

Chapter One

Elda Ainsworth tore through the woods. The sun painted dabbled spots of brightness on the underbrush, making it more difficult to see ruts and holes. The sound of her feet crushing branches and leaves echoed loudly in her head, as her lizard brain urged her feet along. She skidded to a stop for a brief moment and listened. *Yes*—she could hear the distant din of muffled directions and broken twigs, revealing her chasers crashing through the woods behind her.

Speeding up, she wove between trees, to not leave a direct trail to follow. She careened around a sapling, tripped over a root, and jerked to stay upright. Her foot crushed a branch, and the sharp sound of the dry wood breaking reprimanded her woodsman skills and Native American heritage. If she could hear her pursuers, then they could also hear her. She ripped off her boots, tied them around her neck, and continued in her stockings. As she raced on, she could feel the twigs and branches scraping the bottom of her feet, but the sound was muted and she left fewer markers to follow.

Blood oozed from the swollen gums around her new crown, which hid a securely embedded microdot. She resisted the urge to spit out the metallic taste of blood and instead forced herself to swallow and not leave a trail. The pain in her mouth throbbed in time with her heartbeat and offset the pain in her feet. Her toe hit a hidden rock. She went down, barely suppressing the sound of the air leaving her body. She pulled herself up into a quick squat and jerked all the way back upright, moving her feet before she even reached fully vertical.

Her pursuers were gaining on her.

Spying a hollow behind two trees, Elda willed her body toward it. Sweat ran down her face and along the sides of her body. She dove into the hollow and covered herself up with dirt,

leaves, and twigs. Her heart pounded in her chest as she slowed her breath to a whisper. She was grateful that she was wearing dark clothing that would blend in well with the forest undergrowth and debris. She took a deep breath and pressed her head down into the dirt below.

Two hunters raced by, dressed in camouflage and carrying black, steel OTs-02 Kiparis semiautomatic machine guns. The large magazine capacities, laser pointers, silencers, and steel butts folded up against the guns told her all she needed to know—these men knew what they were doing. They stopped a short distance away. Elda could hear them arguing in Russian over which way to continue. Closing her eyes, she silently recited the Lord's prayer. She prayed that she would deliver the vital information she carried, knowing it would save many lives. Desperate for air, she slowly turned her head to take in shallow breaths, keeping her body perfectly still. After what seemed like an eternity, the two men started up again. She could tell from their retreating footsteps that they had veered off in the direction she needed to head.

Elda waited until she could no longer hear any sounds, forced herself to count to sixty to ensure all was clear, and lifted her head up. She rose and took a moment to orient herself. Realizing that the two assassins had gotten ahead of her now—and that others could follow—she calculated a different route to the extraction point. She took off at a rapid but quiet pace, perpendicular to her previous path.