

Caught in the Crosshairs



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To the Colonel, Rome was above all a city of contrasts. Whores in white leather boots plied their trade on the Spanish steps alongside nuns in simple black habits. The nuns and the whores were as commonplace as the submachinegun-armed *carabinieri*, positioned at practically every street corner: Terrorism coexisted with Christ, the Renaissance with Armageddon, antiquity with irreversible decay as the photochemical smog of airborne pollutants slowly turned the

marble walls of the Eternal City's ancient edifices to soot-colored chalk.

It was, the Colonel thought, life's supreme irony that such contradictions could exist side-by-side. His personal history was proof of that. He had killed in the name of his country's survival, yet it seemed that violence to stem violence only beget further violence, as the characters in the Bible had begotten their numberless offspring. Katyusha rockets from the Syrian border had taken the lives of his wife and young daughter; he who had dared death so often had survived when innocents had perished.

With their deaths had come a new phase in the Colonel's life. Joining the Mossad, and then the ultra-secret Sayaret Matkal, called "The Unit." It was The Unit -- an elite paramilitary strike force -- which was responsible for his being here tonight to commit an act which he abhorred but which the realities of his profession so often deemed necessary: kill.

Kill again in survival's name.

The Colonel consulted the luminous dials of his chronometer in the darkened hotel room and rose from the bed. He walked to the window, opened four inches to permit a sniper rifle's silenced barrel to protrude without drawing attention, and pulled up a chair. Dusk had already thickened to night. Church bells tolled the hour and clouds of screeching swallows dipped and swooped across the roofscape of the ancient buildings his window overlooked.

Resting against the wall beneath the window was a slim black attaché case with a numbered combination lock. The Colonel quickly dialed a coded numerical series, snapped back the latches and pulled open the lid, exposing a custom-molded interior containing the broken-down elements of a Heckler & Koch G3SG/1 sniper rifle and an American-made Armson laser-augmented starlight scope.

Placing the empty attaché case on the floor beside him, the Colonel quickly and methodically assembled the fire-selectable

automatic weapon which was capable of firing twenty 7.62 millimeter rounds as quickly as he could pull the trigger, either as single shots or multiround bursts. He extended the H&K's bipod legs and propped them on the wide windowsill for support while moving his chair into a position from which he could command a diagonal line-of-sight across the spacious piazza below to a window in the shorter building opposite his own.

He resisted the impulse to light a cigaret. As well as the threat of its glow presenting a clear target, nicotine jangled the nerves, and they would need to be rock-steady. Instead, he flicked on the Armson's night-vision optics. The dark field of view immediately turned a vibrant green with amazingly clear resolution of detail. He trained the scope on a window on the topmost story of the building across the wide, lozenge-shaped piazza with its baroque fountain by Bernini. All seemed still within the darkened room beyond, though the Colonel knew that it was otherwise. He knew

a killer waited in that room, as he waited in the cage of his own rectangle of darkness.

Then the Colonel angled the scope sharply downward to the dimly lit piazza below. Two men lounged against a rust-colored Lancia parked at the intersection of two broad avenues to the right of the Spanish Steps. Both, he knew, were Americans. A second team of two was positioned in the shadowy doorway of a nearby building at least 800 years old; a building which had certainly witnessed many acts of slaughter in its considerable lifetime, including, but not limited to, the Sack of Rome.

None of the CIA ground assets knew that they had a guardian angel in the hotel room above. It was in the interest of the Colonel's government that the man they had been awaiting for the third consecutive night would survive intact. The man's face was not known. Only his code name: "Nightingale." All else that was known was that he was in possession of the entire clandestine operatives roster of the KGB's West European "illegals" directorate. Nightingale had a

photographic memory. His insurance policy was that he carried all the names in his head. Espionage was a dirty game and one truly never knew the motives of any of its players.

The defector had been a deep-cover mole within the Soviet hierarchy for twenty years. His motives for defection were not clear; perhaps he had simply wearied of the game. The only certainty was that, weeks before, through the clandestine network of couriers he had used for the last two decades to channel information to American intelligence in Europe, Nightingale had informed the CIA that he would come in from the cold in Rome, on One of three nights in early April.

His resurfacing would take place in the Piazza di Spagna on the north side of the Spanish Steps, at the intersection of the vias Condotti and Borgognona. It was the last communication Nightingale had sent. It was conjectured by some that his appearance was timed to coincide with a Soviet trade delegation to Rome and that Nightingale was a member of it; by others, that he was a

high-ranking officer of the KGB contingent watching over the delegates.

Regardless of Nightingale's identity or his motives, it was obvious to the Soviets that if successful, his escape would seriously jeopardize the espionage network which they had labored for years to put in place. They were attempting to stop him at all costs. Though they did not know his face, his name, or anything about him, they did know that he was going to surface here, for his last communication had been intercepted. The KGB had taken measures to compromise Nightingale "with extreme prejudice." They had sent out their best assassin.

The Colonel's lips curled up in a bitter smile at this thought as he brought the scope's crosshairs up again to the darkened window of the ancient, apricot-colored building across the piazza, within which a killer waited. The killer's identity was as much of a mystery as that of Nightingale's. The Colonel knew his name only as Dzabrailov. He had been trained by the KGB's First Directorate, the Soviet elite

organization for mokri dela jobs -- wet operations; terrorism, sabotage and assassinations. Dzabrailov was an expert marksman who had never been known to miss, as well as a master of disguise and an adept in the arts of infiltration, evasion and clandestine escape. The Unit wanted Dzabrailov terminated as much as it wanted Nightingale to reach the American camp unharmed.

In the previous year alone, Dzabrailov had been responsible for the deaths of one British, two American and three Israeli operatives in cities across the globe. Most recently, he had been an instructor to a mixed cadre of terrorists at a desert training camp near Benghazi, Libya. Dzabrailov's mission now was to assassinate Nightingale the moment he made his appearance. The Colonel had been sent by The Unit to see that Dzabrailov would himself be taken out before he had a chance to blow Nightingale away.



Hours had passed, and still Nightingale had not shown himself. The Colonel again consulted the luminous dial of his chronometer. It was already half-past three. In a few more hours, dawn would break. Perhaps Nightingale would not appear, after all. Perhaps he had already been compromised. Perhaps the KGB had staged it all as a diversionary gambit or had thrown out a piece of tantalizing bait in order to see what sort of fish would rise to the surface. The questions had no ready answers. The Colonel began to think of sleep. He raised his head from the Armson scope, rubbed his eyes and stretched.

At that moment, from one of the narrow streets feeding onto the broad piazza, he detected movement. A sudden surge of adrenaline made his heart jump. The Colonel swung the G3SG forty-five degrees to his left.

He saw a man walking slowly toward the American agents on the fountain side of the piazza. He had exited from one of the alley-like streets opening onto the wide cobblestone -paved expanse. The man was of

medium build and height, wearing a short-sleeved white shirt, dark pants and sneakers. He looked neither to the left or to the right. He had his eyes fixed on the two American agents beside the Lancia.

The Colonel knew the man in his sights was Nightingale. Every instinct told him so. The Americans knew it to be him as well. Their postures showed sudden alertness, and one of them could be seen speaking into a small communications device he had whipped from his pocket.

Now the critical seconds would tick by. If Nightingale crossed the piazza and reached the Americans, he would be safe. But if Dzabrailov could get a clear shot at him, Nightingale would certainly never make it. An expertly aimed hollownose bullet would strike him squarely between the temples and send him crumpling to the cobblestones of the piazza, dead even as he fell, his brains pulped as the bullet fragmented like a miniature grenade. After that, it would be finished. The Americans would drive off and report the operation's failure. The Colonel

would leave behind his assassin's bag of tricks for the Roman police to puzzle over and return to headquarters in Tel Aviv for debriefing and reassignment.

Nightingale was already closing the distance between the piazza's far side and the fountain which stood between himself and the Americans. He was now within range of the silencer-augmented Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifle which Dzabrailov's modus operandi indicated he would probably use. The Colonel swung the scope upwards until he had the dark window again in his field of view.

Yes! There it was! The long black cylinder of a silenced automatic rifle projecting from the room's dark interior. And beyond, the dim outline of the assassin's face to one side of the black, cylindrical bulge at the muzzle end of the silenced weapon.

The Colonel depressed the auto-targeting stud at the side of his scope and crosshairs of solid green light flashed on, framing a point directly beneath Dzabrailov's

left eye. An LCD display just beneath them, in glowing red numerals, quickly scrolled through a series of digital updates, computing the distance between muzzle and target. In a split-second, the display began flashing rapidly, indicating the laser now had its target locked on in a perfect line of fire. Dzabrailov was caught in the crosshairs. Firing now would assure the Colonel a clean, surgical kill.

Then -- as though in response to someone else in the darkened room across the piazza -- the face of the killer rose suddenly from the eyepiece and turned, momentarily showing itself in full profile. A sudden shock made the Colonel's heart skip a beat. He had now seen what had never before been witnessed. He had glimpsed Dzabrailov's face.

He had glimpsed the long, dark hair, the small, delicate nose, the sensuously full lips, before the face of the beautiful young woman was once more pressed in concentration to one side of the sound suppresser-equipped barrel of the automatic rifle as Dzabrailov --

now more appropriately Dzabrailova -- squinted into the nightscope mounted atop her weapon. In a moment, the Colonel sensed, she would fire. And before that moment passed, he would have to put a bullet in her brain.

As the tightening finger on the G3SG's trigger brought it to within a hairbreadth of the point of no-return, the Colonel suddenly remembered another young woman, killed in a Katyusha rocket attack a dozen years before. In that split instant, the Colonel reached a decision; one, he knew, that might spell the end of his career. The silenced automatic rifle coughed and jerked in his hands. Across the piazza, the Colonel could see the Kalashnikov leap from the girl's grasp. A moment later, she was being pulled back and away by unseen accomplices in the dark room.

Nightingale broke into a run as the muffled reports of silenced weapons from both the KGB agents in the hotel window, and the CIA field team rapidly pulling the defector into the Lancia, resounded off the

ancient cobbled surface of the deserted piazza. And then the Soviet defector was inside the Lancia, tires screaming as the car raced from the piazza toward the American embassy in the heart of the Eternal City.

It was over. The Colonel turned and left the darkened hotel room. With luck, he would be at his own embassy before the sniper weapon was discovered. There would be much he would have to explain. His superiors in The Unit would be furious with him for allowing the girl to live.

But the Colonel had no regrets. To all practical purposes, he had taken the girl out. She had been compromised, and would be of no further use to the KGB. Alive, she would pay far more dearly for her failure tonight than were she to have died. In fact, a quick, clean death with a bullet in the brain would have been merciful compared to what awaited her in the dungeons of Moscow's Lubyanka prison once she had returned to her motherland.

No, the Colonel felt no regrets. He would tell his superiors at the Sayaret Matkal to go to hell should they reprove him. He would then gladly hand in his resignation and go live in a kibbutz in the Galilee, spending his remaining years planting groves of Haifa oranges. He had done, at last, as his conscience had dictated, not what his duty had demanded. Finally permitting himself the nicotine he craved, he lit a cigaret, went down the steps into the hotel's lobby and out into the narrow street, walking in a direction opposite that of the Piazza di Spagna as he felt the cool, if polluted, night air of Rome against his face.