

# ONE

*Somewhere over the Atlantic*

The flight attendant brought the tall man in seat 3A a glass of Jim Beam neat and placed it on the small surface adjacent to his seat. “Here you are, Signore Zegna.”

The man in seat 3A had one leg crossed over the other, his fingers holding the laces of his right shoe. He did not react and his eyes were fixed straight ahead into space as if in a trance. The flight attendant gave him a gentle tap on the shoulder that brought him back from his dream state. He shook his head in mild surprise, nodded, smiled at the attendant, and took a sip. Another brief bit of lost time he could not explain. He checked his watch. Only a minute or so, maybe less. Noticeable enough to cause mild embarrassment but short enough for him to dismiss the episode as just another sign of aging. People expect their elders to drift off now and then, he reasoned.

He took another sip of his drink, closed his eyes, and mused how, after fifty-six years of living on earth, many of them in modest circumstances, he was now reclining in perfect comfort in the first-class cabin of a wide-body jet coursing over the Atlantic. Life, he concluded, not for the first time, was full of surprises.

If the man known on this flight as Signore Gilberto Zegna ever imagined he’d be in this position, he never expected that the reason would be connected to a group of over-the-hill Chechen rebels who lived in London and who were intent on revenge against Mother Russia. He’d never been to Chechnya, nor did he ever intend to go. cursory research showed it to be a fierce and unforgiving country in every way. Chechens were at war for much of recorded time, if not with the Turks, then with the Georgians or the Russians. As for Russia, his only visit there was to Moscow for another assignment many years earlier, and due to the bitter cold of its weather and its inhabitants he likewise had no desire to return. In the end, he cared little about the Russian-Chechen antagonisms; if pressed, he regretted only that one side would eventually have to win.

Nevertheless, the Chechen war horses in exile hired him because they needed his specialized skills and were willing to pay his considerable fee. He neither admired nor respected this crude cluster of relics, but he had been quietly hoping for an assignment, if only to end his career and enter full blown retirement on a high note. His last assignment ended in disaster and he came too close to spending his remaining years in a British prison. In his line of work, failure was not only unacceptable but could well prove fatal. He was lucky to be alive to face another sunrise.

Sunrise. Tomorrow, if this Al Italia flight from Caracas to Rome arrived on time, and with some good fortune and timely trains, he could be enjoying the next day’s sunrise over the golden Italian hills of Camposanto near the ancient city of Modena. In Camposanto was his precious farm of olive trees.

He reflected that he owed, in a convoluted way, some debt of gratitude for this his precious farm to Russia in general and one particular Russian in particular. He still carried a

dimpled scar on his left buttock, the result of an errant shot from a Russian pistol. The headaches that began after that episode and persisted for years were gratefully gone now.

It was twenty years ago that he was mid air when a shot from that Russian pistol rang out, his feet barely clearing the cast iron rail on the edge of a parapet on a Prague roof. He crumpled and rolled when he landed, his skull colliding into a wide brick chimney. He managed to crawl to cover behind the chimney, the moonless night a silent ally. He knew his assailant well. He and Dmitri had enjoyed a glass of pilsner only a year before at a small café in Ghent after an assignment in which they were allies. But his was a profession built on skill and nerve. Old alliances can change, as evidenced that evening in Prague, and friendship had little to do with anything. He had no time to examine his wounds, but drew his pistol from its ankle holster and waited. He knew Dmitri could not leave the task unfinished. In moments, he saw Dmitri lean over the edge of the roof to seek his wounded quarry, his Russian-made Makarov held in both hands and panning the area. It was then that he raised his own pistol, a compact Beretta, from the chimney's shadow below and fired, the round finding Dmitri's right nostril and the orbit of his right eye.

Dmitri lived, horribly scarred and missing one eye, but the man in seat 3A and known for the moment as Gilberto Zegna went on from that Prague roof top to heal his cracked skull, his gluteus maximus and his pride at a hillside villa owned by a friend in Italy. It was during that period that he fell in love with the area and determined that when he amassed enough cash, he would own a similarly beautiful and serene piece of real estate. Fifteen years and dozens of assignments later, he did just that.

It was to this estate, his own hundred acres of rolling hills he would repair tomorrow and spend his remaining days as a gentleman farmer. His assets in land and bank accounts were substantial, and he could and would reject any and all offers for future assignments. He would drive his ancient tractors across his property, pedal his battered bicycle into the village and enjoy espresso and a sweet roll at the café. All the while he would know at his core that his last exploit was a success.

To be sure, this assignment did have its negatives, including some fatalities. Death was part of the job, though, and he tempered his regrets with a combination of professional acceptance and the selfish pleasure of his own survival. Survival was never guaranteed, and he came perilously close in the past weeks to missing that objective. He would wonder for the rest of his days how he managed that. For all his skill, planning and cunning, he should be dead and cold on a slab in a Florida morgue. It was more than mere good fortune that kept him alive.

At his feet in a brown leather valise was a small package, a gift he bought in a rude roadside market stall near a bus stop in a Mexican village three days ago. He reached down and removed the gift, still wrapped in tissue paper. He held the silver frame in his hands and looked at it. How appropriate, he thought. Inside the frame in flowing Spanish script and on heavy ivory parchment were the words of Christ from his Sermon on the Mount: *“Bienaventurados los pacificadores: porque ellos serán llamados hijos de Dios.”* He held it close and thought of the man to whom he would send it, anonymously of course. He hoped the recipient would appreciate the sentiment, and felt certain he would.

When the flight attendant walked by seat 3A a few minutes later and picked up his empty glass, the man known as Gilberto Zegna shook his head at the offer of another beverage, and she continued down the aisle. He sighed, and if he'd been somewhere else unencumbered by the white noise and steady whoosh of the jet engines, he was certain it would be audible. He looked around; the other passengers in the area were either asleep, reading or watching movies.

Outside the porthole of the jet he saw only the reflected light on the tops of the clouds from the nearly full moon above. The bourbon warmed his insides and he felt sleep coming on. He removed the tissue covering the small silver frame and again read its inscription, reminding himself as he started to doze of how this whole episode began.