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Vanishing Games

Written by Roger Hobbs

Published by Doubleday

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Vanishing Games

ROGER HOBBS



Doubleday

LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA
www.transworldbooks.co.uk

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



First published in Great Britain in 2015 by Doubleday
an imprint of Transworld Publishers

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9780857522054 (cased)
9780857522061 (tpb)

Typeset in Adobe Garamond
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable
future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book
is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



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PROLOGUE

The South China Sea

A few hours before dawn on the morning of his last job, Sabo Park got down on his belly next to the rifle on the bow of his fishing boat, eased forward into a comfortable shooting position and flipped open the lens cap on his night-vision scope. After quickly double-checking the sight-in, he took out a pair of white earbuds, put them in and pressed PLAY on his iPod. The only song on the playlist was Nina Simone's "Sinnerman." Ten minutes and twenty seconds long.

When it was over, Sabo was going to kill as many people as he could.

Here's the deal: the South China Sea has more active smugglers than any other place in the world. The sea connects ports in China, the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam. More cargo rolls through that puddle than anywhere else in the region. Most of it is legitimate, of course, but not all of it. Any illegal product worth selling goes through there. Human traffickers in Cambodia load up old cargo containers with children, throw them a couple cans of Ensure and a bucket for waste, then ship them wholesale to sell as slaves in China. In Vietnam, cartels send out flotillas so packed with Golden Triangle dope that they can barely stay afloat. Every day go-fast boats packed with counterfeit luxury goods make it out of Hong Kong and fishing ships loaded with illicit whale meat come north for the hungry Japanese. Meth comes from Thailand, guns come from Russia, fake money comes from North Korea and bootlegs come from Shanghai. The South China Sea, for better or worse, is the epicenter of illegal shipping in the world.

And where there's illegal shipping, there are pirates.

When most people think of a pirate, they don't have a guy like Sabo Park in mind. Modern pirates are supposed to be Somalian kids with AKs who are hopped up on khat, not skinny Koreans with a propensity for seasickness. Sabo looked more like a fashion model than a hardened criminal. He stood six foot six and wore a Hugo Boss windbreaker, a blue pin-striped Eton shirt, tight-fitting jeans and a pair of twelve-hundred-dollar designer boots that had never seen mud. He had a Rolex Daytona and an iPod plated with fourteen-carat gold. Only the thick cotton ski mask and the latex gloves revealed his true purpose.

Sabo Park was an armed robber.

But tonight he wasn't stealing just anything. He was after something small enough to fit in the palm of his hand and valuable enough to buy a whole cargo container of Golden Triangle heroin. Over the years, thousands of men like him had fought and died for these things because Sabo's target was, by weight, one of the most valuable substances in the world.

Tonight, Sabo was going to steal a blue sapphire.

You see, more than half of the world's blue sapphires are smuggled at one point or another, because the best ones come from a little place called Burma. Specifically, they come from the town of Mogok in the Mandalay region. The problem is, Burma isn't a place anymore. The country now calls itself Myanmar, because for a few decades it was ruled by a military junta who ran the whole place into the ground. The nation's bosses still sent people into the pits to pan for sapphires, sure, but every stone they pulled out was supposed to go directly to a state-supported gem dealer, who'd mark it up a few thousand percent and pass the profits over to the regime. For some people, that markup just wouldn't do. Even now that Myanmar is taking some baby steps toward democracy, the markup's still there. So there are smugglers. A lot of smugglers. And worse, the independent narco-armies who control the north are finally getting in on the action, in order to supplement the drug money that pays for their perpetual civil war. More than a billion dollars of illegal gemstones get out each year, every year, like clockwork.

There are two major smuggling routes—the cheap way, and the good way. The former is for crummy stones, which take the long route. First, a miner has to sneak the stone out from under his military-supported taskmaster's nose. This can be pretty tough. The miners are often children, sometimes as young as seven, who put in eighteen-hour days in blistering heat or freezing cold panning through gravel and cholera water with their bare hands for tiny colored rocks worth more than their entire village. Once they find one, they have to hide it or it will be taken away. You'd think there are lots of ways to hide a stone, but there aren't, and the taskmasters are wise to most of them. Only one method really works. Before anybody notices, the miner has to take that muddy hunk of rock, pop it in his mouth and swallow the fucker whole. No simple task. A sapphire has a hardness of 9 on the Mohs scale, making it just slightly softer than a diamond. If the stone has a jagged edge even a millimeter long, it could be as dangerous as swallowing a razor blade. And the kid can't just throw it up later, either. No. That rock has to go through everything. Throat, stomach, intestines, colon. Then, if it finally passes, the miner's got to pick it out of his own blood-soaked feces, wash it off and bring it to market.

Once there, a fat Chinese guy with a jeweler's loupe examines the rock and gives the kid some money. The kid doesn't get much because he's basically a slave, but even a little money can go a long way in the pits. Once the Chinese broker gets a bunch of stones together, he sells them to a Thai drug dealer in exchange for heroin. Heroin is better than currency in Myanmar. The heroin dealer then stuffs the stones in his car and drives to Tachileik, a tiny village near the border to both Thailand and Laos. When he arrives he trades the sapphires to a border crosser for more heroin, who then hides the sapphires in bags of rice and smuggles them across the river into Thailand on a bicycle or a big farm truck. Easy as can be. In Mae Sai the rocks are pawned off to legitimate jewelry dealers under the pretense that they came from local Thai or Laotian mines. Since the sapphires are low quality, the lie holds up. The dealers mix the illegal stones with legal ones and sell them off wholesale to retailers around the world. The rest is obvious. Rinse, repeat.

This route is small-time, however. No money in it. The real players don't care about little one-carat stones with milky centers and no color. The serious money comes from smuggling the big world-class sapphires—ten carats or more, no flaws, clear center, bright color, perfect hue. The story starts the same: miner, Chinese guy, heroin. After that, though, the serious smuggling rings take over. Instead of going to a border town like Mae Sai or Mae Hong Son, they pick up the stones for a pittance in Mandalay, hide them in their gas tanks or elsewhere in their vehicles and drive a few hundred kilometers down to the port city of Rangoon. Hell, if the shipment's big enough, they don't bother being subtle. They just put the sapphires on an armored convoy with a bunch of armed guards and shoot it out with anybody who's asking for it. Once the stones make it to Rangoon, they're loaded onto a small fishing vessel or some other inconspicuous boat that hauls them out to international waters. This, of course, is the most dangerous part. The smugglers not only have to get past the Burmese coast guard, who are hard to bribe, but also have to sail more than a thousand kilometers around the tip of Malaysia, through the pirate-heavy waters of Thailand and Vietnam, to the monsoon-ridden South China Sea. That's when they reach Hong Kong—the city where you can buy anything. It's a perilous journey, but if the ship makes it there safely, even a small handful of those stones can become a hefty fortune on the international jewelry market. And if your poison is gemstones, that's the place to be.

Hong Kong's got more jewelry stores per square mile than anywhere else on earth. It puts New York and Antwerp to shame. Kowloon is the Candy Land of shined-up rocks. The profits are obscene. The sky's the limit. Stores there have sapphires as blue as the Pacific Ocean and as clear as a shard of glass. They've got uncut rubies the size of a testicle and as radiant as an evening star. You could buy a watch covered with diamonds or a cell phone plated with platinum, if you wanted to. There are four Cs for gemstones—cut, clarity, color and carat. If you take a five-minute walk down Canton Road in Hong Kong, you'll see every combination of those traits laid out in the windows. One successful smuggling trip can turn a twenty-thousand-dollar investment

into a million-dollar windfall. Each sapphire can fetch up to fifteen thousand dollars a carat, fifty carats per stone. You do the math. That's serious money.

And Sabo Park was all about the serious money.

He scanned the distance through his night scope, which illuminated the placid ocean with a pale green glow. In less than ten minutes, a smuggler's yacht loaded with sapphires would sail into view and he'd be there to take it. The vessel wasn't in sight yet, but Sabo knew where it was. Its lights glowed just over the horizon, like a car coming over a hilltop in the fog. Sabo tapped his finger on the trigger guard to the beat of the music.

Eight minutes to go.

Sabo held up his left hand to signal his crew. No pirate in the history of the profession has ever worked alone, and he was no exception. This sort of job called for two other people, plus a third who wasn't on the boat. That person was the jugmarker—the woman with the plan. She'd done all the research and told them where to be and when. Jugmarkers rarely do their jobs in person. His was three hundred kilometers away, sitting next to her satellite phone in a limousine and waiting. She'd get a double share.

The man behind the Plexiglas on the bridge deck was Captain. For lack of a better word, he was the wheelman. His job was planning the getaway. Captain was his only name, too. Everybody called him that. He was a stout, older gentleman of eastern Russian extraction with a face like a shriveled prune. While Sabo had been queasy the whole trip out, Captain had salt in his veins. He was one of the best illegal seafarers in the world. He'd gotten his start running refugees from Shanghai to Jindo in the eighties, but when that route dried up he'd tried his hand at heroin in Malaysia. Bangkok to Singapore in eighteen hours—the hardest smuggling route in Asia. For ten years he ran go-fast boats full of the stuff until a bust higher up left him penniless. He was a patient and kind man. A life of crime didn't suit him. He never left anyone behind, even if he had to miss a shipment. He considered himself a victim of poverty and circumstance, and was probably right about that. There are no old pirates, just old men.

Down in the hold was the pointman, who'd do the actual ship-to-ship boarding. They called him Jim Holmes, and he was a Kiwi who couldn't go back home on penalty of twenty-five years for bank robbery. He had the complexion of a cotton ball and the nerves of a small rodent. He was so scared that he was literally shaking, but to be fair he had every right to be jumpy. His job was both the easiest and most dangerous. After Sabo finished shooting, Holmes would jump over onto the smuggler's yacht while it was still moving, search it and find where the sapphires were hidden. Who knows what else might be stashed on board? One cleverly hidden smuggler with a gun or a single booby-trapped door could end his life. Trembling in his rubber boots, his eyes closed tight, he clutched his twelve-gauge shotgun like it might slip away from him.

And then there was Sabo Park. Slim build, dark eyes, no smile. His long black hair went down to his shoulders, where it partially covered a tattoo of the British pound sign inked into the back of his neck. A pair of long, deep scars zigzagged down his cheekbones in the shape of a permanent grimace. He didn't show fear, not because he was tough or strong, but because he'd never once felt that emotion in his life. His heartbeat was as steady as the tick of a Swiss watch. He bobbed his head to the beat.

Sabo was a *buttonman.*

A professional killer.

And that was the whole crew. Just three guys. You might be surprised, but three pirates working together could take down almost any ship on the sea. Even a tanker the size of the Empire State Building can run with as few as ten or fifteen sailors on board. Modern ships don't need a large crew. It's all automatic now.

Captain raised his hand, acknowledging Sabo's signal. He'd been watching the target yacht coming at them on the radar, but no longer. He crouched under the fishing boat's control panel to flip the breaker and what little light remained on board flickered out. The instruments went dark. The boat was as black as the ocean beneath it. There was no moon. Next, he waded through the darkness and, by sense of touch alone, connected a car battery to a white, round electronic device

mounted to the roof of the cabin. It was a spot-frequency jammer, just in case their target's captain was wise enough to check his instruments. Now the fishing boat was completely invisible, like a hole on the ocean. In this fog, no one would see it coming.

Five minutes to go.

Sabo pulled back the bolt on his rifle and chambered a round. His gun was an H-S Precision Tactical Take-Down rifle, a civilian version of the kind favored by Israeli snipers. Mechanically, it was little more than an old-fashioned all-purpose rifle. Bolt-action, .308 Winchester, twenty-four-inch barrel. His version had a matte-black finish and cost a little over seven thousand dollars, including the night-vision scope, from an American gun shop. It had a trio of four-box magazines, one in the receiver and two more strapped to the forestock so he could grab them at a moment's notice. He pressed his cheek to the stock, closed one eye and started listening to his heartbeat. Sabo'd found only two things in the world that gave him pleasure: killing people and the music of Nina Simone. For him, this moment was bliss.

So he waited.

Months of work had gone into making this moment possible. The woman who'd planned this heist, the jugmarker, had pored over dozens of nautical maps and sailors' almanacs in search of the perfect takedown spot. She'd traced and retraced the yacht's route through the sea with a protractor and consulted computer models to make sure. The South China Sea is three and a half million square kilometers. Finding this specific vessel on this particular night was like hitting a bull's-eye on a dartboard, while blindfolded, from two blocks away. It took months of study to pinpoint this location. The longitude and latitude were precise.

Three minutes.

Then the yacht peeked over the horizon, not all at once but drifting into view in parts, like a sunrise in winter. First the radio antennae, followed by the mast light, the green and red sidelights, the deck and finally the reflective markings on the hull. All four lights seemed to shimmer in the distance—a shape Captain called the Diamond of

Death. Soon the whole boat was cutting through the fog like a miniature model.

It was coming straight toward them.

Sabo grew more and more excited. Every passing moment felt like an age. When he was a child he didn't know how to control his bloodlust. In moments like these he'd fidget with anticipation until he burst, unleashing his violence on anyone unfortunate enough to be nearby. Now he had more control, but he could still feel it building. The anger and pleasure and rage moved up his spine to the back of his neck and set his hairs on end. He knew that the longer he waited for release, the better it would be. It had been a month since he'd last hurt a man and six since he'd killed one. His mind raced with calculations. Wind, distance, knots, muzzle velocity. The horizon was three miles away. The yacht was moving at fifteen knots. The bullet would fly at nineteen hundred miles per hour. Sabo didn't have to make such calculations, obviously—he'd only shoot once the target was close—but he went through the motions anyway. Pure habit. This was about his own personal enjoyment. He wanted the big moment to be perfect. Only a little bit longer. He eased his finger onto the trigger.

One minute.

The yacht was so close now that Sabo could see two men on board. On the bow was a young man seated in a camp chair with a pair of binoculars around his neck. In the middle of the deck was another man, older, smoking a cigarette.

Sabo randomly picked the smoker, a tall Asian man who was bone skinny and as bald as a baby, and scanned him through his sight. Tattoos ran down his neck and poked out from his shirt on his forearms. He stood to starboard, smoking his cigarette and peering out into the fog. He had some sort of submachine gun slung over his shoulder. It looked like an older MP5 variant, but Sabo couldn't really tell at this angle. It had a folding stock and two magazines in the receiver, taped together jungle style. This gun wouldn't do him much good. There were scratches around the action from years of abuse.

The second target, the kid in the camp chair, was much more interesting. He couldn't have been more than twenty years old. Judging by

the binoculars around his neck, he was the lookout. Sabo sized him up real quick. The kid didn't look like much, but he had a nice rifle on his lap. Some variation on the AR-15, but Sabo couldn't tell which. Given the kid's job, though, it was probably an East Asian knockoff—maybe a CQ or Trailblazer. In either case, it was a perfectly decent weapon. Too bad he'd never get a chance to use it.

Through the optics, Sabo felt like he was making eye contact. The targets didn't look like any Burmese men Sabo had ever seen before. Their features were flat and pale, which was unusual in hot, bright Burma. Sabo didn't care, though. He took aim at the older man with the cigarette. His red dot slid upward, as if of its own accord, until it rested on the center of the man's head, just below the bridge of his nose. The sweet spot. A good buttonman doesn't aim for the forehead, but rather the center of the face. Once the bullet passes through the teeth or nose, it wipes out the lower half of the brain. The upper brain may hold all of a guy's feelings and memories, but the lower half has all the plumbing. The medulla oblongata and the midbrain—heartbeat and motor control. A man shot in the brain stem shuts off like a switch. He's dead so fast he doesn't even feel it.

Sabo kept his body steady, compensating for the ever-so-slight ebb and flow of the fishing boat as it bobbed under him. He stopped breathing and listened to the very last few chords of his song, waiting until the moment was right.

Three seconds.

Two seconds.

One.

Then, in Sabo's mind, time slowed to a crawl. He could see as if the bullet were his eyes. As soon as the trigger locked back, the firing pin launched forward, striking the heart of the gun's massive .308 brass cartridge. The primer ignited with a spark, then the gunpowder and hot gases propelled the bullet forward down the barrel, bursting out of the muzzle with a supersonic crack. The bullet wavered and spun in the gentle ocean wind, then banked left and down once it was close. Sabo had expected that, though—gravity guided the bullet into place. It made contact with the target just below his left eye and crossed his

head laterally to exit behind his right ear. The shot blew his whole head apart. Large sheets of skull fell off in different directions. The exit wound let out a heavy pink mist. Then, as if as an afterthought, the sound of the shot finally reached Sabo's ears.

Boom.

Sabo worked the bolt and moved over to the next target on the bow of the ship. The kid didn't even have time to grab his gun. It was too late. Sabo took a bead and fired, blowing the kid's brains out before he could even stand up. The boy slumped backward and slid halfway off his chair.

The sound of the shots must have alerted the rest of the crew. Sabo saw the yacht's engines shoot out a blast of water, then sputter out. A few seconds later, another man, this one in plain gray overalls and a stocking cap, burst out of the cabin with a small black handgun up and ready. Sabo didn't bother with another head shot. He aimed and squeezed the trigger, putting the bullet directly through his sternum. The body fell forward and the gun skidded off the deck into the sea. A moment passed.

It was all Sabo could do to keep from coming. The pleasure coursing through his veins was better than anything he'd ever felt. All the sex, drugs, money and music in the world paled in comparison to the pleasure of a fresh kill. He let out a low shudder, barely containing himself. He pulled back the bolt, ejected the spent brass and locked in the fourth round.

And waited.

Sabo's imagination ran wild. He could picture the other smugglers in the cabin suddenly waking up to the sound of gunfire. If they were smart they'd take their time, maybe even work out what direction the shots had come from, before venturing out onto the deck to return fire. But eventually they would have to come outside. Curiosity would get the better of them. And when they came, Sabo would be ready. He fixed his crosshairs midway up the cabin door, six inches above the doorknob and a foot or so to the right. Anyone coming out would move through that target area. Sabo let go of his breath, inhaled again and held it. The only sound was his heartbeat.

A few feet away, Captain went into action. He flipped the boat's power back on and hit the ignition. The dim antennae and mast lights flickered and lit up, followed by the red and green sidelights. The engine sputtered, then purred. He kept it in neutral and waited at the helm with one hand on the wheel, the other on the throttle. If things went according to plan, though, he wouldn't even need to steer. The remaining smugglers would step outside and die, then the yacht, now without a helmsman, would drift forward under pure inertia until it was right next to them, mere meters away.

Sabo waited, focusing on the door to the hold through his sight. He let go of his breath, breathed in, held it again. The waiting was almost unbearable. He'd just killed three men, but that wasn't enough. He was still hungry for blood. He tapped his finger against the trigger guard in impatience.

Holmes, on the other hand, wanted all the time he could get. The sound of the rifle shots had shaken him even further, and he slumped down against the hull and sat there, nearly catatonic. Worse, he knew this would happen. He had a breakdown before every bank job he ever pulled because he was horrified by the prospect of going to prison. He'd started washing down handfuls of Xanax with Jack Daniel's between gigs, but found that the dose he needed to kill his stress was more than enough to render a normal person unconscious. He needed to suck it up. If he could keep it together long enough to get through this one last job, he could hide out in the Czech Republic for years and snort all the benzos he wanted. He just had to hold on a little longer.

Sabo laid down his rifle. Now the yacht was no more than twenty meters away. That meant his part of the job was over. It was showtime for Holmes. Sabo waved at him, but Holmes didn't respond. He still had his eyes closed. His knuckles had gone white clutching the shotgun.

"Hey," Sabo said. "You're up."

Holmes nodded, but still took a moment to gather his wits. He took a deep breath and slowly let it out, then pushed himself up from his position and climbed to the bow. By now the yacht was no more than ten meters out, forward and starboard, drifting silently toward them.

Still too far to jump. Holmes picked up a chain that was bolted to the hull, waited until the boat was a little closer and tossed the loop around the yacht's bow, like a steel lasso.

A few seconds later, the chain went taut. Physics did the rest. The fishing boat served as an anchor, turning the yacht sideways and pulling itself backward and around. After a minute, both bows were facing in the same direction. The distance between them shortened until the hulls bumped together with a dull thud and the ships came to an uneasy stop.

Holmes jumped from one deck to the other.

He brought the shotgun up to his shoulder immediately. He had to force himself to work slowly. His instincts told him to go right to the cabin and get it over with, but the jugmarker had given him different instructions. He had to check every crevice of the deck first, to make sure nobody was hiding in plain sight. He moved around the dead boy in the folding chair and stepped down onto the main deck. The wood under his feet was slick with blood. He kept one eye, at all times, on that cabin door.

The search was methodical. Holmes moved in a zigzag pattern, knees bent, swinging his shotgun back and forth to clear the corners. There was a checklist he'd memorized of places to look. In the cupboard under the bridge deck. Behind the gunwale. Between the gangway. All clear. His breath, still fast, came out in furious white puffs in the fog. It took him a full minute to clear the deck and reach the cabin door. He pressed his back against the bulkhead next to it and took a moment to rest. This was the moment of truth. He held the shotgun in one hand and tried the handle with the other. To his surprise, the door opened easily.

And nothing happened.

Holmes had been expecting gunfire—one, maybe even two or three more smugglers waiting for him just inside that door, ready to rake him with sixty rounds from their assault rifles. It didn't happen. There was nothing there. No makeshift barricade, no barrage of bullets, no hidden trap and, most important, no sign of people. Holmes didn't hear any voices or see any movement. No footsteps or soft breathing.

The cabin seemed empty, except for a single glowing lightbulb in the back that poured light out onto the deck and cast a large rectangular shadow on the bulkhead wall. Holmes noticed the shadow but couldn't imagine what might be causing it. It certainly wasn't part of the ship. This gave him pause.

What the hell *was* that thing?

He stood there for a moment longer, waiting for the remaining smugglers to make their move. Then he allowed himself the briefest moment of hope. Maybe there weren't any more smugglers. Maybe there were only three of them to begin with. The moment passed, though. Holmes still had work to do. He had to focus on the task at hand. Once he was ready, he quickly turned, shotgun first, keeping half of his body inside the doorway and the other half covered by the bulkhead. He whipped the gun back and forth to clear the corners. No one home.

Then he proceeded inside.

And for the third time that morning, Sabo Park had to wait.

It would be nice to say that Sabo Park was concerned about his colleague, but he wasn't. Sabo was impatient. Part of him even hoped that there was another smuggler down there who'd kill Holmes, just so Sabo wouldn't have to listen to the kid sniffle on the ride back. He'd seen how he'd trembled, all weak in the knees. The thought of such a pitiful loser getting an equal share of the loot turned his stomach.

Sabo peeled off his ski mask, then took out his earbuds and slipped them back in his pocket. He left the rifle behind and walked to the other side of the boat to get a better look. The corpses on deck seemed to glow green in the half-light. They were perfect. Sabo's mouth twitched into a perverted smile. The first smuggler's head had been ripped in two right down the middle. His finest work in a long, long time.

He drew his Beretta from the holster concealed under his belt and pointed it at the yacht's cabin door. A handgun wouldn't be very good at that range, but it didn't have to be. Sabo could lick all fifteen shots, drop the mag, reload and be ready to shoot again in just under fifteen seconds. A rifle is for precision work. A handgun can do pretty well at moderately close ranges, but nobody shoots straight in a firefight.

Holmes emerged from the cabin, holding his shotgun in the air to get attention.

"All clear?" Sabo shouted.

"Clear," Holmes shouted back. "But we've got a problem."

"What is it?"

Holmes sputtered, as if he didn't know how to respond. "You better just come see."

Sabo stared at him for a long moment, then holstered the nine-millimeter, leapt onto the yacht and stepped delicately around the bodies. When he got close enough to talk normally, he could see that Holmes's face showed fear and awe and terror, but also something else. Something different. Something Sabo couldn't quite place.

"Where?" he said.

"Right through the cabin doorway."

"Do we at least have the sapphires?"

"I think you'd better look first."

Sabo glanced at Holmes suspiciously, then at the cabin door. Holmes pushed it open so Sabo could see through.

And then Sabo saw it.

The object sat in the very middle of the cabin, under a small table. It was one of the most amazing things he'd ever seen. Roughly cubic, the object was a little more than two feet in every direction. Sitting on top of it, almost as an afterthought, was the bag of blue sapphires, which suddenly meant nothing, their value as trivial as pennies on a stack of hundred-dollar bills. What Sabo saw shocked him so deeply that for a moment all other thoughts vacated his busy mind. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He was rendered speechless and motionless. What he saw was more dangerous than all the guns and knives he'd ever touched, more valuable than all the money in all the banks he'd ever robbed, more beautiful than all the blood in all the men he'd ever killed. For a man as twisted as Sabo Park, it was like seeing the face of god.

Holmes turned to him. "What the hell do we do?"

Sabo didn't respond. Instead, without saying a word, he pulled the Beretta from his belt and shot him in the head.

Holmes dropped immediately and was dead before he hit the ground. The shot seemed to echo out over the water like a distant stroke of thunder. The brass tinkled on the deck before rolling into the cabin. Captain saw what happened, but it took him too long to put two and two together. Instead he froze where he stood in the cockpit of the fishing boat, dumbfounded, until Sabo turned and fired at him.

The bullet blew a spider-vein crack in the Plexiglas maybe a foot from his head and he ducked for cover. Captain didn't carry a gun. He was just the driver, after all. The wheelman. The nearest weapon was Sabo's rifle on the far side of the boat, where he'd left it with the bolt open. Captain made a mad dash for it.

Sabo walked calmly back toward the fishing boat, arm outstretched, firing round after round at the old man. He was still too far away to make a clean kill, so he took every shot he could. Bullets tore through the Plexiglas and ricocheted around the hull, smashing instruments and embedding in the deck. One whizzed inches from Captain's head and disappeared into the night sky.

Captain got almost fifteen feet into a dead run before a bullet struck him in the chest, on the right side, opposite his heart. He kept going for a few feet before dropping to the floorboards only inches short of the rifle, writhing and clawing at his wound as his lung collapsed.

Sabo took his time. Once he saw that Captain was down for sure, he holstered the Beretta and casually jumped back onto the fishing boat. He took one look at the old man to make sure he wouldn't get up again, then went to the cabin and turned off all the instruments. The old man followed Sabo with his eyes as the blood blossomed through his coat and soaked the deck. The wound made a crackling sound with every fast, shallow breath. Captain began to gurgle up pink froth, which dribbled from the corner of his mouth. Sabo walked over to him, then got down on his haunches and cocked an ear.

Captain struggled to speak, but no words came.

Sabo shook his head. "Can't talk, right? A chest shot will do that. Your lungs are going to fill up with blood. I'd give you about ten minutes."

Captain glared up at him, pleading.

Sabo looked at his watch, then right into Captain's eyes. "Unfortunately, I don't have ten minutes."

Sabo reached over to pick up his rifle, then pressed the muzzle against Captain's head and shot him dead. He paused to wipe the blood off his windbreaker, then pulled out the old magazine and jammed in another. Sabo fired all four rounds into the hull next to him, just below the waterline, so the holes would let in water. Once he was done, he threw the rifle into the sea. The pumps would handle some of the flooding, but not for long. In an hour the fishing boat would be halfway to the bottom of the ocean.

Sabo knew he couldn't leave anything behind. Nothing could connect him to what happened here tonight. Powerful people would come looking for what he'd stolen. They might never stop looking. Some men would die of old age before giving up this search. Sabo knew they'd be relentless, but he also knew it was worth it. If he could get away, he'd have everything he ever wanted. He'd live in the luxurious fashion he'd always dreamed about. Sabo could leave no witnesses. No accomplices. No trace.

He'd have to vanish.

Sabo jumped back over to the yacht. He could see his whole future extending from that moment. He'd dump the bodies, then call the jugmarker and tell her the others had died in the firefight. He'd disable the yacht's radio and EPIRB so he couldn't be tracked. He'd sail to the nearest port, take out his treasure and sink the boat. His treasure was too heavy to travel with him. He'd have to stash it somewhere. The jugmarker would sell the sapphires, and once Sabo got his share he'd travel as far away as he could. He'd lie low in some remote corner of the world, for years if he had to, before coming back to claim what was his. But it was worth it. It would all be worth it.

Because from this moment on, Sabo Park was the richest man he'd ever known.

1

Taipa Island, Macau

The rumbling vibration of the jugmarker's satellite phone gave her a start. For the better part of the night she'd been sleeping in her limousine under a bridge in the old city, drifting in and out of wakefulness. When the phone finally went off, she rubbed the sleep from her eyes and fished it out of the cup holder in the center console. She reached up and turned on the reading light before flipping the phone open.

She'd been waiting for this text message all night.

Button here it said. *We won. 2 red cards. 3 penalties. Score 26–0, 8 minutes on the clock.*

She nodded and read through the message again. She'd designed the code to sound like innocent, nonsensical sports talk. To a trained eye, however, this message was like a telegram. In a single line it had everything there was to know about the heist on the fishing boat. The jugmarker lit a cigarette and looked the message over.

Button stood for *buttonman.* Sabo Park was the one sending the message. After that was the outcome. Was the heist successful or not? Yes, it was. *We won.* Then came the damage report. *Yellow cards* stood for wounded crew members, and *red cards* for dead ones. Both Captain and Holmes were dead. The *penalties* were the number of dead smugglers. The final score stood for the loot. Twenty-six stones were taken, and zero lost. The time on the clock stood for their ETA. How far was Sabo from the rendezvous point? For these purposes seconds were minutes, minutes were hours and hours were days. Sabo Park had twenty-six sapphires and was eight hours away. Reading this was second nature to her.

She turned the satellite phone over, pulled out the battery, stripped away the memory chip and pried off the interior antennae, just in case. Once the phone was in pieces, she opened the door and threw it into a storm drain.

That was it.

The first part of the job was over.

She was upset that two of her crew had been killed, but there was no time to mourn them. Emotion couldn't come into it. Not yet. They'd all agreed to a contingency plan if something like this happened, and they knew the risks when they signed up. Piracy isn't a job for anybody who's afraid of the Reaper. Loved ones would receive their shares. It would take the jugmarker a few days to fence the stones, but once the cash came through she'd honor her crew's final requests. Holmes had a brother back home in Auckland. She'd transfer his millions to a bank account in his name in Switzerland. He'd never have to work again. Captain didn't have any family, so he wanted his share donated to a marine preserve off the coast of Australia. She could transfer the money anonymously through an online cryptocurrency—and if these gems were worth half what she expected, his donation could fund years of vital wildlife preservation and research. It would be his one last gift to the sea.

But right now there was other work to do.

There weren't many women in the world like the jugmarker. She wasn't just a world-class thief, she was a criminal mastermind. She'd been stealing things for more than twenty years and never been caught. She'd stolen diamonds from Russian palaces. Emptied art museums in Europe. Robbed banks on four continents and committed fraud in more than thirty countries. She'd stolen millions, spent it all and stolen even more. She never stayed in one place for long, and could change identities, personalities and appearances as easily as another person might change clothes. You could've known her for years and never recognize her on the street.

She didn't like to use a name, but some people called her Angela.

Her real name was long gone. Angela was her most popular alias, but it was just another word on one of her dozens of passports. She

hadn't gone by her real name since childhood, and it didn't really matter anymore. Only one person knew about her old life, and she hadn't seen him in six years. For all she knew, he could be dead or wasting away in some CIA black site halfway across the world. If that were the case, the memories of her civilian life would die with her.

She sighed and pressed the button that brought down the privacy visor between her and her driver. Right now she didn't look like the type of woman who belonged in a limousine. With her discount skirt and olive-drab denim jacket, she could pass for a waitress. She had curly brown hair down to her shoulders and cigarette stains on her fingertips. She told the driver to wait for her, then got out of the limousine and started walking. She took a long drag on her cigarette and threw the butt on the sidewalk.

That's when she transformed herself.

The jugmarker unclasped the brooch on her skirt, which instantly doubled over and became a formless black dress. She pulled off her belt and put it in her handbag. She slipped off her light jacket and turned it inside out, the olive-drab exterior reversing into a fashionable white leather. She took off her glasses and brown wig to reveal a mane of bright blond curls. In just a few seconds she'd gone from looking like a waitress heading home to looking like an heiress bound for a party.

She didn't change only her appearance, though. She changed her behavior. There are hundreds of small expressions and mannerisms that make a person unique, and she could manipulate them all. With every step she seemed to age a year. She straightened her back and raised her chin in the air. The strength drained from her hands and her stride became smaller and more delicate. She started clutching her purse like she was afraid some thug might snatch it. She relaxed, revealing the lines in her face, and shifted her weight forward onto her toes to emphasize her height. The cumulative effect made her seem not only ten years older, but significantly thinner and taller as well. By the time she turned the corner toward the jewelry store, she was a different woman altogether.

She was Oksana Tymoshenko.

That wasn't just the name on a Ukrainian passport at the bottom

of her purse. No, she was the matriarch of a Ukrainian steel empire. Her late husband had stolen billions in the decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, and since then she'd spent most of her time bouncing between the world's elite hotels and high-limit gambling parlors. She held herself with a certain mix of authority and fragility that betrayed her virtually unlimited wealth and privilege. She took a diamond ring out of her purse and worked it onto her finger. It was the pièce de résistance—after all, no woman of Oksana's status would be caught dead without a diamond. Jewelry is everything in Macau. It's an essential part of the culture. Seattle has coffee shops. New York has pizzerias. Paris has bakeries.

Macau has jewelers. And this one was the worst.

Old World Gemstones was a hole-in-the-wall joint on the ground level of an old brownstone in one of the cheesiest parts of Taipa Island, just a few blocks from where Angela's limousine was parked. It looked more like a pawnshop than a proper jewelry store, and for good reason. Everything in the window was second- or third-hand, and the prices were marked up to absurd amounts. A broken Rolex was on sale for twenty thousand euros. A one-carat diamond wedding ring, set in silver, for twice that. The place was sandwiched between a karaoke bar and a defunct noodle shop with plywood over the doors and windows. The display case was lit up with a neon dollar sign and a blue light shaped like a round brilliant diamond. When Oksana opened the door, a bell rang.

Past the rows and rows of overpriced jewels, a young European woman—the fence—was sitting behind the counter. Huddled over a short table next to a jewelry saw, she stubbed out her cigarette and looked up when Oksana walked in. The woman switched off her equipment and said, "Can I help you?"

"Yes," Oksana said, in an impeccable Ukrainian accent. "I'm here about the sapphires."

"You're the one I talked to on the phone, then."

"Yes."

"Good," the woman said. "I'm Elisheva. Do you have the stones with you?"

"Not yet. They're coming in by messenger. I should have them here in a few hours, if you don't mind staying up."

"I'm already up," she said. "I only sleep during the day anyway. Is your messenger trustworthy?"

"He hasn't failed me before."

"Huh," Elisheva said. "Okay."

"It'll be twenty-six sapphires of various sizes," Oksana said. "I'll need them cut and polished as quickly as possible. You'll know how to retrieve the greatest value from the rough material. Just no signature cuts. Nothing that'll trace back to here."

"Whatever you want," Elisheva said. "But first, come here. Let me show you something."

Elisheva took out a small parcel paper and slid it across the table. Inside was a tiny diamond roughly the size of the head of a pin. Oksana picked it up with a pair of tweezers and examined it closely through a loupe. It was as pure and clear as sunlight. For a moment, her breath stopped. Looking into a diamond is a rush. It's hard to explain the feeling, but it's something akin to awe and sadness. A perfect diamond goes beyond mere beauty—it's perfection made immortal. Everything else in the world dies eventually. People pass away, civilizations crumble and rivers turn mountains into dust. A diamond doesn't just symbolize eternity, it *is* eternity. A properly cut stone will look the same in a hundred years, or a thousand years, as it does today. Long after these two women died, and their memories had disappeared from the earth, this diamond would still be beautiful. For a woman with no name and no family, merely touching it was as close as she'd ever come to immortality. She nodded her head and put the tiny thing back on the table.

"It's a diamond," Oksana said.

"Sure it is," Elisheva said. "Have you ever heard of the Pride of Tanzania?"

Oksana was silent.

"Don't worry if you haven't," Elisheva said. "Not many people have. Even top-rate jewelers don't know the name. For a while, though, it was the most famous gemstone in the world. It was discovered back in 2002. A farmer pulled it out of an alluvial field near mountains in Lon-

gido, from the base of a collapsed volcano. He nearly had a heart attack when he saw it. What he found was a twelve-thousand-carat ruby that was fifteen centimeters long. Vivid-medium saturation. Pigeon's blood. Few needle inclusions. Eye clean. Flawless core. At the time it was the biggest fine ruby in the world. It outweighed the next largest by more than five and a half thousand carats—three whole pounds. There were photos, but they couldn't capture its perfection. It was enormous and unbelievably beautiful—like a drop of frozen blood blown up to the size of two fists. Can you imagine that? A ruby that weighs anywhere near that much?"

Oksana shook her head.

"I can't either," Elisheva said. "Nobody had any idea what it was worth. The farmer sold it to a British real estate developer for twenty thousand pounds sterling. By the time it got back to the U.K., the insurance alone cost ten times that. Even though they tried to keep the deal secret, news of the rock started to spread. Within a week, journalists were pouring into the village where the rock had been found. Within a month, the value of the farmer's land had quintupled. Speculators bought up every square inch of that alluvial field. By the time the stone went to private auction two years later, it had an opening price of twenty-six million. When the bidding closed two hours later, a Saudi prince had shelled out nearly seventy million for it. It was the most money ever paid for a ruby. There'd never been anything like it."

"Then why haven't I heard about it?"

"Because the Pride of Tanzania was worthless," Elisheva said. "It was a fake."

Elisheva took a hammer from her desk and smashed the small diamond between them to bits with one blow. Oksana stared at the fine dust in disbelief. She touched the material and her finger came away coated with glass dust.

"It broke before it left London," Elisheva said. "Because it wasn't really a ruby. It wasn't even a flux-grown *synthetic* ruby. It was an ordinary crystal made with a chemical adulterant to give it color and increase its refractive index, not unlike the chemically enhanced flint glass I use to practice my cutting. The farmer had sold the gem with

fake paperwork, and the businessman didn't question it. He didn't even question how a rural farmer in Tanzania managed to get high-quality gemstone paperwork. Nobody bothered to test the rock until it fell out of the Saudi's bag on the runway to his private jet and broke into seventeen pieces. On further appraisal, the remaining shards were worth less than a hundred pounds. It wasn't even costume jewelry."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because this is a story about trust," Elisheva said. "Nobody's quite sure how it went down, but the prevailing theory is that the farmer was actually a con man. The businessman didn't mind ripping off the farmer because he thought it was normal. Poor Africans never get the largest share. Why should this one? The businessman thought he could rip off the farmer, but the farmer ripped off the businessman first. So who's the real con? The farmer who sold the fake? Or the businessman who wanted to believe so badly that he swallowed such an obvious lie? Either through willful and malicious ignorance or pure stupidity, the businessman never bothered to test his purchase. Any real jeweler could've revealed the fraud in a matter of minutes, but nobody hired one until it was too late. When the initial news got out about the ruby, everybody wanted to believe it. The whole world was so enamored with the story that they failed to evaluate it for themselves. They wanted it to be true, so they behaved as if it was. That's why I never buy anything on a story alone. Until I see the stones for myself, they don't exist. There's nothing more dangerous than a trustworthy story, understand? Because the best storyteller in the world can't turn glass into rubies."

Oksana didn't say anything.

"That's how I run my business," Elisheva said. "There's no credit here. No promises. No handshakes. To me, the Pride of Tanzania was more than just the world's greatest fake gem, it was a business lesson. A reminder."

"Of what?"

"Of death, of course," Elisheva said. "You see, not even gemstones last forever."