

# PRIVATE MOSCOW

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# **CHAPTER 1**

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“REMEMBER DUNKER TRAINING at Pendleton?”

There was a smile pinned to Karl Parker’s face, but his eyes made a liar of his mouth. Something was wrong and, as we waited for our breakfast to arrive, I wondered when he was going to share the real reason he’d contacted me after so many years.

“Yeah, Hudson almost drowned,” I replied, recalling the helo underwater egress training we’d undertaken at Camp Pendleton, just outside San Diego. The Marine Corps had a chopper fuselage in a deepwater pool at Pendleton that was designed to be almost impossible to escape. It was intended to train Marines how to survive a crash at sea, but with an escape rate of less than 10 percent, it just hammered home the very real prospect of dying if your bird dunked.

“You looked like you were crying, but you were so wet, it was hard to tell,” Karl said.

“I swallowed half the pool, so a little water might have leaked out of my eyes.”

“Leaked!” Karl’s laugh was genuine, but it only served to accentuate the shift of mood that followed. His smile fell away and he looked as though he was plucking up the courage to tell me something.

Karl Parker had been my Marine flight instructor and was one of the straightest shooters I’d ever known. The kind of guy who’d not only confess to chopping down the tree, but who’d also tell you exactly how many cherries he’d eaten from it first. Whatever he had to say was clearly troubling him. The towering, strong, jovial African American I’d looked up to as a newly minted leatherneck had been replaced by a jaded man with haunted eyes and hunched shoulders. The smile returned, but it was a politician’s grin, the kind worn by a senator when he’s been caught cheating on his wife, flickering, hesitant, as though it might shatter at the slightest touch of truth.

I tried to make it easier on him. “It’s great seeing you again, but you didn’t invite me to New York to reminisce about old times. What’s up?”

The vulnerability I’d sensed vanished and his smile broadened. “Up? Nothing’s up. I wanted one of my oldest friends here to celebrate. Remind me just how far I’ve come.”

Karl’s business, Silverlink International, was one of America’s most successful telecoms companies, and today it would be listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Karl had been invited to ring the opening bell to mark the occasion. It seemed strange that he’d chosen to start this momentous day with me rather

than his wife Victoria, his son Kevin or any of the thousands of people who worked for him. We were old friends, but I'd lost count of the number of years that had passed since we'd last seen each other.

"Come on, Karl," I said. "I know up from down."

"You didn't in that helo training tank," he tried, but the attempted joke fell flat. His smile vanished and he looked away, troubled. "Jack Morgan, war hero, superstar detective, patriot." Was there a hint of sarcasm in his voice? "You always were a smart one. I should've known I couldn't put anything past you." He fixed me with sad eyes. "I've run into some trouble, Jack. I need someone to watch my back."

I was puzzled. Karl had a four-man security detail stationed in the lobby of Augustine, the upmarket brasserie in the Beekman Hotel where we'd met for breakfast. His back was well watched.

"Someone I can trust."

"You want to tell me what's going on?" I asked.

He bit his lip and opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, but before he could respond, a member of his security detail approached and discreetly interrupted us.

"Mr. Parker, it's time, sir."

# CHAPTER 2

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WE WALKED THE short distance along a snow-covered Nassau Street to the intersection with Wall Street, where we were searched by Exchange security in a large heated tent before being allowed into the building. Once inside, Karl was greeted by Rachel Glennie, the President of the New York Stock Exchange. She gave me a cursory hello—I wasn't the billionaire—and led us onto the Exchange floor, where dozens of financial movers and shakers milled around the trading stations.

“We can have a maximum of sixteen on the podium,” Rachel said, indicating Karl's security detail.

The men waited at the foot of a stone staircase, while Karl and I followed Rachel. We climbed the steps to a podium where Karl's wife, Victoria, a beautiful, accomplished woman, ten years his junior, waited with their bored-looking seventeen-year-old son, Kevin, and a dozen Silverlink executives, lawyers and

bankers who'd advised on the deal. I was introduced to everyone, but I didn't absorb their names. I was still puzzling over why, on this, one of the biggest days of his life, Karl had invited me for breakfast rather than spend it with his family and friends. I couldn't shake the feeling he'd planned to tell me something, but had balked at the last moment.

Standing on a rostrum high above the booths and clusters of screens that cluttered the trading floor, I could sense the anticipation of those around me. The lawyers, bankers and executives stood to make millions, but Karl, Silverlink's majority stockholder, stood to pocket more than twenty-five billion from the listing, making him one of the richest men in America. Maybe there was some truth in his having invited me to remind himself just how far he'd come. Karl was from humble beginnings, and the busy trading floor, packed with financial movers and shakers, was about as far as it was possible to get from Clarion, Iowa, the small town where he'd grown up.

It was almost 9:30 a.m. and Karl stepped away from Rachel Glennie to take his place by the oversized gavel and sounding block. Next to them were a control panel and the large button that activated the New York Stock Exchange's famous rotary bell.

"You ready for this?" I asked.

Karl looked at me with sad eyes, and an even more forlorn smile. "Of course." But I knew he was lying.

And then, suddenly remembering the eyes of the world were on him, honest Karl was replaced by the grins-and-chuckles fake.

“You going to hit this thing?” He waved the oversized gavel at his son, and Victoria ushered the reluctant teenager forward. “Give it a good smack,” Karl said as he handed the giant hammer to the boy.

The clamor in the marble hall rose a pitch as traders gathered around the podium. Rachel Glennie checked the time, and as she stepped forward, many of the traders closest to us stopped what they were doing and looked up.

“Good morning, ladies and gentleman,” Rachel said. She was wearing a suit that looked as though it cost more than most family cars. She exuded refined elegance, but her voice carried like the cry of a New Jersey market trader. “We’d like to celebrate the listing of Silverlink International by inviting the founder and chief executive, Karl Parker, to ring the opening bell.”

Karl placed his hand on the large button and kept his eyes on the clock. An image of the rostrum was broadcast on screens throughout the vaulted hall, and the traders applauded and cheered. Men and women in suits gathered around the J.P. Morgan and Goldman Sachs booths that were immediately to the left and right of the rostrum, clapping and yelling their congratulations. Silverlink’s stock was a new product, and more product meant more money.

“Ten, nine, eight,” Karl said, counting down the seconds. “Here goes.” He raised his hand theatrically.

It never touched the button again. A gunshot echoed off the marble walls, silencing the cheers, and Karl tumbled back with a single smoking hole in his skull.

# CHAPTER 3

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VICTORIA SCREAMED AND rushed to Karl's side. Kevin dropped the gavel, which tumbled onto the trading floor twelve feet below. He froze and looked in horror at his father's lifeless body. Karl's team of bodyguards raced to the stairs that would bring them to the podium.

"Get down!" I yelled, tugging Kevin behind the marble balustrade that lined the perimeter of the rostrum.

Karl's colleagues followed my lead, while the trading floor erupted in pandemonium as millionaire financiers and their employees fought each other for the quickest route to the exits. I was numb with shock, but years of training kicked in, and part of my mind swiftly adjusted to the new reality. Someone had just shot my friend with a small caliber firearm, which meant they had to be close. I suppressed my rising grief, peered over

the balustrade and focused on pinpointing and neutralizing the danger.

I scanned the trading floor and, amidst the noisy panic of the stampede, I saw one man standing perfectly still, his cool eyes on the rostrum. He wore the navy blue uniform of an Exchange security guard, but his trousers and jacket didn't fit right, and unlike the guards who'd searched me in the tent, he wore heavy boots instead of smart shoes. He just stood there watching and waiting. And then it hit me. Karl's body had fallen behind the balustrade, which was wrapped in a New York Stock Exchange banner. An assassin couldn't be certain of a kill until a third party gave some kind of confirmation. This man was waiting to be sure his bullet had struck its intended target.

He must have sensed me watching him, because at that moment his gaze shifted and he stared directly at me. His face seemed out of proportion, as though his features had been changed by prosthetics. Only his eyes told the truth, and I'd encountered enough stone-cold killers to know when I was looking at one.

I jumped over the balustrade, and the assassin started running the moment my feet hit the marble trading floor. I pushed past panicked traders and up ahead I saw the assassin doing likewise. Men and women were knocked to the floor as the desperate killer tried to outrun me.

I followed the assassin through the crowd and saw him burst through the doors onto Broad Street. He sprinted toward the security tent and shouted something at the two guards who were on their way to deal with the growing crowd of evacuees.

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“He’s the shooter!” I yelled as the guards turned toward me.

I pointed at the assassin who ran south along Broad Street, but the guards weren’t interested in the man. Instead they tackled me, and drove me into the drift of gray snow that was piled beside the entrance.

“We’ve got the suspect in custody,” the older guard said into his radio as the real killer sprinted away.