
Consequential Damage

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He moved easily and attracted little attention, an asset of his that came naturally and had been perfected under the tutelage of the best CIA trainers. He was tall, well over six feet, and had features that had been described at times as being both striking and anonymous. It thus seemed strange that someone as noticeable as he appeared to be could melt into the background as effortlessly as he did.

The ultimate enigma, Blake Casson.

To his credit, the fact that Blake had risen to the top of his profession, renown in intelligence circles worldwide as one of the most cunning assassins alive, and was still virtually unrecognizable was no easy feat. No photographs existed of him as he looked now; indeed there were only two pictures of him after the age of twenty-five. One was in his permanent CIA file and the other was in his house, a picture of him seated next to his father on a boat. There were few people who had lived to recount his post CIA, post plastic surgery description, and he made sure to keep it that way. For this particular contract he was disguised with a curly black wig, fashionably short, blue contact lenses that was a distinct contrast to his honey colored skin, and he had a goatee. Very different from his normal appearance, but that was the idea.

He stood in the shadows of a downtown Manhattan office building, shielded from the cold, driving rainstorm by the scaffold overhead and the leather trench coat covering his body. He faced out towards lower Broadway, and while he was cognizant of everything going on around him, he paid particular attention to the entrance of Number 222.

His target had entered the building twenty minutes before, and Blake was patiently awaiting the time when he would go in after him. This particular operation had been set up to the second by the party that contracted him, and everything was to be executed as effortlessly and flawlessly as a quarterback-receiver timing pattern.

Danny Ostrov was the quarry on this night.

Ostrov was an engineer from the former Soviet territory of Kazakhstan. He had emigrated at the age of twelve to London with his parents, and from those humble beginnings had begun the life of an intellectual supernova.

Danny Ostrov was the living, breathing definition of a prodigy. The only man with the dual distinction of being the world's youngest chess grandmaster and the youngest recipient of a Rhodes Scholarship. All of that before his sweet sixteen. After completing his studies at Oxford, Danny Ostrov did post graduate work at MIT and Cal-Berkley, gaining a reputation as being the unquestioned authority on advanced energy systems designs. He had then worked for a few months at a naval base in Florida. Then Danyel Dominik Ostrov disappeared. That fact in and of itself was cause for alarm, even though people disappear all the time for good and bad reasons. What really caused eyebrows to raise was that at the time of his vanishing act Ostrov was being courted by the US government to head a super secret project in California. The project was revolutionary to say the least; Danny was finishing development on a prototype generator that ran on water rather than oil, a development that would dramatically shift world economic and political power from the Arab world to whoever controlled the use of these generators. The government contract was rumored to have paid him close to \$2 million annually, not the kind of cheese one just walks away from. Not unless one is forced to. Or, in the scarier line of reasoning contemplated by the US and its allies, unless someone is giving you something more.

For two years the government hoped he had lost his will to work on the project, or had been killed by forces unknown. The fact that Danny Ostrov had now resurfaced, two years later, gave credence to the second, scarier line of reasoning.

Blake reached into the right pocket of his coat for the third time and fiddled with the 9mm Glock nestled there. He never liked using these guns, but for this job he needed something common and untraceable.

Thus his signature weapon, a silver plated SigPro was left at home, replaced by the 9mm Glock in his pocket and the other one in the back of his waistband. The people who had contracted him for this assignment had specifically requested a low-key job, and a 9mm Glock with filed off serial numbers was as low key as you could get. He looked at his watch and adjusted the stopwatch function.

It was time. He had given himself 20 minutes to wrap this up, considering the transaction occurring in the suite, the possibility of added security, and the response time of the local police. Blake stepped away from the cover of the scaffold, hands planted deep into his pockets, and shoulders hunched, head down. Quick and low key.

He crossed the street at the base of City Hall Park, watching the reflection of the pouring rain in the illumination of the streetlights. The wind acted the role of an animated conductor to nature's orchestra, twisting and turning the rain into a frenetic pattern of movement and sound that resembled an ancient, exotic dance.

"Nature's party." he mumbled to no one in particular as he watched the torrent while waiting to cross the street. He trotted across onto Park Row, barely escaping being splashed by a speeding yellow cab, and walked the short block to 222 Broadway. The entrance to the office building was brightly lit, and as he glanced skyward he could see where several offices had lights on and apparently people working. The business of making money knows neither time clock nor time zone, he thought, a second before admonishing himself for his quirky random musings. Focus on the matter at hand.

He entered through the revolving doors and approached the lobby information desk. It was not immediately past the entrance doors; rather it was situated in the crook of the building's L shaped lobby area. Its location gave the security guards an ideal position to see everyone coming and going through the building's two entrances, and the cameras located at dizzying angles thirty feet above made sure that whatever human eyes

missed was nonetheless recorded. His hands were still jammed in his pockets, and he walked the twenty feet or so towards the desk.

His path was echoed by the sound of water squashing from his shoes on the thin carpet runner laid down by the building's maintenance people. As he got closer to the desk, mental alarms went off, and he reflexively slipped the safety off the gun in his pocket.

There were two men standing behind the desk, one was clearly a security guard. The other was clearly not. The security guard moved from behind the marble topped desk and approached Blake, but it was the second man, the one who sat in the rear, who had alarmed Blake. As the guard stepped somewhat hesitantly towards Blake, he re-focused his attention on the approaching man.

The security guard was a short, rather pudgy, balding black man. Probably a retired, or close-to-it, civil servant, probably on his second or third moonlighting job. He carried no gun, and as he raised his hand to slow down the purposeful strides of Blake's approach, Blake could see the glint of gold from his wedding band. Blake was about ten paces away from him, and he shifted his look to the other man still standing behind the desk. His look was being matched, openly hostile and full of bad intentions.

The other man stood up, and Blake could see him better now. Not even the bulky, wool pea coat he wore could conceal his powerful physique. Or the bulge of his shoulder bolstered handgun.

The uniformed security guard stopped a few feet away, one hand on his walkie-talkie, the other extended towards Blake.

"Good evening, sir, can I help you?"

Blake stopped a few feet away, and noticed that the second man behind the console had moved slightly to an angle where he could view the discussion between Blake

and the guard and still have a clear shot at Blake. The security guard stood waiting for an answer.

"I have an appointment with John Sonnenfield."

The guard eyed him warily.

"What's your name?"

"Charles Blake."

He nodded slowly and backed away from Blake. The other man was still standing silently in the background, but Blake noticed his right hand was now hidden under his coat. The guard was totally oblivious to the drama unfolding around him as he called someone on his walkie-talkie to confirm Blake's story. There was a brief conversation in very hushed tones, and then the guard turned his attention to Blake again.

"Okay sir, just one moment, let me get you a pass."

Blake nodded in reply, and followed the guard to the desk, staying a few feet behind him. Blake was feeling very apprehensive now. Something was not right here. This was supposed to be a very simple, in and out job. Nice and clean. Yes, Danny Ostrov was a fugitive, wanted in half a dozen countries, and yes he had a \$3 million bounty on his head, but no one knew he was in New York. Most people did not know if he was even still alive for Christ sakes!

Blake still had his hand wrapped around his Glock, and he knew that one wrong move and the goon staring him down was going to open fire. As the guard went behind the desk and was about to hand a visitor's pass to Blake, the third man cut in.

"What floor are you going?"

His accent was Eastern European, most likely Russian. Blake was on high alert now. A lot of people were hunting for Danny Ostrov, and the Chechen mob from outside Russia was high on that list. The possibility that this goon just happened to be watching the lobby of the same building as a man wanted by elements in the Chechen mob was too remote to be coincidence. This man was going to the same party he was, and most likely to meet the same date.

"Seventeen. Why do you ask?"

Blake answered him in flawless Russian and the shock and confusion was plain to see. Blake spoke to him again, stifling any further questions.

"We are here for the same thing, friend. We are on the same team."

The goon's eyes narrowed slightly, but puzzlement and surprise got the better of common sense.

"You were sent by Yuri?" He responded in Russian. His hand was halfway out of his jacket, but he wouldn't shoot. Not until he knew who sent Blake.

Blake's face did not betray his own surprise. Yuri Yashin! Definitely not a good thing! Thinking quickly he shook his head.

"No, by the old man."

The goon nodded but seemed even more confused by that answer. The security guard was watching this foreign exchange, his head swiveling like in a tennis match, the pass still extended in his hand.

"You guys know each other?" He quizzically asked neither one in particular.

Blake looked at him and gave a thin smile, switching back to English.

"We have mutual acquaintances."

With that he took the pass, affixed it to his coat and walked away from both men towards the elevator. It was a calculated move on his part, but he took a chance that if this guy in the lobby worked for Yuri Yashin and valued his life, he wouldn't stop someone sent by 'the old man' Frantz Yashin. It worked. As he walked towards the bank of elevators to the right of the desk, he could feel the eyes of both men on him.

The security guard had no idea how close he came to being a bullet cushion, but Blake had at least temporarily saved both of their lives. He walked the short distance to the elevator trying to look as relaxed as possible, hands at his side, even though he was

far from relaxed. His agenda had just moved into high gear, because the presence of this Russian sent by Yuri meant more were on the way. And he needed to get in and out of this building before it turned into a fire zone. He entered the first open elevator, pressed his floor and let out a soft sigh. There was a camera overhead, no doubt the men in the lobby were looking at him now; the Russian was probably now trying to verify that the tall American was indeed sent by old man Yashin. Yuri Yashin and his father Frantz were the leaders of the biggest mob operating out of the old Soviet Union.

Frantz Yashin owned property all over the world, engaging in everything from computer theft, money laundering and industrial espionage in the US to drug running in Europe and white slavery in the Middle East. While he now delegated much of the day-to-day operations of his empire to his only son, he still undertook many deals himself. Blake never looked at the camera, instead staring straight ahead and, right before getting off on his floor, checked his watch.

Seventeen minutes left. He was still on schedule. John Sonnenfield was the cover story in case he did get stopped, and Mr. Sonnenfield would be left wondering where his appointment had vanished.

Getting off on 17, Blake walked over to the stairwell and took the steps two at a time to the 19th floor. He was expecting five people in the suite and from his information they should all be in the rear conference room. He entered the reception area, which was well lit. As he went through the main door that had been left open, he could hear the sound of several voices in animated conversation.

Quickly he walked down the long corridor to where he knew the voices were coming from, using his memory of the floor plans as his guide. The office suite was extravagantly furnished, with plush burgundy carpeting and an array of geometrically styled workstations. Covering one wall was an intricate map of the world showing all the coun

tries, time zones, and major cities, highlighted with red and blue lights. He walked past that area, following the still muffled voices towards the closed conference room door at the far end. His GLOCK was now in his hand, held close against his leg. As he reached the oak doors he heard a click and it began to open.

The door swung open and a stocky, tanned man appeared in the doorway. Blake was on him in a flash, pointing the Glock at an area between his gut and his chest. The man was half turned towards the conference room, smiling at someone in there, a big grin on his face that with his thick moustache and dark skin gave him the look of an 18'h century pirate. His eyes bulged with shock and fear as he saw first Blake and then the gun aimed at him, and he opened his mouth to say something. Blake shook his head and aimed the gun in his gut.

"Back up, amigo, and keep it quiet."

This was said in a low tone, and it was a few seconds before the other people in the room realized something was wrong and looked up.

Blake motioned him towards the center of the room as the conversation died and all eyes turned towards the intruder. Blake looked at each of them in turn and smiled to himself, never wavering his gun from his captive. All present and accounted for. There was a long oak table that ran the length of the room, and several chairs around it. The conference room itself was not as lavish as the rest of the suite, but it offered an expansive view of all of Manhattan through the wraparound windows. Four people sat around the table, and Blake checked off all the participants in his head.

Sammy Ullrich, the German billionaire was there, accompanied by his bodyguard Alex Kolat, a huge man who Blake had been warned was a black belt in tae-kwon-do and judo. Danny Ostrov sat dwarfed between both men, the look of a cornered rat on his face. On the other side of the table closest to Blake was Tracy Adams, Ostrov's lawyer and girlfriend. She was a tall stunning redhead, with an olive complexion and beautiful hazel eyes that hinted at her Mediterranean ancestry. The man on the other end of Blake's gun was Naseem Quereshi, a Pakistani scientist brought in by Ullrich to

verify the data about to be purchased. Two attaché cases were on the table, one in front of Danny and the other on the floor next to Kolat. Blake had studied the information he had on everyone, he knew who they were. There was an added dimension to this whole affair however, and it involved one of the people in the room. Someone here had tipped off Yuri Yashin as to where he would find the elusive Danny Ostrov. But first things first. "I came for the disks, Danny."

Ostrov's eyes widened even more and he reflexively gave a quick glance towards Ullrich. The German mogul did not even acknowledge the look, instead continuing to stare coldly at Blake. The air in the room seemed scant as everyone held their breath. Ostrov broke the silence with a stuttering comment, trying to bluff his way out of what seemed a very tight spot.

"What disks? Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Blake reached behind him, pulled out the second Glock and pointed it at Tracy Adams, Danny Ostrov's girlfriend and partner, centering it on her legs, shapely and visible from her seat. "You have fifteen seconds or I shoot the kneecaps off everyone in the room. Starting with Ms. Adams. Danny Ostrov swallowed hard, and Tracy Adams flinched and turned her legs to the side in obvious discomfort. Blake looked at the watch on his wrist. Thirteen minutes.

"Do you know about the bounty on your head, Danny?"

Ostrov began to look more and more like a cornered rat. Blake pushed it.

"The price is \$3 million, alive. Not that you will be alive for long after they get hold of you. Right now there are men on the way here to collect that bounty, Danny. Men working for the Chechen. Working for Yashin. These men here," Blake swept his gun towards Ullrich and his bodyguard "They cannot help you get out of here alive. I can."

A look of unadulterated terror crossed the face of Danny Ostrov. He glanced at Ullrich again and Blake noticed his hands visibly trembling. After a couple of seconds, he reached for the attaché case on the table, retrieved a CD case and slid it across the table towards Blake. The gunman replaced one of the guns in his waistband, and walked

over to the table. With his free hand he picked up the case and slid it into the pocket of his coat. At the exact moment he took up the case he heard the 'ding' of the elevator arriving in the reception area. The eyes of everyone in the room flashed towards the outer office and then back at the intruder holding them hostage. Blake stepped back, shielding himself from whoever would be undoubtedly approaching. There was silence and Blake looked at the faces of everyone in the room. He heard the sound of footsteps, muffled and barely audible, coming down the long passageway. He couldn't tell how many, but it didn't matter. Blake raised the Glock and pointed it at the forehead of Sammy Ullrich, speaking to the still unperturbed billionaire in English.

"Any wrong moves and you go first."

The deep blue eyes flickered and Blake thought he saw a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. The footsteps were getting closer, and everyone in the room was tense in anticipation. Blake pulled out the second Glock 9mm. This one was pointed at Danny Ostrov. Just then all hell broke loose. The doors to the conference room burst open and four men brandishing handguns came in. Blake recognized the first two; one was the Russian from the lobby downstairs, the other man was Yuri Yashin. They all froze at the setting before them, but held their fire.

"Hello Yuri. What are you doing here?"

Yuri Yashin was still glaring at Blake, his face contorted into a look of rage. He was tall and sturdily built, dressed in a dark blue suit and turtleneck, looking as if he were going to a trendy city nightspot. He lowered his gun and ordered his cohorts to do the same. His eyes were still on Blake. **"I would think, the same thing you are doing, Blake. You look different."**

His voice was soft, the voice one would expect a therapist to have, with the barest hint of an accent. **"Obviously not that different, you recognized me."** responded Blake.

"My business here does not concern you, Blake. Our personal matters will be handled on another day. I want here to take care of a much more important concern. I

will let you live if you drop your weapons and leave now."

Blake laughed, a hollow sound in the otherwise stony silence.

"Sorry, Yuri. I cannot do that." He paused for a few seconds, then spoke again.

"You are here for Ostrov. I don't need him. But." The Russians eyebrows arched and Blake continued. "These others come with me."

Yashin's eyes narrowed and he glanced around at the assemblage then back at Blake. He then shrugged. "What's to stop me from killing all of you now?"

Blake gave him a wide, wolfish smile.

"Because I will kill Ostrov before you kill me and you won't get the \$3 million or the information you need." Ostrov was growing increasingly uncomfortable as the chess game for his head was played out. There was a long silence as Yashin and Blake stared each other down, and finally Blake spoke again. "I know the terms of the reward, Yuri. Alive, not dead. I don't want the bounty. But I intend to walk out of here with these other people. Or you get nyet except a room full of corpses." Blake watched as the Russian weighed his options. His henchmen stood silent and still, like two legged Russian gargoyles. Waiting for a word from their master to begin the carriage they came to perform. Yuri finally nodded, his eyes never leaving Blake's face.

"I get Ostrov alive if you walk out of here, right?"

Blake nodded. "Me and these others. You don't need them."

Out of the corner of his eye, Blake saw Ostrov open his mouth to speak, then apparently think better of it and slump silently in his seat.

Yuri smiled, and shook his head. "You are the softest killer I've ever met, Blake. Always looking out for innocents. Okay, how do we do this?"

Blake shifted his eyes to Ullrich.

"You have a cell phone?"

The German nodded. His facial expression had not changed since Blake first walked in on his deal. "You, Ms. Adams, and your bodyguard can leave."

Yashin interjected "One of my men goes down with them." Blake hesitated and then acquiesced.

Okay. But if he tries anything. Ostrov gets it."

Yuri matched Blake's earlier feral smile.

"I am a man of my word, Blake. I too don't believe in killing unnecessarily."

Blake continued speaking to Ullrich.

"When you get downstairs, call the number here. I will then go downstairs with Danny and Mr. Quereshi here." He addressed Yuri again. "You can have one of your men come with me; when we get to the lobby you can have Mr. Ostrov."

Yuri smiled again. "I think I'll send two of my men with you. You can be, how do you say, a handful, for just one man."

Blake shrugged, and then motioned to Ullrich. "Get up. Time to say nite-nite."

All three rose slowly, and the Russian closest to the door moved to accompany them as they filed out silently.

The minutes went by agonizingly slowly. Blake glanced at his watch again. Its time was up, but that was the least of his concerns right now. Ostrov, who moments before was a fidgeting mess, now seemed resigned to his fate, slumped over in his seat, his face buried in his hands.

Blake had moved over to a position right behind both of the remaining captives.

When the telephone rang, a loud long electronic buzz, everyone flinched, and Danny Ostrov almost jumped out of his chair. The realization of the nearness of his impending fate hit him, and he slumped back in his seat, sobbing loudly.

The telephone was on it's third ring. Yuri directed one of his men to answer it, and the huge Russian from the lobby downstairs walked over and put it on speaker. Sammy Ullrich's voice filled the room. "We are downstairs. My car is here. Can we go now."

The absurdity of this request was not lost on Yashin or Blake, and the former allowed himself a little smile. "Yes, You can go home now."

Quereshi exhaled and looked hopefully at Blake. Ostrov was still sobbing, his face buried in his hands, his head bowed.

Black addressed him.

"C'mon Danny Boy. They're playing our song."

The fugitive engineer's shoulders stiffened but his head remained bowed. Quereshi was already standing, ready to go.

"Get up Danny." Blake's tone this time was harsher, carrying a promise of immediate violence if his order was not responded to. Danny Ostrov raised is head, and his face was anguished, tears flowing down his checks and glimmering over his blotched features where his fingers were imprinted.

"Please, don't do this! I can pay you! Whatever you want! For the love of god, please don't let them take me!"

Blake's face and voice hardened.

"Up. Now. And take the briefcase."

The diminutive genius fell silent and rose to his feet. Quereshi walked ahead of him towards the door. Yuri turned to one of his men, the man-mountain Blake had seen in the lobby.

"Mikhail, go with Andrei. Bring Mr. Ostrov back to me in one piece."

Both men took up position by the door as Blake walked over to where they were. He still had one gun pointed at Ostrov, the other aimed at Yuri. They walked towards the elevator, the two Russians, Ostrov, then Blake and Quereshi following closely on his heels. They trooped silently towards the elevators and Mikhail pressed the down button.

The elevator was there in seconds, and they all entered in the same order. Blake stood in the middle of both men, one Glock pointed in the small of Ostrov's back, the other in his pocket and aimed in the direction of Mikhail. The elevator's bell rang as the display flashed the 17'h floor. Both Russians tensed, and the doors slid open slowly and silently. No one. Blake saw the man on his left, Andrei slowly. almost nonchalantly reached into his coat pocket.

Blake was on full alert, tense, sweaty, mind racing. The elevator resumed it's descent. They reached the lobby in seconds, and once again the bell rang softly and the doors slid open.

Quereshi exited first, then Andrei, Mikhail, Ostrov and Blake. There were

approaching the lobby desk, and as they got closer, Blake could see. sticking out from behind the desk, a pair of legs, black orthopaedic shoes and blue striped trousers. The overnight security guard was not going to make it home to his family. A small trail of blood had tricked away from the body, collecting in a barely discernible pool near his feet. Anger rose 'm Blake, quickly spreading through his body, his arms, legs, boiling in his head like a fever; a physical, hurting ailment. Mikhail, the goon from lobby was looking at him closely, Blake felt the eyes on him and sensed the heightened tension. He maintained his stony outward facade.

They were fifteen feet away from the revolving glass doors leading out onto Broadway, walking quickly, everyone still on edge.

Mikhail." Blake called his name softly in Russian. The man turned his head towards Blake, eyebrows arched. "What?" came the curt response.

"You didn't have to kill him." They were still walking, and through the mist smeared windows Blake could see a black Lincoln pull up to the curb, spraying a pedestrian trying to hurry to shelter. Next to the revolving doors, partially hidden by a column, was Yuri's other henchman, the one who had accompanied Ullrich downstairs. Mikhail shrugged, his eyes moving, looking for danger. His response to Blake was flip-pant, and for him, fatal.

"He was nothing, who cares?"

Blake kept one Glock pointed at Danny Ostrov, and with the other hand holding the second Glock in his pocket, he fired through his leather coat shooting Mikhail in the stomach twice. Even as the giant crumpled over, and the others jumped at the muffled sound of the shots, Blake fired two bullets from the other Glock into the back of Danny Ostrov's head. The lifeless engineer pitched forward, falling on Andrei, the briefcase he was carrying clattering to the floor.

Quereshi was in a full sprint toward the entrance, and Andrei was trying to get a shot at Blake, having pushed Ostrov to the side. Blake lowered his gun and shot him in the right knee. Andrei fell in a heap on the carpet runner, screening in pain and clutching his knee as blood squirted between his clenched fingers. The goon in hiding stepped

out from behind the column, already shooting at Blake. Blake fired back from a kneeling position, hitting him twice in the chest. Two more men had gotten out of the Lincoln, and they came rushing through the revolving door.

Bad mistake. Blake fired five shots in rapid fire sequence, shattering the glass into smidgens and dropping both men before they even got off a shot. Andrei had dropped his gun and Blake stepped over to where he writhed in pain and kicked it across the lobby. He then walked back to Mikhail, who was in a fetal curl and grunting loudly.

"Mikhail." He said it just as he had before, in a confidential whisper. He was kneeling next to him, but his eyes remained tightly shut. Sweat beaded his forehead and cheeks and his only response was more grunts. The arms of his peacoat were saturated with blood from where they wrapped his bleeding abdomen.

"Mikhail," repeated Blake. After a few seconds his eyes opened, and he looked into the eyes of his assailant with open terror.

"You didn't have to kill him, Mikhail."

That elicited a louder groan from the dying Russian. Blake could hear police sirens approaching. Time to go.

Almost.

"Your know why I killed Danny Ostrov, Mikhail?"

The eyes were squeezed shut again, an attempt to blot out the nightmare of impending death.

"Well, I'll tell you, cause you need to know this. I killed him because all the information I need is already in my pocket, and the big reason is because Yuri, and you, and people like both of you are scum. Scum with no regard for anyone else."

Mikhail actually managed a grunt and a small shake of the head, as if to refute Blake's assessment. Blake nodded to him, still kneeling over his balled up body.

"Yes, Mikhail, I'm right. You killed him for no reason, and that's why I killed Danny and that's why I'm killing you."

With that he straightened up, shot him once in the head and looked around. The only other Russian still alive, Andrei, was clutching his knee trying to diminish the ever

expanding pool of blood around him. "Andrei, I am going to let you I've, but give Yuri a message for me."

Andrei nodded his neck bobbing ridiculously fast in response to Blake's request to him in Russian. "Tell him I am a man of my word, and better luck next time."

With that Blake walked quickly away, outside onto the sidewalk and down the side street. After going two blocks south, Blake made a sharp turn into a narrow alleyway. At the furthest end of the alley he knocked on a steel door and after a few seconds it was opened. Alex Kolat stood in the doorway, grinning broadly.

"Where are the discs?"

Blake reached into the breast pocket of his coat and extracted the CD case. Kolat took it, opened and closed it and gave Blake another big grin.

"Wunderbar. You are indeed as smooth as I heard."

Blake allowed himself a smile.

"I believe you have something for me."

Alex Kolat winked, slapped Blake on the back and led him inside the warehouse. The room was well lit by four rows of fluorescent bulbs each hanging from the twenty-foot ceiling. A long narrow folding table was in the middle of the room, along with six chairs. Tracy Adams sat at the table with her long legs crossed, smoking a cigarette, looking totally unruffled. Not like someone who had just engineered a stickup deal worth at least several hundred million dollars. Alex walked over to the table, reached underneath, and pulled out a leather zippered backpack.

He unzipped and opened it with a flourish, revealing several stacks of fifty dollars bills.

"Five hundred thousand, Casson, as you can see, Ms. Adams is a woman of her word."

He zipped the backpack shut, walked over to Blake and handed it to the assassin. Blake slung it over one arm and pulled out a wool cap from the pocket of his coat. He spoke to Tracy as he prepared to leave. "Did you know Ullrich planned to turn him over to the Russians?"

She smiled and nodded.

"He didn't know that Alex and I were old acquaintances. We had everything set, and at the last minute found out Ullrich was going to get the information and then hand Danny over to the Chechens. Alex warned me not to go. We had already made the arrangements with you." She shrugged. "I had confidence the best hired gun in the world could handle this situation."

Blake turned to Tracy Adams and bowed respectfully.

"A pleasure, Ms. Adams. I hope we do business again."

Blake left with the backpack on his shoulder and the wool cap pulled down on his head. The rain was still beating at a frenetic pace from above, and he hunched his shoulders as he walked quickly down the alley, headed to the nearest subway station. He already had the initial down payment on this job, another \$500,000, in one of his accounts. One million for one night's work was good, but he still felt angry at the death of the security guard. He saw the green lamp signalling the subway entrance affixed to the side of an office building. A modern day urban lighthouse, marking the way to temporary sanctuary from the storm. A police car went speeding by lights and sirens going spraying water onto the sidewalk near him. It was headed toward Broadway, no doubt in response to the carriage Blake had left behind. His mind was else where now, consumed with thoughts of what next. He had scheduled a flight to Paris in two days; he had a job waiting there. For a brief second his mind went back to the dead security guard. He knew the papers would most likely have a piece of him, a small article or maybe just a couple of lines. Blake made a mental note to send his family some cash in an envelope. Not the kind of thing he normally would do, but this was not a normal deal.

A couple approached him, heading in the opposite direction, and Blake could see them tense as they caught sight of the tall black man heading their way. He ignored them and their predisposition to bigotry, averting his eyes as he continued on his way to the train entrance. The irony of the couple's response struck him as he descended the steps, passing under a sign proclaiming I,2,3,A,C Trains. They were right; after all he was a very dangerous kind of man. If only they really knew.

End

A large, light gray letter 'B' graphic is centered on the page. The word 'End' is written in a smaller, bold, black font inside the upper curve of the letter 'B'.