

## Chapter One

Petrovich Research Facility

Eastern Siberia, Russia

December 11<sup>th</sup>

15:30 Local Time (07:30 GMT)

The snowmobile launched off a massive build-up of snow and soared through the air. Agent Lance Tucker manhandled the machine, negotiated a perfect landing, and gunned the engine. Not all of his six pursuers were able to clear the same bank successfully and continue their pursuit.

He glanced back and grinned with a feeling of satisfaction.

*Two down. Four more to go.*

A light snow fell as automatic weapons and the screaming of engines ripped through the once-quiet air. Lance tensed and prepared for the worst. Bullets peppered the terrain all around him as he dodged and weaved toward a dense line of trees at the forest's edge. It lay a few hundred yards ahead, and he aimed for the closest opening.

*I can lose them in the woods.*

The windscreen starred as one of his pursuer's slugs tore through the fabric in his coat, narrowly missing his elbow. The ground flattened out, and Lance reached into his heavy white garment and pulled out his sidearm. With his right hand on the throttle, he turned back over his left shoulder and fired three rounds. The bouncing made it difficult to steady his arm. A single lucky shot found its mark in the chest of the leading pursuer, and he hunched over and fell off his

sled.

The second in line plowed into the body and lost control. Lance smiled. From his mirror, the rider dove off and rolled. The abandoned snowmobile capsized and slammed into a boulder, disabled from the chase.

*That's two more.*

He steered into the tall pines at maximum power, eyes wide with fear as projectiles whizzed past him. He thought back to what Marshal had told him about getting caught. An uneasy feeling crept over him. The fear pumped adrenaline through his veins.

Bark from the trees exploded and bounced off his thick winter coat as the flying lead penetrated the forest surrounding him. Lance looked in front of him and scanned the landscape, searching for the best route to make his escape. He changed his heading to an outcropping of rock to his three o'clock.

Beyond the stone was a clearing. A road was visible. It led out into the vast area known as Siberia. As he sped along, he maneuvered his machine toward the rocks when another barrage of gunfire came his way. Four bullets struck his ride, and a fifth hit his right calf.

*Oh Shit! I've been hit. Dammit. Oh, God. I've got to lose them.*

Screaming and wincing in pain, he trudged forward. The motor sputtered, and he turned to look behind him as two men on snowmobiles entered the woods on his tail.

It struggled, smoking from the damage. He made a desperate attempt to find a place where he could take cover. He panned left, then opposite. The speed of each breath increased while his engine choked and oil spewed out of the side. In his futile effort to keep his sled moving, his right runner slipped under the fallen branch, hidden in the fresh white powder. The sudden halt flipped him over the machine onto his back.

Lance tried to get up, but the pain emanating from the wound in his calf was too intense. Out of desperation, he fired five more rounds at the group of pursuers. He crawled to a mature pine tree and hid out of view from the people who were hunting him. As he inspected his calf, the wound remained hidden beneath the thick fabric of his pants, however; the blood had already seeped through, staining it a deep red.

Two snowmobiles rejoined the hunt, and all four came to a stop, shy of where his ride lay wrecked. One of them spoke on the radio. It crackled as the response came back.

In the distance, the sound of something bigger resonated through the trees. Panic started to flow through Lance.

*What in the hell is that?*

Two minutes later, a snowcat plowed through the woods; its tread gears rattled and squeaked as the sound of small branches snapped under the weight of the heavy machine.

Lance peeked around the tree and witnessed more men, along with a pack of dogs, get out of the metal beast. Nikoli Petrovich, the man he had come to acquire information about, was one of those individuals. Dogs drowned out the words of men speaking in Russian as they barked, snarled, and fought against their restraints.

“We know where you are, Agent Tucker. The tracks in the snow give you away.”

*How the hell do they know my name?*

“Well, come and get me then!”

“I know you’ve been shot. You’re bleeding! Come out and we can treat you.”

Lance closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He pulled the magazine out of his pistol and checked the number of remaining rounds. His left hand slammed it back into the butt of his weapon.

“Yeah? Not a chance.”

Lance spun around the base of the tree, squeezed the trigger, and emptied his magazine. The front light on one of the snowmobiles disintegrated as the lead tore through it.

Men on either side of Petrovich ducked for cover, while he stood stoic.

Lance released the empty mag and inserted a full one as it fell into the snow. Bullets penetrated the back of the tree and surrounding snow. Pieces of bark peppered the ground where he sat.

Petrovich raised his hand. “Hold your fire!”

Lance leaned against the trunk. As he exhaled into the frigid air, he couldn’t help but track the wisps of his breath dissipating between the skeletal trees around him.

Petrovich shifted his weight as his patience began to wane. “Agent Tucker. I will release the dogs if you do not come out.”

Reality was setting in for Lance. He had screwed up. Tendrils of fear wove their way through him.

*Send in the dogs? I don’t want to get mauled.*

“Who am I talking to?”

“You know who I am, Agent Tucker. Do not play me for the fool.”

The dogs’ barking became more constant. They fought against their restraints.

“Yeah—I know who you are. Nikoli Petrovich. The man who wants to *change the world*.”

Nikoli smiled and chuckled. “See? Not so difficult, was it? Now come out and we can treat your wound.”

“Fuck you!”

The smile vanished from his face. Petrovich waved his hand forward and signaled to send in the dogs. Two pairs of German Shepherds raced in his direction. Lance raised his firearm, but then they disappeared from view.

*Where are those fucking things?*

He scanned around the trees, hoping to catch a glimpse of them. It was clear they were there, but hidden.

“Last chance, Agent Tucker.”

Lance shut his eyes and inhaled, feeling the frigid air sting his lungs. The silence unsettled him, sending shivers down his spine.

Without warning, two dogs appeared on his right, moving fast. He lifted his weapon to fire, but they made small targets, wide apart. He fired two rounds at the incoming animals. Both shots missed.

As he squeezed the trigger for another shot, something hit him from his left.

Ninety pounds of muscle and bone, traveling at thirty miles per hour, slammed into his side, and jaws clamped down on his shoulder. Close to three thousand joules of energy knocked him flat on his back.

Even as he fell, another dog rammed into him, and a vice tightened on his gun arm. Lance screamed in pain. A third animal sank its fangs into his thigh, and a fourth grabbed his other ankle.

By this time, he was in excruciating agony as the dogs tried to rip him apart, snarling, pulling, and shaking. The blood flowing from his bites fueled their ferocity, and their attack became ever more savage. His muscles were tearing. Lance could only scream. This was no way for a man to die.

Powerful jaws shook him like a rag doll, ripping through his clothes and his flesh. His screams shattered the quiet, and the fresh white powder turned to red as he bled from his arms and lower limbs.

Without a hint of concern, Petrovich turned to the man in charge of the dogs. “Call them off.”

Four men raced toward him, each one yelling and grabbing a dog. “*Nyet. Otpustit!*” The animals ignored them, refusing to let go, continuing to shake and tear his flesh. Finally, choking, they released their grip, and the handlers got them on their leashes.

They stood on their hind legs barking like crazy, teeth bared, lunging at him as well as dripping foam and saliva, as the soldiers tried to haul them away from him.

One of them slipped its chain, broke loose and ran back at him, snarling. Lance was powerless to protect himself, and the beast sank its canines into his crotch.

The handler pulled and yanked at the dog, but it refused to let go. It ripped off a huge chunk of his pants along with tender portions of his anatomy. Lance prayed for death.

Petrovich approached him with slow, deliberate steps, casting a long shadow over the prone man. His eyes traveled to the crimson stains blossoming across Lance’s clothes, a vivid contrast to the pale winter sky above.

Lance’s eyes met his. His voice was a hoarse whisper. “You’re not going to get away with this. I’ve reported everything.”

“On the contrary, Agent Tucker. I *am* getting away with it.” Petrovich reached into his coat and pulled out a Makarov pistol. “And you’ve not disclosed anything damaging about my operation. We’ve been watching you.”

Petrovich laughed. “We’ve been spying on the spy.” The surrounding men joined in with

laughter.

Lance glanced around and weighed his options. His mind raced, calculating every possible phrase capable of swaying his captors and keeping him alive for another moment.

“I’ve got information. If I don’t report back—”

Taking aim at Lance’s head with his firearm, Petrovich squeezed the trigger without a shred of hesitation.

As the deafening shot echoed across the snowy terrain, a gory canvas of bone and brains decorated the pristine white snow behind Lance.

Petrovich stared out beyond the clearing and through to the road where a lone automobile had stopped. The tiny motor reverberated through the trees. As he tried to focus on it, the car accelerated. He stepped through the snow to his right-hand man, Vasily.

The massive bald man cleared his throat. “What do you want us to do with him?”

Petrovich still focused on the road. “Leave the body for the wolves.” He pointed to the vehicle speeding off. “And find out who owns that car.”