

DOUBLECROSS

MISSION HURRICANE



JENNY GOEBEL

SCHOLASTIC INC.

For Mallory Kass, with overflowing gratitude and admiration

—J.G.



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CHAPTER 1

Depths of the North Sea, Undisclosed Coordinates

The dry suit, the neoprene, the diving helmet—none of it was enough to stave off the icy chill of the North Sea. Alek Spasky didn't mind the frigid water, though. It reminded him of Mother Russia and of his own bitter-cold heart.

On the other hand, the gaseous chemical elements and compounds regulated by the umbilical cable that connected his helmet to the salvage ship bobbing on the surface were really annoying. Let alone the buzz and whir in Alek's ears as the helmet valves let the gases in and then expelled his breath.

He reminded himself that the dive helmet wasn't the real problem. The real problem was the missing nuclear sub.

Cutting the darkness with his headlamp, Alek saw nothing but bubbles, sediment, and one lonely, pathetic-looking fish drifting in the shadowy water. Hundreds of feet below the surface, the sea was nearly devoid of life, and everything appeared drab and ashen in the shreds of sunlight struggling to reach the sea floor.

His lamp landed on a cluster of mineral deposits rising like knobby fingers from the sandy bottom of the sea. But the rock formation seemed to be the only distinguishable form in the desolate void surrounding him. That is, if he wasn't counting the other diver.

Alek turned his gaze on the salvage crew captain and he caught the man's attention.

The captain was wiry and weather-worn. He had a hearty laugh and a genuine smile. Alek had disliked him from the very beginning. He liked the captain even less now that he seemed unfazed by the dark expanse of nothingness stretching out before them.

They were not comrades. The captain and his crew of seamen who salvaged sunken vessels for a living, salvors for short, were hired hands. Nothing more.

As they'd ridden together out to the open sea and waves had splashed over the sides of the salvage ship, the captain had begun to reminisce about his days working as an underwater welder on oil rigs off the coast of Texas. "Those currents could rip you right off—"

"Get this straight," Alek had interrupted. "You are not to make small talk. You are not to tell stories. Your job is to deliver me to the *Kraken*, no questions asked."

Alek narrowed his eyes at the captain as they stood side by side in the depths of the barren sea. "Where is it?" Alek asked with a knife-sharp edge to his voice. "Where is the wreckage?"

After a slight pause the captain's voice crackled inside Alek's helmet. "Don't you worry. I'm sure we're

just a hop, skip, and a jump away.” The feed broke and then started again with another crackle. “It appears we landed slightly off course. We might have some exploring to do, but I promise we’ll find your sunken vessel.” At this, the captain chortled softly.

Alek detested people who had the tiresome habit of laughing when nothing was funny.

Imbeciles, the entire crew—they couldn’t salvage a sunken vessel if the fate of their country depended on it. Which, in a way, it does . . . The thought made Alek’s lips curl slightly at the corners.

The captain no doubt mistook Alek’s smirk as a sign of shared lightheartedness. He gave the hand signal that meant everything was okay before turning to trudge along the sandy sea bottom.

Sure. Okay. Tread on like everything is fantastichesky, you careless excuse for a captain. I will take solace in knowing that your mixed-gas breaths are numbered. And there it finally was. With one single murderous thought, Alek at last felt calm wash over him.

The gases hissed and droned inside his helmet as he regulated his breathing once again and picked up his heavily weighted boots to follow in the captain’s footsteps.

Soon after passing the oddly shaped rock formation, a dark, jagged outline emerged in the murky water a short distance away. Alek’s pulse quickened. Was this it? Was this the *Kraken*?

Dozens of nuclear bombs went missing during the Cold War, but most people live blissfully unaware of

all the sunken subs and crashed airplanes that disappeared along with the bombs they carried. Known as broken arrows, the lost nukes were untapped opportunities for terror and catastrophe. If only they could be recovered.

Alek's neoprene-clad skin tingled with anticipation as he took another step toward the shadowy object.

When a fire had broken out in the aft compartment of the *Kraken* decades before and it plunged to the bottom of the North Sea, Alek had been charged with covering up the calamity. As one of the Soviet Union's top KGB operatives, he'd pored over the images and sonar readings and had fabricated stories in order to maintain foreign relations.

Unable to share what he knew with anyone—Cold War secrets were well guarded—he had silently mourned the *Kraken's* brokenness. What a waste that the sub had fallen. What a waste that the *Kraken* had never had the chance to demonstrate its awesome power.

Everything in life deserves a second chance. I deserve a second chance.

At long last Alek would emerge from the shadows.

He quickened his slog through the sea. Yet as he drew closer to the looming form, it proved not to be the sub, but instead a towering deep-sea reef. When the captain merely glanced back and shrugged before turning the corner of the closest ridge, Alek's anger flared.

As Alek rounded the corner to follow the captain, the current pushed back. It unbalanced him. It teased beneath his arms, streamed between his legs, and tugged on his helmet and boots. Tucking his head slightly, he leaned into it.

Like walking uphill in a windstorm.

Slanting forward as he went, he maneuvered around the first rocky bend only to be swept off his feet and bashed back against the reef by the flow of the sea.

The captain's voice resounded inside his helmet. "Be careful back there." *Crackle*. "The current really picks up alongside the reef. It might just pick you up and toss you around if you don't plant your boots in the sand."

Even though Alek couldn't see the captain's face, he could hear the smile in his voice. Oh, how he hated that man.

Leaning against the jagged reef for stability, Alek pulled a steel rod from a pouch on his dry suit. With the current, he couldn't spin it across his fingers the way he so enjoyed. Yet just the weight of it in his gloved hand made him feel centered again. Deadly centered.

When Alek finally worked his way around the last sharp bend, to a flat area where the current waned, the sea rewarded him by coughing up its long-forgotten treasure. Nestled behind the reef, the *Kraken* slept, covered by a blanket of barnacles and silt.

The captain stood directly in front of Alek, staring up in awe at the giant arc of the *Kraken's* rear propeller.

Even half buried, the blades reached high above his head.

Alek ran his headlamp down the bridge of the sub and across the blanket of sludge and sediment cloaking it. There was something eerie about the wreckage and the way the sea had claimed it—rusting the steel and draping the railings with red kelp.

Over the whirl and hiss of his own breathing, Alek could hear creaks and moans as the current whistled through the metal vessel. Or perhaps what he really heard were the groans and cries of a ghostly crew forever trapped inside.

Beyond the captain, the enormous missile-shaped submarine faded in the darkness. It was impossible to see from one end of the sub to the other, but Alek could tell the hull was still intact. More importantly, the nukes inside were still intact.

A broad smile cracked Alek's face.

He had everything he needed: the warheads, the cables, the equipment necessary to salvage the wreck. He also had one thing he didn't need. While the captain stood with his back to Alek, still appraising the behemoth sub, Alek raised the steel rod. He used it to slice the captain's umbilical.