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Sentinel

Written by Matthew Dunn

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SENTINEL

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ONE

The Russian submarine captain ran through the woods, searching for signs of anyone who might kill him. It was night, and the forest was dense. Sleet struck his face. His body trembled with cold and fear.

Reaching a tiny area of open ground, he stopped, crouched, and listened. The sea was only a few hundred yards away, and he could hear the sounds of waves crashing over shingle. Turning slowly, he braced himself, half expecting to see men with flashlights, guns, and dogs rushing toward him.

He stayed like this for two minutes before glancing in the direction of his car. It was hidden from view, parked in the trees off the nearest road. It would take him one minute to get back to the vehicle and another twenty minutes to reach his submarine base. He was allowed off the base for only one hour. Time was running out.

Walking quickly, he moved out of the clearing and into more forest. He counted each step, stopped when he had gone eighty paces, changed direction, and walked a further fifty steps. The tree was

before him. It looked like those around it—tall, thin, no foliage, and slightly bent from easterly winds—but he knew it was the right tree. He'd been here seven times before and despised the location because on each visit he'd always wondered if it was the place where he'd be trapped and killed.

He unwrapped a thin, waterproof poncho, draped it over his head and body, withdrew a small flashlight and penknife, and knelt at the base of the tree. The ground beneath him was sodden with an icy slush, and his pants quickly became saturated. After lifting the poncho's edge and positioning it against the tree, he switched on the flashlight and moved its beam over the trunk. He quickly found what he was looking for: a small circle with two horizontal lines within it carved into the bark. Around it were seven older carvings that had since been defaced. Flicking open the knife, he carefully cut a third horizontal line into the circle.

He bent down and let the poncho fall away from the tree so that it was completely covering his body and acting as a makeshift tent. Sleet banged against it. After putting the end of the light into his mouth, he used the knife and his other hand to dig in the ground directly beneath the symbol. Pain shot through his fingers as they removed cold, wet soil, but he kept digging, constantly aware that he had to do what was necessary as quickly as he could.

The knife struck something hard a few inches beneath the ground's surface. He tapped the blade against the thing to confirm that he'd not simply struck a root, but the object was clearly metallic. Discarding the knife, he eased both hands into the hole, wincing as more pain moved into his arms, and gripped tight when he felt the small box. After he pulled it out, he placed it next to his knife. Then he momentarily put his hands into his armpits to try to get them warm before shining the light directly on the container.

Brushing soil off its surface, he saw that it was the same gunmetal box he'd always used. But he had to be careful in case it was booby-trapped. He lifted it off the ground and thought that it felt the right

weight, though he knew that told him nothing. Only a tiny piece of primed C4 would be needed to rip off his face. Grabbing the knife, he placed the tip under the container's latch, paused for a moment, and flicked it open. The rain drummed harder against his poncho.

He stared at the box for a while, his heart racing, sweat running down his back even though he was colder than he'd ever been in his life. Placing one hand on the base and the other on the lid, he began pulling it open. When he felt the hidden rubber seals resist, he closed his eyes and pulled harder until it was ajar. He opened his eyes. The only thing inside was a metal cigar tube. Lifting it carefully, he unscrewed the tube's cap, peered into the tube, and felt relief. Inside were a stubby pencil and a rolled sheet of plain paper. He flattened the paper and began to read.

The relief vanished.

His hand shook as he brought the pencil close to the paper.

The codes raced through his mind. He identified the numerical equivalent of each letter, added that to another set of memorized numbers that corresponded to the letters in order to determine the cipher text letters, and then began writing.

It took him six minutes to write the first sentence. He hated communicating this way but knew that the code was almost unbreakable unless the key code was discovered or he was tortured to reveal its detail. Communicating with anything more sophisticated was far too risky. All electronic communications signals into, out of, and near to the base were monitored. Sending an encrypted burst transmission from close to the base could easily pinpoint him as a spy.

He was about to begin the second sentence, but then he stopped, his hand hovering over the paper. A noise, distant but loud enough to be heard over the dreadful weather, was coming from the direction of the road. Then it grew louder. He thought it might be a car. Then he knew it was a truck. Only the military drove vehicles like that around here.

His hand unconsciously became a clenched fist. Tonight he was

due to telephone his daughter to congratulate her on her promotion within Russian military intelligence. She would be pleased with his call because she respected her father's opinion and deeply admired his lifelong career of service to Russia. But he knew that if she could see him now she would be deeply ashamed of him.

The truck slowed. He wondered if the patrol had spotted his car and was worried about its owner or whether it had come here looking for a traitor. He tried to think clearly and wished the sleet and rain would stop.

An idea came to him: if his car had been spotted, he would confront the soldiers and tell them that he'd hit a deer and followed it into the woods, a likely enough occurrence on these forested roads. They'd probably even volunteer to help him kill the injured beast so that they could take it back to the base.

The truck braked; its engine idled.

The captain looked at the cipher. He had to write the next sentence, but time was short.

A door slammed. Then another.

He had no time.

He made a decision and muttered in Russian, "It's all I can give you."

Ramming the paper and pencil back into the cigar tube, he put it back into the box and buried the container in the same spot. Wind buffeted his poncho, the rain forcing it onto his face. He had to move, but he hesitated for a moment. Shivering, he silently recited the message he had just written.

"He has betrayed us and wants to go to war."

TWO

Will Cochrane stood alone on the deck of the rusty merchant cargo ship. It was night, and the boat rocked with the swell of the sea as a snowy wind blasted his face, but the MI6 officer ignored the vessel's movement and freezing weather. All that mattered to him was his destination. The desolate Russian coastline drew closer. He was being taken to a place where he knew he could die.

His objective was to get to shore, infiltrate the remote Rybachiy submarine base, and locate the captain. The Russian submariner, an MI6 agent code-named Svelte, had sent an encrypted message of such importance that it had been passed to the top secret joint MI6-CIA Spartan Section. It was clear that the message was incomplete, and a decision had been made to deploy the section's senior field operative to find out who had betrayed the West and wanted war.

The big officer brushed snow off his cropped dark hair, checked that his Heckler & Koch USP Compact Tactical pistol was secure in his jacket, and waited. He'd been on similar missions in the past during his nine years in MI6 and during the preceding five years as a

French Foreign Legion Groupement des Commandos Parachutistes special forces soldier. But the thirty-five-year-old knew this was going to be particularly tough—even for a man who carried the code name Spartan, a title given to only the most effective and deadliest Western intelligence officer.

The boat slowed down.

It was time to go.

He was dressed head to toe in white arctic warfare clothes and boots; he pulled up the jacket hood. Walking carefully to a gap in the railings, he crouched down and ran a hand along the edge of the deck until he found what he was looking for. The rope ladder would take him thirty-five feet down the starboard side of the ship to the tiny rowboat.

The noise of the ocean and wind seemed even louder as he moved down. With every step he wrapped his forearms around the rope to stop him from being thrown away from the ladder as it slapped hard against the merchant ship's side. Reaching the rowboat, he found both ties and loosened them so that the vessel was free. The merchant ship moved on. Will was now on his own.

He waited until the barely lit ship was out of sight, then he gathered up the oars to his vessel and rowed toward his destination.

It took him four hours to reach the shore.

When he arrived, he got out carefully, grabbed the boat with both hands, and hauled it onto the slim beach of sand, loose rock, snow, and ice. Using his flashlight to check his compass, he mentally pictured the maps he had studied of this area. The base was ten miles away; the journey there would take him over forest-covered mountains before he reached the thin peninsula where the naval installation was located.

He pulled himself up a large snow-covered bank until he was off the beach and on higher ground. Snow was falling fast now, and the wind seemed even stronger. He started shaking and knew that he would have to move quickly to generate some warmth. He moved uphill through the forest. After two hours of running, walking, and clambering ever higher, he stopped.

He was on a mountain peak, and although little could be seen around him, in the distance and far below were numerous artificial lights. They came from an area of land that Will knew to be his destination: a peninsula three miles long and a quarter mile wide and accessible only via a bottleneck of land. The peninsula was surrounded by the icy waters of Avacha Bay, and the lights he could see ran from the bottleneck along the entire southern side of the peninsula. The lights belonged to the Rybachiy Nuclear Submarine Base.

Checking his watch, he saw that it was three A.M., and he began to run fast, knowing that he had a maximum of four hours to get into the base, find and speak to Svelte, and escape the military installation and its surrounding peninsula.

He covered two miles before throwing himself onto the ground. The bottleneck entrance to the peninsula was before him. It was three hundred yards below his position and contained medium-sized buildings and huts, a wide road, smaller adjacent tracks, and four stationary military jeeps. It also contained seven naval guards, two of whom had German shepherds on leashes. They were all dressed in navy blue overcoats and standing underneath streetlamps by a sign saying HALT in Russian. There were no barriers on the road, and the rest of the bottleneck was unprotected; its buildings would give him cover to enter the base easily.

Will smiled. Svelte had previously briefed MI6 that the land around the Rybachiy submarine base was so severe and remote that the base had small need for guards save for those who patrolled around the nuclear and diesel submarines. On top of that, those few guards were little more than poorly trained naval conscripts. Will had worried that Svelte's intelligence might be wrong, but he was relieved to see that it wasn't. He looked to his right and watched a four-ton truck drive slowly along a road toward the base. Glancing back at the guards, he saw that they were looking at the vehicle but had not raised their rifles. It clearly did not bother them.

Deciding that the vehicle's approach to the base would be a good

distraction, Will got to his feet and ran fast to his right. After five hundred feet, he stopped and saw that the truck was now motionless by the entrance. The guards were standing by the driver's door and stamping their feet on the ground, their arms wrapped around their chests. To their right were the buildings and huts.

He moved diagonally so that he was heading toward the side of the bottleneck that was furthest away from the guards. Soon, trees and buildings obstructed his view of the truck. Slowing to a jog, he moved into open ground before reaching the wall of one of the huts. He placed himself flush against the building and listened for a moment. He could hear nothing save the sound of wind and the sea.

Moving along a gap between the hut and an adjacent larger building, he crouched down when he got to the end of the alley and slowly eased his head around the corner. The road entrance was visible on the other side of the bottleneck, but it was at least five hundred feet away. No one was looking his way. Glancing ahead, he saw more buildings beyond another area of open ground that was in darkness. He waited a few seconds, then sprinted toward them. After reaching the buildings, he spun around and looked toward the guards. They were still by the truck, doing nothing. He'd successfully entered the outer perimeter of Rybachiy submarine base.

He was about to move when he heard distant engine noises from the black sky. The noises grew louder until they were directly above him. They were clearly coming from aircraft, and their deep drone sounded very familiar. He briefly wondered if they were flying to the base, but Svelte had never mentioned that the base had an airstrip. He silently muttered "shit" as he realized why the sounds were so well known to him. Looking desperately at the black sky, he searched for what he knew was coming. There was nothing at first, but then he glimpsed the first one, followed by another, followed by several others. Paratroopers. They drifted silently through the sky before landing within one hundred feet of the guards behind him.

Will stayed very still. The soldiers were dressed in white combat

clothes and had balaclavas, webbing, and tactical goggles. Assault rifles were strapped to their chests. He counted twenty-five of them as he watched the platoon gather up its parachutes, pack them away, and walk toward the guards.

Some of the airborne soldiers had unslung their weapons; some had not. The guards remained stationary and showed no signs of concern at the encroaching force, now clearly lit up by the lights of the base. The paratroopers moved right up to the guards, who seemed to be communicating with a handful of the men. The dogs were handed to two of the airborne soldiers. Then the guards turned and walked casually away from the entrance into the peninsula base.

The airborne soldiers split into groups. Four of them took two of the jeeps and drove into the base, six men and one dog took over protection of the entrance, the rest entered the base on foot. Now all of them had their weapons at the ready.

Will shook his head slowly; his heart beat fast. It seemed that the silent and clearly very professional Russian airborne troops had taken over security of the base. He had no idea why this had happened, but it meant everything had changed. His chances of completing his mission and escaping without being spotted were now nearly impossible.

He ran deeper into the base, using more buildings and the darkness as cover, but as he did so his mind raced with confusion. Only two men knew that he was attempting to infiltrate the Rybachiy submarine base—the CIA director and the MI6 controller who ran his covert unit—and he knew they would never betray him. A stark conclusion entered his mind: the Russian airborne troops were not searching for him; they were searching for another man.

He checked that his military knife was securely fastened at his waist, pulled out his pistol, looked left and right, and began to walk fast.

The area around him was a mixture of shadows, lights, long huts, warehouses, factory units, and roads. Snow carpeted everything. From his study of Svelte's map, Will knew that the submarine base

was rectangular in shape and the size of a large town. He also knew from the map, and could see now, that the place was not densely built and that there were large gaps of open ground between buildings. Even though he still had the cover of night, he would have to be extremely careful moving through Rybachiy.

He stood in the blackness next to a building and watched everything around him for a while. Keeping low in the shadows, he moved carefully to the edge of the hut while staying flush against its wall. Another road was before him, and he looked left along its route. Buildings straddled the road; some were in darkness, and some had internal lights on. He knew that Svelte's quarters were approximately one mile farther along the route and adjacent to submarine pens. He saw two headlights in the distance and watched them draw closer. They seemed to be moving at a medium speed, and he could see they belonged to a civilian truck. He decided he would try to get onto the back of the vehicle and allow it to take him close to his destination.

The truck slowed and stopped about 250 feet from his position. Two men approached the vehicle. They were dressed in white and carrying guns. They spoke to the driver of the truck before waving him on. The truck drew nearer to Will, but the soldiers stayed motionless in the center of the road, watching the vehicle. He knew that if he stepped onto the road at this point he would be spotted and could easily be shot. The truck was now only a few feet from him. He kept staring at the soldiers. The truck drew alongside him, audibly changed gears, and started moving faster. One of the soldiers turned to face the other direction. The truck passed Will and in seconds would be out of range for what he needed to do. He stared at the other soldier, willing him to turn and join his colleague. The soldier placed the butt of his rifle into his shoulder, looked to his left and right, and turned. Will wasted no time. He jumped up, sprinted onto the road, and chased after the truck.

It was now fifty feet ahead of him and picking up speed. He wondered if he had the strength and pace to reach it and if the two soldiers

would turn around and shoot him in the back. He lowered his head, ran faster, got closer to the truck, heard it change gears again, realized that it was about to accelerate away, pumped his legs and arms harder to bring him within five feet of its rear, and leapt forward.

He grabbed the vehicle's rear bumper and wrapped his arms tightly around it. Snow sprayed up either side of his body as he was dragged and tossed violently over the ground. He pulled with his arms and tried to move his body into a crouch position, but he slipped so that he was again horizontal and being dragged along the road. The soldiers were now 150 yards away, but the vehicle's rear lights would still allow them to see him if they turned to face in his direction. He ignored the paratroopers and looked quickly to his left and right in case the truck was passing one of the jeeps or other paratroopers on foot. Pulling again, he kicked at the rapidly moving ground, looked up, saw a rear door handle on the truck, took a deep breath, and lunged upward toward the handle. He grabbed it with one hand just as the truck made a slight turn on the road and lifted his whole body into the air. Yanking with the arm holding the handle and the arm holding the bumper, he slammed his body against the back of the truck and lifted his knees high before banging his feet down onto the bumper. Out of breath, he felt pain creep over his back and legs. But he was secure on the vehicle, out of sight of its driver, and now out of sight of the foot patrol.

The truck drove steadily for a minute before breaking hard, skidding over the icy ground, and stopping. Will kept his grip firm while desperately looking left and right. He heard a door on the vehicle open and close, men's voices and dogs barking, and he saw light on the ground. Standing fully on the bumper, he placed one foot on the door handle by his waist, thrust upward with his leg, and grabbed the top of the truck. Keeping his body flush against the vehicle, he pulled his body quickly onto the roof and lay there with his body pressed flat against its surface. The voices were all around the truck, and, judging by their noise, there was at least one dog to his right and one dog to his left. He was fifteen feet aboveground, hidden from view, and the

snow-carrying wind would make his scent untraceable to the dogs. But he was surrounded, and if any of the men decided to check the truck's roof he would have no choice other than to fight his way out of the place that was clearly the main checkpoint entrance to the submarine pens and their surrounding quarters.

He heard the truck's rear door open and then footsteps inside the vehicle, directly beneath him. At least one of the men was searching the interior. The door slammed shut, followed by the bark of a dog and more voices. Will resisted the temptation to look over the side to see how many soldiers were around him. He kept motionless and waited. A door from the truck's cabin opened and closed; then the vehicle shuddered as the driver engaged the gears and gunned the engine. A man said something loudly in Russian, and the truck moved slowly forward before picking up pace.

Will crawled quickly along the roof so that he was in the center of the truck, keeping low in case his increasing distance from the checkpoint gave the soldiers there visibility of him. As the truck moved onward he waited for thirty seconds before raising his head a few inches to look around. Everywhere was brightly illuminated. He saw buildings and submarines. The vessels were berthed alongside walkways, and as the truck continued on, Will counted sixteen craft. He saw four Delta IIIs, five Akula Is, one Akula II, and six Oscar IIs, one of which was captained by Svelte.

The truck slowed, and Will quickly crawled farther along its roof until he was close to the cabin. Three hundred feet ahead of him were six men standing on the road. Four of them looked like naval guards; the other two were airborne soldiers. Will crawled rapidly back along the roof and decided that he had to get off the vehicle before it reached the men. He looked around, lowered himself down the back of the truck, and waited while continuing to look left and right. When he saw nothing, he jumped to the ground.

He rolled over snow and lay flat for a moment, watching the tail-lights of the truck move away from his position. He waited until the

truck was closer to the men and would hide his movements from their vision. After counting five seconds, he rose to one knee and looked around again before dashing off the road and into darkness. Pulling out his handgun, he attached the sound suppressor to the weapon and walked carefully alongside a building wall while tightly gripping the gun. Svelte's quarters were very close now.

He moved to the edge of the building and stood by a narrow road. There were buildings on either side of the route, and each one had an external lamp casting a dim light over the road. But none of the buildings had internal lights on, save one small hut. That building was Svelte's quarters and would be where the man slept, washed, dressed, and sometimes ate when not dining in the officers' mess or on board his submarine. It was about three hundred yards away from him on the left of the road. He looked up and down the route, checked his watch, and waited for a few seconds before deciding he had to move.

Moving out of the alley, he looked toward Svelte's residence and tightly gripped his handgun. He knew he needed to be within the man's quarters in seconds. He ran.

When he came to within a few feet of Svelte's hut, he slowed to a walk, crouched low, and pulled out his military knife. He moved carefully forward, looking around, with his gun in one hand and the knife in the other. The narrow street was still quiet as he looked up and down the route. His eyes narrowed. A streak of light began moving slowly down the road. It was daylight.

Moving up to the hut's door, he brought the knife up to force its lock. He frowned. The door was already ajar an inch. He pushed at it and immediately slammed his back against the adjacent wall so that he would not be visible to anyone inside. He waited, and when he heard nothing he swung himself low into the doorway with his handgun held forward. The room before him was small. It contained a tiny dining table and chair, a sofa, a television, an illuminated corner lamp, wall-mounted shelves filled with books, and a free-standing rack with a coat hanger holding an immaculately pressed naval captain's dress

uniform. Beyond the room was a corridor, and Will moved silently into it. To his left was a room with a toilet, hand basin, and shower cubicle. To his right was a closed door. He crouched down and moved to one side of the door while placing his knife into its scabbard. Then he removed his jacket hood, lifted his handgun up high, and used his free hand to open the door.

A man was lying in the center of the room, moaning. Will ran to him and crouched down. Immediately, he recognized the man from a photograph he'd seen in MI6 headquarters. It was Svelte, and he was dressed in uniform. The MI6 Russian agent's face was screwed up in agony. His stomach had been torn open by a knife.

In Russian, Will said urgently, "I am a British intelligence officer." He cradled the back of Svelte's head and leaned down so that his face was inches away from the agent's. "Who did this to you?"

Svelte's eyes partially opened, his lips moved, but the only sound he made was a blood-filled guttural noise.

Will shook his head with disbelief. One of MI6's most prized Russian agents was dying, and there was nothing he could do to stop it from happening. Will had traveled halfway around the world to meet him, but now it seemed that his journey might have been a waste of time. He moved even closer to him. "You sent us a message. What did it mean?"

Svelte shook his head; tears streamed down the sides of his face.

"Who did this to you? Who wants to go to war?"

Svelte gripped Will's forearm tightly and opened his bloody mouth. But still no words came out.

Will felt anger, sorrow, and frustration that he'd not gotten to Svelte sooner. This was his fault. He'd failed the Russian officer. "Please . . . please try to speak." He made no attempt to hide the desperation he felt. "I'm so *very* sorry. I should have got to you sooner."

Svelte's back arched as his body went into a spasm, and he cried out in agony. His body slumped back to the floor; his breathing was fast and shallow. Unscrewing his eyes, he stared straight at Will. "Not . . . not

your fault.” He spoke with a barely audible voice. “Khmelnysky . . . Colonel Taras Khmelnysky. War between Russia and America.” He coughed blood and gritted his teeth. “Only Sentinel can stop him.”

His grip on Will instantly relaxed and his hand fell away to the floor, but his eyes remained wide open. He was dead.

Will briefly closed his eyes and muttered, “Fuck.” He lowered Svelte’s head to the floor, placed his fingers gently onto the Russian’s eyelids and closed them, and stared at the dead agent. Standing, he turned and kicked a bin across the room with a hushed “Damn it!”

Breathing deeply, he tried to control the anger he felt toward himself. He had to take control of the situation. Though Svelte’s dying words had no meaning to him, his priority now was getting out of the base and taking the information back to people who almost certainly would know what Svelte had meant. But daylight and the presence of the paratroopers would make an attempted covert escape suicidal.

His eyes fixed onto a tumbler glass on a bedside table. Within it was an inch of clear liquid. Lifting it to his nose, he smelled vodka. He moved quickly around the room, opening the small number of cupboards and drawers. Only clothes and stationery. Entering the lounge, he spotted a small fridge unit in one corner. Pulling it open, he saw eight full bottles of vodka. He glanced at the sofa next to him. It was cheap and made of foam, ideal for what he needed. Opening the first bottle, he poured its contents over the sofa; then he did the same with a second bottle before splashing the contents of the remaining bottles over anything in Svelte’s quarters that might be flammable. Grabbing a copy of an *Izvestia* newspaper from the dinner table, he tore it apart, wadded pieces of the paper into small balls, and scattered them over the sofa and elsewhere. He lit some of the balls, watched them start to burn, and then jogged back into the bedroom.

From the window, he saw that this side of the residence butted up against an alley and more buildings. Easing the window open, he clambered out of Svelte’s quarters. The alley was empty; snow was falling thick and fast. Looking back into the quarters, he saw black

smoke beginning to emerge from the lounge into the bedroom, and he walked quickly to the end of the alley before stopping. Ahead of him was open ground, and to his right was the main road. Smoke was now billowing out of Svelte's window. He ran north alongside a large warehouse and ducked into a narrow gap between buildings. His only hope lay in luring the paratroopers to Svelte's quarters so that he could escape on foot. It was a vain hope. He doubted they'd all break formation to come here.

Engine noises came from his right. Easing farther into the gap, he saw two jeeps emerge through the blizzard, driving off the road and stopping on the open ground ahead of him. Four troopers got out; one of them was shouting into a radio mic, the others had their rifles held ready to shoot. None of the men was wearing a balaclava. They sped toward the alley that led to the rear of Svelte's residence.

A minute later, a truck arrived and braked opposite the jeeps. Six airborne soldiers and four navy conscripts jumped out of the truck and ran along the road toward the front entrance of the burning building. When they were out of sight, Will braced himself to sprint across the open ground to reach a cluster of more buildings and the cover they would provide. He hesitated as an idea came to him. Staying low, and with his pistol held with both hands, he moved to the jeeps. One of them had its engine idling, the keys still in the ignition.

Seeing that the soldiers were out of sight in Svelte's quarters, he got into the vehicle, jammed his handgun between the seat and door, and slowly drove away from the road across the open ground. Turning, he moved the jeep between two long huts before stopping and glancing over his shoulder. One white balaclava lay on a rear seat. He put it on and drove the vehicle out of the alley, across more snow-covered rough ground, and onto the main road.

Snow was hitting the windshield fast. He engaged the wipers on high, turned on the headlights, and lowered the driver's window. Depressing the accelerator, he increased speed until he was driving at fifty miles an hour. He saw a group of conscripts ahead of him,

walking along the road. Flashing his lights and beeping the horn, he maintained his speed and pointed urgently out of the window in the direction of the fire behind him. As he passed the group, they broke into a run toward the fire.

He drove past the submarines until he was a mile and a half away from Svelte's residence. Checking the fuel gauge, he saw that the tank was half full. If he could escape the base, that would be more than enough. He only needed to drive fourteen miles south across roads and tracks to reach the coast. There, he'd be met by the Russian merchant navy captain who'd brought him to Russia. The captain, a CIA asset, would then take him to Alaska.

He saw the headlights of a four-ton truck. The vehicle stopped by the inner checkpoint to the submarine pens. As he neared it, five paratroopers emerged from the blizzard and got into the vehicle. The truck pulled away, coming right toward him, but it did not slow as it passed.

Will increased speed. Within five minutes he was nearing the outer perimeter of the base. He raced by more buildings, civilian workers, and two navy soldiers, who took no notice of him. His only hope was to put enough distance between him and the soldiers he'd lured to the fire. He needed that distance because in a few seconds the whole base would be alerted to his jeep and the paratroopers would be chasing after him. The alert would be raised by one of the six airborne soldiers now standing ahead of him at the bottleneck entrance to Rybachiy. They were five hundred feet away, and he could see that they were facing him but had not yet raised their weapons. He put his foot to the floor and got to within three hundred feet of them. The troopers remained still. When he was 150 feet away, he flashed his headlights. One of the soldiers raised a hand. Will returned the gesture. The soldiers moved away from the center of the road, no doubt expecting him to screech to a halt between them. He slowed down to half speed, got to within thirty feet of them, and gunned the engine again. The paratroopers leapt aside and fell to the ground as Will's vehicle sped by, spraying snow over the prone soldiers.

Swerving the jeep left and right, Will moved out of the base and onto the mountain road. Shots rang out. Two bullets smashed through the rear window and front windshield, narrowly missing Will's head. He swerved again just as more bullets slammed into the passenger door. One hundred feet ahead of him were the outskirts of the forest and a bend in the road that would take him out of the paratroopers' sight. His heart pounded. He was just as concerned about bullets striking the jeep's tires, fuel tank, or engine as he was about them hitting his body. A sustained burst of gunfire pounded the snow by his vehicle. More rounds rushed through the broken windows, one of them grazing his jacket. Yanking hard down on the steering wheel, he careered left and skidded, desperately trying to maintain control of the vehicle, then he yanked right, and momentarily took his foot off the accelerator. The jeep stayed on the road. Accelerating fast again, he approached the bend. Trees were now around him. He was just a few feet away from cover.

He heard a final volley of automatic gunfire.