

PROLOGUE

July 23, 1918

Ivan Dombrovski sloshed through the muddy bog, stopping only to catch his breath. Tracking dogs howled in the distance, their task slowed by the stench of rot suffusing the air. He checked his holstered Nagant revolver to verify that it hadn't come loose. When the time came, he would need it to ensure the future for his beloved Tsar Nicholas.

The rain clouds parted briefly, and he ducked to avoid the glow of the full moon that would make him visible among the shattered trees that surrounded him. The showers gave way to hordes of mosquitoes and horseflies, but Dombrovski's head-to-toe wool clothing and the netting over his face protected him from the bloodsucking insects. The heat from the outfit was bearable only when compared to the unrelenting swarms that had driven half of his team mad during their trek to this forsaken stretch of Siberian wilderness.

His heart pounding loudly in the sudden silence, Dombrovski poked his head up and searched for any sign of his adversary, who would also be keeping well ahead of the baying hounds. Vasily Suzdalev must be close. The footprints in the mud meant they'd been circling each other, but the rain had drowned out any noise of Suzdalev splashing through the swamp.

Dombrovski could see nothing but death, an entire forest of eighty million trees denuded and scythed flat. Although he had been in the Tunguska region for more than a week, he was still agog at the expanse of devastation caused a decade ago. According to the reports of the Evenki natives, the Tunguska cataclysm had happened in mere seconds, a blinding flash in the sky followed by a sound like a million cannons firing at once.

By Dombrovski's estimation the razed area measured twenty kilometers in every direction from the center of the blast, larger than Moscow. He knew of no power capable of such an event. Yet despite the unprecedented scale of the destruction, the area was so sparsely populated that no one had been killed by the explosion.

Suzdalev, a Bolshevik agent for Lenin, had come to this desolate region two years ago and discovered a metallic substance never before found on this earth. During the subsequent lab tests, an accident destroyed the specimen, and now Suzdalev was back on another expedition to find more. Dombrovski had been sent to retrieve the secret material from him before Suzdalev could return to Moscow with it and seal the fate of Mother Russia.

Dombrovski would sacrifice himself rather than let the communists claim it for their own. They had already killed his wife and daughter. He would not let them destroy his country as well.

The clouds shielded the moon again, and raindrops pelted him anew. With one last look around, he hoisted himself up onto the log he'd been crouching behind and ran along it to avoid the quagmire. Where the tree ended at a splintered stump, he leaped over to the log next to it. A hand shot up and snagged his boot while he was in mid-air, causing

Dombrovski's foot to miss the log. His chest slammed into the trunk and he fell backward into the mud.

Suzdalev, who must have been lying in wait for Dombrovski to make exactly that move, jumped onto him and kned him in the stomach, driving the air from his lungs. Suzdalev scrabbled at the pistol holster, trying to draw the Nagant.

Dombrovski grabbed a handful of muck and threw it in Suzdalev's face. The Bolshevik wiped at his netting in an attempt to clear it. Dombrovski launched a fist at Suzdalev's neck. Suzdalev grasped at his throat and collapsed from the blow. Dombrovski rolled over and pulled the pistol free. He staggered to his feet, keeping the gun aimed at Suzdalev, who was on his hands and knees wheezing. The man was no longer a threat. If he'd had a weapon, Dombrovski would already be dead.

More baying. The dogs were closer, and Dombrovski could now hear the shouts of the fifteen armed men with them.

"Where is it?" Dombrovski demanded.

Suzdalev sat back on his haunches and spit mud from his lips. "It won't do you any good."

"You're wrong. It will be a powerful weapon for the tsar—"

"By now the tsar has been executed, along with the entire royal family."

Dombrovski narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

The clouds parted again, and he could see Suzdalev's smile just below the shadow from his hood. "I mean the Romanovs are no more. It is only a matter of time before the glorious revolution transforms our country into a worker's paradise."

"How do you know the tsar is dead?"

“As one of Comrade Lenin’s most trusted agents, I am privy to much. Nicholas was scheduled to be shot on the night of July eighteenth.”

Almost a week ago. As isolated as they were, it would take news even of such momentous proportions quite a while to reach them. Suzdalev might be telling the truth. But it made Dombrovski’s task that much more important. If the Reds took over and gained possession of Suzdalev’s secret, the communist revolution might not stop at Russia’s borders.

Two dogs barked as they latched onto a stronger scent.

“I know you found another sample of xenobium,” Dombrovski said. “Tell me where it is, and I’ll kill you quickly.”

“I hid it an hour ago. You’ll never find it.”

Dombrovski shot him in the left knee, drawing a scream from Suzdalev and shouts from the dogs’ handlers.

“You’re lying.” If Suzdalev had hidden the specimen during his midnight escape, there would have been no way for him to find it again among the countless identical logs. He had to have it with him.

Dombrovski spied a knapsack inside a cavity beneath the log. With the pistol trained on Suzdalev, he snatched the pack and rifled through it until it was empty. The material was not inside. He checked Suzdalev’s pockets with the same results.

“Where!” Dombrovski shouted and fired into Suzdalev’s right knee.

Another scream. More shouts. The trackers were almost upon him.

Then Dombrovski spotted a glint reflecting the moonlight next to Suzdalev. The Bolshevik followed his eye and grabbed for it, intending to fling it away, but Dombrovski

stepped on his hand. Suzdalev must have tried to bury it beside him after he'd been defeated in the melee.

Dombrovski plucked it from the mire and wiped it on his sleeve. No bigger than a piece of hard candy, the multicolored surface of the xenobium shimmered in the light. Whoever could puzzle out the secrets of this object would have a tool to dominate the world.

Dombrovski bent down and ripped the net and hood from Suzdalev's head. The ravenous mosquitoes descended. Dombrovski could see the pure hatred in Suzdalev's eyes.

"I warned you, *tovarisch*," Dombrovski said, spitting the despised word for *comrade*. "You should have told me. Now you will suffer the way my family did."

Suzdalev launched himself forward but cried out in agony when his legs wouldn't support him. "Your kind will be extinct soon!" he shouted as he swatted at his face. Even the thick mud was no match for his insect tormentors. "You cannot stem the tide of history!"

Dombrovski said nothing. He pocketed the object, took the pack's rations, and left Suzdalev cursing and writhing in pain, at the mercy of Siberia's natural horrors. With no food and dozens of kilometers to the nearest settlement, his last days on shattered knees would be excruciating.

It took less than five minutes for the tracker team to catch up with Dombrovski. The team's leader, his rifle at the ready, eyed him warily. "Did your idea work?"

Dombrovski nodded. “The dogs drove Suzdalev straight to me. Our mission is accomplished.” He would secure the specimen in a lead-lined case when they returned to camp.

“So now we return to Yekaterinburg and rescue the tsar, sir?” the man said.

Dombrovski would have to confirm Suzdalev’s claim about the death of Nicholas. If he was correct, it was only a matter of time until the civil war was lost to the Reds.

“Perhaps not, my friend. When we return to civilization, we may need to find a different path.”

As he led his team away from Suzdalev’s final resting place, Dombrovski was already formulating a new route and a new plan. He had to get Suzdalev’s find as far from the communists as possible. Instead of taking the Trans-Siberian railway west toward Moscow, they would head east—to Vladivostok and eventually, to America.

QUEENSTOWN

ONE

Present Day

They called it the Snow Farm, and Tyler Locke had to admit this winter brought a bumper crop. White stretched across the rolling hills unbroken until it reached the rocky peaks in the distance. As he strolled out the lodge entrance, Tyler zipped up his leather jacket and put on gloves. Although there were no clouds to block the morning sun, it was still a nippy negative ten Celsius outside, not the temperature he was used to in mid-July.

With a wave to the bellman, Tyler walked out into the frigid air. He squinted against the blinding white before donning his sunglasses. In the distance, clusters of Nordic skiers whisked across groomed courses. Behind him he could hear the whine of car engines being pushed to their limits as they raced around a track.

A silver Audi S4 rounded a bend piled high by the Snow Farm's massive snow blowers. The Audi drifted one direction, then the other, throwing up a rooster tail of snow behind it. The turbo howled as the car accelerated toward the hotel entrance. Just when it looked like the driver was going to blow past him, the antilock brakes chattered, and the car skidded to a stop in front of Tyler.

The driver's door flew open, and a black man bounded out with a quickness that must have amazed the bellman watching from inside. Though Grant Westfield's six-foot frame

was two inches shorter than Tyler's, he was built like a tank and moved like a Ferrari. If Tyler shaved off his short brown hair and quadrupled his time in the weight room, he might look half as formidable.

Not that Grant was looking particularly intimidating at the moment. Tyler barked a laugh when he saw that his friend had squeezed all 250 pounds of muscle into an enormous orange parka. To Tyler, Grant looked like the unholy offspring of the Michelin Man and a pumpkin.

"Where did you get that?" Tyler said.

Grant patted the car and smiled. "Isn't it cool? I talked the guys at the Proving Grounds into letting us borrow it for the day."

New Zealand's Southern Hemisphere Proving Grounds, located halfway between Wanaka and Queenstown in the South Island's Southern Alps, is the leading facility for auto companies that want to torture-test their upcoming cars in winter conditions while the US, Japan, and Europe bask in summer. Tyler and Grant were there to put a top-secret hybrid prototype through its cold-weather paces for an unnamed manufacturer. Now that they were done with their main work, they had one more job to do before they took a few days off to explore some of the adventures for which the Queenstown area was famous.

Skiing, however, would not be one of the activities. Unlike Tyler, Grant hated the cold.

"The car is great," Tyler said, "but I was talking about your nuclear-powered parka."

Grant stretched out his arms and then adjusted the black ski hat that covered his shorn head. "It's awesome. Even Antarctica is afraid of this parka. You don't like it?"

"I'm afraid that if I sit next to it for more than an hour, the radiation will make me as bald as you are." He rounded the front of the Audi, but Grant blocked the opening.

"What are you doing?" Grant said.

"I'm driving."

"The hell you are. I procured the vehicle, so I get to drive."

"When was the last time you drove in snow?"

"Two years ago. When we were in Whistler for that job at the Olympics."

"Exactly," Tyler said. "You tore the bumper off my Cayenne."

"An accident. Could have happened to anyone."

"In the condo parking lot?"

Grant shrugged. "Then this is just the practice I need. Four-wheel drive, top-of-the-line snow tires, electronic stability control."

"Ten airbags."

"Right! You'll be plenty safe. What more could you want?"

Seeing that Grant wouldn't relent, Tyler trudged back to the other side and got in. Before he even had his belt on, Grant punched the accelerator and they were fishtailing down the road.

"Where to?" Grant asked.

"Left when we get to the highway. The sheep station is north of Queenstown. My phone's map says no more than an hour to get there, even with your driving."

"Man, I cannot believe we are doing this."

"Aren't you a little curious to see what she's got?"

“Come on. This lady must be senile. A seventy-five-year-old woman claims to have witnessed the crash of an alien spacecraft at Roswell and has a piece of the wreckage, and you think she’ll hand us anything other than some unidentifiable hunk of twisted metal? If she’s creative, it’ll at least be from a 1947 Buick. Who is she anyway?”

“Fay Turia. Born Fay Allen. Raised on a ranch near Roswell, New Mexico, until the age of ten when her father’s cousin got him a job as a foreman at a sheep station in New Zealand. The whole family moved down here, and she hasn’t lived in the US since.”

“You checked her out?”

“As much as I could,” Tyler said. “She emailed me a copy of her birth certificate to prove she was born in Roswell. It was legit.”

“So she lived there. Why does she want to hire us?”

“She called Gordian the foremost airplane accident investigation firm in the world.”

“Well, that’s true. At least she’s perceptive in that respect.”

Gordian Engineering was the company Tyler had founded. With a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering from MIT and a PhD from Stanford, he’d since happily stepped down from his role as president of the firm and now served as its chief of special operations, which meant he could pick and choose the projects he wanted to pursue. Grant was his best friend and the company’s top electrical engineer. Their complementary skills let them oversee a wide range of projects, including forensic accident analysis, demolition, loss prevention, and automotive testing.

But this request was not in the normal line of inquiry. Most of their jobs were for large multinationals that could afford the rates they charged. An individual asking for their assistance was highly unusual.

“Did she ever say why she waited sixty-five years to come out to the world?” Grant asked.

“She said she’s been doing her own investigation on the down low because she heard too many stories about what the government did to the other people who came forward about the crash. But now she’s stuck and wants to see if we can help her out.”

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

“She sweet-talked me into it. Of course, I wasn’t going to take on the job officially.”

“Probably not something we want to add to our website.”

Tyler laughed. “Right. I told her if she could wait three months, we’d be in her neck of the woods for another job and would stop by to see what she had. So here we are.”

“She’s a kook.”

“Likely, although she sounded remarkably with-it on the phone. I’m sure whatever the object is, we’ll turn it over, frown at it with concern, take a sample and some photos, and then tell her that its origin is indeterminate. We won’t give her a conclusive answer, but we won’t dash her hopes for an alien artifact, either. After that we can head into Queenstown.”

“I hear they’ve got a good pizza place there called The Cow,” Grant said. “Then we can figure out what to do for fun. You know, I do have the parachutes in the trunk.”

Tyler smirked at him. “You don’t give up, do you? I told you. Bungee jumping, yes. Skydiving, no. At least with the bungee you’re already tied to the bridge.”

For the next thirty minutes, Grant steered them down a twisty cliff-hugging road called the Crown Range, where the drop-offs were so steep and Grant’s driving was so

suspect that Tyler started to wonder just how much more adventure he could stand during the trip.

Once they got below three thousand feet, the snow cleared and Grant upped the speed. They made up so much time that Tyler texted Fay that they'd be twenty minutes early.

Tyler guided Grant through green pastures and farmland dotted by quaint bed-and-breakfasts. When they turned onto Fay's road along a deep ravine carved by the Shotover River, Grant sighed as it climbed back above the snow line. In another few minutes they saw a sign for the Turia Remarkables Sheep Station, named for the jagged Remarkables mountain range looming over Queenstown's Lake Wakatipu. Fresh tire tracks split the driveway's snow.

"Maybe this means she left," Grant said hopefully. "I'm starving."

Tyler looked at his watch: 9:40 a.m. Twenty minutes early for their appointment. "That would explain why she hasn't texted back."

They followed the tracks for half a mile until they reached a stately white clapboard home with an attached garage. Behind it was a large red barn. Except for a few evergreens surrounding the house, the countryside was bare of trees. A fence disappeared into the hills on either side.

The snow tracks separated into a pair that led to the garage and a second set leading to a Toyota sedan parked in the circular driveway in front of the house. Grant pulled up next to it.

Tyler got out and laid his hand on the Toyota's hood. Still warm, just like he expected. No rancher would drive a sedan. Two pairs of footprints wound to the door. Fay must have visitors.

No sheep or ranch hands were visible, probably out working somewhere on the station's two thousand acres.

"Nice place," Grant said.

"Looks like ranching has been good to her. Shall we say howdy?"

Grant nodded, and they crunched through the snow. When they were within ten feet of the front door, two shotgun blasts erupted from inside the house.

Their Army training kicking in, Tyler and Grant both dived to their bellies without hesitation. Grant gave him a look and silently mouthed, "What the hell?"

Tyler was about to suggest they make a hasty retreat to the Audi when he was stopped by a woman's shout, followed by a third shotgun blast closer to the right side of the home. Tyler turned his head and saw a man skid around the corner of the house.

He raised a pistol, but before Tyler could yell, "Don't shoot," the stranger fired wildly in their direction, bullet impacts kicking up snow all around them.

That was all the prodding they needed to find cover. Grant scrambled toward the house and rammed the front door open like a charging rhino. Tyler was hot on his heels and slammed it closed once he crossed the threshold.

The hallway seemed shrouded in darkness until Tyler realized he was still wearing his sunglasses. When he doffed them, he saw that shards of a broken lamp littered the floor and buckshot holes peppered the wall.

From his right came the unmistakable sound of a pump-action shotgun chambering a new round. Tyler looked up to see a striking woman who had to be seventy-five-year-old Fay Turia, though she didn't look a day over sixty. In her white hair cropped just below the ears, slim sporty figure, and bright green eyes, Tyler perceived the echo of the

stunning beauty she must have been fifty years ago. Only the wrinkles around her eyes and neck and several liver spots on her hands betrayed her true age. She held the shotgun firm to her shoulder, as if she were not merely comfortable with the weapon but adept at handling it.

“Who are you?” she growled. The yawning barrel was the size of a manhole at this distance. Smoke wafted from it.

Tyler put up his hands. “I’m Tyler Locke. You must be Fay. I believe you invited me and my friend, Grant Westfield, for a friendly visit.”

Recognition dawned on her face, and the scowl melted away, replaced by a toothsome smile.

“Welcome to my home, Dr. Locke,” she said cheerfully, as if she were about to serve tea and crumpets instead of hot lead. “Would you mind terribly calling the police?”