

Chapter Six

*Strategic Rocket Forces Headquarters
Moscow, Russia*

Mikhail Vasilyev looked at the grim concrete edifice before them with a distinct lack of enthusiasm and then turned to Anatoly Grishkov.

"I see what you meant about feeling like you were back in the 1980s," Vasilyev said.

Grishkov arched one eyebrow. "Wait until you get inside. Since you are by far the better-dressed agent, I'll let you do the talking."

Indeed, Vasilyev was resplendent in his new, custom-fitted suit and fine cotton shirt. With, of course, French cuffs held together by his father's cufflinks.

The previous day, Grishkov had shown Vasilyev how they worked. Vasilyev's father Alexei had the cufflinks custom made by a friend who dated from his KGB days. There his friend had worked in the Seventh Directorate, which among other things, produced surveillance equipment. Like Alexei, he had continued in the new FSB, but now with access to better technology.

Each cufflink contained a tiny optical lens concealed in the cufflink's black "stone" surface. The image collected was stored directly to an SD card, embedded within the cufflink.

Alexei had told Grishkov that the challenging task for his friend had been writing the software that stitched and sharpened the two images from the cufflinks together. This software was necessary because the cufflinks were intended to work in tandem, capturing images side by side as each hand moved down the page.

They walked through the entry door and were immediately before a lone receptionist, a burly man who sat behind bulletproof glass next to a heavy metal door. It was the only one leading inside the building from this entrance.

Vasilyev said calmly, "Captain Vasilyev to see Comrade Pavel Golovkin, accompanied by Captain Grishkov. We have authorization papers."

The receptionist frowned, and said, "I remember those names, though I don't remember you. And the names I remember were from men with the FSB."

Vasilyev nodded. "Yes, you're right on both counts. We are with the FSB. You don't remember me because the last time it was my father who came with my colleague, Captain Grishkov."

"Humph," the receptionist said. Pulling a lever that slid a metal drawer towards them from below the glass, he added, "Papers, please." Vasilyev and Grishkov both handed over their FSB IDs, to which Vasilyev added a thick sheaf of authorization papers.

The receptionist picked up the phone. "Comrade Golovkin, please. Yes, FSB Captains Vasilyev and Grishkov are here to see you. Yes, they have authorization papers to conduct research. Very well, I will have them wait for you to escort them to the archives."

The receptionist pulled out two plastic cards with the word "Visitor" on them in large letters, each attached to a metal chain. Pulling on the lever, the metal drawer slid towards them again, and the receptionist said sharply, "All phones, cameras, weapons, and metal objects of all types must be deposited with me until your departure from this building. You will pass through a metal detector before you are allowed entry past this lobby, and any metal objects detected will be confiscated permanently."

Once they had dropped everything they were carrying in the drawer, it went back and then returned with the visitor cards and Vasilyev's authorization papers, but not their IDs.

"Wear these at all times while you are inside this headquarters. You must remain in the company of your escort at all times. Failure to do so is a breach of security regulations. You will retrieve your IDs and possessions when you return your visitor cards."

Pointing to two hardcast plastic chairs that appeared to have been in place since the building opened, the receptionist added, "Sit, please, and await Comrade Golovkin."

Once they were sitting, Grishkov leaned towards Vasilyev and said in a near whisper, "Spooky, like he was some kind of robot. Everything that receptionist said was the same as the last time I was here with your father."

Vasilyev gave Grishkov a faint smile. "And why would it be any different? He's probably said the same thing to visitors hundreds of times. Maybe thousands."

At least they didn't have to wait long. After just a few minutes, the heavy metal door opened, and Senior Academic Researcher Golovkin was gesturing to enter.

Grishkov thought to himself that the man looked just as he had the last time. A mole in human form, right down to the blinking eyes and skittering walk. A crooked bow tie, gold wire-rim glasses, and a perfectly bald head completed the picture. As Grishkov had suggested based on his father's performance during their last visit, Vasilyev spoke to him with deep respect as they walked down the halls.

"Comrade Golovkin, it is a genuine pleasure to meet you. My father told me a great deal about you, in particular, how helpful you were during his last visit," Vasilyev said.

Golovkin blinked and picked up his already brisk pace. Grishkov thought to himself that he'd never imagined a speedy mole. Unless something was chasing it?

Golovkin confirmed Grishkov's guess. "It won't be long until my boss finds out you're here. We have to be done before that happens. What do you need?"

Vasilyev hadn't expected Golovkin to get to the point quite so quickly but didn't hesitate.

"We need technical data on the SS-24 warhead," Vasilyev said.

Golovkin nodded and turned a corner. "Warheads," he said absently. "There were ten on each missile. But then you probably knew that much, at least."

Without waiting for a reply, Golovkin settled to the task of unlocking the door to the record archives, which took several steps. First, Golovkin placed his hand on a scanner and bent towards a lens that appeared to examine his right eye for a retinal scan. Finally, he entered a code onto a keypad and gestured for the others to follow as the door slid open.

Rows of plain metal file cabinets marched in ranks that to Vasilyev's eye appeared to number in the dozens. Seeing his expression, Golovkin laughed. "Captain Grishkov may remember what I told him on his last visit. We've disposed of all records relating to weapons that were destroyed either due to replacement with more advanced models or due to strategic weapons agreements with the Americans. Naturally, that includes the SS-24."

Seeing the look of confusion and dismay that was now on both Vasilyev and Grishkov, Golovkin shook his head. "Don't worry. That's just what I told my boss. I doubt you're here for the

records that really were destroyed, like maintenance schedules. Technical schematics and operational instructions, yes?"

Vasilyev and Grishkov both nodded.

Golovkin walked directly to an unmarked filing cabinet about halfway through their massed ranks. Then he pulled a large key ring from his pocket and began fishing for the right ones. A metal bar passed through the drawers' handles, making it physically impossible to open them without removing the padlock that secured the bar at its top.

Vasilyev and Grishkov exchanged glances, but both remained silent. Yes, the contrast between the technology at the entrance and now here at the source of the information they needed was striking. But at least it was nearly in their hands.

Grishkov was impressed with how quickly Golovkin found the right key and extracted the heavy metal bar from the cabinet. Practice, he supposed.

"Here's the file you need. I see you have your father's equipment," Golovkin said, pointing at Vasilyev's cufflinks and then at a nearby small wooden table. "Use it to copy the file there. Hurry."

Vasilyev was only partially successful at keeping astonishment away from his expression but wasted no time following Golovkin's instructions.

While Vasilyev worked to copy the file, Grishkov couldn't help asking Golovkin, "Why are you helping us? And aren't you risking trouble with your boss?"

Vasilyev's frown told Grishkov he didn't like his questions. Grishkov saw, though, that his queries didn't stop Vasilyev from his methodical work copying the file.

Golovkin shrugged. "When you were here the last time asking about the nuclear 'suitcase' weapons used by Spetsnaz forces, it was evident that one or more had gone missing. I assume the same is true for the SS-24 warheads."

Grishkov nodded but said nothing.

"Good. The less I know, the better," Golovkin said with a smile. "As to why I'm helping you, that should be obvious. I've dedicated my life to preserving records on the weapons that have

kept us safe from enemies like the Americans. If any of those weapons were stolen and not recovered, that protection could unravel very quickly."

Grishkov looked at Golovkin directly. "And the risk to you?"

Golovkin gave a short, dry chuckle in response. "Not so great as you might imagine. Replacing me would not be easy, as my boss well knows."

Golovkin waved at the ranks of label-free cabinets and smiled.

"No, as long as I've followed the rules, my boss will bark but can do little to bite," Golovkin said confidently.

As though summoned by repeated mention, the door to the records storage room flew open to admit the same corpulent figure Grishkov remembered from his last visit. While he now understood that the "mole man" persona Golovkin had adopted was an act, he was sure the same wasn't true of his boss.

Just as before, the man's wobbling neck fat made Grishkov think of an angry bullfrog. If anything, the man's beady red eyes and the stench of vodka that preceded him like a cloud made it clear the intervening years had done nothing to improve him.

"Golovkin, what are they doing here! After the last time these FSB men came poking their noses where they have no business, I told you never again!" Golovkin's boss said in an angry roar.

Grishkov had to swallow a smile at Golovkin's transformation back to the hesitant, hunched figure he'd presented at the start of their visit. Blinking through his thick glasses, Golovkin answered in a quavering voice.

"Yes, Comrade Director. I tried to reach you, but your secretary said you were unavailable. These FSB men do have proper authorization papers, and I knew you wouldn't want me to take action contrary to regulations without your direct order. Shall I tell them to leave now, sir?" Golovkin asked.

As the man's eyes bulged and the veins in his neck throbbed alarmingly, Grishkov thought for a moment that a stroke might solve Golovkin's problems on the spot. After a moment, though, the full meaning of Golovkin's words penetrated.

If he tried to do anything to Golovkin, he might be asked why he had been unavailable for Golovkin's call. Since the only answer was to be found in the vodka bottle he kept in his bottom desk drawer, it would be best to wrap this up.

Collecting himself with a visible effort, the Director said in a lower voice. "Yes. They must leave immediately. Did you give them copies of any documents?"

"No, sir. That would be completely contrary to regulations!" Golovkin said in a mildly indignant tone. He then pointed to Vasilyev and Grishkov, whose hands were clearly empty.

The Director's eyes narrowed. "Secure that file," he said, pointing at the file on the desk. "Then escort them out. Once they're out of the building, come to my office."

"At once, Comrade Director," Golovkin replied.

Moments later, Vasilyev and Grishkov were trailing behind Golovkin as they approached the exit.

"Did you get what you needed?" Golovkin asked in a near whisper.

Vasilyev nodded. "I finished seconds before your boss arrived. Should I have our Director call yours to explain why we were here?"

Golovkin snorted with laughter. "That might be the only way to get me fired. No, leave it to me. I've outlasted five Directors, and this one is no real challenge. I'll still be here long after he's drunk himself into an early grave."

With that, he opened the exit door. "Good luck to you both," Golovkin said in a low voice as he closed the door behind them.