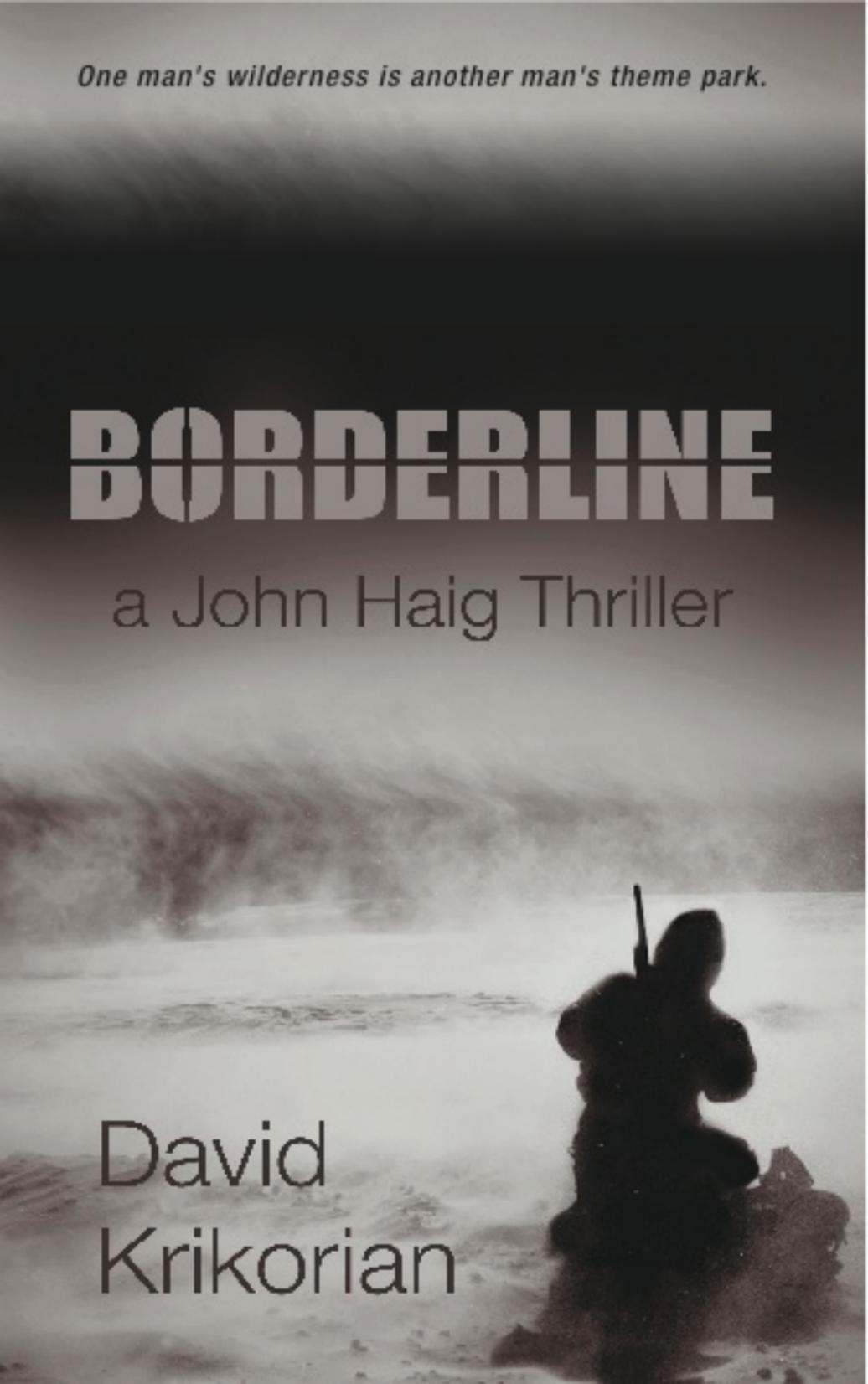


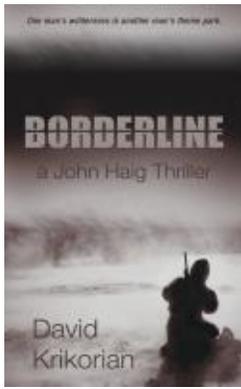
*One man's wilderness is another man's theme park.*

# BORDERLINE

a John Haig Thriller

David  
Krikorian

A black and white photograph of a soldier in silhouette, kneeling in a trench and holding a rifle. The soldier is positioned on the right side of the frame, looking out over a vast, misty, and desolate landscape. The background is filled with a thick, white mist or smoke that obscures the horizon. The overall mood is somber and tense.



*One man's wilderness is another man's theme park. John Haig. Nature lover. Survivor. A US Border Patrol agent tasked with tracking down illegals in the wilderness between Canada and Minnesota. Yet an unhealed wound stalks Haig every day of his life, until the morning he finds the body of an old friend. As Haig fights to survive a covert war, he collides with a pair of maniacs tangled with the ghosts of his past.*

# Borderline

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**DAVID KRIKORIAN**

**BORDERLINE**

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# ONE

Cold fog rolled in from Lake Superior blocking the October sun. Breakers crashing into rocks could be heard a mile through the woods before the roar of Manitou Falls smothered the sound. Above the falls, leaves circled, caught in gusts spinning off the turbine flow of the river forming the borderline between Canada and the US.

Sunlight broke through at noon, and the fog lifted over a bronze plaque bolted to the viewing deck on the Minnesota side. The plaque had stated that the rock formations were two and half billion years old, Algoman shale deposits imbedded with iron ore that gave a metallic ring to the falls. Fundamentalists angered by the scientific claim had flattened the plaque's lettering with a sledgehammer during a recent Grand Portage revival. Yet the vandalism couldn't mar the beauty of sunlight worming down the waterfall's chute, spreading over brick-like walls of sandstone and greywacke before resting on the Canadian side where Sam Means' corpse bobbed in an eddy with one of his suspenders caught on a spike of ledge rock.

The strap snapped loose and Means' face turned into the binocular view of US Border Patrol contract agent, John Haig, who caught the man's expression before the body washed downstream, eyes frozen in a glare that put words in Haig's head — *We all go full circle in the end, eh John?*

In midsummer's low water, daredevils raced across the rocks at the upper edge of the falls. Yet

locals on both sides of the border knew to dive toward the center of the pool if they slipped. Sam Means, a native hunting and fishing guide, knew these parts better than Haig even. They'd stood in this same place decades ago with Titus Redman and the others.

Though hardened to the sight of death, Haig knew he'd have a tough time dealing with the look in Sam's eyes, as if Haig had a psychic receiver that picked up the man's last moment on earth. He could never come to terms with his ability to divine the last living thoughts of a human being, especially the thoughts of an old friend.

The same thing happened every time he came across a body, the worst part of his job with Border Patrol tracking the woods alone.

A harvest moon rose over Lake Superior later that night, reflecting in the swells playing a funeral drumbeat against the base of a cliff.

Downdrafts scuffled through the cedars as a snowstorm approached from the northwest. Redstarts and Yellow-rumped warblers chirped overhead, speeding south with the last of the neo tropical songbirds. Like a migrating bird, Haig had an instinct of knowing when to leave and felt that pull now.

He held a tumbler of scotch in one hand and an old trumpet in the other as he stood at the cliff edge. Tired of his demons, he set his drink on a rock, put the horn to his lips and blew a dirge from his perch overlooking the lake. He faced toward Lake Michigan hundreds of miles to the south, the place where he'd grown to adulthood. He kept his back to Superior's north shore; his adopted home where the years had

proven it was easier to survive the elements than the human inhabitants.

None of the locals knew he played the horn. The sound faded over water long before reaching his neighbors. His dirge played tribute to the dead, and to the crazy people he'd survived. And to Petersen, an old fisherman and friend who'd died so many years ago. And one last lick to drown out the image of Sam Means' death.

Tonight Haig had no more time for such lamentations. He turned away from the lake and walked through the tree shadows over the trail to his cabin, closing in on the grind of a propane generator and a TV announcer's voice blaring through the open front door. As a boy living near Chicago, Haig had never dreamed he'd end up alone in a cabin above Lake Superior. Nor did he imagine how long it would take the Chicago Cubs to get to the World Series.

He'd waited decades for this night.

He swept directly under the motion sensor lights to make sure they were turned off, likewise the inside lights, the phone and the computer system — all shut down. He wanted no distractions, not tonight.

Earlier, after hauling Sam's body out from the river, a few of the first responders had invited Haig to watch the game at the Gitchi-Gami Bar in the resort where he worked weekends as a naturalist. Over a drink he had no trouble sharing things he knew about the woods and the lake to resort guests who were taken by his knowledge, yet often mistaking him for an outgoing man. That's when his co-workers would step in and quietly suggest to the guests that there was more to John Haig than a friendly man at the bar.

He entered the cabin guided by the moonlight coming through the glass storm door. The glow contrasted with the flashing TV and the bright infield green of Wrigley Field under nightlights that glowered over the fake leather of his La-Z-Boy Recliner circa 1966. His late father's chair. His father was the man who had instilled in Haig the value of owning land, and tonight's only invited guest.

Haig flipped on an overhead light with a growing sense of something out of place. He looked about the room and saw nothing but the usual mess of books, rocks and artifacts, still unable to shake his sadness over Sam and something else.

Two weeks ago Haig had met a woman. Maybe she was the cause of his unease since she was the only other thing on his mind tonight. Her name was Sara Novak, a nurse from eastern Europe with bobbed coppery hair, a petite woman with a knowing smile and unusual grace. She was renting Haig's mobile home by the highway. After chatting last night while he fixed a leaky kitchen faucet, she suddenly reached out and pulled him close saying how he reminded her of a reluctant hero, and then she kissed him unaware that it was the first kiss to arouse him years.

Kiss or no kiss, tonight Haig sat alone before the bleachers of Wrigley Field, Cubs against the Yankees, with a Havana cigar, a bottle of single-malt and a bowl of Red Jewel popcorn, minutes to game time.

He shut off the overhead light. The series of a lifetime was about to begin.

The scotch was halfway to his lips when the TV went dark.

# TWO

*Sonofabitch.*

He had less than five minutes to game time to rush through the power failure drill: check the breaker panel behind the cabin, check the solar-wind inverter, the main DC disconnect, the system meter, the charge controller. He slid on his boots. Outside, all systems of his solar array appeared intact, but with red instead of green diodes glowing; a power spike. Damned electric co-op.

His backup generator hummed from inside the shed at the end of his flashlight beam ninety feet south of the cabin's front door, churning electric power that would normally override the Co-op's power loss and keep the lights on. Something wasn't right.

After converting to sustainable energy, Haig's self-contained solar-wind system had racked up excess kilowatt-hours that went back into the Arrowhead Co-op's grid, power worth hundreds of dollars, which the Co-op refused to pay back but instead put into a balance on a reverse electric tab. Money or energy owed to Haig that he'd never receive. And that rundown Co-op was messing up his game. Now he had to restart the main breaker switch in the old electric box a hundred yards west of his cabin at the bottom of a hill.

He hurried past the ledge rock and cedars that bordered a wide clearing where his herb garden sat under a row of bird feeders strung on a cable set well

above a bear's reach, though the bears never stopped trying.

At the crest of the hill a stone stairway ran down to his pole barn a half-mile inland from Highway 61. Lit by moonlight, the gravel driveway showed no tracks of any other vehicle. Still sensing something out of place, he eyed his property one last time and saw no movement.

Then a snowshoe hare shot out from behind the compost bin, chased by a fox across the garden. Another hare bounded away in the opposite direction — a spoiled hunt.

A third hare ran out from beneath the cabin.

Someone was inside.

Haig shut off the flashlight and headed toward the woodshed. He cursed himself for letting his instincts slip because of the game.

A herring gull paced back and forth on the woodshed roof, alarmed and cackling with its eyes on the cabin. Haig slowed to glance over his shoulder. Just inside the cabin's glass storm door, the orange tip of a cigarette grew bright from a long inhale.

Under the woodshed's awning the steel blade of an Estwing hand axe shone in the moonlight. One solid piece of forged stainless; the axe was an old friend, a most dependable friend. He jerked it out of a log aware of two things. First. He shouldn't have left the place unlocked even for a minute. Second. He was pissed. Beneath his wall of warm smiles and friendly chitchat, those who knew about him had a nervous respect for the bloodbath he'd gone through four years ago. Most kept clear of his personal space, knowing what John Haig had once done with an axe to survive.

The gull took flight and landed on the cabin roof where it repeated its nervous pacing. Pausing at the base of the deck stairs, Haig figured the bird must have been wondering what the human would do with an intruder inside his cabin, possibly some local psychotic with a gun.

A wave of disgust came over him. Of course he knew exactly who was inside. He slammed the axe into a nearby stump, turned on the flashlight and climbed up the deck stairs.

Titus Redman sat in Haig's chair grasping a tumbler of Haig's scotch with Haig's computer resting on his lap. He appeared quite comfortable for a man who had the stress of holding two concurrent jobs. One as Resident Agent for US Customs and Border Security, and the other as Head of Casino Security for the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa.

Despite rumors of his involvement in slot machine tampering, Titus was a well-liked security head who managed to weed out snakes in the grass ranging from mob family vendors to corrupt Indian gaming officials. A native wonder boy to the white-owned news media of northern Minnesota, he'd been given an open ticket to run things his way with the clever hands of a card shark that slowly netted the highest personal fortune of any member of his tribe. Latching himself to the success of Border Patrol contractors like Haig, he also achieved the arrest-to-conviction rate of all Resident Agents in the Grand Forks Sector.

In the book of *Who's Who of Native Americans*, Titus Redman was the North Star.

He turned the computer toward Haig. A blank Border Security Incident Report filled the laptop screen. “Each time you go out for a nature walk I have to detail every pile of animal shit you step into. Why you were tracking Sam Means?”

“Did you read the email I sent?”

“Your letter of resignation? That’s like spam coming from you.”

“So you’re not here out of respect for an old friend?”

“I didn’t know you played the horn. How come you never invite me over?”

“Tell me who I’ve got to track, then leave.”

A shadow blocked out the moonlight from streaming through the glass door. Titus straightened in his seat, “Mr. Lewis. Meet Mr. Haig. It’s his place but I don’t think he’s in the mood to invite you in. The power stays cut until I say otherwise. Knock him cold if he comes out that door.”

The moonlight returned as footsteps thudded down the deck stairs. Big guys like that were always nearby wherever Titus roamed. The first man Haig remembered seeing with him was a bear of a young man, Samuel Means.

“Take a seat. When we’re finished talking, I promise Lewis will get your game back on.”

Haig shut off the flashlight and the room went black.

“Don’t go psycho on me, Haig. Even if you axe me and Lewis like you did after your ex-wife’s murder, you’ll be out all night trying to find out where we cut the line.”

A Coleman lantern hissed to life. Haig placed it on the side table before stepping back toward the door where he could watch Titus' movement in the light. "You've got two minutes."

"I understand if you're a little touchy over Sam and all." He inserted a flash drive into Haig's laptop and clicked on a file folder. A blue background filled the screen behind a white logo: *US Customs and Border Security*. Titus typed in a long pass code and opened another MS file.

"First you break into my place and now this, a goddamned Power Point?"

"Shut up and watch." Titus clicked through a set of text slides.

"Attaché is spelled with two T's."

"Don't be a nerd. It's bad enough with you sulking over the past."

Titus paused on the next slide and held up the laptop to give Haig a better look at a man dressed in a lab coat slumped over a table-desk. The image appeared to be black and white except for the reddish blood splatter on the wall behind the desk.

"Apparently this guy was a doctor, some kind of worldwide oncologist from eastern Slobovia, wherever. A perfect shot through the Adam's apple. Spinal cord's snapped in two. The bullet was fired by a suppressed large caliber pistol from a distance of twenty-two feet."

"And this concerns me, how?"

"Because Sam didn't just fall into the river and drown. The Cook County M.E. found a bullet hole through his neck. So pay attention and make sure it's not you who ends up on some asshole's Power Point."

Haig focused on the image, not so much on the gore but what was on the doctor's desk, a lone computer and two picture frames laying face side down.

"Who exactly were you tracking before dawn?" Titus asked.

"I got a message late last night from the old woman who empties the trash at the new State Park pavilion. She was worried about a pair of men dressed head to toe in black, hiking in from Highway 61 toting packs and hunting rifles."

"Of course, violating state and federal law from here to eternity. That would be Emily Nanabozo who made the call. But why call you?"

"Because she doesn't trust authority, and is especially mistrusting of you."

"Did you find anything?"

"Sam Means."

Titus Redman claimed that his roots were pureblooded Ojibwa from an aristocratic line of chiefs, a claim that denoted a loose screw to many on a mixed-blood reservation. He nailed the part by dressing native chic, wearing a sheepskin field coat over a tailored Hopi rug-pattern shirt, and designer blue jeans tucked inside alligator cowboy boots. He cut his graying black hair in a Mohawk buzz and wore amber night-driving sunglasses, as if his eyes were sensitive to moonlight.

After four years of tracking for Border Security, this was the first time Haig had received a home visit from Titus. And of all nights, to be forced to listen to

this nonsense about some central European assassin stealing over the border, Haig was about to lose self-control. He figured the Cub's game was halfway through the third inning by now. He wanted Titus gone.

"Dargov." Titus let the assassin's name float about the room. "Weird name, like a vampire or something."

"Not a name. But a place," Haig said, pissed for getting sucked in.

"Please. Feel free to elaborate."

"Dargov. Slovak form of the Hungarian word, 'Drago.' Meaning a place of dark and despair. Not eastern *Slobovia*, but Slovakia and not far from Ukraine. Close to where the Battle of Dargov Pass took place in late 1944. Twenty thousand Soviet allies killed in a clash with a Nazi SS division. Most killed by friendly fire, all but lost to history."

"That's pure Haig. Guys like you are stuffed with crap like that. All right then. The assassin, Dargov, was spotted in Montreal then again at the Thunder Bay airport. Canadians were on him, so they thought before losing him."

"This is where your presentation falls apart. A worldwide killer, most likely on a no-fly list, shows up in a Canadian pulp mill town just across the US border. Why, to assassinate a moose?"

Titus hesitated, which meant that he was instructed not to answer, or maybe he knew how ridiculous the story sounded. Instead he clicked to the next Power Point slide, revealing a man in a black suit coat, late fifties, thick eyebrows, dark deep-set eyes and a head-full of hair. Even a black suit coat couldn't mask his weightlifter torso used to crunching reps,

and apparently other men's bones. His face reminded Haig of a Soviet era mug shot, all stoic, plus something else. Attitude; with an aura of superiority beneath the skin.

"Using a name like Dargov suggests a unique slant on his profession," Haig said. "Is this guy military?"

"Beat's me." Shots of more victims appeared on the next slide. "Dargov's got a dozen kills that we know of. Bankers, politicians, mafia. And that cancer doctor."

The next slide showed three passports.

"Fakes?"

"Hard to tell. He's leaving them behind like crumbs on a trail. Ukrainian, Slovak, and Hungarian as you suggested."

"Where did this trail *appear* to be headed?"

"The West Coast. See, you're good at this."

Letting the flattery fall to the floor, Haig closely examined each passport. "And Dargov's coming here gunning for what? Cancer experts? And those two dressed in black at the state park, are they connected? What about Sam?"

"That's where you come in. Tomorrow morning at 6:00 AM sharp."

Titus picked up Haig's cigar. "A Havana smuggled in from Canada. And you, a representative of US Customs. Got a match?"

"Why, to blow more smoke up my ass?"

"Okay man, like I said, we don't know shit. By the way, my boss, Eva Rapala says hello. She also said to feel free to bust up your place if you didn't volunteer for the job. Seriously, all I can tell you is that Dargov is extremely important to her."

“Don’t you cruise the internet? How’s any asshole going to sneak across the border over the next six days?”

“Those war games, so what?”

*Operation Snow Angel* was what the news feeds had called it, a joint exercise in counter-terrorism, a rare show for two unlikely partners, the US and Russia, complete with combat aircraft, armor and two battalions of troops here to maneuver against a hypothetical terrorist incursion.

“This Dargov,” Haig said. “He’s picked when and where to cross, knowing the woods would be crawling with tanks, helicopters, Russians and whatnot. What’s he running from?”

“Good question. And you’ll be the first to find out since you know these woods better than a pack of wolves.”

“Then get wolves to track him down. You’ve got my resignation.”

“What’s this I hear about some hot nurse renting your trailer?”

Haig squinted to make sure he read Titus clearly.

“Local women talk about you like you’re the catch of the day. You still got that young hard body. Rapala said so a number of times.”

“You want to seduce me? Start with the truth about Dargov.”

“This nurse, she’s Slovak, right?”

“What are you suggesting?”

“How come you didn’t invite Ms. Novak to watch the game?”

Haig said nothing.

“Rapala says men are naturally unable to communicate with each other. From my point of view, your resignation is moot. Truth or no truth, you’ll track Dargov because you were born for this.”

Haig couldn’t help but grin. “You may slip through it like you’re made of Teflon, but the idea of tracking you down someday is the one thing that I look forward to the most in this job.”

“I know what I did to you and Sam back then. But I had no choice. A survivor like you should’ve figured it out by now.”

Haig’s grin tensed. Of the few friends he’d known in this life, Titus and Sam Means were the last to remain within reach. He and Sam had stayed on good terms until this morning. His relationship with Titus was a different matter. Did he even realize that the sound of his voice hadn’t changed one iota since the days of their youth, or know how Haig longed to go back to those days and steer them onto a different path? No, the old Titus was lost forever. He was more like a ghost now, here to taunt more than haunt because he had the power to do so.

Haig turned his back to him.

Titus also looked away, as if saddened by the distance between them. “I’ll be back at 6:00 AM sharp. You’ll be flown out of here by military chopper. That’s how important this is.”

He quit the cabin without another word.

# THREE

Sixteen inches of snow fell overnight.

At 6:00 AM Haig emerged from a warm nest into a whirlwind of freezing sleet.

In the time it took to trudge from the cabin to the garden, Titus was able to shout out a last minute briefing, mostly a replay of the night before on the man suspected of shooting the doctor in the photo and numerous others, apparently.

A helicopter waited nearby in the dark. Haig could barely hear Titus yelling over the rotor noise.

“A red what?” Haig yelled back.

“A red level threat. You don’t look too convinced, Haig. Rock solid intelligence costs big bucks. This Intel involved the combined efforts of *CBP*, *DHS*, *ICE* and *BORTAC*. Dargov intends to cross the US border. That’s why you’re flying in on a chopper instead of hoofing it through the woods.”

“That’s the same e coli you fed me last night and I still have the shits. Give me something to hunt.”

“Are you hung over, man? I swear up and down, all you need to know is that he’s most likely to cross between Highway 61 and where the road ends at Northern Lights Lake.”

“All you people see is a line on a map. That section of border’s not a line but a hundred miles of twisted waterways.”

“You see the news last night?”

“The Cubs lost, one to zip. You want to rub it in?”

“Yeah, I do. Especially the part about the storm cutting the game short. But more important, NBC did a special report about traffickers turning north to the soft border with Canada because Border Security has a chokehold along the Mexican border. Congress is about to put another twenty million into our budget next year. Understand?”

“What, you get to buy another yacht?”

“No, Haig. Next year, you’ll be paid real money as a Senior Patrol Agent. Catch this guy, Dargov and you’re home free. Now get it?”

Haig kicked wet snow off his boots. “No one’s taking a hike in this slush. Get it?”

In one fluid turn, he broke free of Titus’s arm hold, grabbed onto the cockpit window ledge and swung inside the chopper’s front gunner’s seat, a move that yanked Titus off his feet burying his ass in the snow.

End of briefing.

The Cobra ascended over Haig’s cabin like a rocket.

He struggled to buckle up, fighting the sudden G-force. Hangover nausea blasted up from his gut and crashed into his headache, pain overlaid with the same anxiety he’d had the night before. He loosened the seat harness and leaned back to cool his neck against the cold seat. A gray eternity spread below him. Snow covered woods spread to the north, as a white-capped Lake Superior billowed below.

Something hit his shoulder and fell into his lap. A helmet.

The pilot's voice barked through the helmet's earphones, as Haig put in on. "Forty minutes to the border. Can you hear me?"

Haig was fumbling with the goggles. He had read that Cobra's were built lean for maneuverability and not for passengers. But this narrow compartment made the cheap seats on a flight to Florida seem like luxury loungers.

"Mr. Haig, you listening?"

He gave a thumb's up to the pilot then searched for a way to turn down the volume.

"So how long have you worked for Redman? I've heard some local bullshit about you, but one thing he told me was that you're a diehard Cub's fan. A damn shame about that five-inning rule. Too bad, a couple more innings and they would've come through, you think?"

*Another talker.* Haig turned to face the pilot, but the harness fought back. The same dark goggles, mike and chinstrap obscured the pilot's face. Haig tested his microphone by blowing air. "What's your name?"

"Captain Greene, Minnesota Air Guard from Duluth."

"Next time, Captain Greene. Don't land your goddamned Cobra in my garden."

"Blame your boss. Redman told me to land there. He also said you're the best tracker they've got, but to steer clear of conversation since you're a kettle about to blow."

"Good advice."

"This guy you're tracking, I hear he's got all the top brass in a lather. Do you have any idea why?"

"Delinquent parking tickets in Kiev."

“Funny. There’s something else they haven’t told you.”

“I take it you’re about to enlighten me.”

“Some might call me an oracle.”

“Why bother?”

“A mutual friend.”

“And this person is concerned about, what?”

“You and me. Since the bad guy you’re after might take this chopper for one fat target should he carry something bigger than a rifle.”

“Then you better know how to duck and cover with this bird.”

“What I’m trying to relate to you is that a *UAV* drone will be circling every second you’re out there. Redman’s boss suggested using your position to zero in on bad guys with hellfire missiles and shit. Once you hit the ground, you’re the one that will need to be ready to duck and cover.”

Haig tried to answer but a hiccup of last night’s scotch and cigar burned his throat. He stared out the cockpit window and tried to calm his churning gut.

### *Titus Redman.*

Twenty-five years ago, Haig had camped with Titus and Sam Means and a gang of misfits in makeshift teepees, birch bark huts and tents hidden beneath the deep timbered ridges above Lake Superior just south of the Canadian border — Grand Portage Reservation full bloods, breeds and the odd one like Haig, a lone college dropout from Chicago in search of something impossible to define.

Chief of the renegades, Titus Redman was a six-foot-four self-professed warrior who looked as if he’d

been torn from a comic book of Native American superheroes. Hard to believe that the same man that had taught Haig to hunt and track, sat ten hours ago in Haig's cabin last night reeking of cologne. Yet his old friend, Titus, would sell out his friends and family for a bucketful of slot machine tokens, a fate he'd bestowed on every member of his misfit tribe.

The Feds had reason to suspect that a few of those renegade tribe members were smuggling drugs and human cargo in and out of Canada. The Simpson-Mazzoli Act of 1986 had upped the penalty for 'knowingly assisting illegal immigration into the US.' Over funded by Congress and armed with the fervor of Regan's Zero Tolerance drug policy, a more vigilant Border Patrol tried complex stings and stakeouts but failed to catch the smugglers in the act, a game of cat and mouse that went on for a year and a half. As Titus had put it, the situation presented him with a unique opportunity to make a smart bargain. After selling out Haig and the others to the Feds, he became an agent for the US Government. Indian casinos were popping up all over the upper Great Lakes at the time. The Feds needed inside people. Titus worked both sides; a full-fledged tribal council member paid big bucks as head of security at the Grand Portage Casino, and as a paid government informant. From nothing he became a big man with a big house, big car, big guns, a big boat and a big fat Skidoo.

Ten years into his good fortune 9-11 happened. Suddenly endowed with a goldmine of Homeland Security funding, US Customs and Border Security offered Titus a more lucrative position as the Grand

Portage Resident Agent, a title that earned even more cash in addition to his combined jobs with the casino and the US government.

Haig lived through those years with much less good fortune, mostly because of the smuggling conviction courtesy of Titus and his rat-faced immunity as a federal witness. Luckily Haig never had to serve time like Sam did, but still struggled for five long years to pull himself out of the jam. He ended up earning a college degree in business, used his wits to rise to a good position with a company in Duluth, and then married a beautiful local woman named Lena, who gave back ten ugly years of marriage. After which Haig, drunk, broken of health and penniless, filed for divorce. Which was only the beginning of the whirlwind catastrophe that took place four years ago, the infamous French River Bloodbath, an event that had whittled him down to the bone and sinew of an unlikely survivor, taking the lives of his ex-wife and six others.

One month after it happened, Titus drove his BMW up Haig's driveway and parked next to the mobile home adjacent to the charred remains of the former house. Their conversation went something like it had last night.

“Get the hell off my land, Titus.”

“Who do you think kept you out of prison after that conviction twenty years ago? And now. After that murder fest on your land here, who do you think is keeping you from a stiff sentence at Stillwater, you ingrate pile of shit? You're lucky I'm still your best friend and a harbinger of second chances — 9-11, barbarians at the gate, man. Government needs all

kinds of special talent. Your talents are unique. Hell, I know, because I taught you.”

Still under Titus’s thumb, Haig reckoned as he unbuckled his seat harness and reached inside his coat for the only hard-copy photo that Titus had of Dargov. He studied the man’s face for the twentieth time. Dargov had a road-worn sternness, a distrustful glare reminiscent of cold war Europe, and with a dark look that promised violence, almost clannish in origin. Haig couldn’t pin a tail to it, but somehow Dargov hid something deep beneath his rock hard exterior.

According to Titus, Dargov was an expert assassin, a well-paid pro. Haig stared deeper into the photo. Above all else, Dargov’s eyes were tightly focused with no hint of a fanatic’s glare.

Titus lied at every opportunity, but Haig always managed to track his words, knowing how lies floated like a razor-thin oil stain on water, only seen from odd angles. In two short briefings, Titus had said that Dargov was high on the totem pole of Homeland Security, adding that assassins were one notch above terrorist henchmen, ranked just under the so-called lieutenants and masterminds of the big time militants.

Titles. Titus could rattle them off like a marketing guy at a Monday staff meeting. Haig saw it plain and simple: Bad guy murderers killing other bad guys and innocents. But how could an assassin be classified as a terrorist, especially when he was paid hard currency for a hit? Scratch terror monger. Something didn’t fit. Homeland Security had no business tracking a professional hit man. FBI, CIA, where were they?

Titus, drunk at the Gitchi-Gami bar, had once explained to Haig the nuances of the post 9-11 system

of ranking celebrity psychopaths. How top targets, when located and tracked, meant premium access to both military assets and cash reserves. If Dargov was worth the cost of this chopper ride — Haig figured they were cruising at around \$5,000 an hour — then the man could indeed be a high-end killer, a scenario that alerted Haig to all kinds of possibilities.

The question of Sara Novak kept playing around in Haig's head amid the same gnawing uneasiness he'd felt since the night they kissed, and now with the inference behind Titus mentioning her name last night, as if she was somehow connected to all this, something Haig would be compelled to uncover as soon as he returned from this wasted trip.

A muscle cramp pinched hard in his left calf. Dehydration.

Clock chimes rang in his head, an echo of last night. He still tasted the scotch that he'd downed too fast amidst the TV flashing and sports announcers talking over a low crowd noise with cameras trained on the blue rain-soaked tarp covering Wrigley Field. Five hundred miles to the south the edge of the storm had reached Chicago as the words RAIN DELAY scrolled across the bottom of the TV screen. Some night.

Staring out the chopper window, Haig now remembered walking out the cabin door after midnight, Lake Superior lost in a squall. Snow melting down his forehead as he turned toward his overlook where a wrong step off the cliff would lead to an eighty-foot plunge into the depths where leviathans loomed in icy stillness.

# SEVEN

The word *blizzard* was used by European American settlers to describe a sharp blow to the head.

Davy Crockett used the word once in a journal: *I took a blizzard to a large buck and down he tumbled.* Then the word vanished from use until 1873 when in Marshall, Minnesota a German immigrant named Knowles exclaimed, *Blitzardt!*, to describe the storm that had destroyed the town church. A nearby reporter coined the word in an article about the Great Storm of 1873, the worst arctic windstorm in recorded history.

The wind on Rose Lake howled from the northwest and what remained of the visibility was racing south.

Four ravens shot across the lake for the cover of the south ridge. On a calmer day, ravens might lead Haig to Dargov, often circling humans out of curiosity. Not today.

Haig was agitated to a degree, yet unshaken. The game had been raised a few notches by the bear trap, most likely set by Dargov. The rapidly changing weather now forced Haig to come up with a new plan.

He trudged back into the cedars and dusted the snow off a flat boulder. Out of the way of the direct wind he laid down the rifle on the rock and removed his pack. He unzipped the main compartment and pulled out a nylon sack. Out of the sack came an i-Pad armed with a Global Positioning app. Next appeared a few less modern items, a Brunton compass, a protractor, a pencil and a notepad, which he placed on the boulder.

The bear trap had changed everything.

Haig put his hands into the mittens tied to his waist and felt around for two small cloth bags, hand warmers. Inside were iron filings; mineral salt and sawdust, which when rubbed together gave off heat for eight hours. Magnificent invention.

He also extracted a pair of neoprene gloves, tight fitting but warm and waterproof.

No doubt now, Dargov was making his way into the US to earn his pay. But he'd have to turn south and soon. Two miles to the next lake and the trail ended. Dargov had several choices of when and where to turn. By the time Haig caught up to him the blizzard would have obliterated the tracks. The only choice now was to cut Dargov off.

It always amused Haig how simple things became when left with only one option. Must be the way mystery writers figure shit out. Oh yeah, make a beeline for the killer, and then you gain the element of surprise. But then there's always one big ass obstacle.

The goddamned blizzard.

Earlier Haig had downloaded winter satellite images of the area on the i-Pad. Now he overlaid the images with another image saved on the computer, a USGS map. He was trying to pinpoint the exact location where a straight line could be envisioned from here to the end of the winding portage. Checking his GPS position, he double-checked the map coordinates. This would give him two critical advantages.

He could walk the line, blaze through the woods, and then he'd eventually run across the trail Dargov would use to make his way south. If the timing was

right, it'd take Haig roughly an hour to circumnavigate the portage. Dargov would still be ahead of him when he caught up, but close enough to track, even in the blizzard. Haig tightened the anorak hood and lowered the snow goggles over his eyes.

He crossed back onto the trail and into the wind and blowing snow. He now became a stake in the ground and took a long compass reading. 57 degrees ESE minus magnetic correction. He checked it twice.

Then went back to the boulder and wrote down the reading. He drew a map of the portage according to the map on the i-Pad. He set the protractor across the drawn map of the trail, read the compass bearing, and then drew a straight line from the point where he stood to the end of the portage.

The portage trail looked like a re-curved hunting bow. The line was the bowstring. Somewhere along that line Haig would intersect Dargov's trail. A simple but risky plan.

Simple as a straight line, if Haig could stick to it. One slight misread and he'd be off by miles. The blizzard wouldn't make it easy. He returned away the nylon sack before shouldering the pack, and grabbed the rifle.

He took one last GPS reading and then slipped the i-Pad into his pack. Visibility was disappearing by the minute. The weather radio predicted the blizzard would last a few hours.

Time to move. *Simple but dangerous.*

So far Dargov had proved his mettle. It wouldn't be that hard for him to figure out what Haig was up to.

The last thought Haig had before stepping off the trail was more like a snapshot a hundredth of a second

in time: *Blizzard snow lit up by a bright orange gun flash from Dargov crouched behind a tree.*

# EIGHT

The four ravens circled the south ridge through tall pines that offered protection from the gale.

The ravens, the smartest of birds and overly curious, had watched Haig step off the trail and disappear into a thick spruce bog, and then the wind pushed them beyond the far end of Rose Lake where a second human had caught their attention. They landed on the limbs of a dead birch for a better view.

It was a curious thing to the ravens; the sight of a man that lumbered like a great white bear then stopped and scanned the area through spyglasses. A heavy bag was slung over his shoulder. Each raven imagined what was in the bag, a deer, perhaps the hindquarter of a moose.

If not for the terrible wind, the ravens would follow the man, waiting for him to dress the quarry, to leave behind the bones and gristle and precious scraps of meat.

*So they sent the dog*, Dargov observed through binoculars.

Watching the American escape the bear trap, Dargov had recalled an old Ukrainian fable— *The Czar of the Forest*, about a cocky bear that fell asleep hungry under an oak. And the squirrel that fell from a limb into the bear's paws. The squirrel squealed, "Please, please let me go!" promising the bear that she would one day return the favor. The bear burst out laughing and tossed away the squirrel by the tail.

Later, out hunting, the bear was caught in a snare, which of course the squirrel chewed through.

*Lucky for the bear*— But this tracker was no bear, Dargov thought — coughing uncontrollably. Bloody phlegm spattered on the ground.

He was quite warm despite the weather, wearing the snow battle dress of the 99th Ukrainian Tactical Brigade, formally a unit of the Soviet 8th Tank Army that fought in the bloody battle from which he took his name. The uniform was white with small black splotches for camouflage, which made him look like a damned Dalmatian dog.

Peering through a pair of Sotem 12 x 40 binoculars, Mikael Zlatkov, a. k. a. the assassin named Dargov, remembered another old Ukrainian proverb:

*Set a chained dog loose, and watch a wolf run.*

Dargov wondered how smart this dog-wolf was, almost stumbling into the bear trap, but then recovering his composure, taking his time to survey the trail— Impressive rifle, the 572 Remington .22, a pump-action special-edition Fieldmaster, one of a hundred ever made with the twenty-four inch barrel, a most deadly small caliber rifle. Only a shooter would know this.

Dargov also wondered if this skinny American had the strength to endure the extra thirty-five kilos, the weight of the special package that Dargov was carrying.

Especially difficult, he observed, when one cuts through the woods— a wolf's trick, to sneak around its quarry in such a way. But foolish. A lone wolf tracker without the full strength of the wolf pack.

Dargov spat. Another bright red glob hit the ground.

He despised wolves. And regarded the familial structure of wolf packs as weakness: Alpha male and female, bastard uncles and aunts, and the freaking pups. Utter nonsense. Long ago, before women forced the wolf concept of family upon them, men were much stronger, stalking prey as lone hunters unlike group hunters that yell and corner game like cowards.

Dargov cursed the folly of men behaving like wolves: Male wolf rules. Male gets horny. Female rules.

Dargov's mother had raised him alone after giving his vodka-swilling father the boot. She made young Mikael tend the pigs and chickens, and go to school, nothing of value in a country of mud and potatoes. At nine, he ran away after his mother became pregnant from another man.

Mikael went to the mountains, found a village of gypsies always in the need of young clever hands. He learned how to live off the land, at first gathering mushrooms and blueberries and then how to steal farmers' vegetables to sell along the road to Lvov. He bought a shotgun with the money and became a poacher. The best. He still recalled his mentor, Zhmud, and everything Zhmud had ever taught him.

Like the day he had taught Mikael how to skin a wolf.

Zhmud had said, "Don't be nothing like these creatures, Mikael. Right now, the bitch and her puppies mourn this mangy dog—" Zhmud made quick deft cuts around the wolf's paws, and then handed the claws to Mikael one-by-one. "They cry in their den.

For what? See? ... It is much better to be strong and alone. Only to worry about one's own belly, no?" Zhmud paused.

"Be like the bear, Mikael. Like the bear."

Now standing on the borderline, Dargov heard the four ravens cackling softly overhead, like hungry gulls. He made a slow lumbering turn, shifted the balance of the package over his shoulder and held it tight with his left hand.

He reached inside the snow parka with his right hand and slid out a black automatic pistol, elongated by a silencer and camouflaged by a white rag wrapped around the handle and barrel. He spoke softly to the ravens, "Now we mustn't have you trailing me..."

He popped off four muffled shots.

Four black feathered puffs, and the four ravens fell dead to the ground.

Dargov fingered the necklace made of Zhmud's wolf claws. He took one last look down the trail to the lake, which had vanished in a blur of whiteout. The blizzard had begun and there were only two men on earth crazy enough to be out playing.

So this must be the American from the dossier. The man named John Haig.

*A lone wolf.*

Lucky for him, he wasn't in pistol range.

*Wolf against bear.* Dargov grinned.

For a bear in October was a most dangerous creature, stalking day and night, ever hungry for one last meal before eternal hibernation. Dargov put away the gun and the heat of the metal soothed his raking pain.

He started up the portage trail, already planning his next surprise.

## TWENTY-FIVE

Haig lifted Stefan inside the camper and closed the door, slamming the tailgate shut for extra precaution.

Marching the boy across the junkyard a minute ago, he had almost come to appreciate what drove mothers to abuse their children in Wal-Mart parking lots. His head pounded to the image of shooting Marty dead, all because of some Russians lusting to have this damn kid in their possession. No wonder humans were the only creatures on earth that could sell their children. Still, whatever had inflicted the Stefan was something no child should bear. And watching a man die, well, Haig refused to dump his anger on the kid.

Instead he picked up a tire iron and bashed the sheet metal on the ground — loud enough to cause Nadya to stop cursing at him in the distance. He watched her hurriedly make the Sign of the Cross over Marty's corpse. She swept her arms over him as if chasing away bad spirits. She ended the ceremony by flipping Haig the bird before vanishing.

*Fucking junkyards.*

Junkyards existed because of lost love. A deep seeded need in men who needed to stave off the condemnation of the metal objects that had shaped their lives. Unable to let go of old beaters and tractors, leaving them to rust in places where time stood eternal. Tonight Haig's inner junkyard, his hidden forest had also caught fire. He stomped through the snow, kicking embers as if the pointlessness of doing this could put out the burn.

His hands trembled as he unlocked the door to the truck's cab. He reached into his pack. Put an airplane bottle of booze to his lips. Drained it to the notion that a man has a right to deal with things his own damn way.

The alcohol did nothing but fuel the flames. "I'm not your goddamned dog, Dargov," he said. "And if you're betting on my kind nature to keep the boy safe, bet again. Maybe I'll sell the damn kid, hear me?"

Haig couldn't tell if he was yelling or if his thought volume was pumped up too high.

"Hey kid, where's your uncle now, huh? What's going on inside you, boy?" Haig slammed down the tailgate. "It's time we talked."

Stefan burst through the door, knocking Haig into the snow. For a lank kid, he knew how to throw his weight. He pounded one fist on Haig's chest and got the other wrapped up in Haig's parka. He rolled the boy flat on his back and felt a hot sting.

"You stabbed me you little—" Stefan squirmed like an eel as Haig pried a bloody penknife from the kid's fingers. "So that's your lock pick." He threw away the knife. "Stefan, I'm not about to sell you. I'm trying to get you to your mom. She and I are close friends."

Stefan clenched his jaw. Tears ran down his cheeks.

"What exactly did your uncle whisper to you in the den?"

Then his eyes rolled up into the sockets.

Haig lifted Stefan's limp carcass off the ground. *One second a kicking buck, a sleeping beauty in the*

*next.* The kid gasped in a couple of short breaths before his head dropped like a rubber chicken.

Fainting like a starlet, the boy had taken control of the situation; spinning Haig the way Dargov had spun him earlier in the night. And with that stark notion came an abrupt halt to Haig's anger. He tried to stand with Stefan in his arms, but fell back to his knees, slammed by a dearth of regret taking its sweet time to pass. His head pounding, he tried to scoop up Stefan up again and was barely able to lay him on the tailgate. Regret was suddenly replaced by a sharp pang of hunger. He jumped up onto the tailgate, stepped over Stefan and grabbed the kid's sleeping bag from the camper. He reached inside the bag and pulled out a cloth packsack that he set on a bunk. He went back out and covered the kid, checked his breathing, temperature, pulse, anything. He pinched a forearm: no reaction.

*Stefan is unusually afflicted,* Nadya had said. Maybe he had more than a sleep disorder. Something that might mean the boy wasn't as accountable for his odd behavior. Just what Haig needed, sympathy for the devil. He reached inside Stefan's packsack. A Cubs cap. Socks. Comic books; Euro comics, one cover showed a half-man half-serpent named *CLONE*. A medic-alert bracelet with his name, an ID number and phone number, and the words Kline-Levin *Nemoc*—a disease?

Another explosion from the lodge sent a streaming liquid flare into the sky. Forth of July fireworks in the middle of October. Haig rolled Stefan into the sleeping bag, stuffed in the boy's packsack then zipped him up. He went inside the camper to turn out

the lantern, and smelled the greasy bag of fish but decided to leave it despite his hunger.

Haig heard the siren of the hose truck from the fire station at Northern Lights Lake.

A Lake Superior fog bank had moved in, covering the borderline ridge, a lucky break. He stared up the old mining rail spur that cut northeast across the road, and then throttled a stolen Skidoo Tundra snowmobile and onto the tracks. The snowmobile had belonged to Marty, who had left it behind the lodge's garage, gassed up and with the key in the ignition, another lucky break. A steel sled was attached to a rear hitch, where the kid lay snugly in his sleeping bag, strapped in the sled with bungee cords. Haig had smashed out the snowmobile's automatic running lights as a precaution, and now revved up the tracks at an even twenty miles an hour and knew he could throttle up to seventy if needed. He had a simple plan. Make due northeast twenty-five miles along the railway until they reached Partridge Falls on the Pigeon River, and then try to wade across the border. If his plan worked the way he hoped, he'd ride the snowmobile a few miles north of the bad guys patrolling to the south along the borderline. With warming temperatures pushing in a new bank of fog, the helicopters would be grounded; more good fortune but luck had its limits.

South of Partridge Falls, lay a stretch of forest that was as close to mystical as Haig had ever seen, a perfect corridor of escape, no roads, no marked trails, a rare virgin tract of deciduous trees that he'd used as a hideout twenty years ago as a smuggler. Here stood

hundreds of surviving elm trees mixed with tall red maple and oaks scattered at the far northern limit of the hardwoods' range. And at the end of those woods sat a good place for a hunted boy to seek refuge, Doc Olson's compound at the foot of Mt. Maud.

Haig stopped the snowmobile and shut down the engine.

The fire engine siren had faded. Behind him the lodge fire glowed in a dreamlike shimmer, in a much cooler shade of red than his anger over Marty's death.

Haig never spoke much about anger. Hell, what could he say about the constant rage just beneath his skin that began in the bloody aftermath of his ex-wife's murder after a decade of dealing with her abuse? *Marriage sucks. You should know, Haig*, Marty had said. Poor Marty. At least he won't be feeling his rage any longer. But Marty shared something with Haig, how it felt to live with a mean woman that would willfully send her man to his death, and then he'd gone and died knowing he'd be better off keeping her happy.

Now after a full day of helicopters, death and destruction, four million acres of forest had become one crazy island, but a place where a part of Haig felt right at home; like in the worst days of his marriage dealing with his wife's drunken outbursts, a wine glass smashing into a window, a vodka bottle smashed up the side of his head, blood on the carpet where another of her faked suicide attempts had gotten all the attention she craved, then she'd go and say something, like *it's all your fault, asshole*. By that time of the evening, Haig could almost laugh every time he shoved her into the bathtub and turned on a

cold shower, watching the blood from her scratched wrists run down the drain, wishing he had a video camera to prove what she would forget the next morning, except for last time when he finally checked her into the psych ward. He'd wanted to be stronger for the woman. He cared deeply for her, but love was fluid. And fluid leaked, then drained completely. The nurse at the front desk would admit his wife with the seamless manner of a motel clerk: *Ten thousand dollars, please. Cash or charge?*

It was Haig's turn to drink after driving home from the hospital. He'd downed a few scotches, loaded his Remington at 1:30 in the morning and shot holes in her evening stack of beer cans. The target practice paid off in the end.

No, Haig never spoke to anyone about his anger. Not then or now. And especially not tonight with two dead Russians in the valley, not after learning that Sara had been shot in the calf after the helicopter crashed and burned and especially now after shooting Marty dead in the junkyard.

*Everybody dies*, Sara had said. Had she any clue of the chord she'd struck in him? Did anyone understand how sick and tired he'd become of anger and rage, or how he just needed to find the right valve and then screw it so tight that it would never leak again? Perhaps, this was how it could be done, by delivering Sara's boy safe and sound. Do something good for a change.

He stretched his upper torso to relieve the pain in his back and felt dried blood from Stefan's knife cut sticking his undershirt to his skin.

*Christ*, it was happening again, the hardening in his backbone. The way his eyes suddenly focused in the dark after hearing the distant sound of approaching snowmobiles. The last thing he wanted was to emerge inside his survivor's skin, but it might be a blessing in the miles ahead. Because without his inner beast, Haig and this kid had no chance of surviving.

He switched on the ignition and started down the tracks annoyed by the fact that they weren't the only train on this midnight run.

## TWENTY-SIX

Dargov tore through each compartment of Haig's camper.

Clothes, tools, pots and pans flew across the small space with the frenzy of a starved bear until he found Haig's discarded Eskimo anorak. Tracks from Haig's mukluks had led him to the truck, but nothing had explained the disappearance of Haig's flat footprints after entering the vacant camper, except, as Dargov realized, holding and sniffing a pair of mukluks from beneath a bunk bed, Haig had changed into boots.

Dargov dropped his ass on the same bunk and tried to catch his breath, and once more fought against a violent urge to wretch up his entire gut. He managed to only cough up a few gobs of blood. Hell, who needed blood anyway? Antifreeze or vodka was the best thing to sustain a man on his last legs. His breath pulsed. His eyes strained to focus at the gnome-like shadow darting through the smoke outside the camper door.

Water dripped from above and had halfway filled a pan next to his feet. He picked it up, brushing away the grains of floating mouse shit as his other hand reached into a pocket. A pill bottle appeared, the pills taken by Haig from the dead Russian Ninjas, re-acquired by Stefan's deft hand in the bear's den. Methamphetamine. Uppers. Pills and dirty water ran down his constricted throat. Pervitin, a most preferred drug of the Red Army, would make any normal man queasy at the thought of food, and especially the smell of fried fish coming from that brown bag. Dargov

ravaged every bite. Soon, the enlarged veins on the back of his hands glowed from fry grease. He felt digestion slowing his bloodstream. But nothing could slow his racing heartbeat.

Gas bubbles had formed at the behest of his accelerated metabolism. His first fart filled the camper with a stench of fish and his own blood.

*Still dying.* Even though the pills had led him to think otherwise. But such vigor. Strong like a bull! The impossible Dargov, how he had savored the terror in the eyes of the men as the helicopter sped off in flames before exploding.

Suddenly, two large cat eyes appeared in the camper doorway. "It stinks like a rotting goat in here."

Seeing Nadya, Dargov grinned wantonly, high as a kite on uppers. "My dream woman."

"You're alive then?" She shook her head. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Come, Nadya. Lay with me. Like old times, huh?"

"You want intercourse? You, a dying man? Did you not hear me crying out there like a young widow? My husband shot dead, and all you care about is sex?"

Dargov gave a knowing smile. "So the *Dog* finally used his rifle. But something must have caused a friction between him and your oilman. Ah, so you tried to steal the boy?"

A quick side peddle... "Please, how were we to know you were still alive? With Martin gone, and—and me a poor woman alone in a wilderness." She straightened, eyes wide open, fierce. "I would have raised him to be like his uncle. You should beg for my forgiveness. And for me to go away with you now."

“Nadya, no one is filming. Your performance is wasted.”

“Haig told me what you said about me.”

“But I also told him that my love had faded to the idea of living with little you. You made a wise choice, marrying an oilman. I’m sure he will provide for you even from the grave. But you always want more.”

Nadya jumped up onto the bunk and squeezed next to Dargov. “Mikael, my Mikael. You have amazing vitality compared to the cancerous devil that left me last night. Some sort of chemical magic?” Her wraith-like hand found the inside of Dargov’s thigh. “I have just the thing to go with your drug,” she whispered.

Dargov breathed hard, “Tell me something.”

“Never have I forgotten you, my love.”

“Nor I, you.”

“Oh, darling, what is it you have to say?”

“Which way did Haig go?”

Dargov wasn’t quite prepared for the sudden chokehold that she inflicted on his balls. “You want to go with me, yes?” He cringed.

Nadya led him along a footpath that ran uphill from the burning remains of Arrow Lake Lodge, past the flashing lights of a hose truck and a half dozen volunteer firemen passing a booze bottle between them and the last of the bar patrons. When they reached the road, Nadya showed Dargov the way Haig had escaped in her husband’s snowmobile, a route Dargov appreciated, down abandoned railroad tracks.

As a young man, he had ridden a different kind of snow machine, a large North-2, much like a

Volkswagen bus with wide aircraft skis and turbo engine mounted on its ass. But he'd never ridden a fast American snowmobile. Buzzed on uppers, he savored the possibility. "Does your husband have another snow machine?"

"No," Nadya said. "All broken down."

He pointed toward the crowd at the fire engine. "Perhaps one of them arrived by snowmobile or an ATV?"

"I was in my bedroom, remember? Mourning for you."

"How fast was your husband's machine?"

"Fast is fast. How should I know? Why do you smile at me?"

"I'm trying to picture you mourning for me. Haig married a woman like you. And she almost killed him. He still pays for this relationship. Pays and pays. Sad that he will not live to survive the story of his own life. Come. Sit with me. Here amid the scent of cedars. This soft log is inviting us. Besides, I need to catch my wind."

"Obsessed with the boy, Haig and sex. Those pills have made you into a nutcase."

"Just allow me a minute's rest. It will be difficult enough to follow on railroad tracks. Haig was smart to choose them. Where did he shoot your husband, in the heart? The head?"

Nadya hesitated before she touched her throat. "Satisfied?"

"Ha, clear of body armor. See? Haig would make a fine assassin. Too bad he is riddled by his past doings." Dargov looked at her eyes and sadly shook his head. "I remember returning from the Army to

find that you had left. At first I had connected everything to my own shortcomings. But then after time, my life inched forward and I began to see the truth. My humble life would never be fancy enough for little Nadya. Haig has yet to understand that he never stood a chance married to a lunatic. And that killing to survive is no shame, especially with such terrible odds against him. He may think he's writing his destiny by punishing himself with seclusion. But destiny alone isn't the story. I know this now, perched at death's door."

"You're a babbling old fool."

"If I only had the time to teach him the trade. Then he'd get over his wife and his fear of his true self. Sara could fix that as well. She'd never mix nonsense with love, like you, Nadya. If I had wanted to marry, to have children after you left me, I would have. No problem. Unlike Haig, I understood there was no chance of me getting over you, you special little witch. But then I learned how time alone helps a man to forget."

"Is this your way of kissing me off?"

"Never, my love."

"Then what is it? You look as if you've already left me."

"You have my most sincere promise that we will be together in the end. Listen!"

Hearing the buzz from incoming snowmobiles, Dargov slid away from the log. The machines circled the entrance of the lodge road and paused. Two black Artic Cats, Sno-Pro 1000's fast as lightning, idled like a pair of hungry jaguars at the railroad crossing. Two more black Russian Ninjas gave each other hand

signals according to the GRU Spetsnaz special-ops training manual. One of them raced down the tracks. The other pulled out a sat-phone—and dropped dead after Dargov fired his silenced pistol.

The snowmobile continued to idle, like it was waiting for a new driver.

So be it. Dargov turned his aim.

Another clean shot. And alas poor Nadya dead at his feet, shot exactly in the same part of her neck that she had touched a minute ago.

Dargov spoke out loud to Nadya's corpse as he approached the snow machine. "Well, it appears we have a ride after all." He grabbed the Russian's sat-phone and machine pistol, and then dragged his bodies off the road into the cedars.

Dargov punched the phone's redial button. There was a pickup at the other end but no voice answered.

"Like old times, eh Zhmud?" Dargov said.

"I thought we struck a bargain, Mikael. Like old times, you continue to betray me."

"Perhaps blood is thicker than vodka after all."

"Where is the boy then?"

"I was hoping you would be kind enough to lead me to him."

"You of all people should know this isn't a game. Or has the cancer eaten your brain?"

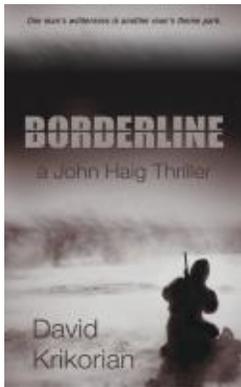
"Be careful, Colonel. By the time this is over, you may be guilty of underestimating the situation." Dargov tossed the phone into the trees.

Not prone to post mortem antics, he broke new ground and knelt beside Nadya, gently closing her eyelids. "So my life will end in a complete circle after all. Once more meeting my sister, with any luck.

Being with my nephew. And you, my lost love. But then you betrayed me. You offered to sell the boy to Zhmud, didn't you? You had to have more. How could you stand it living here in this frozen wasteland all those years?"

Even in death, Nadya was still lovely to behold, so Dargov wanted to believe.

He leaned in and kissed her goodbye, and was kind enough to wipe away the blood he had coughed up on her lips.



*One man's wilderness is another man's theme park. John Haig. Nature lover. Survivor. A US Border Patrol agent tasked with tracking down illegals in the wilderness between Canada and Minnesota. Yet an unhealed wound stalks Haig every day of his life, until the morning he finds the body of an old friend. As Haig fights to survive a covert war, he collides with a pair of maniacs tangled with the ghosts of his past.*

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