Chapter 1

Adrian Markov entered the large warehouse, just off San Fernando Rd. in Sun Valley. Surrounded by industrial buildings, storage facilities, auto shops, and junkyards, it was the perfect place for a meeting of this sort. Nobody around here is going to ask questions. Nobody around here is going to care at all. He felt as if he was a bit overdressed. Jeans and a blazer, around here, he looked like a fucking cop, and that was the last thing he wanted to be made as. He hurried into the metal door of the building, trying not to have too many eyes on him. It smelled of oil and old rust inside. Must have been a machine shop at one time. The place was large, with a huge roll door to the right of the smaller door he entered. Aerospace maybe, whatever it was, it was all gone now. A table and six chairs with a rolling whiteboard sat in the center of the empty warehouse. A man stood at the whiteboard, putting up photos and writing names. Another man in an all-black suit with a thin red tie sat about ten or more feet away from the table. Probably secret service, he'd never seen him before, Adrian was sure he didn't work for "The Company."

"Good afternoon Mr. Markov. Glad you could make it." the man at the whiteboard said, turning to Adrian. "Have a seat. The rest will be here soon."

The man turned back to the whiteboard and continued putting photos up. He was in his mid-forties, curly short brown hair with gray at the temples. He was in a cheap yellow dress shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows and brown polyester slacks. Did they even make things from polyester anymore? He looked like a man who was so overworked that he didn't have any time to put himself together. Some would say, Sloppy, but Adrian could see it. He wasn't a slob. He was focused. So focused, he had little time to put on airs. The door opened, spilling sunlight into the dim warehouse. Time for roll call.

A woman in a dark blue skirt suit and sensible black heals entered. Now, she works for "The Company," he could tell. She had that arrogance in her stride that said, "I don't give a fuck. My clearance is so high I could find out the results of your last colonoscopy." fuckin' spooks, she better play nice. He had a lot riding on this.

As she approached the table and pulled out a chair, the man at the whiteboard broke the silence, "Ms. Polzin, a pleasure to see you again." He hadn't turned around to look at her just continued to write on the board.

"You too, Stanley, thanks for the invite." she glanced at the second man sitting alone away from the table. Adrian could tell she was suspicious of the man. Guess he's not CIA then. Looking at the pictures being added to the whiteboard, Adrian recognized some of them. At least two of them were on the FBI's most-wanted list. Every agent committed those faces to memory, and Adrian was no different. He had his marching orders though, get the intel on Sadaf Yassin, where he is, where he goes, who he meets with. It should be smooth as silk, as long as everyone else can keep their shit together. The door opened again. This time two men entered.

The first one shaved bald with a goatee, gray and black plaid flannel with the top button done and a white t-shirt beneath, pulled out a seat, turned it around, and sat. Both men were covered in tattoos. The second slowly walked up, black Dickies work shirt with black Dickies pants, pleated and rolled, he wore a black and white bandanna and was shaved bald as well. Adrian could see what the tattoos were, he was FBI, and they were on his radar. The facial tattoos marked them as Maras. These guys were Mara Salvatrucha, MS13. So brutal was this gang that the Sinaloa Cartel recruited them to fight Los Zetas in Mexico. What the hell were these guys doing here.

The man at the whiteboard broke the tension. "Mr. Silva. Now that you have arrived, we can start." he moved to the side of the board so that everyone could see.

"OK, everyone, this op came together pretty quickly, and we have a very short window to get this done. I know not all of you have been briefed, so I appreciate your quick response and patience. Let me start by saying. I don't give a fuck who you are or who you work for, I have it from on high that this is my op and the rest of you are here in a support capacity. I know you have your own agendas, but listen up, your agencies wouldn't have the chance to get in this close if it weren't for us. We're happy to have you hitching a ride, but this is a DEA operation, people. I don't want to see shit go off the rails because of some other priority. These men's lives depend on you all doing what they tell you to do. So don't fuck it up. I also want you to know there is no extraction plan. You are expected to operate completely on your own. Mr. Silva has more details for you, Mr. Silva." at that, he moved for an empty chair. It was the first time since Adrian had shown up that he sat down.

Silva stood. The tattoos covering his face hid his mood. He was in a perpetual state of scary as fuck. How could we be working with MS13, Adrian thought? These were some of the most brutal criminals on the planet. The tattooed man walked to the whiteboard, regarded it for a moment, and then turned to face the others. "My name is Alto Silva, some of you are feds," he looked at Adrian, "you may have heard my name a time or two. Forget everything you know about me. It should go without saying that what I am about to say cannot leave this room". He looked into the eyes of each person, holding for a moment.

"I'm undercover DEA. I have been under deep cover for the last five years. I grew up in Los Angeles. Connections from my youth helped me infiltrate MS13. I climbed the ladder and am now on the Council of Nine, the organization's top. I have done things to get there that, well; let's just say I'm a wanted man. You may have seen my face in connection with some nasty shit. Now you know I'm on your side. This is Himee Hernandez." He motioned to the other tattooed man. "It's the same for him. He isn't as high ranking as me, but he is the leader of what they call a 'Clica' in El Paso. He runs groups of soldiers on the streets. You may have seen him on a wall as well. He's undercover DEA, three years in the gang. I tell you this because I want you all to understand the gravity of the situation. If you fail to listen to Himee or me, it could get us killed. Not to mention dumping five-plus years of work down the toilet. After this op, I'm out. Everything I have done to this point comes to a head here. Himee too. So you better believe we want this to go smooth. I have to live with the things I've done and this", he gestured to his face with two fingers, "it has been long and hard, but this is the end of the line. I only say this because if you compromise the mission or hang back when it's time to go, I will leave your ass. Believe it."

He turned to the whiteboard and paused. Moving one of the photos to replace another, the picture that was replaced, he threw on the table. "He's dead," he said, pointing to the image. It was an Afghani man in his late forties, maybe. "So, here it is. I found out that MS13 operates a distribution line out of San Antonio, Texas, which is the largest supply line of heroin into the US that we have ever seen. The interesting part is that no one can seem to find out where it's coming from. It just appears in San Antonio, and then MS13 distributes it from there. We could never figure out where it was coming from until I overheard some conversations regarding it a year and a half ago. Mara Salvatrucha has been working with someone in Afghanistan. We suspect it is the Taliban or one of the other extremist groups providing the drugs for money to fund their operations. I have been working to find more information for over a year. I positioned myself in a good place to be put on the management of this supply line. Last week we got a break. A drone strike killed two Maras who were in Afghanistan overseeing the operation. They needed a new boss out there, and my ticket was pulled. It's an opportunity like no other. Because of that, we allowed other agencies to hitch a ride. We won't get an opportunity to be inside the belly of the beast anytime soon. You two," he said, pointing at Adrian and the woman across from him with his pointer and pinky fingers. "are acting as Russian mafia. I have been working the Russian angle with the higher ups, telling them we need to expand globally. It's all bullshit. No one but me has been talking to the Russians, I can introduce anyone, and they will think it's legit. That is the volatile piece that could backfire on us. If anyone from MS13 starts to try and contact the Russians, we will be in a world of shit. They are letting me deal with it, for now, so you have your cover story. It's just the four of us. We are going in with no backup and no extraction plan. If we can pull this off, we will be cutting off a supply line that provides over forty percent of MS13's revenue. That will cause some serious problems for them. Once done, several smaller operations will take out other key supply lines. In the end, over half of the money MS13 brings in will disappear overnight. This could collapse the organization entirely. It also cuts off the flow of money into Afghanistan in a big way. This is big, folks. So here's the plan."

"Himee and I will be flying into Kandahar together. You two will fly in separately, routed through somewhere in Eastern Europe. We will have rooms reserved at the Kandahar Hotel, so ask for a reservation under your name when you get there. After that, we wait for my contact to get in touch. The main objective of this operation is to break the supply line from Afghanistan to San Antonio. We will do that by assessing the operation from the far side, getting all of the intel we need on the who's, what's and where's. We'll then be making the full trip, from Afghanistan to San Antonio, traveling with the drugs. We'll be going on the cover story that we need to see the operation in its entirety. That will be our ticket home. If something goes wrong and we can't make the run, we are stuck out there. On the state's side, we will have provided the location of the drop. Agents will be waiting to take the location on our go. At that point, we will be on the inside. We can drop cover and try to take out any high-ranking objectives. None of our people will know who we are. They will only know there are four agents on the inside. If we can pull this off, we will be cutting off a huge supply of money to both MS13 and the Taliban. The Afghans don't trust the Maras, and we don't trust them. You two, no fucking one is going to trust you. We have to play this smart and low key. Let me do the talking. We'll have to figure out which one of you is in charge for the Russians. Whoever it is can do the talking for you. We won't get a second chance at this. Once Himee and I blow cover, it's all over. We will either be killed or be out of MS forever."

"Any Questions?"

Ms. Polzin leaned back in her chair, "Weapons?"

"No weapons, we have to fly, and we are supposed to be civilians. We will have to come up with any heat once we get there. I may be able to talk them into giving us something. It depends on how jumpy these fuckers are."

"Pretty fucking jumpy, I suspect." Adrian broke in.

"We'll they know us, and they know we aren't gonna be anywhere unless we have coverage, you know what I'm saying?"

"What if something goes down on the trip back to San Antonio?" Adrian's expression changed; a darker look came over his face.

"We're fucked." It was the first thing that Himee said.

"I don't like it," Polzin protested. "How long will we be there before coming back with the drugs?"

"As long as it takes, they have to be ready for a shipment. It could take a few days. We don't know."

Adrian stood up and went to the whiteboard, inspecting the faces in the photographs. There were six photos up on the board currently, and one of them was Sadah Yassin, the man he was after. He turned back to the others, "Where will we be staying?"

"We are going into deep tribal country. Areas completely held by the Taliban. They are the ones putting us up. We will be right there in the poppy fields, inspecting the whole operation." Alto sat down.

"What kind of support can we expect from our people there." Nina Polzin spoke in a thick Russian accent with the personality of a saltine cracker. It seemed every word she said dripped with contempt for everyone in the room. Adrian knew the type, that stoic Eastern Block persona. Somewhere, in there, was a person. She just wasn't about to show it. She was definitely a spook. When shit gets hairy, Adrian knew who to stay close to.

"We will be in the middle of Taliban controlled territory, we have Special Forces available, but there's no way they can get in there. They'll be dead before they reach us. As I said, we are on our own. We are gonna have to play this just as our covers dictate. Himee and me, we are MS13, don't give a fuck about any of this terrorist bullshit. We are just working on our drug supply lines. You are Russian Bratva, you don't give a shit either, and you just want to get your hands on some of that distribution. We need to play this as criminals who don't have any political affiliation. We have to be just as ruthless and hard as they are toward us. They have no play in killing us or taking us hostage. We make them money. They make us money. None of our governments will give two shits if we are hostages. There's nothing to leverage. As long as we keep our cover, we are safe." Alto stood again and walked to the board.

"This man Sadah Yassin, he is Taliban. He is also my contact in Kandahar," Alto pointed at the photograph of Yassin. Adrian was going to be closer to him than he thought. "This is Aasif Basha. He is in charge of security around the poppy fields. He controls a small army in the area of somewhere over one hundred soldiers." He moved to the third photo on the board. "We don't know who this is. We think he is the money man, but we aren't sure." He pointed at the last photo on the board. "We know this man only as Bridger. He is American. We think. We don't know what his connection is, but he is always around."

"So that's it. I know you two have people of interest in this. I don't wanna know unless it's absolutely crucial. We stick to the plan, get intel on these men, observe on the trip back, and shut it down stateside. Simple, right. OK, you Russians need to get in costume."

Adrian knew it was coming. If he was going to be impersonating a brigadier, he would need the tattoos to prove it, Ms. Polzin also. The ink they were using would begin fading after a week. That had better be enough time. No damn way was he gonna do what Silva and Hernandez did, tattoos all over their damn faces. That was a severe price to pay. He had respect for these men; they had infiltrated a dangerous organization and were willing to pay the ultimate price to gain their trust. There was no going back from that. Once they were out, they would need to be undercover for the rest of their lives. Marked men. This was serious. For the first time, Adrian began to have second thoughts. He had to suck it up now. It was what he had been waiting for, a chance to make a real difference, a chance to win one for the good guys.

To be continued…