

# **FREEZING ORDER**

**A TRUE STORY OF MONEY LAUNDERING, MURDER,  
AND SURVIVING VLADIMIR PUTIN'S WRATH**



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To my wife and children, who have stood by me,  
supported me, and loved me as the events in this story  
unfolded. I know it hasn't been easy, but I'm eternally  
grateful to each of you.

## **Author's Note**

This is a true story that will surely offend some very powerful and dangerous people. In order to protect the innocent, some names, locations, and details have been changed.

**Freezing Order:** A legal procedure that prevents a defendant from moving their assets beyond the reach of a court.

# The Madrid Arrest

SPRING 2018

Madrid was uncharacteristically cool for the end of spring. I'd flown in for a meeting with José Grinda, Spain's top anti-corruption prosecutor. I was there to share evidence about how dirty money connected to the murder of my Russian lawyer, Sergei Magnitsky, had been used to purchase luxury properties along Spain's Costa del Sol. The meeting was scheduled for 11:00 a.m. the following morning, which in Spain counts as an early meeting.

When I arrived at my hotel that evening, the manager scurried over to the check-in desk and ushered the clerk aside. "Mr. Browder?" he asked. I nodded. "Welcome to the Gran Hotel Inglés. We have a very special surprise for you!"

I stay at a lot of hotels. Managers don't typically have surprises for me. "What's that?" I asked.

"You will see. I will accompany you to your room." He spoke in careful English. "Could you please give me your passport and credit card?" I handed them over. He scanned my passport and fed the credit card—a Black American Express Card to which I'd recently been upgraded—into a chip reader. He handed me a room key with both hands cupped in a vaguely Japanese manner and stepped from behind the counter. Holding out his arm, he said, "Please. After you."

I walked to the elevator, the manager following directly behind. We rode to the top floor.

He stepped aside when the doors opened, making room for me to exit first, but once we were in the hall he shuffled past me, stopping in front of a white door. He fumbled briefly with his master key, and then opened the room. I peered inside. I'd been upgraded to the presidential suite. I was pretty sure this

wasn't because of who I was, but because of this new American Express card. I'd always wondered what the fuss was with these things. Now I knew.

"Wow," I said.

I walked through the foyer and into a white living room decorated with tasteful modern furniture. On a low table was a spread of Spanish cheeses, Ibérico ham, and fruit. The manager talked about what an honor it was to have me as a guest, even though I doubted he knew anything about me beyond which credit card I carried.

He followed me around the suite, seeking my approval. There was a dining room, its table laid out with pastries, chocolates, and champagne on ice; then came the reading room, with a small private library; then a lounge with a glass-topped bar; then a little office with subdued lighting; and finally, the bedroom, which had a freestanding bathtub tucked under a high window.

I had to suppress laughter. Of course, I loved the room—who wouldn't?—but I was in Madrid on a one-night business trip. It would have taken half a dozen people to eat all the food they had laid out. Moreover, if the manager had known the nature of my visit—talking to law enforcement officials about the sort of Russian gangsters who often booked suites like this—he probably wouldn't have been so enthusiastic. Still, I wasn't going to be rude. When we circled back to the foyer, I nodded appreciatively. "It's very nice," I said. "Thank you."

As soon as he was gone, I called Elena, my wife, who was at home in London with our four children. I told her all about the room, how extravagant and ridiculous it was, and how I wished she were with me.

After our call, I changed into jeans and a light sweater before heading out for an evening walk through the streets of Madrid, mentally preparing for my meeting with José Grinda the next day. Eventually, though, I got lost in the maze-like streets and squares, and had to hail a cab to take me back to the hotel.

The following morning was bright and sunny. Unlike the previous day, it was going to be hot.

At around 8:15 a.m. I checked my papers and business cards and opened the door to go downstairs for breakfast.

I stopped short.

The manager stood on the landing, hand raised in mid-knock.



On each side of him was a uniformed police officer. The patches on their crisp, navy shirts read, POLICIA NACIONAL.

“Apologies, Mr. Browder,” the manager said, glancing at the floor. “But these men need to see your identification.”

I handed my British passport to the larger of the two stone-faced officers. He studied it, comparing it to a piece of paper in his other hand. He then spoke to the manager in Spanish, which I don’t understand.

The manager translated. “I’m sorry, Mr. Browder, but you must go with these men.”

“What for?” I asked, looking past the manager.

He turned to the larger officer and rattled off something in Spanish.

The officer, staring directly at me, stated, “Interpol. Russia.”

Fuck.

The Russians had been trying have me arrested for years, and now it was finally happening.

You notice odd things when adrenaline hits you. I noticed there was a light out at the far end of the hall, and that there was a small stain on the manager’s lapel. I also noticed that the manager didn’t look so much contrite as concerned. I could tell this wasn’t for me. What concerned him was that his presidential suite would be unavailable so long as it contained my belongings. He wanted my things out as soon as possible.

He spoke quickly to the officers, and then said, “These gentlemen will give you a few moments to pack.”

I hurried through the series of rooms to the bedroom, leaving the officers waiting in the entryway. I suddenly realized I was alone and had an opportunity. If I’d thought the room upgrade was frivolous before, now it was a godsend.

I called Elena. But she didn’t answer.

I then called Ruperto, my Spanish lawyer who’d arranged the meeting with Prosecutor Grinda. No answer there, either.

As I rushed to pack, I remembered something Elena had said to me after I’d been detained at Geneva Airport that February. “If something like this ever happens again,” she said, “and you can’t reach anyone, post it on Twitter.” I’d started using Twitter a couple of years earlier, and now had some 135,000 followers, many of them journalists, government officials, and politicians from around the world.

I followed her instructions, tweeting: “Urgent: Just was arrested by Spanish police in Madrid on a Russian Interpol arrest warrant. Going to the police station right now.”

I grabbed my bag and returned to the two waiting officers. I expected to be formally arrested, but they didn’t behave like cops in the movies. They didn’t cuff me, frisk me, or take my things. They just told me to follow them.

We went downstairs, not a word passing between us. The officers stood behind me while I paid the bill. Other guests gawked as they filtered through the lobby.

The manager, back behind the desk, broke the silence. “Do you want to leave your bag with us, Mr. Browder, while these men take you to the police station? I’m sure this will be sorted out quickly.”

Knowing what I did about Putin and Russia, I was sure it wouldn’t be. “I’ll keep my things, thank you,” I responded.

I turned to the officers, who sandwiched me front and back. They led me outside to their small Peugeot police car. One took my bag and put it in the trunk; the other pushed me into the back seat.

The door slammed shut.

A partition of thick Plexiglas separated me from the officers. The back seat was hard plastic like a stadium seat. There were no door handles and no way to open the windows. The interior was tinged with the odors of sweat and urine. The driver started the car while the other officer turned on the lights and sirens. We were off.

As soon as the car’s sirens started blaring, I was struck by a terrifying thought. What if these people weren’t police officers? What if they’d somehow obtained uniforms and a police car and were impersonating police officers?

What if, instead of driving me to the police station, they drove me to an airstrip, put me on a private plane, and whisked me off to Moscow?

This was not just a paranoid fantasy. I had been subjected to dozens of death threats, and had even been warned several years earlier by a US government official that an extrajudicial rendition was being planned for me.

My heart pounded. How was I going to get out of this? I began to worry that the people who’d seen my tweet might not believe it. They might have thought my account had been hacked, or that the tweet was some kind of joke.

Thankfully, the police officers—or whoever they were—hadn’t taken my phone.

I pulled my mobile out of my jacket pocket and surreptitiously snapped a picture through the Plexiglas, capturing the backs of the officers' heads and their police radio mounted on the dashboard. I tweeted the image out immediately.

If anyone doubted my arrest before, they certainly weren't now.



Bill Browder ✓

@Billbrowder

...

In the back of the Spanish police car going to the station on the Russian arrest warrant. They won't tell me which station





8:36 am · 30 May 2018 · Twitter for iPhone

Bill Browder, via Twitter. (©BILL BROWDER)

My phone was on silent, but within seconds it lit up. Calls started coming in from journalists everywhere. I couldn't answer any of them, but then my Spanish lawyer called. I *had* to let him know what was going on, so I ducked behind the partition and cupped my hand over the phone.

"I've been arrested," I whispered. "I'm in a squad car."

The officers heard me. The driver jerked the car to the side of the road. Both men jumped out. My door opened, and the larger officer hauled me onto the street. He aggressively patted me down and confiscated both of my phones.

"No phones!" the smaller officer shouted. "Under arrest!"

"Lawyer," I said to him.

"No lawyer!"

The larger one then pushed me back into the car and slammed the door. We took off again, coursing through the streets of old Madrid.

No lawyer? What the hell did that mean? This was an EU country. I was sure I had the right to a lawyer.

I scanned the streets outside, looking for any sign of a police station. None. I tried to convince myself: *I'm not being kidnapped. I'm not being kidnapped. I'm not being kidnapped.* But of course, this could easily be a kidnapping.

We made a sharp turn and suddenly got stuck behind a double-parked moving truck. As the car idled, I panicked and desperately looked for a way out. But there was none.

The truck driver eventually emerged from a nearby building, saw the police car's flashing lights, and moved his vehicle out of the way. We continued to snake through the narrow streets for more than 15 minutes. Finally, we slowed as we came to an empty square.



We rocked to a halt in front of a nondescript office building. There were no people and no signs that this was a police station. The officers exited the car and, standing side by side, ordered me out.

“What are we doing here?” I asked as I stood.

“Medical exam,” the smaller officer shouted.

*Medical exam?* I’d never heard of a medical exam when being arrested.

Cool sweat gathered on my palms. The hairs on my neck tingled.

There was no way I would willingly enter an unmarked building to submit to an exam of any kind. If this *were* a kidnapping, and I was starting to believe it was, I could picture what was in there: a bright-white office with a steel gurney, a little table with an assortment of syringes, and Russian men in cheap suits. Once inside, I’d be injected with something. The next thing I knew, I’d wake up in a Moscow prison. My life would be over.

“No medical exam!” I said forcefully. I clenched my fists as the fight-or-flight instinct took hold. I hadn’t been in a fistfight since ninth grade, when I was the smallest kid at a boarding school in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, but I was suddenly ready for a physical confrontation with these men if that meant avoiding being kidnapped.

But at that moment, something shifted in their demeanor. One officer stepped very close to me while the other made a frantic call on his cell phone. He spoke into the phone for a couple of minutes and, after hanging up, typed something. He showed it to me. Google Translate. It read, “Medical exams standard protocol.”

“Bullshit. I want my lawyer. Now!”

The one next to me repeated flatly, “No lawyer.”

I leaned against the car and planted my feet in front of me. The one with the phone made another call and then blurted something in Spanish. Before I knew it, the car door was opened and I was shoved back inside.

They put on the lights and sirens again. We drove out of the square in a different direction. We were soon stuck in traffic again, this time in front of the Royal Palace, among a throng of tour buses and schoolchildren. I was either being kidnapped or arrested, but the world outside was oblivious, enjoying a day of sightseeing.

Ten minutes later, we pulled onto a narrow street lined with police cars. A dark blue sign reading POLICIA stuck out from the side of a weathered stone-and-redbrick building.

These officers *were* real police. I was in a proper European legal system and not in the hands of Russian kidnappers. If nothing else, I would be afforded due process before any possibility of being extradited to Moscow.

The officers pulled me from the car and marched me inside. There was a palpable air of excitement in the station. From their perspective, they'd successfully tracked down and arrested an international fugitive wanted by Interpol, which probably didn't happen every day at this little police station in central Madrid.

They dropped me in the processing room and put my suitcase in the corner. My phones were placed facedown on top of a desk. One of the arresting officers ordered me not to touch anything. It was difficult. My phones buzzed and glowed with messages, tweets, and unanswered calls. I was relieved to see that my situation was getting so much attention.

As I sat there alone, the gravity of the situation swept over me. I may not have been kidnapped, but I was now in the Spanish criminal justice system on a Russian arrest warrant. I'd been bracing for a moment exactly like this for years. It had been drilled into me how this process would work. The arresting country would call up Moscow and say, "We've got your fugitive. What do you want us to do with him?" Russia would respond, "Extradite him." Russia would have 45 days to file a formal extradition request. I would then have 30 days to respond, and the Russians would have another 30 days to respond to my response.

With the inevitable delays, I was looking at a minimum of six months of sitting in a sweltering Spanish jail before I was either released or sent to Russia.

I thought of my 12-year-old daughter, Jessica. Only a week before, I'd taken her on a long-promised father-daughter trip to England's Cotswolds. I thought of my 10-year-old daughter, Veronica, whom I had promised a similar trip, but who might now have to wait a very long time. I thought about my eldest child, David, a junior at Stanford who was already making a life for himself. He'd dealt with all my Russian troubles so well, but I was sure he was following this ordeal on Twitter, overcome with worry.

I thought of my wife, and of what she must have been feeling at that moment.

Twenty long minutes later, a young woman entered the room and sat beside me. "I'm the translator," she said in English bearing no Spanish accent.

"When can I speak to my lawyer?" I demanded.

“I’m sorry, I’m just the translator. I only wanted to introduce myself.” She got up and left. She didn’t even say her name.

Ten more minutes crept by before she returned with a senior-looking police officer. He stood over me and presented my charge sheet in English. Under EU law, anyone who’s been arrested must be presented with the charges in their native language.

I bent over the sheet of paper. It was all boilerplate except for a little space for whatever alleged crimes I’d committed. The only word there was “Fraud.” Nothing else.

I leaned back. The wooden chair creaked. I eyed the officer and translator. They expected some kind of reaction, but the Russians had been accusing me of much more serious crimes for such a long time that the sole accusation of “fraud” had almost no impact. I was surprised they’d opened so low.

Once again, I asked if I could speak to my lawyer. The translator replied, “In due course.”

At that moment, a commotion erupted in the hallway. An officer I hadn’t seen before burst into an adjacent room packed with people in uniform. The door slammed. The officer and translator who were with me looked at each other and then disappeared, leaving me alone again.

Five minutes later, the door leading to the room full of officers opened. People spilled out. I called for the translator, who ducked into my room. “What’s going on?” I pleaded. She ignored me and left.

A few minutes later, the senior officer who’d presented the charge sheet re-entered the room, translator in tow, both with heads bowed. He said something to her in Spanish, and then she turned to me and said, “Mr. Browder, the Interpol general secretariat in Lyon has just sent us a message. They’ve ordered us to release you. The warrant is invalid.”

My spirits soared. My phone buzzed. I stood. “Can I use my phone now?”

“Sí.” No translation necessary.

I snatched up the charge sheet along with my phones. I had 178 missed calls. There was a message from the British foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, asking me to call as soon as possible. Every news outlet—ABC, Sky News, the BBC, CNN, *Time*, the *Washington Post*—all of them wanted to know what was going on. Same with Elena, David, and friends from all around the world, including several in Russia. I texted Elena that I was fine and would call her soon. I did the same with David and my colleagues at the office in London.

I strode into the open part of the police station. The mood had swung. They thought they'd caught a modern-day Carlos the Jackal, but now I was going to walk.

At last I was able to get ahold of my Spanish lawyer. While I'd been sitting at the police station, he'd been busy calling everyone he knew in Spanish law enforcement, to no avail.

What saved me was Twitter. My tweets had generated hundreds of phone calls to Interpol and the Spanish authorities, who soon realized the mess they'd waltzed into.

As I left the station, the arresting officers sheepishly stepped in front of me with the translator. "They'd like you to delete the tweet that has their photo in it. Would that be okay?" she asked.

"Will I be breaking any laws if I don't?" She translated. The officers shrugged. "Then no, I won't." The tweet is still there to this day.

They then offered me a ride to my hotel.

I laughed a little. "No, thank you. This whole ordeal has made me forty-five minutes late for a meeting—with José Grinda."

When they heard his name, all the color drained from their faces. They practically fell over themselves to offer me a ride to Grinda's office.

I accepted. This time, we rode in a much nicer car.

Less than half an hour later, we pulled up to the prosecutor's office. I was met in the lobby by Prosecutor Grinda himself. He apologized profusely, mortified that he'd invited me to Madrid to give evidence against Russian criminals only to be arrested by his colleagues on the orders of the same Russian criminals.

He led me to his office, where I told him the story about Sergei Magnitsky, my Russian lawyer, that I'd told so many times before. I explained how, in 2008, Sergei had been taken hostage by corrupt Russian officials and ultimately killed in jail as my proxy. I talked about the people who had murdered Sergei and profited from the \$230 million tax rebate fraud he'd exposed. I explained how some of that money had been used to purchase \$33 million of property along the Spanish Riviera.

By the glint in Prosecutor Grinda's eye, I could see that he would take what I was telling him seriously. When our meeting was over, I felt confident that we had gained another ally in the West—and that Putin's Russia had lost a few more shreds of its tattered credibility.