

The sun was still above the horizon, fighting to remain, but had started its inexorable dip, the Black Sea below the helicopter reflecting its light, lending a spectacular flare of orange and red hues to the imposing grandeur of the palace perched on the cliff above it.

The helicopter went feet dry and swept inland, directly over the top of what could only be described as a work of architectural excess. A massive, ostentatious structure of granite and stone that sprawled over 160 acres, from the air it looked like something created from the botched memories of Marie Antoinette and the Mad Hatter. Or from a man who was fervently attempting to reconstruct the power of tsars of old. Springing out of the thick woods on the Russian coast, the building had an opulence that reflected an earlier time, when money and power were meant to be displayed.

The AugustaWestland AW 139 crested the eastern facade, flew over the top of a courtyard large enough to host the World Cup, then zeroed in on four helipads five hundred meters away.

Sitting in his leather seat, the chill fading from the untouched glass of vodka in his hand, Simon Migonuv took one look at the mansion and realized whom they were going to meet.

He had never been to the “Black Sea Estate,” but of course, he’d heard about it. Everyone in Russia had, but only a select few were allowed to actually visit, and for good reason: It was where any decisions were made that fell outside of the official records of Russian history. Which was a misleading distinction, as the true history of modern Russia was precisely decided here, outside of any official organ, at a place that not even the Russian press admitted existed, even though it could be seen from satellites as clearly as the Great Wall of China.

Any sordid event that threatened to sully the rarefied air of the State Duma was discussed and decided here, under the canopy of a mansion that, in and of itself, was built using pilfered and hidden funds from the state. The stone construct, in fact, was the perfect embodiment of modern Russia.

The thought was unsettling to Simon, as were the two security men at the back of the helicopter, looking bored even as their jackets bulged with potential death.

Simon glanced at his . . . boss? peer? friend? and nodded at the courtyard below. Viktor Markelov smiled and said, “I told you it was important.”

“You said nothing of the sort. You said we were negotiating natural gas extensions with the Baltic States.”

Viktor flashed yellow teeth, then downed yet another

shot of vodka. He said, “The Baltic States are on the menu, but their representatives won’t be here. They aren’t necessary for this conversation.”

Victor Markelov was the vice president of external business development for a Russian conglomerate called Gazprom, the largest oil company on Earth. Which, while impressive, didn’t really do the organization justice. It was actually the largest company on the planet, oil or otherwise. A quasi-state-run entity, it controlled the massive amount of natural gas flowing out of Russia and, in so doing, was a hammer used in Russian foreign policy.

To put it bluntly, Gazprom was a weapon. An enormous beast that couldn’t really be compared to any other corporation on Earth, unless one turned to fiction, where it looked more like something James Bond would fight, with Blofeld at the helm.

Part profit-driven corporation, part state-run politics, part mafia-controlled interests, its whole was something that couldn’t be adequately described. But, Simon knew, it could certainly be leveraged.

Simon represented the seedier mafia side. Viktor was on the corporate, money side. Noticeably absent in the posh helicopter was anything resembling the state.

That, Simon concluded, resided in the mansion by the sea.

The helicopter settled onto the second pad to the left, the others empty, the only thing visible a small caravan of black Mercedes. The chosen vehicle of the elite.

As the engines wound down, Simon said, “Have you been here before?”

“No. This is my first time.”

Simon flicked his head to the rear, toward the armed men, and said, “We must be careful. This meeting may be about more than gas.”

Simon’s tendency toward such vigilance was born from direct experience. A Russian Jew, he was barely cresting twenty years old when the Soviet Union fell, scraping a living out of petty crime on the streets, but with a wily intelligence and a knack for survival.

The wall fell, and Simon had plied his trade in the chaotic freefall of the Soviet state, becoming a powerhouse working for an oligarch, using whatever levers he could to crush anyone who opposed him. Eventually, he had become the powerful head of an ever-expanding organized crime syndicate, working hand in glove with the new “democracy” of the Russian Federation. Then, as if on a whim, he’d been arrested by those same men. He’d spent a hellish year in a Moscow prison when his agenda no longer fit the desires of the state. Twelve months later, with no reason given, he’d been released.

He’d learned much during that time, the most important being that the state was fickle and could turn from provider to punisher at any moment. He was now back on top with Gazprom, doing enough underhanded business to end up on the FBI’s top ten most wanted list, but he understood his entire life was lived on a brittle shelf of

ice. The man they were to meet inside the mansion had almost had him executed once, and Simon held an irrational terror that he had voluntarily given himself over for a second attempt.

Viktor smiled at the concern on his face and said, “We have nothing to fear. I told you this would be a surprise. We are about to step into history. We were invited here because of what we have done with Gazprom. You for your inroads into the true power of the states, and me for my official expansion. We’ll seize the day. Seize what is offered tonight.”

Simon glanced again to the rear, where the security men were, and said, “Careful what you seek, Viktor. I have seen what catching the tiger brings.”

Viktor slapped his leg and said, “Nobody cares about your prison time. That was the old days. When the oligarchs ruled Russia. This is a new age, where we rule. Gazprom is the single biggest weapon Russia has. We execute using our power. *Our* power. Not Russia’s.”

Simon was amazed that Viktor actually thought his position brought him leverage. But, then again, he’d been burned once by the same hubris.

Viktor unbuckled his seat belt, and the three nameless aides to his left did the same. Simon sat for a moment, reflecting, letting them exit first.

In his youth, he’d worked as a dealer in an unauthorized poker den, carving a living out of the concrete and steel of a new Moscow and hiding his Jewish past. The

men in the games would just as soon cut your throat as look at you, and he'd learned something significant from the manager who'd allowed him to deal the cards: If you couldn't recognize the sucker at the table, more than likely it was you.

He exited the aircraft behind Viktor's entourage and in front of the security, taking a seat in a Mercedes limo next to a guy with a bulging neck, wearing a suit that didn't quite fit.

After a short drive, they pulled into the courtyard they'd flown over and entered the fantasyland that was modern Russia—if one were in a position to appreciate it. They walked through two gigantic wooden doors into an atrium that looked like a caricature of opulence, something from a Hollywood movie set, as if someone was trying too hard to show off their wealth. The only thing missing was a naked woman and a midget giraffe from a vodka commercial.

They climbed up a granite stairwell large enough to drive two cars abreast, the clack of their heels the only noise bouncing in the hall. Simon's trepidation increased with each step.

They reached the top and entered a hall with a dining table the size of the landing deck of an aircraft carrier, the far end set for six.

The security men motioned for them to sit, then retreated to the walls behind them. They did so, staring uncomfortably, no words spoken.

After a brief interlude, another entourage entered,

four men striding as if they were late for a meeting, breaking the plane of the room with a purpose. Behind them was the *man*. The president of Russia, Vladimir Putin.

It was only the second time Simon had met him, and the first hadn't ended very well.