

Knowing his life depends on stealth, Eli Dagan moves warily with the tide of pedestrians streaming along East Forty-Second Street.

Walking amid the late-morning crowds, he does a peripheral check of his surroundings, grabs glimpses of people in store-window reflections, and watches for danger that could come from any direction.

He's always been a hard target—tough to kill—because he's able to think exactly like those who would ambush him. That's one of the secrets of being a good assassin. And of staying alive.

It's reflexive to notice everything. He misses nothing—sights, sounds, smells, movement. It's all processed in milliseconds as his brain whirrs through the possibilities that could bring about the end of life.

Nothing distracts him: not the press of people or the clot of traffic, the blinking WALK-DON'T WALK signs, the blare of horns, the hiss of air brakes, the wail of sirens, or the clatter of jackhammers.

Because no matter where he may be, he's focused on one imperative: survival.

There's a chance he's being followed this morning—maybe by Chechens, or they could be Albanians. Or Russians—the most likely possibility given the jobs he's done for various Russian mob factions over the last few years.

The two guys he noticed on the subway are still near enough to make the back of his neck feel even colder than normal in the

frigid February air. One wears a dark blue parka with the hood pulled over his head. The other is bareheaded and wears dark sunglasses. Each time Eli thinks he sees them, they somehow manage to disappear.

He picked them up easily on the subway platform while he was waiting for the uptown local. And he's kept track of them on the streets where he's been meandering in a seemingly aimless way for the last fifteen minutes. No matter how skilled these guys may be, it's tough to tail a moving target. Static shadowing is more effective when one man picks up where the other leaves off.

He's taken the usual precautions: he left the apartment through the garage exit, rerouted himself twice, ducked in and out of a few stores, and watched for anyone on the subway who appeared suspicious. Yet, there's a good chance they're still on his tail.

The life he's been living has primed him to be suspicious in even the most ordinary situations.

*Is it paranoia, now at a full boil?*

*Is this any way to live? Maybe it's time to get out of the life.*

He'll think about that later. Right now he's gotta focus on what's going to happen very soon. There's no room for distraction.

He's glad he decided to take the Beretta. Funny how when the piece is tucked into his waistband at the small of his back, it bites into the skin. But after a while, the pressure lessens and it's easy to forget the pistol is there. It just seems to disappear, as though it no longer exists.

If only guilt worked the same way.

At the intersection of Vanderbilt and Forty-Second, he turns abruptly and heads down the ramp into the southwest corner of Grand Central Terminal.

Veering right, he strides along a corridor that parallels Forty-Second Street and passes the Oyster Bar with its vaulted tile ceilings. At the entrance to the restaurant, he abruptly turns left, walks along a short corridor, and emerges into the terminal's echoing main concourse. Making his way across the expanse, he weaves through

masses of people, then heads toward the Lexington passage and the subway.

Midway along the walkway, he darts into Grand Central Market's side entrance. The place brims with shoppers. He stops at a cheese stall, pretends he's examining the goods, then glances at the entrance to see if he's drawn anyone off course. He stays in place for a few more moments, waiting to see if any pair of eyes remains fixed on him for a beat too long.

It doesn't happen, so he decides to move on.

Threading through swarms of lunchtime customers, he passes a sushi stand, a butcher counter, a few more concessions, then slips out the door onto Lexington Avenue. Turning left, he reenters Grand Central through the Graybar passage.

Glancing back, he has a clear view for at least fifty meters. There's a good chance he's lost the guys tracking him.

Walking along the passageway, he passes a series of kiosks, then stops at the entrance to Track 13, near Zaro's bakery, at the periphery of the terminal's concourse. The aroma of freshly baked bread wafts through the air. Ordinarily, the yeasty smell would whet his appetite, but not today.

What's about to happen is serious enough to quell any desire for food.

There's no sign of the guys who'd been following him. He wonders how they managed to know his identity well enough to try tracking him. He goes by different names and for the last ten years has lived a sequestered existence. Escape, evasion, and deception have been a way of life ever since he left the Mossad, where he'd been a field agent.

But it's essential to focus on the here and now because he'll soon be meeting with Anton Gorlov, a major boss in the Odessa mafia. Eli has never before met with a client in person; discussions have always been over a satellite phone or through encrypted messages over the dark net. So Eli's breaking a long-established protocol by agreeing to meet with Gorlov. But the *pakhan* insisted the purpose of the meeting was so crucial it had

to be face-to-face. Which makes Eli even more suspicious. Why take the chance? But here he is.

He scans the concourse. Streams of people crisscross the space in an array of intersecting lines. A choral roar fills the air as passengers stream in every direction. Armed, camo-clad National Guardsmen—some with bomb-sniffing dogs—stand at strategic points around the expanse.

Waiting for their scheduled train departures, conductors and terminal employees cluster near the tunnel gates. Over the intercom a robotic voice warns commuters to “Keep your belongings in sight at all times” and “If you see something, say something.”

He’s forty minutes early, plenty of time to reconnoiter the area. Was agreeing to this meeting a mistake? Has he unwittingly set himself up for assassination?

To ensure that doesn’t happen, he’ll soon alter the plan. Unpredictability is another requirement for staying alive.

Standing near Track 13, he eyes every passerby. That Russian gangster look is easy to recognize—there’s the Slavic face, something reminiscent of Putin’s, with high cheekbones, a more or less oval-shaped face, and almond-shaped eyes. Though there are exceptions, most of those guys are gorilla-like in size and often have shaved heads along with heavy facial stubble.

The Mossad taught Eli situational awareness. It’s imprinted on his brain, as though his motherboard is hardwired to pick up the slightest hint of danger.

The sit-down was scheduled to take place at Cucina, a restaurant near the top of the escalators of the MetLife building. There’s less chance of an ambush in a public place like that. A Russian boss like Gorlov—a pakhan in the Odessa mafia—might stay ensconced in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, while two members of his crew could saunter into the restaurant, whip out shotguns from beneath their overcoats, and blow him away.

There are now fifteen minutes until the meeting. It’s time to change things up.

Using his satellite phone, Eli dials Gorlov’s cell phone.

“Da?” answers a deep, rumbling voice.

“Mr. Gorlov?”

“Yes.”

“A change of plans,” Eli says.

“I expected that,” Gorlov replies with a heavy Russian accent.

Yes, Gorlov knows the terrain, is aware of the precautions Eli must take.

“We’re still on for noon, but not at Cucina,” Eli says, trying for a matter-of-fact voice. “There’s a restaurant called Cipriani Dolci on the west balcony of the concourse at Grand Central. You know where it is?”

“I’ll find it.”

“Be alone.”

Clicking the End Call button, Eli is certain Gorlov won’t obey his instructions.

A few minutes later four men descend on the escalator leading from the MetLife building to the concourse of Grand Central Terminal.

At the foot of the escalator, they stop and talk among themselves.

It's them.

The Russians. They have that *look*.

Two older men and two younger ones.

The young ones look like muscle.

Gorlov's violating Eli's instruction to come alone. To be expected.

There's no way a crime boss of Gorlov's stature would come without foot soldiers. The top dog always has muscle nearby. Eli told him to come alone as a test to see if the guy was malleable.

As anticipated, the young ones are big and tough-looking, hard-core muscle, ready to do whatever it takes to protect the boss.

The four men walk to the center of the concourse and stop near the information booth. One older guy is a grizzly bear of a man. Really huge. Eli knows it's him. Even if he'd never seen photos of Anton Gorlov, he'd know he's the boss.

As Gorlov talks, there's a certain thrust and tilt of the chin, a posture Eli thinks of as the *Il Duce* look. It's the authoritarian Mussolini pose of a head honcho, a pakhan in Russian organized crime, the Bratva, or Brotherhood. This guy can't be taken lightly; you don't rise to his position in an organization like the Odessa mafia without being ruthless. And smart.

While the boss is speaking, the others nod in an über-respectful way.

Three of the men, including Gorlov, now proceed toward the marble stairway leading to the west balcony and Cipriani Dolci.

One bodyguard remains at the information booth. Leaning against the ledge, he takes out a cell phone and peers at it. It might be configured to pick up signals from Gorlov, who could be wired to transmit the conversation he'll have with Eli.

Squinting, Eli peers more closely at the guy. There's no ear-piece in his right ear. But one could be inserted in his left ear, which faces away from Eli.

The three others continue walking toward the west balcony.

One bodyguard—a hulking fellow—stops at the bottom of the stairway leading to the restaurant and leans casually against the balustrade. Whipping out a *New York Post*, he begins reading, or feigns doing so. He's a study in pretense.

It's now ten minutes before noon as Gorlov and the other older man climb the stairway to Cipriani Dolci. The maître d' greets them and sees that their coats are taken, then seats them at separate tables adjacent to each other. Also predictable. The other one is positioned nearby to overhear whatever's said at Gorlov's table. The maître d' hands each man a menu and then makes his way back to the reception area's podium.

Gorlov picks up the menu and examines it.

A waiter approaches. As though he realizes he's serving a mobster, the waiter virtually bows and scrapes, scribbles on his pad while leaning close to Gorlov as the Russian speaks. If Eli can predict anything, Gorlov's ordering lunch without waiting for his arrival. Arrogant behavior, to be sure. This man waits for no one. The waiter nods, bows again, retrieves the menu, and disappears.

It's clear Eli will have to pass the soldier at the bottom of the stairway on his way to the restaurant. A reasonable precaution being taken by the pakhán.

Yesterday Eli did a methodical walk-through of the terminal. He's familiar with every part in the complex. If things get dicey,

there are more than a few avenues of escape in the labyrinthine passageways of Grand Central.

Waiting another two minutes, he keeps his eyes on both bodyguards. Neither man seems to be wearing an earpiece. The one at the information booth turns his head to ogle a good-looking woman passing by him. Eli notices there's no earpiece in his left ear.

The guy loitering at the staircase flips through the newspaper. His lips don't move. No way is he speaking into a lapel microphone. It's unlikely there's any communication between or among the Russians.

It's time to move. Eli crosses the concourse and heads through the Vanderbilt passage. Exiting on Forty-Second Street, he walks around the corner.

At 15 Vanderbilt Avenue, between Forty-Second and Forty-Third Streets, he reenters the building, then takes the stairway to the Campbell Bar. He walks through the elaborately furnished room, waves off the *maitre d'*, and traverses a short corridor leading directly to a side entrance of Cipriani Dolci.

The Beretta tucked firmly into the waistband at his lower back feels reassuring.

He hopes he won't have to use it.

But in Eli Dagan's life, hope has always been in short supply.



At precisely one minute past noon, Eli enters the restaurant. The decor is stark, modern. Every table is occupied.

From this height, the roar of the concourse is audible but muted.

Gorlov sits alone at a four-top.

Passing the other older Russian at the adjacent table, Eli approaches the pakhan.

“Mr. Gorlov, I presume,” he says as he sits catty-corner to Gorlov. He can now eyeball the other man and view the concourse below. A simple and necessary precaution.

Gorlov’s bushy eyebrows move upward. He tries to mask his surprise, but Eli notices the man’s pupils dilate. A sure sign of fight-or-flight hormones pouring through his bloodstream.

“And you’re Aiden?” Gorlov asks, using the alias Eli assumes with anyone from the Odessa mafia.

Eli nods. His eyes flit to the Russian at the next table. Pretending he’s perusing the offerings, the man stares steadily at the menu.

“So, we finally meet.” A smile breaks out on Gorlov’s fleshy face. As was evident on the phone, the man’s voice is a deep rumble. Though he speaks with a thick Russian accent, he sounds fluent in English.

“Yes, we do.”

“Tell me, is Aiden your real name?”

“It is for you.”

Gorlov looks to be about sixty and he’s ponderous—has a thick chest, massive shoulders, and a protuberant belly. The

man must tip the scales at well over a hundred kilos, maybe two and a half bills if you use the American weight standard. He has the thickest wrists Eli's ever seen. His huge hands sport gnarled knuckles, which were probably broken in street fights when he was a young man in Odessa. Though he's wearing a dark suit, he looks like a Russian or Ukrainian peasant, except this guy doesn't do farm work.

His weathered face has no doubt seen its share of tough times. A shock of iron-gray hair looks like a massive halo surrounding his head. His unkempt eyebrows are black, reminding Eli of hairy caterpillars.

Eli notices a dark blue tattoo of the Imperial Czar's crown etched on the outer surface of Gorlov's right thumb. In the Russian underworld it signifies a man of authority, a leader who commands respect, unquestioning obedience. To defy such a man guarantees death.

Eli senses something predatory about the man. But he's certain Gorlov doesn't need to threaten violence to get his way. He exudes a level of confidence shown by men accustomed to leading others, and it's clear he sees through artifice and deception. It's gotta be tough to bullshit this guy.

Eli thinks he detects something else: though they've said very little to each other, a deep sadness seems to lurk beneath Anton Gorlov's veneer of geniality.

Whatever this meeting concerns, it's important enough for the pakhan to have requested an in-person sit-down, an unusual situation—virtually unheard of—because ordinarily a man like Gorlov would insulate himself from even the most peripheral contact with an assassin. And it's critical enough for a guy who looks like an underboss to have accompanied him.

The Spytec bug detector in Eli's pocket isn't vibrating. He's now certain he's not being bugged. The slim, lightweight device can pick up analog or digital transmissions anywhere between 30 MHz and 6,000 MHz.

The instrument's stillness is comforting.

Anton Gorlov sizes up Aiden, or whatever his real name may be, because there's no doubt that's not the name he was born with. Equally telling, he has no surname, or at least, he's never used one in any contact with a member of the Odessa mafia.

He looks like he's closing in on forty; he's a bit under six feet tall, well built, with a thick neck and sloped shoulders. Athletic-looking, it's clear he'd be fearsome in a physical confrontation. He probably weighs about ninety-five kilos—about 200 pounds—and has a full head of black hair with a few threads of white at the temples.

He has a straight, prominent nose, high cheekbones, a strong jaw. His eyes are as black as coffee, but when he glances at Viktor, whom he clearly realizes has accompanied Anton, his eyes appear gray. Can eyes change color with an alteration in lighting?

And there's something else in those eyes: it could be tragedy or perhaps a world-weary sense of the world gone wrong. Terribly wrong. They're not the eyes of a stone-cold killer, though the man certainly kills. Something else is in those eyes, but it's impossible to make out what it may be.

He's dressed in black cargo pants and a dark blue turtleneck sweater beneath a waist-length black leather jacket. There's little doubt that tucked somewhere beneath that jacket is a small-caliber pistol ready to be whipped out and fired.

Gorlov can't quite make out Aiden's ethnicity. He could be Italian or French, Corsican, maybe Albanian, even Chechen. He doesn't look Eastern European, though it's always risky to try guessing ethnicity. You can never know a man's origins with even a hint of certainty.

This Aiden character's tough-looking and handsome in a rugged way. He's not a pretty-boy. He looks vigilant, ready for anything, the way Gorlov was as a young man.

Something disquieting seems to be at the core of this man: a hardness that's either inborn or the result of experience. Surely this Aiden has a military background. He's probably mastered many combat skills. And now uses them in the most deadly way.

Though the movement is subtle, Gorlov notices Aiden's eyes shift slightly. He's taking in his surroundings, including Gorlov's second-in-command, Viktor who's sitting at the next table. And there's something about those eyes. They're the eyes of a man who has seen the ugly underbelly of life, knows it for what it is: brutal, unfair, unforgiving.

He's not one to be fooled with. He hasn't blinked once since he sat down. It's the sign of a hardened man, a fearless man.

Before this moment, Aiden—or whatever his real name may be—was only a voice on an encrypted cell phone. Or a typed message on a secure server. No one in the Bratva—in any brigade—has ever seen him, though he's done many jobs for a number of the factions.

But now, seeing him in the flesh, Anton Gorlov feels an edge of discomfort, not just because this Aiden fellow radiates danger. Gorlov senses something else: though he's spoken only a few words, it seems clear this man possesses a fierce intelligence. He knows the world and has intellect to spare.

It would be difficult to outwit him.

Maybe it's the way he bypassed the bodyguards and appeared so suddenly, just popped up beside the table like an apparition.

Over the years, Gorlov has learned to read men the way a beast of prey picks out the vulnerable gazelle in a herd. But what he detects now is unsettling.

Something strange ripples through Anton Gorlov: it's not quite fear.

It's a sense of dread.

One thing is abundantly clear: Anton must use caution in dealing with this so-called Aiden.

Because this man exudes danger.

Of course he does; he's a paid assassin.

Eli feels Gorlov's eyes lasering in on him; the man is sizing him up, making moment-to-moment calculations.

Just the way Eli is formulating ideas about this Bratva boss.

"Up until now, Aiden, you've been a ghost. Why do you operate this way?"

"The less you know about me, the better it is for both of us."

"I don't disagree. In our lines of work, we need secrecy."

Eli shoots him a tight smile. There's no reason to be disagreeable, but Gorlov had better get to the point of this meeting, fast.

The waiter approaches with a plate of rigatoni alla Bolognese and sets the dish in front of Gorlov.

*Of course, judging by his size, Gorlov is a man of great appetites, one who gives in to his urges. He finds it hard to delay gratification. He'll wait for no man, will put his own needs before all else.*

"May I offer you a drink, Aiden? Or better yet, how about joining me for lunch?"

"No, thank you. I never mix business with pleasure."

Gorlov nods knowingly.

The truth is Eli rarely drinks. When he does, it's a bottle of beer, nothing more. On rare occasions, he may enjoy a glass or two of wine. But never during daylight hours. And never in the presence of a dangerous man about whom he knows so little, only what's been in the newspapers.

Gorlov cants his head, then says, "We can be sociable. Order something, anything. It's my pleasure. The chicken club sandwich looks excellent. I saw it at another table."

"Thank you, but no."

“Your choice.” Gorlov shrugs as he spears two rigatoni, swirls them in the sauce, then slips them past wet lips. He chews vigorously, swallows, then downs another two pasta tubes with barely an interval between each mouthful.

Yes, the man has more than what can be called a robust appetite; he has an insatiable level of hunger. It says volumes about him.

Eli always notices the way someone eats, especially when the food is eaten as though it must be consumed before the dish is taken away. Gorlov probably grew up in poverty and food was precious. He’s lived a hard life filled with uncertainty, with deprivation. He still feels life is unpredictable, that good things won’t persist, so he must seize the moment.

“Tell me, Aiden, how did you get started in this business?”

Another mouthful of pasta passes his lips.

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because you *fascinate* me. I’ve always been drawn to mysteries.”

“It’s better that I remain a mystery.”

“I see . . .”

“But there’s no mystery about how you operate, Mr. Gorlov.”

“Meaning what? And, please, call me Anton.” Gorlov tosses him a quick smile and continues chewing.

“Sure, Anton. It’s no mystery that three of your men are watching us.”

“Oh?”

“There’s one at the bottom of the stairway pretending to read a newspaper. There’s another at the information booth, looking at his cell phone. And the third one’s at the next table,” Eli says with a nod toward the other Russian sitting nearby. The man is overweight, has a fleshy neck that hangs over his collar, and has dewlaps that remind him of the guy who played Clemenza in *The Godfather*. “He’s staring at the menu as though it’s the bible, yet every once in a while he glances our way. And, of course, the two men down below are carrying.”

Though Eli’s words are spoken softly, coiled energy seethes within him. But he reveals nothing that could give him away—no

tightening of his muscles, no vocal tremor, no change in his pulse rate. Body control was part of his Mossad training—even the ability to control his blood pressure—and it's served him well over the years.

In this circumstance the movie reel of the next few seconds spools through Eli's mind.

*He whips out the Beretta and puts a bullet into Gorlov's head, then pumps two rounds into the chest of the other man, rockets up from his chair and puts two slugs into the Russian climbing the stairway. The other patrons duck beneath tables. Shouts erupt, and the air smells of fear and gunpowder. He then melts into the crowd.*

It's happened in a souk in Damascus, in a restaurant in Lebanon, a market in Tunisia, and a bazaar in Cyprus. It's happened throughout Europe and the Middle East. People never see what went down; at least that's what they tell the cops.

But he's way ahead of himself, and the movie ends abruptly with no rolling credits.

Gorlov nods. "Very observant, Aiden. I'm sure you know these are merely precautions. Let me assure you, these men are only here for my safety, and no threat is intended."

"I understand, Anton. And I'm sure *you* understand that I too have men positioned throughout this terminal," Eli lies. "They'll take matters into their own hands if anything happens to me."

Gorlov nods as though he appreciates Eli's safety measures.

*Enough dancing around, Eli thinks. Let's get down to specifics.*

He senses the Russian wants something unusual. Hence this unheard-of situation: an in-person meeting with a Bratva commander.

"So, Anton, why are we in a restaurant in Midtown Manhattan on a weekday afternoon?" Eli lets his tone of voice convey his impatience.

Gorlov sets his fork on his plate and leans toward Eli. "We're here because I want to discuss something important to me . . . *personally.*"

"I'm listening."