



# PROLOGUE

## OFF THE DELAWARE BREAKWATER

*AUGUST 1, 1902*

By the time the echo from the first knock on his door rebounded off the back of his cabin, Captain Charles Urquhart was fully awake. A lifetime at sea had given him the reflexes of a cat. By the second knock he knew through the vibrations transmitted by his mattress that the ship's engines had been shut down, but the hiss of water flowing along her steel hull told him the *Mohican* had not yet begun to slow. Dishwater-colored light leaked around the curtain pulled over the room's single porthole. With the ship heading north and his cabin on the starboard side, Urquhart estimated it was coming up on nine in the evening.

He'd been asleep less than a half hour, following a grueling twenty hours on duty as the cargo vessel ran through the tail end of an early-season hurricane.

"Come," he called and swung his legs off his cot. The deck was covered with a carpet of such thin pile that he could feel the cool of the metal plates beneath it.

The cabin door creaked open, light from a gas lantern marking a wedge across the threshold. The ship had an electrical generator, but the few lights it powered were reserved for the

bridge. "Sorry to bother, sir," said the third officer, a Welshman named Jones.

"What is it?" Urquhart asked, the last vestiges of sleep sloughing off. No one woke the captain unless it was an emergency, and he knew he had to be ready for anything.

The man hesitated for a second, then said, "We're not sure. We need you on the bridge." He paused again. "Sir."

Urquhart tossed aside his bedcovers. He thrust his feet into a pair of rubber boots and threw a ratty robe over his shoulders. A Greek fisherman's cap finished his ridiculous outfit. "Let's go."

The bridge was one deck above his cabin. A helmsman stood mutely behind the large oaken wheel, his gaze not over the bow as it should have been but fixated out the port door leading to the ship's stubby bridge wing. Urquhart followed the gaze, and although his expression didn't change, his mind whirled.

About two miles away, an eerie blue glow clung to the horizon and blotted out the dying rays of the setting sun. It wasn't the color of lightning or St. Elmo's fire, which had been the captain's first suspicion. It was a deeper blue, and a color he had never seen before.

Then all at once it expanded. Not like a fog boiling up from the ocean's surface but like the beat of a gigantic heart. Suddenly they were inside the luminous effect, and it was as if color had texture. Urquhart could somehow feel the glow on his skin as the hairs on his arms raised up and the thick pelt of man fur that covered his torso and back prickled as if the legs of a thousand insects were crawling on his body.

"Captain," the second mate called plaintively. He was point-

ing at the big compass ball mounted above the main bridge windows. Inside its liquid gimbal, the compass spun like a child's toy top.

Like any good seaman, Charles Urquhart lived by routine, and when routine was broken, it was to be reported in the ship's log. His next glance was to the chronograph, hanging on the back wall above a chart table, so he could record the time of this strange phenomenon. To his dismay, the two hands pointed straight down.

Not like it was six thirty, where the shorter hour hand would rest halfway to the Roman numeral seven, but straight down.

He crossed to it to check the mechanism and accidentally dislodged its metal winding key. As if snatched by a force greater than gravity, the key dropped to the deck like it had been hurled at great speed. The key didn't bounce but seemed to adhere itself to the metal deck. He stooped to retrieve it but couldn't even wedge a fingernail between the key and the deck.

He again looked to the west, but the cobalt light cut visibility to just a few dozen yards. He did notice that the sea around the ship was so still, it appeared solid, as though it had frozen as smooth as a skating rink, only it remained as black as anthracite coal.

A few crewmen down on the main deck spotted Urquhart's silhouette in the bridge wing door. One cupped a hand to his mouth and called, "What's all this, Captain?"

The voice reached him like the man had yelled from the bottom of a well.

Other men appeared, and Urquhart could sense their ner-

vous apprehension. He knew sailors were a superstitious lot. Each one of them carried talismans of various kinds, miniature dream catchers, rabbits' feet, and lucky marbles. He'd once served with a fellow who kept a small jar of alcohol in his pocket with the preserved remains of his severed pinkie finger. He claimed losing the digit proved it was lucky. Urquhart had never pressed for the details of exactly why that was.

In order to get their minds off the strangeness of the situation, he pointed to some loose chains left haphazardly on the *Mohican's* forward hatch cover.

"Stow that chain properly," Urquhart said in his most commanding voice, "or there'll be hell to pay."

The four men moved from the rail at double speed, as eager to have something to do as the veteran ship's master had suspected. But like his experience with the key, the brawny seamen could not move so much as a link of the chain. Had someone welded the entire mass of rusted steel to the hatch, he couldn't have done a better job of adhering the chain to the ship.

It was just occurring to Urquhart that his ship had turned into a giant magnet when he heard the scream, an unworldly peal of anguish that keened higher and higher without letup.

The noise galvanized him because he recognized the voice despite the agony tearing through it, and he knew what was happening to the man.

The chief engineer, a Scotsman, had his cabin down the hallway from Urquhart's own. Urquhart reached McTaggart's door and burst through it only seconds after hearing him scream.

In the beam of the brass hurricane lantern Urquhart'd

snatched from the second mate, he saw the shirtless Scot atop his bed with a look of terror etched upon his face. He was pawing at his chest, or, more precisely, at the big scar that bisected his left pectoral muscle. The scar was a souvenir of a boiler explosion some twenty years back, and behind it, as McTaggart liked to brag, was a piece of pot metal the ship's cook who'd stitched him up at the time had been unable to remove.

"Flip over, Conner," Urquhart shouted, but knew he was too late.

A fresh scream exploded from the engineer, a sound so sharp and so full of pain that Urquhart winced. And then a sputter of blood bubbled from Conner McTaggart's lips. The two men's eyes locked, and a silent message passed between them. Good-bye, it said.

The sputter turned into a continuous gout of rich arterial blood as the shard of metal lodged in his chest tore through his heart and lungs as it was drawn inexorably deckward by the powerful magnetic forces at play. The pain that had transformed his face into an ugly mask had passed, and the crimson stain running from chin to chest was the only testament to the man's last horrifying seconds.

A moment later came a wet sucking sound, then the metallic ting of the chunk of shrapnel hitting the deck after passing all the way through McTaggart's body.

Urquhart closed the cabin door before any of the other crew members saw the corpse. He returned to the bridge, his face ashen and his hands a little unsteady. The glow still spread over the ship with its eerie light, while the men on deck had given

up their task of stowing the chain and peered anxiously toward where the glow had first emanated.

The sea remained glassy, and not a breath of air stirred the ship's rigging. The plume of smoke from her still-fired boilers shot straight into the sky and hung over the *Mohican* like a pall.

For twenty minutes nothing changed, and then, as if a light had been switched off, the glow vanished entirely. In the next instant, a chop returned to the ocean's surface, and the smoke began drifting aft as a wind swept across the ship from out of the north. To the west, where the phenomenon had first appeared, lay nothing but darkened skies sprinkled with a scattering of stars. A night at sea had never appeared more normal.

Urquhart huddled with his remaining officers in the back corner of the pilothouse while they detoured west to see if another ship had been at the epicenter of the otherworldly aura. He gave them orders to have Conner McTaggart sewn into his blankets and for his body to be slipped over the side. They were close enough to making Philadelphia that the engineer's death could be concealed, and his absence, once they left port, could be explained away as him jumping ship.

They found no evidence of any other vessels in the area, and after an hour-long search Urquhart determined that they had wasted enough time. Still, when they reached Phili, he planned to report the incident in case any other ships had suffered from the strange effect. McTaggart's death would remain a secret for the simple reason that it would delay them for days, or weeks, as statements were taken and investigations launched.

He wasn't pleased at the disrespect he was showing his friend,

but he felt certain that the unmarried McTaggart would understand.

As he'd promised himself, Charles Urquhart did report the incident to the Coast Guard, and his story was picked up by a local paper. No mention was made of the dead engineer. Nor was there any mention of another ship that had experienced the phenomenon. The *Mohican* managed to limp back to Philadelphia. But another ship, and its five-man crew, had vanished without a trace.





# ONE

## **NORTH SIBERIA**

### ***PRESENT DAY***

It was the landscape of another world. Towering black crags rose above vast glittering snowfields. Winds that could shriek out of the stillness blasted the air at over seventy miles per hour. A sky that was sometimes so clear it was as though the earth had no atmosphere. And sometimes clouds would cling to the land with such utter tenacity that the sun remained hidden for weeks on end.

It was a landscape not meant for human habitation. Even the hardiest natives avoided this location and lived far down the coast in tiny villages that they could pack up in pursuit of caribou herds.

All this made it the ideal spot for the Soviets to build a super-max prison in the early 1970s, a prison meant for the most dangerous criminals—the political kind. God and a few bureaucrats alone knew how many souls had perished behind the bleak concrete walls. The prison was built to hold five hundred men, and until it was shuttered in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a steady stream had been trucked in on the

isolated access road to replace those who had succumbed to the cold and deprivation and brutality.

There were no graves to mark men's remains, only a pit of ashes from their cremated bodies—a very large pit—that now lay buried in the permafrost a short distance from the main gate.

For twenty years the facility remained abandoned and left to the vagaries of the weather, though Siberia's notorious winters could do little to erode the cement-and-steel structure. When people returned to reopen the prison, they found that it was exactly as it had been when it closed, immutable, impenetrable, and, most of all, inescapable.

A lone truck painted in matte green military livery wound its way toward the penitentiary that sat in the shadow of a singular mountain that looked as if it had been cleaved in two, with a sheer vertical face to the north, the Arctic Ocean some thirty miles away. The road was heavily rutted because in the summer parts of it turned into a swampy morass, and if crews didn't smooth it before the frosts came, it retained a corrugated texture. Blowing snow drifted across it in places where the plows hadn't opened the pathway far enough.

The sun hung low on the horizon, cold and distant. In a few weeks' time it would make its final plunge over the rim of the world and not reappear until the next spring. The temperature hovered just a tick above zero Fahrenheit.

The truck approached the slab-sided prison fortress, with its four guard towers rising like minarets. An outer ring of chain-link fence with razor wire circled the entire two-square-acre building. A sentry box sat just inside of the fence to the right of

the access road. Between the box and the prison sat a hump-backed heavy-transport helicopter painted arctic white.

Only when the truck had come to a stop did a guard, bundled against the cold, waddle out of his little heated hut. He knew the truck was expected, but peering through the windshield he didn't recognize the drivers. He kept his AK-74, the updated version of Mikhail Kalashnikov's venerable AK-47, within easy reach on the strap dangling from his shoulder.

He motioned for the driver to step out of the cab.

With a resigned shrug, the driver opened his door, and his boots crunched into the compacted snow.

"Where's Dmitri?" the guard asked.

"Who's Dmitri?" the driver replied.

It had been a test. The regular drivers of the prison transfer truck were named Vasily and Anton.

The driver continued, "If you mean Anton or Sasha"—Vasily's nickname—"Anton's wife had her baby, another boy, and Sash is down with pneumonia."

The guard nodded and felt less ill at ease at having strangers coming out to the secret prison. They obviously belonged to the same squad as the regular crew. "Show me your papers, and have your co-driver come out with his."

A few moments later, the guard was satisfied with the men's bona fides. He swung his assault rifle farther onto his back and keyed open the gate. He pushed the gate outward, its mass of concertina wire jangling with dark resonance.

Exhaust burst into a white cloud as the driver accelerated through the gate and under an open portcullis that gave access

to the central courtyard around which the four blocks of the prison had been built. Ahead were steps leading to the entrance, itself a door more befitting a bank vault than a building. Two guards in white camouflage were waiting by the door. The truck turned in a tight arc, then began backing slowly toward the men. When one of them judged it close enough, he held up a hand. The driver hit the brakes. It was against protocol for him to leave the engine idling, on the off chance a prisoner might manage to steal the truck, so he killed the ignition and pocketed the keys.

It was a separate key on a different fob that opened the rear doors. The two guards had their AKs at their shoulders when the doors creaked open.

Inside was a single prisoner, shackled at the wrists and ankles and chained to the floor. He wore prison blues, with a thinly padded jacket to ward off a little of the arctic air. At first, it looked as though he had tightly cropped dark hair, but, in fact, his head was perfectly shaved. It was the intricate design of interlacing tattoos covering his skull that made it look like he had hair. The tattoos continued around his throat and disappeared into the V of his prison shirt. He wasn't necessarily a big man, but there was a feral intensity to his glacial blue eyes that made him seem dangerous.

"Okay, my friend," the driver said with mocking jocularly, "you're home." His tone darkened. "Give us any trouble and you die here and now."

The prisoner said nothing, but the ferocity of his glare eased like he'd dialed down some personal rheostat of rage. He nodded once, a signal that he would cooperate.

The driver stepped up into the truck and unlocked the chain that secured the prisoner to the windowless truck's floor. The driver backed out, and the prisoner shuffled after him. The prisoner winced when he jumped to the ground. He'd been locked in the same position for the past six torturous hours. The transfer would not be complete until he had changed out the shackles he wore, so all four men mounted the stairs and stepped into the prison.

The cinder-block walls of the receiving hall were painted a sickly green favored by all Soviet institutions. The floors were bare concrete, and the ceiling lofted ten feet. The room was little warmer than the outside air, but at least there was no wind. There was a barred cage to the right of the door. Inside were two additional men. They weren't dressed in uniforms but wore clothing not unlike the prisoner himself.

Both of them were massive, standing at least six foot six, with hands like sledgehammers and biceps and chests that strained the fabric of their shirts. Also like the newly arrived prisoner, their necks were adorned with prison tattoos, though one had a strand of barbed wire inked across his forehead that denoted he'd been sentenced to life with no possibility of parole.

The new prisoner was shepherded into the caged room. One of the armed guards handed his assault rifle to his companion and pulled a set of shackles off a peg above a bare desk. Together with the driver, they entered the enclosure and closed the barred door. The lock engaged automatically.

"This is a rather ugly new fish you brought us," said the prisoner doing life. "We were hoping for something prettier."

“Beggars can’t be choosy, Marko,” the prison guard told him. “And with you, they are never pretty for long.”

The mountainous man shrugged as if agreeing. “Let’s see where you’ve been, little fish. Take off your shirt.”

Tattoos were like a résumé inside the Russian penal system, telling others how many years a man has been inside, what kinds of crimes he’d committed, who he had worked for on the outside, and all manner of other information. A cat tattoo meant the man had been a thief, and if he had more felines inked on his body, it meant he worked with a gang. A cross on his chest was usually applied involuntarily and meant he was someone’s slave.

The driver glanced at the guard, who nodded at this slight deviation from procedure and proceeded to unlock the leg and wrist irons. When he was free, the prisoner stood as a statue, his eyes never leaving those of Marko, the lifer who sat at the apex of prison hierarchy and actually ran it for the guards.

“Take off your shirt or you won’t leave this room alive,” Marko said.

If being threatened with death a second time in as many minutes intimidated the prisoner, it didn’t show. He remained motionless and unblinking for a beat of ten seconds. Then, with slow deliberation as if it were his idea, he unzipped his thin jacket and languidly unbuttoned his shirt.

There were no crosses on his chest, though nearly every square inch of skin was decorated with ersatz prison ink.

Marko pushed himself from the wall, saying, “Let’s see what we have.”

The prisoner, one Ivan Karnov—though he had many names

over the years, and given his southern rather than Slavic features, this too was no doubt an alias—knew what was coming. He knew prison culture, understood every subtext and nuanced meaning, and the next few seconds would determine how the rest of his time here would be spent.

Marko towered over Karnov as he sidled up behind him, and the stench of garlic that oozed out of his skin despite the chilled air was overpowering.

Ivan Karnov gamed it in his head, watched angles and postures, but mostly he kept his attention on Marko's consigliere. When his eyes widened just the tiniest amount, Karnov spun and grabbed at Marko's wrist an instant before he almost powered his massive fist into Karnov's kidney with a hammer blow that would have likely ruptured the organ. Next, Karnov's knee came up as he forced Marko's arm downward. The two bones, the radius and the ulna, shattered upon impact, and their sharpened ends erupted through the skin as the forearm was bent in half.

Karnov was in motion before Marko's nervous system told his brain of the massive damage. He was across the room in two strides and slammed his forehead into the other prison trustee's nose. The angle wasn't optimal because of the man's height, but the nose shattered anyway.

In a fight, this move accomplished one critical goal. No matter how big an opponent, or strong, the eyes watered copiously as an autonomic response. For the next few seconds, the man was effectively blind.

Marko's agonized roar filled the room as his mind finally reacted to the trauma.

Karnov pounded the second man's nose. Right, left, right, and then he slammed a stiffened hand into the guy's neck, shocking the muscles so they clamped down on the carotid artery. Starved of blood, the man's brain simply shut down, and he collapsed.

Elapsed time: four seconds.

More than enough for the driver and the prison guard to react. The driver had stepped back a pace while the guard had come forward, his hand on the lacquered black nightstick fitted through a ring on his utility belt. The guard was concentrating on making it a clean cross draw, knowing once he had the weapon out all advantage swung to him.

That was the mistake of thinking a weapon gave you an advantage before it was deployed. His concentration was on his own actions and not on those of his opponent.

Karnov got his hand on the nightstick's tip just before it pulled free of its restraining loop and crashed into the guard while his arm was drawn awkwardly between their chests. Both were solid men, and the impact when they hit the cage wall was more than enough to pop the ball joint at the top of the guard's humerus bone from the glenoid socket of his scapula and tear several connective muscles and fibers.

The guard outside the caged room had his rifle up to his shoulder and was shouting incoherent orders but had the presence of mind not to fire into a confined space where only one of the five men was a threat.

Karnov whirled to face the driver and had eight pounds of steel shackles swung at his head and nowhere near enough time to avoid them.

The blow sent him staggering as blood sprayed from where the sharp manacles had flayed open skin at his temple. The driver was on him even before he collapsed to the floor, not quite unconscious but not all there either. In quick, practiced moves, he had Karnov fully cuffed at the wrists and ankles.

Karnov began pressing himself up from the floor.

The driver stepped back and said softly, "Good luck in here, my friend. You're going to need it."

The outside guard finally thought about the alarm and tripped a switch under the desk. The klaxon brought a half dozen men within seconds. Karnov was on his feet now, but the defiance that had made his face such a mask was gone. He'd done what he needed to do—establish himself quickly. He was not a man to mess with, but his fight was with the other prisoners, not their guards. The dislocated shoulder was collateral damage only.

"I am done," he said to the guards frothing to tear him apart. "I will resist no more, and I am sorry for your man here."

The first guard finally opened the door, and despite Karnov's words and passivity, the men wouldn't be denied. Karnov was only grateful as they swarmed him and began a vicious pummeling that they were using only their fists and not their nightsticks. And then a guard kicked the crown of Karnov's head with a steel-toed boot, and the beating faded away from his consciousness.

Time was meaningless after that, so Karnov had no idea how much had elapsed before he came to. His body ached all over, which told him the beating went on long after he'd been knocked out, but that was to be expected. He couldn't imagine

mercy being a job requirement for a guard at a supermax prison at the ass end of the world.

His cell was tiny, barely big enough for him to stretch fully across its freezing floor. The walls were unadorned cinder blocks, and the door was solid metal, with a slot at the bottom for food and another at eye level for observation.

He was locked down in solitary.

Perfect, he thought.

He was still fully shackled, and in the confusion the guards hadn't realized that he still sported the transport manacles he'd had on at his arrival.

Perfect, he grinned.

Also in their anger and their desire to see the prisoner punished, the guards hadn't performed the customary full body search, otherwise they would have taken away his prosthetic leg.

Perfect. He knew he was home free.

Juan Cabrillo had busted out of more than one prison in his life, but this was the first time he'd ever busted *into* one.

The whole purpose of the fight had been to get himself thrown into solitary as soon as he arrived. Marko and his goon buddy had made perfect targets, but if necessary Cabrillo would have taken on the guards just as easily. None of them here were upstanding citizens doing a needed but dismal job. They were handpicked thugs who were pretty much part of a private army commanded by Pytor Kenin, a fleet admiral and perhaps the second-most-corrupt man on the planet. Cabrillo's whole plan was to bypass the prison indoctrination process entirely.

He touched the spot where he'd been hit with the shackles. The bleeding had mostly stopped. He looked down at his chest.

The tattoos did look real, even though they had been applied in four-hour-long sessions over the past week aboard the *Oregon*. Kevin Nixon, a former Hollywood special effects artist who'd painted on the special ink, had warned him that it would begin to fade quickly. Hence Cabrillo's desire to get himself tossed into solitary as soon as he arrived at the prison.

Juan rolled up his pant leg and checked the artificial limb that attached just below his knee. It was neither the most realistic of his collection of prosthetics nor even the most functional. This one was special built for this mission to allow him to smuggle in as much equipment as possible. The leg was almost a perfect cylinder, with only a slight indentation for an ankle. Had a guard slapped on the shackles, he would have been suspicious right away, but the driver who'd done the cuffing was on Cabrillo's payroll for this mission. Throughout the entire incident, only he had manacled Cabrillo's legs, as they had planned and choreographed over and over.

Juan fingered his bloody temple and wished they'd rehearsed that bit a little more.

Not knowing the prison's routine, he decided it best to wait for a while before making his move. It would also allow him some time to recover from the beating. The first part of the operation, hijacking the truck carrying the real Ivan Karnov, had gone off without a hitch. The two drivers and their prisoner were trussed up in an abandoned house at a largely forgotten port town that was the closest to the prison.

When this op was over, a call would be placed to the village's authorities, and Karnov would once again be headed to whatever fate awaited him here.

The second part, getting smuggled into the prison, had gone as well as to be expected. It was the third phase that gave Cabrillo pause. Max Hanley, Cabrillo's closest friend, second-in-command of their 550-foot freighter *Oregon*, and all-around curmudgeon, would call it insane.

But that's what Juan Cabrillo and his team did on a routine basis—pull off the impossible for the right reasons. And the right price.

And while this mission had a personal component for Cabrillo, he wasn't above accepting the rest of the twenty-five million dollars they'd been guaranteed.

Over the next thirty-six, frigid hours, Cabrillo figured out the routine for solitary confinement. There wasn't much to it.

At what he guessed was near noon, the slit at the base of his door was opened and a metal tray with thin gruel and a hunk of black bread the size and consistency of a hand grenade was passed through. He had as much time to eat as it took the jailor to feed the other prisoners on this level and empty the slop buckets the men passed out to him. Judging by the sounds of the guard doing this dreary work, there were six others in solitary. None of the prisoners spoke, which told Cabrillo that if he tried, there would be reprisals.

He remained silent, ignoring the food, and waited. A hairy hand reached back for the tray. The guard muttered, "Suit yourself. The food ain't gonna get any better," and the slot slid closed.

Knowing now that no one checked on the men down here other than the once-a-day feeding, Cabrillo set to work. After removing his artificial leg and opening its removable cover, he

carefully set his equipment around him. He first used a key to unshackle himself from the irons. The key was a duplicate made from the original the driver carried. Not clanking around like the ghost of Jacob Marley was a relief unto itself. Putting on the shirt and jacket that had been dumped into the cell with him was sublime. Next from the leg came nearly a dozen tubes of a putty-like substance—the key to the whole operation. If this didn't work as advertised, if Mark Murphy and Eric Stone, Cabrillo's crackerjack researchers, had messed up, this would be the shortest prison break in history.

He strapped his leg in place and uncapped one of the tubes and applied a thin bead of the gel to the mortar seam between two of the cinder blocks nearest the floor.

All manner of horrible thoughts flashed through Cabrillo's mind when the gel didn't react as it had when they were experimenting back on the *Oregon*. But the brain can think up scary scenarios in fractions of seconds. The chemical reaction was a tad slower.

Stone and Murph had deduced the chemical makeup of the mortar used here by reading through thousands of pages of declassified documents in Archangel, where the company that had built the facility back in the '70s was located. (In truth, a team from the *Oregon* had broken into the facility and scanned the documents over a three-night period and fed them into the ship's mainframe computer for translation, and then Eric and Mark had gotten to work.)

In less than a minute, the acidic putty had completely broken down the mortar. Cabrillo then attached a probe to the tube, so he could stick it into the narrow slit he'd created, and applied

more gel to etch away the remaining mortar on the far side of the block. When he was certain it was clear, he kicked the block into a narrow crawl space between his cell's wall and the prison's exterior basement wall. He peered into the gloomy space and saw that the next obstacle was a preformed slab of concrete resting on poured-cement footings. Each section probably weighed ten or so tons.

The mortar acid wouldn't work on it, but the pack of C-4 plastic explosives would more than do the job.

## TWO

It took Cabrillo nearly an hour to enlarge his one-block hole into an aperture he could crawl through. On the off chance of a random inspection through the peephole, he stacked the blocks in front of it with just enough room to squeeze behind. In the cell's dismal lighting it would give the optical illusion of a solid wall.

Next, he attacked the wall next to the cell door. Rather than use the acidic putty to remove individual blocks, he first eroded all the mortar he could reach in an area just wider than his body. Again, this was a precaution in case a guard or the warden came around. Only when he was ready to make his move would he blow through the rest of the mortar.

The second-to-last item in his prosthetic limb had been a tiny transmitter. Once he hit the button and its burst signal was sent to the men waiting on the ship, he had six minutes to get the man he had come here to rescue, blow the C-4 he'd already planted, and make it up to the surface.

Yuri Borodin had been imprisoned here for just a few weeks. While the man ate like a bear, drank like, well, like a Russian,

and exercised every third leap year, he was still in pretty good shape for a man of fifty-five. But the guards could have done anything to him in that time. For all Juan knew, he'd find a broken and shattered man in Yuri's cell, or, worse, Yuri'd already been executed and his ashes added to the mound outside.

No matter what he found, Cabrillo's six-minute deadline was carved in stone.

He went to work on the last of the mortar, committed now beyond all shadow of a doubt. When he was done, he got his lock picks ready, the last trick to come from his cache, and kicked his way through the cement blocks. They tumbled to the floor in a chalky heap, and Juan dove through headfirst.

"Yuri," he called in a stage whisper when he got to his feet.

He was in a long corridor with at least twenty cell doors. At the far end he could see where the hallway bent ninety degrees. From his study of the construction diagrams, he knew there was another door just around the corner and, beyond that, stairs that rose to the prison's first floor. It was like Hannibal Lecter's cellblock without the creepy acrylic wall.

"Who's there?" a voice he recognized from their years of dealings called back just as faintly.

Juan went to the door where he thought Yuri was being held and drew back the observation slit. The cell was empty.

"To your left," Yuri said.

Juan drew back that slit, and there in front of him was Admiral Yuri Borodin, former commandant of the naval base in Vladivostok. It had been at Borodin's shipyard that the *Oregon* had been refitted and the sophisticated weapons systems integrated after the original ship had outlived her usefulness and

was nearly scrapped. The fitting of her revolutionary magneto-hydrodynamic engines had been carried out at another shipyard Yuri controlled. Both jobs had neared a combined cost of one hundred million dollars, but with Juan's former boss at the CIA giving him the go-ahead to convert the *Oregon* into what she was today, financing had not been an issue.

Borodin's normal helmet of bronze hair lay limp along the sides of his open face, and his skin had an unnaturally sallow mien, but he still had the alert dark eyes of the canny fox he was. They hadn't broken him yet, not by a mile.

He had a look of wary confusion as he regarded the man before him, as if he recognized him but couldn't place him. Then his face split into a big toothy grin. "Chairman Juan Cabrillo," he exclaimed loudly before moderating his voice to a whisper again. "Of all the prisons in all the towns in all the world, why am I not surprised you are in this one?"

"Proverbial bad penny," Cabrillo said deadpan.

Borodin reached through the observation slit to rub Juan's head. "What have you done to yourself?"

"Making myself pretty just for you." Juan started working the lock picks.

"Who sent you?"

"Misha." Captain Mikhail Kasporov was Borodin's longtime assistant and aide-de-camp.

"God bless the boy." A sudden dark thought occurred to him. "To rescue me or kill me?"

Juan glanced up from the lock, which he almost had open. "Does your paranoia know no bounds? To rescue you, you idiot."

“Ah, he is a good boy. And as for my paranoia, Mr. Chairman of the Corporation, a look at my present surroundings shows that I was not paranoid enough. So what is new, my friend?”

“Let’s see. The civil war in the Sudan is winding down. The Dodgers again have no pitching staff. And I think half the Kardashians are getting married while the other half are divorcing. Oh, and once again you’ve managed to anger the wrong guy.”

On his ruthless rise to power within the Russian Navy, backed by hard-right political cronies, the mercurial Admiral Pytor Kenin had left a trail of destruction in his wake—careers ruined and, in one instance, a rival’s suspicious death. Now that he was one of the youngest fleet admirals in the country’s history, rumors abounded that he would soon turn to politics under the guiding wing of Vladimir Putin.

Yuri Borodin had become one of Kenin’s enemies, though he was too well positioned among the general staff to be dismissed outright and had been arrested on trumped-up charges and sent to this prison to await trial—a trial that he would most likely never survive to see. A company Kenin controlled ran the prison on behalf of the government in a public/private cooperative much like the ones that gave rise to the oligarchs in the days after communism’s demise. His death could be easily arranged and would likely happen after the initial flap over his arrest died down.

That Borodin was corrupt was an open secret, but singling him out was like arresting only a single user in an overcrowded crack house. Corruption in the Russian military was as much a part of the culture as itchy uniforms and lousy food.

“And you do this out of the goodness of your heart?”

“Of course,” Cabrillo said. “And about a tenth of your net worth.”

“Bah. My Misha is a good boy, but he is a lousy negotiator. You love me like a brother for what I did to that oversized scow of yours. We had good times, you and me, while the men at my shipyard turned your tabby cat into a lion. To honor those memories alone you should rescue me for free.”

Juan countered, “I could have charged double, and Mikhail would have paid because even he doesn’t know all your Swiss bank account numbers.” With that, he twisted the picks and sprang the lock.

The first thing Yuri Borodin did was grasp Cabrillo in a big bear hug and kiss him on both cheeks. “You are a saint amongst men.”

“Get off me, you crazy Russian,” Juan said lightly as he extricated himself from Yuri’s grip. “We’re not out of this yet.”

Borodin turned serious. “There is a great deal we need to talk about. The timing of my arrest was not coincidental.”

“Not now. Let’s go.”

They crawled back into Cabrillo’s cell. Juan took up the microburst transmitter, set a mental timer in his head, and activated both. He then keyed the plastic explosives he’d earlier molded to the prison’s exterior wall a good distance from his rabbit hole. The blast was muted by the intervening cinder blocks but could still be felt in every corner of the large facility. The guards would be swinging into action almost immediately.

Juan ducked down to enter the claustrophobic space between the prison’s inner and outer walls. He turned back to Borodin. “No matter what happens, just stay with me.”

Yuri nodded grimly, his normal bonhomie replaced with real concern for his fate.

They moved laterally along the cramped space and had to squeeze by pipes that rose through the floor. These were part of the passive ammonia cooling system that kept what little heat maintained by the prison from melting the permafrost on which it was built. The air thickened with the burned chemical stench of the explosives as they neared the breach through the outer foundation.

The C-4 had blown a ragged hole through the concrete slab about the size of a manhole cover. Chunks of smashed cement shifted under his feet as Cabrillo boosted himself through the opening. On the far side he found himself standing in a moat that encircled the prison's basement level. This dead space acted as a thermal buffer to again prevent the building's latent heat from melting the frozen ground.

Twelve feet overhead were panels that hid the moat from the surface. The panels had dozens of holes punched through them so that air could circulate freely and were supported by metal scaffolding. Clots of snow jammed some of the holes, and some drifted down on the men as a result of the blast.

"Come on," Juan called over the sound of a dopplering siren. They ran away from the hole in the wall, as the blast had surely been seen by the guards in the towers. It was like running through a maze. They had to twist and contort their bodies around the countless struts that made up the scaffold. And yet only a contortionist could have moved quicker than these two. Once they rounded a corner, Cabrillo led them a few more feet and then began climbing upward. The metal was so cold, it felt

like his hands were being scalded. The panels were secured from above with threaded bolts screwed into receptors on the steel framework. A final tube of concentrated acid formulated to dissolve steel ate through the rust-stuck nuts and even the bolts themselves.

Cabrillo's six minutes were almost up. He levered himself into position so he could use his back and legs to shove the panel up and off the scaffold.

"Remember, stay with me, and we'll be fine," he warned again. "Half of what's about to happen is for show."

He pressed with his shoulders to test how hard the panel would resist after so many decades and, to his surprise, the section of perforated steel plate popped free almost before he was ready.

The prison alarm continued to keen, but over it came another sound, the unmistakable *whop-whop-whop* of a fast-approaching helicopter.

The timer in his head touched zero, and Cabrillo heaved the panel aside. He scrambled up and out of the earth, knowing that his blue prison uniform stood out starkly against the foot-deep snow that lay in drifts all around him. A dedicated guard could spot him in an instant, but he was banking on human instinct to keep from being spotted. The guards should be watching the approaching helicopter.

He could see the chopper out beyond the security fence, an olive drab insect that grew in size until he could recognize it as an ungainly Kamov Ka-26. With two main rotors set one above the other atop the hull and spinning in opposite directions, the craft had no need for a tail rotor on a long, tapering boom.

This made the six-passenger helo resemble a flying moving van with two stumpy rudders bolted to its rear bumper.

In seconds, Yuri was at his side, and both men stood with their backs pressed against the prison's featureless wall.

Now that it was closer, Juan saw the small wings that had been attached to the chopper's hull just aft of the pilot's door.

A jumpy guard let loose a long burst with his AK even though the chopper was well out of range. In response, a single rocket shot off one of the winglets and streaked toward the perimeter fence while a heavy machine gun on the opposite side roared to life, spitting a tongue of flame that shot out past the cockpit bubble. Shell casings the size of cigar tubes rained from the weapon as the newly fallen snow between the perimeter fence and the building came alive under the blistering assault of lead.

"Run!" Juan shouted over the hellish din.

To Yuri's utter astonishment, Cabrillo charged into the maelstrom kicked up by the machine gun as though he were a member of the Light Brigade riding into the Russian guns at Balaclava.

"No matter what, follow me," the man who called himself Chairman had said, and, to his greater amazement, Yuri let out a full-throated bellow that was unheard over the siren and chopper and still-pounding machine gun and took off after his friend.

The rocket detonated at the base of the fence, throwing up even more snow and clumps of frozen soil. Borodin expected to be cut down at any moment while geysers of snow erupted all around him, tossed high by bullets he had yet to hear crackling past.

Then he felt a small hit to the bottom of his left foot. It wasn't enough to toss him to the ground, but it did make him stagger. It was the clue he needed to tell him he wasn't immune to the massive amount of bullets pouring down from the chopper's machine gun, for, in truth, there were no rounds. The Kamov was firing blanks, and the detonations of snow that created a ten-foot-high fog were small explosive charges that Cabrillo's team had likely sown during the last snowstorm by simply tossing them over the fence.

But their luck couldn't last forever. Bullets from autofire by the men in the guard towers began searching them out, the micro supersonic booms ripping the air near his head. Borodin wished Cabrillo wasn't so soft. Had *he* planned this escape, the first missiles off the Kamov's rails would have taken out the guards' lofty perches. But Juan was different. Though a mercenary, as tough as any, he loathed killing when it wasn't necessary, even if that put his own life at risk. Juan also didn't know these men, didn't know that they were Kenin's private army, paid more for their loyalty to the admiral than to Mother Russia. They wore the uniforms of their country, but they were no less mercenary than Cabrillo himself.

With more and more real bullets stitching the ground, Cabrillo and Borodin made it across the open killing field with neither man being hit. The rocket had blown apart a section of the fence near one of its support stanchions, leaving a gap wide enough for them to run through but forcing them to angle to the left to avoid the mound of deadly razor wire lying on the ground.

Now clear of the shooting gallery and much closer to the

chopper, they saw that ropes dangled from each side of the Kamov that were long enough to trail on the ground.

Juan led them to the ropes, and he quickly found the loop for his foot and another for a hand. "Hang on," he shouted over the jarring rattle of rotor and gunfire.

The chopper's downblast was a maelstrom of Category 5 proportions.

The pilot must have seen the two men take their places, for no sooner had Yuri slipped his shoe into one of the loops and his hand through another than it felt as though his stomach was trying to leave his body through the soles of his feet.

The Kamov lifted and whirled, swinging both men like pendulums and leaving the ground a good hundred feet below them. The wind, as the chopper gained speed, clawed at their exposed bodies like stinging needles that numbed skin and turned eyes into streaming torrents.

Borodin fought to cling to the twisting, sinuous rope and prayed that Cabrillo's plan called for them to land soon and crawl into the nice warm cabin—and knowing Juan's style—where a good bottle of brandy awaited. He wasn't sure how long he could hold on, but looking down at the snow and stone racing by below, he knew he could last for the rest of his life because a fall would certainly kill him.

The chopper thundered due east and deeper into the mountains, the pilot flying as close to the earth as he dared with his two passengers dangling below the helo's tricycle landing wheels. Each dip and rise and swooping turn sent shocks through both men's bodies. Dusk was beginning to settle over the landscape, but the pilot didn't turn on any landing lights.

Borodin suspected he had some night vision capabilities to be flying so recklessly through these uncharted canyons.

After an eternity of ten freezing minutes, the beat of the rotors changed when they neared a copse of pines sheltered under yet another granite cliff. They were finally landing. Borodin would curse the Chairman for such a torturous flight, but only after he stopped shivering.

The chopper dropped lower and lower until both men could simply step out of the loops and duck under the wind screaming at them from the whirling blades. Borodin expected the Kamov would continue to the ground, but instead the engine's whine increased, and once again the ungainly aircraft was shooting eastward, leaving the two men alone in a frozen wasteland. He knew that they'd both be dead of hypothermia within the next hour, if not sooner. He also knew that Juan Cabrillo hadn't yet finished dipping into his bag of tricks.

Borodin pointed to where the helicopter had vanished around a cragged tor. "Decoy, yes."

Juan switched from Russian, one of the four languages he spoke, but said in Russian-accented English to mock Borodin's syntax, "Decoy, *da*."

"What about the pilot? Will he be okay?"

"Why wouldn't he be? He's sitting at a console aboard the *Oregon*."

Juan enjoyed the range of emotions that played across Yuri's wind-chapped face as he absorbed that information. Incomprehension morphed into understanding, and then horror at the implications, and then outrage at the potential consequence.

"You mean while we were whizzing by mountains and skim-

ming the ground, there was no pilot? He could have killed us while he sat safe and secure on your ship?"

Juan couldn't help but taunt him a bit more. "My pilot, Gomez Adams, so nicknamed for a dalliance he had with a woman who looked remarkably like Carolyn Jones, the original Morticia, had less than a week to practice tele-flying the Kamov after we bought it and installed the remote controls."

"You're mad."

"Barking," Juan agreed with a grin. "Come on."

He led them a short distance into the trees, where Cabrillo's team had another surprise waiting. It was a Lynx Rave RE 800R snowmobile painted a matte white that perfectly matched the snow. With its massive caterpillar tread and double runner skis, it was the perfect machine for crossing any arctic terrain. Bundled next to it was a bag containing helmets and white snowsuits, one helmet battery-powered and the other able to jack into the Lynx's electrical system, as well as insulated boots and gloves.

"Put these on. There's a chopper at the prison, and they'll soon be in pursuit."

As they dressed Yuri said, "That was why we didn't change direction when we flew off. You wanted them to follow the Kamov."

"And while they head east in pursuit of an empty chopper, we go north to where the *Oregon*'s waiting for us."

"How long?"

Juan threw a leg over the sled's saddle seat and flicked the 800cc Rotax engine to life. Over the whine of the two-stroke he replied, "About an hour."

He jacked a cord dangling from his helmet into a satellite phone that had been secreted with the rest of the gear.

"This is Edmond Dantès calling." His code name referenced the famous prisoner who escaped a life sentence in the Dumas masterpiece *The Count of Monte Cristo*. "We have gotten out of the Château d'If."

"Edmond," came Max Hanley's happy reply. "Ready to go find your treasure and exact your revenge?"

"The treasure's going to be sent to a numbered account as soon as we're back aboard, and revenge has never been my intent."

"How'd it go?" Max asked, dropping all pretense that he hadn't been concerned for Juan's safety.

"No problems as yet. The squib bombs worked better than we'd hoped, and Gomez could have thread that chopper through a needle if he'd needed to."

"You're on speaker here in the op center, Chairman," George Adams drawled. "I heard that and won't disagree for a second."

Juan could picture the handsome Texan, with his drooping gunslinger mustache, sitting just behind and to the right of the command chair in the middle of the *Oregon's* high-tech nerve center. While Cabrillo was being transported to the prison, Adams had flown the drone Kamov from the ship and prepositioned it near the complex with another of Yuri's loyalists waiting to fire up its engine when he received Juan's signal.

"We're in position and standing by," Hanley cut in.

"Okay, Max. Yuri and I will be there in about an hour."

"We'll keep the light on for you."

Juan patted the seat, and Borodin legged over to straddle the sled just behind him. Two handholds had been sewn into the back of Cabrillo's snowsuit for him to hold on to, saving both men the ignominy of the Russian clutching Juan's waist. Juan could have jacked Borodin's helmet into the snow machine's onboard communications set, but that would mean he would miss any incoming calls from the *Oregon* as they tracked both the drone Kamov and the prison's big Mil chopper in hot pursuit.

The Lynx accelerated like a rocket and shot out of the pines with the swift agility of a startled hare. In minutes, they were blasting over the snowpack. Because of the sophisticated suspension and the heated suits, the ride was remarkably comfortable. The deep core chill Cabrillo had suffered was soon replaced with enough warmth that he had to dial down his heater. He barely felt the vibration of the sled cutting through the snow, and the whine of the two-stroke engine was a muted purr in his helmet.

If not for the fact an armed Russian helicopter would soon be hunting for them, he would have enjoyed the ride.

It was only fifteen minutes into their dash for the coast that Max Hanley called to report their drone helicopter had been shot down and that its cameras had survived long enough to tell them the Russians knew the aircraft was unmanned.

Cabrillo cursed silently. He'd hoped for a half hour or more. The Mil must have been kept at ready status to have caught their bird so quickly. Now it would be doubling back, and a sharp-eyed pilot would see the snowmobile's trail like a scar across the virgin crust of snow.

Juan slowed just enough for him to open his visor and crank his head around. He shouted over the wind, "They're onto us."

Yuri understood the danger and gave Cabrillo a double tap on the shoulder in acknowledgment.

It was a race not only against the chopper now searching for them but also against the setting sun. The Mil doubtlessly had running lights, so once it found their spore, they could keep it lit up as they ran the fleeing pair to ground. On the other hand, Juan couldn't switch on the Lynx's headlamp because it would be the only source of light in the otherwise desolate plane, and the pursuing chopper could cut a vector onto them if they spotted it. He dared not back off the throttle, and he cursed the decision to go with a tinted visor. He could just barely see the white snow through the darkness.

When it got too dark, he thought he could ride with the visor popped up. He tried an experiment. The wind stung like daggers thrust deep into his eye sockets, and he quickly lowered the protective shield. For several seconds he was completely blinded by the tears. So much for that.

They'd just have to trust his reflexes as they continued screaming across the open ground.

Out here it wasn't that big of a deal, there was very little by way of obstacles, but they had to cover several more miles of frozen ocean to reach the *Oregon*.

On they drove, Borodin clinging to the straps while Juan hunched over the handlebars, and the sun sank below the horizon to the west. Somewhere to the east a chopper was hunting them as surely as a hawk searches for prey.

They rapidly approached the coastline and entered a jumbled

mess of icy hummocks and crushed leads in a nightmare landscape that appeared impassable. Juan was forced to slow, and no matter how badly it stung, he also had to open his visor. It was just too dark to see through its tinting, and almost too dark to see anything period.

Despite the Lynx's superb suspension, both men were tossed about as the machine lurched and rolled over the fractured ice. Yuri was forced to loop his arms up to the elbows through the straps and clutch at the seat with his thighs as though he were trying to break an untamed stallion. But still he maintained the presence of mind to scan the sky around them so that the Chairman could concentrate on the path ahead. A particularly bright star caught his attention, and he gazed at it in exhausted wonder.

He'd been so cold for so long—his prison cell never rose above fifty degrees, making sleep nearly impossible—that the warmth of his heated suit was dulling his senses and making his mind drift to near unconsciousness. Only the jarring ride was keeping him awake. The day of his arrest, he'd been in his six-thousand-square-foot apartment in the company of a Burmese courtesan, sipping Cristal. His last real physical ordeal had been basic training when he'd joined the Navy. Brezhnev had been president.

He craved sleep the way a drunk craved alcohol.

But there was something bedazzling about this one particular star that held his attention. It didn't have the cold aloofness of its celestial neighbors, as it straddled the razor's edge between the earth and sky. It pulsed and seemed to grow, almost calling to him like the way the Sirens called to Odysseus when he was

lashed to the mast of his ship. They had tried to draw him to the rocks.

To danger.

To his death.

Stars don't grow!

It was the Mil!