

THE LOST RELIC

Scott Mariani grew up in the historic town of St Andrews, Scotland and now lives in the wilds of Wales. *The Lost Relic* is the sixth book in *The Sunday Times* bestselling series featuring ex-SAS hero and former theology scholar Ben Hope, translated into over twenty languages worldwide. Scott is also the author of the Vampire Federation series, which started with the novel *Uprising* (Avon, June 2010). A sequel, *The Cross*, is due to be published during autumn 2011. For further information please visit: www.scottmariani.com

Prologue

Italy

October 1986

The old woman was alone that night, just as she had lived alone in her rambling country house near Cesena for many years. She'd spent the evening in her studio, as she did most evenings, surrounded by her precious paintings and her beautiful things, putting the final touches to a piece of artwork she believed to be the finest she had produced in a long while.

The work that was to be her last.

It was just after ten, and the old woman was thinking about going to bed, when she heard the crash of breaking glass and the six armed men stormed into her home. They grabbed her roughly, forced her down into a chair, held guns to her head. Their leader was a big, burly man with a nose that had been broken more than once. He wore a suit and his greying hair was cropped like a brush.

The last time she had heard an accent like his had been a lifetime ago. She'd been young and beautiful then.

'Where is it?' he shouted at her, over and over, with his face so close to hers she could feel the heat of his fury when she said she didn't know, that she didn't have it. She'd never had it, never even laid eyes on it.

They let her go then, and she collapsed gasping to the floor. As she lay there shuddering with terror and clutching her racing heart, the six men tore apart her home with a violence she hadn't seen in all her seventy-eight years.

By the time the men had realised they wouldn't find what they'd come so far to obtain, the old woman's heart had given out and she was dead.

What they found instead was a cracked old diary that she had kept close to her for over six decades. The leader of the men flipped hungrily through its pages, running his eye down the faded lines of the old woman's elegant handwriting.

His long search was only just beginning.

Chapter One

Western Georgia

250 kilometres from the Russian border

The present day

A warm September breeze rippled softly through the conifers in the mountain ravine. The air was sweet with the scent of pine, and the late morning sunlight twinkled off the faraway snowy peaks. The mother lynx had come padding down from the forest to quench her thirst from a stream, keeping a watchful eye on her cubs as they played and wrestled in the long grass by the bank.

As she bent to lap at the cool water, her body went suddenly rigid, her acute senses alerting her to an alien presence. Her tufted ears pricked up at the unrecognisable sound that was coming out of nowhere and rising alarmingly fast. She quickly drew away from the water's edge while her cubs, sensing their mother's apprehension, grouped together and scampered behind her.

The terrifying noise was on them in moments, blasting, roaring, filling their ears. The cats bolted for the safety of the forest as two huge black shapes streaked violently overhead, shattering the tranquillity of the ravine. Then, as

suddenly as they'd come hurtling over, the monsters were gone.

More dangerous predators than big cats were out hunting today.

Four kilometres across the forest, standing alone on a rocky knoll, was a craggy old stone shack. A century ago, maybe two, it might have been the humble home of a peasant farmer or shepherd. But those days were history, and nobody had lived there for a long time. It had been years since anyone had even set foot in there, until that morning.

It was cool and shady inside the windowless building. The only furnishings within its walls, spaced out in a row and crudely but securely nailed down to the floorboards, were three wooden chairs. The three occupants of the chairs sat quietly, breathing softly, tuned into their shared silence. They knew each other well, but it was some time since they'd all run out of things to say – and in any case there seemed little point in conversation. Even if they'd been able to free themselves from the ropes that bound each of them tightly to his seat, and remove the hoods that their captors had placed over their heads, they knew that the door was heavily chained. Nobody was going anywhere.

So they just waited, each of them alone with his thoughts, in the stillness that comes with true resignation to an irreversible fate. The same kinds of thoughts were running through each of their minds. Wistful thoughts of wives and girlfriends they wouldn't be seeing again. Memories of good times. Each of them knew that he'd had a good run. It tasted bittersweet now, in retrospect, but they'd all known this time would come round eventually, one way or another. They'd all known who they were dealing with. In the world they'd long ago chosen for themselves, it was just the way things were.

As long as it was over quickly. That was all they could ask for now.

The pair of identical Kamov Ka-50 Black Shark combat helicopters were closing rapidly in on their target. Behind their mirrored visors, the pilots calmly checked their readouts and readied the weapons systems that bristled across the undersides of their aircraft. Two kilometres away, their automatic laser-guided target tracking systems locked in, and a sharp image of the shack appeared simultaneously on the monitors inside each cockpit, enlarged enough to count the links in the chain that was padlocked to the door. The pilots armed their missiles and prepared to fire.

There had been no word from base. That meant the operation was a go.

The pilots hit their triggers, and felt the recoil judder their aircraft as their weapons launched simultaneously. Just under three metres long and weighing forty-five kilos each, the Vikhr anti-tank missiles could travel at six hundred metres a second. The pilots watched them go, hunting down their target with deadly accuracy. Three long seconds as the four white vapour trails snaked and twisted through the blue sky, lancing down towards the trees. They hit in rapid succession, with blinding white flashes as the fragmentation warheads detonated on impact. The shack was instantly blown into pieces of whirling debris.

The pilots closed in on the smashed target and activated their side-mounted 30mm cannons. It was complete overkill, but this was a demonstration and the boss was watching. The boss wanted it to look good, and if the boss said he wanted a show of firepower, he'd get a show. The machine cannons raked and strafed the ground with hammering shellfire. Billowing clouds of dust were churned into whirling

spirals by the downdraft of the rotors as the choppers roared over the devastated scene. As the clouds slowly settled, the plot that the shack had once stood on now looked like a ploughed field.

Whatever remained of the three men, come nightfall the wild animals would soon claim it.