



The Matarese Countdown

Robert Ludlum

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THE
MATARESE
COUNTDOWN

ROBERT LUDLUM



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For Karen—"Suzie"

She came with laughter when there was none.
And brought joy to life once more.

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prologue

In the forests of Chelyabinsk, roughly nine hundred air miles from Moscow, there is a hunting lodge once considered a favorite retreat by the elite rulers of the Soviet Union. It was a *dacha* for all seasons, in spring and summer a festival of gardens and wildflowers on the edge of a mountain lake, in autumn and winter a paradise for hunters. In the years since the collapse of the old Presidium, it was held inviolate by the new rulers, an apolitical resting place of Russia's most venerated scientist, a nuclear physicist named Dimitri Yurievich, a *man* for all seasons. For he had been assassinated, brutally led into a monstrous trap by killers who held no respect, only fury, for his genius, which he wanted to share with all nations. No matter where the assassins came from, and no one really knew, they were the evil ones, certainly not their target, regardless of the lethal implications of his scholarship.

The white-haired, balding old woman lay on the bed, the huge bay window in front of her revealing the early northern snow. Like her hair and her wrinkled flesh, everything beyond the glass was white, frozen new purity from the skies, bending branches with its weight, a paradise of blinding light. With effort, she reached for the brass bell on the bedside table and shook it.

In moments, a buxom woman in her thirties with brown hair and eyes that were alive and questioning rushed through the door. "Yes, Grandmother, what can I do for you?" she asked.

"You've already done more than you should, my child."

"I'm hardly a child, and there's nothing I *wouldn't* do for you, you know that. May I get you some tea?"

"No, you can get me a priest—doesn't matter which variety. We weren't permitted the for so long."

"You don't need a priest, you need some solid food, Grandmother."

"My God, you sound like your grandfather. Always arguing, forever analyzing—"

"I wasn't analyzing at all," interrupted Anastasia Yuriskaya Solatov. "You eat like a sparrow!"

"They probably eat their weight every day.... Not that it matters, but where's your husband?"

"Out hunting. He says one can track animals in the new snow."

"He'll probably shoot his foot off. Also, we don't need provisions. Moscow is generous," the old woman said.

"As they *should* be!" interjected Anastasia Solatov.

"No, my dear. Because they're frightened to be otherwise."

"What are you *saying*, Maria Yuriskaya?"

"Bring me the priest, my child. I'm eighty-five years old, and someone must be told the truth. *Now!*"

The elderly, black-robed Russian Orthodox prelate stood over the bed. He knew the signs; he

had seen them too often. The old woman was dying, her breath growing shorter, with each moment more difficult. “Your confession, dear lady?” he intoned.

“Not mine, you *ass!*” replied Maria Yuriskaya. “It was a day not unlike this—the snow on the ground, the hunters ready, their guns strapped over their shoulders. He was killed on such a day as this, his body mauled, torn apart by a crazed wounded bear driven into his path by madmen.”

“Yes, yes, we’ve all heard the story of your tragic loss, Maria.”

“They said at first it was the Americans, then that it was my husband’s critics in Moscow—even his jealous competitors, but it was *neither*.”

“It was so long ago, madame. Stay calm, the Lord is waiting for you. He will take you into his bosom and comfort you—”

“*Guvno*, you fool! The truth must be *told*. I learned later—calls from all over the world, nothing written, only words spoken through the air—that I and my children, and the children, would never live to see another daybreak should I speak of what my husband said to me.”

“What was that, Maria?”

“My breath is leaving me, Father, the window grows dark.”

“What *was* it, my child of God?”

“A force far more dangerous than what exists between all the warring factions on the earth.”

“What ‘force,’ dear woman?”

“The *Matarese* ... the consummate evil.” The old woman’s head fell back. She was dead.

The huge, glistening white yacht, its length over a hundred fifty feet from bow to stern, slowly maneuvered its way into the marina at Estepona, the northern point of Spain’s opulent Costa del Sol, a retirement haven for the wealthy of the world.

The gaunt old man in the luxurious master stateroom sat in a velvet-covered chair attended to by his personal valet of nearly three decades. The aged owner of the ship was being groomed by his servant and friend for the most important conference of his long life, a life that spanned over ninety years, the precise age kept secret, for much of that life was spent in the cutthroat arenas of men much younger. Why give those avaricious turks the advantage of his rumored senility, which in reality amounted to several generations of superior experience? Three cosmetic operations on his features might have left his face partially masklike, but that was merely superficial, a misleading image to confuse the opportunists who would usurp his financial empire, given half a chance.

An empire that meant nothing any longer. It was a paper colossus worth over seven billion American dollars, seven thousand times a million, built on the manipulations of a long forgotten entity. It began with a vision of revenge and turned ever more violently satanic, further corrupted by underlings who had no vision beyond themselves.

“How do I look, Antoine?”

“Splendid, *monsieur*,” replied the valet, applying a mild aftershave lotion and removing the lap cloth to reveal formal clothes complete with a striped cravat.

“This isn’t too much, is it?” asked the elegant employer, gesturing at his finery.

“Not at all. You are the *chairman*, sir, and they must understand that. You can brook no

opposition.”

“Oh, my old friend, there’ll be no opposition. I plan to instruct my various boards to prepare for destructurization. I intend to give generous benefits to all who have devoted their time and energy to enterprises they essentially knew nothing about.”

“There will be those who will find your instructions difficult to accept, *mon ami* René.”

“Good! You’re dropping our pretenses, you’re about to tell me something.” Both men laughed softly as the old man continued. “If the truth were told, Antoine, I should have put you on some executive committee. I can’t remember when your advice was in error.”

“I only offered it when you asked and when I thought I understood the circumstances. Never in the areas of business negotiations, of which I understand nothing.”

“Only of people, correct?”

“Let’s say I’m protective, René.... Come, let me help you up and put you in the wheelchair—”

“No, Antoine, no wheelchair! Take my arm and I’ll walk into the meeting... By the way, what did you mean when you said there’ll be those who won’t like my instructions? They’ll get their benefits. They’ll all be more than comfortable.”

“Security is not the same as active involvement, *mon ami*. The workers will be grateful indeed, but your executives may feel otherwise. You are removing them from their fiefdom of power, of influence. Beware, René, several who’ll be at this conference are among the group.”

The yacht’s large dining room was a low-ceilinged replica of a fashionable Paris restaurant, the impressionistic murals on the walls depicting scenes of the Seine, the Arc de Triomphe, the Eiffel Tower, and various other Parisian sights. The circular mahogany table held five chairs, four occupied, one vacant. Seated were four men in severe business suits, bottles of Evian water in front of each, ashtrays with boxes of Gauloises cigarettes beside them. Only two ashtrays were in use, the others firmly set aside.

The frail old man walked into the room, accompanied by his valet of twenty-eight years known by all around the table from previous meetings. Salutations were exchanged; the ancient “chairman” was lowered into a middle chair, as his servant sat behind him against the wall. The procedure was accepted, none objected, nor could they, for it was tradition.

“So here are all the attorneys. *Mon avocat* in Paris, *ein Rechtsanwalt* in Berlin, *mio avvocato* in Rome, and, of course, our corporate lawyer in Washington, D.C. It is good to see you again.” There were muted acceptances of the greeting; the old man went on. “I can see by your eager reception that you are not enthralled by our meeting. That’s a pity, for my instructions *will* be carried out, whether you like it or not.”

“If you please, Herr Mouchistine,” said the attorney from Germany, “we have all received your coded instructions, now locked away in our vaults, and, frankly, we are appalled! It is not merely your intention to sell your companies and all their assets—”

“Excluding rather extraordinary sums for your professional services, of course,” René Mouchistine abruptly, firmly, broke in.

“We’re most appreciative of your generosity, René, but that’s not our concern,” said the lawyer from Washington, D.C. “It’s what follows. Certain markets will crash, stocks will plummet ... questions will be asked! There could be investigations ... all of us compromised.”

“Nonsense. Each of you has been following the orders of the elusive René Pier-

Mouchistine, sole owner of my enterprises. To do otherwise would result in your dismissal. For once, tell the truth, gentlemen. With the truth, no one can touch you.”

“But, *monsignore*,” exclaimed the *avvocato* from Italy, “you are selling assets far below market value! For what *purpose*? You delegate millions upon millions to charities everywhere, to nobodies who cannot tell a lira from a deutsche mark! What *are* you, *socialista* who wants to reform the world while destroying the thousands who believed in you in *us*?”

“Not at all. You are all part of something that began years before you were born, the vision of the great *padrone*, the Baron of Matarese.”

“Who?” asked the French attorney.

“I vaguely remember hearing the name, *mein Herr*,” said the German. “But it has no relevance for me.”

“Why should it?” René Mouchistine glanced briefly over his shoulder at his valet, Antoine. “You are all nothing but the webs of spiders that spun out from the source, hired by the source, making its operations appear legitimate, for *you* were legitimate. You say I’m giving back millions to those who lost the games—where do you suppose my riches came from? We became greed gone berserk.”

“You cannot *do* this, Mouchistine!” shouted the American, springing to his feet. “I’ll be hauled before Congress!”

“And I! The Bundestag will insist on investigating!” yelled the *Rechtsanwalt* from Berlin.

“I will not subject myself to the Chamber of Deputies!” cried the Parisian.

“I’ll have our associates in Palermo convince you otherwise,” said the man from Rome ominously. “You’ll see the logic.”

“Why not try it now yourself? Are you afraid of an old man?”

The Italian rose in fury to his feet, his hand reaching under his tailored jacket. It was as fast as he got. *Kesitch!* A silenced, single gunshot blew his face apart, fired by Antoine, the valet. The Roman lawyer fell, soiling the parquet floor.

“You’re *insane!*” screamed the German. “He was merely showing you a newspaper article in which several of your companies are linked to the Mafia, which is *true*. You are a *monster!*”

“That’s sheer irony coming from you, considering Auschwitz and Dachau.”

“I wasn’t *born* then!”

“Read history.... What do you say, Antoine?”

“Self-defense, *monsieur*. As a senior informer to the Sûreté, I will put it in my report. He reached for a weapon.”

“*Shit!*” yelled the lawyer from Washington. “You set us up here, you son of a bitch!”

“Not really. I simply wanted to make sure you would carry out my orders.”

“We *can’t!* For God’s sake, don’t you *understand?* It would be the end of *all* of us—”

“One certainly, but we’ll get rid of the body, fish for the fish under the sea.”

“You *are* insane!”

“We became insane. We were not at the beginning.... *Stop! Antoine!... The portholes!*”

The yacht’s small circular windows were suddenly filled with faces covered with rubber masks. One by one, each smashed the glass with his weapon and began firing indiscriminately at every corner and shadow of the room. The valet, Antoine, pulled Mouchistine under the bulkhead armoire, his own shoulder blown apart, his master punctured around the chest. He

friend of thirty years would not survive.

“René, *René!*” cried Antoine. “Take deep breaths, keep *breathing!* They’ve gone! I’ll get you to the hospital!”

“No, Antoine, it is too late!” Mouchistine choked. “The lawyers are gone and I do not regret my end. I lived with evil and I die rejecting it. Perhaps it will mean something somewhere.”

“What are you talking about, *mon ami*, the dearest friend of my life?”

“Find Beowulf Agate.”

“*Who?*”

“Ask Washington. They have to know where he is! Vasili Taleniekov was killed, yes, but not Beowulf Agate. He is somewhere and he knows the truth.”

“What truth, my closest friend?”

“The *Matarese!* They’re back. They knew about this conference, the coded instructions that are meaningless without the ciphers. Whoever’s left had to stop me, so you must stop them!”

“How?”

“Fight it with all your heart and soul! Soon it will be everywhere. It was the evil that the archangel of hell prophesied, the good that became the servant of Satan.”

“You’re not making sense. I’m not a biblical scholar!”

“You don’t have to be,” whispered the dying Mouchistine. “Ideas are greater monuments than cathedrals. They last millennia beyond the stone.”

“What the hell are you saying?”

“Find Beowulf Agate. He’s the key.”

René Mouchistine spastically lurched forward, then fell back, his head resting against the bulkhead. His last words were so clear they might have been gutturally whispered through an echo chamber. “The Matarese ... the evil incarnate.” The old man with the secrets was dead.

chapter 1

Six months earlier.

In the rugged Corsican hills above the waters of Porto Vecchio on the Tyrrhenian Sea there stood the skeletal remains of a once-majestic estate. The exterior stonework, built to stand for centuries, was by and large intact, the insides of the various structures destroyed, gutted by fire decades ago. It was midafternoon, the skies dark, heavy rain imminent as a late-winter storm made its way up the coast from Bonifacio. Soon the air and the earth would be drenched, mud everywhere, the overgrown, barely visible paths around the great house to be slogged through, not walked over.

“I would suggest that we hurry, *padrone*,” said the heavysset Corsican in a hooded parka. “The roads back to the Senetosa airfield are difficult enough without the storm,” he added in accented English, the language mutually agreed upon.

“Senetosa can wait,” replied the slender man in a raincoat, his speech betraying his Netherlands origin. “*Everything* can wait until I’m finished!... Let me have the survey map for the north property, if you please.” The Corsican reached into his pocket and withdrew a many-folded sheaf of heavy paper. He gave it to the man from Amsterdam, who rapidly unfolded it, placed it against a stone wall, and anxiously studied it. He kept turning his gaze away from the map, looking over at the area that momentarily consumed his attention. The rain began, a drizzle that quickly became a steady shower.

“Over here, *padrone*,” cried the guide from Bonifacio, pointing at an archway in the stone wall. It was the entrance to a long-ago garden arbor of sorts, odd insofar as the arch itself was barely four feet wide while its thickness was nearly six feet—tunnel-like, strange. It was overgrown with vines crawling up the sides, strangling the entrance—forbidding. Still, it was a refuge from the sudden downpour.

The “*padrone*,” a man in his early forties, dashed into the small sanctuary, immediately pressing the unfolded map against the spidery foliage; he took out a red felt marker from his raincoat pocket and circled a wide area. “*This* section,” he yelled to be heard over the pounding rain hitting the stone, “it must be roped off, *sealed* off, so that no one enters it or disturbs it in any way! Is that *clear*?”

“If that is your order, it is done. But, *padrone*, you’re talking about a hundred or so acres.”

“Then that is my order. My representatives will check constantly to make sure it’s carried out.”

“That is not necessary, sir, *I* shall carry it out.”

“Good, fine, do so.”

“And the rest, *grande signore*?”

“As we discussed in Senetosa. Everything must be precisely duplicated from the original plans as recorded in Bastia two hundred years ago, updated, of course, with modern conveniences. Whatever you need will be supplied by my ships and cargo aircraft.”

Marseilles. You have the numbers and the codes for my unlisted telephones and fax machine. Accomplish what I ask of you—*demand* from you—and you can retire a wealthy man, your future secure.”

“It is a privilege to have been chosen, *padrone*.”

“And you understand the need for absolute secrecy?”

“*Naturalmente, padrone!* You are an eccentric Bavarian man of immense riches who cares to live out his life in the magnificent hills of Porto Vecchio. That is all *anyone* knows!”

“Good, fine.”

“But if I may, *grande signore*, we stopped in the village and the old woman who runs the decrepit inn saw you. In truth, she fell to her knees in the kitchen and gave thanks to the Savior that you had come back.”

“*What?*”

“If you recall, when our refreshments were so long in coming, I went into the *cucina* and found her in very loud prayers. She wept as she spoke, saying that she could tell by your face, your eyes. ‘The Barone di Matarese has returned,’ she repeated over and over again. The Corsican spoke the name as it was in Italian, *Mataresa*. ‘She thanked the Lord God that you had come back, that greatness and happiness would return to the mountains.’”

“That incident must be erased from your memory, do you understand me?”

“Of *course*, sir. I heard nothing!”

“To the reconstruction. It must be completed in six months. Spare nothing, just do it.”

“I will endeavor to do my best.”

“If your best is not good enough, you’ll have no retirement, wealthy or otherwise, *capisce?*”

“I do, *padrone*,” said the Corsican, swallowing.

“As to the old woman at the inn—”

“Yes?”

“Kill her.”

Six months and twelve hysterical days passed, and the great estate of the Matarese dynasty was restored. The results were remarkable, as only many millions of dollars could ensure. The great house with its massive banquet hall was as the original architect in the early eighteenth century envisioned it, chandeliers replacing the enormous candelabrum, and the modern amenities, such as running water, toilets, air-conditioning, and, naturally, electricity reproduced throughout.

The grounds were cleared, the sodded grass around the main house allowing for a large croquet course and a challenging putting green. The long entrance from the road to Senetor had been paved, submerged grass lamps lighting the way at night, and well-dressed attendants greeted all vehicles as they approached the marble steps of the entrance. What visitors did not know was that each attendant was a professional guard, in the main, former commandos from various countries. Each palmed an electronic scanner that would detect weapons, cameras, or recorders within three meters; in essence, they could expose such objects from a distance of two feet.

The orders were clear. Should anyone arrive with these items, he or she was to be forcibly detained and taken to an interrogation room where harsh questions would be asked. If the answers were unsatisfactory, there was equipment, both manual and electrical, designed

elicit more favorable responses. The Matarese was back, in all its questionable power and glory.

It was dusk, the hills of Porto Vecchio fired by the setting sun, when the limousines began arriving. The Armani-suited guards greeted the visitors solicitously, helping each from their vehicle courteously with hands that unobtrusively roamed over their clothing. There were seven outsized cars, seven guests; there would be no more. Six men and one woman, ranging in ages from their early thirties to their middle fifties, a mix of nationalities with one thing common—all were immensely rich. Each was ushered up the marble steps of the Villa Matarese where the individual guards led them to the banquet hall. A long table was in the center of the huge room, place cards in front of the seven chairs, four on the right, three on the left, no one closer than five feet from another guest. At the head of the table was an empty chair; a small lectern stood in front of it. Two uniformed waiters rushed about taking orders for cocktails; delicate crystal bowls of beluga caviar were at each place setting, and the muted strains of a Bach fugue subtly filled the room.

Quiet conversations began haltingly, as though none of the guests understood the reason for this gathering. Yet, again, there was a common denominator: All spoke English and French, so both languages were employed, finally narrowed down to the former, as the two male Americans were neither especially quick nor sufficiently comfortable with the latter tongue. The badinage was inconsequential, reduced to who knew whom and wasn't the weather glorious in St. Tropez, or the Bahamas, Hawaii, or Hong Kong? None dared to ask the essential question: *Why are we here?* Six men and one woman were frightened people. They had reason to be. There was more in their individual pasts than the present suggested.

Suddenly, the music stopped. The massive chandeliers were dimmed as a small spotlight emerged from the railing of the balcony, growing brighter as it shone down on the lectern at the head of the table. The slender man from Amsterdam walked out of an alcove and moved slowly into light and the lectern. His pleasant if dismissible face looked pale under the glare, but his eyes were not to be dismissed. They were alive and steady, centering briefly on each person as he nodded to each in turn.

"I thank you all for accepting my invitation," he began, his voice an odd mixture of ice and repressed heat. "I trust your traveling accommodations were in the style to which you are accustomed." There was a murmur of affirmatives, although hardly enthusiastic. "I realize," continued the man from Amsterdam, "that I interrupted your lives, both social and professional, but I had no choice."

"You have it now," interrupted the lone woman coldly. She was in her thirties and dressed in an expensive black dress with a string of pearls that bespoke at least fifty thousand dollars. American. "We're here, now tell us why."

"I apologize, madam. I am well aware you were on your way to the Rancho Mirage in Palm Springs for an assignation with your current husband's partner in his extortionist brokerage firm. I'm sure your absence will be overlooked, as there would be no firm had you not financed it."

"I beg your pardon!"

"Please, madam, I'm uncomfortable with beggars."

"Speaking for myself," said a middle-aged, balding Portuguese, "I'm here because you implied that I could be in serious difficulty if I did not appear. Your coded allusion was not

lost on me.”

“My cable merely mentioned the name ‘Azores.’ Apparently it was enough. The consortium you head is fraught with corruption, the bribes to Lisbon are blatantly criminal. Should you control the Azores, you control not only the incessantly excessive airline fees but the excise taxes of over a million tourists a year. Well thought out, I’d say.”

There was an eruption of voices on both sides of the table, some hinting at various questionable activities that might have been the bases of the seven coming to the hidden estate in Porto Vecchio.

“*Enough*,” said the man from Amsterdam, raising his voice. “You mistake why you are here. I know more about each one of you than you know about yourselves. It is my legacy, my inheritance—and you are *all* inheritors. We are the descendants of the *Matarese*, the font from whom all your wealth derives.”

The seven visitors were stunned, a number glancing at each other as if an unspeakable thing bonded them to one another.

“That’s not a name we use or refer to, I shouldn’t think,” said an Englishman in the sartorial splendor of Savile Row. “Neither my wife nor my children have ever heard it,” he added softly.

“Why bring it up?” asked a Frenchman. “The Matarese is long gone—dead and forgotten, a distant memory to be buried.”

“Are you dead?” said the Hollander. “Are *you* buried? I think not. Your riches have enabled you to reach the pinnacle of financial influence. All of you lead, by name or in absentia, major corporations and conglomerates, the very essence of the Matarese philosophy. And each of you was chosen by me to fulfill the Matarese destiny.”

“What goddamned destiny?” asked one of the Americans, his accent from the Deep South. “You some kinda Huey Long?”

“Hardly, but your casino interests along the Mississippi River might suggest that you are.”

“My operations are as clean as they have to be, buddy-boy!”

“I relish your modifier—”

“*What* destiny?” broke in another American. “The name Matarese never appeared in any legal documentation relative to the real-estate interests bequeathed to my family.”

“I’d be appalled if it had, sir. You’re the leading attorney at a major bank in Boston, Massachusetts. Harvard Law School, *magna cum laude* ... and part of the most bribery-prone institution that ever sucked money by way of compromising state and federal officials, both elected *and* appointed. I commend your talents.”

“You can’t *prove* any such thing.”

“Don’t tempt me, Counselor—you’d lose. However, I did not bring all of you to Porto Vecchio merely to parade the thoroughness of my inquiries, although I concede they’re a part of the whole. The carrot and the stick, as it were.... First let me introduce myself. I am Jan van der Meer Matareisen, and I’m sure the last name has meaning for you. I am a direct descendant of the Baron of Matarese; he was, in fact, my grandfather. As you may or may not know, the Baron’s liaisons were held secret, and whatever offspring resulted were also kept secret. However, the great man in no way abandoned his responsibilities. His issue was sent to the finest families throughout Italy, France, England, Portugal, America, and, as I can attest, the Netherlands.”

The visitors were again dumbstruck. Slowly, gradually, their eyes strayed around the table. All stared at one another briefly, penetratingly, as if some extraordinary secret was about to be revealed.

“What the hell are you gettin’ at?” said the large, coarse American from Louisiana. “Spell out, boy!”

“I agree,” added the man from London, “what’s your point, old man?”

“I believe several of you are already ahead of me,” said Jan van der Meer Matarese, permitting himself the trace of a smile.

“Then say it, Dutchman!” demanded the entrepreneur from Lisbon.

“Very well, I shall. Like myself, you are all children of those children. We are the product of the same loins, as the English bard might have phrased it. Each and every one of you is blood descendant of the Baron of Matarese.”

The audience exploded as one with phrases such as “We’ve heard of the Matarese, but nothing like *this!*” and “That’s *preposterous!* My family was wealthy in its own right!” and “*Look at me!* I’m a natural blond, not a trace of the Mediterranean in me!” The protestation grew in volume until the protestors ran out of breath, finally subsiding as Jan Matarese raised his hands under the shaft of light.

“I can answer your assaults specifically,” he said calmly, “if you will but listen... The Baron’s appetites were fierce and varied, as he was. Your grandmothers were brought to him as if they were the whims of an Arabian sheikh; none, however, was defiled, for all accepted him for the extraordinary man he was. But I, and only I, was the legitimate child in the eyes of the Church. He married my grandmother.”

“What the hell are *we?*” yelled the American from New Orleans. “*Bastards* goin’ back two generations?”

“Have you ever lacked for funds, sir? For education or investment.”

“No ... can’t say that I have.”

“And your grandmother was, and is still, an extremely beautiful woman, a model whose face and figure graced such publications as *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, is that not so?”

“I reckon, although she doesn’t talk about it much.”

“She didn’t have to. She quickly married an insurance executive whose company expanded to the point where he was made president.”

“You’re not only suggesting, but you’re also actually stating, that we’re all *related!*” cried the attorney from Boston. “What proof do you have?”

“Buried six feet in the earth on the northeast acreage of this property was a small vault, a oilcloth packet inside. It took me five months to find it. In the oilcloth were the names of the Baron’s children and their new homelands. He was, if nothing else, precise in all things. Yes, my Bostonian guest, we are all related. We are cousins, whether we like it or not. Collectively, we are the inheritors of the Matarese.”

“*Incredible!*” said the Englishman, his breath suspended.

“My *Gawd!*” said the American from the Deep South.

“It’s *ridiculous!*” shouted the blond woman from Los Angeles.

“Actually, it’s rather comical,” said a man from Rome in the clerical garb of the Vatican cardinal.

“Yes,” agreed Matarese, “I thought you might appreciate the sublime humor. You are

rogue priest, in favor with His Holiness but loathed by the Collegium.”

“We must move the Church into the twenty-first century. I make no apologies.”

“But you make a great deal of money from banks controlled by the Holy See, is that not so?”

“I recommend, I do not profit personally.”

“According to my sources, that’s debatable. I refer, of course, to a mansion on the banks of Lake Como.”

“It is my *nephew’s*.”

“From his second marriage, the first having been illegally annulled by you, but let us move on. I really don’t care to embarrass anyone. After all, we *are* family.... You are all here because you are vulnerable, as I am most certainly vulnerable. If I can uncover your various enterprises, so can others. It’s merely a question of provocation, time, and curiosity, isn’t it?”

“You talk too damned much without sayin’ a damn thing,” said the agitated American from the South. “What’s your agenda, buddy-boy?”

“‘Agenda,’ I like that. It tallies with your background, a Ph.D. in business management, I’m not mistaken.”

“You’re not. You can call me a redneck and you wouldn’t be far wrong, but I’m not a stupid one. Go on.”

“Very well. The agenda—*our* agenda—is to bring to fruition the cause of the Matarese, the vision of our grandfather, Guillaume de Matarese.”

All eyes were riveted on the Dutchman. It was apparent that despite reservations, the seven inheritors were intrigued—cautiously. “Since you’re far more familiar with this ‘vision’ than we are, might you be clearer?” asked the subdued, fashionably dressed woman.

“As you’re all aware, international finance is now globally integrated. What happens to the American dollar affects the German deutsche mark, the English pound, the Japanese yen, and all the world’s currencies, as well as each in turn affecting the others.”

“We are well aware,” said the Portuguese. “I suspect that many of us profit considerably from the fluctuating exchange rates.”

“You’ve suffered losses, too, haven’t you?”

“Minor compared to our winnings, as my ‘cousin,’ the American, might say of his casino profits, as opposed to his players’ losses.”

“You’ve got *that* right, Cousin—”

“I believe we stray,” interrupted the Englishman. “The agenda, if you please?”

“To control the global markets, to infuse discipline on international finance—that was the cause of the visionary known as the Baron of Matarese. Put money in the hands of those who know how to use it, not governments, who know only how to waste it, pitting one nation against another. The world is already at war, a continuing economic war, yet who are the victors? Remember, whoever controls a nation’s economy controls its government.”

“And you’re saying?...” The Portuguese sat forward.

“Yes, I am,” the Hollander broke in. “We can do it. Our collective assets are over a trillion dollars, sufficiently excessive seed money and spread out geographically to influence the power centers we represent. Influence that will spread across the world as rapidly as the hourly transfers of millions from one financial market to another. Acting in concert, we have the power to create economic chaos, all to our individual and collective benefit.”

“That’s wild,” cried the entrepreneur from New Orleans. “We can’t lose ’cause we hold the cards!”

“Except a few,” said the Matarese grandson. “As I mentioned before, you were all chosen because I found vulnerabilities that served my purposes, the carrots and sticks, I believe said. There were others I approached, perhaps giving away more than I should have. They were violently opposed to my supplications, stating that they would instantly expose any moves the inheritors of the Matarese might make.... They are three, two men and one woman, for the Baron had ten grandchildren outside of the Church. So we go from the abstract, the global, to the personal. To those three extremely influential individuals who would destroy us. Therefore, we must destroy them first. Here, you can all be of service. Gentlemen and dear lady, they must be eliminated before we make our moves. But killed ingeniously, leaving no traces whatsoever to any of you. There was another, not of our bloodline, an old man but so powerful he could have crippled us the instant we started to rise. He is no longer an obstacle, the others are. They are the only ones left who stand in our way. Shall we get down to basics? Or are there any who care to leave now?”

“Why do I have the feeling that if we did, we’d never reach the road to Senetosa?” mused the woman.

“You ascribe to me more than I ascribe to myself, madam.”

“Go ahead, Jan van der Meer Matareisen, visions are my business,” said the cardinal.

“Then envision this, Priest,” said Matareisen. “We have a schedule, a countdown, if you like. Only a few months away, the beginning of the New Year. That is our target for global control, Matarese control.”

chapter 2

The Hamptons, New York. August 28.

The East End of Long Island is less than an hour from Manhattan, depending upon the type of private aircraft involved. The “Hamps” will forever remain the imaginary province of the novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald, at least certain sections where private aircraft *are* involved. It is rich and pampered, replete with grand mansions, manicured lawns, glittering blue pools, tennis courts, and serrated ranks of English gardens in stunning bloom under the summer sun. The exclusivity of decades past has been swept away by the wealth of the meritocracy. Jews, Italians, idolized blacks and Hispanics—all previously excluded—are now the grandes of the East End, peacefully, even enthusiastically, coexisting with the still shocked WASP inheritors of ancestral prosperity.

Money is a unique equalizer. The various clubs’ dues are reduced by the influx of the pretenders, and their generous contributions to the improvements of the numerous premises gratefully, enthusiastically accepted.

Jay Gatsby forever lives, with or without Daisy—and Nick, the conscience of an era.

• • •

The polo match at the Green Meadow Hunt Club was in full fury, ponies and riders drenched in sweat as hooves pounded and mallets swung viciously at the elusive white ball that kept veering dangerously out of reach beneath the stampeding horses and across the flying turf. Suddenly, there was an agonized scream from one of the riders. He had lost his helmet in the heat of the chase. His head was a mass of blood; the skull itself appeared to be cracked open.

Everything came to a halt as the combatants sprang off their mounts and raced to the fallen rider. Among them was a doctor, an Argentinean surgeon who parted the bodies in front of him and knelt beside the unconscious figure. He looked up at the expectant faces. “He’s dead,” the doctor said.

“How could it have *happened?*” cried the captain of the Red Team, the dead man’s team. “A wooden mallet might have knocked him out—we’ve all experienced that—but not crush his skull, for God’s sake!”

“What struck him wasn’t wood,” said the Argentinean. “I’d say it was far heavier—iron or lead, perhaps.” They were in an alcove of the enormous stables, two uniformed patrolmen and the local Emergency Medical Services unit having been summoned. “There should be an autopsy, specifically concentrating on the cranial impact,” continued the doctor. “Put that in your report, please.”

“Yes, sir,” answered one of the patrolmen.

“What are you suggesting, Luis?” asked another rider.

“It’s pretty clear,” answered a patrolman, writing in his notebook. “He’s suggesting that this may not be an accident, am I correct, sir?”

“That’s not for me to say, Officer. I’m a doctor, not a policeman. I’m only offering an observation.”

“What’s the deceased’s name, and does he have a wife or relatives in the area?” interrupted the second patrolman, glancing at his companion and nodding at the notebook.

“Giancarlo Tremonte,” replied a blond rider, his speech born of the old crowd.

“I’ve heard that name,” said the first policeman.

“Quite possibly,” continued the light-haired player. “The Tremonte family of Lake Como and Milan are very well known. They have considerable interests in Italy and France, as well as over here, of course.”

“No, I mean the Giancarlo part,” broke in the patrolman with the notebook.

“He’s frequently in the newspapers,” said the captain of the Red Team. “Not always in the more respectable ones, although his own reputation is splendid—was splendid.”

“Then why was he in the papers so frequently?” asked the second policeman.

“I suppose because he was terribly wealthy, attended many social and charity events, and liked women.” The leader of the Red Team looked pointedly at the patrolman. “That’s gripe for third-rate journalists, Officer, but hardly a sin. After all, he didn’t choose his parentage.”

“I guess not, but I think you’ve answered one of my questions. There’s no wife around, and if there were any girlfriends, they got the hell out of here. To avoid those third-rate journalists, of course.”

“You have no argument with me.”

“I’m not looking for one, Mr.... Mr.?...”

“Albion, Geoffrey Albion. My summer house is in Gull Bay, on the beach. And to the best of my knowledge, Giancarlo has no relatives in the area. It’s my understanding that he was here in the States to oversee the Tremonte family’s American interests. When he leased the Wellstone estate, we were, of course, delighted to accept him into Green Meadow. He is—was—a very talented polo player.... May we please remove his remains?”

“We’ll cover him, sir, but he has to stay here until our superiors and the medical examiners arrive. The less he’s moved, the better.”

“Are you implying that we should have left him out in the field in front of the crowds?” said Albion curtly. “If so, you *will* have an argument with me. It’s tasteless enough that you roped off the area where he fell.”

“We’re just doing our job, sir.” The first police officer replaced the notebook in his pocket. “Insurance companies are very demanding in these cases, especially cases where injury or death is the result. They want to examine everything.”

“Speaking of which,” added the second patrolman, “we’ll need the mallets of both teams, and everyone who was in the match.”

“They’re all on the wall over there,” said the blond player with the precise if slightly nasal speech. The wall referred to held dozens of two-pronged colored racks from which the polo mallets hung like wooden utensils. “Today’s players are in the red section, the farthest on the left,” he continued. “The grooms hose them down but they’re all there.”

“Hose them down?...” The first policeman took out his notebook.

"Dirt and mud, old boy. It can get messy out there. See, some are still dripping."

"Yes, I can see that," said the second patrolman quietly. "Just water from hoses? No dipping in cleaning solutions or anything like that?"

"No, but it sounds like a fine idea," said yet another rider, shaking, then nodding, his head.

"Just a minute," interrupted the patrolman, walking to the wall and studying the mallet.

"How many are supposed to be here in the red section?"

"It varies," replied Albion condescendingly. "There are eight players, four to a team, along with replacements and reserve mallets. There's a movable yellow peg that separates the current match from the members not playing that day. The grooms take care of it all."

"Is this the yellow peg?" asked the patrolman, pointing to a bright, circular, snub-nosed piece of wood.

"It's not purple, is it?"

"No, it's not, Mr. Albion. And it hasn't been moved since the match began this afternoon?"

"Why should it be?"

"Maybe you should ask, why wasn't it? There are two mallets missing."

The celebrity tennis tournament in Monte Carlo drew dozens of recognizable performers from films and television. Most were American and British who played with and against the socialites of Europe—minor royalty and wealthy Greeks, Germans, a few fading French writers, and several Spaniards who claimed long-forgotten titles but insisted that the word *Don* preceded their names. Nobody took much seriously, for the nightly festivities were extravagant, the participants gloried in their brief spotlights—televised, of course—and since everything was sponsored by Monaco's ruling house, a great deal of fun—and publicity—was had by all while charity thrived.

An enormous buffet was held under the stars in the huge courtyard of the palace overlooking the harbor. A talented orchestra held sway, playing in a variety of musical styles from opera to nostalgic pop, as internationally known singers took turns entertaining the crowd, each receiving an ovation as the elegant audience rose from their elegantly dressed tables under the spill of roving spotlights.

"Manny, I want my gig on *Sixty Minutes*, you got that?"

"Got it, babe, it's a natural!"

"Cyril, why am I here? I don't play *tennis!*"

"Because there are studio heads here! Go up and recite something in your dulcet tones, and keep turning right and left. Your *profeel*, chap!"

"That fucking bitch stole my *song!*"

"You didn't copyright it, darling. Do 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' or something!"

"I don't know all the words!"

"Then hum and push your tits into their faces. The *record* boys are here!" And so it went, and altruism will out.

Among the congregation of great, near-great, non-great, and never-great was a quiet man, a modest man of wealth with little or no pretense. He was a research fellow, a scholar committed to the study of cancers, and was in Monte Carlo as one of the contributing sponsors. He had requested anonymity, but his largess prohibited it in the eyes of the Grand Committee. He had agreed, in the name of his Spanish family, to give a very short speech

welcoming the guests.

He stood behind a courtyard screen, prepared to walk out to the podium when his name was called. "I'm quite nervous," he said to a stagehand who stood beside him, ready to tap him on the shoulder when it was his time. "I'm not very good at speaking in public."

"Make it short and thank them, that's all you have to do.... Here, have a glass of water, it'll clear your throat."

"*Gracias*," said the genuinely titled Juan Garcia Guaiardo. He drank, and on his way to the podium he collapsed. By the time he was dead, the stagehand had disappeared.

Alicia Brewster, Dame of the Realm by decree of the Queen, emerged from her Bentley in front of the family residence in London's Belgravia. She was a medium-sized, compact woman, but her stride and the energy it implied made her appear much larger, a force to be reckoned with. She let herself into the colonnaded entrance of the Edwardian house, only to be greeted by her two children, who had been summoned from their respective boarding schools and were waiting for her in the large, polished hall. They were a tall, clean-cut, muscular young man and a shorter, equally attractive girl, he in his late teens, she a little younger, both anxious, concerned, even frightened.

"I'm sorry to have called you home," said the mother after briefly embracing each child. "I simply thought it was better this way."

"It's that serious, then?" asked the older brother.

"That serious, Roger."

"I'd say it's long overdue," said the girl. "I never liked him, you know."

"Oh, I did, very much, Angela." Alicia Brewster smiled sadly while nodding her head. "Also, I felt you needed a man around the house—"

"He was hardly tops in that department, Mother," interrupted the boy.

"Well, he had a tough act to follow, as they say. Your father was rather overwhelming, wasn't he? Successful, famous, certainly dynamic."

"You had a lot to do with it, Mum," said the daughter.

"Far less than you think, my dear. Daniel was his own man. I depended a great deal more on him than he depended on me. The saddest part of his passing, I always think, is that it was so prosaic, so banal, really. Dying in his sleep from a stroke. Merely the thought of it would have driven him to his gym, swearing."

"What do you want us to do, Mother?" asked Roger quickly, as if to stem the flow of her painful memories.

"I'm not sure. Moral support, I guess. Like most weak men, your stepfather has a vicious temper—"

"He'd better not show it," the strapping young man broke in. "If he even raises his voice, I'll break his neck."

"And Rog can do it, Mum. He won't tell you, but he's the Midlands interscholastic wrestling champ."

"Oh, shut up, Angie, there wasn't any competition."

"I hardly meant in the physical sense," interrupted Alicia. "Gerald's not the sort. It's all just screaming tantrums with him. It'll simply be unpleasant."

"Then why not have your solicitor take care of it, Mother?"

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