

reaction. "Of course, she never mentioned another man to me. She always claimed she loved you!" Her eyes narrowed, and she said, "You're on to something, aren't you? What have you found? Tell me!" she demanded.

"Only questions, so far," he replied, looking away.

"For your own sake, you must let them go, William. Visit their graves, say a prayer, and put it behind you."

"Thanks for the advice," he snapped, momentarily hostile, and then recanted. "Sorry for that." He took a sip of the whiskey, as if accepting the drink would help seal the apology.

After a moment, Benn continued, "Suriah took a trip to France before we left for our holiday." Cybele stared at him, trying to decipher his meaning. "What I mean to ask is, did Suriah really go to France?"

"I don't remember, William," she replied with a shrug. "It seems like ancient history. I remember she was away for a while. Now, what's this all about, anyway? You think she was off having an affair and told me all the exciting details. Rather not!" she piped in a superior tone. Then, coming back down to earth, she said, "William, let me be clear. I doubt very much that Suriah was seeing anyone, and if she was, she bloody well didn't inform me!"

Before Benn could respond, she clapped her hands together and exclaimed, "Wait! I think I still have a postcard she sent me upstairs. Let me go have a rummage for it. I won't be a minute." At that, she dashed out of the room. Benn sat quietly for a while and then stood to stretch his legs.

He entered the lounge. The bookshelves were empty, and stacks of cardboard boxes were piled about. Cybele had been packing, and one of the cartons lay open, exposing a leather-bound photo album. Benn casually flipped open the volume and let the heavy pages fall one by one. Suddenly, he stopped, lifted the album, and carried it over to the table lamp. He had to be certain of what he was seeing. Just before Cybele returned, he replaced the album in the carton.

"I'm sending some old things into storage," explained Cybele, seeing Benn standing awkwardly in the lounge. "I had to dig through a few boxes upstairs, but I found it." She waved the postcard in front of him but didn't let him have it until he was back in the kitchen.

A shot of Paris at night lay before him. The glittering Champs Élysées leading to the Arc de Triomphe. On the back was written: "Just a quick note to apologize for not saying good-bye. See you soon. Suriah." He recognized the fluid handwriting, but there was no date. The smudged postmark was illegible.

Benn looked more carefully at Cybele. Clearly, he'd underestimated her.

She felt that his mood had changed but was unsure of the reason. The wall clock chimed twice. Benn took the cue and rose to leave.

"Are you staying at Sunrise Place tonight?" she inquired, feigning concern for his well-being. "You can have the spare room here, if you like," she offered with an inviting smile. "Francine and Jacques are away at the moment, but I'm not entirely helpless. I can make you a nice English breakfast in the morning."

"Thanks, but I'd better stay at the house. I still have a few more things to do." Before departing, he reached into his breast pocket and withdrew the photograph of the two women riding together that he had found among Suriah's things. "I thought you might like to have this," he said, handing it over. His rising anger was concealed with a benign smile. He wanted to force the truth out of her, then and there, but knew that first he needed to figure out the right questions. She accepted the photograph with an enigmatic expression and saw him to the door. *For your collection*, he thought bitterly as he wished her good night.

A hackney met him at a red phone booth outside the King's Head pub in Shere. The driver was pleased to have a fare all the way to London, even at that time of night. Benn switched on the cabin light and studied the two photographs he had taken from the album. One showed a youthful Cybele standing just behind a teenage Suriah. The other seemed to be a posed family portrait, members unknown, except for Cybele and Suriah. Benn's brain labored as the taxi wound its way through the familiar suburban lanes. At dawn, they rolled into the city, where he paid his fare and joined the ranks of homeless men who were stirring from the alleys and stoops.

Chapter Thirteen

The Smugglers

Azhigali had selected one hundred of the most important museum pieces for the auction. They were of all shapes and sizes, some delicate, others quite substantial. Having been trained as a curator, he wanted to ensure that each item was carefully packaged, so he and Blake worked for several days—under Sasha's watchful eyes—to prepare the shipment.

"Ah, *regardez!*" exclaimed Azhigali, pausing in his work. "Look how exquisite it is." He displayed a small votive figure in near perfect condition. "It is most likely from Samos. In the sixth century B.C., it was a center for high-quality silver and bronze work. Herodotus, the father of history, spoke of the place. They used the lost wax technique. You see, the craftsmanship is marvelous."

Blake switched off the hair dryer he was using to shrink-wrap a Chinese vase. "How much is it worth?" he asked, scrutinizing the item.

"It is difficult to know precisely," replied Azhigali, his brow furrowing. "It's rare but not very sought after. I chose it because it's such a fine example. Maybe the bidding starts at only fifty thousand dollars."

"Right!" said Blake enthusiastically. "The sooner we get it loaded, the sooner the dosh is in our pockets."

Azhigali sighed and placed the silver statue on the workbench. "As you say," he agreed reluctantly.

"Your problem," chided Blake, "is that you want the treasure and the money. You cannot have your cake and eat it, too, mate!"

Azhigali nodded. "You're quite right, my friend. Life is never entirely perfect."

The men continued to wrap each item in paper and foil before spraying it with insulating foam. This provided good structural support as well as padding. When the foam hardened, the encasement was pierced to allow the package to breathe.

This left the problems of concealment and documentation. They settled on two separate containers. The stone, marble, and terra-cotta pieces were packed together with cheap garden ceramics. The bronze, gold, and silver lots were concealed with industrial goods. The rest of the itemized cargo included a variety of mechanical equipment. A consolidator and freight forwarder known to Blake supplied all the necessary paperwork.

Once the shipment was organized, Azhigali prepared to go into hiding, but before departing, he presented Blake with a small bronze Hellenistic statuette of Fortuna. "You see, her leg is broken, and her face bears a beatific smile. Keep it with you. It will bring you success."

"Thanks, mate, I'll be needing Lady Luck," replied Blake, cheerily accepting the item.

Looking up at the Russian giant, Azhigali said, "For you, because you are Mikhail's friend, I have this," and, with a grand gesture, he handed Sasha a petite terracotta figure from the Begram treasure. "Be careful, it's very delicate. You see, it's a rare composite of Helios and Harpocrates. Look how he holds his finger to his lips. He keeps the mystery of the season's revival." Sasha stood the figure up on his palm, appraising it in unintended mimicry of the Turk.

Blake and Azhigali broke into good-natured laughter at the sight of Sasha the connoisseur. To their amazement, the recipient of the little man's gift blushed, and his head dipped to his chest as he tried to conceal his emotion. Sasha slipped the figure into his breast pocket, unexpectedly put his enormous hands around Azhigali's waist, and hoisted him onto one of the wooden crates so they were at eye level with each other. Then, reaching into his trouser pocket, he withdrew a soiled handkerchief and uncovered a small brass star from within its folds. After buffing it with his handkerchief, he carefully pinned it to the Turk's lapel.

For once, Azhigali was at a loss for words. He could only offer a respectful military salute in response.

In that instant, Sasha adopted Azhigali and insisted on accompanying his friend to the airport to keep a protective eye on him. Blake was also sorry to see Azhigali go. He, too, actually had become fond of the diminutive scholar.

The following morning, Blake set out for the southern Balkans with the somber Sasha riding shotgun alongside him. At the Bulgarian border, they were met by Wolfgang Schneider, an East German fixer and part-time pimp whom Blake knew from previous endeavors.

Blake now sat impassively beside Schneider while he haggled with the Bulgarian customs inspector. Gray tobacco smoke polluted the grimy cubicle, and Blake wondered how the fags managed to burn given the lack of oxygen in the tiny customs shed. Yellow newspapers glued over the windows ensured privacy. A blind moth, flitting

too near the light, was the only witness to their discussion.

"How many kilos you have?" demanded the Bulgarian in heavily accented German. Blake ignored the question and rolled his head from side to side to loosen his neck muscles. He was stiff from the long drive. Schneider leaned close to the greasy, bug-faced man and diverted him with a filthy anecdote about a woman he'd met over the weekend. Both men laughed, and Blake noted that the inspector's mouth was full of gold teeth. The metal work was a good sign. He guessed that the man's wife was fat as well.

"Hey, you want to get high?" asked Schneider unexpectedly. He withdrew a small vial of hashish from his jacket and held it up to the inspector between his thumb and index finger.

"You're crazy!" gasped the Bulgarian in alarm. "Put that away!" Schneider shrugged and slipped the prop back into his pocket.

The inspector shook his head in disgust, but he was already calculating his terms for allowing the truck to pass. Drugs, weapons, refugees—each had its own price. Hashish was good, not too dangerous, and he could obtain a reasonable bribe.

"Here," he said, pulling a bottle of spiced vodka and three stained glasses from a cupboard behind him. "Here's a man's drink." Schneider and Blake accepted the offer, and negotiations continued. Soon safe passage was ensured, and Blake went to the truck to get the payoff money.

The fresh air came as a shock after the putrid stench of the customs office. Blake was proud of the rig, a Mercedes tractor with a spacious sleeper coupled to a beautiful Belgian-made trailer. He had leased it through a cut-out and used his connections in the transport ministry to obtain all the necessary documentation.

He walked around the cab, admiring the paint job, and found Sasha urinating against the rear wheel. "Stupid birk!" he snapped in disgust. The hulking enforcer, oblivious to the insult, gazed back at him with childlike innocence.

Blake shook his head and shrugged. "You're a blessed beast, ain't you?" Gesturing with his thumb toward the cab, he said, "Better get in, mate. We're off as soon as I finish with this geezer."

The plan was to move the treasure from Turkey through Bulgaria and Macedonia to the industrial port of Vlora in southern Albania. From there, it would be shipped to Marseille on a Chinese freighter.

Afterward, Blake and Sasha would to fly to Paris, make contact with Azhigali's French auctioneer, and set the conditions for the delivery. When the Frenchman had the antiquities safely in hand, Blake's role would be over, and he could head home to wait for his share of the take. Sasha was to join Petrov.

Chapter Fourteen

Londinium

Benn waited at his London club within the leather embrace of an old porter's chair. It was a small, quiet place reserved for the more reclusive financial doyens of the City. There were no brash young traders flashing in and out. No hit-and-run deals over lunch. One's reputation, fortune, and family had to be aligned to play here. This was old money contemplating the events of the day in the traditional comfort of polished mahogany and well-worn chesterfields. An aged waiter passed slowly through the Edwardian drawing room, balancing a silver tray. Upon it, poised like a chalice, stood a single crystal glass of Andalusian cream sherry, the preferred afternoon aperitif.

Respectable gentlemen reclined in a dozen private alcoves and held quiet discussions with their peers. Benn knew from experience that important favors and well-advised tips were being exchanged. *Another life*, he thought, shaking his head at the fading memory of his career.

The telephone next to him emitted a muffled ring. "Yes?" he answered expectantly.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. William Benn?" The voice came through a speaker phone and was disrupted by the sound of shuffling papers in the background.

"This is he," replied Benn, settling into the chair's deep upholstery.

"Mr. Benn, this is Farley Leonard at Martin and Downs insurance brokerage returning your call. How may I be of service to you?" The words were delivered with more than a trace of a lisp.

"I'd like to come and see you about a matter related to my wife. Her maiden name was Dumarché," Benn explained with anticipation.

"Oh, I see!" Leonard's tone became more respectful. He lifted the receiver, killing the background noise. "I'm free next Thursday. May I have my secretary try to fit you in sometime?"

"Actually," replied Benn, in the manner of one used to getting his way, "I was thinking that this afternoon would be convenient."

"I'm terribly sorry. I have an appointment this afternoon," responded Leonard automatically, before quickly reconsidering. "No, I'm sure I can change it. What time would you like to stop by?"

"I'll be there at four sharp," Benn replied, somehow not surprised at the broker's willingness to drop everything for the late Mrs. Dumarché's husband.

The Martin and Downs enterprise was in the heart of the City, on Broad Street within sight of the old Roman walls. It was a venerable firm of Lloyd's brokers with a commercial history dating back to the East India Trading Company. The building was a postmodernist disaster, yet certain traditions remained. Benn was escorted to a private reception room reserved for important clients and offered cream tea and the *Shipping News*. Before he became impatient, a handsome matron escorted him to Leonard's office on the twelfth floor, where the windows presented splendid views of Tower Bridge and the Thames.

Farley Leonard affected the rumpled charcoal-stripped uniform of the City neither better nor worse than any other London commuter and was unremarkable in most other respects, except for his hair, which was dyed a sick yellowish gray. By contrast, Benn looked as though he had just emerged from a Manhattan boardroom. He wore a crisply pressed Fifth Avenue suit, handmade spit-polished shoes, and a power tie fastened with a ruby pin.

After cordially greeting Benn, Leonard took the high ground behind his broad kidney-shaped desk. "Right, sir, how may I help you?" he asked convivially.

"I've come about the refund, Mr. Leonard," Benn announced.

"The refund?" the broker repeated with a blank expression.

"Yes, the refund owed to my wife by Lloyd's."

"Oh, yes, I remember now," he said, sucking air through capped teeth. "Well, that was some time ago, wasn't it? What seems to be the problem?" Leonard spoke in a tone that expressed amazement that there should be any problem at all.

"Well, the check was never deposited," Benn explained. "Now it's expired. I'd like to have it reissued."

"Do you still have it?" Leonard asked.

"Of course," replied Benn, leaning forward. "I presume you're aware that my wife is deceased?"

"Well, yes, I am, and I'm very sorry indeed," Leonard replied solemnly. "I read the story in the newspapers and spoke to your wife's secretary about it. You may not recall, but the firm sent its condolences." Benn's expression remained neutral at the mention of a secretary, but his thoughts were blazing. "It's a terrible thing, dreadful really, and the children . . . it must have been awful for you. Would you like some tea?" Leonard offered sympathetically.

Benn declined politely and continued, "Thank you for your sentiments. The problem is that my wife is gone, and the check was never deposited. Now her accounts are closed, and the check is expired. I'd like it reissued."

Leonard's eyebrows arched like pup tents. "In your name?" he asked, recalling that Benn had briefly been a suspect.

"No, the money is to go to Charter House. It was my wife's charity. And I'd like it to be discreet."

"Oh, right," Leonard intoned with visible relief. "I'm sure that won't be any trouble at all. May I see the check?"

Benn removed an envelope from his breast pocket and passed it across the desk.

"Just allow me to bring your wife's account up on the computer." The broker swiveled his chair away from Benn and faced his terminal. He tapped in his personal access code and the name Dumarché.

Benn rose and stepped quickly around the desk to see the screen. To cover this breach of office etiquette, he quipped, "Well, that's efficient. You have your client accounts right at hand. No long delays while staffers rummage around in the belly of the beast searching for lost files."

The observation pleased Leonard. He cocked his head like a pigeon and twittered, "Oh, yes, the firm has made a considerable investment in all the latest technology. Well, it is necessary to keep up with the times. Here she is; I mean, it is." Benn watched in amazement as Leonard scrolled through a score of Dumarché ledger entries before coming to the Lloyd's transaction.

He leaned over the broker's shoulder to get a better look at the screen. The file entry referred to a sculpture that had been sold and included a refund request for 11,500 pounds on the prepaid balance of the insurance premium.

"You know, Mr. Leonard," Benn confided, "I never really involved myself in my wife's personal matters. Now I'm trying to settle all the family accounts. It would be a great help to have a copy of her file."

Leonard peered up at Benn in surprise. He couldn't recall any company policies that would prevent him from providing it. There was, of course, the matter of confidentiality, but, as Suriah Dumarché was deceased, why shouldn't her husband have a copy of the account notes? "Very well," he agreed, queuing the record to print.

"Did you know my wife well?" Benn inquired, returning to his seat.

"I regret to say that I met her only once, about six years ago. She was a charming lady, stunning really. After that, all business was conducted by post."

"So, you didn't transact with her directly?" Benn asked.

"No, only through her secretary. Frankly, I'm used to having a closer relationship with my clients." Benn tried not to show any reaction to the second mention of a secretary. "I expect it would have been different if she were requiring appraisals or placement services."

"What do you mean?" asked Benn.

"Well, I am responsible for the firm's fine art brokerage. I deal only with high-net-worth individuals like yourself. When my clients make a purchase, I place the insurance coverage with the underwriters. It's all about spreading the risk in case of damage or loss."

"So, my wife was selling, not buying," Benn concluded.

"That's right," Leonard agreed. "She owned a fabulous collection when I first took over the account. It was one of the most interesting private holdings in my portfolio, very thoughtfully assembled. As far as I know, she never actually displayed any of it, just kept everything in storage. Are you a collector?" Leonard asked hopefully as the printer labored.

Benn was about to respond in the negative but changed his mind. "To some degree, yes."

At this opening, Leonard brightened. "Oh, your wife had marvelous things, but she began selling them off one by one about six years ago. I dare say she could have done better at auction. The Bonfranco sculpture was the last of it. May I ask if you have your pieces insured?" Leonard inquired with well-practiced gravitas.

"Probably not to the extent that I should," Benn replied, pretending to ponder his exposed risk. "Perhaps we could get together to discuss it sometime," he offered.

"Oh, I'd be delighted," Leonard twittered, pleased at the possibility of maintaining the Dumarché account.

Leonard placed the printout in an envelope and passed it to Benn. "Right, the check will be reissued and sent to Charter House as an anonymous donation, just as you requested. Should I send the confirmation to you or to Mrs. Stanley?"

"Mrs. Stanley?" Benn said with a blank look.

"Your wife's secretary," said Leonard.

"Oh, the family no longer employs her. Just send the confirmation to me," Benn said, and he provided his club address before departing.

Benn stopped pacing the floor and slumped down onto a stained chair opposite the bed. Wanting to avoid a hotel register, he had paid cash for a dreary private room at a South Bank boarding house off Crucifixion Lane. The only comfort the place offered was anonymity. He shared the rundown flat with three Balkan immigrants. They worked long hours and mostly slept when they were in.

The time line he'd created was spread out on the bed along with the computer printout from Martin and Downs. He took an occasional note as he reviewed the sequence. In all, twenty-two items were listed. Suriah had sold them singly, or a few at a time, beginning the year Tristan was born. The collection was insured for fifteen million pounds. Four different underwriters provided the coverage, all respectable names. If the pieces were properly appraised and insured—and, judging from Leonard's scrupulous handling, they were—then Suriah must have received several million pounds from selling her collection.

Given that there was no record of any significant deposits, and her trust account showed only interest gains, Benn concluded that the money probably went into her offshore account. He recalled his visit to Martin and Downs and wondered if Mrs. Stanley, the secretary to whom Leonard referred, was really Cybele St. Cyr.

It was time to take stock. He wanted to return to Surrey to confront Cybele, but first he had to prepare his questions. He needed to know more about her and about Suriah's life before their marriage. He had to learn how the two women were connected and why they had concealed their relationship from him.

He regarded the black-and-white photograph he had taken from Cybele's cottage. A young man in his thirties stood beside Cybele and Suriah. They were grouped around an elderly patriarch seated in a wheelchair. Suriah looked all of seventeen. Her red hair was cropped shorter than he had ever seen it, but the demure smile was there. So charming, so poised, even then, he thought nostalgically. Cybele was directly behind the old man, with one hand on his shoulder. Suriah was to his left. The young man was to his right. It was difficult to discern any family resemblance among them. The men wore white dinner jackets, the ladies evening dresses. The assembly was posed in the midst of a topiary garden. Just behind them, a fountain gushed water from the mouths of two lion-headed sphinxes. A high stone tower flanked the scene.

Benn sighed and rubbed his brow. He was due to meet Petrov in Amsterdam and had promised to attend the Paris

auction, but he still had no inkling of how to manage it. He had gone as far as he could into Suriah's background. It was time to get help.

He decided to employ a private detective, a man who had worked for him before when he required background information on business associates. The investigator's name was Gains. He was a hard-nosed professional and former SAS man with good connections at Scotland Yard.

Benn met Gains at a pub off Tottenham Court Road. After explaining his concerns, he requested detailed biographical information on Suriah Dumarché, Cybele St. Cyr, and anyone associated with them.

Within seventy-two hours, Gains presented his disappointingly slim initial report. The only relations of Suriah's that he could confirm were her deceased parents. Apparently, she was the last surviving member of her family.

The detective's report inspired more questions than it answered. Most distressing was the last two words concerning Cybele St. Cyr: "relocated abroad." She had left England for an unknown destination just two days after Benn dropped by to see her. He remembered the packing boxes and her telling him she was "just sending a few things into storage." *Another lie*, he thought bitterly.

Benn commissioned Gains to find Cybele and doubled his fees to ensure his complete dedication to the matter.

Chapter Fifteen

The Cloudberrries

The hovercraft glided over the still waters of the artificial lake like a spaceship, its fans whining as they pitched into high gear. Besides the two-man crew, the craft carried a ten-man assault squad requisitioned from the local authorities. Major Dudiev wanted to be sure he had enough firepower to protect him if things got out of hand. He had known Petrov since their days at the Academy together—how clever he was and how dangerous he could be. From today onward, Petrov would consider him his mortal enemy. Dudiev knew that his life would be under threat until the Siberian was dead.

"How long until we arrive?" he asked, noting that the militia lieutenant had removed the insignia from his uniform, just as he'd been ordered.

"Twenty minutes," responded the young officer. He unfolded a map of the oval-shaped lake and spread it out across the radio console. "We're headed here, out to the point farthest from the dam," he said, gesturing with a short pencil. "The lodge is on a slope that sweeps back for six kilometers right up to the edge of the taiga." He pointed out the location of the hunting lodge before continuing. "There are steep mountains to the west and east. We'll pitch the craft right up onto the shore at this point." He circled a spot on the map southeast of the lodge. "It's rocky, but we should have good cover."

The lieutenant displayed four aerial photographs. "Aircraft reconnaissance noted smoke coming from the lodge yesterday." He pointed to a rectangular structure not far from the shore. "Regional officials and other important people sometimes stay here, but I checked, and right now no one has it reserved. Evgeny Petrov is the caretaker and a real woodsman, from what I hear. This smaller building situated north of the lodge, here, near the taiga, is his private dacha. However, it's probable that he stays down at the lodge when there are no guests. If he is there, we should be able to capture him without too much difficulty."

The lieutenant was ambitious and naive. Dudiev told him that the authorities in Moscow wanted Petrov arrested and that his family knew where to find him. The young officer asked few questions. He was pleased to have the opportunity to exercise his men and gain a bit of notoriety for himself.

"He's more than a woodsman, he's former Spetznaiz," Dudiev mused. "So we'll do this by the book. Divide your men into three teams. Six men will go with us to the

dacha. Send two pairs of men out to cover our flanks, blue team east and red team west," he ordered, marking the lieutenant's map. "If he is at the lodge and decides to run, he'll most likely head for cover in the mountains. Have your men move into position quickly, and they'll be able to cut him off."

"What if he retreats into the taiga?" asked the lieutenant.

"Then we will track him," said Dudiev. "And with his experience, that won't be easy. I'm hoping we can nail him in the basin."

The lieutenant went to prepare his men while Dudiev studied the personnel file Gulidov had given him. It included several photographs of Petrov's family and known acquaintances. The photos went back fifty years, and many were taken surreptitiously as part of the routine KGB surveillance of important scientists. He picked out a picture of Petrov's mother. On the back, someone had stamped the word *deceased*. Next, he stared into the eyes of Petrov's father. He wore a chest full of civilian medals, and although he sat stiffly in the orthodox pose of Soviet heroes, the profound dignity of his expression was disturbing.

There was an image of Petrov's sister winning a foot race at a school track meet and several photographs of Petrov's uncle on duty in Afghanistan. He wore the blue epaulets and cocked beret of the airborne forces but no orders or medals, although he had earned more than his share for bravery in combat.

The last picture was of Petrov's ex-wife and their young son. It prompted an uncomfortable memory.

As soon he'd seen the men from the Directorate approaching, the boy took off running. Clearly, he had inherited his father's antenna for sensing danger. Dudiev had chased him, intending only to catch him and take him to the car they had waiting, but the unfortunate child darted into the street. The recollection of what had followed braced Dudiev. Petrov had to be eliminated. He would never understand that the boy's death was unintentional. Revenge was surely in his blood.

"Get your men ready," he ordered as the features of the shoreline became articulated, and he directed the pilot to steer for an open spot between the rocks and the pier. "Get as close to that line of cover as possible," he shouted, pointing toward a deposit of granite boulders left over from the last ice age. "Then withdraw and wait for us to radio you for the pickup."

"Acknowledged," replied the pilot, recalling Dudiev's promise to make good on their overdue pay.

The hovercraft headed for the shallows, bouncing wildly as it encountered the rocks that littered the shore. As soon as they came to rest, the pilot cut the engine, and it settled gently as the cushions deflated.

The troops deployed, and the first men out of the craft set up enfilade to protect the landing zone. Two scouts charged through the trees to the east, and two more headed west to set up firing positions on the slopes of the mountains. If Evgeny headed for the high ground, they were to deny his escape and turn him back toward the central basin. The other four men followed the young lieutenant toward the hunting lodge, with Dudiev trailing cautiously behind them. As soon as the assault team entered the woods, the men who covered their landing followed, walking backward, to protect the squad's flank.

The pilot revved the hovercraft's engines and prepared to reverse out to the lake, but the hull was hung up on the rocks. He saw that he would need to hoist the port-side cushion over the impediment. He idled the engines and checked his sidearm. Judging from the serious expression of the man from Moscow, he figured things could get dangerous.

When the assault team was within fifty yards of the lodge, the lieutenant used hand signals to deploy his men to the compass points around the structure. Then, along with the two remaining recruits, he prepared to charge the front door. If the place was empty, they would rapidly proceed up the slope toward the old soldier's dacha. Dudiev lagged behind the squad, watching for anything the young soldiers missed. As he came closer to the lodge, he was surprised to hear the sound of an engine coming from inside the woodshed.

Irina was busy repairing her motorbike and had its motor running. She worked inside the tin structure to avoid the afternoon chill, and the noise masked the sound of the approaching force.

At the lieutenant's signal, the assault team bolted toward the lodge and, without hesitation, crashed through the front door. The racket startled Irina, and she rushed out of the woodshed, half expecting to see a bear. She instantly connected the assault with her brother's recent visit and shouted at the intruders, hoping to alert Evgeny, who had gone to his dacha to fetch his tools.

Dudiev quickly moved toward Irina while bearing a friendly, disarming smile. When the gap was closed between them, he unexpectedly drove his fist into her solar plexus. Her lungs collapsed, and she dropped to her knees, gasping for air.

The lieutenant strode out onto the veranda and announced excitedly, "It's clear inside! What are your orders? Are we to move up the ridge?"

"No," Dudiev replied in a sanguine tone as he stared down at Irina. "He'll be coming to us now."

Evgeny had just stepped into the clearing south of his dacha and was headed toward the lodge when he sighted a flock of birds leaving the tree line by the shore. The gusting wind prevented him from hearing the sound of the hovercraft, but the flock's sudden departure signaled the arrival of unexpected visitors. Dropping his tools, he took off down the slope as fast as he could, intending to warn Irina, but arrived within sight of the lodge only in time to witness Dudiev dragging his niece inside.

He stopped and leaned back against a birch tree to catch his breath. The sky was clear, the air as clean and sweet as ever. A small gray bird landed nearby on a slender branch and cocked its head toward him as if to ask, "What now, old man?" Evgeny slowly extended his index finger, coming to within an inch of the creature before it fluttered off. As his breathing steadied, he appreciated the sounds of the forest while simultaneously recalling the sensations of war.

Having recovered his breath, he turned away from the lodge and made his way down to his lakeside hunting blind. Once there, he tore open a waterproof munitions case and began to prepare himself. He selected a pump shotgun and a Dragunov sniper rifle equipped with a tactical suppressor. His AK-47 and AKS-74 were in the lodge, but that was all right. He had other surprises in store.

Dudiev threw Irina onto the floor of the kitchen and, glancing at the young lieutenant, said gruffly, "Leave. And keep your men out of sight." The officer nodded and obediently went outside to speak to his men, who were still deployed around the perimeter.

Dudiev rested on a low stool opposite Irina. When he spoke, it was in an altogether courteous tone. "You're Mikhail's sister, aren't you? Well, I'm Major Anatoly Dudievich. Have you ever heard your brother talk about me? I'm an old classmate and colleague of his. I'm sorry I had to strike you outside. I've just come by to speak to your uncle, and I didn't expect to find you here. It is quite a surprise, but not an unwelcome one."

Nauseated and frightened, Irina kept her arms folded across her aching stomach muscles and said nothing.

"I understand Mikhail was here recently," continued Dudiev. "I'm trying to find him. He has done some things he must answer for in Moscow. I can help him with the authorities. Where is your uncle? Is he up at his dacha? He will want to check on you before long, won't he? How is his health? He must be quite old now . . ."

Evgeny didn't know how many had landed, but he estimated the craft could hold about fifteen fully equipped men. That would be the worst case. *Very well*, he thought. The first thing to do was to cut off their escape, then go for the officers and destroy any long-range communications equipment. After that, he knew he would kill them, one by one. It didn't matter what uniform they wore. They were there for Misha, they came prepared for violence, and they used force on his niece. That was enough to seal their fate. *Their commander is incredibly stupid to walk into my part of the forest carrying weapons*, he thought. After wrapping himself in a camouflage net, he began crawling toward the hovercraft.

"As I said, my name is Dudiev. Did your brother ever mention me?" the major repeated while lighting a cigarette on the stove.

"No," Irina replied in a voice that was less controlled than she hoped. "But if you really know my brother, you know what he'll do to you for this. God help you!"

"He's out on his own. No single man can match the organization," Dudiev explained confidently. "It's only a matter of time until we find him." Prompted by her silence, he asked, "Or is he alone? He was here with an American, wasn't he? That's strange, isn't it? Were you here when they visited?" At that, Irina's cheeks visibly blushed. Dudiev smiled and said, "Ah, you were here, weren't you? Oh, Irina, you and I have a lot to talk about. Would you like a cup of tea while we wait for your uncle?"

The two hovercraft crewmen stood knee-deep in the cold water, trying to work a long tree branch under the port-side cushion and use it as a lever to lift the craft over the rocks. They had their backs to the shore and were too

involved in the effort to notice how quiet the forest had become.

Evgeny crouched in the fallen leaves and rested his left elbow upon his left knee. He tightened the silencer and carefully adjusted the rifle's scope. The men in the cross hairs looked vaguely familiar. He wondered if he knew their mothers. Their executions were swift, and after dragging their bodies into the woods, he boarded the craft.

"You know, you're a very beautiful woman, Irina," Dudiev remarked as he brushed her hair back from her eyes. "What are you doing wasting yourself out here in the wilderness? With your figure, you could be a fashion model. I know a private club where you could get work right away. To tell you the truth, your brother is a pariah. He crossed some very powerful interests. It was unwise, and I have come to help him fix things. Now, why don't you tell me where he is so we can get out of here? I'll take you back to Moscow with me."

"He will kill everyone responsible for Andryushka's murder," Irina blurted with unexpected ferocity.

Dudiev smiled at her insolence, but the remark disturbed him. He concluded that Petrov must have discovered his involvement in the boy's death. "Irina, I am your brother's friend, really. What happened to his son was an accident. I was just ordered to pick the child up on his way to school, for his own protection."

"You were the one!" she exclaimed.

"No, I said it was an accident. Look, maybe I can help your brother," Dudiev offered, "but I need to know what he was doing here with that American and where to find him. Do you know where he is?"

Irina glared at Dudiev. She could see the guilt in his eyes. "No!" she snapped defiantly.

"All right, I believe you," he said, feigning resignation. "Never mind. Your brother is a professional. Naturally, he wouldn't confide in you."

She shot an angry look at Dudiev and just managed to catch herself before spitting an insult, but it was already too late. He had read her reaction.

"Irina!" Dudiev scolded excitedly. "You do know something, don't you?" Now his tone became threatening. "I hope you're not a brave woman, because you are going to tell me everything I want to know. It will be now or in an hour. It is your choice, but you are going to help me."

Evgeny took his time. The lieutenant was easy to identify, swaggering stupidly among his men and revealing each man's location. He could count only a half dozen soldiers positioned around the lodge. He guessed that any others must be inside with Irina. He didn't like the thought. He hefted his rifle and adjusted the scope a few mils. The first soldier to die carried the long-range transmitter. Evgeny fired a second bullet into his backpack for good measure and moved counterclockwise around the lodge, taking out the next man in turn.

Now it was the lieutenant's turn to die, but just as Evgeny squeezed the trigger, he heard Irina scream. The sound made his heart miss a beat, and the bullet only nicked the lieutenant's wrist. The officer cursed, dove for cover, and returned fire. His aim was good, and Evgeny had to move. He abandoned the Dragunov and drew his shotgun from its sling.

The troop was confused and began firing into the trees in all directions. Evgeny kept moving in an arc toward the next target; however, he soon ran into trouble. There was a slight depression in the forest floor. One of the soldiers had positioned himself there, and Evgeny had missed sighting him when he reconnoitered. Suddenly, the soldier rose up directly beside him. He was expecting to find a comrade and held his weapon at ease. The professional looked into the conscript's surprised face. Only a teenager, Evgeny observed without emotion.

He heard the click of the soldier's safety being released. At this, Evgeny instinctively triggered his shotgun. The blast caught the boy just above his field vest. The impact elevated his body, and his arm jerked, discharging his weapon. Evgeny violently recoiled as a bullet tore through his right shoulder.

He was forced to withdraw. The pain was a reminder of an instant twenty years back when the mujahideen wounded him. He lived then and figured he'd live now, but the bleeding had to be stopped. "Hold on, Irina," he muttered as he slipped back down the ridge to his blind.

The lieutenant ordered his men to close in on the spot where Evgeny had fired the shotgun, but by the time they arrived, he had disappeared. They found little left of the boy's face. His cap was filled with gore. The young lieutenant wasn't ready for this and wanted to pull his men out. He used his field radio to poll his squad. A private reported that the sergeant was dead along with one other man. He also said that the long-range transmitter was disabled.

"Dammit! Three down already," swore a corporal named Golosin, while covering the dead teenager's face.

"Assault team, head for the lodge!" the lieutenant barked into his field radio. Next, he addressed the two flanking teams. "Red team, blue team, be advised, we're under attack. The enemy is somewhere between the lodge and the shoreline. Head for the water, and secure the landing area. We'll be coming out at dusk."

As he stanchd his wound, Evgeny listened to the field set that he had taken from the dead boy. The officer was criminally stupid, he observed angrily. Imagine such an idiot being allowed to lead young men into battle.

The lieutenant burst into the lodge, followed by his three close reports, and confronted Dudiev, weapon in hand. "What the hell have you gotten us into!" he demanded. "Three of my men are dead, and look at my hand!" Then he saw Irina. Her wrists were bound to the iron stove with metal wire, her head sagged, and she was sobbing. A kettle of water was boiling on the stove. "Major, I demand an explanation," the lieutenant said with a shocked look on his beet-red face.

"Shut up!" Dudiev snapped. "By bringing your men in here, you've given the initiative away to the enemy. Idiot! Can't you see we're bottled up in here? Deploy your team outside, immediately!"

"I'm not losing any more men!" the lieutenant responded fiercely. "We are staying here until dusk, then we will make our way to the hovercraft. I don't even know who or how many men we're fighting, for God's sake."

Irina groaned in pain. Her fingers were badly scalded. They were purple and already blistering. The company stared at the man from Moscow with disgust. Dudiev realized that his authority was undermined. The men would back their lieutenant in any confrontation. "Very well. Cover the windows, and bring me the transmitter," he ordered.

"It's been destroyed," the lieutenant said curtly.

Now even Dudiev became worried. *Dammit!* He'd been a fool to think Petrov would leave his family unguarded after what had happened to his son. "Listen to me, all of you. This woman has information important for our survival, and I intend to get it out of her. Understand? So, if you're squeamish, go wait outside."

The lieutenant considered the senior officer's words. He looked at Irina and her burned hands. It was unfortunate, but he had no desire to die. At the very least, the woman probably knew what they were up against.