

To Free A Spy

By Nick Ganaway

BORIS PETREVICH LOOKED AT his hands as he held them in front of him. No tremor. Better than his insides as he watched the seconds tick down on his digital watch, which was synchronized precisely with another digital timepiece three thousand feet from there. No matter his months of preparation, his maplike brainshot of the Sarov compound, his familiarity with the security safeguards, his encyclopedic knowledge of bomb-grade nuclear materials—all of those factors combined held no guarantee that his plan that night and the following days would succeed but there was no turning back now.

To the extent possible Petrevich had calculated the risks tonight's plan presented. The first would occur when time zero arrived minutes from now. There'd be no problem moving around within Sarov but the guards manning the checkpoint inspected every car leaving the sealed city for radiation. Petrevich had used the most emission-secure travel container available to him in the nuclear lab but the lab's Geiger-counter still reported minuscule leakage. He shielded the radiation exposure within his car with the only remaining lead-lined blanket to be found. While there was no assurance he would get past this first hurdle unscathed he was not totally unprepared. Stuck under his belt in the small of his back was the World War II-vintage Russian TT-33 7.62 mm semi-automatic pistol he'd been issued years ago. The model had its flaws, such as no safety latch, but it was what he had. He had not fired it in years, saving up his ration of ammunition, and had never had the occasion to use it in a hostile situation. His once-fine shooting skills would certainly have waned but any use of the pistol required at the Sarov checkpoint would be at close range. Later could be another story: He still had to cross the borders into Georgia and Turkey, then into Iraq—the most worrisome of all.

Now for the last time Petrevich looked around the meager flat assigned to him and got down to his car to wait as the final seconds ticked off. His aged black Volvo was packed with the few personal items he was taking, along with the case containing the uranium. Exactly when expected, the flash from the blast lit up the sky and three seconds later the sound reached his ears. The ground trembled momentarily under the car. He waited the ten minutes it would take for authorities to be awakened and to realize that the explosion was at the old monastery where the nuclear material was secured. Not that the three-hundred-year-old monastery still held any religious sentiment. They would be worried about containing the nuclear hazard. Every military, fire and hazmat operative in the city would be needed at the site, and even the checkpoint security was sure to be in disarray, with too little time to regroup. Petrevich's life depended on that and his timing was critical.

He pulled into the street and took the route through the dark city that he knew would be the less traveled during the minutes after the explosion. It would take him four minutes to reach the checkpoint and by then fourteen or fifteen minutes would have elapsed. The remaining checkpoint guards would be focused on the blast with their radios and phones. Boris Petrevich in his old Volvo would be the least of their worries.

Petrevich approached the halogen-flooded checkpoint that was framed by the reinforced-concrete archway and columns that had always reminded him of Berlin's Brandenburg Gate. Gone were the machine-gun emplacements but the tangle of concertina wire topping the parallel concrete walls bordering Sarov's four square miles remained. Flight from this top-secret military-industrial complex where he'd devoted his

life to his country's global security was mere seconds away. *If only it were that simple*, Petrevich thought. There were no other vehicles at this the only remaining checkpoint in Sarov and Petrevich felt a moment of relief when he saw only two guards rather than the usual eight or so. A single alert German Shepherd stood watch inside the kiosk with one of them as the other officer approached the Volvo. "What's going on?" Petrevich said to the officer.

"We are not sure, sir. The first report was of an explosion at the monastery, where I've heard nuclear materials are stored. They've called for every available guard to report there." He held the Geiger-counter at his side and walked around the car, as Petrevich knew he'd done a thousand times before. The guard returned to the driver-side window and stuck the handheld instrument inside the car, where it began its signature ticking that was so familiar to Petrevich. "Do you know of any reason your car might be hot, sir?"

Petrevich's pulse quickened but he maintained an unconcerned look. "My work is inside the monastery. I go there daily." He shrugged. "That's likely the problem."

"Let's be sure." The guard said it without a hint of suspicion. "You don't want any extra exposure. Why don't you step out of the car so that I can check inside more thoroughly? And I will need to see your credentials." Petrevich had hoped to avoid these intrusions.

He got out of the car and reached behind his back as if to retrieve his papers. The officer did not see the T-33 before the 7.62 mm round destroyed the left side of his head. The other guard, who had been paying only casual attention, became alert and took aim at Petrevich but not soon enough. At least one of Petrevich's four rounds struck him, entering his right eye socket and exiting the back of his head along with fragments of skull and brain tissue. Still, he had managed to activate a piercing general alarm before being shot but Petrevich knew it would be only one of the many to which overloaded authorities were busy responding. Petrevich fired a round at the guard dog, who did not die immediately but was incapacitated and yelping in pain. He had studied the video security system at the lab and knew how to delete all images at the checkpoint kiosk. With that done there was nothing to give the authorities any information to track him with. They would figure it out eventually, of course, but there were ninety-thousand residents in Sarov and a budding nuclear disaster to deal with. It would take some time. By then Petrevich would be far away, perhaps even all the way to Georgia, whose cooperation with Russia was in shambles. Soon after that, Turkey, but his trail would be cold by then. His final border crossing, at Habur, into Iraq, was nineteen-hundred miles south—three days driving, with luck. Once in Iraq it would no longer be the authorities he'd be worried about. It would be Seth.