

**BLACK  
WOLF**

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# BLACK WOLF

KATHLEEN KENT



*An Aries Book*

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*For Lowell A. Mintz  
Mentor and friend*

Even Atlas would strive to withstand  
the glowing hot axis of the earth.

—Ovid

# CHAPTER 1

31 IYUL' 1990

TUESDAY, JULY 31, 1990

MINSK OBLAST, BYELORUSSIA

The man was so happy, he thought his heart would shatter. This surge of elation brought to mind the poem that every schoolchild grew up reciting:

*There, the birch in silence  
Slumbers all day long...*

But at night. At night, with the warm summer breezes, the birch groves came alive, their topmost branches whipping carelessly in all directions. As did the tall, slender pines that stretched on formidably, lining both sides of the road like restless armies facing each other before a battle. The luminous shale road cut through the forest in an unbroken line—a white scar gouged into the land, shining pale and lustrous beneath a three-quarter moon.

The night air, as balmy, and as dense, as an evening spent on a Georgian holiday beach. The sky, for a few hours a shade blacker than black, punctured by a million pinpricks of light, bathed in the vaporous light of the Milky Way.

The man had rolled down all the windows of his car to let in the breezes, but soon, overcome by his senses, he killed the engine and

stepped out of the blue Lada. He stood in ecstasy, the poem inviting back so many memories of his childhood. The savory smell of shashlik roasting on an open fire, the clink of a metal spoon against glass as the small dollop of jam was stirred into his tea, the meaty slap of fish against the surface of the lake as they leapt to catch bottle flies. The lazy, hours-long hunt for mushrooms. Delighted, he shivered and hugged himself and laughed out loud.

He had another ten kilometers to go before he could rest, and so he climbed into the driver's seat, started the engine, and continued on his northeast journey. As he drove, he listened for any noise from his passenger in the backseat. It had been quiet for the past twenty minutes, but he glanced in his rearview mirror all the same, checking for movement. There was none.

He smiled and began to hum a song he'd heard on the radio. "You Will Come Back to Me" by the Russian star Tamara Miansarova. A bit saccharine, but far better than listening to the Red Army Choir butcher another Western rock melody. He sang along, loudly, extravagantly, appreciating his own warm baritone, which had charmed so many women. So many women...

He was tempted to turn off his headlights and let the reflective glow from the road guide him. It would feel like flying. But it would not do to veer off, to get stuck in a boggy rut or, worse, hit a fox or wolf or the occasional elk that ventured out at night.

Checking the backseat again, he once more admired the ingenuity of his handiwork. The simplicity, the subtlety, of his methods. He had been a student of Western history. In particular, American Colonial history, that all-too-familiar swamp of superstitious dread and cultlike devotion to the ruling magistrates. That culture of opportunistic accusations, as during the Salem witch trials, where the remnants of medieval British law held strong: guilty until proven innocent. But even with debtors' prisons and oppressive religious rulings, outright torture had been outlawed. However, like good apparatchiks, the black-coated judges and



their willing constables found a cunning way around the ban. They devised the Bow.

Economically, it only involved two lengths of rope. A prisoner was laid prone on the ground, belly down. The first length of rope tied his hands behind his back. One end of the second bound his ankles, the knees then bent backward at a sharp angle; the other was formed into a slip noose and secured around his neck. The prisoner was forced to bow his back to keep the noose from tightening. Eventually, no matter how strong, the muscles in his back would give out. His head would drop, the noose would tighten, and, unless he revealed what the magistrates wanted to hear, he would strangle himself.

He would *strangle himself*.

Technically, by the letter of the law, the jurists would not be responsible. Their consciences could remain clear. Ingenious, really.

The woman lying contorted in the backseat had been a famous gymnast as a teenager. But since, she had become doughy and overweight, continuing to eat as though she were still lithe and active, in training for the Soviet Olympics. She had remained quite strong, though, and had held out longer than any who had come before. Almost four minutes. A record!

She'd also not cried or begged as the others had. Instead, she had spat and raged and sworn at him. A fighter till the very end. It had added immeasurably to the piquancy of their shared experience, accounting, perhaps, for his heightened exhilaration now.

He saw the turnoff to his dacha. For the briefest moment he thought to keep driving the dozen or so kilometers on to Khatyn. Now abandoned, it'd been the town where as a boy he'd dreamed about serving as a policeman. He'd imagined having a new uniform, and a warm woolen coat, with boots of good leather. But the war had started, and German soldiers were soon thick as flies across the countryside. In 1942, not yet twenty, he'd joined the Resistance instead.

There was something delicious about the thought of performing his

planting at the official park at Khatyn. To return in the fall to watch scores of respectful visitors laying flowers on the war memorials, and then stooping to harvest the fruits of his labors. But there was no guarantee that he could return when the park was open in September. The fall would be a very busy time for him.

Momentous events were taking place. The Byelorussian Soviet Republic would soon declare its sovereignty, and full independence from the Soviet Union would follow within a year's time. Of that he was certain.

So he turned and drove around the dacha slowly, skirting the broad sweep of the lawn, thick with fibrous grasses and wildflowers, and pulling into the deeper shadows at the back of the house. He parked, his headlights illuminating a stand of birch trees. They'd been tall even when he was a boy. Opening one of the rear doors, he pulled a pocketknife from his coat and deftly cut the ropes binding the woman, gently pulling them from her stiffening limbs. He dragged her from the backseat and, with some effort, across the dirt, until he felt his shoes sink into the softened, spongy earth under the sheltering trees.

He retrieved a shovel from the trunk of his car and, removing his coat, began to dig. A trench a few feet deep would suit his purposes. He soon began to sweat, but the predawn breeze was pleasant, and he hummed quietly to pass the time. When he was satisfied, he stripped the woman until she was naked, her cool skin pearlescent in the headlights, and settled her in. Then he stroked her, running his callused fingers over her contours, kneading her mounds of flesh and marveling at their velvety texture.

*"Moya ledyanaya printsessa,"* he whispered, laying his body over hers, sinking his teeth into her until he tasted the bright tang of blood. *My Ice Princess.*

But it wasn't until, in a building frenzy, he had packed her mouth and the tight recess between her legs with dirt that he could obtain an erection and gain release.

When he had finished, he rested for a bit, and then stood and shoveled the earth back over her form. She would rest beneath the surface, her body providing the necessary nutrients for the mushrooms to grow. He only ever planted the luscious ones. The others—the skinny, harping, bold-faced ones—he threw away like the trash that they were.

Later, he'd sprinkle on barn hay and horse manure for carbon and nitrogen. Then the spores would grow thick and fragrant. In a few weeks he'd return to harvest them, along with the many others growing in the grove behind the well-seasoned dacha—at least twenty-six patches of them. He'd cook them in soups and stews and his personal specialty, made in vast quantities: *draniki*, mushroom-stuffed potato pancakes. After all, what good was plucking the bounty of the earth if you couldn't share it with friends and colleagues?

Finally finishing, depleted, he entered his summer home, where he stripped and washed and fell heavily upon the bed that had once been shared by his parents and his grandparents before them.

He smiled in the dark, remembering the Tamara song. "You Will Come Back to Me."

*Yes, you will, he thought. Again. And again. And again.*