

# DEADLY SERIOUS

By

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## CHAPTER ONE

The pond was white. Around the edge clear wafers of ice had begun to form. The dark silhouettes of evergreens stood out against a cold and graying sky. Except for the far-off call of a flock of summer-bound geese, there was no sound at Wintercove.

The snow continued to fall. The temperature dropped. The bearded stranger waited.

‘This is no place for an old man,’ he thought. ‘What am I doing here? Maybe this lunatic won't show up.’

His fingers and toes ached from the cold. He'd been waiting here for three hours. Suvorov knew this would be his last time. After this, he would retire; maybe some warm island in the South Pacific where no one would remember his name. A quiet place where he might lose himself among the natives, grow old undisturbed, feign senility and die. This he longed for.

A white blanket of snow rested softly over the tops of the tall pines and the upper branches sported a coat of fine powder. Everywhere he looked it was as if he was inside a magical kingdom. A few snowflakes settled on his open palm revealing unique, diamond-like patterns before they melted.

Suvorov remembered how in his youth he and his brother used to lie on their backs in the snow and spread their arms and legs to make angels. ‘Whatever happened to that kind of innocence,’ he wondered.

His training did not allow for idle thought. Still, it was difficult not to let his mind wander. After ten long years of searching he had found his brother, Aleksandr and his brother was dead.

Glancing at his watch, Suvorov realized that it was four in the afternoon. Goodis should be here by now.

Below the tree ridge where he was hiding and yet in clear view lay the pond. Snowdrifts traversed a pathway that wandered toward four tennis courts seen now as distant, fenced-in, white squares. To the east were a little rock garden and a wooden

bridge that looked like toothpicks dusted with flour. High on the hill beyond the bridge stood a large stately home.

A crackling alerted Suvorov to the accumulating weight of the snow on the branches above his head. Looking around, he saw the forest trees drooping to the ground, overburdened with the weight of this November gift. The storms had come early this year. No one had expected it. No one had asked for it. This was Nature's way of defying Man, he thought, as his dull green eyes continued to roam the landscape. He sucked in his breath and shifted his weight to the other foot when his eyes instinctively focused on a flicker of movement.

Coughing wretchedly, a thin visitor in an oversized greatcoat dragged himself through the storm.

Goodis.

Suvorov forgot about the cold. He forgot about the angels. He forgot about the storm. He reached for his gun, a Mauser C96, not a fancy weapon but a trusting one that had served him well in the past.

Jonny Goodis had just turned forty as he kicked his way through a two-foot high snowdrift. On the half-frozen pond directly in front of him a sleek, black swan arched its slender neck. The ice around the edges of the pond was slowly closing in on the bird as heavy snow sprinkled down around it. It swam in small concentric circles.

“What are you doing here?” Jon shouted drunkenly. “Jesus, I hate this crap!”

Jon glared at the tree line, his dark eyes unfocused from the binge.

“I know you're here, Lauren,” he shouted out loud. “I know you're responsible for this.”

The sleek bird ruffled its dark feathers and raised itself up.

A frozen tear was trapped in Jon's eye. Muffling a sneeze, he dug deep inside his coat pockets. Muttering to himself during a long and winded search, he finally withdrew a pair of blue earmuffs. These he clamped over his head. His left hand returned to the pockets for a bottle of Stolichnaya. Jon wet his thin blue lips and drained the bottle. With a remarkable burst of energy he tossed the vodka bottle across the broken ice.

“Go on! Get the hell outa' here, bird. Doncha' know it's winter?” he shouted. “Doncha' know birds fly south?”

The graceful cygnet barely glanced at him.

Deep in the shadows Suvorov began loading the clip for his weapon, just as he had a thousand times before; slowly, methodically, expertly. The kill would be easy. ‘But who should go first, he wondered. The bird or the man?’

Suvorov's mind delighted in this kind of game. That's why he had been chosen. He was an expert sharpshooter with a flawless record and a simple assignment. Ask no questions, terminate one political troublemaker and within a few hours he would be winging his way to Bali, tasting fresh veal and sipping Pernod. He would have done it for nothing. After all, his sources informed him, this was the man who had killed Aleksandr Vasinoff, the great physicist.

Firming his stance, he aimed the gun and pulled the trigger. The first shot was designed to pierce the ice six inches from Jon's left foot.

“Better get out of here, bird.” Jon wheezed at the swan. “Go on! Take off!” He ordered.

He threw a handful of snow, hitting the swan in its side. In a sudden flurry of speed the black bird swept across the ice and lit into the air. As soon as it attained airspeed, two well-placed bullets tore the creature's body apart. A trail of red steamed across the virgin white landscape.

Jon watched in horror.

For the first time ever warm blood spilled over the Goodis estate. Jon felt each shot in the cells of his mind. Panic rose in the woods of his youth. The golf course was deserted, the tennis courts haunted. He stared at the large stone house on the hill. The smell of death was everywhere. His father's home was no longer safe and for the last time in his troubled life, Jon Goodis began to run. Through the snowdrift, along the sandbar, toward the bridge.

Tracking his prey, Suvorov stepped into the open but heard a thud in the distance. It could have been the wind or a broken branch snapping. But he knew it was a car door. Firm, solid, rich. Probably European. He leveled his gun at the retreating figure and fired the kill shot.

Jon's entire body jerked to the left indicating a solid neck rupture. Then another in the chest. Suvorov fired again but the bullet missed its mark as the gun was knocked from his hand.

"You goddamned son of a Commie whore bitch," a gravelly voice hissed in his ear.

Two burly hands wrapped a garrote around Suvorov's throat. The wire cut deep into the Russian's windpipe. He tried to jerk free. He thought of his island. The fishing. The payoff. But the grip on his neck was like iron. The snow and the cold bit into his open wound and the last thing he remembered hearing from his executioner was a lousy American nursery rhyme.

"Georgie Porgie puddin' 'n pie." George Arkin pulled tighter on the wire. "Kissed the girls and made them cry."

It was clear from his grasp that he wanted the steel to slice apart the sniper's carotid artery.

"When the boys came out to play." Arkin yanked harder on the wire as a well-placed knee to the kidney deflated the Russian.

"Georgie Porgie ran away."

Arkin knew the marksman was dead when his head rolled north. Releasing the bloody garrote, he let the body crumple to the ground.

"Jon?" A woman's voice broke the silence. She started to run. Closer. Arkin could tell. "Jon, are you there?" she called.

Dragging the corpse behind a spruce tree, Arkin shook snow from a branch and began covering the dead man. It would be spring before anyone found the body unless the wolves got him first.

Lauren cried out again. "Jon, where are you?"

Then she noticed the mess of entrails where the swan or what remained of it, lay. Sinew, guts, feather and shattered bone formed a trail of blood through the snow. Lauren screamed. The bird's neck and parts of its head lay several feet away by the water's edge.

Gagging, she raced toward the pond, trying to keep from throwing up. Nearing the embankment she tripped on a gnarled root. She caught her balance, looked up and spotted

Jon's blue earmuffs. She picked them up. She followed his fresh tracks past the drift, beyond the sandbar, across the bridge and toward the house.

Arkin wiped the wire on his sleeve and stuffed it back inside his coat. As he pulled up his collar, he took one last look at the property and disappeared silently into the dense forest. He reached the road in a matter of seconds.

Though the trees and the snow and the storm always had a tendency to muffle human terror, George heard the scream. It was chilling. It was unending. It was always the same.

He never looked forward to winter.

## CHAPTER TWO

*Ten Years Earlier*

*Los Angeles, 1980*

If Jon had known where this would eventually lead, he never would have left teaching, he never would have bought a dog, he never would have gone jogging and he never would have met Lauren. But it was all inevitable.

A bright sliver of light pierced through the skylight to the lower level of his Brentwood apartment. As the morning sun rose higher in the pale blue sky, a thin beam shot across the teal carpet. It climbed up the side of the eggshell-colored ottoman and swept through a forest of potted plants until it reached the antique, mahogany roll-top desk. Tracing a path over a stack of unopened mail and unpaid bills, the ray of light spread its radiant glow across a large beveled mirror hanging on the north wall. The sliver of light reflected off the mirror and raced up through the air attacking Jon's unopened eyes.

He rolled over onto his stomach and covered his head with a pillow. Opening one tired blue eye he glanced across the bed. Lady Hunt, his three-month-old English sheepdog, poked her little black nose out from under the down comforter.

“Well, Merriedip Phillimore Hunt III, did you sleep OK?”

The little sheep dog sprang to its feet with a Nike in her maw and jumped on top of her master's head.

In his Langley, Virginia office Arkin, a sturdy and handsome man in his mid-forties, passed a disk file to two gray-suited agents a few years out of college. The label on it read VASINOFF.

“We found him and you'll never guess where,” Arkin informed the men.

In Intelligence circles they called them The Gardeners; the first team in the field to take action on long-term projects. After initial security assessment of a disappointing harvest seven highly trained agents were routinely dispatched through Top Secret directives. They would plant industrial-grade hybrid seeds, scientists and engineers from foreign countries for which emigration was not a choice. It was a necessity.

The Gardeners would nurture them, prune them and as needed clear away any weeds growing among them.

George Arkin had been one of the best. Now he was team leader. With the cold war out of the way he could afford to focus on his ripe crop and before the next round of budget cuts, he was determined to see his projects bear fruit. For years he had sewn and reaped. Like a gentleman farmer, the practice of crop rotation of sensitive information became second nature to him. When you were looking for it, it wasn't there and when you least expected it, it could rear up and bite you in the ass.

In the early days, the goals of national security were clearly defined. The practices however were not. They changed, shifted with the wind, with the current Administration and the ambition and needs of the Director of Central Intelligence.

On the way to the airport, the agents, Bolt and Stats, perused the file. Aleksandr Vasinoff had been a Sleeper, a seed. Planted thirty years ago in the upstanding east bay community of Piedmont, his career had taken him inside Martin Marietta, later Xerox PARC. He taught a class at Stanford in nuclear physics and the effects of gravity on sub-atomic particles and was eventually tenured. No Eastern Bloc scientist could have asked for more. But when it was time to go home, Vasinoff had fled.

Over the years CIA's search for him proved disappointing. All it turned up was a fractured trail of family problems, career setbacks and financial reversals buried underneath the glowing outer persona. The Gardeners could not interfere.

By the time they discovered the root rot Vasinoff had entirely disappeared. He had been on the run from Cuban agents who were trying to sell information he claimed he didn't have to Iraqi secret intelligence agents who claimed they didn't exist. It was time to bring Vasinoff in and debrief him. Critical information could slip into the wrong hands and it was Arkin's job to clean up the mess.

Besides, he had a personal stake.

## CHAPTER THREE

Twenty-three hundred miles away in Malibu canyon and drenched with sweat from his seven-mile run, Jon Goodis pushed himself over one more misty crest. Lady Hunt panted alongside chasing the yellow and navy blue-clad figure in front of her.

Almost thirty, with a runner's body, Jon had a quick wit and a quicker mind. There was an intensity about him that masked a certain emotional vulnerability. But if you really knew him, which few people did, you would find he was a guy who was wound up very, very tight.

"So, I ran into this guy, see," Jon spoke to himself forcing the words as he regulated his breathing. He dictated into a Panasonic RN-122 micro cassette recorder. Every six months he broke the door hinge but at \$34.95 at Adrays, they were cheap enough to throw away and replace.

"And he owned this bakery, you see. Well, one day me and my buddy walked in there when his wife was behind the counter and we asked if she had any hot buns. Just then this nun walks in behind us."

Jon ran another ten yards and shook the sweat from his forehead. He was working on a comedy routine. With enough practice, he guessed one day he could do stand-up.

"And the nun says, 'I beg your pardon.' And I look at my buddy and I say, I tell you what. You beg the nun's pardon while I eat the baker's buns." Jon spat phlegm from his throat.

"What a stupid joke. Hunt, come on girl. You've got to keep up. Just a few more hills and we're done."

A couple of cars sped past breaking the monotony of the exercise.

Jon started again. "There was this guy, you see, and every morning he used to get on his Nikes and his sweats and go for a run. The first day he almost collapsed."

Jon suddenly stopped and stared at the climb ahead of him. His little dog pulled up right behind.

"Whew. We can't keep going like this, Hunt. Let's just cut through here and head back," Jon panted.

"Good thinking, Jon," a deep voice complimented his decision. "That's the smartest thing you've said all day." By talking to himself in different voices, Jon kept himself company. It was better than nothing.

"Gee thanks," his normal voice responded.

He and Hunt started up a dirt trail that ran across a wooded property. A rusty sign read 'NO TRESPASSING.'

Seventy-five yards further along the path Jon passed a solitary shack. Wrecked auto parts littered the yard and a rusted fence surrounded the clapboard structure that was decorated with peeling dried patches of green paint.

A man's resonant voice boomed from within in a foreign accent Jon couldn't be certain of.

"But that thou wouldst have ridded thyself of this famine nigh unto this time, the journey would be swift." Jon stopped by the fence. The voice continued.

"I do not live by my own father nor mine self my own son for this is not what I am. Contempt and murder have ravaged these hills."

"Hello," Jon called out. "Are you all right?"

The voice stopped. A set of dark eyes emerged from behind the open door of the shack as a tall bearded man dressed in rags presented himself at the threshold.

This guy's unbelievable, Jon thought as his thumb pressed the RECORD button on the cassette. The disheveled figure glared at him.

"There is a tumor amongst us and those who witnesseth it shall be no better than dust for you and this creature make not haste before my eyes for I have seen what cancer penetrates thy soul, oh murderous villain. Would that I could shed my sorrow and take the dagger unto mine own hands, but that the blood of mankind would stain my house. Banish thee, demon, from this land."

"What?" Jon cried out. "Who are you talking to?"

A buzzing noise turned to thunder and ricocheted off the surrounding hills. Within seconds an unmarked black helicopter circled overhead spitting up dust, hovering closer. The copter twisted around, nose down, pushing the trees and grass away with its force. The rotor wash turned particles of dirt into tiny tornadoes whipping them high into the mountain air.

Jon took cover behind a tree. He stuffed his shaggy dog inside his shirt to protect her from the dust. The chopper circled three more times before vacating the premises.

When Jon looked up the old man was gone. Prying his way through the fence, Jon stepped onto the porch. He forced open the door and looked inside.

"Are you in here?" he asked. No answer.

The inside of the house looked worse than the yard. Rust, dust, filth, mice. Miscellaneous junk and the odor of garbage penetrated the hermit's living quarters.

"Hello?" Jon shouted again.

Lady Hunt growled and tried to appear fierce.

"What's the matter, Hunt?" he asked her.

A team of oversized cockroaches were playing stick hockey with a scrap of bread in a drawer.

"Gawd, I'd hate to have dinner here." Jon spun around to leave but the old man suddenly appeared, holding a machete, blocking his retreat.

"Who are you?" the hermit Aleksandr Vasinoff snarled.

"Woah, woah there. I'm just a comedian looking for material," Jon stuttered.

"What kind of material?"

"Funny material, light things."

The old man brushed past Jon and took a drink from the tap, swallowing the brownish water. "Light like not heavy?" he asked setting the machete aside.

"Yeah, not heavy, like humor you know, levity," said Jon.



The old man smirked revealing a yellow, un-flossed bite. "I used to work with levity." He moved to block the door.

"Really?" Jon looked for a way past him.

"Anti-gravity," the hermit returned trying to gauge if this was his contact.

"That's pretty funny."

"Are you famous?" asked the hermit.

"No. But I'm on my way. I play some notable clubs," Jon boasted.

"So I could find you and see you?"

"Sure, but you'd probably have to clean up a little and there's usually a two drink minimum. So, why were you quoting all this doom and gloom stuff? Things aren't that bad"

"Shhhh. They can hear us, up there." He pointed overhead.

"Really?"

"Yes, by satellite."

"I think we're safe here."

The hermit sized him up and relaxed.

"You probably think I'm insane after all this time but I'm not." Out from under the sofa he pulled a black leather briefcase and opened it. Inside was a manila envelope. "Here, take this. It'll explain everything"

"Everything? What's in it?" Jon asked.

"Jokes, of course; my humorous scenario. Read them. Tell me if you like them, if you think they're funny, if they have... levity."

"Well, I can't promise anything," Jon stammered.

"Timing. I understand is everything," smiled Vasinoff.

Jon wheeled his navy blue Mercedes Benz 450 SL into the school parking lot, blocking four other vehicles. He left the briefcase on the seat of the car. Jumping out, he coaxed his pup.

"C'mon Hunt. C'mon girl. You don't want to be late for class." Jon tugged gently on the leash but Lady Hunt sat firmly in the passenger seat, unmoving. Jon scooped her up. "I know the first day is rough but you'll get used to it."

He moved along the silent halls toward his classroom. When he pushed the door open a tall, thin substitute teacher glared at him.

"What are you doing, here?" he asked her. "This is my class."

The horn-rim bespectacled woman hushed him whispering, "Mr. Frugaglio wants to see you. It's almost 11:30."

"Great," Jon steamed in his best twelve year-old-manner. "That's really good." He and Hunt spun around and headed toward the principal's office.

"Where's the honorable Anthony Gaglio?" Jon barked at the administrative secretary. "He wants to see me? Well here I am."

Tony Frugaglio had been a tight end for the L.A. Rams before he ruptured ligaments in his knee. Since that time, he maintained his modest seat of power within the troubled educational system pursuing his new game plan by running a tight ship that produced only winners in his schools. Now on his second school, he had no patience for trouble-making subordinates.

“Goodis,” the thick Italian accent rolled out from the inner office. Jon moved to the door. Frugaglio sat at his undersized desk puffing on a cigar.

“Come in, come in. I been meaning to talk to you, Jon.” Frugaglio got up and closed the door behind them, slapping a friendly hand on Jon's shoulder. “How you doing? All right?”

“Yeah, not bad, except for the fact that I've got this funny owl in there running my class.”

“Ah, don't worry about her, Jon. She's not going to corrupt them.” He winked. “Sit. Sit. You want a cigar?”

Jon shook his head.

“Nice dog you got there. Real cute. What is that? Some kind of terrier?”

“German shepherd.” Jon took offense at his condescension. “Look, what did you call me in here for?”

Frugaglio returned to his desk and signaled Jon to relax.

“Look, you're one of the best teachers we have here. I want you to know that. It's not a thing I say to very many people.”

“Save the speeches and get to the point.”

“OK, you want the point? You're fired.”

“What? I'm so good you've got to fire me? That makes a lot of sense.”

“This isn't easy for me, Jon.”

“Bullshit. You've wanted to do it ever since you got here. Run your own little domain, keep enrollment up and all that shit.”

“Don't get angry now,” Frugaglio tried to appease him. “Look, I'm not angry. I'm not hurt. I'm not disappointed. The fact is I couldn't give a shit. I just want you to know that you're not going to find anyone more dedicated to the ideals of education in America than me, and I pity the poor parents who think their kids are getting educated here and I wish you luck with your shitass attitude and your medieval methods because frankly, Frugaglio, this whole place stinks.” He stormed out.

In the parking lot the pup tried to jump into the driver's seat and Jon had to help her move her uncoordinated legs over.

“You're too young to drive, Hunt. Scoot over.” Jon plopped the puppy into the passenger seat and turned up the stereo. “I hope you like it loud, honey, 'cause from now on that's how it's going to be.”

Dr. Arnold Pizzenbaum never scheduled sessions in the early part of the afternoon. Early on he learned that a full stomach contributed little, if anything, to effective counseling.

“The blood is in the stomach,” he would often lecture his students. “Therefore, people are unable to think and analyze properly. They become relegated to the instinctual, like animals. You should never forget that.”

Pizzenbaum was lying on the couch with his shirt off. The shades were drawn. A big-boned woman straddled his hips. The top half of her dress was gathered around her waist allowing her mature breasts to swing freely across the doctor's moist lips. The eminent psychiatrist pushed his tongue across each of her large, turgid nipples before squeezing his head between the woman's proud breasts.

“This is the best therapy for you, Vesna. I just want you to enjoy it.”

The woman moaned pushing her large Yugoslavian hips into the doctor's groin. “Take me, Arnold. I want you to have all of me. I want you inside me.”

Pizzenbaum made her arch her back and massaged her breasts, enjoying the firm swell beneath his palm. The woman reached behind her searching for her lover's zipper.

Pizzenbaum had always yearned for moments like this. How many years had it been since he'd had a woman who truly enjoyed giving her entire self to him, to surrendering all of the make-believe psychoses? So many of his patients carried their problems around with them like old baggage, waiting for the stern voice of a psychiatrist to tell them to throw it away, to forget the past, to let go.

Dr. Pizzenbaum had studied diligently for a decade before building a successful practice. During this time he'd experienced years of celibacy while doggedly working on his medical degree and Doctorate. In Vesna's presence he reveled in freedom and sheer excitement, feeling guiltless in the awareness that some unexpressed fantasy was being realized.

Vesna was not the kind of woman he could walk into a cocktail party with or introduce as his wife. But for Pizzenbaum this woman embodied every man's fantasy of the large, straddling dirty blonde with huge firm breasts; a woman in heat who wanted nothing more than to experience orgasm over and over again within the confines of some element of respectability. She was a woman who wanted to carry that memory forever, the time in her life when she was loved for being a woman, not just a set of tits. The time when she could relish the ecstatic release of a small, understanding man stretching himself sacrificially between her powerful loins. She asked for nothing more than the celebration of the moment.

“Hey, Pizz.” Jon strolled in unannounced and pulled up a chair. “I see you're busy but I wanted to talk,” he stated nonchalantly.

Pizzenbaum and his partner stared in disbelief of his cavalier manner.

“Carry on, carry on. Don't let me interrupt you,” Jon chortled.

“Jonny,” Pizzenbaum rasped. “I can't see you right now. I'm busy”

“Don't get so hung up on this one, Pizz. Just pretend like I'm not here.”

The woman sat up and glared at Jon. “Do you mind?” she asked indignantly.

“Not at all,” Jon replied. “Great set of cans, ma'am. Listen, Pizz. I wouldn't barge in like this but you told me any place, any time. So you see, I got some problems like career anxiety. I lost my job. I'm turning thirty.” He rattled on. “I feel like a failure. I have weird dreams. I can't find true love. So I bought a dog because I need someone to talk to Pizz and besides you, I have no other friends who completely understand what I'm going through. I'm not sure what to do. All I want is to contribute in a meaningful way. Now why is everything so goddamn hard?”

“You're a fuckup!” Pizzenbaum scolded.

“Think so? Hey, I feel bad for barging in like this but I wanted you to know how vulnerable I've been feeling. That's all.” There was a moment of silence in the room. Jon took a deep breath and stood up.

“OK. I'll be going now. Thanks, Pizz. Thank you, ma'am.” He walked out the door.

Pizzenbaum and his lover looked at one another without speaking.

Finally she remarked. "He is one of your patients?"

Pizzenbaum nodded.

"And I thought I was sick!" she exclaimed.

Jon drove the L.A. freeways for hours, a practice he sometimes performed to replace zazen. Deep in thought, he returned home after midnight and plopped into bed. After a moment he switched on the light and stared at the hermit's briefcase. He pulled it toward him and opened it. Jon unsealed the envelope and inside found a yellow legal pad inscribed with complex mathematical equations; page after page of strings of symbols. What was this guy up to?

He rewound the hermit's portion of the tape.

'There is a tumor amongst us...' He shuttled back and forth.

'Oh murderous villain, what, that I could shed my sorrow.'

The sound of the rotating ceiling fan reminded Jon of the mysterious helicopter. He took one last look at the notes before setting them aside and turning out the light.