

The Unseen 144

Fourteen clocks fill most of the wall on one side of the conference room, in two rows, each showing a different time zone for U.S. territories. The wall in front is a presentation screen showing only the FBI logo.

The room smells like bad breath. Around the long table, coincidentally— unless you don't believe in coincidences— fourteen agents are chatting in pairs and small groups, clean-shaven G-men and G-women in black and gray suits. One man at the table is silently watching. His suit is lighter gray. He's older than the rest.

"I don't get it," one agent says, turning away from his conversation with the woman next to him and spinning his chair toward the older man. "A witness to what, exactly?"

"All I know is there's a lady who's sure she knows more about this investigation than we do," he answers.

"And you believe her?" he asks.

"Walker believes her," he replies.

One man and one woman aren't wearing suits: Agent Walker and the woman with him, he in khaki pants, a white shirt with thin red stripes, brown Sketchers and a gold badge attached to his belt, she in sweat pants and shirt. At first glance you might think she's a soccer mom, fortyish, tired, blonde streaks.

Walker turns to her. His voice is gentle. "Stay here by the stairway for just a moment." She nods.

In anticipation, the room turns to look as he enters. The older man, the Director, stands up. "Gentlemen, ladies, please give agent Walker your full attention now."

As he walks past, Walker hears one of the agents whispering. "Apparently she walked into the police station with a sledge hammer..."

Now at the front of the room, Walker has the group's attention.

"It's true. A lady walked into the Santa Monica police station with a sledge hammer demanding to speak to the chief. But it was a small-size sledge hammer."

The room chuckles.

"And it turns out, not only is she not crazy... she's crazy smart. And thank heaven for that. Because she knows more about this operation than any of us. And it's not what we thought it was."

Murmurs.

Walker continues. "She's been right next to the heart of it."

Another agent pipes. "Doesn't the way she contacted you make you wonder if she's credible?"

"She tried reaching the FBI two days ago. Got voice mails. Police wouldn't listen, so she had to find alternate means, and in my experience a sledge hammer does communicate urgency."

The room echoes with laughter.

"Look, folks, we don't have time for a whole back-story here. We're way behind on this. And we've only seen the tip of the iceberg. That's why the director asked General Forrester to join us."

"You called the Secretary of Defense?" one agent says.

"Holy shit," at least two people added. They all turn to the Director. He nods at Walker.

"This is much more than a bustle in our hedgerow, guys. This is an existential threat. To our democracy, to our country."

"How do you mean?" Several agents ask the question at once.

"One group?"

"Did she infiltrate the group?"

"No. She's lived with it for five years. And according to her, we've got this group all wrong. Look, let me let her tell you. No reason to get it from me second hand. Miss Piper?"

Eyes turn to the door. She walks too slowly to the front of the room and faces the table, looking around nervously at the faces of the agents staring at her.

"I am Irina Kuznetsov, wife of Viktor Morozov."

The agents look at each other, shaking their heads. Several of them start looking up the name on their phones.

Her accent is strong. "You will not find him in your computers. Now his name is called Vic Piper. He has this name his whole life in America."

The agents look around at each other, puzzled.

"He is full American citizen businessman," she continues. "He has no ties to Russian government. But he is Russian government."

The room is silent for a moment, but then table bursts into multiple conversations for a few seconds. One agent asks, "Excuse me, Director, but are we sure we're talking about our terrorist group?"

"Yes," Walker says. "We are. As I said, according to Miss... Irina, we've got this wrong. We're not looking at a domestic terrorist attack."

Muttering and discussion among the agents.

"Are you saying the group is sponsored by the Russian government?"

"No, Walker says. "I'm saying they *are* the Russian government."

Questions fly. How is that possible, what evidence is there, why do we think that.

"Hold on, hold on." Walker holds his palms up. "She's not finished." He turns to her. "Tell them what you told me. Tell them about their plans."

She's clasping her hands in front of her. "FSB is everywhere in Russia. In everyone's life. All their life. Every Russian must be FSB. But FSB is not only in Russia. All Russians are not in Russia. Many are in America."

"Spies?" one agent asks. "Just to be clear, that's what you're saying?"

"Yes. *Tihee Shpiony*. Quiet spies. They do nothing until they are activated. They are American. You cannot see they are FSB. They look like you. They sound like you. They work like you. Many do not even speak Russian."

"Holy shit."

"We do know there are thousands of spies living here."

"That's true."

"Yes," Irina says. "But many are you do not know about. So many."

"How many spies are we talking about?"

"Yes, as you say, there maybe are thousands. But Viktor's mission is with one hundred and forty four."

"A hundred and forty-four spies?"

"Spy leaders."

"And your husband is one of the 'spy leaders?'"

"Yes. He is in charge to manage one hundred forty four of them."

"Holy shit."

"Holy shit. A hundred and forty-four cells?"

A tall man, younger than the others, enters.

"Do we have it?" Walker asks.

"Yeah. It's on." He uses a remote control to turn the screen on and display a picture of a man. He hands the remote to Walker.

The man in the picture is a middle-aged blonde man wearing jeans and a cowboy-style shirt.

"This is Vic Piper. We have nothing on him. Born in Kansas, no criminal record, all bona fide documentation. No one would look at him twice."

Walker puts the remote on the table.

"That's it?"

"That's it. But apparently he's in charge of this whole thing. Okay, Irina, please continue. Tell them what the plan is."

"This man is Victor Morozov. He brings me to America five years ago for marriage. For children. He lost his sons to car accident..."

"Is that why he's doing this?"

"No," says Walker. "Let her finish. Irina, tell us about the plan."

"This plan begins with fire. Many fires. More than thousand fires. Fire in every states."

The agents murmur and look around. "Is she serious?" - "Is that possible?"

"One hundred forty-four agents will start fires with their group."

"So there are more than a hundred and forty four?"

"Many more."

"How many more?"

"I do not know. But many enough for fire in many places."

"That's the plan? To start fires everywhere?"

"That is the beginning of the plan. For because, to cause power out."

A din of questions fades as Walker looks around the table.

"They want to knock out power throughout the United States. And that's just phase one. Next, they use ordnance."

"What kind of ordnance?"

"She doesn't know. But she says it's a lot."

"Many barns and garages, buildings full of bombs," Irina says. "I don't know what kind. Boxes."

"Where do they plan to use it?"

She scans the room. "Everywhere."

"Why? What's their end game?"

"End game?"

"End game, what is the reason for this?"

"Yes, I understand end game. The operation objective is to make a path."

"Make a path?"

"Yes, make America weak and afraid."

"That's it?"

"To make a path to take over White House."

"Take over the White House? The Russians?"

"Russians will never be able to take the White House."

"Never."

"Not Russians. Americans will take over White House."

Walker steps close to her again. "In other words," he says, "They're softening us up so insurgents— domestic insurgents— can take the White House, and take over."

The Director stands. "Let's break this down. An unknown number of groups of Russian spies— professionals— are going to be activated start a thousand fires and..."

"More than a thousand."

"...More than a thousand fires and then use an unknown type of explosive on multiple critical infrastructure targets... in order to facilitate an insurgency." He turns to Irina. "For what reason? Because the White House is a symbol? Putin wants that?"

"Not insurgency."

"Not insurgency?"

"No. Revolution. This is what Vladimir Putin wants. Viktor says America is ready to explode by itself, and maybe just needs a little push for encourage civilian war."

"Good God. How do you know all this, Miss Irina?" asks Chief.

"Viktor thinks I am stupid. He thinks I do not listen. He thinks I do not understand. But I understand. Five years I see, and I do not want this. I love America now. I want to be a true American citizen."

"When are these assets supposed to be activated?"

"Maybe eight or ten years ago. I am not sure."

"You mean, they were activated eight or ten years ago?"

"Yes, before I arrive from Russia. They are planning this very long time."

"Holy shit." This time almost in unison.

"But when is all this supposed to happen?"

"I do not know exactly. But soon."

Walker turns to her. "Why do you think that, Irina? Why soon?"

"I think because always some trucks are moving, moving, moving, then sudden... suddenly many, many trucks are moving. Many trucks, then no trucks. Now is quiet. Everyone is gone."

"Trucks carrying the boxes?" Walker asks.

"Yes, all the trucks have boxes."

"The boxes with the bombs."

"Yes, the boxes with the bombs."

"Jeezus."

"How many trucks are there, Irina? Approximately?"

"Approximately? I don't know, hundreds, maybe a thousand..."

"My God."

"Wait," Walker says. "Do you mean a thousand trucks with bombs?"

"Yes, I watch them many months, why I tell you. This is why I tell you." She's trying not to cry.

"Yes, I know, Irina, thank you."

"How do we know this is real?" one agent asks.

"Right, could she be making it up?" asks a woman in a suit.

Walker looks at her. "Do you think she's making it up?"

"How do we respond to this, Director?" asks an agent.

"We don't respond to this."

"We don't?"

"No. This isn't about national security anymore. This is a matter of national defense. We don't do anything until the General arrives. Once he's briefed, he'll decide which path to go down along with the Joint Chiefs. Our role is to find these bastards. Lucas, get this on the wire and to every field office. Justin, see what the CIA has on Viktor Morozov. Belamy... What is it, Harrington? Is he here?"

The younger man holds up his phone, then points to the remote controller.

"No, sir. But you should see this, Director. You need to see this. The TV, sir."

The Director picks up the remote. "Which station..."

The room goes completely silent. The screen shows fire.

He turns the volume up.

"...and as crews battled that fire," the newswoman says, "Another fire was reported east of Santa Barbara, California, where fires in the past have devastated local forests... just a moment..."

The woman newscaster is handed a page. *"We have yet another report of a large fire in eastern San Diego..."*

Someone on set wearing headphones hands her another page, then another, then several more, along with unprofessional murmuring. The newscaster puts a hand to her ear. *"Okay. I'm now getting reports of fires appearing all over California, Nevada and Arizona..."*

Someone in the studio hands her more pages. *"Okay, I will. I have it."* She turns back to the camera.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have reports of wildfires across the country, but we don't have any information yet on..."

The Director turns down the sound and sits sound.

Walker slams his fist on the table and stands. "Fuck!"

"This is it?" The Director stares at Irina. "This is happening now?"

"Yes," Irina says. "I mean, I try to tell you two days ago, but no one will listen. Now, it is too late."

"She's right," says Walker. "We have surveillance on Piper's house, but he's apparently gone dark. We need the military to protect all the major potential targets."

The Director seems upset now. "Do we know what the target are?"

"No, but we can predict most of them because, thanks to a lady we all know, we at least know what's happening."

"Yes, without her we would be completely in the dark." The Director leans forward. "Belamy." The tall young man stands. "Check on General Forrester. See if you can get him on the phone. If not, get me an ETA. The rest of you, get on your phones. And walk around a bit. This might be your only chance to take a break. It's going to be a long night."

"Shit, we may be in the dark soon anyway." Walker points to the TV. "There's a fire in Fountainhead."

They all look at the TV as the Director turns up the volume.

The screen shows video of fires near cities in different states: Tennessee, Kansas, Arkansas, Colorado, Ohio.

"Evacuation orders are in place from Lake Ridge to South Run as multiple fires in the Fountainhead region burn, heading toward the city. Officials have yet to comment on the origin of any of the fires that seem to be exploding across the country this evening, but as reports continue to come in, it appears that dozen and possibly hundreds of fires have suddenly started throughout the United States—"

The TV shuts off abruptly and the room goes dark and silent for a second, then backup lights blink on in the corners of the ceiling.

An agent's face is illuminated by his phone screen. "My calls aren't getting through. Anyone else?"

"No, mine aren't either," someone says.

"No, can't get through." "Nope." "...call cannot be connected." "Me. too."

"Heaven help us now." The Director's face looks grim in the dim orange glow.