

Prologue

The day was an unrelenting grey. Trees not yet in leaf on this late March morning stood framed as stark skeletons against the backdrop of the surrounding city. The rain, though hardly more than a mist, was cold and penetrating.

Three people huddled close together under one large black umbrella. Jane, her best friend, wept softly, clinging to Lacy, whose husband Igor was about to be lowered into the earth. Igor's attorney, Richard, was stony faced. Lacy held herself rigid, straight and tall. She wanted to cry, to feel something, anything, but somehow the tears just would not come. There was a hollowness deep inside her that left her unable to cry, unable to feel. Odd. She had cried so frequently during these last two years. But what was left to cry for? Igor was gone, irretrievably lost. There would never be a chance to make things right between them now. Her sense of desolation was beyond tears.

In keeping with Russian Orthodox tradition, the grave site faced east. The coffin was suspended over the open grave, ready to be lowered at the signal.

Lacy listened without really hearing, as the priest, dressed in black cassock with a large gold cross on a heavy chain around his neck, intoned the words of the burial service. Numbly she fixed her eyes on the long black scarf covering his traditional, high cylindrical hat as it fluttered

in the wind. He uttered the last prayer of the service, "*Zemle roszstupysia.*" *Be open, oh earth, and receive the body which has been created out of you.* He took a hand full of soil and sprinkled it on the coffin in the shape of a cross.

Lacy stepped forward and placed a single long-stemmed purple iris on the coffin. Igor had loved irises. Jane and Richard followed, each in turn placing an iris on his casket.

Stepping back, Lacy nodded. She watched as the coffin was lowered slowly into its final resting place, and two workmen who had been standing in the background began to shovel the earth over it.

Lacy shivered as she heard the first clods strike the coffin. Taking a deep breath, she approached the priest and spoke to him in Russian. "Thank you, Father Zacchaeus. It was important to Igor that he be given a Russian Orthodox burial."

The priest nodded. "I understand. In the end, we all return to our roots." He placed a hand gently on her arm. "Bless you, my child."

Richard appeared at her side and putting his arm around her shoulders, led her away as the grave was closed. Jane was waiting in the limousine.

At the car, Lacy turned to look one last time at the grave. Two rather ominous -looking men dressed in dark raincoats, with hats pulled low over their brows, stood under a clump of trees nearby. They appeared to have been observing the graveside service. Who were they? If they had known Igor, wouldn't they have spoken to her? As she stared at them, they turned and left.

Chapter One

Lacy stood on the porch of their house in the Berkshires breathing in the clear air with its scent of evergreens. Being here these last two weeks had given her a sense of peace she hadn't experienced in a very long time. She had done the right thing, coming here as soon as the funeral was over.

She smiled as she remembered the way Igor always referred to this place somewhat disparagingly as "the cabin." In truth, it was a spacious two-story log home on three acres of wooded hillside overlooking the river. She sat down in one of the old-fashioned Boston rockers and moved gently back and forth. Whenever they were in residence, she and Igor had taken their morning tea here where they could watch the deer fearlessly grazing their way across the lawn.

Lacy loved it, and she'd enjoyed her weeks of solitude here. She'd stayed longer than she intended, but she was ready to get back to the city now. It was time to get her life back in order. Besides, she had an appointment with their attorney, Richard, tomorrow.

She glanced at her watch. Four o'clock. If she left now she'd be home before midnight. Then she could get an early start tomorrow morning. She was pretty sure she'd be welcomed back at her old job at the United Nations, but there were forms to fill out, procedures to go through. Sighing, she got up and wnye into the house and began

the ritual of closing it up. Water shut off, valve on the propane tank closed, fridge emptied. Shutters all closed and bolted.

Finally, she locked the front door behind her and stood looking one last time at the swift flowing river, heavy from spring rains. It would be so easy just to stay here forever. But she needed to get back to New York. Back to work. For her own good she wanted to be doing something more than drifting. She couldn't go on like this, half alive.

She shivered. There was a chill in the air. It was mid-April, but in these mountains spring came late. She picked up her duffel bag and threw it into the back seat of the Austin Mini Igor had given her for her twenty-third birthday. Living in the city, she rarely drove it, but they'd always used it when they came to the cabin. She headed down the long drive to the winding country road.

She'd been driving for about an hour in the increasing dusk when a car came up close behind her blinking his high beams, almost blinding her. She flipped her rearview mirror to the night position, but the bright lights continued to reflect in her side view mirror. Irritated, she peered at the road ahead. There were dense woods on one side, a sharp drop off on the other, and a long curve. No place to pull over and let him pass. She glanced at the speedometer. Sixty-five, ten miles above the speed limit on this two lane road. What was the matter with him? She could do nothing for the moment. He'd just have to be patient until she could let him pass safely.

Suddenly, the black sedan hurtled around her and

swerved to a halt in front of her, blocking the road. “God dammit!” Lacy stood on her brakes, swerved, and almost plowed into him. Fortunately, her brakes were good and her reaction time better. Even so, she was sure the Mini had left rubber on the road. She sat in her car, somewhere between furious and shaking, trying to slow her hammering heart.

Two men got out of the vehicle and walked toward her. They were ordinary looking men, dressed in dark raincoats, like those two at the funeral. They didn’t look particularly threatening. So why was she suddenly so frightened?

One pulled out a wallet and flipped it open to some kind of badge. Police? Lacy thought. What did they want of her?

“Open the door and step out of the car, miss.” Trying to control her rapid breathing, her hands clenched, Lacy did as she was told.

“Where is it? Just tell us where it is, and you won’t get hurt.” The taller man loomed over her, his face an expressionless mask.

“Where is what? What are you talking about? Who are you?” Lacy stood rigid, her mind whirling. She was frightened, but she mustn’t let it show because she sensed these men wanted to frighten her. No. She wouldn’t give them that satisfaction. In a deliberately brisk tone of voice that she hoped conveyed merely annoyance, she said, “May I see your badges again?”

The second man stared hard at her though dead looking, flat grey eyes. “Mrs. Telchev”—his voice was low and menacing—“we mean you no harm. But you must tell us where your husband hid his manuscript.”

They knew her name? Icy tentacles of fear slipped

down Lacy's back. She shook her head. "What manuscript? I have no idea what you're talking about." At that moment, a state police vehicle rounded the curve coming toward them. Seeing the blocked road, it pulled over, its red-and-white lights flashing. Two uniformed officers got out and approached the parked cars.

"You're blocking the road. What's the trouble here?"

The taller man spoke. "No trouble, officer. Sorry about the way we're parked. I'll move the car immediately. The lady was pulled over here, and we just stopped to see if she needed help."

He flipped open his wallet and showed the officers the same ID he'd shown Lacy.

Lacy watched as the policeman took the proffered wallet and studied it quietly. Then he passed it on to his partner, who nodded and handed it back to its owner. It appeared to mean something to the policemen.

Lacy opened her mouth to speak and then thought better of it. What could she tell the police? That these men had recklessly forced her off the road because they wanted a manuscript? That she didn't know where the manuscript was? Or what it was about? Only that it was her dead husband's work? No. She wouldn't say anything. Not until she knew more.

The younger policeman held out his hand. "We'll need to see your license and registration, ma'am."

"Of course."

As Lacy was fishing in her purse and her glove compartment, she heard the taller man speak to the officers. "We'll be on our way, since we're not needed here."

Lacy glanced up to see the older officer look sharply at them, but then he merely nodded. With that, the men who'd stopped her walked back to their car. They drove off at a sedate speed in the direction from which Lacy had come.

The police were letting them go? Lacy was somewhere between relieved and incensed. How could they just let them just walk away? They'd accosted her. They'd threatened her... But she couldn't tell the police about that without explaining about Igor's new manuscript. And how could she explain about the manuscript when Igor had told her nothing about it? She knew he'd been working on a new book, but he'd gone to great lengths to keep its subject secret, even from her.

"You all right, ma'am?" the older officer asked. "You look pale."

"Yes. Yes, I'm fine. "

Back in the patrol car the first officer checked out her papers before returning them to her. "Everything seems to be in order here. You sure you're okay to drive, Mrs. Telchev?"

"I'm quite sure, thank you."

The officers appeared puzzled by the situation, but it seemed no laws had been broken.

Under the scrutiny of the two officers, she got back into her car and continued on her way.

By the time she pulled into the town of Great Barrington, she was shaking. The encounter on the road had upset her more than she'd realized.

She remembered staying in this town several times with Igor. What was the name of the place? The Wainwright Inn. Perhaps they'd have a room for her for

the night. She could continue on to New York in the morning.

The innkeeper greeted her graciously. "Of course, Mrs. Telchev. I remember your husband well. I've read all his books. I'm so sorry to hear of his passing."

Lacy found herself ensconced in a cozy warm room under the eaves. Everything about the room spoke comfort and security. She fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

The next morning, the frightening events of the evening before seemed unreal, as if they'd happened in a dream, less ominous by the light of day. Surely there must have been some mistake. Ordinary people like her weren't involved in this kind of melodrama. It was like a scene out of a movie or late night TV.

But who were those two men who stopped her? They appeared to have some kind of official standing, if the reaction of the highway police was anything to go by. And what did they want? A manuscript of Igor's? He had been working on a new book when he died. That was nothing unusual. Igor was always working on a new book. But in the months before his death he'd been writing day and night, compulsively on this one. What could he have been writing about to stir up such a hornet's nest?

After a light breakfast at the inn, Lacy continued on her way back to New York, and at noon she pulled up at the entrance to her Park Avenue address.

The doorman opened the car door, took her bag, and saw her to the elevator. "I'll see to the car," he said. "We were all so sorry about Mr. Telchev. He was a real gentleman."

“Yes, he was. Thank you, John.”

She pushed the button for the eleventh floor. There was only one other apartment on that floor, and the elevator opened to a small foyer between the two. As Lacy stepped out of the lift, she glanced at her neighbor’s door. They were away in Florida for the winter.

She fished her keys out of her purse and opened the door to a pitiful sound, halfway between a meow and a howl. She nearly tripped over the large Burmese cat weaving between her legs. Taking off her raincoat and throwing it on the antique bench in the hallway, Lacy reached down and picked up her cat, Igor’s cat. “I know, Sica. I miss him, too.” She rubbed her face in the cat’s soft fur.

The sable-colored feline nestled into her shoulder with a deep rumbling purr.

Cuddling the cat, Lacy went through to the kitchen and poured her a bowl of kibble. Then she prepared herself a cup of the strong Russian tea she’d learned to like since marrying Igor and took it into the living room.

Placing her tea cup on a side table, she looked up at the oil painting over the fireplace. The picture portrayed an old-fashioned china pitcher haphazardly filled with irises. More irises were on the table in front of the pitcher, as if waiting to be arranged. It was a soft painting, vaguely impressionist in style. Igor had loved it.

She picked up the CD remote and pressed play. The room filled with a soaring soprano voice singing Mozart’s heart-breaking “Dove Sono.”

No. She couldn’t listen to that lament, today of all

days. She clicked it off mid-phrase.

It was this place. Everywhere she looked she saw Igor. Idly she picked up a triptych that sat on a side table, a lovely miniature three-panel painting depicting the birth of the Christ Child. She ran her finger lightly over the gilt frame, feeling the texture. Something from Igor's Russian past. A past about which she knew so little. Where had this little piece of medieval art come from? It clearly had personal meaning for him, but why?

How could she know so little about the man she'd loved? The man she'd married? She wandered over to the large window and gazed down at Central Park. Igor told her he'd chosen the apartment for this view.

It had been his when she first met him. How impressed she'd been at the address and at the view. Impressed with the apartment and with the man.

At the time, she'd been living with her closest friend, Jane Kline, in a tiny walk-up in Brooklyn. She smiled in remembrance.

Igor had been so different from the other men, boys really, she'd dated. He was so sure of himself. So at home in his mind and comfortable in his body. He was fifty to her twenty-two. And she'd never met anyone like him in her life.

Coming back to the present, she glanced at her watch. She had an appointment to keep. She looked down at her plaid shirt and faded jeans. They certainly wouldn't do for a meeting with Richard.

An hour later when she left the apartment she was wearing a simple black sheath and the pearls Igor had given her for their first anniversary.

“So in summary, you own the apartment on Park Avenue and the cabin in the Berkshires, and Igor left you an income sufficient to live as you always have since your marriage.”

Igor’s attorney looked down at the sheaf of papers in front of him. “You’re not exactly wealthy, Lacy, but you need never work again if you don’t wish to.”

“I think I’ll be going back to my job at the U.N., if they’ll have me, Richard. I can’t imagine what I’d do with my life if I didn’t work. It seems so empty.”

“Take some time to think about it.” Richard looked at her appraisingly. “How was your stay at the cabin? I know you’ve always said you love it there. Although I can’t imagine why. All those mountains and trees and wildlife. Not my kind of thing. I prefer my wildlife of the urban kind.”

Then he became serious once more. “I need to inform you of one other provision in the will. Igor left a sizable bequest to an Irenke Telchev in Budapest, Hungary. Do you know who she is?”

“I have no idea. But if her name is Telchev, she must be a relative. Igor never mentioned anyone named Irenke. He never mentioned any living relatives. I wonder...Did he not explain anything to you?”

“Igor explain?” Richard gave a short laugh. “Never. It wasn’t his style to explain anything.”

“I’d like to write to her, whoever she is. Clearly she mattered to Igor if he left her a bequest. Can’t you get me her address?”

“I can try. But all I have at the moment is her name and a bank account number.”

“Please get me whatever information you can.” Lacy looked down at her hands tightly clenched in

her lap and plunged into speech. “Richard, something funny happened on the way back from the cabin.”

“Funny?”

“Odd. Two men stopped me on the road. They passed me and blocked my car and...”

Richard exploded. “Blocked your car!”

“I’d just closed up the cabin and started driving. I intended to come straight through to New York, but after I got stopped on the road...” Lacy thought back to that night. “They weren’t wearing uniforms, but they seemed to be police of some kind. They showed me a badge, but I didn’t see it clearly.”

“The Feds?” Richard’s voice registered shock.

“They said something about wanting a manuscript of Igor’s. Their attitude was quite threatening. But then the highway police came.”

“The highway police?” Richard shook his head, eyebrows raised, incredulous. “Didn’t they question the men who’d stopped you?”

“No. That’s what’s so odd. The two men just showed them their badges and left.”

Richard was silent for a moment. Then, “Did the police look at your registration and license?”

“Yes.”

“And what time would that have been?”

“Around seven o’clock, I think.”

“I’ll try to follow up with the Massachusetts State Police. They should have a record of the incident. Perhaps they can tell me something more.”

Lacy frowned, remembering. “They just sent me on my way. But by that time I was too upset to drive any farther, so I stopped for the night in Great Barrington.”

“I should think so. Why didn’t you call me, Lacy?”

I'm your attorney and your friend. You should have called me last night when this happened."

"I didn't think...I was upset."

"I'm sure you were. But if anything like this should occur again, call me immediately." Richard hesitated. "About Igor's new manuscript..."

"I don't know where it is or what it is. I haven't yet tried to get into his computer."

Richard was silent for a moment, his brow furrowed. "You should try. I suppose we'll come across it at some point. He must at least have kept a back-up someplace."

"Perhaps," Lacy agreed as she stood to leave.

Richard rose to see her out. "Don't forget, we're having dinner next Tuesday. I'll pick you up at seven."

"Of course." Lacy had indeed forgotten.

As she left Richard's office her thoughts returned to Irenke Telchev. Who was she? Why had Igor never mentioned her?

The next morning, Lacy dragged herself out of bed. Eight a.m. Again she'd had less than four hours sleep. She couldn't go on this way. She wasn't sleeping; she didn't feel like eating.

The cat brushed between her legs, bringing her mind back to the present. "I get the message, Sica. Your breakfast is coming up."

As she opened the can and dished out the cat food, she thought about what Richard had said. She should try to find Igor's new manuscript.

What had he been working on? Lacy went through to his office and opened his computer.

Several frustrating hours later she'd been able to

get in sufficiently to open his email and bank accounts. Nothing new there. She'd always had access to those on her own laptop. But there was one file, enigmatically entitled simply "M," she'd been unable to open. She'd tried every password she could think of. Nothing worked. Maybe she should ask Richard to try. He'd known Igor longer than she had. He might have some insight into Igor's mind, into likely passwords, that she didn't. Somehow she was sure the file contained the manuscript that had so obsessed Igor during the two years preceding his death. If she only knew what he'd been working on, she might be able to come to terms with the loss of her husband. And with the threatening men who seemed to want whatever it was he was writing.

She sat at the keyboard trying combination after combination of letters and numbers that might have had some meaning to Igor. Nothing worked. Finally, Lacy pushed the desk chair back and put her head in her hands. There was so much she didn't know about her husband. How could she ever hope to get into this file he'd wanted to keep secret?

She stood and stretched and took a sip of the tea she'd prepared earlier. It was cold and bitter. She looked at her watch. Five in the afternoon? Had she really been at this all day? And with so little to show for it?

Taking her tea to the kitchen, she threw it down the sink and put fresh water in the kettle. She should call and thank Jane for feeding Sica and looking after her plants while she was in the Berkshires.

As if in answer to her thoughts, the phone rang.

It was Jane. "Richard told me you were back, and

I'll bet you don't have anything in the house to eat. I've got some carry-out Thai food."

"Where are you?"

"In your lobby."

In spite of herself, Lacy laughed. "By all means, come on up."

Jane was there moments later, her arms full of boxes. "I hope you're hungry. I couldn't decide what to get so I got it all. Chicken in coconut curry sauce, noodle soup, satay, lots of condiments," Jane said, unloading boxes.

"You knew I could never resist satay." Lacy busied herself pulling dishes down from the cupboard and getting silverware out of the drawer. She set the small table in the living room while Jane spooned the food onto the plates.

When they were seated, Lacy sat staring at her plate, toying with her food.

"During the funeral I kept thinking about your wedding," Jane said. "It was so sudden. One minute you're telling me about this handsome Russian you met at a lecture and the next, I'm attending your wedding at the courthouse." She took a sip of her tea. "Richard was supposed to be best man, and he was late. He rushed in just after me. That was the first time I'd met him, and I was stunned speechless. He's so incredibly good-looking."

Lacy smiled. "Richard is very attractive, isn't he? I've often wondered how he manages to remain single."

"I thought for a while we might..." Jane sighed. "I mean, in those first couple of years when we were so often together as a foursome I thought something might come of it. But of course it never did. Just as well. Richard's a bit of a cold fish."

“Do you think so? I think it’s just that he’s a bit shy and so correct and proper; sometimes it’s hard to see the man under the façade. He was Igor’s friend and attorney for years before we met. He negotiated all of Igor’s contracts. Igor said he couldn’t have managed the business side of his writing without Richard. And he’s been very helpful to me since Igor...” Lacy stumbled over his name and looked down at her untouched food.

Jane put her fork down and took Lacy’s hand. “Talk to me, Lacy. I know you’re hurting. I know how much you loved him, but there’s something more to it. I know there is. Tell me. Maybe I can help.”

The tears came. The tears she hadn’t shed at his funeral. The tears she’d been unable to stop shedding during the last two cold years of her marriage to Igor.

“We were so happy at first. You know I was wildly in love with him. We talked and laughed”—Lacy smiled through her tears—“and spent inordinate amounts of time in bed.”

“I know,” Jane said. “Anyone could see how happy you were.”

“Of course, Igor often traveled for weeks at a time, meetings with his publisher in London, research for his next book. We agreed I should keep my job at the U.N. even though we didn’t need the money.”

“I remember,” Jane said, gently prodding. “But...?”

“It’s just that I know so little about him, about the years before we met. Of course I was curious about his past. What woman wouldn’t be? And he occasionally disclosed odd bits about his early years, but I always

sensed I was getting a very much abridged version. He told me he was born in Russia and still had numerous connections there and in the rest of Europe. And that he'd made his home in the United States for some thirty years."

Lacy looked up at Jane. "He wasn't exactly evasive, but I never really learned anything about his past. When I asked him about it, Igor had a way of diverting attention very quickly with a caress or a kiss. Our more personal conversations always seemed to end up in bed. I think, looking back, it was Igor's way of avoiding unwanted discussions."

Jane laughed. "Not an unpleasant way."

"No," Lacy agreed. "But I keep asking myself if there were problems in his life even then? Did I, in my newfound happiness, simply ignore the warning signs?" Lacy stumbled over the last words as tears streaked her cheeks.

Jane came around to Lacy's chair and led her to the sofa. She put her arms around her friend and waited until the sobbing stopped. Then she went to the sideboard and poured a cognac and brought it to Lacy.

Lacy gave her a watery smile. "Thanks. I feel better now. I haven't ever talked to anyone about this."

"Perhaps it's time you did," Jane murmured. "It isn't good to keep things bottled up."

They were silent for a moment as Lacy sipped her drink. When she started talking, her voice was flat, devoid of emotion.

"My marriage to Igor didn't end when I buried him. It ended after his first heart attack two years ago." Lacy took a shuddering breath. "You remember I quit my U.N. job? I wanted to be there for him during his convalescence

But when he came home from the hospital, he moved into the guest bedroom. The doctor told me it was safe for us to resume sex, but sex was the farthest thing from Igor's mind. He was so withdrawn. He never laughed anymore. He hardly spoke to me. If I put my arms around him, tried to kiss him, show any sign of affection, he brushed me off. Finally I stopped trying. For the last year, we lived in this apartment together, strangers, hardly speaking to one another."

Jane shook her head. "I've known for a long time there was something wrong."

"He was deeply depressed. I tried to talk to his doctors about it, but they didn't want to hear from anyone except the patient himself, and Igor was very good at dissembling when he was with his doctors."

Anguish swept through Lacy. When she spoke there was a catch in her voice. "Then it got worse. He'd closet himself in his study for hours at a time, writing. I don't know what he was working on. When I asked him, he just shook his head. He was very secretive."

"Was that unusual when he was writing?"

"Very. Before that he always told me what he was working on." Lacy sighed. "When he started traveling again I had a brief hope. He made three trips to Europe about two months apart. I thought maybe his getting away, returning to places he loved, might signal a more normal life for both of us when he returned."

"Was it?" Jane asked.

"No. When he came home he once again closeted himself in his study. He was writing, I think working on a new book, day and night."

Jane looked puzzled. "But he was a writer when you married him. It's what he did. How was this

different?”

“It was very different. He wouldn’t talk about it. He seemed fearful. Toward the end he hardly ever left the apartment. I prepared food for him and took it into his study. Sometimes he ate it. Often he didn’t. I was out of my mind with worry.”

Jane frowned. “It was obvious something wasn’t right between you. But I never suspected it was so serious.”

“He made one last trip to Europe shortly before his death. After that he never left this apartment again. He became almost paranoid. He never ate any food unless he prepared it himself. He saw no one except Richard who came often. Igor seemed...I don’t know...almost fatalistic. As if he knew he was going to die. And I was no help. I just stood by helplessly while the man I loved disappeared bit by bit.”

“I’m not sure there was anything you could have done, Lacy. From what you say, Igor seems to have been unwilling to accept help.”

“But I should have seen the signs. I should have realized he was suicidal.”

“Suicidal! There was never any mention of suicide.” Jane’s voice shook with shock.

“No. There wouldn’t be. He was too bright for that. A second heart attack, perhaps brought on by an accidental overdose...That’s what they said.”

Lacy started weeping again, silently. “I feel responsible. I loved him, and I stood by and let him die. I keep feeling I could have done something more.”

Jane took Lacy in her arms and comforted her. Lacy crumpled against her, relieved to have at last shared the burden she had carried for the last two years.

