

Prologue.

February 2022, Kyiv, Ukraine

In the early days of the full-throated Russian invasion chaos, CIA's Alex Curtner and the Ukrainian Defense Intelligence's Andriy Stashko led a team of forty Ukrainian special forces. They hunted down groups of Russian special forces soldiers who had slipped past the city's outer defenses, roaming now within Kyiv proper. Fortunate to have a sizable CIA-trained group of Ukrainian special forces in this critical hour for the country, the military used several such small Ukrainian units around the city.

By now, the president and his administration had already worked from a deep bunker beneath the administration building since everyone expected an imminent attack.

As Alex, in the light armored truck, turned right out of Bankova Street onto Instytutska Street, gunfire erupted just fifty yards ahead. To get over the noise, Alex bellowed to Stepan and Anton, two soldiers in his truck, "Move in closer and engage."

He then called Stashko and Volodimir (Vova) Homel. "We've got a scrap on Instytutska fifty yards from the Bankova corner. Don't know how many Russians yet. Andriy, bring your BTR (armored infantry vehicle) here. Vova, stay put on your street until we know more – they might hit your side, too. Over."

Affirmative responses crackled back from both men. Through the hatch, Anton manned the heavy machine gun while Stepan slowly advanced the truck.

"How many?" Alex yelled into his radio over the gunfire. Over."

"At least a dozen," came the reply from one of the soldiers. "They might've come down from Sadova Street or slipped in from the right on Instytutska. They're throwing a lot of grenades. Over."

“We’re coming in the truck on your left, and Stashko is on the way in the BTR. Out.”

Being from the Ukrainian forces, Stashko was officially in charge. Still, he and Alex both knew that after multiple tours in Afghanistan, leading a company of Green Berets, including in an urban environment, Alex had more experience in these kinds of things.

Stashko’s BTR sped past Alex, hopping the curb to the other sidewalk of Instytutska to get a better view of the attackers’ location and numbers. “Many more than a dozen,” came word from Stashko. “I’m getting the guys around the Rada building (Parliament of Ukraine) to come down through Sadova to get a good look from behind the Russians. Over.”

“Roger that,” Alex replied. “But tell them to hold their fire – no crossfire. Make sure our guys know about it, too. Out.”

A grenade rolled towards them and exploded under the truck’s left front tire. The truck jolted but didn’t roll over.

“Anybody hurt?” Alex yelled over the ruckus.

“No,” answered the two guys at the same time.

“Stepan, get us closer to the side of that building on the right.” Alex gestured. “We need to bail out. With a limping left tire, we’re sitting ducks,” he added.

The BTR’s guns blazed as Alex, Stepan, and Anton scrambled from the truck to take cover behind the corner of the building.

“Let’s see if we can get into shooting positions,” Alex shouted as he ran to crouch behind an SUV parked on the sidewalk. Anton and Stepan ended up behind a large garbage container, and they all began firing.

Grenade explosions lit up the night. Gunfire shattered the windows of the apartment buildings’ lower floors with a series of clattering noises as glass shards tumbled and skidded across the sidewalks on both sides of the street.

Alex hoped the evacuation orders had been effective and that the residents near the presidential administration's perimeter had left.

Earlier that night, all had been quiet.

Two teams had guarded the rectangle-shaped area which formed the protective perimeter around the presidential administration building, each side the size of one city block. Alex and Stashko had led the team covering the northeastern half of the perimeter with one armored infantry BTR vehicle and a couple of light armored trucks. With the BTR, they had positioned themselves in the small parking lot off the northeastern side of Bankova Street, about 150 yards from the administration building. Volodimir Homel had covered the southwestern half of the perimeter with the second special forces team.

"This is crazy!" Stashko said. "We're at it for two days now. You should have been heading to the Polish border by now."

"You mean stuck in the gridlock? No, thanks. I prefer to spend this not particularly cold February night waiting for a visit from the Russian Spetsnaz (Special Forces) with you," Alex answered.

Stashko cursed and shook his head. "What are the odds that two ex-special forces guys like us, now working for their countries' intelligence services, would end up together trying to prevent a Russian attack on the presidential administration of Ukraine?"

"I guess they're as high as the odds everyone in this country placed on crazy Putin's decision to attack Ukraine." Alex paused. "But attack he did." He checked his comm (communication) units. Everybody on their team had reported 'all clear.'

"You're right," Stashko said. "I do remember the almost unanimous Ukrainian denial beforehand." Then he stopped and changed the subject. "One of us should go around to see how the guys are doing. Everyone on the team is a little jittery in this wait-and-see game. They all remember that

yesterday they lost two of our own after mistakenly identifying a couple of vehicles as friendly.”

“I’ll go,” Alex said. “In addition to yesterday, we now hear rumors that after capturing some of our guys on the outskirts of the city, they put on Ukrainian uniforms.”

“More crap to deal with.”

“Yeah, people have suggested speaking only Ukrainian with any soldiers one encounters on the streets.”

“That would make you a target.” Stashko smiled.

Alex spoke native Russian but almost zilch Ukrainian.

“You!” Alex laughed. “I’m learning as fast as I can. I’ll take Stepan and Anton.”

“Don’t leave me here for too long,” Stashko said. He also started laughing.

“Okay. Just long enough for you to get lonely.” Alex deadpanned.

Putin had sent several groups of Russian special forces to infiltrate and, as different commentators later would call it, ‘decapitate’ or ‘physically liquidate’ the Ukrainian government and, first of all, its president, Zelenskyy.

One such group, composed of the Russian Guard of Chechnya (Chechen Republic within the Russian Federation), had been attached to the units invading from Belarus. The Ukrainian forces had mostly wiped out those troops near the Hostomel airport in the suburbs. There had also been rumors about Wagner PMC (Private Military Company) having had a similar mission.

The Ukrainian military had begun distributing assault rifles to anyone in Kyiv who could handle them.

Alex shook off his thoughts. He felt like it was a long time ago.

The gunfight on Instytutaska raged for a good thirty minutes. When it stopped, an eerie silence fell. The air was thick with the smell of smoke and gunpowder.

“We got most of them,” a soldier reported. “Over.”

Someone else said, “There were thirty or so of them. Most of them are dead now. Out.”

Just after the last message, two remaining attackers emerged from behind a vehicle on the other side of the street, hands up.

It was over.

With losses and wounded on both sides, the troops helped medics with the wounded.

Stashko, exhausted, stood with Alex at the intersection of Sadova and Instytutaska. Alex glanced at the horizon, where the city’s skyline seemed almost calm under the clouded night sky. “Haven’t thought I would be here with this going on,” he murmured. The surreal realization dawned on him – not Afghanistan or some other battlefield – this city reminded him of places he had once strolled without a gun in hand.

Stashko said, “I’m especially pissed about the date this shithead selected.”

“Would February 25 or a non-existent 29 have been better?”

“Yeah, my mom and wife wouldn’t be sitting alone with my birthday cake, which I know they worked so hard on. I’ll be happy if the cake is even edible when I get back,” Stashko grumbled. “Knowing my wife, she’s probably drinking the entire bottle of wine worrying about me.”

“Sorry about that. Happy birthday, Andriy.” Alex slapped the other man on the shoulder.

“Thanks, I guess,” Stashko said. “These two days may not be the end of it.” He sniffed the air. “Why didn’t they bring their copter gunships to the fight?”

“They’re not very effective in the city, especially at night. Plus, they feared we would use our MANPADS missiles.”

“They’re all at the front. We don’t have any.”

“They didn’t know.”

December 2022

Chapter 1

Dulles Airport in Virginia teamed with people. The hazel-eyed man boarded the flight to San Francisco. He folded his six-foot, athletic but tired body into a business class seat for the six-hour trip to the West Coast.

After a grueling train trip from Kyiv to Poland, Alex Curtner flew from Warsaw to Washington. Then, following a set of long meetings at Langley, he finally headed home for a few days.

He gazed out the window. The ground service crew readied the plane for departure from DC. As usual, he marveled at them flinging suitcases from carts into the cargo hold and wondered how luggage remained intact. He only had a carry-on.

Alex had swiftly risen through the CIA ranks. Sometimes, he thought, too quickly. Highly unusual. Yes, he had the background. But what he thought had really made it happen was that he had gotten lucky in successfully organizing, managing, and completing two very challenging ops in the last couple of years. Of course, he hadn’t gotten lucky – he had done an excellent job – but that’s how he saw it. His time in the Army Special Service, extensive knowledge of history, culture, and native-level fluency in Russian all contributed. But despite his accomplishments, a sense of humility and perhaps even self-doubt formed a part of this strong man’s character, as he always downplayed his achievements.

Because of the war, the CIA combined the Russian and Ukrainian stations and placed them in a safe location near Helsinki, Finland. Alex became the CIA's COS (Chief of Station) with so-called 'undeclared status' and a State Department DSS (Diplomatic State Security) officer as cover.

Flight attendants greeted the passengers. Alex leaned against his backrest. His sharp, intelligent eyes reflected the fatigue of his intense career. He stretched out his long legs and, ignoring the noise of passengers boarding the plane, slipped into a light slumber. He had learned to find rest whenever and wherever he could, a necessary skill in his life.

Someone tapped him on his left shoulder. Groggy, he turned around and looked up. "Brad!" Alex rose and man-hugged his old buddy from his Stanford University years.

Brad's dark hair had grown a little, and he had started to grow a beard. It suited him well.

"How are you doing, man?" Brad asked.

"Tired. But glad to get home to see my family for a few days."

"How long has it been since we last talked?"

"Three months, I think."

"We need to get together for lunch or something. To catch up. Do you have some time when you're in Palo Alto?"

"Yeah. I do. We should."

Passengers tried to pass in the aisle, and Brad said, "I'll see you when we're in the air." He walked forward ahead of people looking for their seats.

When Alex had studied electrical engineering and computer science at Stanford, he was a part of a tight group of several friends. Brad Nicholls had been one of them.

They attended classes, played soccer, and spent most of their free evenings together. Then, as sophomores, they developed their high-tech investment strategy after taking a microeconomics course. Starting out with a couple of thousand dollars of small loans from their parents, they did pretty well – so well, in fact, that by the time Alex graduated, he had \$50K to his name. Being in the middle of the Silicon Valley start-up craze didn't hurt. He had kept up his investments ever since.

One thing Alex had done that was different from the others in his group. Unusual for a Stanford student, he had worked through the Santa Clara University ROTC program while doing his other studies. The group hadn't entirely understood his decision to become a military officer. But ... they had been an eclectic bunch and respected everyone's choice.

When the plane reached cruising altitude, Alex and Brad hung out by the divider between the business and coach classes.

As always, they had a lot to chat about. The guys, their families, and the Valley.

"You know, I'm glad I ran into you," Brad said.

"Beyond my wonderful personality, why is that?" Alex smiled.

"Partially, it's your wonderful personality, and partially, I need some help with a project. Do you have some time for lunch in the next couple of days?"

They agreed to meet the day after tomorrow for lunch at their favorite restaurant, and Alex headed to his seat to catch some Zs.

He couldn't sleep. He thought of Oksana and the eventful last day in Kyiv.

Alex and Oksana had enjoyed walking in the woods near the Dnipro River that day. When the air raid siren sounded, they quickly left the wooded area near the Green Theater. They crossed Parkova Road to return to the Arsenal metro station. They didn't reach it.

Something swished over their heads, fast.

“Against the fence!” Alex yelled in English, pushing Oksana towards the tall metal mesh to the left of their path.

Fragments of an intercepted missile or drone struck a five-story residential building a hundred feet in front of them. Huddles of people crouched here and there, and the acrid smell of charred cement and wood filled the area.

When the noise of falling debris ceased, they saw a gaping hole in the place of a third-floor balcony door. Alex was almost certain he had seen them – an older woman and a boy pulling clothes off a balcony line right there moments before the projectile hit.

Alex switched languages. “Are you alright?” He looked at Oksana.

“I’m okay.”

“Please wait here,” Alex addressed his security detail. He turned to Oksana. “Let’s see if we can help.”

He started running. Oksana followed. As they ran up the stairs, disheveled people appeared, coming out from their apartments. Men and women, holding small children to their chests, looked terrified. Alex kept looking over his shoulder to make sure Oksana followed.

On the third floor, an apartment door had been blown open from a projectile impact. A large, twisted piece of metal lay on the landing’s floor.

They ran inside. An older woman on the floor lay bleeding from a large laceration on her thigh. She tried to press her hand over the wound, but blood spurted out. A teenage boy was struggling to get off the floor. He only had minor cuts and rapidly forming bruises from the glass and wood pieces that had struck him. Judging by the size of the missile fragment in the hall, they had been incredibly lucky.

Alex helped the boy up.

Oksana quickly pulled a sheet from a laundry basket on the floor and tore off a long piece. Using all her force, she tied a tourniquet on the lady's leg above the cut to stop the bleeding. "Just stay down," she said in a soothing voice.

The bleeding subsided. Most likely, a tiny part of the projectile had struck the woman's leg. Oksana tore another piece from the sheet and started bandaging the wound. The woman winced in pain.

Oksana looked at Alex and said, "She needs an ambulance now."

A man rushed in.

"Call the ambulance," Alex instructed him.

The man pulled out a cell phone and started dialing.

They were fortunate. The ambulance arrived quickly, and the paramedics took over.

Outside, other ambulances blared their sirens – just another day of Russian missiles hitting Kyiv's residential areas.

"Why didn't you guys go to a bomb shelter? The metro station is right there," Alex asked the boy.

"Grandma says she can't get there fast enough. It's difficult for her," answered the boy. His eyes gleamed with tears. "I don't want to leave her here alone."

Alex reflected on all the horror stories he had heard in Kyiv about the elderly people trying to get to a shelter. He put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "You are a brave young man and kind not to leave your grandma."

The ambulance took off. The all-clear siren sounded.

Oksana and Alex walked towards the metro station. People who had used the subway as shelter streamed out onto the street. Many carried backpacks or bags with their belongings. Holding Oksana's hand, the two descended on the long escalator to the tracks.

Squeezing Alex's hand, Oksana blurted out, "When will it end?!"

"No one knows, but it will probably last for a long time," Alex said, a grim expression on his face.

When they reached the crowded platform, they hugged.

"It has been a good couple of days," Oksana said in a soft voice. "Even if they turned out too short."

"Yeah, you don't get much time off, do you?"

Her striking blue, vivid eyes became contemplative. "Not really. Between my military trauma surgery work and teaching a course at the medical school, I'm pretty much consumed. No breaks." She shrugged. "Oh, almost forgot, every couple of months, I go to help at one of the field hospitals. So, yeah. It's war." A fleeting look of sadness crossed her face. Silent momentarily, she added with a smile, "They almost had to force me to take time off this week. I'm glad they did."

"It was good to spend what little time you had together."

"Yes, it was." Oksana pushed her pale yellow shirt into her jeans and fixed her blue scarf around her neck. Her outfit had become completely undone during the ordeal.

"Tomorrow, I start my trip home," Alex said.

"For the holidays?" She looked up in his face.

"Partially. First, to my headquarters in DC for a day and then to California for a short visit with my folks."

Alex told anybody who asked that he worked at the State Department's DSS. He usually added that he assisted overseas embassies and consulates with their security.

"But first, the train to Poland. Right?"

"Yes. Long ride to Warsaw." He sighed.

They heard a metro train arriving at the station. Soon, it stopped on the platform.

"And this is my train," Oksana said. She slung her backpack over her shoulder.

"I'll call." Every moment with her seemed fleeting, and he hated that.

"You better!" She laughed and turned to run towards the train car. Her blond hair swung as she jumped up between the doors, ready to close.

They had waved as the train began to move. Alex's hand had lingered in the air for some time after she disappeared from sight.

I should have kissed her.

Alex stared out the plane window. His thoughts drifted back to the blast, the woman's leg wound, and the boy's trembling voice. He could still hear the sirens, still feel the dust in his lungs.

He wondered how many more people Oksana had treated since that day. How many more families had been torn apart in the days he had been on the road?

When will this end?

He contemplated, knowing the answer wouldn't come.

He barely noticed when his phone buzzed with a message. Pulling it out, he saw Oksana's name on the screen.

'Miss me already?' it read, accompanied by a winking emoji.

Arriving, he made his way through the airport, feeling a sense of relief wash over him at the thought of finally being home for a few days. He hailed a cab and settled into the backseat. He watched the familiar sights as he left SFO, passing through several Valley towns before reaching Palo Alto.

His phone buzzed again as they pulled up to his parents' house. Oksana's message remained on his screen.

I'll call her tonight.