

CHAPTER TEN

Russia — Outer Manchuria (early autumn, 2021)

It was a beautiful day.

Xia's small plane descended toward a large lake. She could clearly see a weathered hunting shack nestled in dense forest stretching for kilometers. From the plane's window, she watched the thick smoke curl from the cabin's chimney and drift away on the breeze.

She looked for any sign of overwatch.

Xia grunted. *Too much canopy.*

She admired the view as the plane glided toward the ramshackle wooden pier jutting out from the shore. Autumn colors burned across the shoreline. At any other time, Xia thought it would be romantic to spend a rustic weekend in that cabin.

Before Xia got out of the plane, the pilot shouted in Russian, "Watch your step. That pier is so rotten that you could fall through."

Xia was wary as she stepped out onto it, testing each board before committing her weight, but the pier seemed solid under her feet.

The warm breeze brushed her face and ruffled the leaves. She slowly inhaled, savoring the strong autumn scent.

The sheer beauty eased her tension as she stood on the pier, taking it in.

Still, Xia walked lightly across the pier to the shore.

No one came to meet her.

Xia walked toward the cabin while watching for shooters hiding in the tree line. She assumed someone was watching.

Near the front steps, she stopped. The forest had gone quiet. No animal sounds. No movement.

She climbed the steps cautiously. The steps and porch boards creaked under her feet. They were so rotten that Xia feared falling through.

Xia knocked. The front door shuddered on its hinges. The latch inside broke free and fell to the floor. No one came to the door. She pounded on it. The door rattled, then opened slightly.

Speaking in Russian, she asked in a loud voice, "Is anyone here?"

Three men walked out from around the side of the cabin. One said in Russian, "You didn't have to break the door."

She turned to look, instinctively assessing the threat.

Three men.

Two bodyguards.

Sidearms.

Defensive spacing.

Tactical clothing.

Not flanking.

Satisfied that they were not preparing to attack her, Xia entered the cabin without comment.

1 Immediately, Xia looked for an escape route, then for anything she could use as a
2 weapon.

3 She noted the single window, the door behind her, and no secondary exit. A chair, a small
4 hand-hewn table made from logs, and a wood box filled with firewood sat in the single room. A
5 small, unpainted counter of hand-hewn logs stood against one wall, with a sink beneath the
6 window.

7 Diffuse light filtered through the cabin's only window while the fireplace burned
8 brightly. In the dim light, Xia could hear the fire crackle behind her. The cabin was dusty. There
9 were cobwebs in the corners and around the wood box. Dirt and wood chips were strewn across
10 the room's rough, plank floor.

11 As the three men entered, Xia asked, "Why this shithole in the middle of nowhere?"

12 One man stood by the door, relaxed and watchful.

13 The older of the three replied, "It's comfortable. Sit."

14 Xia made a quick assessment.

15 Casual clothing.

16 No visible weapon.

17 Not the threat.

18 "I'd rather not. Let's get this over with."

19 The older man's jaw tightened.

20 "Director, I'm a project manager. For this project, I'm your recruiter. Your ad on the
21 Dark Web said you're looking for candidates with specific skills. My employer can secure those
22 candidates for you. Our fee is fifty million payable in various currencies that we identify. We
23 want half upfront and the remainder when we place the candidates. Are you interested?"

24 The man Xia had identified as the Director said, "Check her."

25 Xia didn't move.

26 One man immediately conducted a systematic pat-down, checking waistband, ankles, and
27 underarms—standard concealment points for weapons or transmitters. He opened her coat and
28 removed her passport.

29 The man handed the passport to the Director. "No phone."

30 "Sit," the Director said.

31 Xia ignored him.

32 In a polite voice, the Director asked, "Why no cell phone?"

33 Xia laughed. "Really? A cell phone? Out here?"

34 The Director opened the passport, then glanced up at her.

35 He pulled out his satellite phone and photographed the identification page. A few
36 moments later, he studied the screen.

37 "According to your visa application, you teach first grade in Dachi. You also live in
38 Dachi. You don't look like a person who teaches first grade."

39 The Director ordered one of the men, "Check her fingerprints."

40 One of the men grabbed Xia's hands and turned them palms-up. He lifted each closer to
41 inspect her fingertips.

42 The man turned to the Director. "Her fingerprints have been erased, chemically or by
43 abrasion."

44 The Director grunted. He put his phone back into his pocket and asked, "So, who is Xia
45 Qī?"

1 Xia replied, “She’s a 30-year-old first grade teacher who lives in Dachi. She’s married
2 with no children.”

3 “Who are you?”

4 Xia shrugged.

5 “I’m Xia Qī.”

6 A grin spread across Xia’s face. “Director, were you expecting a curriculum vitae and
7 references?”

8 The Director’s expression hardened. “Do you think this is a joke?”

9 Xia met the Director’s gaze without flinching. She replied in a quiet, controlled voice,
10 “Why is the Head of Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service here? Is your presence a joke?
11 Director, was your advertisement a joke? Did you take my employer’s response to your
12 advertisement as a joke? Was it a joke to prepare a proposal and come to this shithole to deliver
13 it in person as your ad required?”

14 Xia stopped speaking and waited.

15 He sat silently for several seconds.

16 The fire popped sharply in the silence.

17 Finally he said, “I’m looking for information.”

18 Xia shrugged.

19 “Information, candidates, they’re all the same.”

20 She took a picture from her pocket and handed it to him.

21 “That’s my contact in Moscow. He’ll negotiate his own rates.”

22 The Director looked at the picture.

23 “Russian mafia?”

24 Xia quipped, “Are you getting picky?”

25 She continued, “This project’s description will be for the delivery of African diamonds.
26 Rough diamonds. Think conflict diamonds. Their delivery point will be Antwerp.

27 “And the SVR and FSB stay out of this project. Entirely. If either one shows up in China
28 or gets involved in any way, I scrap the project and my employer keeps the first payment. This
29 project is sensitive enough without the SVR or FSB blundering around.”

30 “Why is your finder’s fee so high? And why conflict diamonds?”

31 “Diamonds are an excellent cover—high value, low volume, and we’re providing
32 something you can’t get. Also, this requires equipment and logistics that don’t come cheap.
33 Anyone who helps knows they’ll be shot on the spot. That kind of help isn’t cheap.

34 “What you want attracts intense scrutiny and gets people killed. My employer doesn’t
35 want to be directly responsible for either. Blood diamonds will divert that attention.

36 “Then there’s my employer. We don’t come cheap, especially when anonymity is
37 required.

38 “One other thing. I’d like your wish list. Be specific.”

39 The Director asked, “Is there anything else?”

40 “Not at this time. My bid expires in thirty days. If you accept, my contact will provide
41 transfer instructions. Half the fee is due within twenty-four hours.

42 “Once payment is confirmed, all planning and communication will go through
43 compartmentalized cutouts tied to the Russian military presence in Burkina Faso. Choose people
44 so insignificant nobody remembers seeing them.

45 “When the information is ready, you’ll receive new transfer instructions for the balance.
46 Once payment is confirmed, you’ll receive the delivery details.

1 “At that point, my employer’s responsibilities end.”

2 “Now, as far as I’m concerned, this meeting is over.”

3 The Director escorted Xia out to her plane. Neither spoke as the boards creaked under
4 each step.

5 When the plane was in the air, one of the men asked the Director, “Should we chase
6 down the information and cross-check the visa source?”

7 The Director smiled.

8 “No. That girl’s Chinese mafia. She’s got quite a set of brass balls, too. You’re not going
9 to find anything useful. If anyone can get the information we want, it’s the Chinese mafia.

10 “Wait twenty-nine days. Then accept.

11 “Set up the Burkina Faso channel. Use our most trusted agents. I don’t want anything
12 regarding this project to leak. Bring in the security team from the woods and call for pickup.”

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