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by
Daniel Silva

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PART ONE
The Summons

I

Courchevel, France

The invasion began, as it always did, in the last days of December. They came by armored caravan up the winding road from the floor of the Rhône Valley or descended onto the treacherous mountaintop airstrip by helicopter and private plane. Billionaires and bankers, oil tycoons and metal magnates, supermodels and spoiled children: the moneyed elite of a Russia resurgent. They streamed into the suites of the Cheval Blanc and the Byblos and commandeered the big private chalets along the rue de Bellecôte. They booked Les Caves nightclub for private all-night parties and looted the glittering shops of the Croisette. They snatched up all the best ski instructors and emptied the wineshops of their best champagne and cognac. By the morning of the twenty-eighth there was not a hair appointment to be had anywhere in town, and Le Chalet de Pierres, the famous slope-side restaurant renowned for its fire-roasted beef, had stopped taking reservations for dinner until mid-January. By New Year's Eve, the conquest was complete. Courchevel, the exclusive ski resort high in the French Alps, was once more a village under Russian occupation.

Only the Hôtel Grand Courchevel managed to survive the onslaught from the East. Hardly surprising, devotees might have said, for, at the Grand, Russians, like those with

children, were quietly encouraged to find accommodations elsewhere. Her rooms were thirty in number, modest in size, and discreet in appointment. One did not come to the Grand for gold fixtures and suites the size of football pitches. One came for a taste of Europe as it once was. One came to linger over a Campari in the lounge bar or to dawdle over coffee and *Le Monde* in the breakfast room. Gentlemen wore jackets to dinner and waited until after breakfast before changing into their ski attire. Conversation was conducted in a confessional murmur and with excessive courtesy. The Internet had not yet arrived at the Grand and the phones were moody. Her guests did not seem to mind; they were as genteel as the Grand herself and trended toward late middle age. A wit from one of the flashier hotels in the Jardin Alpin once described the Grand's clientele as 'the elderly and their parents.'

The lobby was small, tidy, and heated by a well-tended wood fire. To the right, near the entrance of the dining room, was Reception, a cramped alcove with brass hooks for the room keys and pigeonholes for mail and messages. Adjacent to Reception, near the Grand's single wheezing lift, stood the concierge desk. Early in the afternoon of the second of January, it was occupied by Philippe, a neatly built former French paratrooper who wore the crossed golden keys of the International Concierge Institute on his spotless lapel and dreamed of leaving the hotel business behind for good and settling permanently on his family's truffle farm in Périgord. His thoughtful dark gaze was lowered toward a list of pending arrivals and departures. It contained a single entry: *Lubin, Alex. Arriving by car from Geneva. Booked into Room 237. Ski rental required.*

Philippe cast his seasoned concierge's eye over the name. He had a flair for names. One had to in this line of work. *Alex. . . short for Alexander*, he reckoned. *Or was it Aleksandr? Or Aleksei?* He looked up and cleared his throat discreetly. An impeccably groomed head poked from Reception. It belonged to Ricardo, the afternoon manager.

'I think we have a problem,' Philippe said calmly.

Ricardo frowned. He was a Spaniard from the Basque region. He didn't like problems.

'What is it?'

Philippe held up the arrivals sheet. 'Lubin, Alex.'

Ricardo tapped a few keys on his computer with a manicured forefinger.

'Twelve nights? Ski rental required? Who took this reservation?'

'I believe it was Nadine.'

Nadine was the new girl. She worked the graveyard shift. And for the crime of granting a room to someone called Alex Lubin without first consulting Ricardo, she would do so for all eternity.

'You think he's Russian?' Ricardo asked.

'Guilty as charged.'

Ricardo accepted the verdict without appeal. Though senior in rank, he was twenty years Philippe's junior and had come to rely heavily upon the older man's experience and judgment.

'Perhaps we can dump him on our competitors.'

'Not possible. There isn't a room to be had between here and Albertville.'

'Then I suppose we're stuck with him – unless, of course, he can be convinced to leave on his own.'

‘What are you suggesting?’

‘Plan B, of course.’

‘It’s rather extreme, don’t you think?’

‘Yes, but it’s the only way.’

The former paratrooper accepted his orders with a crisp nod and began planning the operation. It commenced at 4:12 P.M., when a dark gray Mercedes sedan with Geneva registration pulled up at the front steps and sounded its horn. Philippe remained at his pulpit for a full two minutes before donning his greatcoat at considerable leisure and heading slowly outside. By now the unwanted Monsieur Alex Lubin – twelve nights, ski rental required – had left his car and was standing angrily next to the open trunk. He had a face full of sharp angles and pale blond hair arranged carefully over a broad pate. His narrow eyes were cast downward into the trunk, toward a pair of large nylon suitcases. The concierge frowned at the bags as if he had never seen such objects before, then greeted the guest with a glacial warmth.

‘May I help you, Monsieur?’

The question had been posed in English. The response came in the same language, with a distinct Slavic accent.

‘I’m checking into the hotel.’

‘Really? I wasn’t told about any pending arrivals this afternoon. I’m sure it was just a slipup. Why don’t you have a word with my colleague at Reception? I’m confident he’ll be able to rectify the situation.’

Lubin murmured something under his breath and tramped up the steep steps. Philippe took hold of the first bag and nearly ruptured a disk trying to hoist it out. *He’s a Russian anvil salesman and he’s brought along a case filled with samples.* By the

time he had managed to heave the bags into the lobby, Lubin was slowly reciting his confirmation number to a perplexed-looking Ricardo, who, try as he might, had been unable to locate the reservation in question. The problem was finally resolved – *‘A small mistake by one of our staff, Monsieur Lubin. I’ll be certain to have a word with her’* – only to be followed by another. Due to an oversight by the housekeeping staff, the room was not yet ready. ‘It will just be a few moments,’ Ricardo said in his most silken voice. ‘My colleague will place your bags in the storage room. Allow me to show you to our lounge bar. There will be no charge for your drinks, of course.’ There would be a charge – a rather bloated one, in fact – but Ricardo planned to spring that little surprise when Monsieur Lubin’s defenses were at their weakest.

Sadly, Ricardo’s optimism that the delay would be brief turned out to be misplaced. Indeed, ninety additional minutes would elapse before Lubin was shown, sans baggage, to his room. In accordance with Plan B, there was no bathrobe for trips to the wellness center, no vodka in the minibar, and no remote for the television. The bedside alarm clock had been set for 4:15 A.M. The heater was roaring. Philippe covertly removed the last bar of soap from the bathroom, then, after being offered no gratuity, slipped out the door, with a promise that the bags would be delivered in short order. Ricardo was waiting for him as he came off the lift.

‘How many vodkas did he drink in the bar?’

‘Seven,’ said Ricardo.

The concierge put his teeth together and hissed contemptuously. Only a Russian could drink seven vodkas in an hour and a half and still remain on his feet.

‘What do you think?’ asked Ricardo. ‘Mobster, spy, or hit man?’

It didn’t matter, thought Philippe gloomily. The walls of the Grand had been breached by a Russian. *Resistance* was now the order of the day. They retreated to their respective outposts, Ricardo to the grotto of Reception, Philippe to his pulpit near the lift. Ten minutes later came the first call from Room 237. Ricardo endured a Stalin-esque tirade before murmuring a few soothing words and hanging up the phone. He looked at Philippe and smiled.

‘Monsieur Lubin was wondering when his bags might arrive.’

‘I’ll see to it right away,’ said Philippe, smothering a yawn.

‘He was also wondering whether something could be done about the heat in his room. He says it’s too warm, and the thermostat doesn’t seem to work.’

Philippe picked up his telephone and dialed Maintenance.

‘Turn the heat up in Room 237,’ he said. ‘Monsieur Lubin is cold.’

Had they witnessed the first few moments of Lubin’s stay, they would have felt certain in their belief that a miscreant was in their midst. How else to explain that he removed all the drawers from the chest and the bedside tables and unscrewed all the bulbs from the lamps and the light fixtures? Or that he stripped bare the deluxe queen-size bed and pried the lid from the two-line message-center telephone? Or that he poured a complimentary bottle of mineral water into the toilet and hurled a pair of chocolates by Touvier of Geneva into the snow-filled street? Or

that, having completed his rampage, he then returned the room to the near-pristine state in which he had found it?

It was because of his profession that he took these rather drastic measures, but his profession was not one of those suggested by Ricardo the receptionist. Aleksandr Viktorovich Lubin was neither a mobster nor a spy, nor a hit man, only a practitioner of the most dangerous trade one could choose in the brave New Russia: the trade of journalism. And not just any type of journalism: *independent* journalism. His magazine, *Moskovsky Gazeta*, was one of the country's last investigative weeklies and had been a persistent stone in the shoe of the Kremlin. Its reporters and photographers were watched and harassed constantly, not only by the secret police but by the private security services of the powerful oligarchs they attempted to cover. Courchevel was now crawling with such men. Men who thought nothing of sprinkling transmitters and poisons around hotel rooms. Men who operated by the creed of Stalin: *Death solves all problems. No man, no problem.*

Confident the room had not been tampered with, Lubin again dialed the concierge to check on his bags and was informed they would arrive 'imminently.' Then, after throwing open the balcony doors to the cold evening air, he settled himself at the writing desk and removed a file folder from his dog-eared leather briefcase. It had been given to him the previous evening by Boris Ostrovsky, the *Gazeta's* editor in chief. Their meeting had taken place not in the *Gazeta's* offices, which were assumed to be thoroughly bugged, but on a bench in the Arbatskaya Metro station.

I'm only going to give you part of the picture, Ostrovsky had said, handing Lubin the documents with practiced indifference.

It's for your own protection. Do you understand, Aleksandr? Lubin had understood perfectly. Ostrovsky was handing him an assignment that could get him killed.

He opened the file now and examined the photograph that lay atop the dossier. It showed a well-dressed man with cropped dark hair and a prizefighter's rugged face standing at the side of the Russian president at a Kremlin reception. Attached to the photo was a thumbnail biography – wholly unnecessary, because Aleksandr Lubin, like every other journalist in Moscow, could recite the particulars of Ivan Borisovich Kharkov's remarkable career from memory. *Son of a senior KGB officer . . . graduate of the prestigious Moscow State University . . . boy wonder of the KGB's Fifth Main Directorate . . .* As the empire was crumbling, Kharkov had left the KGB and earned a fortune in banking during the anarchic early years of Russian capitalism. He had invested wisely in energy, raw materials, and real estate, and by the dawn of the millennium had joined Moscow's growing cadre of newly minted multimillionaires. Among his many holdings was a shipping and air freight company with tentacles stretching across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. The true size of his financial empire was impossible for an outsider to estimate. A relative newcomer to capitalism, Ivan Kharkov had mastered the art of the front company and the corporate shell.

Lubin flipped to the next page of the dossier, a glossy magazine-quality photograph of 'Château Kharkov,' Ivan's winter palace on the rue de Nogentil in Courchevel.

He spends the winter holiday there along with every other rich and famous Russian, Ostrovsky had said. *Watch your step around the house. Ivan's goons are all former Spetsnaz and OMON. Do*

you hear what I'm saying to you, Aleksandr? I don't want you to end up like Irina Chernova.

Irina Chernova was the famous journalist from the *Gazeta's* main rival who had exposed one of Kharkov's shadier investments. Two nights after the article appeared, she had been shot to death by a pair of hired assassins in the elevator of her Moscow apartment building. Ostrovsky, for reasons known only to him, had included a photograph of her bullet-riddled body in the dossier. Now, as then, Lubin turned it over quickly.

Ivan usually operates behind tightly closed doors. Courchevel is one of the few places where he actually moves around in public. We want you to follow him, Aleksandr. We want to know who he's meeting with. Who he's skiing with. Who he's taking to lunch. Get pictures when you can, but never approach him. And don't tell anyone in town where you work. Ivan's security boys can smell a reporter a mile away.

Ostrovsky had then handed Lubin an envelope containing airline tickets, a rental car reservation, and hotel accommodations. *Check in with the office every couple of days, Ostrovsky had said. And try to have some fun, Aleksandr. Your colleagues are all very jealous. You get to go to Courchevel and party with the rich and famous while we freeze to death in Moscow.*

On that note, Ostrovsky had risen to his feet and walked to the edge of the platform. Lubin had slipped the dossier into his briefcase and immediately broken into a drenching sweat. He was sweating again now. *The damn heat!* The furnace was still blazing away. He was starting to reach for the telephone to lodge another complaint when finally he heard the knock. He covered the length of the short entrance hall in two resentful strides and flung open the door without

bothering to ask who was on the other side. *A mistake*, he thought immediately, for standing in the semidarkness of the corridor was a man of medium height, dressed in a dark ski jacket, a woolen cap, and mirrored goggles.

Lubin was wondering why anyone would wear goggles inside a hotel at night when the first blow came, a vicious sideways chop that seemed to crush his windpipe. The second strike, a well-aimed kick to the groin, caused his body to bend in half at the waist. He was able to emit no protest as the man slipped into the room and closed the door soundlessly behind him. Nor was he able to resist when the man forced him onto the bed and sat astride his hips. The knife that emerged from the inside of the ski jacket was the type wielded by elite soldiers. It entered Lubin's abdomen just below the ribs and plunged upward toward his heart. As his chest cavity filled with blood, Lubin was forced to suffer the additional indignity of watching his own death reflected in the mirrored lenses of his killer's goggles. The assassin released his grip on the knife and, with the weapon still lodged in Lubin's chest, rose from the bed and calmly collected the dossier. Aleksandr Lubin felt his heart beat a final time as his killer slipped silently from the room. *The beat*, he was thinking. *The damn beat . . .*

It was shortly after seven when Philippe finally collected Monsieur Lubin's bags from storage and loaded them onto the lift. Arriving at Room 237, he found the DO NOT DISTURB sign hanging from the latch. In accordance with the conventions of Plan B, he gave the door three thunderous knocks. Receiving no reply, he drew his passkey from his pocket and entered, just far enough to see two size-twelve

Russian loafers hanging a few inches off the end of the bed. He left the bags in the entrance hall and returned to the lobby, where he delivered a report of his findings to Ricardo.

‘Passed out drunk.’

The Spaniard glanced at his watch. ‘It’s early, even for a Russian. What now?’

‘We’ll let him sleep it off. In the morning, when he’s good and hungover, we’ll initiate Phase Two.’

The Spaniard smiled. No guest had ever survived Phase Two. Phase Two was always fatal.

Umbria, Italy

The Villa dei Fiori, a thousand-acre estate in the rolling hills between the Tiber and Nera rivers, had been a possession of the Gasparri family since the days when Umbria was still ruled by the popes. There was a large and lucrative cattle operation and an equestrian center that bred some of the finest jumpers in all of Italy. There were pigs no one ate and a flock of goats kept solely for entertainment value. There were khaki-colored fields of hay, hill-sides ablaze with sunflowers, olive groves that produced some of Umbria's best oil, and a small vineyard that contributed several hundred pounds of grapes each year to the local cooperative. On the highest part of the land lay a swath of untamed woods where it was not safe to walk because of the wild boar. Scattered round the estate were shrines to the Madonna, and, at an intersection of three dusty gravel roads, stood an imposing wood-carved crucifix. Everywhere, there were dogs: a quartet of hounds that roamed the pastures, devouring fox and rabbit, and a pair of neurotic terriers that patrolled the perimeter of the stables with the fervor of holy warriors.

The villa itself stood at the southern edge of the property and was reached by a long gravel drive lined with towering umbrella pine. In the eleventh century, it had been a monastery. There was still a small chapel, and, in the walled

interior courtyard, the remains of an oven where the brothers had baked their daily bread. The doors to the courtyard were fashioned of heavy wood and iron and looked as though they had been built to withstand pagan assault. At the base of the house was a large swimming pool, and adjacent to the pool was a trellised garden where rosemary and lavender grew along walls of Etruscan stone.

Count Gasparri, a faded Italian nobleman with close ties to the Vatican, did not rent the villa; nor did he make a habit of lending it to friends and relatives, which was why the staff were surprised by the news that they would be playing host to a long-term guest. 'His name is Alessio Vianelli,' the count informed Margherita, the housekeeper, by telephone from his office in Rome. 'He's working on a special project for the Holy Father. You're not to disturb him. You're not to talk to him. But, most important, you are not to tell a soul he's there. As far as you're concerned, this man is a nonperson. He does not exist.'

'And where shall I put this nonperson?' asked Margherita.

'In the master suite, overlooking the swimming pool. And remove everything from the drawing room, including the paintings and the tapestries. He plans to use it as his work space.'

'Everything?'

'*Everything.*'

'Will Anna be cooking for him?'

'I've offered her services, but, as yet, have received no answer.'

'Will he be having any guests?'

'It is not outside the realm of possibility.'

‘What time should we expect him?’

‘He refuses to say. He’s rather vague, our Signore Vianelli.’

As it turned out, he arrived in the dead of night – some-time after three, according to Margherita, who was in her room above the chapel at the time and woke with the sound of his car. She glimpsed him briefly as he stole across the courtyard in the moonlight, a dark-haired man, thin as a rail, with a duffel bag in one hand and a Maglite torch in the other. He used the torch to read the note she had left at the entrance of the villa, then slipped inside with the air of a thief stealing into his own home. A moment later, a light came on in the master bedroom, and she could see him prowling restlessly about, as though looking for a lost object. He appeared briefly in the window, and, for several tense seconds, they gazed at each other across the courtyard. Then he gave her a single soldierly nod and drew the shutters closed with an emphatic thump.

They greeted each other properly the next morning at breakfast. After an exchange of polite but cool pleasantries, he said he had come to the Villa dei Fiori for the purposes of work. Once that work began, he explained, noise and interruptions were to be kept to a minimum, though he neglected to say precisely what sort of work he would be doing or how they would know whether it had commenced. He then forbade Margherita to enter his rooms under any circumstances and informed a devastated Anna he would be seeing to his own meals. When recounting the details of the meeting for the rest of the staff, Margherita described his demeanor as ‘standoffish.’

Anna, who took an instant loathing to him, was far less charitable in her depiction. ‘Unbearably rude,’ she said. ‘The sooner he’s gone, the better.’

His life quickly acquired a strict routine. After a spartan breakfast of espresso and dry toast, he would set out on a long forced march around the estate. At first, he snapped at the dogs when they followed him, but eventually he seemed resigned to their company. He walked through the olive groves and the sunflowers and even ventured into the woods. When Carlos pleaded with him to carry a shotgun because of the wild boar, he calmly assured Carlos that he could look after himself.

After his walk, he would spend a few moments tending to his quarters and laundry, then prepare a light lunch – usually a bit of bread and local cheese, pasta with canned tomato sauce if he was feeling particularly adventurous. Then, after a vigorous swim in the pool, he would settle in the garden with a bottle of Orvieto and a stack of books about Italian painters. His car, a battered Volkswagen Passat, gathered a thick layer of dust, for not once did he set foot outside the estate. Anna went to market for him, resentfully filling her basket with the air of a virtuoso forced to play a child’s simple tune. Once, she tried to slip a few local delights past his defenses, but the next morning, when she arrived for work, the food was waiting for her on the kitchen counter, along with a note explaining that she had left these things in his refrigerator by mistake. The handwriting was exquisite.

As the days ground gloriously past, the nonperson called Alessio Vianelli, and the nature of his mysterious work on behalf of the Holy Father, became something of

an obsession for the staff of the Villa dei Fiori. Margherita, a temperamental soul herself, thought him a missionary recently returned from some hostile region of the world. Anna suspected a fallen priest who had been cast into Umbrian exile, but then Anna was inclined to see the worst in him. Isabella, the ethereal half Swede who oversaw the horse operation, believed him to be a recluse theologian at work on an important Church document. Carlos, the Argentine cowboy who tended the cattle, reckoned he was an agent of Vatican intelligence. To support this theory, he cited the nature of Signore Vianelli's Italian, which, while fluent, was tinged with a faint accent that spoke of many years in foreign lands. And then there were the eyes, which were an unnerving shade of emerald green. 'Take a look into them, if you dare,' Carlos said. 'He has the eyes of a man who knows death.'

During the second week, there were a series of events that clouded the mystery further. The first was the arrival of a tall young woman with riotous auburn hair and eyes the color of caramel. She called herself Francesca, spoke Italian with a pronounced Venetian accent, and proved to be a much-needed breath of fresh air. She rode the horses – '*Quite well, actually,*' Isabella informed the others – and organized elaborate games involving the goats and the dogs. She secretly permitted Margherita to clean Signore Vianelli's rooms and even encouraged Anna to cook. Whether they were husband and wife was unclear. Margherita, however, was sure of two things: Signore Vianelli and Francesca were sharing the same bed, and his mood had improved dramatically since her arrival.

And then there were the delivery trucks. The first

dispensed a white table of the sort found in professional laboratories; the second, a large microscope with a retractable arm. Then came a pair of lamps that, when switched on, made the entire villa glow with an intense white light. Then it was a case of chemicals that, when opened, made Margherita feel faint from the stench. Other parcels arrived in rapid succession: two large easels of varnished oak from Venice, a strange-looking magnifying visor, bundles of cotton wool, woodworking tools, dowels, brushes, professional-grade glue, and several dozen vessels of pigment.

Finally, three weeks after Signore Vianelli's arrival in Umbria, a dark green panel van eased its way slowly up the tree-lined drive, followed by an official-looking Lancia sedan. The two vehicles had no markings, but their distinct SCV license plates spoke of links to the Holy See. From the back of the van emerged a vast, ghastly painting depicting a man being disemboweled. It was soon propped on the two large easels in Count Gasparri's drawing room.

Isabella, who had studied art history before devoting her life to horses, recognized the canvas immediately as *Martyrdom of St. Erasmus* by the French painter Nicolas Poussin. Rendered in the style of Caravaggio, it had been commissioned by the Vatican in 1628 and resided now in the Pinacoteca at the Vatican Museums. That evening, at the staff dinner, she announced that the mystery was solved. Signore Alessio Vianelli was a famous art restorer. And he had been retained by the Vatican to save a painting.

His days took on a distinctly monastic rhythm. He toiled from dawn till midday, slept through the heat of the afternoon, then worked again from dusk until dinner. For the

first week, the painting remained on the worktable, where he examined the surface with the microscope, made a series of detailed photographs, and performed structural reinforcements on the canvas and stretcher. Then he transferred the canvas to the easels and began removing the surface grime and yellowed varnish. It was a markedly tedious task. First he would fashion a swab, using a blob of cotton wool and a wooden dowel; then he would dip the swab in solvent and twirl it over the surface of the painting – *gently*, Isabella explained to the others, so as not to cause any additional flaking of the paint. Each swab could clean about a square inch of the painting. When it became too soiled to use any longer, he would drop it on the floor at his feet and start the process over again. Margherita likened it to cleaning the entire villa with a toothbrush. ‘No wonder he’s so peculiar,’ she said. ‘His work drives him mad.’

When he finished removing the old varnish, he covered the canvas in a coat of isolating varnish and began the final phase of the restoration, retouching those portions of the painting that had been lost to time and stress. So perfect was his mimicry of Poussin that it was impossible to tell where the painter’s work ended and his began. He even added faux craquelure, the fine webbing of surface cracks, so that the new faded flawlessly into the old. Isabella knew enough of the Italian art community to realize Signore Vianelli was no ordinary restorer. He was special, she thought. It was no wonder the men of the Vatican had entrusted him with their masterpiece.

But why was he working here at an isolated farm in the hills of Umbria instead of the state-of-the-art conservation

labs at the Vatican? She was pondering this question, on a brilliant afternoon in early June, when she saw the restorer's car speeding down the tree-lined drive. He gave her a curt, soldierly wave as he went hurtling past the stables, then disappeared behind a cloud of pale gray dust. Isabella spent the remainder of the afternoon wrestling with a new question. Why, after remaining a prisoner of the villa for five weeks, was he suddenly leaving for the first time? Though she would never know it, the restorer had been summoned by other masters. As for the Poussin, he would never touch it again.

Assisi, Italy

Few Italian cities handle the crush of summer tourists more gracefully than Assisi. The packaged pilgrims arrive in midmorning and shuffle politely through the sacred streets until dusk, when they are herded once more onto air-conditioned coaches and whisked back to their discount hotels in Rome. Propped against the western ramparts of the city, the restorer watched a group of overfed German stragglers tramp wearily through the stone archway of the Porto Nuova. Then he walked over to a newspaper kiosk and bought a day-old copy of the *International Herald Tribune*. The purchase, like his visit to Assisi, was professional in nature. The *Herald Tribune* meant his tail was clean. Had he purchased *La Repubblica*, or any other Italian-language paper, it would have signified that he had been followed by agents of the Italian security service, and the meeting would have been called off.

He tucked the newspaper beneath his arm, with the banner facing out, and walked along the Corso Mazzini to the Piazza del Commune. At the edge of a fountain sat a girl in faded blue jeans and a gauzy cotton top. She pushed her sunglasses onto her forehead and peered across the square toward the entrance of the Via Portica. The restorer dropped the paper into a rubbish bin and set off down the narrow street.

The restaurant where he had been instructed to come was about a hundred yards from the Basilica di San Francesco. He told the hostess he was meeting a man called Monsieur Laffont and was immediately shown onto a narrow terrace with sweeping views of the Tiber River valley. At the end of the terrace, reached by a flight of narrow stone steps, was a small patio with a single private table. Potted geraniums stood along the edge of the balustrade and overhead stretched a canopy of flowering vines. Seated before an open bottle of white wine was a man with cropped strawberry blond hair and the heavy shoulders of a wrestler. Laffont was only a work name. His real name was Uzi Navot, and he held a senior post in the secret intelligence service of the State of Israel. He was also one of the few people in the world who knew that the Italian art restorer known as Alessio Vianelli was actually an Israeli from the Valley of Jezreel named Gabriel Allon.

‘Nice table,’ said Gabriel as he took his seat.

‘It’s one of the fringe benefits of this life. We know all the best tables in all the best restaurants in Europe.’

Gabriel poured himself a glass of wine and nodded slowly. They did know all the best restaurants, but they also knew all the dreary airport lounges, all the stinking rail platforms, and all the moth-eaten transit hotels. The supposedly glamorous life of an Israeli intelligence agent was actually one of near-constant travel and mind-numbing boredom broken by brief interludes of sheer terror. Gabriel Allon had endured more such interludes than most agents. By association, so had Uzi Navot.

‘I used to bring one of my sources here,’ Navot said. ‘A Syrian who worked for the state-run pharmaceutical

company. His job was to secure supplies of chemicals and equipment from European manufacturers. That was just a cover, of course. He was really working on behalf of Syria's chemical and biological weapons program. We met here twice. I'd give him a suitcase filled with money and three bottles of this delicious Umbrian Sauvignon Blanc and he'd tell me the regime's darkest secrets. Headquarters used to complain bitterly about the size of the checks.' Navot smiled and shook his head slowly. 'Those idiots in the Banking section would hand me a briefcase containing a hundred thousand dollars without a second thought, but if I exceeded my meal allowance by so much as a shekel, the heavens would open up. Such is the life of an accountant at King Saul Boulevard.'

King Saul Boulevard was the longtime address of Israel's foreign intelligence service. The service had a long name that had very little to do with the true nature of its work. Men like Gabriel and Uzi Navot referred to it as 'the Office' and nothing else.

'Is he still on the payroll?'

'The Syrian?' Navot, playing the role of Monsieur Lafont, pulled his lips into a Parisian frown. 'I'm afraid he had something of a mishap a few years back.'

'What happened?' Gabriel asked cautiously. He knew that when individuals associated with the Office had mishaps, it was usually fatal.

'A team of Syrian counterintelligence agents photographed him entering a bank in Geneva. He was arrested at the airport in Damascus the next day and taken to the Palestine Branch.' The Palestine Branch was the name of Syria's main interrogation center. 'They tortured him

viciously for a month. When they'd wrung everything out of him they could, they put a bullet in his head and threw his body in an unmarked grave.'

Gabriel looked down toward the other tables. The girl from the piazza was now seated alone near the entrance. Her menu was open but her eyes were slowly scanning the other patrons. An oversize handbag lay at her feet with the zipper open. Inside the bag, Gabriel knew, was a loaded gun.

'Who's the *bat leveyha*?'

'Tamara,' said Navot. 'She's new.'

'She's also very pretty.'

'Yes,' said Navot, as though he'd never noticed that before.

'You could have selected someone who was over thirty.'

'She was the only girl available on short notice.'

'Just make sure you behave yourself, Monsieur Laffont.'

'The days of torrid affairs with my female escort officers are officially over.' Navot removed his spectacles and laid them on the table. They were highly fashionable and far too small for his large face. 'Bella has decided it's time we finally get married.'

'So that explains the new eyeglasses. You're the chief of Special Ops now, Uzi. You really should be able to choose your own glasses.'

Special Ops, in the words of the celebrated Israeli spy-master Ari Shamron, was 'the dark side of a dark service.' They were the ones who did the jobs no one else wanted, or dared, to do. They were executioners and kidnapers, buggers and blackmailers; men of intellect and ingenuity with a criminal streak wider than the criminals themselves;

multilinguists and chameleons who were at home in the finest hotels and salons in Europe or the worst back alleys of Beirut and Baghdad.

‘I thought Bella had grown weary of you,’ Gabriel said. ‘I thought you two were in the final throes.’

‘Your wedding to Chiara managed to rekindle her belief in love. At the moment, we are in tense negotiations over the time and place.’ Navot frowned. ‘I’m confident it will be easier to reach agreement with the Palestinians over the final status of Jerusalem than it will be for Bella and me to come to terms over wedding plans.’

Gabriel raised his wineglass a few inches from the white tablecloth and murmured, ‘*Mazel tov*, Uzi.’

‘That’s easy for you to say,’ Navot said gloomily. ‘You see, Gabriel, you’ve set the bar rather high for the rest of us. Imagine, a surprise wedding, perfectly planned and executed – the dress, the food, even the place settings, exactly what Chiara wanted. And now you’re spending your honeymoon at an isolated villa in Umbria restoring a painting for the pope. How’s a mere mortal like me ever supposed to live up to that?’

‘I had help.’ Gabriel smiled. ‘Special Ops really *did* do a lovely job with the arrangements, didn’t they?’

‘If our enemies ever find out Special Ops planned a wedding, our vaunted reputation will be ruined.’

A waiter mounted the steps and started up toward the table. Navot stilled him with a small movement of his hand and added wine to Gabriel’s glass.

‘The Old Man sends his love.’

‘I’m sure he does,’ Gabriel said absently. ‘How is he?’

‘He’s beginning to grumble.’

‘What’s bothering him now?’

‘Your security arrangements at the villa. He thinks they’re less than satisfactory.’

‘Precisely five people know I’m in the country: the Italian prime minister, the chiefs of his intelligence and security services, the pope, and the pope’s private secretary.’

‘He still thinks the security is inadequate.’ Navot hesitated. ‘And I’m afraid that, given recent developments, I must concur.’

‘What recent developments?’

Navot placed his big arms on the table and leaned forward a few inches. ‘We’re picking up some rumblings from our sources in Egypt. It seems Sheikh Tayyib is rather upset with you for foiling his well-laid plan to bring down the Mubarak government. He’s instructed all Sword of Allah operatives in Europe and the Middle East to begin looking for you at once. Last week, a Sword agent crossed into Gaza and asked Hamas to join in the search.’

‘I take it our friends in Hamas agreed to help.’

‘Without hesitation.’ Navot’s next words were spoken not in French but in quiet Hebrew. ‘As you might imagine, the Old Man is hearing these reports about the gathering threats to your life, and he is fixated on one single thought: Why is Gabriel Allon, Israel’s avenging angel and most capable secret servant, sitting on a cattle ranch in the hills of Umbria restoring a painting for His Holiness Pope Paul the Seventh?’

Gabriel looked out at the view. The sun was sinking toward the distant hills in the west and the first lights were coming up on the valley floor. An image flashed in his memory: a man with a gun in his outstretched hand, firing

bullets into the face of a fallen terrorist, beneath the North Tower of Westminster Abbey. It appeared to him in oil on canvas, as if painted by the hand of Caravaggio.

‘The angel is on his honeymoon,’ he said, his gaze still focused on the valley. ‘And the angel is in no condition to work again.’

‘We don’t get honeymoons, Gabriel – not proper ones, in any case. As for your physical condition, God knows you went through hell at the hands of the Sword of Allah. No one would blame you if you left the Office for good this time.’

‘No one but Shamron, of course.’

Navot picked at the tablecloth but made no reply. It had been nearly a decade since Ari Shamron had done his last tour as chief, yet he still meddled with the affairs of the Office as though it were his personal fiefdom. For several years, he had done so from Kaplan Street in Jerusalem, where he had served as the prime minister’s chief adviser on matters of security and counterterrorism. Now, aged and still recovering from a terrorist attack on his official car, he pulled the levers of influence from his fortresslike villa overlooking the Sea of Galilee.

‘Shamron wants me locked in a cage in Jerusalem,’ Gabriel said. ‘He thinks that if he can make my life miserable enough, I’ll have no other choice but to take over control of the Office.’

‘There are worse fates in life, Gabriel. A hundred men would give their right arm to be in your position.’ Navot lapsed into silence, then added, ‘Including me.’

‘Play your cards carefully, Uzi, and someday the job will be yours.’

‘That’s the way I got the job as chief of Special Ops – because you refused to take it. I’ve spent my career living in your shadow, Gabriel. It’s not easy. It makes me feel like a consolation prize.’

‘They don’t promote consolation prizes, Uzi. If they didn’t think you were worthy of the job, they would have left you in the European post and found someone else.’

Navot seemed eager to change the subject. ‘Let’s have something to eat,’ he suggested. ‘Otherwise, the waiter might think we’re a couple of spies, talking business.’

‘That’s it, Uzi? Surely you didn’t come all the way to Umbria just to tell me that people wanted me dead.’

‘Actually, we were wondering whether you might be willing to do us a favor.’

‘What sort of favor?’

Navot opened his menu and frowned. ‘My God, look at all this pasta.’

‘You don’t like pasta, Uzi?’

‘I love pasta, but Bella says it makes me fat.’

He massaged the bridge of his nose and put on his new eyeglasses.

‘How much weight do you have to lose before the wedding, Uzi?’

‘Thirty pounds,’ Navot said sullenly. ‘Thirty pounds.’