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THE KURCHATOV PENETRATION

A Novel

Timothy S. Jacobson

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For Jacquelyn, and in memory of Ruth, 1955-2009

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CHAPTER ONE

Moscow, Russia
January

Pyotr Yakushkin pulled a large, antiquated cell phone from his lab jacket pocket, and popped off the back, exposing a hollow interior. He dumped the contents, washer-shaped pieces of lead wrapped in tissue paper, into his gloved hand and set the package on a small table. The gloves couldn't conceal the physicist's trembling. He unfolded the tissue paper and slid the pieces of lead to one side.

He opened a locker, nothing more than those used in high schools, and selected a plastic tube from the dozens stored there. A man who'd worked with nuclear materials for twenty-six years, Yakushkin poured 97-percent-enriched uranium washers onto the tissue paper as casually as one would pour cereal into a bowl. He dumped several others directly on the table, stuffed the lead rings into the tube as

replacements, and topped it off with the few uranium pieces on the table.

Then he returned the tube to the locker, nestling it behind several unmolested cylinders. He wrapped the remaining rings of uranium in the tissue paper and stuffed them into the cavity in the gutted-out phone. As he locked Building 116, he averted his eyes from the camera above the door.

This would be the last time, he assured himself. He accomplished the first two thefts without raising suspicion, and they'd paid him six times his annual salary in a lump sum for his trouble. But he could never shake the feeling he'd be caught eventually.

Yakushkin walked on the ice-covered path and approached the secured exit of the Kurchatov Institute, headquarters of Russia's nuclear program. His heart raced as he entered the building where he'd have to be cleared before leaving the grounds.

The scientist had been a fixture at the institute for many years, and the guards greeted him with disinterest. Despite the exchange of pleasantries, Yakushkin couldn't stop thinking about the handguns the guards carried, and how easily they could shoot him.

He stepped onto the man trap, a device that weighed a person upon entering and again upon leaving, calculating any discrepancy as a warning of possible theft. The man trap would not betray him—he'd brought in precisely enough washers to offset the weight of the uranium.

He placed the phone and his keys in a tray as he stepped through the metal detector. A guard slid the tray along a table

to the other side of the metal detector, then plucked the phone from the tray. Yakushkin froze in horror.

The young soldier studied the phone, examining it from several angles. He moved it up and down to feel its heft. “I’d be happy to have even an old cell phone like this, but I can’t afford it if they don’t pay me.”

“It’s handy, but I could use a smart phone,” the scientist said, reaching for the phone but unable to grasp it.

“How does it work?” the guard asked, pressing the power button. Nothing happened, and he looked puzzled.

“Battery must be dead.” Yakushkin put a hand on the table to allow himself to lean farther, and snatched the phone away. “I’ll recharge it and show you sometime.”

He walked past the elegant, bright yellow main building to his drab, brown car. He gazed at the huge bust of I.V. Kurchatov, father of the Soviet atom bomb, feeling a tinge of guilt. What would his scientific hero think of his life’s work being plundered for personal wealth? he wondered. Then he noticed the shiny Mercedes parked nearby, and the guilt was replaced with contempt sparring with envy. Yakushkin knew the Mercedes had not been purchased from a regular salary.

The scientist drove a torturous route through a residential neighborhood for twenty minutes as he’d been instructed, nervously watching his rearview mirror to see if anyone followed. He stopped on a randomly chosen street, emptied the uranium from the phone, and stuffed the washers in the bottom of a white paper bag of pigeon food.

At a park along the Moskva River, he sat on a bench and fed a hungry flock. When the bag was half empty, he closed the top and rolled it tightly, placing it in the snow under the

bench. He pulled an empty bag from his parka, opened it by inserting a fist, then carried the empty bag to his car as a decoy.

Two men in a silver BMW studied Yakushkin as he walked to his car with the empty bag. The driver rested his large head on his hand, elbow braced against the junction between the car door and window. The side of his face squished by his hand made his deep-set eyes sink lower. “It’s about time the old coot stopped feeding those damned pigeons.”

The passenger in the BMW looked barely eighteen, and he wondered how his partner could be so calm and act so bored with respect to their mission. The teenager fidgeted with a modified TEC-9 machine pistol in his lap, pulling the clip, examining the top round of ammunition, replacing the clip, and checking to ensure it was properly seated. “Yeah,” he answered at last, “I want to get this over with.”

“Nervous?” the driver asked, perking up with concern over whether his young companion would complete the task. “Don’t worry, you’ll have plenty of opportunities to practice ‘taking out the garbage.’”

The young man pondered that statement for a moment, then asked, “What’s the deal with this guy, anyway?”

The driver shrugged. “I don’t know. I heard something about him refusing to cooperate anymore. What difference does it make? You’ll get paid.”

“I was just curious.”

The BMW driver started the engine after Yakushkin passed by, and waited for the scientist to get a block and a half ahead before pulling out from the curb. They followed at a distance until Yakushkin turned down an empty side street.

Yakushkin drove toward home without bothering to look for a tail. He no longer possessed anything illegal, and he figured that if no one followed him to the park, no one would bother following him as he left.

The BMW roared as it closed the distance between the two vehicles. The young passenger lowered the window, and maintaining a tight grip on the TEC-9, repositioned his legs to suppress the shaking of his knees. Turning his head from the driver, he shut his eyes tightly for a moment and summoned from his gut the strength to carry out his assignment.

The silver car sped alongside the physicist's brown vehicle. The young man popped the TEC-9 up from his lap and braced himself on the door. The gun sputtered, and a shower of lead ripped through the car door and disintegrated the front windows. The bullets shredded Yakushkin's body, the interior of the car splattered with blood, pieces of lung and brain tissue, and fragments of bone.

The BMW skidded to a stop, allowing the scientist's car to coast onward into a parked car. The thugs spun around and raced from the scene.

Vienna, Austria

Vladimir Petrovich Stoletov sat at the desk in the corner of the grimy hotel room, running his fingers through his thinning hair, looking disgustedly at the carpeting blemished with numerous cigarette burns and larger stains. In the years since he left the old KGB, he'd grown accustomed to finer accommodations. Vienna had much better to offer, but he didn't come here on vacation. His companion, barrel-chested

with a thick neck, sat on the bed inspecting a Tokarev pistol, unconcerned with his surroundings.

The knocks came, three quick ones followed by a pause before the fourth. Both men rose, the bulky one moving behind the door, his gun ready. Stoletov walked up to the door, taking comfort in the presence of his bodyguard and several more armed men in a room across the hall. “Who is it?” he asked in German.

“I’m from the photo shop. I have the pictures you dropped off.”

The Russian opened the door. An Iranian, dressed like a tourist, entered. He carried a leather bag on a shoulder strap.

The stranger noticed the bodyguard and looked at the pistol. The bodyguard, seeing the man’s hands in the open, holstered the gun inside his blazer.

“I’m Riza,” the stranger said, extending his hand. The two Russians knew this was not his name, as he was a member of Etallat, the Iranian intelligence service.

Stoletov introduced himself as Viktor. He motioned toward one of two chairs on either side of a small table. They sat while the bodyguard locked the door.

In the custom of his Iranian guest, Stoletov made sure the table had been set with a teapot, small ceramic cups, a plate with filled with figs and dates, another with a stack of flatbread, and bowls of hummus and olives.

It would be rude for Stoletov to jump immediately into discussing business with an Iranian, and so the two discussed soccer and compared the weather in Russia and Iran while sampling the food and sipping mint tea.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Timothy S. Jacobson is an attorney who has served as president of a law firm, chief techie geek of a dot-com business, executive producer of documentaries, historical interpreter and blacksmith for a living history museum, executive of a privately-held energy company, and executive director of a nonprofit conservancy. *Law & Politics* and *Milwaukee Magazine* named him a “Super Lawyer” in 2005. He is admitted to practice before the United States Supreme Court. *USA Today* said, “If ... Jacobson[’s firm] isn’t careful, it may wind up giving lawyers a good name.” *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* called his firm “one of the most Internet-savvy law firms in existence.” The conservancy he runs received recognition as “Land Trust of the Year” and “Friend of Conservation – Outstanding Organization.” *La Crosse Tribune* proclaimed Jacobson “King of the Hills” in a front-page article. He has served on the board of directors for multiple for-profit companies and nonprofit organizations, and he is a frequent public speaker.

He is an instrument-rated airplane pilot, as well as being a mission pilot and squadron legal officer with the rank of major in the Civil Air Patrol, the official auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force. In addition, Jacobson has a black belt in karate and an advanced scuba diving certification. He enjoys playing guitar and writing songs, hiking, skiing, rock climbing, kayaking, world travel and study of languages, blacksmithing, filmmaking, writing, skydiving, calligraphy, drawing, reading, taxidermy, juggling and computer programming.