

The Hunter

TOM WOOD

sphere

CHAPTER 1

Paris, France
Monday
06:19 CET

The target looked older than in the photographs. The glow from the streetlight accentuated the deep lines in his face and pallid, almost sickly complexion. To Victor the man seemed on edge, either high on nervous energy or maybe just too much caffeine. But whatever the explanation, it wasn't going to matter thirty seconds from now.

The name on the dossier was Andris Ozols. Latvian national. Fifty-eight years old. Five-feet-nine-inches tall. One hundred and sixty pounds. He was right handed. No noticeable scars. His greying hair was cut short and neat, as was his moustache. Ozols's eyes were blue. He wore glasses for short-sightedness. He was smartly dressed, a dark suit beneath his overcoat, polished shoes. With both hands he clutched a small leather attaché case to his stomach.

At the entrance to the alleyway Ozols glanced over his shoulder, an amateurish move, too obvious to trip up a shadow, too

quick to register one if he did. Ozols didn't see the man standing in the shadows just a few yards away. The man who was there to kill him.

Victor waited until Ozols had passed out of the light before squeezing the trigger with smooth, even pressure.

Suppressed gunshots interrupted the early morning stillness. Ozols was hit in the sternum, twice in rapid succession. The bullets were low powered, subsonic 5.7 mm, but larger rounds could have been no more fatal. Copper-encased lead tore through skin, bone, and heart before lodging side by side between vertebrae. Ozols collapsed backward, hitting the ground with a dull thud, arms outstretched, head rolling to one side.

Victor melted out of the darkness and took a measured step forward. He angled the FN Five-seveN and put a bullet through Ozols's temple. He was already dead, but in Victor's opinion there was no such thing as overkill.

The expended cartridge clinked on the paving stones and came to rest in a puddle shimmering with sodium-orange light. A quiet whistling from the twin holes in Ozols's chest was the only other sound. Air was escaping from the still-inflated lungs – the last breath he never had a chance to release.

The morning was cold and dark, the approaching dawn only beginning to tinge the eastern sky with colour. Victor was in the heart of Paris, a neighbourhood of narrow avenues and twisting side streets. The alleyway was secluded – no overlooking windows – but Victor spent a moment checking that nobody had observed the killing. No one could have heard it. With subsonic ammunition and a suppressor, the noise of each shot had been muffled to a quiet *clack*, but that couldn't stop the random chance of someone deciding this particular location was a good place to relieve their bladder.

Satisfied he was alone, Victor squatted down next to the body,

Careful to avoid the gore draining from the quarter-inch exit wound in his victim's temple. Using his left hand, Victor unzipped the attaché case and checked inside. The item was there as he expected but otherwise the case was empty. Victor took the flash drive and slipped it into his inside jacket pocket. Small and innocuous, it barely seemed reason enough to have a man killed, but it was. One reason was as good as another, Victor reminded himself. It was all a matter of perspective. Victor liked to believe he did nothing more than get paid to do that which the human race had been perfecting for millennia. He was simply the culmination of that evolution.

He frisked the body thoroughly to confirm there was nothing else he should know about. Just pocket litter and a wallet, which Victor opened and tilted into the light. It contained the usual: credit cards and a driver's license in the Latvian's name, cash, as well as a faded photograph of a younger Ozols with the wife and kids. A good-looking family, healthy.

Victor put the wallet back and rose to his feet, mentally re-checking how many rounds he'd fired. Two to the chest, one to the head. Seventeen left in the FN's magazine. It was simple math but protocol nonetheless. He knew the day he lost count would be the day he squeezed the trigger only to hear the dreaded dead man's click. He'd heard it before when the gun had been in another's hand, and he'd promised himself then that he would never die like that.

His gaze swept the area again for signs of exposure, but there were no people or cars in sight, no footsteps to be heard. Victor unscrewed the suppressor and placed it into a pocket of his overcoat. With the suppressor in place the gun was too long to be properly concealed and too slow to draw with speed. He turned on the spot, locating and retrieving the three empty cartridges before the spreading blood reached them. Two were still warm but the one from the puddle was cool.

The half moon was bright in the sky above. Somewhere beyond the stars the universe continued forever, but from where Victor stood the world was small and time all too short. He could feel his pulse, slow and steady, but maybe four whole beats per minute above his resting heart rate. He was surprised it was so high. He wanted a cigarette. These days he always did.

He'd been in Paris for a week awaiting the go-ahead – and he was glad the job was almost over. All that remained was to stash the item tonight and contact the broker with its location. It hadn't been a difficult or even risky contract; if anything, it had been simple, boring. A standard kill and collect, beneath his skills, but if the client was willing to pay his outrageous fee for a job any amateur could have fulfilled, it wasn't Victor's place to argue. Though something in the back of his mind warned him it had been too easy.

He left the alley, shoes virtually silent on the hard, uneven ground. Before he disappeared into the city he took one last look at the man he'd murdered without word or conscience. In the dim light he saw the wide, accusing eyes of his victim staring after him. The whites already black from the haemorrhaging.