, but he kept his voice even. "I'm Alex. Don't comrade me, the Soviet Union hasn't existed for a long time, and I pray it will never come back."

That seemed to shock the other, but at least it made him quiet.

They went to a hotel. It was okay, but he would rather be home. He wanted to kiss his daughter good night, watch her fall asleep, and then go make love with Jenny.

I wish I could call them.

Cristoph had everything they might need stashed away in the room. Maps, clothes, weapons, it was all there.

"We will make this traitor pay, yes?"

Alex shrugged. Martin had been a courier, carrying stolen blueprints for a new defense satellite system to the senator, who in turn was the major shareholder in an American electronics company. They would change the name of the invention, present it as their own, and make a lot of money.

He didn't care.

His country had stolen their share of technology and military secrets, everyone did. What difference did it make if everyone had the same inventions? This mission was just about money, and it disgusted him.

If the man on the phone hadn't reminded him of how big and cold Siberia is, and how hard life there would be for a little girl and her mother, he would have told them to go to hell and stayed home.

I was going to make lasagne for dinner. Lindsay would have liked that.

He would have liked it too. Cooking might not be the most masculine activity for a secret agent, but he still enjoyed it.

They rehearsed their strategy and watched TV while waiting for evening to turn to night. As different as they were, they had one thing in common: American sports were incomprehensible to both of them.

It was near midnight when they arrived at the mansion.

The senator's home was at the outskirts of town, and they knew he would be there and not in Washington. The senator's girlfriend in Washington had been offered a lot of money to share this piece of information, and Alex suspected she was dead by now.

In his imagination, Cristoph had raped and killed her, not necessarily in that order, and gotten rid of her body. She wouldn't be found again.

The two watched the house with night-vision binoculars from a high hill behind it. It looked peaceful. Most of the windows were dark, but the master bedroom was dimly lit, and inside, the senator was making love to his wife.

The beautiful house would be a perfect retreat from the surely stressful life in Washington. Maintaining two families would be hard work for anyone, and trying to increase

one's profit through dealing with industrial espionage while also making important decisions for the country and appearing in the media...

The senator must suffer at least high blood pressure. He himself had a hard time balancing caring for his one family with a regular job, and with performing these occasional acts of terrorism.

He wanted to say the moment wasn't perfect, say they should pull back and leave this for another day, but he knew better. He couldn't postpone this just because he didn't want to do it, and their orders were explicit.

Cristoph looked at him. "Do we have a go?"

Alex nodded.

Chapter Two

The house offered little resistance when they forced their way in.

The alarm was set, of course, but even the alarms protecting Americas' finest didn't take elite trained assassins into account. They secured the ground floor within minutes, and it was just as empty as it was supposed to be.

Shouldn't a senator have more tangible forms of security?

Back home, high ranking members of society would have guards. Not that he was complaining; this western trust in fences, doors, and electronics made his life easier.

Moving slowly up the stairs with their weapons held in front of them, both men froze when they almost reached the top. Alex stared into the eyes of a little girl. For a moment, she looked exactly like Lindsay.

It wasn't her. Of course it wasn't, but his mind played tricks on him, and he wanted to reach out for her and carry her away.

This little girl had fair hair and big, round, blue eyes. She was dressed in a nightgown with Smurfs on it, and she carried a teddy bear under one arm. When she saw them come up the stairs, she just stopped and stared.

We must look like a nightmare come alive.

Come to think about it, they *were* a nightmare come alive.

They would have been discovered then and there if it hadn't been for Cristoph. Alex would have stood there, staring at the girl, until she screamed loudly enough to wake the entire neighborhood. Cristoph clasped a hand over her mouth and swept her up in one quick motion, and when he carried her off to the left, Alex shook free from the paralysis. He took a deep breath and went to the right, towards the master bedroom.

All the rooms lining the corridor were empty and he pressed his ear towards the master bedroom door for a second before opening it. The senator groaned and panted, and Alex made a grimace. It wasn't bad enough just to storm the house, no, they had to surprise the couple while having sex too.

It didn't make any difference.

He pulled the goggles off and pushed the door open. They didn't even notice him at first, and he lifted an eyebrow at the very white, naked ass moving up and down in front of him. Then, he cleared his throat and said in an almost friendly voice, "I am sorry senator, but you do not have time for that anymore."

The man started and almost jumped away from his wife, his erection falling quickly at the sight of Alex's gun. His wife yelped, but was too frightened to scream.

Alex nodded to the side. "Why don't you stand over there."

It wasn't a suggestion, but the man didn't obey.

"Who are you? What do you want? There is money in the safe, you can take that and leave."

Cristoph appeared behind Alex. "The rooms over here are clear."

He carried two children; the girl from the hallway and her older sister. Both were tied up, and he had taped their mouths to keep them silent.

Seeing the children like that made Alex feel like someone stuck a knife in his own heart and twisted it, slowly but he was careful not to show any emotion. For now, all compassion must remain buried deep inside.

The woman on the bed hadn't made much noise until now, but when seeing her little ones treated this way she flew up and screamed, making a valiant effort to get to them. Alex's training finally took over, and he hit her over the head with the butt of his handgun, making her fall to the floor like a sad pile of discarded laundry.

She is innocent. I'm a monster.

He had performed many atrocious acts in the past, but managed to turn himself off to a point where it didn't matter. This time, it didn't work.

The senator backed up towards the wall, looking vulnerable when wearing only socks. He shook his head.

"No. This isn't happening. This is just a dream, just a dream."

Cristoph rolled his eyes and tossed the girls on the bed. He hauled the woman up between them.

"You are losing your touch, Alexei. She is still alive."

"I wasn't trying to kill her; I wanted her to shut up."

There was a shirt on the floor, and he threw it to the man shivering in the corner.

"Put some clothes on. We need to talk to you downstairs."

When sitting in his own study, dressed in a shirt and boxers, the senator finally allowed reality to enter his mind.

"You can't do this. I'm an important man. You can't do this."

Alex leaned against the desk, and Cristoph stood a couple of steps away, looking relaxed, but clearly just waiting for an excuse to explode into violence. Alex shook a finger in front of the senator's face to get his attention.

"You have been a naughty boy. You have been stealing secrets from my country, and not even to keep your own country safe. You just want to make more money."

To his surprise, his words made the senator laugh. "Oh come on now, haven't you ever wanted power? Do you have any idea what campaigns cost? I, my foreign friend, intend to be president one day. Do you really think I can scrape together that kind of funding without doing some... business?"

"Who else knows about this?"

The senator made a dismissive gesture.

"Do you think I would share this rare opportunity for money and fame?" He took on a sly look and leaned back in the chair. "I would share with you. I suppose you've already gotten rid of Martin, since he never reported in. It would just be the three of us, more money than you could ever dream of."

Cristoph drummed his fingers against the pistol on his hip. "Let's get this over with."

Alex held up a hand, "Wait a minute, we need to know more."

Cristoph shrugged, but circled the room. He pulled out a knife and started to play with it. He stopped right behind the senator, pressing the blade against the man's cheek, cutting through the skin just enough to make it hurt, and to make blood drizzle down his face.

The senator stuttered, "I don't know anything more. I don't know who provides the blueprints. Someone approached Martin, and he contacted me."

I don't want to watch that lunatic cut someone into pieces.

"Fine, let's get this over with."

Cristoph grimaced. He probably looked forward to some screams, but torture wasn't part of the plan. He shifted the grip on the knife and the senator's eyes turned blank as his life poured out of him.

Chapter Three

Alex rolled his shoulders and counted the steps up the stairs.

The attempt to occupy his mind did nothing to regain inner peace. Christoph killed the senator and it was a death he could reconcile with his conscience, but how could he go on living after what would happen with the family upstairs?

The woman was still unconscious, but the girls whimpered behind their gags. The big one had tried to get away, but just managed to roll down from the bed. She was crying and tears lined her face. The little one had nudged herself closer to her mother.

Don't think about it. If you think about it, and if you hesitate, this will happen to Jenny and Lindsay.

He still wanted to set them free. He wanted to tell them to run for their lives, to run and hide, but Christoph was already coming up the staircase, tugging a heavy can of kerosene. The small window of opportunity closed too fast.

A moment later, the other man was there, pouring Kerosene over the girl on the floor. She tried to scream, but no sound came out. She needed to cough from the fumes, but couldn't, and her small cheeks puffed up with air she couldn't get out.

Alex finally shook himself out of the indecision.

"We are not burning them alive."

There was a door inside him that needed to be closed if he was to be able to do this. All the revulsion and sympathy he felt must be tucked away where it wouldn't hinder him. Still, it was so easy to see Jenny on the bed instead of the stranger, so easy to see Lindsay's face on the girls.

Cristoph looked up at him and shrugged, "As you wish, Comrade."

Alex didn't even have time to move; the other man shoved his knife through the girl's heart. She convulsed once, and fell still. He had hit it just right and there was little blood. The heart had pumped it all out into the body, and only a couple of drops seethed through the wound.

There was no going back, and no time to remain indecisive. He forced his feet to approach the bed and snapped the other girl's neck, killing her painlessly. Telling himself it was an act of mercy did not help.

He took the mother's life too. It seemed more humane to let her continue into whatever darkness already held her than allow her to wake up to a flaming inferno..

When he went back around the bed, Christoph glanced up from the dead girl's body. He looked as if he smelled the corpse. He might just be getting high from the kerosene fumes, but the bulge in his pants spoke against it.

Cristoph grinned as he ran a hand over the little girl's flat chest. He stared into Alex's eyes, taunting him.

"She's beautiful, don't you think? Just like your little girl. Your wife is pretty too, but not like your daughter."

That was too much. If he let this monster come anywhere near his girls, everything would have been in vain. He would have to try to live with what happened here for the rest of his life, which might not be a long time, but Christoph could not be allowed to leave the building.

The other man never saw it coming. He was preoccupied with tugging the girl's nightie up, looking almost like a little boy trying to peek under the clothes of a doll to determine if she's anatomically correct. He was dead a second later, and Alex tossed his body carelessly to the side.

He finished pouring Kerosene over all the bodies, tossed a match over his shoulder and didn't look back as he walked through the hallway, down the stairs and out the front door.

The car waited untouched, and he drove towards the hotel, hands clutching the wheel so hard his knuckles whitened. He dumped the vehicle in a lot where he was sure it would be stolen, and went on the rest of the way on foot.

It wasn't easy to sneak into the hotel without being seen, but he was good at those things, and he soon scrubbed himself in much too hot water in the shower. The smell of death and flames might always remain with him.

Lifting the phone, he delivered a simple message to an answering machine. "It is done. Unfortunately, we lost the operative."

It was late, but that didn't matter; he might never be able to sleep again. He still laid down on the bed, just because he didn't have anything better to do. Each time he closed his eyes, he could see the faces of two frightened little girls. How could he go back home and face his own family when he couldn't even stand to face himself?

Chapter Four

Jenny was certain she was going crazy.

They had been through a lot and survived together, but this time her mind would snap, like a rubber band stretched too far, and that would be it.

Alex had left so quickly, sounded so strange, and been unable to hide the tormented look in his eyes. A million or so different scenarios flashed through her mind, and they all ended with disaster. She pretended to be happy for Lindsay's sake, but the girl probably saw through it. At work she pretended Alex was home with the flu.

A small, reasoning part of her mind knew he couldn't contact her even if he was okay, but that didn't lessen the urge to break down and weep.

He might be wounded, or dead, and I would never know.

She might have to spend the rest of her life alone, raising their daughter alone. How would she cope with that now when she used to him being there?

In her attempts to dial down her fears she acted like a broken machine, repeating the same motions over and over. She vacuumed the house seven times before Lindsay had enough of it and shouted, "Mommy, that's enough, *stop!*"

Every time the phone made any kind of sound she threw herself on it, just in case it was a message from him.

After all this gruesome waiting, she still wasn't ready when the front door opened. When she heard his footsteps, she ran into the hallway, squealed, and threw herself into his arms. Alex looked pale and haggard, but held her tight. When Lindsay came running, he hauled her up in his arms too.

Alex had hesitated for a long time before going home.

He wouldn't have returned, except for his promise to Jenny. Promises to her were sacred and must not be broken. He still couldn't make himself meet her eyes, and not even seeing Lindsay helped him shake the sensation of being dead inside.

Once he made himself free from his girls, he went to the bar and poured himself a large glass of vodka. Jenny followed him and stood in the doorway, holding Lindsay in her arms. "Rough time, love? I'll be down in a minute, I'll put her to bed."

He sighed. "No. Let me do it. Please."

Jenny smiled at Lindsay, "You want Daddy to take you to bed?"

The little girl giggled and nodded, and he took her gently from Jenny's arms. Feeling her weight made him want to weep, both with relief she was still there and safe, and with shame over what he had done.

Lindsay rested her head against him.

"I missed you, Daddy. Mom was crazy when you were away."

He muttered, "Mom was crazy? You should have seen you dad."

Not the right thing to say to a child. He tried again.

"I missed you too. You have no idea."

This make-believe life couldn't last much longer. So many problems would have been solved and so many bad things would never have happened if he had just taken himself out of the equation the first time he wanted to do it.

Jenny curled up in the living room sofa with her feet under her.

She *wanted* to follow her husband and daughter, but her instincts told her to leave them alone. Whatever he had been doing had not gone well, this much was clear.

She heard them brush Lindsay's teeth, and she heard Alex read a story. It took a while before he came downstairs again and that was okay. Their daughter was better therapy than anything; he looked a little better.

He walked through the room like a ghost, heading for the bar to pick up his glass. He brought both that and the bottle with him to the sofa, and took a seat close to her. That was good. Staying away from her would be worse.

She leaned her head on his shoulder.

"You're a good father."

He made a grimace and shook his head.

"I'm not a good anything. But there's no reason she should have to watch her dad drink himself stupid."

"Don't say that. You're a wonderful husband and a wonderful dad, and I'm lucky to have you in my life."

His attempt to laugh could come from a horror movie.

"You say that now." He gulped his drink down and refilled the glass.

"I've said that for many years. Is there something you want to tell me?"

Alex grimaced at the alcohol, cursing it quietly in Russian, and shook his head.

"No... Or yes, but I can't."

Why? Are people listening in on us?

As always, he guessed what she was thinking. "No, that's not it. I don't want you to despise me."

What did you do?

Time to change the subject. "I missed you so much. I'm glad you're home."

Understatement of the year.

He buried his face in her hair. "I've missed you too."

Keeping the conversation on harmless, neutral subjects seemed prudent. "How about getting me a drink too, handsome?"

He nodded a couple of times and ran a hand over her shoulder. "Of course. What do you want, my precious darling?"

She loved when he called her that, and she didn't care what he brought her. She just said it to keep his mind off whatever was bothering him.

"Whatever. Give me a scotch."

He went over to the bar and returned a minute later with a glass filled with golden liquid and a couple of ice cubes. She pretended everything was normal and patted the sofa next to her, urging him to sit back down. He did, and wrapped his arms around her, making her want to purr like a contented cat. Snuggling closer, she took the remote and turned on the TV.

Maybe everything would be okay.

Eventually, the news came on, and the headline disturbed her. A senator's house burned to the ground just outside Chicago a day earlier, with both the senator himself and his family in it. The reporter said the police identified four of the bodies as the senator and his family, but the fifth still remained a mystery.

They showed pictures of the charred ruins and Jenny shuddered. It was much too easy to imagine being trapped in a blazing inferno with nowhere to run. With luck, smoke would render a person unconscious before the actual flames arrived, but it still seemed like a horrendous way to die.

I think I was burned as a witch in a previous life. It could happen again.

The news anchor read from his teleprompter, making a suitably upset expression as he reported, "Authorities think the fire started upstairs, but the cause is still unknown. Mrs. Price and the couple's daughters appear to have been in the middle of the inferno, and it seems to have spread from the master bedroom."

Jenny pressed her face against Alex, drawing comfort from his solid and warm body next to hers. "That would be terrible. Just imagine the choking smoke, and the pain."

She expected him to say something soothing, maybe hug her tighter, but he sighed, got up, and walked towards the door.

What happened? What did I say?

Her eyes wandered between the TV and her husband. It was much too farfetched to be true, wasn't it?

"Alex, where are you going?"

He didn't look back.

"I'm going to shoot myself. I should have done that a long time ago."

It took several seconds for his words to penetrate her mind.

He wasn't joking.

Once her brain caught up with reality, she jumped off the sofa and ran across the room. A second later, she pushed him backwards, towards a chair. When his legs bumped against the edge, he was caught off guard, couldn't keep his balance, and sat down.

Jenny jumped up on his lap, facing him. Her weight wouldn't be enough to keep him there if he really wanted to get up, but it was the best she could do.

"Don't talk like that. What has gotten into you?"

Alex's eyes wandered over to the TV, where they were interviewing someone from the fire department. The man looked very official, and said they suspected arson.

He put his hands on her waist and she pressed herself downwards in an attempt to become heavier. If he wanted to lift her away, she wouldn't make it easy.

His face was almost gray, and his grip on her too hard. "You see it. Right there. They... They didn't suffer. They were dead when the fire started."

The world wobbled around her. After their trip to Russia years earlier and everything that happened there she should have seen something like this coming, but these events were too far from her way of life to imagine.

She wanted to faint just to get away from reality.

Not a feasible plan.

"Can they trace it to you?"

She wasn't afraid *of* him, but for him. She had known he was able to kill other people for years, but he was also the man she loved, and her conflicting emotions made her feel queasy.

"I doubt it. Not unless I'm disobedient anyway." He added in a gentle voice, "I can't do this anymore, Jenny. You know I would do anything to protect you and the pumpkin, and I do, but if I wasn't here, there would be no threat. This would still have happened, but at least, you two would be safe. I have to put an end to this before you start to hate me, and before Lindsay understands her father is a monster."

"No. No, no, no."

Repeating the word might not make him hear it better, but it made her *feel* better.

"There has to be another way. You are *not* leaving us. Not like that. I love you, you know I love you. I need you, Alex. Don't you even *dare* think of doing a thing like that."

She raised her voice without meaning to, and almost shouted the last words. He opened his mouth to say something, but the only thing that came out was, "But..."

"There will be no buts!"

Alex blinked and reached for his glass, but she slapped his hand away from it.

"Are you listening to me? I don't hate you, I love you. You're not a monster. I don't think you go around killing people for fun and it's time for all this insanity to end, even if we have to move to..." She couldn't think of any country far enough away, and finally burst out, "... Kenya."

"Are you done?"

She wanted to yell more, but couldn't think of anything.

"I guess."

"This has to stop. There might not be another way."

"There has to be."

He made an exasperated gesture.

She said, "Do you want to talk about it?"

He shook his head and ran his hands over her back. She knew she won when he mumbled, "Not now, I can't... Maybe later."

She had to shake him out of this, whatever it was, for all their sakes, but how? She said the first thing that came to mind, "Come with me to the hot tub."

It sounded silly, but was as good an idea as any. Besides, she didn't have to use a lot of imagination to think he still carried the smell of smoke and blood. It might not wash off even with an abundance of warm water, but trying wouldn't hurt.

Alex shook his head again, but now there was a trace of a smile on his lips.

"Jenny, I do not want to bathe."

She pulled her shirt over her head, showing a lot of soft skin and silky underwear.

"Sure you do."

He trailed a finger over her skin, tracing the edge of her bra and crossing over it to her nipples. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I do."

She knew an opportunity when she saw one, and kissed him hungrily.

He might *think* he knew what was best, but this was a discussion she couldn't let him win.

This text was originally intended for Undercover the novel, but was cut out in the editing process.