

CHAPTER THREE

Duke of Madison's estate

Somerset County, England

The startled ring-necked pheasant burst from its hiding place in the knee high grasses. The blood red circling its eyes gave the bird a terrified look as it flapped its wings to gain speed. A brown-and-white spotted Cocker Spaniel had flushed it. Like many game birds in England, the pheasant had been bred and reared by a professional gamekeeper and then released to roam the rolling hills of the Duke of Madison's vast estate under its master came hunting.

The pheasant had flown about twenty feet above the ground when the boom of a .12 gauge shotgun broke the early morning silence. Dozens of blackbirds in nearby trees took wing, scattering in different directions.

The buckshot broke the pheasant's right wing, causing it to careen to the ground where it flapped desperately as the dog raced toward it. The Spaniel

expertly snatched the wounded bird in its mouth and shook it violently, snapping its neck and ending its misery.

“Good boy, Rasputin,” cried the dog’s owner, Ivan Sergeyevich Petrov. The Spaniel dropped the pheasant at Petrov’s feet and was rewarded with both a treat and pat on its head. One of Petrov’s two bodyguards took the bird and deposited it into a satchel. It was the first kill of the morning.

“Nice shooting Ivan Sergeyevich,” Georgi Ivanovich Lebedev said. He was Petrov’s best friend and morning hunting companion.

Petrov opened the breach of his .12 gauge shotgun and inserted a new shell. He considered it un-sportsmanlike to hunt with anything other than a single shot rifle. If he couldn’t kill a bird with one round, the creature deserved to escape.

“The next bird we see will be yours,” Petrov promised.

Lebedev was smart enough to always allow Petrov the first kill. It was one reason why the two men had stayed close friends for so many years. Lebedev was content being second fiddle. It had been this way from the time when they were boys growing up in the northwest Moscow neighborhood of Solntsevo, one of city’s toughest areas. When the teenaged Petrov took a sudden interest in a girl named Yelena, Lebedev stepped aside even though he had a crush on her. When Petrov became best friends with Russian President Barkovsky, Lebedev gladly

became a third wheel. When Petrov and Barkovsky became sworn enemies, Lebedev supported Petrov, eventually following him to London.

While Lebedev played the role of a supplicant well, Petrov played it not at all. It was fair to say that he never put his own wants or needs aside for anyone. It was a luxury he could afford, given his net worth of a reported \$6 billion. The fact that his fortune had come not because of hard work or brilliance but good timing and connections did nothing to deflate his grandiose ego.

It was his bloated self-esteem that had ultimately led to him clashing with President Barkovsky. To escape being arrested and thrown into prison, Petrov had been forced to flee Moscow at night, concealed behind a false panel inside a Russian SUV. British foreign intelligence had arranged his escape and in return had demanded that he snitch on his Kremlin friends. Petrov had done so with relish. He had known where lots of bodies were buried.

In truth, only his money made him attractive to the young women who frequently accompanied him to London's most posh clubs. A big man, standing six-foot, two- inches tall and weighing nearly 300 pounds, Petrov's face was puffy white and round. At age forty-two, he was balding, although his personal stylist did her best to disguise it by combing long strains of hair from the side of his head across his naked scalp. He favored loose fitting, hand tailored clothes and only

wore black and white because he was colorblind. This morning, a pair of handmade platinum rimmed sunglasses copied from a photograph of a bespectacled Johnny Depp sat on his nose.

His hunting partner was shorter, standing five foot, six inches, and considerably thinner. Lebedev had a full head of bushy black hair, as well as two caterpillar like eyebrows. He was both a lawyer and accountant, two trades which served him well as Petrov's most trusted lackey and advisor.

Shortly before daybreak, they had left the 40,000 square foot manor house, that Petrov had purchased from the cash poor heirs of the Duke of Madison. Walking side-by-side, they had crossed the lush fields and rolling hills of the Cotswolds.

With Rasputin racing a few feet in front of them, they had entered a tall grass area near a brook and trees. It was here that Petrov had killed the first bird.

Afterwards, he had celebrated by opening a Thermos bottle filled with black coffee mixed with vodka, Kahlua, and amaretto. Lebedev had brought coffee too but it contained no alcohol. As the two men drank, Petrov's bodyguards walked in a circle around them, safely out of hearing distance as they scanned the landscape for possible flashes of sunlight -- reflections from a camouflaged shooter's telescopic gun sight.

“The Americans will be sending people to question you about Senator Windslow,” Lebedev said solemnly.

“Should I see them?” Petrov asked. “Or go to the Daria?” He was referring to his 439 foot-long yacht that had cost \$1 billion to build and was named after his mother. He kept it anchored in the Mediterranean Sea off the French Riviera. “It will be more difficult for them to interrogate me there.”

“I think you should meet with them. Otherwise, it will look as if you have something to hide.”

Petrov chuckled. “I do.”

“I should be present as your lawyer.”

“Perhaps, it was a mistake telling the CIA about the gold, instead of my British friends,” Petrov said.

“I disagree,” Lebedev replied. “The Americans have longer arms and are not as timid as MI-6. It was right to tell them. The Americans also have more to gain by helping us.”

Rasputin, who was waiting patiently at Petrov’s feet, began to pant loudly and whine.

“You have a scent, don’t you boy?” Petrov said to his dog. He finished his drink. “Are you ready,” he asked Lebedev.

Tossing away the remains of his coffee, Lebedev put his stainless steel cup into his knapsack and said, “I’m ready.”

Leaning down, Petrov gave his dog the command: “BIRD.”

The Spaniel bolted along a hedgerow, its snout floating inches above the ground. The sound of rustlings feathers and a cry of alarm caused both men to shoulder their shotguns. Another pheasant exploded into the sky, this one much smaller and faster than the first.

Petrov fired. His shot stopped the bird in mid-air. Bits of feathers blew away from its breast. It fell dead.

Cracking open his shotgun, Petrov said, “I promised you the second kill, my friend, but my instincts overruled my obligation.”

Lebedev shrugged. “There will be other birds for me.”

Rasputin arrived with the dead bird clutched in his mouth. Petrov petted the dog.

“You have someone watching the Americans,” he said.

“Yes, of course. One of our best. ”

Lebedev reloaded and snapped the shotgun shut.

“Do you think Jedidiah Jones has told the FBI what he knows?”

Lebedev replied, “We can’t be certain. This is why you must meet with the Americans.”

Petrov grinned. “They think they are coming to interrogate me but I will be interrogating them.”