

A Bloody Storm

Derrick Storm, #3

by Richard Castle

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Chapter 1

Ten miles outside Oxford, England ***Present day***

Flames from the engine licked across the Vauxhall's undercarriage and raced like a firecracker fuse toward gasoline squirting from the sedan's ruptured gas tank.

Derrick Storm was fifty yards away when the tank exploded, causing an ear-punishing explosion that sent the car's steel carcass flopping into the air before it came crashing down.

Only moments earlier, Storm had deliberately driven the speeding Vauxhall off the highway into the stone wall of an abandoned farmhouse, sending his passenger, a Croation vixen named Antonija Nad, through the windshield. She had been pointing a pistol at Storm at the moment of impact. Now her lifeless body was limp in the grass beside the burning car.

Storm had cheated death thanks to a seat belt, a driver's air bag, the car's crumple zone, and Nad's foolishness in not buckling up and in assuming that no one would be crazy enough to nosedive into a wall at nearly a hundred miles per hour.

Storm wasn't sure if his partner, FBI Agent April Showers, had been as fortunate as he was.

She'd been a passenger in a Mercedes-Benz that Storm was chasing. Its driver, Georgi Lebedev, was supposed to be taking Showers and a Russian oligarch to a hospital emergency room. She had been shot in her right shoulder. Ivan Petrov had been gut-shot.

Rather than driving to an emergency room, Lebedev had turned in the opposite direction, eventually pulling off the highway onto a dirt road and stopping under a grove of English oaks.

"April!" Storm yelled, as he hurried toward the parked sedan some forty yards away. He was moving as fast as a thirty-year-old man, who'd just survived a crash, could. His knees threatened to buckle. His entire body ached. Blood trickled from his ears. His skin shined with sweat and smelled of fuel and motor oil.

"April!" he hollered again.

Blood.

He could now see it splattered inside the Mercedes's windows. Storm tightened his grip on the semiautomatic pistol that he'd retrieved from Nad's corpse.

Whose blood was he seeing? And why had someone inside the vehicle opened fire on a fellow occupant?

Ignoring the shrill ringing in his ears and his shocked senses, Storm struggled to make sense of it all. The stunning and now dead Nad had been chief of security in charge of protecting her wealthy boss. Even in Storm's confused state, he

realized that Nad had betrayed Ivan Petrov. So had Lebedev, who was the wounded Petrov's oldest and dearest friend. Gold—lots of it—had turned both of them into modern day Judases.

Storm didn't care about the gold. Only rescuing Showers. Assuming she was still alive. Assuming it was not her blood that he was now seeing.

Even though he was in top physical shape, by the time Storm reached the sedan, he was gasping for breath. He grabbed the car's latch, raised his handgun, and jerked open the driver's door.

The top half of Lebedev's body fell out. Half of his skull was missing.

That explained the blood.

Storm leaned into the car for a better look.

Showers was in the passenger seat, with her head leaning against the passenger window. She was clutching her Glock in her left hand.

"April!" Storm called.

She didn't respond.

Grabbing Lebedev's belt, Storm pulled the dead man's body from the car and slipped onto the blood-covered driver's seat. He touched Showers's neck and found a pulse. But it was weak.

The touch of his fingers caused Showers to open her eyes. She gave him a faint smile.

"I knew you'd come for me," she whispered. "I knew Nad wasn't clever enough to kill you."

"Hold on! I'll get you to the hospital," Storm said. Glancing over the front seat, Storm looked onto the dead eyes of Petrov. There was a bullet hole in his forehead, as well as his earlier chest wound.

Storm started the car's engine.

"Wait," Showers sputtered. "The phone. Get it!"

"What phone?"

"Lebedev's."

Stepping from the car, Storm found the phone in Lebedev's jacket. Since he was out of the vehicle, he quickly opened the car's rear passenger door and grabbed Petrov's elephantine legs. Someone had shot a bullet into Petrov's foot. Storm pulled the three-hundred-pound carcass from the Mercedes, leaving smeared blood on the leather seat.

Two lifelong friends, now killer and victim, lying next to each other under the oaks.

Back in the driver's seat, Storm jammed on the car's accelerator, causing the sedan to rocket from under the trees.

"April! You can't fall asleep!" he snapped. "Stay awake!"

"Sure thing," she replied unconvincingly. Her voice was robotic.

Alternating his glances between the road leading to Oxford and her face, Storm saw Showers chose her eyes and he knew that he was in danger of losing her. He reached over, put his hand on her leg, and squeezed it.

Showers opened her eyes. "Hands off the merchandise," she said.

Good. She still had a sense of humor.

"You wear a bullet well," he replied.

But the truth was that she looked wretched. Her white skin was ghostly and her blouse was stained red.

Showers was in shock and that could kill her. He needed to make her stay focused, to keep her grounded in the moment.

"What happened here?" he asked. "Who shot whom?"

"Lebedev," she said in a whisper, "shot Petrov. Something about gold."

Storm knew about the gold. Sixty billion dollars' worth smuggled out of the Soviet Union before it collapsed. But he hadn't told Showers. The CIA didn't want the FBI to know about it.

"April," he said, "if Lebedev killed Petrov, who shot Lebedev? Who killed him?"

"Too tired to talk now," she moaned. "Later."

"No, now, April," he said sternly. "Did you shoot Lebedev or did Petrov kill him?"

"Me. He was going to kill me. Blame me for Petrov's death."

The gunshot in her shoulder had crippled her right arm. *How had she outmaneuvered Lebedev?*

"He took my Glock from me. Used it to shoot Petrov," she said. He noticed that she was speaking in bursts, trying to concentrate and also save her breath. "He put my Glock on his lap. Got his own pistol. Was going to shoot me. Tell everyone I shot Petrov. There was an explosion. A noise."

"That was me crashing into the farmhouse," Storm explained. But he wasn't certain if she understood.

"Loud noise. Lebedev looked away from me. Turned his head. I seized my Glock. Left hand," she said, smiling. "Didn't expect that. Shot up in his face."

Storm asked: "Why did you tell me to grab Lebedev's phone?"

"The gold. Longitude. Latitude. App. Memory card."

"You shot him left-handed after you discovered where the gold is hidden!" he exclaimed. "Outstanding! You're really incredible."

Through half-closed eyes and with an unsteady head, she replied, "I have my moments."

Chapter 2

The Mercedes's GPS directed him to the emergency room at the John Radcliffe Hospital on the east side of Oxford. Storm bolted inside.

"I have a gunshot victim in the car!" he announced. "She's bleeding. In shock. But conscious!"

An intake clerk grabbed a phone, and within seconds an emergency assessment unit came rushing from behind double metal doors. An attendant pushing a "trolley bed" ran behind a triage trauma nurse and a physician's assistant. The three of them followed Storm to the still-running Mercedes, where he helped the attendant lift Showers onto the cart while the nurse and the medic worked on her.

"She allergic to any medicines?" the nurse asked.

"Don't know," he replied.

"How'd this happen?" she asked.

"She was shot at a protest rally at Oxford this morning."

"We've already had three others come through here who were in the crowd. Why are you so late?"

"Got lost."

The nurse noticed the blood on the interior of the car windows and also on him. "We'll take it from here," she said. "You need to sign in."

As they hurried by the intake desk, Storm overheard the nurse say, "Call Security." Before the receptionist could lift her phone, Storm handed her Showers's FBI business card.

"Left my car running," he said. "Be right back."

"Wait," she called after him. "There are forms—"

But he was already speeding away from the hospital.

From behind the wheel, Storm called Jedidiah Jones, the director of the National Clandestine Service at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. "Showers has been shot," he said. "Just dropped her at the John Radcliffe emergency room in Oxford, England. You need to call."

"I'll put the FBI in touch with the hospital. They have her medical information from her personnel file," Jones replied. "I'll let our London embassy know. They'll get people out there. What about you?"

"Only bruises."

Storm recapped the morning's events at the Oxford rally and later under the English oaks.

Jones listened without interrupting and then said, "Obviously, Georgi Lebedev was a traitor in Petrov's camp. He was keeping Russian President Oleg Barkovsky informed about what Petrov was doing."

Once former pals, Barkovsky and Petrov had turned against each other after the oligarch had criticized the Kremlin leader in public. A furious Barkovsky had forced Petrov to flee Russia and had later sent assassins to kill him in England.

Jones said, "It all makes sense now. President Barkovsky must have bribed Lebedev. Because Petrov trusted Lebedev like a brother, he wouldn't have suspected that he would turn on him."

Storm said, "There's more. Showers found out where the gold is hidden."

"She did? Only Petrov knew its location, and he'd refused to tell anyone. How'd she pull that off?"

"Judging from the bullet hole in Petrov's foot, I'm guessing Lebedev forced the issue. Lebedev must have threatened him in the parked car. He probably said he wouldn't drive him to a hospital for his chest wound unless he spilled his guts—pun intended—about the gold. When Petrov refused, Lebedev showed him how serious he was. Showers was in the front seat during all of this and overheard their entire exchange. I'll send you the longitude and latitude coordinates for the gold from Lebedev's cell phone after I ditch this car."

"Delete them after you send them to me," Jones said, adding, "Do you need a cleaner?"

"Too late," Storm said. "I'm sure the car explosion has attracted a crowd by now."

"I'll call MI-6 and have the FBI pull strings with Scotland Yard. Both owe us. But it would be best if you disappeared. Hold on for a moment."

Jones was off-line for less than a minute. When he returned, he said, "About forty miles south of Oxford is a town called Newbury. There's a U.S. Air Force operation there under the command of the 420 Munitions Squadron. I'm arranging a military flight to get you out of England into Germany and then home. Best to avoid commercial flights and passport controls. How soon can you get to Newbury?"

"An hour or less unless I get stopped."

"Don't. At least not before you send me those coordinates."

Jones had his priorities. Gold. Then Storm.

"Call me later," Storm said, "about April."

"April? She your girlfriend now?"

"Agent Showers," he said, correcting himself. "And she's not my girlfriend. She's my partner."

"Right," Jones said skeptically.

"Just make sure someone gets to that hospital."

Hanging up, Storm used the Mercedes's GPS to direct him to the closest shopping mall: Templars Square, less than four miles away. He parked in the garage across the street, leaving his blood-covered jacket in the car. Storm wasn't worried about trace evidence. He'd been dead, at least officially, for four years. The CIA had helped him "die" and vanish from the grid. He'd been happily living in Montana when Jones summoned him back for what was supposed to be a simple kidnapping investigation. If Scotland Yard or Interpol found traceable evidence in the bloody Mercedes, their investigators would compare the findings to records of living suspects. No one searched a cemetery for a killer.

In the parking garage's second-floor stairwell, Storm paused to examine Lebedev's cell phone. He found the directional app and forwarded the coordinates on it to Jones. As a backup, Storm also sent them to his own private cell phone. Satisfied, he deleted the app but kept Lebedev's phone for delivery to the tech experts at Langley. *Who could tell what else it might contain?*

Exiting the garage, Storm entered the shopping mall and went immediately into a public toilet to wash blood from his hands. He had it on his slacks, too, but they were black, so the stains were not so noticeable. He left the toilet and bought a pair of slacks and a shirt in a nearby clothing shop, then returned to the men's room to change.

Outside the mall, he flagged a taxi at the corner of Crowell and Hackmore Streets.

"Where to?" the hack driver asked.

"Air base at Newbury."

"That's a long ride, mate," he said, giving Storm a curious look.

"Got into a fight with my girl inside the mall," Storm improvised. "She won't drive me back to the base. She's Irish, and if I'm late, it'll be my head."

"Birds—or in the States I guess you call 'em broads," the driver said. "The nationality don't matter. They're all a bit loony. We're off to Newbury."

They'd gone about a mile when the cabbie started talking.

Storm leaned back his head and closed his eyes. He didn't want conversation.

"You heard about the shootings at Oxford this morning, didn't you?" the driver asked. "All over the radio. Three men started shooting at some Russian speaking at a rally. People got hurt."

"I've got a twelve-hour shift waiting for me and a girl kicking my balls," Storm replied. "I don't need to hear about someone else's problems."

The cabbie chuckled. "Then you take a little nap and leave the driving to me."

About forty minutes later, the cab arrived at the air base gate. Storm paid the sixty-dollar fare and then handed the driver another twenty. "My Irish girlfriend happens to be married," he explained. "I'd like to have a face that is easy to forget."

The driver pocketed the bills. "You Yanks all look alike to me, mate."

Storm was about to board a flight an hour later when his cell phone rang.

"She's out of surgery," Jones said. "The prognosis is good. A car will be waiting when you land."

Chapter 3

"What's today?"

Those were the first words coming from Agent Showers's mouth when she awoke from the anesthetic.

"You was brought in yesterday morning, miss," a nurse sitting next to her bedside answered. "I'm supposed to fetch our matron now. You're quite the celebrity. You should see all the reporters hovering around, trying to get a story. They got cops at your door to keep them away. They told me not to talk to you, but I want you to know that I'm happy you're okay, and I don't want you to worry a bit, because I won't tell anyone about your bloke."

"My bloke?"

"Sure, your Steve," she replied. "Isn't he your bloke? I mean, I just assumed the way you was going on and on about him and mentioning his name. But don't you worry, ma'am. Lots of people are as mad as a box of frogs when they're gassed."

"What did I say?" Showers asked.

"The truth is that it sounded a bit randy to me, you know. That's why I'll not be repeating it."

"And you're sure that I mentioned the name: Steve?"

"Oh, you did more than mention him. You had me blushing, but I'm really not one to gab."

The nurse hurried from the room, leaving Showers to clear the cobwebs from her head. Obviously, she was in a hospital, which she presumed was in Oxford. Bandages covered her right shoulder, there was an IV in her left arm, and she was attached to a monitor that was tracking her heartbeat, temperature, and blood pressure. She felt a remote device at her side and pushed a button that raised the back of the bed with a loud mechanical whine. A pain immediately shot through her shoulder. Her head was throbbing and she needed to use the toilet.

The nurse returned with an older, gray-haired woman who was being followed by two men in business suits. One had an American flag in his lapel.

"I'm Rachel Smythe, head matron at the hospital, and these men are from the American embassy," the matron said. "They insist on speaking to you. Do you feel up to it?"

"Who are you?" Showers asked the man with the flag lapel.

"FBI Special Agent Douglas Cumerford," he replied, while reaching into his jacket to produce his credentials. "This is Thomas Goodman. He's with the State Department."

Goodman didn't offer credentials, and Showers immediately suspected he worked for the CIA.

"Thank you, Ms. Smythe," Showers told the matron. "I'm okay to speak to these two gentlemen."

"I'll be sending the doctor around dear," Smythe said, "after these two officials are done. If you need anything, just push the remote buzzer." She and the nurse exited.

"Glad you're awake," Cumerford said. "We need to brief you before the Oxford police and Scotland Yard take your official statement. Obviously, Ivan Petrov's murder is making international headlines, and the shooting at the university rally is all over the BBC."

"You've spoken to Washington about this?" Showers asked.

"I've been on the phone with the director numerous times since you were brought into the hospital," Cumerford said. "He sends his best wishes for a speedy recovery."

Gordon removed an envelope from his navy blazer. "This is what we would like you to say in your official statement." He handed it to her.

"The director approved this?" she asked.

Cumerford said, "He did. In fact, he said that you are not to deviate from the text. Say exactly what is written and offer nothing more. I'm going to be with you during all questioning, as your attorney."

Gordon said, "We can't stress how important it is for you to say only what has been written for you."

Showers said, "And if I slip?"

"Don't," Cumerford replied. "The British media have been busy interviewing witnesses from the rally. They've told reporters three men started shooting at Petrov and his bodyguards. Two of the attackers had submachine guns. They killed Petrov's two bodyguards, while the third gunman tried to assassinate Petrov, who'd just started his speech at the protest rally."

Showers said, "That's exactly what happened."

Cumerford continued, "The witnesses told reporters that you drew your handgun and fatally shot the assailant nearest you. Meanwhile, an unidentified man tackled the attacker who was firing at Petrov and killed him. He then used that man's pistol to shoot the third assailant, but not before that gunman fired his machine gun and wounded you."

"That's accurate, too," Showers said, "except it wasn't an unidentified man. It was Steve Mason. We're working together. He's got credentials issued by the State Department."

Gordon replied, "Ms. Showers, there's a bit of a problem when it comes to Mr. Mason."

Cumerford jumped in. "It would be in the best interest of the Bureau and our country if the unidentified man who helped you yesterday remained exactly that. An unidentified man. The director would prefer that you not mention the name Steve Mason to anyone, including the Oxford police and the Scotland Yard detective who will be questioning you."

"Read the statement," Gordon said. "Stick to it."

Cumerford added, "The media knows this unidentified man helped you into the Mercedes that was being driven by Georgi Lebedev and that Petrov was put into the backseat. Witnesses also described on the BBC how this mystery man and Petrov's chief of security followed the Mercedes in a Vauxhall. That car was later found outside of town, where it had crashed. The bodies of Petrov, Lebedev, and Antonija Nad were found nearby. The Mercedes was later recovered in a parking garage at a local shopping mall. Hospital officials also have told the press that an unidentified man brought you into the hospital. The tabloids are calling him a Good Samaritan."

"Steve Mason, Good Samaritan," she said. "He'll love that tag."

Gordon said, "Let's keep him faceless."

Showers scanned the statement that Gordon had handed her. "You want me to tell the police that I blacked out while I was riding in the Mercedes and that I have no recollection of anything that happened from the moment that I left the rally until today when I woke up after surgery."

"That's right," Cumerford said.

Showers said, "You're telling me not to tell investigators what I observed inside the Mercedes. You don't want me to describe how both Petrov and Lebedev ended up dead."

In a stern voice, Gordon said, "You can't comment because you were unconscious. Say that, and life will be easier for everyone."

Showers asked, "Then how are you explaining the deaths of Petrov and Lebedev?"

"We're not," Gordon said.

"We don't have to solve this case, Agent Showers," Cumerford added. "These deaths are not an FBI problem. Just give the local authorities your statement. Our priority is to get you out of England as soon as you do that."

"Before the police can blow holes in my story. Scotland Yard isn't stupid," she said. "When they identify the Vauxhall, they'll know Steve Mason rented it."

"Did he?" Gordon asked her. "Were you there with him?"

Showers realized that she hadn't been at the airport when the car was rented.

"But there must be photographs of him somewhere," she said. "This is Jolly Old England, home of cameras on every street corner. The emergency room here—surely, they have a picture of him bringing me in."

Gordon smirked. "I believe the camera here and the ones outside the shopping mall all malfunctioned yesterday. It happens."

Showers understood. Jedidiah Jones had worked his magic.

During the entire time that Storm and Showers had been in England, they had only been seen twice together. Once when they visited the Duke of Madison residence to interview Petrov and Lebedev, both of whom were now dead, and another when they got drunk at a local London pub. If their fellow pub revelers

recognized Showers from the BBC and called the police, all they would be able to tell them was that she was drinking with a handsome Yank with brown hair and brown eyes who was in his thirties. That could describe anyone. Besides, by the time they called, she would be back in the USA.

Gordon said, "Let the British press and local cops come up with a plausible story."

Cumerford said, "There's speculation that Russian president Barkovsky is behind Petrov's murder. He's denied it, of course. But he's the media's main target. Not the FBI or any other U.S. agency. That's why the less said by you, the better. Save your explanations for when you are debriefed back in Washington."

"And when will that be?"

"There's a local detective and a Scotland Yard investigator waiting downstairs to question you," Cumerford said. "We will let them in. You will give them your statement. As soon as they hear it and the doctor gives his okay, we will take you in an ambulance to a special flight home. I have been assigned to accompany you."

"I'll need a moment to use the bathroom," she said. "Then I'll lie to the investigators."

Cumerford and Gordon exchanged nervous glances.

They expected her to take part in a cover-up. She knew when she began at the FBI that these things happened in government, and that she might be called on to lie someday. She hoped she'd never need to. Showers had run her own background investigation on the mysterious "Steve Mason" when they first met and he claimed to be a private detective. There were no records about him anywhere—no legitimate driver's license, no private detective credentials. She had always known Steve Mason was not his actual name. It was a CIA legend. And Steve Mason had been careful not to give her any clues that might have helped her identify him. Until after they arrived in London. Until the night when they had gone on a long walk and ended up in a pub where they'd downed shots of whiskey and beers. She had told him about her father, a Virginia State Trooper who had been killed in the line of duty after stopping and fatally shooting two drugged-up predators who had kidnapped and raped a ten-year-old girl. Her father had saved that girl's life. Her father was Showers's hero, and when she asked Storm about his own father, he dropped his guard.

"My father was an FBI agent," he'd said.

If that was true, it was start. She would begin investigating as soon as got back to Washington. It wasn't much, but it was an opening. Jedidiah Jones had forced Steve Mason into her life. Judging from her loose tongue while under sedation, he had invaded her subconscious, too.

It was time for her to find out who this mystery man really was.

Chapter 4

Clara Strike was smiling. They were eating breakfast at an outdoor café in New York City on a beautiful summer morning. Storm was a down-on-his-luck private

eye trying to stay one step ahead of bill collectors. The night before he'd nearly been killed. He'd been peeking through a window in a seedy trailer park, secretly recording a cheating husband in a compromising position. It had taken Storm four months to track down Jefferson Grout, but Storm was tenacious, although he didn't take much satisfaction in it. He'd longed for a better class of clientele—and better paying ones than cuckolded spouses. Two redneck neighbors in the trailer park had spotted him and emerged with guns blasting. An angry Grout had fired two rounds, too. But Storm had escaped. Clara Strike had entered his life the next morning, appearing in his office with a sexy smile and a seductive invitation. Over breakfast, she'd explained that Grout was actually a CIA operative gone rogue. The agency had been searching for him for a year. The fact that Storm had found Grout when the agency couldn't impressed her. Grout had been trained, as she put it, to "dance between raindrops." She'd asked for Storm's help and slipped him an unmarked envelope filled with hundreds. He'd been naïve that morning. He'd taken her money and jokingly asked her for a poison pill, a spy camera, a pen that was a gun, and an invisible jet. She'd laughed. It was her smile that still haunted him. He could still smell her perfume. He was looking into her face right now. A morning breeze tousled her hair. She was blushing. He rose from the café table and walked to her. He bent down and kissed her hard. When he looked up, he looked into her eyes—only it wasn't Clara Strike looking back. It was Agent April Showers.

The military transport's tires struck the runway, jarring Storm awake. He'd been dreaming. *Clara Strike. April Showers.*

He rubbed his tired eyes and felt the stubble on his chin.

It was Clara Strike who had introduced him to Jedidiah Jones, and it was Jones who had made him more than a private eye. Jones had recruited him as a contract operative. A tracker of men. It was Jones who'd sent him to Tangiers, where he'd ended up wounded, lying on a cold tile floor in his own blood. Tangiers had been a trap. Someone inside the agency had betrayed the operation.

A black Lincoln Town Car waiting on the tarmac whisked him to CIA headquarters.

"You look like shit." Jones said when Storm plopped into a familiar seat across from the spymaster's desk.

"Nice to see you, too," Storm said.

Jones closed a bright red file with the title "PROJECT MIDAS" emblazoned on it. "Things got a bit ugly in London, but you accomplished your assignment. You found the gold."

"Actually, it was April Showers who got you those coordinates," Storm reminded him. "And it almost cost her her life."

"It's all part of the game," Jones said. "She's a big girl."

"Easy to say when your butt is safe behind a desk."

Jones snickered. "You think I got this pretty face working as a desk jockey?"

It was true. Jones's nose had been broken so many times that even the best plastic surgeon couldn't have fixed it.

"Let's get to it," Jones said. "Before you left for London, I told you there were others like you who were living off the grid. The agency helped a few of them 'die.' Others simply disappeared into our version of a witness protection program."

Jones tapped his finger against the "PROJECT MIDAS" file. "I've found it useful periodically to call on our *D or D* operatives to perform missions that must be completely untraceable to this agency and our government."

"D or D?"

"Disappeared or Dead."

"Who comes up with this stuff?" Storm asked.

Ignoring him, Jones said, "Trying to recover sixty billion in gold bullion and other precious commodities that once belonged to the Communist Party is definitely not something we want traced back to the agency or to the White House."

"I understand," Storm said. "We discussed it before I left for London. Technically, the gold belongs to the Commies who are still running around Russia, and anyone who goes hunting for it would be operating as pirates according to international law."

"That would be a position the international court might take," Jones said, "but I think a good lawyer could argue that the KGB leadership stole the gold when they had soldiers sneak it out of Moscow in the dead of night just before the entire country imploded. When the Soviet Union ceased to exist as a legal entity in 1991, so did the Soviet Communist Party, and since the KGB stole the gold, it really belongs to no one at this point."

"I don't think the Kremlin believes in finders keepers, losers weepers. Especially when you're discussing sixty billion."

"Especially when the country is being run by President Barkovsky," Jones added. "And he has access to nukes and is itching for a fight. That's why the U.S. government and this agency are going to walk away from all of this. We are not going to go after the gold, even though Agent Showers has discovered where it is hidden."

Storm looked at Jones's eyes and said, "You're talking officially, aren't you?"

"That's right. Officially, we're not interested. But I'm sending you and three other D or D operatives after it."

"And if I say no?"

"You can do that," he said. "You can go back to Montana. You can go back to being a faceless nobody who spends his days fly-fishing and remembering past adventures while he's letting his talents and his life go to waste."

"You make that sound appealing," Storm said.

"C'mon, Storm, isn't it time for you to face reality? To face the fact that you aren't someone who can live off the grid. You need the action, the excitement, the adrenaline rush. Besides, in your heart, you're someone who cares—not only about helping people but about your country. You can put on that tough guy mask for the likes of Agent April Showers, but you don't fool me. Clara Strike saw through it, too. That's why I had her recruit you to work for us. It's why I need you now."

Storm thought about what Jones had said. It was true.

"Can I assume the coordinates that I sent you from Lebedev's cell phone checked out?" Storm asked.

Jones spread an enlarged satellite photograph across his desk. "We won't know if the gold is there until we have eyes on the ground," he said. "But the pieces

seem to fit.” He pointed to a tiny circle that he’d drawn on the photograph. “The longitude and latitude coordinates from Lebedev’s cell phone pinpoint a location here, about fifteen miles from the Valley of Five Caves in Uzbekistan. It’s part of the Molguzar mountain range south of the Jizzakh region.”

“Not a frequent flyer hot spot,” Storm said.

“Uzbekistan caves are famous in Eurasian countries. The Great Silk Route that linked Europe and China used to pass through Uzbekistan, and there’s a legend that Alexander the Great hid huge amounts of gold and treasure in a cave in the mountains.”

“Their version of El Dorado?” Storm said.

“Right. Maybe the KGB decided that if treasure hunters since 323 B.C. hadn’t been able to find any gold, it was a safe spot for the Soviet Socialist Republic’s treasure.”

Jones pointed to a jagged line on the recognizance map. “This is an old, long-abandoned logging road. We think the soldiers used trucks to bring the gold up into the mountains.”

“And you expect me and a handful of other D or D operatives to carry out sixty billion worth of gold?”

“Don’t be stupid. We have contacts in Kazakhstan with a fleet of Russian-made Halo helicopters, the most powerful in the world, but how we get the gold out is not your concern,” Jones said. “All I need you and your team to do is locate the cave, see if the gold is hidden inside it, and then get out.”

“Mind if we pocket a few kilobars as mementos?” Storm said. “Remember, finders keepers.”

“Ivan Petrov told me the gold was hidden inside cargo containers that were transported out of Moscow. The containers are marked ‘Toxic Waste’ to keep anyone from looking inside. When you find the cave, you look in the containers and then come back home—with empty pockets. Simple as that.”

Jones removed a men’s wristwatch from his desk drawer and tossed it to Storm. “A present.”

“Let me guess,” Storm said. “It’s a gold detector.”

“No.”

“A laser beam that can cut through locks on the containers when we find the gold.”

“No.”

“A secret gun that—”

“It’s a wristwatch,” said Jones.

Storm raised an eyebrow.

“Okay,” said Jones. “It’s also a worldwide tracker. I can find you no matter where you are.”

“I’m not sure I want you keeping track of me twenty-four hours a day,” Storm said.

“If you pull the stem to set the watch, it sets off an emergency rescue signal that means you are in trouble and need help. Immediately.”

“No poison pill?” Storm said. He slipped it on his wrist and asked, “What if I actually need to set the time?”

“You never will. It automatically corrects itself no matter where you are.”

"A watch that works and a tracker. What will they think of next?"

"For you, a poison pill."

"Who else from your D or D file have you chosen for this operation? And are you giving them watches, too?"

"You'll meet them later today, and no, you've got the only watch," Jones said. He opened the "PROJECT MIDAS" file and removed three photographs, which he handed to Storm.

"The first team member," Jones said, "will be using the name Dilya. She is a native of Uzbekistan. After it broke free from the old Soviet Union, Islamic jihadists moved in. Dilya worked undercover for us. In return, we helped her vanish. She'll serve as your guide and interpreter."

Her photograph showed a stern-looking woman in her thirties with a jagged scar cut across her left cheek.

"She got that scar," Jones explained, "while being interrogated by government officials. What's tragic is that she was actually helping her own government at the time but couldn't tell anyone. She was working on the same side as the people who cut her."

"And she didn't break her cover?"

"No. Dilya is a very tough woman."

Storm glanced at the second photo. It showed a short, round-faced man wearing thick glasses.

"He'll be introduced to you as Oscar. He's a Russian geologist."

"Former Commie?" Storm asked.

"Probably still is one, but he liked U.S. dollars. He supplied us with scientific information before the Soviet Union collapsed. He's familiar with the gold bullion and can confirm if the kilobars are the ones that were stolen from Moscow."

The third photograph was of an American. "You know this operative and he'll know you," Jones said. "On this mission, he'll be called Casper."

Storm did recognize him. They'd worked together before Tangiers. Casper's specialty was killing people.

"If I work with Casper, he'll know I'm alive," Storm said.

"And you'll know he is, too. I wouldn't have put you two together if it weren't absolutely necessary."

Strong and intimidating, Casper was the type you'd want with you in a bar fight but would never introduce to your parents—or your girlfriend.

"You've picked Dilya as a guide," Storm said. "Oscar is a scientist who can confirm the gold is real. Casper can kill anyone who gets in the way. Why do you need me? I'm a private eye. Tracking down people is what I do."

"I need you to watch the other three," Jones replied. "You I trust. With that much gold at stake, I'm not sure about the others."

Chapter 5

"We've been driving more than an hour," Cumerford said. "Let's stop and grab some coffee."

“Just make certain it’s someplace where I won’t be recognized,” Showers replied.

They had slipped out of the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford shortly after eight that morning. The original plan was for Showers to be discharged as soon as she gave a statement to the local police and Scotland Yard. The FBI wanted to get her out of England immediately. But the doctors treating her objected, saying it wasn’t safe to discharge her on the day after she’d undergone emergency surgery for her shoulder wound. Showers had reluctantly agreed to spend one more night at the hospital but had been eager to leave this morning.

She’d gotten dressed in blue denim jeans and T-shirt, donned a baseball cap, and put on dark glasses. Cumerford had arranged for word to be leaked to the television crews and reporters lurking outside the hospital’s emergency entrance that Showers was about to be released. Hospital officials had hustled a female patient into an ambulance, which had sped toward London. To make the decoy more credible, Thomas Gordon, the CIA operative working undercover as a State Department employee, had followed the ambulance in the U.S. embassy-owned car that he and Cumerford had driven to Oxford. While the media was chasing him and the ambulance, Showers and Cumerford had slipped through a hospital side door into a rental car. They managed to leave Oxford without anyone seeing them.

Or so they both thought.

Showers was not going to London. The Bureau had instructed Cumerford to drive her to the Royal Air Force base in Lakenheath, where the U.S.’s Forty-eighth Medical Squadron was based. It had flights with medical personnel on board in case she suffered a relapse. The base was seventy miles north of London, which was another plus. By the time reporters realized that they’d been fooled and started the drive to Lakenheath, Showers would be gone.

The bullet had broken Showers’s right collarbone. But it had been shock that had almost done her in. Had she not gotten to the hospital in what doctors called “the golden hour,” she would have died. Her right arm was now in a sling and she was taking pain pills, but she had not suffered any permanent damage, although there would be a nasty scar to remind her of how close she’d come to death.

“I don’t need to fly back on a medical transport,” she complained.

“Washington insisted,” Cumerford said. “You don’t have a choice.”

“Just like I didn’t have a choice about my statement,” she replied.

“Did you know the Good Samaritan called the hospital to check on you?” Cumerford asked.

“What?”

“Steve Mason, or whatever the hell his real name is. He’d been specifically ordered not to risk calling. But apparently he’s not someone who colors inside the lines.”

“No, he doesn’t think much of rules,” she said. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“You were sleeping. Apparently, when they didn’t put his call through to you, he said a few things to the hospital staff that upset their English sensibilities.”

Showers fought the urge to smile.

As they neared the intersection of the A14 and M11 roadways, Cumerford noticed a road sign that had two yellow, bending palm trees emblazoned on it, with a bright red background.

"There's what the Brits call an extra service area ahead," he explained. "We can pull in there and get something. Most of these service areas have a food court. That would be a smarter place for us to stop than getting off the main motorway and going into a pub, where you might be recognized."

"I come to England and end up eating at McDonald's."

"The BBC has been showing photos of you almost every hour for the past two days," he said. "They're calling it the Oxford Massacre. The Brits aren't used to gunfights, especially at peaceful college demonstrations."

To Showers, Cumerford seemed like an okay guy. He'd been a special agent about five years longer than she had and had done a stint in Washington, D.C., before being sent to London. It was a cushy assignment reserved for FBI agents who were rising stars.

"I'd kill for a good cup of coffee" he said. "The Brits may know how to make tea, but they're lousy at brewing a simple cup of coffee. It's one thing I miss."

"My stomach is a bit upset. I'll just use the bathroom."

They pulled off the A14, and Cumerford parked near the front of the main service building. It was a modern, one-floor structure with large glass windows. Inside were five fast-food eateries, including a McDonald's and a Kentucky Fried Chicken, located in a half-circle food court mobbed with customers.

"I'm going to use the head, too, before I get my coffee," Cumerford said. "I'll meet you in the food court when you are done. Don't make me come looking for you."

He shot her a smile.

The restrooms were to the immediate left of the entrance, about twenty feet from the food court. When Showers walked into the women's side, there were two girls washing their hands at a row of sinks. She slipped by them into an empty stall and struggled to unbutton her pants with her left hand. She struggled with the button and zipper and silently chuckled. She'd had an easier time fatally shooting a man with her left hand than she had dropping her jeans. As she sat down, she heard the girls at the sink depart. In the quiet, she let out a loud sigh. She was exhausted, but mostly frustrated, because she knew her shoulder injury was going to take her out of the action. She'd accomplished what she'd been sent to England for. She'd solved the double murders in Washington, D.C., that she'd been sent to England to investigate. She would explain to her superiors that Lebedev and Nad had orchestrated the kidnapping of Matthew Dull and the assassination of his stepfather, Senator Thurston Windslow. She didn't know why Storm and the CIA hadn't told her about the gold. She wasn't supposed to know about it. But she'd been drawn into that aspect of the case when Lebedev started torturing Petrov in the back of the Mercedes. She suspected that "Steve Mason" already was scheming with Jedidiah Jones about ways to recover the gold. But she wouldn't be part of that now. She'd be stuck at a desk tending her wound. She wondered if she would ever see Steve Mason again or if he would simply disappear just as suddenly as he had appeared in her life. Regardless, she was determined to investigate him as soon as she got back in Washington. If his father was a retired FBI agent, there had to be some thread she could follow.

Buttoning her pants proved as difficult left-handed as loosening them. When she finally managed to complete the task, she opened the stall door, pulling it toward her.

From nowhere, a huge figure appeared in front of her. Showers stepped back and reached for her right hip with her left hand. It was where she normally kept her Glock holstered. When her fingers felt nothing but fabric, she realized that Cumerford had not returned her Glock when she was discharged that morning. She had only one useful arm and no weapons.

For a large man, he moved quickly. Showers saw the flash of his hand, felt a jab into her neck, and then a strange warmth just before she passed out. He caught her limp body as she started to collapse.

"You got her?" a nervous woman watching from the doorway to the women's room asked. She was dressed as a nurse, with a stethoscope dangling from her neck. She had been stopping women from entering the restroom, explaining that a medical emergency was being addressed inside.

"Yes," the hulking figure replied.

Speaking into a tiny microphone tucked under the sleeve of her blouse, the nurse said, "We're ready here. Where's the other American?"

"He just walked out of the men's room and now is standing in line at McDonald's," a male voice replied in her tiny earpiece. "He's got two customers ahead of him."

From the interior of the food court, it was impossible for Agent Cumerford to see the entrance to the women's restroom or a side exit near it that opened into the parking lot.

But Cumerford was not alarmed. Women generally took longer in restrooms than men.

"Let's go now!" the woman ordered.

The man she'd been speaking to immediately left his post in the food court and walked briskly toward her.

"Medical emergency," the nurse said, taking the lead. "Stand aside please."

The gaggle of women patiently waiting at the restroom doorway cleared an opening for the foursome. Within seconds, Showers had been hustled outside and tucked into the rear seat of a sedan with tinted windows.

By the time Cumerford paid for his coffee and collected his change, he was beginning to become suspicious. He scanned the food court, but there was no sight of Showers. He hurried over to the women's restroom but didn't want to yell inside for Showers, and he couldn't walk inside without creating a scene. Cumerford noticed a rest area security guard coming through the front entrance, reporting to work, so he hurried up to him.

"I'm traveling with a female friend who was discharged this morning from a hospital," he said. "She's been in the women's restroom for a long time and I'm worried she might have fainted or is having trouble."

The male guard used his portable radio to call a matron, who approached them about a minute later.

"This man's lost his woman friend in the loo," the guard explained. "Says she's just been discharged from the hospital and is wearing a sling."

"Broken arm?" the woman asked.

"Broken collarbone, an accident," he replied, catching himself before he said "gunshot."

"I'll check," the matron said cheerfully, only to return moments later.

"Sorry, mate," she said. "But there's no women in the loo wearing a sling. No Yanks at all. Maybe she's gone into the food court."

Grabbing his cell phone, Cumerford stepped away from them and called his supervising agent at the embassy in London.

"Showers has disappeared!"

"What? How? Weren't you with her?"

"Not in the bathroom. We stopped at a service area."

Cumerford felt a tug on his arm. It was the matron.

"A couple said they saw your lady friend being carried out of the loo a few minutes ago. There was a nurse with her. She was unconscious."

"A nurse?"

"A nurse and two gentlemen. One was carrying her. He was a big fellow."

Speaking into his cell phone, Cumerford said, "Oh my God! Someone's abducted her! We've lost Agent Showers!"

Chapter 6

President's Office

Senate Office Building inside the Kremlin

Moscow, Russia

Hanging on the wall directly behind President Barkovsky's desk inside his Kremlin office was the Russia Republic's coat of arms. The red seal had a double-headed, golden eagle in its center. In one sinister talon, the bird was clutching a scepter. An imperial crown was in the other talon. There was an overlay of Saint George on a horse about to slay a dragon in the center of the crest.

Barkovsky hated both his antique presidential desk and the seal, but especially the seal. It had been adopted in 1993 by his predecessors, after the collapse of the Soviet Empire. The reformers had stripped away the more familiar hammer and sickle and its motto: "Workers of the World, Unite."

"What does Saint George slaying a dragon have to do with modern Russia?" Barkovsky frequently complained to visitors. The legend had been brought back from the crusades in Libya. Why had the country's leaders put a crusader on a national emblem when there were so many better choices? Barkovsky felt he might as well be on that seal, but certainly before St. George. He had done more for Russia.

Barkovsky had just returned to his office after having a light lunch, when there was a rap on his door and his chief of staff, Mikhail Sokolov, entered, saying: "I have news."

"First answer me this," Barkovsky replied. "I wanted Ivan Petrov interrogated and killed. I wanted the Americans blamed for his murder. What do our people in London do? They sent three assassins to shoot him at a public rally! How is that blaming the FBI? And then they failed to kill him! And now Petrov and Lebedev are dead, and only the two Americans survived."

"Petrov was not supposed to be killed at the rally," Sokolov explained. "The plan was for our men to ambush Petrov and the Americans after the rally when they were returning in a convoy to Petrov's English estate. Petrov's security chief was helping us. She was supposed to make it look like the two Americans killed Petrov and two of his security guards before they were fatally wounded. Only the security chief and Lebedev were supposed to survive the attack. They would be the only witnesses and would interrogate Petrov about the gold before killing him."

"If that was the plan, then why did our men begin shooting at the rally?"

"Because they were recognized by the Americans in the crowd before Petrov began his speech. This Good Samaritan—this unidentified CIA man—was about to confront one of them. Our man panicked and began shooting."

"It's a total disaster. Now the entire world is blaming me, and why not? The men who London hired for this job were all ex-KGB, and all were total idiots. This has become an international incident. And we still have no idea where my gold is located."

"Ah, but we do. That is the good news that I have come to report."

"You know where my gold is? Where is it? How do you know?"

"We do not know the exact spot yet, but we will. Our people in England have abducted the woman FBI agent," Sokolov said.

"How does that help me find my gold? What use is she to me now that Petrov is dead?"

"She knows where your gold is hidden."

"That's impossible," Barkovsky replied. "The BBC is reporting that she was unconscious in the car after the shootings at the rally. She has no idea what happened between Petrov and Lebedev or how they ended up dead."

"The BBC is lying. Petrov told her where the gold is located before he died."

"How can you possibly know this?"

"Because we have confirmation. We have a friend helping us—someone who our intelligence service hasn't heard from for many years."

"We have a spy in the FBI?"

"No, in Langley. One of our best recruits has resurfaced after four years. We'd thought we'd lost him because he stopped all communication with us and disappeared. But now he is back and is helping us again. He sent word early this morning that the CIA is forming a team to go after the gold. The CIA is forming this team because the female FBI agent—April Showers—told them where the gold is located. She must have been conscious in the car when Lebedev interrogated Petrov. That is why we have kidnapped her."

Barkovsky let loose a stream of expletives. "We warned the Americans to stay away from my gold, but Mr. Jedidiah Jones thinks he can defy me and get away with it."

"Mr. President, even if the FBI agent doesn't tell us where the gold is located, we will still be able to find it because our friend—our mole—is on the team that Jones has selected to locate your gold. Without realizing it, Jones will be leading us to your gold."

Barkovsky broke into a menacing grin. "We have both the female FBI agent and a CIA mole." He hesitated and then asked, "But is this spy of ours reliable? How

do you know this isn't a provocation by Jones? One of his many CIA tricks—especially if this spy has been silent for years and only now has resurfaced?”

“It's true, our friend vanished four years ago,” Sokolov said. “But before that, the information he gave us was one hundred percent reliable. In one of the last communications, he warned us about an operation in Tangiers. We were able to use his information to foil the CIA's plans. Americans were killed and Jones's operation was a complete failure.”

“We can use our mole to corroborate the information we get out of the FBI agent, and vice versa,” Barkovsky said. “This is brilliant!”

“Yes, but first we must get April Showers out of England. We can't afford any more mistakes. Where should we send her to be interrogated?”

“Take her to wherever this CIA team goes. Do it there.”

“For what purpose, may I ask?” Sokolov said.

“I want Jedidiah Jones to know when they recover her body that she was executed because of his decision to go after my gold.”

“We embarrassed him in Tangiers,” Sokolov said. “We will do it again.”

“I do not want the FBI agent or members of the CIA team killed until we have my gold. No mistakes this time. Once I get my gold, then I want them all dead. I want to send this arrogant Jedidiah Jones a message.”

“Everyone but our friend, the mole, of course,” Sokolov said.

“No, kill him, too,” Barkovsky said. “There is only one reason a spy betrays his own country. There is no romance, no mystery. It is always for the money. And a man who can be bought is not a man who can be trusted. After we have the gold, he is expendable.”

“But he might be useful later,” Sokolov protested.

“Jones is too smart for that. If only one person survives and escapes, he will know that person is a traitor. Why else would he be alive?”

“Then we will kill all of them and the FBI agent, too. This time she will not escape.”

“I do not want any witnesses. No survivors. I want to piss on Mr. Jedidiah Jones, and I want him to know that I am doing it.”

Chapter 7

A military flight delivered Storm to a U.S. base in Germany, where he boarded a privately owned aircraft chartered by the CIA. It took him to an airfield in Kazakhstan. Although the Kazakhstan government denied that it allowed U.S. flights to operate within its borders, a backroom deal had been cut to allow the CIA to use specific airstrips for its covert operations in return for U.S. foreign aid, and this was one of those operations.

Storm found a late model Range Rover waiting at the Kazakhstan airfield, with a woman standing next to it. From the photograph that Jones had shown him, he knew it was Dilya.

“Welcome to Kazakhstan,” she said, extending her hand. Storm estimated she was five feet, five inches tall and about 120 pounds. She had short black hair and

a firm, no-nonsense grip. Even though she was a native of Uzbekistan, she spoke with a proper British accent.

"Grab your gear and get in," she said. "I'll drive you to our staging area, to where the others are waiting."

"Did you study in England?" he asked as they were driving from the airfield.

"The Soviets didn't allow us to travel when I was a child. But all of our schools relied on English textbooks. That is why we speak with an accent. The audiotapes we heard were from London. I speak three other languages, and there is not a trace of a British accent in my voice then. Only when I speak English do I sound British."

She glanced at him and said, "You will stick out when we go into remote mountain areas. You don't look like men here. People will think you are a Russian, and everyone here hates Russians because they tortured us for decades."

"I'll wave an American flag."

"Tell them you are from American television. We love American TV here. If you want to get women excited, tell them you are from *Dancing with the Stars* and are thinking about making a dance competition in Uzbekistan. You will be a hero!"

"Thanks for the pointers," he said. He noticed the scar that cut across her cheek. It was illuminated by the dash lights as they drove through the night's blackness. She noticed that he was looking at it.

"What do you think of my decoration?" she asked. "A little memento. Here they always cut a woman on her face. That way, every day when she looks in the mirror, it reminds her of what they can do, of their power. And everyone who sees her knows that it is dangerous to associate with her." The car hit a bump that caused them both to bounce in their seat as Dilya turned off the main highway onto what looked to Storm like a cow path that would guide them up a mountain.

She said, "You've never been tortured?"

"Only by former girlfriends"

The Range Rover arrived at a one-room farmhouse with rough stone walls and a wooden roof. It was completely isolated from any neighbors. Dilya parked and explained, "The American inside is called Casper and the Russian is called Oscar. I will introduce you." He followed her through the wooden front door.

A bespectacled man glanced up from a table where he was studying a map. Storm recognized him as Oscar. On the other side of the room, sitting on the edge of a bed, smoking a cigarette, was Casper.

Oscar stood, Casper didn't. Oscar spoke. Casper glared.

"You must be Steve," the ex-Soviet geologist said.

"Nice to meet you, Oscar," Storm replied. He glanced at Casper and said, "We meet again."

"Hello, *Stevie*," said Casper, accenting his name in manner that was clearly meant to belittle.

The last time they had met, Casper had had black hair. Now it was completely white and pulled back into a ponytail. He'd added a new tattoo to his collection. This one was on his right arm and showed a skull with a snake coming out of one eye and a knife jabbed into the other.

"Thought you got killed in Tangiers," Casper said, ignoring Jedidiah Jones's rules about revealing anything about past missions.

“Disappointed?”

Casper sneered. “All I know is that Tangiers went bad and I heard you were the reason.”

“It did go bad,” Storm replied, “and I was thinking that you might have had something to do with that.”

Casper rose from the bed, and Storm saw a U.S. Marine Corps Ka-Bar knife on his belt. The two men locked eyes as Storm readied himself for a fight.

“I lost good people in Tangiers,” Casper said. “Good men who shouldn’t have died.”

“I ended up on the floor with my gut riddled with bullets, while you were miles away sitting in a bar nursing a beer,” Storm replied, “so don’t lecture me about casualties.”

“This really isn’t the time or place for you two to argue,” Oscar said in a quiet voice.

Dilya stepped between Casper and Storm and in a belittling tone said, “We wouldn’t have been chosen for this assignment if Jedidiah Jones didn’t trust us. You need to be professional. You can resolve your personal disputes after we find the gold.”

“Scarface is right,” Casper grunted. “We’ll settle our personal score later, *Stevie boy*.”

Storm couldn’t imagine why Jones had paired him with Casper. He only knew that he’d have to watch his back when it came to him. As for the other two: Dilya seemed trustworthy. He wasn’t certain about Oscar. Did Jones have some reason—besides the fact that they were all officially “dead or disappeared”—for putting them on the same team?

“Everyone gather around,” Dilya said, assuming command.

They each took a position on one side of the square table. “We are here at the base of these mountains,” she said, placing her finger on the map. “We will drive as far as possible tomorrow morning up into the mountains, and then we will hike across the border into Uzbekistan. Our orders were to go this way.” She swept her hand across the map to where she had marked a bright red X. “That is where the gold is hidden. However, we are being diverted.”

“What are you talking about?” Oscar said.

“Yeah,” Casper said suspiciously. “Why the last-minute change in plans?”

“As you know, there is no way for us to contact Langley from the base of this mountain, but while I was at the airport, I received an urgent call from Jones. He gave me additional orders.”

“I don’t like the smell of this,” Casper grumbled.

“I was with Jones yesterday, and he didn’t say anything to me about a change in plans,” Storm added.

“You have been flying with orders to stay off the air since you left Germany,” she reminded him. “It seems that a friend of yours has been kidnapped in England.”

“Agent Showers?” Storm exclaimed. “Kidnapped! How’s that possible? She’s in a hospital recovering from a gunshot wound.”

“She was in a hospital in Oxford, but she was kidnapped while she was being driven to an English air base to fly back to the States.”

“Whose got her? Where is she now?”

"According to Jones, she is being flown to Jizzakh, a city not far from our original destination in the Molguzar Mountains," Dilya said. "He has ordered us to go to Jizzakh and rescue her."

"What?" Oscar said indignantly. "I'm a geologist. I'm not risking my neck because some careless FBI agent got herself kidnapped."

In a move that surprised even himself, Storm grabbed the front of Oscar's shirt, jerking him off his feet and slamming his head down on the map.

"You're talking about a partner of mine," he said. "And she is not careless and we will go rescue her, is that clear?"

"Please release Oscar," Dilya said in a matter-of-fact voice.

Storm turned him loose, and the Russian stood, clearly angry. "Touch me again, and I will kill you," he sputtered.

"With what?" Casper said. "A rock?" Reaching down, he pulled his knife from its scabbard and flipped it in the air, causing it to turn over so that he could catch it by its blade. "I can loan you this, if you think you can take him."

Oscar looked at the extended knife and then at Storm.

"Huh, just like I thought," Casper said, expertly returning the blade to his belt. "I didn't think you had the nuts." He looked at Dilya and said, "This Commie geek has a point though. We were recruited to help find the missing gold. If this FBI broad needs to be saved, why doesn't Jones send in the marines?"

"We're the closest," she said.

"And we're untraceable," said Storm.

"You mean expendable," Casper complained.

"This woman knows the location of the gold," Dilya said. "If she talks before we can rescue her, we could be walking into a trap."

"We either need to rescue her or silence her then," Casper replied.

"We're going to rescue her," Storm snapped. "No one is going to harm her."

Casper rested his palm on his knife and said, "I'm not like our little Commie friend here, Stevie boy. You grab my shirt and push my head down on the table and I'm going to come up swinging. I'll give you a souvenir just like our Uzbekistan princess here has."

"Why don't you two just drop your pants and get this over with?" Dilya said. "This is not a democracy. Jones has given us an order and all of us, for various reasons, have to listen to him."

Casper removed his hand from his knife and said, "Where are they holding this broad?"

Dilya jabbed her finger down on the map. "This is the city of Jizzakh. Jones has arranged for transportation and a satellite tracking device to be waiting for us on the other side of the mountain after we cross the border tomorrow morning. He has told me to use GPS to get our team to where the woman is being held captive. When we reach the location, I am supposed to turn over leadership to Casper."

"Casper?" Storm asked.

"Yes," she said firmly. "Jones was very clear about this. We are not to try to call or communicate with the Agency while we are in Jizzakh, because our signals will be picked up by the Uzbekistan authorities. Jones said it is up to Casper to formulate a plan to rescue Agent Showers."

"Jones clearly doesn't want you to screw this rescue up like you did in Tangiers," Casper said.

Although he was boiling inside, Storm kept himself under control.

Dilya said, "We rescue Showers first and then go after the gold."

"Assuming she's still alive," Oscar said.

Casper grinned, revealing a missing front tooth. "Better be nice to me, Stevie boy. You're girlfriend's fate is in my hands now."

"That's right, this time you'd better plan a perfect rescue."

Storm was worried. Not for himself, but for Showers. He didn't want to think about what might be happening to her at this very moment.

Chapter 8

Where was she?

April Showers stayed perfectly still. She didn't want her captors to know she was conscious. She needed to assess her situation. *How long had it been since she'd been kidnapped in England? How long had she been sedated?* Through half-closed eyes, she carefully checked her surroundings. It was dim in the small room, but there didn't seem to be anyone watching her. Good. She opened her eyes fully and searched for a video camera. There was none that she could see.

The chamber that she was in felt cool and damp. A low-wattage bulb dangled from the center of a concrete ceiling. The walls were also made of concrete. There was a metal drain in one corner and a water hose coiled around a stainless steel hanger bolted to a wall. She saw meat hooks attached to the high ceiling and realized that she was being held in a room where animals were slaughtered. The smell confirmed her suspicions. It was a putrefied mixture of a hundred foul odors. Flies landed on her skin. When she tried to swat one, a pain shot through her right arm. In her drug-induced stupor, she'd forgotten that she was recovering from her wound. She felt her shoulder. Someone had applied fresh bandages. Her right arm was dangling at her side. She could move it, but not without great pain and with only limited mobility. She was wearing the same jeans and T-shirt that she'd been dressed in when she left the hospital. Only her baseball cap was missing. Her sling was still around her neck. With her left hand, she guided her right wrist through it. That felt better.

Showers used her left hand to sit up. She had been lying on a thin mattress that had bloodstains on it and smelled of urine. A leather collar had been fastened around her right ankle. The binding was connected to a two-foot short chain anchored into the floor. If she had a knife or something sharp, she could cut the collar. But she could not break the chain. There was only one entrance into the room and it had a solid door. There were no windows. Escaping was going to be difficult.

She pulled her legs up to her chest. *When were they coming?* She had no concept of time, and that frustrated her. *Was it night? Was it day? Were they sleeping?*

Showers had never been a patient person, and after several minutes of aimlessly swatting at flies and wondering what might happen next, she decided to take charge of her situation.

She screamed, unleashing her pent-up rage.

"Here I am! C'mon inside."

She waited, listening. But there was no reaction. Only silence. She decided to try again.

"Hello!" she called. "Let's get this party started."

Still no reply.

There was no way for her to know that Hasan Sadikov was only a few yards away, resting on a metal folding chair outside the room. His back was facing the door and he was reading.

Books were Hasan's escape. He ignored Showers's calls and instead focused on the novel. He wanted to read another thirty pages before he would stop to interrogate her. The wait would be a good thing. He'd done this many times before and had always found that his victims were uncomfortable with uncertainty. The imagination could be worse than the reality, especially with Westerners. They'd watched too many horror films.

Hasan was teaching Showers a lesson, too. He wanted her to understand that she had no control over her current situation. She was at his mercy.

It had become quiet inside the slaughter room by the time he finished reading and placed his book into a well-worn satchel that he had brought with him. It was time to go to work. He stood, unlocked the door, folded his metal chair together, picked up the satchel, and carried it and the chair into the room.

Showers still had her face pressed against her knees when he entered. She quickly lowered her legs.

"I think we should speak in English," he said politely. He moved close to her, opened his chair, and took a seat. To Showers, Hasan looked completely unremarkable. He was a middle-aged man of medium height with a belly that hung over his belt. He reminded her of a man you might see riding the bus to work or walking with his children in a store. He could have been anyone.

"I've visited the United States," he said, smiling. "New York, Washington, D.C., and, of course, Orlando. Have you been to Disneyland?"

"Disney World," she said, correcting him. "Disneyland is in Anaheim, California. Disney World is in Orlando."

He ran his right hand through his black hair. He turned his neck from one side to the other, as if he were a boxer getting limber before a fight.

Showers said, "I'd like to use the toilet." She was testing him.

He paused, considering her request, then said, "I am a reasonable man." He called out, and a younger man entered the room. "Bring us a pail."

"I'd rather use a bathroom," Showers said.

"Of course you would, because then you could try to escape from this room. But a pail will have to do."

The aide placed it next to Hasan's chair, and he slid it with his foot toward her.

"You can do it here. I'll wait," he said. "I might even turn my head."

Considering how much trouble Showers had had when she'd undone her pants in the bathroom at the English service area, she decided to wait. She kicked the pail back over to him. "I'm not using that."

He shrugged.

They were playing a power game, and she apparently was going to lose.

"When I was in the United States," Hasan continued, "I kept hearing a phrase. It was 'I have good news and I have bad news.'" He grinned, clearly pleased with himself, and continued, "The good news is that I am not a cruel man. I am not a terrorist. I have no interest in holding you hostage for years for ransom or sacrificing you for the glory of Allah. If it matters at all, I was raised Eastern Orthodox."

"Obviously, you slept through Sunday School."

"A sharp wit," he said. "I like that. It makes my work challenging."

He placed the satchel in his ample lap and removed an old Panasonic microcassette recorder from it. After checking to make certain it contained a tape, he switched it on and placed it on the floor.

"My employers will want to know exactly what you said to me and how you said it. I have been hired to make certain you tell the truth."

Hasan shook out a cigarette from a hard pack and offered her one.

"I don't smoke," she said.

"Neither do I. It's a nasty habit," he replied, lighting his cigarette, and slowly exhaling.

His denial didn't make sense, and she wondered if her exhaustion was clouding her thoughts. Suddenly Hasan leaned forward and stuck the burning tip of his cigarette into her neck. She screamed and jerked back as the smell of burned flesh reached her nostrils.

He eased back into his chair and sucked on the cigarette until its tip glowed again.

"Now for the bad news," he said sternly. "I will hurt you much more than that."

Showers was breathing rapidly.

"I don't think you have ever been interrogated," he said, "but I know you have thought about it. Everyone does. 'Can I keep quiet? Or will I break?' It is a fool's question. Do you know why?"

She shook her head.

"Because everyone talks. They talk or they die. The only real uncertainty is how long it will take for you to tell me what I want to know. For me, it doesn't matter. A minute, an hour, a day. But for you, well, it matters a great deal." He looked at the red tip of the cigarette and leaned forward. She instinctively pulled back. He flashed a toothy grin of yellowed teeth.

He said, "Tell me, do you like to read?"

She nodded.

"Good," he said. "I love literature. I try to read a book every day. I have done this since I was six years old. I do it because I want to learn. I am always trying to improve my mind and reading can help you deal with problems. Have you ever read Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*? No? It is an important book, a very important book about life inside a Soviet prison camp where people

were abused. And if you had read it, then perhaps you would have learned something from it that would be helpful to you now.”

She stayed silent.

“Do you know what Solzhenitsyn said about Americans after he was exiled from the Soviet Union and had lived in your country for many years? He said Americans lacked the moral fiber to defeat Communism. He said you didn’t have the stomach for it.”

She drew a deep breath and responded, “Maybe you missed it, but the Cold War ended and we’re still standing—unlike Communism.”

“Defiant. I like that. The challenge.”

By now, the cigarette was spent, and he dropped it on the floor and stepped on it. He reached into the satchel and removed a spool of heavy white cord.

She watched him intently.

He said, “There was a reason why I mentioned books. It’s because I believe a person should strive to improve themselves in their chosen profession. Consider my field, for example. I could use the same interview techniques whenever I interrogate someone, but then how could I improve? This is why I am always searching for something more efficient. This cord, for instance. Do you know how many positions a human body can be tied into that can cause extreme pain?”

She did not answer.

“The Japanese have incorporated the use of knots and ropes and pain into their sexual customs. They call it Kinbaku or Sokubaku—sexual bondage using ropes. Did you know that?”

Again, she kept silent. He was showing off.

He grinned again and said, “What’s the matter? As you Americans say, ‘Cat got your tongue?’ Or did I say that wrong, too?”

He placed the spool on the floor and took a new item from his bag. It was two strands of electrical wire. “Electric shocks, especially applied to a person’s private parts can be extremely painful, but everyone who watches television knows this. There is no imagination involved. It’s mundane torture.”

He put down the wire and said, “You see, a true professional, such as myself, attempts to tailor the various tools at his disposal to the unique personality of the individual being questioned. It’s my job to find just the right motivator to insure that you will tell me what I need to know. You should be grateful that I am not some brute, but a true professional, because I’m actually doing you a favor. It is incredible how much pain some people can tolerate, but I can save you from that by recognizing your deepest fear and tapping into it. It is quicker, more humane, really. Why, I will be doing you a favor. You should thank me, really.”

“I’ll thank you if you undo this chain and let me go,” she said.

He looked into Showers’s eyes and smiled. He said, “I have used all sorts of devices on women such as you. They scream, but then, so do men.” Hasan removed a clear plastic bag filled with soda crackers from the satchel. “This looks refreshing, doesn’t it?” he asked. “Hardly an instrument of torture. Are you hungry?” He opened the bag, took a bite of a cracker. “But in the right hands—someone knowledgeable, well, let me tell you a secret.” He shook the bag and its contents. “If I put this bag over your head and crumple up little dry crackers in it, eventually you have to breathe them into your lungs and those crumbs will

scratch your insides. You will start spitting blood.” He finished the remainder of the cracker and placed the bag onto the floor. “Now, are you still hungry?”

This time, he withdrew a pair of stainless steel shears from his case. “Mutilation—cutting off toes, fingers, or a man’s sexual organ can be effective. Disfigurement terrifies people—especially women—and it is pitifully easy. The chopping off of a hand or foot. The gouging out of an eyeball. The scarring of a cheek. Have you ever smelled your own flesh burning...? Well, yes, you just did.” He smiled again and added, “All it takes is a cup of gasoline and a match.”

He placed the clippers in the row that he had created neatly on the floor. Next from the satchel came a small wooden club. “Beating people is perhaps the most pedestrian form of persuasion, and the most common.”

She realized he was showing her these articles not only to intimidate her but to observe her reaction.

“Actually, I am mistaken,” he said in a sinister voice, “just like when I said Disneyland and meant Disney World. You see, beatings may be a common form of torture, but you could argue that there is another practice that is used just as frequently in jails and prisons. Sexual violation. Rape.”

“I’ve heard enough,” Showers said. “You’re a big, brave man with your little bag of horrors, especially when you are facing a woman with a useless arm who’s chained to the floor. If you get into trouble, all you have to do is call your goons from outside. But you don’t fool me. I see right through you. You’re nothing more than a sadistic little pervert, a bug, a piece of human garbage who gets his kicks out of picking on helpless people who can’t defend themselves. Does it make you feel important? Does it make you feel potent?”

Showers watched as Hasan blushed. At the FBI academy, she’d been told that it was important for agents dealing with hostile witnesses to take command of the interview and then to both intimidate and befriend a witness. Now she was on the other side. She was the witness, and she suspected that Hasan had not read the same textbook, nor did he plan to play by the FBI’s rules.

“Torturing you,” he said, “is going to be very enjoyable for me.”

“That’s just what I would suspect a bug like you to say,” she replied.

Chapter 9

“It’s not going any further,” Storm declared.

Dilya pushed the Range Rover’s gas pedal and the car’s engine roared, but even with its four-wheel drive and climbing ability, the SUV had reached its limits. Switching off the engine, Dilya left the keys in the ignition and stated the obvious: “From here we go on foot.”

The four of them moved to the vehicle’s rear gate, where they collected their gear. All were wearing hiking boots and had sidearms. In addition to his backpack, Casper was carrying a twelve-gauge pump shotgun on a sling, Dilya had a sniper rifle, and Storm was armed with an AK-47. Oscar, meanwhile, was carrying a bag of various geological gear.

“How far to the border crossing?” Storm asked.

"Only three miles," she replied. "We don't have to climb to the top of these mountains. There is a pass that cuts through them, but it will take us at least two hours to reach because of the terrain. It's important for everyone to watch their footing."

Storm asked: "How long until we get to Jizzakh?"

"We'll be there by nightfall."

"That'll give them plenty of time to interrogate your girlfriend," Casper said, taunting him. "Maybe they'll give her a pretty little scar on her face, too—after they've passed her around like a bicycle."

"You talk too much," Dilya said. "Save your breath for climbing the mountain."

"Are there border guards?" Oscar asked.

"Only occasional patrols. There are so many miles of border in these mountains that it would be impossible to watch every pass."

Dilya led. Oscar immediately began following her, but both Casper and Storm hesitated.

"After you, sweetheart," Casper sneered.

Storm shook his head, indicating no. He did not want Casper behind him, and Casper knew it. He chuckled and fell in behind Oscar, leaving the rear to Storm.

There was no formal trail and the incline soon grew steep, but not so much that they needed to be roped together. The tops of the mountains were covered with deep snow, which they avoided where possible. About a half hour into their trek, they came to a mound of loose rocks that they needed to climb. It required them to use their hands to help pull them forward as they scaled a series of jagged rocks on all fours. Dilya scrambled up the surface with ease, but Oscar lost his footing and a half dozen fist-sized rocks broke loose and shot down the incline behind him, nearly hitting Casper and Storm.

"Sorry," he called to them.

Casper cursed, and Storm immediately regretted his decision to be at the bottom of their line. He knew what was about to happen, and a moment later, he found himself dodging another rock that came bouncing down toward his face. It was followed by another, larger stone that barely missed him.

"Oops," Casper said. "My bad."

When they reached the top of the loose rocks, they began walking on a goat path that soon led them to a cut between the mountains. The air was thin, and all of them were struggling to catch their breath. Dilya suddenly raised her hand and they stopped. She dropped to her knees. The rest did, too. About three hundred yards ahead of them were two men in Uzbekistan border patrol uniforms. Both carried automatic weapons. They were smoking cigarettes and talking.

Casper duckwalked to where Dilya was hiding.

"Give me the M-24," he said, referring to the American military-issue sniper rifle that she was carrying. "I'll kill them."

"There are two of them," she said.

"Yeah, so? I'll drop the second before he figures out what happened to his buddy."

"No," she said firmly. "You could miss. One might escape. We will wait."

"I never miss," Casper said. "And they could be here for hours."

"And for what reason?" she replied. "This is a routine stop for them. This path is well known. We will wait."

Casper let out a sigh in disgust and moved back nearer Storm. He sat, leaned his back against a rock, and closed his eyes, but he couldn't help but taunt Storm. "Tick, tick, tick," he whispered. "Every minute we're stuck here is another minute for them to play with your lady friend. Maybe they'll just pull off a fingernail, or maybe they'll take a complete finger or even her hand. How do you like the nickname *Stumpy*?"

Storm moved up to where Dilya was watching the guards through field glasses, which she immediately handed to him.

"Every moment we're stuck here counts," Storm reminded her.

"These two men are part of a twelve-man squad. They ride in a truck to known crossing areas and then fan out searching for drug runners and other illegal aliens. If Casper shoots them, their companions will know. We cannot save your friend if we are discovered."

Through the field glasses, Storm saw one of the guards flick a spent cigarette. The guard then turned, and the two of them began walking away from the pass.

"We'll wait fifteen minutes for them to rejoin their comrades and leave. Then we will cross into Uzbekistan. I only hope that the guards did not discover our new vehicle hidden on the other side of the border. It is a long walk down the mountain to the nearest town."

Storm thought about Showers. Alone, being interrogated in Jizzakh. He was not a deeply religious man, but he said a silent prayer that there would be a car waiting and that Showers would still be alive when they reached her.

Minutes later, the unlikely foursome walked gingerly through the pass and started down a narrow footpath. Coming down the mountain proved more taxing than climbing it. Gravity tugged at them, pulling them close to the path's edge, trying to make them hurry their footing and break into what surely would be a fatal run.

They watched for the border guards but didn't see them.

After about an hour, Dilya said, "There!" She pointed to a clump of trees. Storm caught the reflection of the sun off the windshield of a four-wheel drive Chevy. When they reached it, they shed their gear and paused to catch their breath.

Oscar disappeared into the trees to pee. Casper inspected a diagram that had been left inside the SUV along with a handheld satellite GPS. This left Storm and Dilya together. They walked to a large rock jutting from the terrain, and Dilya took a drink of water then handed her canteen to Storm.

"It's beautiful," Dilya said, scanning the picturesque plains that spread for miles before them from their mountain perch.

He knew better than to ask, but couldn't help himself. "Why did you get involved with Jones?"

"When the Soviet Union collapsed, more than two million Russians ran back to Russia because they knew what would happen if they stayed here. But we had grown dependent on their handouts and there was chaos. People were starving. My country is mostly Sunni Muslim, and the Jihad Group, which is linked to Al Qaeda, soon began launching terrorist attacks because our government became friendly with Americans. My parents, husband, and daughter were murdered in a

bomb blast in a café. I wanted to die, but first I wanted to kill as many terrorists as possible. Jones' people found me. They helped me infiltrate the Jihad Group."

She made it sound simple—like signing up for Terrorism 101. But Storm knew better. He was familiar with the Jihad Group, and it was one of the most secretive and deadly of all the extremists. One of the group's top commanders, a radical known simply as the Viper, was why Storm had been sent to Tangiers. Jones had needed Storm to help track down the Viper, and the CIA had learned that the terrorist was meeting in Tangiers with another Al Qaeda operative. For years, the northern Morocco city had been known as a safe haven for spies and terrorists. Jones told Storm that as soon as he was able to identify where the Viper was hiding, an agency team would be sent to capture or kill him. Casper had been part of that "kill team." It had been housed separately from Storm's group in Tangiers, waiting for a greenlight. But a day after Storm landed in Morocco, he and the others with him had been ambushed. Everyone but him was killed. It had been a trap and the Viper escaped.

"Do you know the Jihad Group?" she asked him.

"Yes, the Viper is a truly evil man."

"They all are."

Oscar emerged from the bushes and Casper finished with his map. "You girls going to chat all afternoon or are we ready to go kill someone?" Casper asked.

Dilya said, "Why must you be so unpleasant?"

"Actually, Scarface, I've been on my best behavior just to impress you." Looking directly at Storm, he added, "Tick, tick, tick."

Chapter 10

"Let's begin with the most obvious question: Where is the gold?" Hasan asked Showers.

"What gold?" she replied.

Hasan chuckled. "So this is how we will play our little game." He scanned the various torture devices that he'd carefully placed in front of him and then yelled something in Uzbek. Two men hurried into the room. One carried a metal folding chair, which he set up directly across from Hasan. He hoisted Showers from the mat and forced her into the chair. The guard jerked her injured right arm behind her, sending a jarring pain up her shoulder, but she refused to scream. He handcuffed her wrists in back of the chair.

The other guard brought a large truck battery with jumper cables into the room and dropped it near her feet.

"Didn't you say shocking people was mundane?" she chided.

"Consider this foreplay," Hasan hissed. "I will get more creative as our evening together progresses."

At least now she knew it was nightfall. Hasan rose from his seat, walked behind her, reached down, and suddenly grabbed her right shoulder, digging his thumb into her wound.

Showers screamed. He pressed again, clearly trying to separate the collarbone that the hospital surgeons had labored to repair. The pain was so intense, and she was so exhausted that Showers mercifully blacked out.

"Langley has a bird's-eye view of the dump where they are entertaining the FBI broad," Casper announced as Dilya drove the SUV toward Jizzakh. "Intel says there are currently only four men inside the building."

"Four?" Oscar replied.

"What sort of building is it?" Dilya asked.

"A slaughterhouse," Casper said, chuckling. "I didn't think Muslims ate meat."

"Muslims practice *Halal*," Dilya said. "We don't eat pork or any meat that has blood in it. Nor do we drink alcohol."

"Pity for you, Scarface. No booze to help you sleep during those lonely nights," Casper said. "Maybe we can get together after this little escapade and I can introduce you to a friend of mine named Jack Daniel's"

"Does this mean women only find you attractive when they are drunk?" she asked.

"What's your rescue plan?" Storm said.

"KISS," Casper replied, smacking his lips at Dilya. "It stands for Keep It Simple Stupid. When we get there, our little scientist friend here will stay outside and shoot anyone who tries to come in to help the other tangos."

He grabbed the barrel of his shotgun and said, "I'm going to take my little friend here and blow open the door."

"You don't have C-3?" Dilya asked, referring to plastic explosives.

"Don't need it," he replied. "A few rounds of double-aught buckshot fired into the hinges and my boot heel will do the trick. And I'll still have a few left over for the tango inside."

"That's your plan?" Dilya said. "Shoot the door and then run inside?"

"Well, it's a bit more sophisticated than that. I'm also going to have lover boy here toss in some flash bangs." He was referring to Storm. "When those bangs explode, there will be a very, very loud noise, a blinding flash, and a shock wave that will knock whoever's inside on their asses like they were standing next to a giant speaker at a heavy metal concert."

Casper paused. He liked being the center of attention and being in charge. "Now," he said, "I figure Scarface here has more time firing an AK-47 than our lover boy. As soon as I blast that door, and while the flash bangs are turning everyone into blind mutes, she fires off a series of bursts that will serve as ground fire, killing anything in our way. Amid this confusion and chaos, yours truly will charge through with my reloaded shotgun, followed by her and the AK-47 and lover boy here bringing up the rear with his Glock. Obviously, lover boy here will need to use his little popgun because the only other rifle we've got is the M-24, and that isn't going to be worth a damn in close-range fighting. I'll assume you can fire a handgun, right?"

Casper glanced at Storm with disdain and didn't wait for him to respond. Instead, Casper said, "Not that it matters, because Dilya and me should be able to take down all four of the tangos with you and Oscar just tagging along for the ride. We'll rescue the FBI princess and then go get the gold. KISS."

Storm asked, "What's to keep them from killing Agent Showers the moment you blow open their front door?"

"Absolutely nothing," said Casper. "But there's no way we can sneak into that building undetected."

"He's right," said Dilya. "Our best hope is that—during all of the confusion—they will either ignore her or attempt to use her as a hostage. We should have the element of surprise."

"Unless," said Casper, "we've got another Tangiers situation here. Isn't that right, lover boy?"

Dilya said, "It's a good plan."

"I wasn't asking for a critique, Scarface."

Showers gagged for breath and opened her eyes just in time to see one of the two guards in the torture chamber lowering the metal pail that she'd been offered earlier to pee in. He'd splashed water onto her face, waking her and also creating a better conduit for electricity, since her feet were now in water. They'd removed her shoes and socks. The pain in her shoulder was excruciating. She felt certain that Hasan had rebroken her collarbone.

Hasan was fiddling with the large truck battery that was next to her. Reaching over, he connected one of the wires from the battery terminal to the metal chair that she was sitting in. He held the other in his hand. Now that she was awake, he was ready to begin. He held the clasp in front of her face. "Where is your smart tongue now? Do you wish to stick it out at me?"

She clenched her jaw.

"Let me think," he said, clearly enjoying himself. "Where should I clip this?"

Although her wrists were handcuffed and her right foot was attached by a leather collar and chain to the floor, Showers's left foot was free. She aimed it for his groin and kicked. Her curled bare toes hit their mark, causing Hasan to instantly double over, gasping in pain. "You bitch!" he sputtered

"Careful," she said. "You might shock yourself."

Hasan lunged forward from his crouched position, extending his left hand. Just as he was about to grab her injured right arm, a loud boom echoed from outside the room, followed quickly by five other identical booms and then two deafening explosions that made Hasan believe the entire building was collapsing.

Dilya peered through the smoke caused by the flash bangs and spotted a dazed man standing ten feet inside the building with an automatic rifle at his feet where he'd dropped it. Both of his hands were on his ears. She fired a burst from her AK-47 and his body fell backward.

Casper charged down the hallway, stepping over the dead sentry, and burst through a half-opened door into the room where Showers was being interrogated. In an expert move, he dropped to one knee while simultaneously shouldering and firing his shotgun. The blast literally blew the guard closest to him from his feet, ripping a gaping red hole in his chest. The second guard was still drawing his sidearm when Casper's second round of buckshot sent him crashing dead to the floor.

In a panic, Hasan reached for his satchel.

Showers screamed: "Look out!"

But when Casper swung his shotgun toward its new target, Hasan yelled, "Don't shoot!" and immediately raised his hands.

Dilya and Storm rushed inside and tended to Showers, retrieving the handcuff keys from Hasan, freeing her hands, and removing the collar from her foot.

"Did he hurt you?" Storm demanded.

"Yes, but I can move. He broke my collar bone again."

Storm swung and planted his right fist squarely in the torturer's jaw, cracking it and causing Hasan to spit out a tooth and cough blood as he staggered sideways.

"How gallant," Casper deadpanned.

Dilya said, "There's no time for this! Let's go!"

Casper aimed his shotgun at Hasan.

"You just can't shoot him in cold blood," Showers said.

"Wanna bet, sweetheart?" Casper replied.

"He was torturing you," Storm said.

"Just handcuff him," she pleaded.

Storm reached for the handcuffs that he'd tossed on the concrete floor, but before he could retrieve them, Casper unloaded a round of buckshot into Hasan's head, literally causing his face to disappear.

Showers gasped.

"We won't be needing those handcuffs now," Casper said, grinning.

Storm flashed Casper an angry look.

"Now, now, now," Casper said as if he were lecturing a small child, "let's not get your panties in a wad. Remember Jones put me in charge of this rescue."

"Time to move," Dilya yelled. They ran from the room, down the short hallway, and outside into the parking lot where a nervous Oscar was pacing with his gun drawn. Dilya took the wheel while Casper jumped into the front seat. Both handed their weapons—the AK-47 and the shotgun—to Oscar, Showers, and Storm, who were in the back seat.

"There's a medical kit in the rear compartment," Dilya announced.

Oscar put the rifles in the back and grabbed the kit. "I have first aid training."

"Finally, something you're good for," Casper.

"Give her morphine," Dilya ordered. "For her shoulder."

As their vehicle began to exit the lot, a blast of bullets peppered the car's front hood, blowing out the SUV's front tires and causing steam to burst from under the hood.

"Who's shooting at us now?" Oscar yelled.

"On the roof!" Storm replied. "Another tango!"

Casper shoved open the front passenger door and leaped out shoulder first, twisting in the air so that he was now facing the building behind them with his handgun raised. He'd emptied the semi-automatic clip by the time he hit the packed ground.

Casper's shots, however, sailed by the lone figure on the roof, completely missing him. The shooter aimed his AK-47 at the helpless America prone on the ground. Just as he was about to unleash a fatal burst, Storm emerged from the SUV with his Glock drawn. Firing upward, his first round struck the tango's chest

with such force that it lifted him off his feet, causing him to instinctively squeeze the AK-47's trigger.

Bullets smacked into the ground around Casper, but the shooter's aim had been misdirected and the worst that the CIA-trained killer suffered was the sting from bits of flying dirt popped loose from the hardened terrain.

The rooftop assailant fell dead.

Casper rose slowly, with a torn shirt and a bleeding scrape on his massive shoulder but no busted bones. Their vehicle hadn't fared as well.

"We're done with this ride," Dilya declared as she stepped from behind the wheel. "Nice shot," she added.

"He saved your life," Showers hollered at Casper as she exited the rear seat, followed by Oscar.

Reloading his handgun and brushing off his arms, Casper looked at Storm but offered him no thanks.

"Grab the gear," Dilya said. "We've got to keep moving."

"Let's take their vehicle," Oscar said, pointing to a new Range Rover parked by the slaughterhouse.

"No!" Storm objected. "It's too easy to track." Eyeballing the street, he spotted a half dozen Russian-made, Lada 4 x 4 SUVs parked about a block away. They were part of a delivery fleet for a national chain of Uzbekistan bakeries.

Storm ran to one, forced open its door, and hotwired the ignition. "She's ugly," he yelled, "but the engine sounds solid."

They carried their weapons and equipment to the well-worn Lada.

"I should've known better than to trust INTEL. Every time I do, it nearly gets me killed," Casper complained. "If I'd had my shotgun, that son of a bitch on the roof never would have gotten the drop on me."

"It's not the size of a gun that matters," Flowers said flatly, "but the man using it." She smiled appreciatively at Storm.

"You're just damn lucky someone was willing to save your ass," Dilya added.

Storm took the wheel. About a mile from the slaughterhouse, a white police car with bright green and blue stripes came speeding toward them on the opposite side of the two-lane road. Once again, Casper drew his Glock but the car zipped passed without slowing.

"They didn't give this old truck a second glance," Storm said. "Must have figured we were making a morning delivery."

"Good choice of getaway vehicles," Dilya said.

Addressing Showers, Casper said, "Now you know why I didn't leave any witnesses behind, sweetheart. The cops won't have any idea what happened and probably will blame it on terrorists. If there was a witness, they'd know it was Americans."

Showers didn't reply. The morphine was taking hold and her eyes were growing heavy. She began to nod off. Somewhere in the distance, she felt a man's hand move her head onto his shoulder. Storm had moved into the backseat, turning over the driving to Dilya.

She leaned against him and slept.

Chapter 11

They drove South from Jizzakh toward the Molguzar mountain range, with everyone except Showers taking turns behind the wheel, so the others could sleep. Daybreak found them still traveling, following directions on the handheld GPS navigation device that had been programmed with the coordinates that would take them to the gold. Their course eventually brought them to a gravel road that snaked up the mountain. Eventually, they were forced to leave it and make their own trail. The ride was slow and jarring as the four-wheel delivery truck climbed over the rough terrain, often being forced to detour because of boulders that had fallen and downed trees that blocked their route.

As they came nearer and nearer to their destination, they began to feel a sense of anticipation. It was hard to imagine so much gold bullion in such a desolated spot, hidden for more than twenty years.

Dilya stopped the vehicle at what looked like a landslide about a tenth of a mile from where the cavern of gold was reportedly stashed. They would have to walk across the rocks. They exited the old truck.

It was now Oscar's turn to be in charge, and he grabbed his backpack of geological gadgets and demanded the GPS from Casper, who had been navigating as Dilya drove. Casper relinquished it begrudgingly and fell in step behind him, with his shotgun slung on his shoulder. Dilya went third, while Storm held back with Showers.

"You feel okay to walk?" he asked.

"Just point me to the start line."

They began crossing the rocky terrain together. "I haven't thanked you for rescuing me," Showers said.

"Nothing I won't be bringing up in front of you every day of your life," he said.

"So what do I have to do to pay my debt?" she asked.

Storm thought for a moment about how she'd tricked him in London after they'd been drinking in a pub. He'd believed they were going to spend the night in his hotel room bed, but she'd innocently asked him to fetch her a cup of coffee, and when he stepped into the hallway, she locked the door.

"The next time we check into a hotel together, I get to keep all the room keys," he said.

"What makes you think that will happen again—us checking into a hotel room?"

"I'm an optimist."

"An optimist would have come up with something better than having control of the room keys."

"Okay, how do you feel about whipped cream and pickles?"

"Pickles?" she repeated.

"Kiwis."

She shook her head in disgust. He was impressed at how well she was taking this.

"Ouch!" she cried, suddenly lifting her heel.

He hurried to her, taking her left arm to steady her.

"What did you step on?"

She kissed his cheek. "Not a thing," she said, breaking free.

Showers started walking and said, as if nothing between them had just happened, "What's the story about the gold? I know we are looking for bullion, but that's about it."

"If the coordinates from Lebedev's cell phone are correct, we're about to find sixty billion in gold that once belonged to the old Communist Party in the equally old Soviet Union. It was hidden here by soldiers after the KGB snuck it out of Moscow before a failed 1991 coup."

Showers said, "How are five people—one with a bad arm—supposed to haul sixty billion in gold out of here in a Chevrolet?"

"We're not. We're just supposed to confirm it is here. Jedidiah Jones has a plan to haul it out with helicopters from Kazakhstan. We look, but don't touch, and definitely don't sample."

"Jones is going to do this under the nose of Uzbekistan authorities?" she asked skeptically.

"Jedidiah wasn't real forthcoming about that, but he did mention several times that we had to keep our hands in our pockets."

"That should be a familiar location for your hands," she replied.

Storm had been so focused on rescuing Showers that he had not dwelt much on what might happen when they actually found the gold. Each kilobar was worth at least fifty-seven thousand dollars, and his job on this trek—according to Jones—was to make certain no one got greedy.

He drew his Glock and handed it to her.

"I already know you can shoot left-handed," he said.

"You think I might need to add some notches on it," she asked.

"Jones warned me that I might. I don't trust Oscar, and I'm not even sure how Dilya is going to react to that much gold."

"And Casper?"

"I told you once that I got wounded in Tangiers. I've always suspected that someone sold us out. Someone betrayed us. Casper was on the kill team that Jones sent in. He went off the grid right after that mission went bad. If I had to guess, Casper sold us out."

"But he's blaming you for Tangiers."

"The best defense is a good offense."

"Do you have a plan if someone gets sticky fingers?" she asked, quickly adding, "I'm talking about the gold bars, not your pockets."

"It depends on who it is. Oscar isn't much of a threat, but Casper and Dilya know how to use weapons and have killed before. They're the ones we have to watch."

"And what about you?" she asked. "Should I be worried about you and the gold?"

"I'm not a big fan of gold," he said. "Or diamonds."

"Diamonds are a girl's best friend."

"Lucky we're searching for gold then. I'd hate to have to shoot you, especially since we just rescued you."

"I knew you'd find a way to bring that up again."

"After that kiss, I'm rethinking the whole whipped cream and pickles fantasy. Maybe adding some ice cream and pie, too. Or a female midget."

"You are sick."

They walked in silence for a few minutes because the altitude was stealing their breath. Storm said, "Jones said he had a reason for sending everyone on this mission. Everyone but you had a purpose. He told me that he didn't trust the others."

"You already said that," she replied.

"What if he wasn't talking about the gold?" Storm replied. "Why would he put me in charge of stopping someone from stealing a few bars of bullion? He can always track them down."

"Your job is what—finding out who isn't trustworthy?"

"Maybe even more specific than that. Casper thinks I screwed up Tangiers. I think he double-crossed the agency. Dilya told me yesterday that she infiltrated the Jihad Group, and I was sent to Tangiers to track down its leader. Is it a coincidence that Casper, Dilya, and I all have ties to Tangiers?"

"What about Oscar?"

"He's not mentioned Tangiers, but Jones always suspected that it was Russian Vympel soldiers who attacked my team there. Oscar had Russian KGB connections."

"What soldiers?"

"The KGB's elite forces, like our SEALs. Jones was convinced that the Russians were responsible for Tangiers."

"Why would Jones put four people together knowing that one of them is a traitor?"

"If my hunch is correct, this may be about more than the gold," Storm said.

The others were fifty yards ahead of them. By the time they caught up, Oscar, Casper, and Dilya were standing in front of a steep ledge that jutted straight up for at least a hundred feet. Oscar doubled-checked the GPS coordinates and then looked at the sheer rock wall. "If this GPS location is accurate, the gold is a few hundred feet behind this rock wall. There must be a cave in there."

Casper grabbed the GPS, snatching it from Oscar's hand. "Let me look."

"This little Russian bastard is telling the truth," he said. "There's got to be a cavern behind this wall of rock."

"This area is composed of large granite slabs," Oscar said, "but there are deep cracks in the rocks that often can lead to inner chambers, some quite large. I'm not sure how the soldiers got truck cargo containers filled with tons of gold up here, but if there is a cavern, the only way to enter it will be through a crack somewhere in the granite."

"We just crossed over rocks that looked like rubble," Dilya said. "Is it possible the KGB dynamited the entrance? Sealing in the gold?"

Oscar said, "That would be logical."

"What exactly do you mean by 'a crack somewhere in the granite'?" Showers asked.

"A hole, an entrance, perhaps small, perhaps big," Oscar replied. "If the soldiers destroyed the main entrance, there should be smaller cracks. Maybe not big enough for a truck to drive through, but big enough for us to walk through."

"Should be a crack? That's real scientific. Thanks for giving us your expert opinion," Casper said. Rather than returning the GPS to Oscar, he clipped it onto his belt.

"How do we find the entrance?" Showers asked.

"Look for water or a stream that suddenly disappears into the ground. Look for steam rising from a hole. Caves are warmer than the air outside them. Look for red dirt—iron-rich soil that has been removed from a cave."

Dilya checked the time. "We've got about an hour left before sundown, so let's spread out. Oscar and I will go to the left. The rest of you can go to the right. If we find something, we'll get each other. But we don't go into any holes alone."

"That's the only way that—" Casper started to say, but Showers cut him off, not wishing to hear another crude comment.

"If you want to go ahead without us, go," she told him.

Casper didn't wait around for a discussion. Instead, he began walking to their right.

"If we're lucky, he'll wander into a cave and never come out," Storm said.

Oscar opened his backpack and removed four flashlights. "You'll need these if you see an opening. But again, wait for everyone. It will be safer. Caving is dangerous."

Showers and Storm began walking in the same direction as Casper. Dilya and Oscar went in the other direction.

For thirty minutes Storm and Showers moved slowly through the terrain, partly because it was rough climbing and she had only one arm. They didn't see any obvious openings and it was beginning to get dark. They were just about to turn back when suddenly Casper's head poked out from behind rocks about ten feet in front of them.

"I found an opening!" he yelled.

They hurried over to him. The crack would have been impossible to see if Casper hadn't climbed between several large boulders. It was an opening about seven feet tall and two feet wide.

"I don't have a flashlight, so I only got about fifteen feet inside, but the opening gets bigger as you go deeper," he said. "Give me one of your flashlights and I'll explore it while you go get the others."

"We're supposed to wait," Showers said.

"What are you afraid of? You think I'm going to cart out sixty billion in gold in my pockets between the time you go get the others and come back here? I'm simply going to save us time in case this opening proves a dead end."

Storm handed Casper his flashlight and he vanished through the crack. "I'll go get the others so you can rest," Storm volunteered. "You still have my Glock, right?"

Showers lifted her sling. His handgun was hidden behind it, tucked in the waistband of her jeans so she could draw it with her left hand.

Storm was able to backtrack quickly without Showers. He found Dilya and Oscar returning to the sheer wall.

"Casper's gone into an opening," he said, catching his breath.

The three of them began running and soon reached Showers, who was sitting outside the cave's mouth. The sun was nearly completely down.

"Has he come back?" Storm asked.

"Nope. Gone like a rabbit."

"Or a snake," said Oscar, taking command. "I'll go into the hole first, Dilya next, then Agent Showers, and finally you. He pointed at Storm. "There could be water, making it slippery, and be careful of drop-offs. You need to watch your heads so you don't knock yourself out, but also keep the light on the ground so you don't step off a ledge."

"How about vampire bats?" Storm asked facetiously. "Just to keep things interesting."

"If you've never been in complete darkness," Oscar continued, "then you are in for a surprise. In a cave there is no light, no sunshine, not even starlight."

"Like a coffin," Dilya said.

Oscar reached into his bag and gave Storm a new flashlight since he had given his to Casper. The Russian then vanished into the opening with Dilya at his heels.

"Vampire bats, coffins, total darkness, steep ledges, and Casper the ghost lurking around," Showers whispered to Storm as they entered the cave. "I might have had better odds being tortured."

Their flashlights cut through the darkness, illuminating a narrow passageway. Storm guessed they had gone about fifteen feet inside the mountain when the crack started to expand and break in different directions. Oscar continued down the main one with everyone on his footsteps. Storm checked his watch as they made their way forward. He wanted to time how long they'd walked. When they'd traveled another twenty minutes, Oscar came to a stop and declared, "We've reached a chamber!"

They crowded up next to him and all shined their flashlights into the blackness. The chamber was at least thirty feet wide, hundreds of feet long, and forty feet high. It certainly was a big enough opening to hide sixty billion dollars of gold packed into cargo containers.

"Nearly all caves are made of calcite, the crystal of calcium carbonate," Oscar explained. He shined his flashlight down and the light reflected back. About ten feet below them was a large pool of water. The roof of the cave was covered with stalactites; water drizzling along the walls had created cave draperies.

"The white that you are seeing is pure calcite," Oscar said. "Other minerals, mostly iron, are responsible for the orange and red stains."

"It's beautiful," Showers said.

"Yes," added Dilya, "but there are no gold bars, no tanker containers."

"If Casper had not taken the GPS, I would be able to tell if this cavern is behind the wall of granite," Oscar complained.

"You mean this GPS?" Casper's husky voice called from behind them. He held the GPS up in front of his flashlight for them to see. None of them had heard him approaching them. They shined their lights on him. His face was dirty, and in their flashlight beams, he looked even more menacing.

"You're standing right where this GPS says there should be truckloads of gold," Casper said. "And there ain't no Commie gold bars anywhere around here. There's nothing but water and rocks."

“Could the gold be under the water?” Dilya asked, shining her light down at the pool beneath them. “Maybe when they destroyed the entrance, they created a dam.”

All of them pointed their lights at the water, but saw nothing except their own reflections staring back.

Chapter 12

“Ivan Petrov must have been lying when he gave the coordinates for the gold to Lebedev,” Storm said.

“But I heard Lebedev say that he knew Petrov was telling him the truth about its location,” Showers said. “The two men had grown up together. They were like brothers.”

“Brothers don’t shoot each other in the foot and then between the eyes,” Storm replied. “Brothers don’t kill each other for gold—usually.”

“I’ve checked all of the other tunnels except for one, ladies,” Casper declared. “They’re all dead ends and there is no gold hidden in any of them.”

“How about the one you didn’t check?” Oscar asked.

“It goes in the opposite direction of us. It goes away from the coordinates. That means this cavern we’re looking at has got to be where the gold was put—unless Petrov lied.”

“You’re the geologist,” Storm said, turning his flashlight so that it illuminated Oscar’s face. “Don’t you have some sort of equipment that can tell us if the gold is here?”

“It’s got to be under the water,” Dilya said. “We have no idea how deep this cavern is. Let’s go back to the surface. We need rope. We might even need diving equipment. But one of us has to go down there in the water for a better look.”

“I agree,” said Oscar. “Let’s go back to the surface and call it a night.”

As they walked toward the cave exit, Casper took the lead, with Oscar following him to make certain he kept on course. But Dilya hung back to get one final glimpse of the pool of water.

“The gold is down there. I feel it,” she said as Showers and Storm stepped by her in the tunnel.

As Casper neared the cave’s opening, he could see faint moonlight coming from outside. He stepped from the cave with Oscar and Showers close behind him. All three of them were blinded by a brilliant light.

“Drop your weapons!” a male voice ordered them.

Still inside the cave passageway, Storm froze. The bright light was coming from a spotlight. Someone outside had ambushed them.

Storm instinctively reached for his Glock, and then remembered he had given his handgun to Showers. He took a step backward away from the cave’s entrance and felt the barrel a pistol pressing against his back.

Dilya said, “Time to leave the cave.”

Instead, he slowly turned to face her.

“Who’s out there?” he asked.

“Friends,” she replied, “of mine, not yours. Now, move or you’ll die here.”

Dilya had betrayed them.

Rather than turning around, Storm stayed facing her with his hands raised and took several steps backward into the light. He moved deliberately, and just before he stepped from the cave, he stopped.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked her.

“Why does it matter?” she snapped.

At that second, Storm turned sideways, causing the bright spotlight to flash into her eyes. Storm had been intentionally keeping his body between the blinding light and Dilya’s face, shielding her with his shadow.

In that same instant, Storm grabbed Dilya’s wrist with his right hand and the gun with his left hand turning its barrel away from him. It was a rudimentary disarming technique taught by U.S. Special Forces, and it, and Dilya’s momentary blindness, resulted in Storm taking the upper hand.

Freeing the pistol from her grasp, he pushed her in front of him at the cave’s entrance.

“Now, let’s go say hello to your friends,” he said.

Dilya walked from the cave into the spotlight, with Storm holding the pistol against her head with his free hand.

“What do we have here?” a man’s voice asked.

“A hostage,” Storm replied.

“And I have three.”

Storm looked to his left and saw the red dots from laser-guided gun sights dancing on the chests of Showers, Oscar, and Casper, who were standing in a line at the cave’s opening.

“You can have the gold,” said Storm. “In return, we go free and we take Dilya with us until we reach the border.”

Dilya yelled something in Uzbek.

“Do you know what she just said?” the man asked.

Because of the spotlight in his face, Storm still couldn’t see the man, and he had no idea how many others were out there with him, although he’d counted four red dots aimed at his team members. Two of the lasers had been pointed at Casper.

“She just told me to shoot her,” the voice said. “This is how loyal she is to our cause. And do you understand why she is willing to sacrifice herself? Because she knows she will be martyred. I don’t expect you to understand that kind of faith.”

“I have faith in what will happen when I pull this trigger,” Storm replied.

Agent Showers jumped into their conversation. “Who are you?”

“The Jihad Group,” the man said. “And the American who is pointing his pistol at my sister’s head once tried to track me down.”

“The Viper,” Storm said aloud.

Dilya again yelled something in Uzbek.

The Viper replied with a single command in Uzbek, and the crack of a rifle broke through the night air. Oscar collapsed on the rocks, shot through the chest. It had happened so quickly that Showers and Casper, who were standing on either side of him, didn’t have time to react until the Russian’s dead body hit the ground.

“The next to die will be FBI Agent Showers,” the Viper said.

"Go ahead," Showers said. "You're going to kill us anyway."

"Actually, you are more valuable to me alive right now," the Viper said.

"I'd rather die," Casper announced, "than have my head cut off on YouTube by a bunch of camel-screwing Hajis extremists."

Storm looked at Showers and saw that all four red dots were now on her torso. The Viper wasn't bluffing. She would be the next to die unless he released Dilya.

He made eye contact with Casper, and for once, the two men seemed to be on the same wavelength.

"Now!" Storm yelled. With his left hand, he grabbed Dilya's throat and pulled her sideways toward the ground, as he began firing his pistol at the spotlight illuminating the cave entrance. Everything instantly went black.

At that same moment, Casper threw himself in front of Showers, shielding her with his own body while knocking her down, as the Viper's men began firing. Bullets ricocheted off the rocks, making pinging sounds.

In the sheer darkness, Storm felt Dilya's body become limp and felt warm fluid flowing onto his left hand that was still clutching her throat. She'd been fatally shot in the neck.

For a second it was completely quiet, and then the booming sound of Casper's shotgun erupted. The first boom was followed immediately by another and another. The well-trained killer was using the red laser sights on their enemies' guns to identify where they were hiding in the darkness. Casper's final blast was answered with the primordial scream of a man whose body had just been ripped into by buckshot.

It became silent again, and Storm noticed there were no longer any laser sights aimed at the cave.

The Viper yelled out in Uzbek. And when one of his men replied, Casper fired his shotgun at the man's voice. His shot drew a round of rapid return fire from the Viper's pistol. Storm immediately answered that with his own handgun, aiming at the muzzle flashes.

And then there was silence.

Out of habit, Storm had counted his shots, and he knew he had only one round left in the gun that he'd taken from Dilya. He had no idea if Casper, Showers, or the Viper and his men were still alive.

No one wanted to speak, because that would reveal location. The evening's already faint moonlight was now obscured by clouds. Storm slowly crawled in the direction of Showers and Casper, picking his way around the chest-high boulders that edged the cave's entrance. When he reached the spot where he had last seen his teammates, his hand touched a body and he froze.

Was it her?

He felt a man's hair and glasses. Oscar.

"April?" he whispered.

"Over here," she replied.

Using his hand as a probe, he felt a boulder rising up in front of him and made his way around its edge. Tucked between large rocks were Showers and Casper. They'd taken shelter on the ground.

"You hit?" Storm asked softly.

"No, but Casper is. Bad."

"How bad?"

"One in the leg. One in my abs," Casper replied. "But I can still shoot."

"How many are still left?" Showers asked.

"Can't tell."

As if on cue, they heard a man screaming and then the rapid fire of a gun. It was followed by another man crying out.

"What's happening?" Showers asked.

Storm carefully inched up from where the three of them were hiding and peered over the huge boulder in front of him, in the direction of where the sounds had come from. He saw nothing distinguishable, only boulders. He inched his way out of their hiding place and crawled several feet forward, then stopped behind another large stone. Using it to shield his body, he peered over its jagged surface. Nothing. And then there was a movement, but it was so slight that he questioned whether his mind might be playing tricks on him. He hadn't seen the outline of a man, rather it appeared as if one of the boulders ten feet in front of him had actually moved, as if the ground around him were coming alive. He picked a single rock and locked his eyes on it. Two minutes later, he was just about to write it off as paranoia and exhaustion, when the rock seemed to rise up and move forward, ever so gradually.

Storm raised his pistol and aimed it at the stone. If it moved again, he was going to fire.

As he stared at the rock, he felt the blade of a knife pressed against his throat and the warmth of breath in his ear. The words were in Russian, but Storm didn't need to understand the language to know the meaning. He released his grip on the pistol.

The man holding the knife at his throat forced him to his feet and called out in a loud voice. Another Russian responded and Storm heard the sounds of people moving. Showers and Casper were being dragged from the rocks behind him.

The beams from the headlights of an SUV shined on them. The vehicle was one of two that the Viper's men had driven along an alternate route to the cave entrance. The spotlight that Storm had ruined had been attached with a long cord to one of their vehicle's batteries.

The headlights made it possible for Storm to see the "rock" that had been moving in front of him. Five bushy monsters now surrounded Storm, Showers, and Casper. They were not rocks. They were Vypel soldiers wearing Ghillie suits, elaborate camouflaged outfits favored by special forces. Their heavy outfits were designed to make them impossible to see when they were on the ground.

"I thought these bastards were a KGB myth," Casper said. "I never saw them coming."

The four men standing guard wore earpieces and had been wearing night vision goggles. Their leader came forward from the parked SUVs, where he had turned on the headbeams.

"Why didn't they just kill us?" Showers asked.

"I'm guessing that's their plan," said Storm, "but first they want to make certain that the gold is here. We're still the Russians' best chance at finding it."

Their leader issued a command in Russian, and three of the soldiers disappeared through the cave entrance, leaving the leader and two men behind to

watch their captives. As they waited, the leader stepped over to Oscar's body and began digging through the backpack that the geologist had been carrying before he was killed. The soldier removed a small device, putting it in his pocket.

"A tracking device," Casper said. "That Russian prick was helping them."

Because of the dark makeup on their faces, it was impossible to see any facial expressions. Only their eyes showed through. They said nothing, and that made them appear even more fierce.

The three soldiers had positioned themselves across from Showers, Storm, and Casper. While two of them watched with their guns pointed at the trio, the third stepped forward to frisk them. He started with Storm and did it quickly, expertly removing his extra clips of ammo. Satisfied, he moved to Showers, beginning with her ankles, moving his hands up her legs, but he hesitated when he reached her waist because her right arm was in a sling. As he began to check her, Showers screamed in pain.

"I'm wearing a sling!" she yelled. "How can I shoot anyone?"

He stepped back, surprised at her outburst.

The leader said something in Russian, and the soldier moved on to Casper. They'd already stripped him of his beloved shotgun, but he was still wearing his Ka-Bar knife on his waist.

Storm looked at Showers, and she moved her right arm slightly, pulling the sling away from her abdomen. Without moving her chin, she looked down, signaling him.

In that instance, Storm understood.

"You Commie bastards are supposed to be invincible," Casper said loudly, "but you look like a bunch of candy-asses to me."

"Oh my God!" Showers screamed hysterically. "I don't want to die!" As the soldiers watched, she threw her good left arm around Storm's neck and cried, "Kiss me one last time, darling!"

The Vympel leader yelled, "Nyet!" But Showers clung desperately to Storm.

With her now blocking the soldiers' view, Storm reached between the sling and her waist, where he felt the familiar metal grip of his Glock. Somehow she had managed to slip the gun back into its hiding place before she'd been captured.

"Now," he whispered.

Showers spun to his left as Storm pulled the handgun and began firing. His first target was the leader. Afraid that the Russian might be wearing a protective vest, Storm fired directly at his face. His first shot found its mark. Leaping to his right, Storm fired at the surprised soldier guarding him, who reacted by raising his submachine gun. Storm's shots whizzed by the Russian's head as the soldier pulled the trigger, popping off two rounds as he'd been trained to do, rather than firing a full, ineffective burst in a panic. One round nicked Storm in his thigh. Its sister sailed past his chest, striking a rock. Before the soldier could squeeze off another pair, Storm fired his Glock, killing him.

While Storm was busy firing at two of the soldiers, Casper attacked the Russian sent to frisk him. Although Casper was wounded, he released a crippling left hook into the soldier's jaw while simultaneously slipping the Ka-Bar knife free with his right hand. Assuming the Russian was wearing an armored vest under his

mountain man attire, Casper curved the blade so that it would puncture his attacker's side.

He thrust his knife with such force that its hilt pushed into the wound. Casper pulled it upward and then sideways and down, ending the man's life.

"Nice shooting, deadeye," Casper called to Storm.

They had successfully killed the leader and two soldiers outside the cave, but there were still three inside it searching for the gold. Storm checked his leg. It was a flesh wound, but the gunshots that Casper had taken earlier, during their exchange with the Jihad Group, were much more serious.

Bending down, Casper retrieved his shotgun from the Russian who'd taken it from him earlier. "I'm bleeding out," Casper said. "You two get going. I'll keep the other three pinned in the cave as long as I can."

"No," Showers said. "We're not leaving you behind."

"It's my choice," Casper replied. He looked at Storm. "I thought you'd betrayed us in Tangiers. I blamed you for what happened."

"I thought you were the traitor," Storm replied.

Casper chuckled. "And it was neither of us. Dilya was working for the Viper all along, and Oscar was a mole for the Russians. They're the ones who sabotaged Tangiers."

He let out a painful groan and reached for his side.

"You don't have to be a hero," Showers said. "We can get you down the mountain."

"To where?" he replied. "I'll be dead by the time we hit the main road. Besides, I want to die a hero and I owe you."

"You don't owe me anything," Storm said.

"You saved my life when you shot that bastard on the roof of the slaughterhouse."

"Then we're squared," Storm said.

"Not yet, deadeye. Not until after you leave and those rats come peeking out of their hole. I never loved anything as much as this shotgun so there's something fitting about me holding it when I die and go to hell. Now get out of here before I change my mind."

Chapter 13

Storm drove the SUV down the mountain at daredevil speed, dodging rocks, trees, and drop-offs that seemed to jump before the vehicle's beams.

They had gone less than a half mile over the rocky terrain when headlights appeared behind them.

"Casper?" Showers asked, but she already knew the answer. "Hurry," she said.

"I'm not Sunday driving," he replied. "But if I go any faster, I'll rip out this car's bottom."

The SUV's undercarriage banged against a rock, nearly knocking both of them from their seats. Mercifully, they reached a gravel road a mile later. The SUV

chasing them was close enough now that Showers could see the outline of the driver and a passenger.

"Casper must have killed one of them," she said.

Her sentence was punctuated by a bullet sailing through the rear window of the SUV. Shards of glass flew by her face. The Russian in the SUV's passenger seat was leaning out his window firing his machine gun at them.

Storm handed his Glock to her and she started to fire, just as Storm swerved to avoid plunging off the narrow road. Her first shot hit their own SUV's back side window and the second the interior of its roof.

"Shoot them, not us," Storm said. "We're the good guys."

"They're less a threat than your driving," she replied.

The gunman chasing them fired another burst of rounds, peppering the rear of the SUV.

Showers spun around in the front passenger seat, so that her back was now pressed against the dash, and lifted her left hand so she could fire through the busted rear window. She emptied the rest of the magazine, causing the attacking vehicle to pull back.

"I must've hit one of them," she declared. "Give me a new clip."

"I don't have any. They took them? Remember? Getting frisked?"

"Time to get creative," she said, climbing between the bucket seats into the SUV's rear compartment.

"Anything there?" Storm asked as she rummaged through the back. "An AK-47, rocket launcher, cannon, bombs? Peanut butter sandwich?"

"Actually, there's only this," she said. She lifted a bag of cr me cookies.

Storm glanced in the rearview mirror and saw Showers throwing them one at a time with her left hand at the approaching SUV. Several exploded onto the windshield.

"You've got to drive faster," Showers yelled.

"I hate backseat drivers," he replied.

She slipped into the front passenger's seat and said, "Drive faster."

"Look at this road," he complained.

They were racing down a one-lane gravel path that had steep drop-offs on its one side. One wrong turn and they would plunge off a cliff.

"Well, he's going faster," she said.

"I'm still in front, aren't I?" Storm said, checking his mirror.

"At least he's not shooting now," she said. "I must have wounded him."

"With a cookie?"

"No, the Glock."

"Maybe they're out of bullets."

Just then the Russian fired another round at them.

"Obviously, they brought along extra ammo," she said.

Storm swerved, and the wheels of the SUV sent gravel flying from the roadway's edge. Showers pressed her left hand against the Range Rover's ceiling to brace herself as he turned quickly around another curve.

Despite Storm's driving, the vehicle behind them was gaining ground. Within a few seconds, they were so close that Showers could see the Russian's eyes as he aimed his machine gun at them. At this distance, he wouldn't miss.

"This is not how I planned to die," Showers said.

"A white picket fence," Storm said, swerving, "a rocking chair, grandkids running around while you sipped lemonade. Was that your plan?"

"No, but it certainly wasn't dying on a Uzbekistan mountain next to someone whose real name I don't even know."

"Planning your own death is overrated," Storm said. "Trust me. I've done it."

Showers braced herself for what she thought would be her last breath as Storm swerved again and waited for the inevitable.

Just as the Russian was about to fire, the SUV that he was riding in turned into a giant fireball. The explosion lifted the vehicle from the roadway and completely engulfed it in flames. It crashed down and bounced off the cliff, tumbling down the mountainside in flames.

"What was in those cookies?" Storm asked. He jammed on his brakes, causing the vehicle to spin to a stop.

"What the hell just happened?" Showers asked.

"Quiet!" Storm said. He turned off the engine.

Through the SUV's shattered windows, they heard a whirling noise hovering above them in the darkness.

"Jedidiah Jones!" Storm said. "He sent a predator." He glanced at Showers and started to explain, "You know, an unmanned radio controlled military drone—"

"I know what a predator is," she snapped. "What I don't know is how Jones knew we were being chased down the side of a Uzbekistan mountain by Russians."

Storm lifted up his wrist so she could see his watch.

"I guess no one in the FBI has one of these," he said proudly. "It's a tracking device. When Dilya pulled a gun on me in the cave, I turned it on and it sent Langley a signal telling Jones that we were in trouble. This watch tells Jones exactly where I am at any time and in any place in the world."

"Glad someone is keeping track of you," she replied.

By the time they reached the bottom of the mountain, the morning sun was rising, and on the horizon they saw a Bell 206 helicopter flying low across the plains toward them. Storm turned off the road as the four-seat chopper landed. Within minutes, they were flying toward Kazakhstan, leaving the bullet-ridden SUV and the bodies of Casper, Oscar, Dilya, the Viper, his men, and six dead Russians behind them.

As they rode in silence in the chopper, Showers suddenly reached over with her left hand.

"Here. A present."

Storm looked at her opened palm.

It was one of the cookies from the SUV. It had fallen into her sling when she was heaving the others through the window.

Chapter 14

They separated as soon as the CIA-contracted charter flight delivered them to the U.S. garrison in Wiesbaden, Germany. Showers was admitted to the hospital

so doctors could repair her damaged collarbone, while Storm was given time to bathe and eat, but then was put on a flight back to Andrews Air Force Base. A car was waiting to take him to Langley.

Jones was leaning back in his squeaky desk chair when Storm entered his office and sat in the all-too-familiar chair across from the CIA spymaster.

"We didn't find any gold," Storm said. "No sixty billion in kilobars owned by the Communist Party. Petrov must have given Lebedev the wrong coordinates."

Jones leaned forward and said, "Is that what you think?"

Storm paused and then said, "You intentionally entered the wrong coordinates into our GPS in Uzbekistan. You sent us on a wild goose chase."

"For more than twenty years, that gold has been hidden in the Molguzar Mountains and no one has been able to find it," said Jones. "Why disturb it now? Especially since I know where it is and we can keep an eye on it with one of our birds."

Removing sixty billion in gold from a Uzbekistan cave would be a major operation that would not go unnoticed. There would be angry denouncements from Russia and Uzbekistan. The White House would have a major political problem on its hands—especially since Russian president Barkovsky remained in power.

"If you didn't expect us to find the gold," Storm said. "Why did you send us to Uzbekistan?"

"I thought you would have figured that out by now," Jones said.

Storm had, but for once he wanted to hear it from Jones. This time, he was the one playing dumb in their cat-and-mouse game.

"Tangiers," said Jones. "After it, I knew we had a leak. There were only four possibilities. Oscar, Casper, Dilya, and—you."

"You suspected me?"

"It's my job to suspect everyone. What did we really know about you as a person? Clara Strike recruited you because you were a skilled private eye. After Tangiers, I thought maybe the other side had gotten to you, corrupted you. You decided you wanted out. I was suspicious, but your death also gave me an idea. I decided to retire Oscar, Dilya, and Casper, too."

"Tangiers," Storm said.

Jones nodded. "When I learned where the gold was hidden, I decided fate had given me an opportunity, a chance to catch a traitor. I knew the mole would contact the Russians. Sixty billion was too big of a prize. And that is exactly what Oscar did."

"What about Dilya?"

"That's an irony, isn't it?" said Jones. "You throw out a net and who knows what you catch? Oscar told the Russians about Tangiers. Dilya tipped off the Viper."

"Twice betrayed," said Storm. "What kind of spying operation are you running when two of your recruits are secretly working for the other side?"

Jones shrugged. "Good traitors are hard to find."

"Why did you suspect Casper?" Storm asked.

"Casper had a habit of getting drunk and bragging. I thought maybe he had inadvertently talked to the wrong people."

"Casper got killed and we nearly did."

"But you didn't, did you?" Jones said. "Before you begin feeling sorry for yourself, remember you came back to work for me because you knew someone had betrayed you in Tangiers. You wanted revenge. And I couldn't afford another Tangiers. It was a price I was willing to pay."

"Casper might feel otherwise."

"In a strange way," Jones said, "fate brought us full circle from Tangiers. We learned that Dilya and Oscar were traitors. We missed the Viper in Tangiers, but his body was found dead on the mountain. The Vympel soldiers apparently cut his throat. You and Casper were cleared, and we now know where the Russian gold is hidden. It's a win-win-win in my book. The only question that remains is this: Are you done? Are you going to disappear back in Wyoming?"

"Montana," Storm said.

"No matter. Are you going to go back off the grid or are you going to do what you do best?"

Storm rose from his chair. "Right now, I'm going to take some time off."

"Take as long as you want," Jones said, opening his desk and removing an envelope. "This will help." He slid over the package and Storm picked it up, knowing that it contained hundred-dollar bills.

Storm removed the wristwatch that Jones had given him and put it on his desk. "I won't be needing this."

Jones said, "I'll keep it for next time. There's a rental car parked outside." He handed Storm a set of keys.

"Is it bugged?" Storm asked.

"You figure it out." He stood and extended his hand.

As the two men shook, Jones said, "Agent Showers will be flying in tomorrow. I understand she will be placed on a mandatory one-month medical leave of absence. She'll have time on her hands, just like you."

Storm found the rental parked outside. Jones had splurged. It was a cherry red Corvette ZR1, a \$110,000-plus convertible with a 638 horsepower, supercharged V-8, the fastest production car ever made by General Motors. It was not the type of car that passed unnoticed—the suburban-friendly vehicles that Jones insisted that his operatives drive.

Storm fired up its engine and enjoyed the loud muffler growl as he exited the CIA en route to the George Washington Parkway. His private cell phone rang.

"Hello?"

It was Showers calling from Germany.

"I need a lift from the airport tomorrow?" she asked.

"I'll check my schedule," he said.

"I'm expecting more than a ride?"

"Like what?"

"Dinner."

"No cookies in Germany?"

"Just be on time." She hung up.

He turned into one of the scenic overlooks on the parkway and look down at the Potomac River. He searched his cell phone until he found what he wanted. When he had been in London in the parking garage, he'd sent Jedidiah Jones the coordinates for the gold. He'd also sent a backup copy to his own private phone.

Jedidiah Jones was not the only one who knew where the sixty billion in bullion was stashed.

His phone rang again.

"Listen," Showers said in a serious voice, "I really do want you to show up tomorrow at the airport. I'll pay for dinner if you want. Just don't go AWOL on me."

"The last time we met, you stuck me with the bill," he said.

"Trust me, it will be worth your while. See you tomorrow, and don't worry, you're not my boyfriend."

"And you're not my girlfriend," he said. "But I have a question. You got some time off coming, right?"

"They're forcing me to take a month off."

"I'm thinking about going on a trip."

"Where in the world are you going now?"

"Mountain climbing."

