

CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED AUTHOR OF *THE TERMINAL LIST*

JACK CARR

A THRILLER

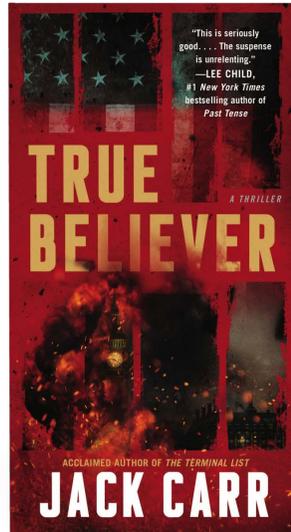
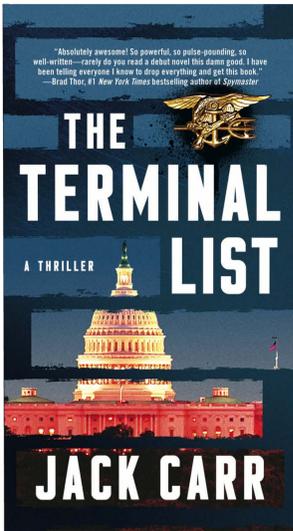
SAVAGE

SON

ALSO BY JACK CARR

*True Believer*

*The Terminal List*



# SAVAGE SON

A THRILLER

# JACK CARR

EMILY BESTLER BOOKS

ATRIA

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI



ATRIA

An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.  
1230 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10020

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2020 by Jack Carr Enterprises, LLC

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information, address Atria Books Subsidiary Rights Department, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

First Emily Bestler Books/Atria Books hardcover edition April 2020

**EMILY BESTLER BOOKS/ATRIA** BOOKS and colophon are trademarks of  
Simon & Schuster, Inc.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact  
Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949 or [business@simonandschuster.com](mailto:business@simonandschuster.com).

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more  
information, or to book an event, contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at  
1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at [www.simonspeakers.com](http://www.simonspeakers.com).

*Interior design by Wendy Blum*

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 978-1-9821-2370-3

ISBN 978-1-9821-2372-7 (ebook)

For Brad Thor, without whom this post-military chapter  
of my life would not be possible  
and,  
to those who run to the sound of the guns.

*Fortuna Favet Fortibus*

“There is no hunting like the hunting of man, and those who have hunted armed men long enough and liked it, never care for anything else thereafter.”

—Ernest Hemingway

# PREFACE

I WAS, AND REMAIN, a student of war and of the hunt. Experiences in combat and in the backcountry helped shape me into the citizen, husband, father, and writer I am today. The one has made me better at the other. I suspect it has always been this way. It is the feelings and emotions from those most primal of endeavors that form the foundation of *Savage Son*.

I was first introduced to Richard Connell's masterpiece, "The Most Dangerous Game," in junior high school. Connell, a veteran of World War I, published his most celebrated short story in *Collier's Weekly* in 1924. Upon that initial reading, I was determined to one day write a modern thriller that paid tribute to this classic tale, exploring the dynamic between hunter and hunted.

Providing for and defending my family and country are hardwired into my DNA. Perhaps that is why "The Most Dangerous Game" resonated with me at such an early age, or maybe those primal impulses are in all of us, which is why Richard Connell's narrative continues to endure almost a century after it was first published.

Fast-forward thirty years. As I prepared to leave the SEAL Teams, I laid out all my ideas for what was to become my first novel, *The Terminal List*. The plot for *Savage Son* was among several of the story lines I was contemplating

as I decided how to introduce the world to James Reece. For that first outing, I knew my protagonist was not yet ready for what I had in store. I needed to develop him through a journey, first of revenge and then of redemption, before I could explore the dark side of man through the medium of the modern political thriller. Is James Reece a warrior, a hunter, a killer? Perhaps all three?

Hunting and war are inexorably mixed. They share a common father. Death begets life, and in defense of oneself, one's family, one's tribe, or one's country, killing is often a part of the equation. Throughout most of human history, defeating an enemy in battle led to the survival of the tribe and the continuation of the bloodline. The same tools developed to defeat rivals in combat are analogous to those used in the quest for sustenance. Similar tactics are used to hunt both man and beast. Those who picked up a spear to defend the tribe were the same ones who used that spear to provide food for their families. The reason each and every one of us is alive today is the martial prowess and hunting abilities of our ancestors.

Much as the hunter, deep in the backcountry, often thinks of his family by the hearth, so too the warrior on the distant battlefield longs for a homecoming. Similarly, when they return home, the hunter dreams of going back to the woods, just as the warrior yearns for battle. Is it the guilt of no longer being in the fight? Not standing shoulder to shoulder with brothers in arms? Or is it missing the sense of belonging that only comes from being part of a team that has spilt blood in war? Or is it something darker? Is it *because* of the kill? Is it because that is the only place one can truly feel alive? Martin Sheen's line from *Apocalypse Now*, the movie my BUD/S class watched before going into Hell Week, rings true for those who have answered the call: "When I was here, I wanted to be there. When I was there, all I could think of was getting back into the jungle." Warriors can relate.

On the battlefield, I witnessed the best and worst of humanity. I have been the hunter, building target packages and developing patterns of life on our targeted individuals, using disassociated human intelligence networks corroborated by technical means to ensure we were taking the right player off the board before launching on a mission to capture or kill them. And

I have been the hunted, caught in an ambush in the Al-Rashid District of Baghdad at the height of the war.

The Global War on Terror has ensured us ample practice, sharpening our skills in the hunting and killing of man. Direct action, special reconnaissance, counterinsurgency, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, hostage rescue, counterterrorism, and counterproliferation of weapons of mass destruction are all crucial special operations mission sets, but it is manhunting that has become a primary focus of our operators and intelligence agencies over the past thirty years: Manuel Noriega, Mohamed Farrah Aidid, Ramzi Yousef, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Mullah Omar, to say nothing of the less well known HVIs targeted and killed or captured over the years. At the time of this writing, Ayman al-Zawahiri remains at large but rest assured there are teams of men and women actively hunting him down. It is a specialty in which we have become quite proficient.

My time in combat was but one chapter in my life. I am now an author. Though I've passed the torch to the next generation, my time in uniform will always be a part of me; those memories, lessons, and reflections are now finding their way into the pages of my novels.

One of the most intriguing passages in "The Most Dangerous Game" is this exchange between the protagonist, Sanger Rainsford, and the antagonist, General Zaroff, where the central theme of the narrative is revealed:

"I wanted the ideal animal to hunt," explained the general.  
"So I said, 'What are the attributes of an ideal quarry?' And the answer was, of course, 'It must have courage, cunning, and, above all, it must be able to reason.'"

"But no animal can reason," objected Rainsford.

"My dear fellow," said the general, "there is one that can."

*Savage Son* explores the darkest impulses of the human psyche. Do they live in all of us, repressed by the comforts and technology of the day? Have

we advanced beyond those more primal instincts and if so, who will provide for and defend the tribe? *Civilized* society tends to keep warriors at arm's length, only turning to them in times of national emergency. *Break glass in case of war.*

We've been hunters and warriors for the majority of our existence. Only recently have we evolved, or possibly regressed, into beings with no connection to the land or the wild animals that inhabit it, while also outsourcing our duty to defend our families and our country. Whether this is a "progression" for our species remains to be seen.

Will there come a day when our survival depends on those primordial abilities? I suspect so. It might not be tomorrow or the day after, but then again, it might.

In either case, we would be wise to be ready, but right now, it's time to turn the page and hunt.

Jack Carr

*August 22, 2019*

Kamchatka Peninsula, Russia

# A NOTE ON DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE REDACTIONS

IN CERTAIN SECTIONS OF *Savage Son*, you will notice words and sentences blacked out. Just as with *The Terminal List* and *True Believer*, I submitted the manuscript to the Department of Defense Office of Pre-Publication and Security Review. What the government censors have redacted in my novels is surprising in that almost every word and sentence can be found in publicly available government documents and is part of the national discourse.

Select information should remain classified, yet the current review process is inefficient and ineffective, wasting time and resources to redact information that is in no way harmful to national security. At issue is freedom. The First Amendment is at the core of our Bill of Rights. It is “The First” for a reason. It is a natural right. It is not a right “given” by government and therefore it cannot be “taken” away. The review process is all about control. As I wrote in the preface to *The Terminal List*: “The consolidation of power at the federal level in the guise of public safety is a national trend and should be guarded against at all costs. This erosion of rights, however incremental, is the slow death of freedom.”

Enjoy your time in the pages of *Savage Son*. Try to ignore the blacked-out sections, or better yet, try to decipher what the government deems so secret. If you read closely, I bet you can figure it out.

Jack Carr  
*February 10, 2020*  
Park City, Utah

# PROLOGUE

*Medny Island, Bering Sea, Russia*

SHE WAS A STRONG one. Most humans would have given up by now, the deep snow quickly exhausting even the fittest among them. His snowshoes weren't exactly sporting, but no one said this was supposed to be fair. His heart rate increased, and he had to take a break to catch his breath due to the steep incline. She had taken the toughest route on the island, directly toward the highest peak. This was a first. *A feisty one.*

Still, the tracking was painfully easy in the waist-deep snow. He didn't speed after her; instead he relished the chase the way one would slowly enjoy a magnificent meal. No, that wasn't the correct comparison. This was more than that; this was carnal.

The winds howled as he crested the first of a spine of ridges that ran toward the summit. His quarry's trail had crossed to the windward side where the gale had already begun to erase her tracks with blowing snow.

*Feisty and crafty.*

The winds had shifted and cold, moist air was now blowing down from the Bering Sea. He looked toward the rapidly disappearing trail and watched the white wall of fog envelop the high ground before him, feeling the elation of finally matching wits with a worthy adversary.

• • •

Her jeans were soaked from the snow and her feet were numb inside her boots. She was post-holing through the deep white drifts, each and every step a physical challenge. She knew that to stop would mean death: death from hypothermia, death from those who hunted her. The pursuit had to be their game. Why else would they have let her go?

She was on an island or at least a peninsula; she could see water on both sides of the treeless landscape. Down to the shore would be the easy route, but that's what they would expect. The coastline was a death trap. She pushed herself up as her leg muscles screamed from the exertion of high-stepping through the powder. An accomplished endurance athlete, she was used to pain. She was comfortable being uncomfortable. A native of Montana, she was also used to being cold and wet.

*God, I wish my brother were here. He'd know what to do,* she thought, remembering their epic trail runs and how they'd cheer one another on at the jiu-jitsu academy.

The desolate tundra landscape meant she was somewhere in the far north; Scandinavia or Alaska maybe. More likely, somewhere in Russia. The men who took her rarely spoke, but they stank of Turkish tobacco. Her father's carpenter was an immigrant from Belarus; the odor of burnt leaf and sweat was one she remembered. If that was true, they'd flown her east. Whatever drugs they'd given her had worn off, and she had been fed surprisingly well. They must have wanted her strong. She looked to the sky and saw that weather was blowing in; fresh snow would cover her tracks and the dense fog would give her camouflage. She scrambled across the ridgeline toward the wind; she would make herself disappear.

. . .

The whiteout lasted nearly two hours. The hunter made his way back to the base camp to wait it out by the crackling fireplace with a leather-bound copy of *Meditations*, by the great Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius. Sergei offered him a brandy but he passed, opting instead for hot tea. There would be plenty of time for celebration later; he wanted nothing in his veins

that would dull the pleasure of what was to come. He savored the flavor of a tea smuggled in from China. He had acquired a taste for it on one of his postings, intrigued by the ritual, history, and a classification system to rival French wines in complexity.

Leaning back in the comfortable leather chair, he took in his surroundings. Above the fireplace hung an impressive Anatolian stag he'd taken in Turkey, a testament to both luck and perseverance. Next to it, a Tin Shan Argali sheep stared at him with lifeless eyes, a hard-won ram taken in the extreme altitudes of Tajikistan. The stone hearth was framed by a thick pair of Botswanan elephant tusks, each of which weighed in just under the mythical hundred-pound mark; he'd walked at least that many miles in pursuit of them. Though he looked upon these trophies fondly, he saw them as relics of a past life similar to the medallions he'd won in sports as a child. He had since moved on to more challenging and satisfying pursuits.

He pulled a Dunhill from the pocket of his wool shirt and lit it with the gold S. T. Dupont lighter that had been a gift from his father. He slid his thumb across the engraved double-headed imperial eagle emblem of the SVR, Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service; some vestiges of the *czar* had survived even communism. What to do about his father? *Not now. Later.*

He sipped his tea and visualized his stalk. He had several hours of daylight left, and it was imperative that he find her before dark. She would never survive the night in these conditions. Steam rose from his boots as the wet snow evaporated from the heat of the fire. The weather would soon turn. This snow would have wiped clean her trail, especially since she was clever enough to have used the wind to her advantage. He called to Sergei to ready the dogs. He was about to teach her a lesson in fear.

. . .

She had run out of elevation and was quickly running out of island. Her path had led beyond the exposed rolling tundra and into a set of jagged cliffs above the icy sea. The cold was all-consuming now and was beginning to sap her will to run,

to survive. She was soaked from head to toe in a mixture of snow and sweat and was numb from the waist down. The agony in her feet had subsided, indicating that frostbite had set in. She rubbed her frozen hands together under her fleece jacket in a vain attempt to warm them. The biting wind was killing her so she moved to the lee side of the island and began to pick her way slowly down onto the sheer cliffs. She lost her footing once and slid fifty feet before she was able to arrest her fall on a small boulder. Part of her wanted to keep falling, to end it and deprive her pursuers the satisfaction of taking her life, but that was not in her constitution. That was not how she was raised.

As she hung desperately from the gray cliff, her eyes found it, a small space under a rocky outcropping that would conceal her from prying eyes and protect her from the deadly wind. She slid the toe of her boot until it found a hold, her hand searching for anything that would give her purchase. Her fingers slipped into a rocky crease, and she began working her way across the cliff face toward her destination. Inch by inch, step by precarious step, she made it. The spot was scarcely large enough to hold her but it was better than being exposed. She pulled her knees to her chest and pulled her arms inside her jacket, working her head down inside the fleece. She was suddenly aware of her thirst, her exhaustion, her fear. For the first time in ages, she allowed herself to weep, her tears and sobbing transitioning into an animalistic roar as she recognized her crying for what it was; she was mourning her own death.

. . .

The cloud ceiling rose, and the snow slowed to a light dust in the breeze. The man drove the snowmobile to the spot where he'd left her tracks and signaled to Sergei to unload the hounds from the back of the six-wheel drive KAMAZ troop transport. Sergei looked longingly at the traditional bow of his people before leaving it in place and obeying his employer. Though the Koryak blood in his veins had been diluted over centuries by Cossack intervention, forced migration, and war, he still felt the pull of his native lands to the north.

The two bearlike Caucasian shepherds leapt down from the vehicle's cargo

hold and began to test the air for the scent of their prey. Sergei had let them fill their nostrils with the scent from the woman's scarf; there were almost no foreign scents here to confuse them. Each animal weighed over 150 pounds and stood almost thirty inches at the shoulder. These particular animals, both of the mountain breed variety, had been born of a fierce military bloodline that went back to the early days of the Soviet Union. They had been chosen for their determination, ferocity, and their taste for human flesh.

He nodded to Sergei, who gave the dogs a whispered command. Their pissing, sniffing, and meandering ceased, and they took off up the grade with both men following on snowshoes. The beasts picked up the woman's scent quickly and charged up the snowy incline, nearly pulling the hulking figure of Sergei along behind them. The animals led them near the summit of the island's highest peak before turning downhill and out of the wind. He admired her desire to survive. This was his prescription for the ennui that had plagued him as long as he could remember. His hand moved subconsciously to the crossbow strapped across his back to confirm that it was still there; they were getting close.

. . .

Protected from the wind, it occurred to her how quiet it was. Her tears had lasted only a few minutes; it had felt good to get them out. *Keep your nerve, little one*, she remembered her father saying, his accent thick with the echoes of Rhodesia. That, she would. It was time to fight.

She grabbed handfuls of the spongy dark soil and rubbed her clothing until it was the color of her surroundings. Digging into the tundra, her hand found something hard and smooth. She scraped furiously, and she ran her fingers across its length to find the edge. Then, using a small rock as a spade, she unearthed what turned out to be a bone, likely a piece of seal rib brought to this perch by a scavenging bird. It was ten inches long, curved, and had a jagged sharp edge where it had split from the rest of its length. She turned it in her hand; now she was armed.

The silence was broken by the sound of barking dogs. This time the shiver

that went up her spine was not from the cold. It didn't matter if the dogs could reach her, they would sniff her hiding place out; she was trapped. She peered over the ledge in front of her boots and saw the waves hitting the rocks several hundred feet below. The barking was suddenly very close; she could see and hear small pebbles roll past her as her pursuers made their way down the steep incline. She took a deep breath, held it, and exhaled as she adjusted her grip on the makeshift dagger.

. . .

For a minute the man thought that his prey had fallen to her death, but the dogs' interest in the rocky face suggested otherwise. He slipped the sling over his head and readied his weapon. The long carbon fiber shaft of the arrow was resting perfectly in its rail, the thin braided cable holding the limbs' kinetic energy at bay. He flipped up the caps on the scope and shouldered the modern rendition of the ancient tool to ensure that the lenses weren't fogged from the cold. His quarry was at bay; now he just had to wait for her to flush.

Sergei unclasped the brass hooks from the dogs' thick collars, releasing them from the yoke of the leather lead. They lurched toward the cliff, then slowed their pace to tiny steps as they tested the ledge. Their deep-throated barks were nearly deafening. The lead animal looked to his master, wary of the terrain before him. Sergei gave a command and all doubt evaporated; the dogs began a controlled slide downward. An ordinary canine would have plummeted into the sea but these were sure-footed mountain animals, bred for this very task.

. . .

She couldn't see them but the roar of their barks told her that they must be just outside her field of view, obscured by the wall of her stone prison. She pulled her left hand back into the sleeve of her jacket so that the material below the elbow hung empty. *Terror*; a snarling muzzle bearing wolflike teeth materialized

before her. She flung her sleeve in its direction and the shepherd snatched it instinctively into his jaws. She pulled her hand from under her fleece and grabbed the beast by the collar as she plunged the seal bone into its neck. She screamed as she stabbed it over and over in unbridled rage, feeling the animal's hot blood spray onto her hands and face. Switching her attention to the dog's lungs, she used all of her strength to pierce its armor of thick fur. Her first blow glanced off a rib but the second and third stabs found their way into the chest cavity. The dog jerked out of her grasp and stumbled in his retreat. His footing lost, he tumbled out of sight.

. . .

Sergei shrieked as his finest hound plummeted into the Bering Sea, howling in agony. "*Ataka*," he commanded to the younger male, his voice devoid of its usual strength, hesitant for the first time to send his dog to do its work. Whatever uncertainty the animal felt was put aside, obedience taking over. Growling, he charged into the fray.

. . .

She scarcely had time to compose herself before the second dog came, all fur and fury. What this animal lacked in experience, he made up for in aggression. He ignored the matador sweep of the jacket sleeve and lunged for her throat. She pushed herself back as far as the mountain would let her, the dog's breath and musky coat heavy in the confined space. Saliva spurted across her face as the thunderous barking reverberated in her soul. She tucked her chin to her chest to protect her exposed neck and put her left arm across her face. Powerful jaws snapped onto her elbow, the canine's teeth piercing her flesh down to the bone.

She stabbed for the dog's flank and felt its hide give way as the seal bone found its home. This dog recognized the threat, shifting its attack to the arm that held the instrument of pain, tearing flesh and crushing through skin, bones, and tendons. The makeshift seal bone dagger dropped to the ground. Grasping a

small rock with her free hand, she hit him again and again but he did not relent. Instead, he dragged her toward the opening, toward his waiting master. The dog outweighed her by thirty pounds, and her bloodied and beaten body was no match for her vicious antagonist. Her spirit, however, was anything but beaten.

*Keep your nerve.*

Knowing that she would be exposed in seconds, she whispered a quick prayer and grabbed the dog's collar with her right hand. The dog's actions were based on pure instinct, but she had the element of reason. Pulling him off balance, she bent at the knees and thrust forward with her feet toward the opening.

*Freedom.*

. . .

He had the scope to his eye now, ready to send his first arrow into her as soon as Sergei's hound pulled her clear. He would wound her first; no sense rushing to the climax. He disengaged the safety and put his gloved finger on the curved metal trigger of the Ravin. The scope's reticle danced, the inevitable result of blood, breathing, and adrenaline, but at this range, he would not miss. He would take her in the thigh, careful not to hit the femoral artery and give her a quick end.

The animal had her. He could see its rear legs moving backward; the anticipation made him feel uniquely alive. He saw a glimpse of her filthy jacket before the dog changed position and stumbled. Then he gasped. The woman's body flung headlong into the air, the animal's jaws still locked on to her. The pair seemed to hang for a moment before crashing downward onto the jagged rocks four hundred feet below.

The selfish bitch had robbed him of his kill. He dropped the crossbow in the snow and reached for a cigarette as he turned toward the lodge, commanding Sergei to retrieve the body as he stomped away.

No matter. The woman was just bait. He was after bigger game; she would still serve her purpose.

PART ONE

THE TRAP

“One does not hunt in order to kill; on the contrary,  
one kills in order to have hunted.”

—José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Hunting*

# CHAPTER 1

*Kumba Ranch, Flathead Valley, Montana*

*Three months earlier*

JAMES REECE RODE IN the passenger seat of the 1997 Land Rover Defender 110 in silence, taking in the serene beauty of the landscape. The road cut through a thick stand of ponderosa pines that towered in every direction. His college friend and former Navy SEAL teammate Raife Hastings was driving the British SUV and wouldn't tell Reece the exact nature of their destination. Raife's family had owned the sprawling ranch since they'd emigrated from southern Africa in the 1980s, when he was in his early teens. What had begun as a small and humble cattle operation had grown into tens of thousands of acres of prime grazing land and pristine wilderness. The family's successes in the cattle and real estate businesses had allowed them to expand their operations and they now owned properties throughout the state. Despite their hard-won wealth, Raife's father had ensured that the family never forgot their humble beginnings or took the opportunities afforded by their adopted homeland for granted.

As a former Navy SEAL, Reece had recently proven himself particularly skillful at adapting; he'd outwitted a national security apparatus set on killing him and then unraveled a plot that put the president of United States in the crosshairs. A man named Vic Rodriguez led the paramilitary branch of the Central Intelligence Agency as the director of the Special Activities Division. He'd then recruited Reece for the mission that had saved the president's life and

spared Ukraine from a chemical weapons attack. Vic recognized Reece's aptitude for aggressive problem solving and wanted to bring the frogman further into the fold. As a result, Reece was technically now a temporary contract employee of the CIA's paramilitary Ground Branch, though currently his only job was to recover from his recent surgery someplace where he could take a breath and reset. Unbeknownst to his new masters at Langley, he had a more personal reason for joining their ranks; two men needed to die.

Reece lifted his ball cap and ran his fingers over his closely cropped hair. He hadn't had a haircut this short since BUD/S. They had shaved his head at Walter Reed and, though it was beginning to grow back, he still hadn't accustomed himself to the feeling. He gingerly touched the scar on his scalp with his fingertips, still amazed at how small it was. The procedure to remove his benign brain tumor had been a complete success. He was relieved that he wouldn't be required to undergo radiation or chemotherapy and was happy to be alive after all that he'd been through over the past two years; there had been too much death.

The 4x4 crunched over gravel as Raife accelerated up a set of dirt switchbacks that led over a ridge.

"These things were always underpowered," Reece commented with a straight face. The Land Rover/Land Cruiser debate was a near-constant source of entertainment for the two friends, neither of whom ever passed up an opportunity to criticize the other's favorite vehicle.

"I should let you walk," was Raife's response.

Raife stopped the old Defender as it leveled off at the top of the trail. The vista of the endless green trees leading to the massive alpine lake below was breathtaking, even for someone who'd spent decades living on this land.

"It's beautiful."

"I thought you might like it."

"The view?"

"No, your new home."

"What are you talking about?"

"See that cabin down there by the lake?"

"Yeah."

“Lucky for you, my dad and father-in-law are James Reece supporters. They had it fixed up for you. They thought you might want a quiet spot away from everything to recover. It’s yours.”

“Are you serious?”

Raife nodded, pleased. It’s not every day one gets to surprise their best friend with a new house.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“‘Thanks’ would do it.”

“Well . . . thanks.”

“You always wanted to live in Robin’s guest house.” Raife smiled, referring to his father’s middle name and knowing his friend would get it. “I’m sure he’ll put you to work sooner or later and make you earn your keep so, if I were you, I’d play sick for as long as possible.”

“Good tip.”

“Reach under the seat.”

Reece reached down and pulled out a SIG P320 X-Compact in a Black Point Tactical mini-wing holster.

“Mato thought that might come in handy,” Raife said, referring to their former command master chief who now ran the training academy for SIG Sauer.

“Does everyone know I’m back?” Reece asked.

“You know this community, brother,” Raife said with a smile. “We’re worse than old ladies in a sewing circle.”

Raife put the vehicle into low gear and let the engine rev as it slowly descended the grade that led toward the cabin. A circular crushed-stone driveway curved toward the home from the dirt road that ran past it. The wooden framed house had begun as a small pioneer cabin and that façade had been preserved and incorporated into the newer, larger structure. The building suited its surroundings and was large without being ostentatious. Raife stopped in front of the home’s broad front porch and the two former commandos stepped out of the vehicle.

They wore jeans and faded T-shirts with holstered handguns that rode inside their waistbands. Reece wore his usual Salomon trail running shoes while Raife’s Courtney boots were of a more traditional design, made from Cape buffalo

hide and imported from his native Zimbabwe. In many ways, their choice of footwear typified their personalities. Though he'd moved around a lot, Reece was a native Californian, always looking for the latest and greatest piece of gear that might give him an edge in terms of performance. Raife was the opposite, a traditionalist who preferred the feel and soul of an earlier time. If Reece was Kydex, nylon, and Kevlar, Raife was leather, brass, and walnut.

The men's athletic physiques were obvious to the most casual observer, with broad, thick chests and powerful arms built by decades of intense physical training. Though their wardrobes were nearly identical and their builds similar, no one would mistake them for brothers. Reece's hair was dark with flecks of gray in his stubble. Raife was two inches taller than his friend's six feet and his build was leaner, with broader shoulders and a narrower waist. His longish hair was a sun-streaked blond that hung from the back of his cap and nearly touched his collar. His eyes were an almost iridescent green that stood in contrast to his tanned face. A discolored scar swept the length of his cheek. Raife stopped short of stepping up onto the planked wooden porch and made a sweeping gesture for Reece to take the lead.

The door was made of local Douglas fir and bore the scars of more than a century's exposure to the elements. Reece pressed the refurbished iron latch and the solid door swung open easily on new hinges. The two-story open space was bathed in natural light thanks to the large windows on the wall opposite the front door. The floor was Montana slate, a mosaic of grays and browns that contrasted with the blond planks that paneled the walls. A stone fireplace rose toward the open fir rafters. Reece's throat went tight when he saw what hung above the hearth.

"Is that my dad's bull?"

"Indeed, it is. He passed away before we could ship him the mount. We thought this would be a good spot for his elk."

The families had become close when Reece and Raife's friendship blossomed at the University of Montana. Reece's father, Tom, had visited the ranch in the fall of 2000 when both Reece and Raife had already graduated from BUD/S and been assigned to SEAL Teams on opposite coasts. Tom Reece, himself a frogman veteran of Vietnam, had elk-hunted during the visit and had taken the

six-by-six bull that hung in his son's new home. It had been the last time they'd hunted together. The 9/11 attacks struck the following year and Reece had spent the next decade and a half chasing Al Qaeda, ISIS, and their ilk to the far corners of the globe. Tom Reece had passed away suddenly and tragically while Reece was deployed to Iraq in 2003, killed in an apparent mugging in Buenos Aires, Argentina, while working for the CIA.

A comfortable-looking nail-head leather sofa faced the fireplace and a tawny hair-on cow rug covered the stone floor, framing a sitting area. Reece noticed it bore the raised keloid scar of the Hastings family brand. Raife hung back a step as his friend toured his new home, humbled by the generosity shown to him by the Hastings family. There was a large kitchen with what looked to be the original cast iron stove, surrounded by modern appliances, a comfortable bedroom with a rustic pine-framed king-sized bed, a guest bedroom, bathrooms, and a loft area that was set up as an office. Nearly every room in the home had a view of the lake.

"I have one other thing to show you." Raife broke the silence and motioned toward the door that led outside from the kitchen. He descended the steps and strode toward a small barnlike structure. He pulled open the two large doors and stood aside wearing a rare grin. Inside the detached garage sat a perfectly restored 1988 FJ62 Toyota Land Cruiser, its bluish gunmetal gloss clear-coat paint gleaming under the room's overhead LED lights. The vintage paint scheme contrasted tastefully with the flat black aluminum wheels, off-road bumpers, and roof rack.

Reece's eyes widened at the sight of the custom off-road vehicle. He'd been forced to abandon his beloved Land Cruiser more than a year earlier as part of a one-man mission of vengeance that had left a trail of bodies that stretched from coast to coast. Since then, he'd driven Land Cruisers while working anti-poaching patrols for Raife's uncle in Mozambique, but he hadn't had a vehicle to call his own.

"It comes with the house. You know I'd never drive it so you may as well."

"Now I really don't know what to say."

"All of a sudden you're the quiet one?" Raife joked, referring to *Utilivu*, a

Shona nickname given to him by the trackers in Africa. “Don’t just stand there like a *bloody* idiot, hop in.”

Reece walked forward, as if he were approaching an extraterrestrial object. The door handle unlatched with a tactile and positive click; whoever had done the restoration work had done it exceptionally well. The dark interior combined utilitarian finishes and materials with style and comfort. The keys were in the ignition. The 376-cubic-inch, 430-horsepower General Motors LS3 V-8 roared to life instantly, its throaty growl tamed by an effective ceramic-coated exhaust system that allowed the vehicle to maintain a reasonable amount of stealth given its power.

“Not bad for a Japanese import, eh?” Political correctness was not one of Raife’s strengths.

“I love it.”

“This one’s from Thorn,” Raife confessed, using the nickname for his father-in-law. “He’s taken pity on you in your weakened state.”

“Where did he find it?”

“Don’t you recognize her?”

Reece looked in the seats behind him and then back to his friend.

“It’s yours. Ol’ Clint couldn’t bring himself to destroy her when you left California. He held on to it just in case. When he found out you were alive, he reached out to Thorn through the Special Operations Association. Their Vietnam network is strong. Thorn had it shipped out here, but not before having it fixed up for you.”

“This is a bit more than ‘fixed up.’ This is a work of art!”

“Glad you like it. ICON 4X4 did the renovation so it should actually make it to town unlike your stock original. I almost forgot, look behind the seat.”

Reece switched off the motor and looked over his shoulder. Hanging in a purpose-built Greyman tactical rack behind the seat was a Daniel Defense MK12 with a SilencerCo Omega suppressor and a Nightforce 1-8x24mm ATACR optic mounted on the receiver’s top rail.

“Trouble seems to find you. I figured it would be wise to have more than that nine-mil pea shooter in your holster.”

“You were not wrong, my friend,” Reece said with genuine sincerity.

“Make yourself at home and relax. The family is flying in tomorrow and Dad is throwing a big dinner party in your honor.”

“It will be great to see everyone.”

“*Almost* everyone. You remember my younger sister Hanna. She’s currently in Romania saving the world, but I think she’s planning to come home for Christmas.”

“It will be great to see her. And it gives me a few months to get into shape. As I remember, she was always doing those ultra-marathons.”

“She won the Grand Traverse a couple years ago, so you have a lot of work to do.”

“That’s no joke. I’ve always wanted to do that. Crested Butte to Aspen, right?”

“That’s right. Forty miles of ski-mountaineering over the Elk Mountain range.”

“You have to have a partner for that one. Who’d she race with?”

“Me,” Raife smiled. “And, if they didn’t remove your liver along with your brain tumor you might want to bring it, along with a spare. You know how my family is.”

“If I find an extra, I’ll be sure to bring it.”

“I’ll be at the shop if you need anything.”

“Hey Raife,” Reece called out as his friend walked toward his Land Rover.

“Yeah?”

“You might want to check the oil in that Defender. It’s been sitting there for a few minutes so it probably all leaked out.”

Raife turned and smiled to himself as he saluted his friend with his middle finger.

# CHAPTER 2

## *Bangui, Central African Republic*

ROMAN DOBRYNIN WAS NOT a man accustomed to waiting. Usually, just the opposite. People waited on him: subordinates, security personnel, even foreign dignitaries. He was the Russian president's man in Africa, or at least in the Central African Republic. In his mid-fifties, he was a seasoned diplomat, having earned his stripes in the chaos that was Chechnya. He had proven himself to be an aggressive negotiator unafraid to threaten and then employ the darker arts of manipulation to achieve his, and Mother Russia's, strategic goals. Technically a senior policy advisor in Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he was their de facto senior man in the CAR. His official title was National Security Advisor to the President of the Central African Republic.

Russia was a power on the rise in Africa, and Dobrynin had counterparts in the Congo, Ethiopia, Guinea, Eritrea, and Mozambique. With France all but abandoning its former colony, Russia and China were quick to fill the void; arms deals, security training assistance, regional negotiations, lumber, diamonds, oil, gold, cobalt, and most important for Russia, uranium. Russia had vaguely disguised its intentions on the international stage, citing its involvement in the region beginning in 1964. Strategically located in the heart of the Dark Continent, the Central African Republic was the ideal hub from which Russia could move troops into neighboring countries while exploiting and exporting their natural

resources. Dobrynin was there to ensure it was Russia, not China, that would control both the natural resources of this landlocked nation and, more important, their votes at the United Nations.

Though rich in raw materials, CAR was one of the ten poorest countries in the world. Its record of human rights violations including extrajudicial executions, torture, female genital mutilation, slavery, human trafficking, the sex trade, child labor, rape, and genocide made the country the perfect home for an outside power seeking to take advantage. It was a disenfranchised country ripe for exploitation.

The call had come from the chief staff officer of the general director himself, which meant it was one of the few calls Dobrynin had to take. It was made clear that his guest was to be granted every professional courtesy and that he was coming in at the behest of the president. In Russia the lines between official, unofficial, and private blurred to the point of virtual invisibility. This visit had all the trappings of the latter. Dobrynin knew that as deputy director of Directorate S in the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, Aleksandr Zharkov could be coming to CAR for a variety of reasons. He also knew the Zharkov name and, much more than the call he'd received from his own high command, that was reason alone to accommodate the intelligence officer. Dobrynin wanted to keep his head attached to his body. One did not offend a *Pakhan* in the Russian *Bratva* and expect to stay aboveground for long.

Dobrynin watched the monstrous Antonov AN-225 circle the airfield and begin its final approach. He remained in his vehicle until the aircraft had touched down and taxied to the Russian-controlled side of the airport before disembarking the armored and air-conditioned Toyota Hilux. Straightening the tie on his Armani suit, he walked forward to meet his guest.

. . .

Deputy Director Zharkov waited patiently as the aircraft hinged just behind the cockpit, pulling the entire nose of the massive plane skyward. It stopped when it reached ninety degrees, leaving the fuselage open to the elements. Most planes

have cargo ramps in the aft but the AN-225 has just the opposite. The nose gear slowly lowered the open beast to the ground, a unique design feature that allowed the largest aircraft in the world to load a staggering amount of cargo. A blast of heat off the tarmac nearly took his breath away, a clear indicator that he was no longer in Moscow; its intensity carried the distinctive smell of conflict. His mind raced with possibilities.

Scanning the tarmac, he saw a four-vehicle convoy of trucks surrounded by a perimeter of armed security. *Spetsnaz*. They had once been feared the world over as the premier special operations force of the former Soviet Union, based on what was touted as the toughest training ever devised by a modern military and because of their actions, the West would say atrocities, in Afghanistan in the 1980s. They had now been relegated to protection duties for those who wanted to be surrounded by the myth that was *spetsnaz*.

A man in a crisp black suit walked toward him flanked by two men from his security detail carrying AKM rifles.

“Director Zharkov, I am . . .”

“Roman Dobrynin,” the deputy director completed the sentence for him. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Thank you for taking the time to meet me. I am sure you have pressing matters that require your attention. I have heard glowing reports of your progress here as national security advisor, advancing Russia’s interest in the region.”

“It is an honor to be of assistance,” Dobrynin countered, his eyes moving up to the large airframe and then back to his visitor. “Are you alone, Director Zharkov?”

“*Da*,” Zharkov confirmed with a wave of his hand, as if there were nothing odd about him being the single passenger on the heaviest airplane ever built. With a quarter-million kilograms of payload capacity, the plane had completed its fourteen-hour flight from Moscow to the middle of the African continent and successfully inserted the senior intelligence official into the *heart of darkness*.

“No security detail?” Dobrynin asked, looking back to the plane.

“I prefer to travel light and without the trappings of my position that could draw undue attention.”

Zharkov was dressed comfortably in brown pants and a beige safari shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a canvas pack slung over his shoulder.

“Besides, with your clout and control in the area I knew you would have security arrangements taken care of.”

“Of course, Director. Shall we?” Dobrynin motioned toward the waiting vehicles, struggling to decipher if the director’s words were a compliment, a warning, or simply condescending.

Zharkov nodded. “I understand you were briefed on my requests?”

“*Da*, we will take you to the hotel now and tomorrow we will go to the mines.”

. . .

Zharkov took in the sights of the bustling city, politely listening to Dobrynin drone on about his most recent diplomatic victories. A five-thousand-man force of Russian military and contracted advisors were in the country training the CAR special operations forces on the finer points of counterinsurgency. Zharkov correctly assumed that meant a systematic campaign of terror aimed at keeping the dissidents in check and ensuring the current president remained in power and friendly to Russian interests in the country.

At each stoplight, the cars were swarmed by children, arms outstretched, their faces hopeful for a coin or a piece of candy. Traffic was at its usual stop-and-go, broken-down vehicles impeding their progress as scooters buzzed past like the swarms of insects that infested the nearby jungle. It was a country on its last breaths.

Just outside the hotel, a small convoy of taxis lingered, each flying a small Russian flag on the front bumper, waiting eagerly for the opportunity to ferry guests to and from the airport. At the approach of the convoy, the Hotel Ledger’s guarded gates opened, and the depravity of the streets was left in the dust. The driveway curved up to the entrance, and the outside world was forgotten. Old-world opulence, no doubt a vestige of the French colonial days, permeated every aspect of Bangui’s finest hotel; abundant marble and ornate tapestry were accented by rich African wood polished to perfection, its gold inlay reflecting the late afternoon light.

“My men will show you to your room. I trust you will find your accommodations acceptable. Will dinner in two hours be convenient?”

“That will be fine, thank you,” Zharkov nodded politely and proceeded to the elevator to the penthouse suite, two *spetsnaz* and one bellhop in tow. As they arrived at the double suite doors, his new security halted him on the outside.

“Just a moment, sir.”

“Open it,” one commanded the bellhop.

They entered the six-thousand-square-foot suite guns raised, then performed a sweep of every corner before pronouncing it safe to enter.

Zharkov walked in and was not surprised to see two young girls who couldn't have been more than fifteen in thin white linen dresses standing obediently by the king-size bed. This was Africa. He eyeballed their lean, underfed bodies, dark skin a sensual contrast to their scant dresses. A bottle of vintage 1987 Dom Pérignon and fresh strawberries covered with chocolate were set at the table. He set his pack down and poured a glass of the cold sparkling wine, savoring the taste, and glanced at the agenda sitting on the table.

He looked back to the girls and was tempted, watching them shift nervously, fear radiating from their not-yet-vacant eyes. They still held a glimmer of hope.

He shook his head toward the door, “*Ukhady*,” he said. “*Von*,” the Russian said again, more firmly when they remained motionless.

Not knowing a word of Russian, the girls stood there unsure of what to do. Zharkov pointed to the door.

“*Out!*” he said, this time in English, pointing at the door.

Understanding the international language of tone and gesture, the two girls made their way slowly past him, still unsure of what they should do and beginning to worry they had somehow upset the man they had been told to obey and pleasure. Opening the door for them, he told his new security detail he did not want to be interrupted until dinner.

He'd been through enough prostitutes in this part of the world in his younger days and he needed to stay healthy; his mind was on his mission.

# CHAPTER 3

*Akyan Hotel, Saint Petersburg, Russia*

TO IVAN ZHARKOV, INFORMATION was everything. It had been information, and his willingness to exploit it at all costs, that had led to his position of power in the Bratva, the Brotherhood, known to the rest of the world as the Russian mafia. His consolidation of St. Petersburg's Tambov Gang was the result of well-timed intelligence, brought to him by his eldest son, Aleksandr. Some even thought that, through Aleksandr, Ivan may have organized the arrests in Spain that took out the powerful gang's former leadership, though no one dared whisper such a thing. Ivan was the *Vor v Zakone*. No one, not even the government in Moscow, would cross him.

It was Ivan's lust for information that persuaded him to send an emissary to Argentina, where a CIA officer was offering him valuable intelligence. That job fell to Dimitry Mashkov, a trusted *bratok* who had interrogated enough Chechens during his days as a paratrooper in the 104th Guards Airborne Regiment to know when a man was lying. If he could break a fanatical Muslim, stay alive in Kresty Prison, and take out members of the rival Solntsevskaya Gang, he was confident he could discern if some American desk officer was the genuine article.

Dimitry spent three days interrogating the American in a Cordoba farmhouse and was convinced he was being truthful. Such an asset would be invaluable to Zharkov's operations. The trick was getting him from Argentina to

Russia, which meant airports and customs officials. Via his son, Aleksandr, the elder Zharkov had the appropriate influence to provide the man with a clean passport, but he would still have to traverse a series of international airports. These days, ever-present surveillance cameras using facial recognition technology made clandestine travel problematic.

Luckily, Zharkov's friends in the South American drug trade were the best in the world when it came to moving contraband; they ultimately provided the solution. The former spy was moved overland from his Argentine hideout to Caracas, where the failing government was ripe with corruption. For a staggeringly low sum, he was shepherded through the airport's already lax security and loaded onto a Havana flight without incident. From José Martí in Cuba, it was a direct flight to Moscow on an Aeroflot SU-151, an unremarkable event for a man carrying a legitimate passport of the Russian Federation. Aleksandr was able to smooth things over at Sheremetyevo, one of Moscow's four international airports, and the man had been delivered to Ivan just a few hours and a quick domestic flight later.

The CIA man was now parked in a hotel suite, waiting impatiently for what was, effectively, a job interview.

. . .

Oliver Grey looked at his watch, the iconic dive instrument that had influenced a thousand knockoffs. The stainless steel case and bracelet were worn and scored by a hard lifetime's worth of use, though they had accrued before Grey took possession. The acrylic crystal was burnished by time and the bezel and face were faded from months in the sun, a standing testament to the original owner's vocation. Behind the battered exterior, though, the hands of the precision Swiss instrument swept on unscathed.

He knew that the watch was a Rolex Submariner, and that its former owner was the late Thomas Reece. What he did not know was that Tom Reece purchased it on R&R in Saigon during his first tour in Vietnam with SEAL Team Two. He'd worn it on hundreds of ops both as a frogman and an intel-

ligence officer, and had planned on passing it to his son, James, when the time was right.

He never got the chance. Grey had planned his demise, outwitting the legendary CIA case officer who was far past his prime, sticking his nose where it didn't belong when he should have been fishing or playing golf or whatever it is that retired spooks do with their free time. Grey had used the watch's absence to make the murder appear to be the result of a simple mugging in a South American city well acquainted with that brand of violence. Grey hadn't killed him with his own hands. He'd instead used his Cajun pit bull Jules Landry, who had brought him the watch as a trophy, eager to please his new boss. That was fifteen years ago. Now Landry was dead, castrated and left to bleed out on a dirty floor in northern Iraq. Grey had no illusions as to where his future was headed. He knew he was firmly in James Reece's sights and, if he hoped to survive, he was going to have to strike soon, before the frogman had a chance to track him down.

*He will come for me and that Syrian sniper, Nizar, who put a round through his SEAL friend.*

Grey had read all about it in the papers, how two Americans had thwarted the assassination of the U.S. president in Ukraine and saved Odessa from a chemical weapon attack at the last moment. The coup orchestrated by the late Vasili Andrenov, Grey's Russian handler, had ended in failure. Reece had been unsuccessful in saving the Russian president, and Senior Chief Freddy Strain had been killed in the attempt.

He needed to outthink James Reece before the SEAL could track him down and put a bullet in his head, or worse. Grey had no illusions about the true reason James Reece was currently in the employ of the CIA; he needed their resources to find his friend's killer. Since his former employer and the closest thing to a father Grey had ever known had been sent to a fiery grave, killed by one of the countless weapons with which he'd sown the seeds of revolution around the globe, Grey was now a *rōnin*. He needed a new master. Grey was sure that Tom Reece's son had been involved in Vasili Andrenov's assassination and he knew he was next on Reece's list.

Grey had endured the brutal questioning from the criminal called Dimitry as well as the excruciating overland trip taking him nearly the length of the South American continent, both only made bearable by the sweet tobacco he packed into his old billiard pipe. Add in the international flights on aging aircraft serving cheap booze, and Grey was in rough shape. They hadn't even offered him a coffee. An accountant by trade, he sought order in life, and that order was severely lacking at present. The watch was the only thing that had kept him sane, its hands moving steadily and predictably as his world became anything but. The irony was that the time wasn't even correct. He hadn't changed it since he'd left Buenos Aires.

Grey was not an imposing figure, and the travel had done nothing to improve his bearing. His beard needed trimming and had turned nearly snow white over the past few months. He wore a sweat-stained wool fedora over his cap of thinning hair, and his tweed coat was badly in need of washing. He hadn't been able to bathe since he'd left Venezuela and looked like a disheveled university professor, wearing a bitter halo of stale sweat and metabolized vodka. His appearance was in stark contrast to the spacious and orderly hotel suite. It was known as the White Suite, thanks to the snowy fabric that covered its luxurious furniture. A large freestanding bathtub sat just feet from the rounded bed on a waxed parquet floor. What he would give for a warm bath and some sleep!

His escort hadn't said a word, but had motioned for him to sit in a chair padded in white leather that faced a comfortable-looking love seat against the suite's wall. He was near the balcony and had a marvelous view of the Tsentralny District. Though mentally exhausted, he took comfort from being in the land of his ancestry. His plan had been to rise alongside his mentor, Colonel Vasili Andrenov, the right hand of the returning leader. Instead, because of James Reece, he was here to beg for a job from a criminal.

Grey expected the security men would look like club bouncers in leather jackets, but the *vory* bodyguards who protected the mob boss were clad in finely tailored business suits. The neatly groomed men could have passed for agents of the FSO or Federal Protective Service and, in fact, some of them had history in that organization. Four of them moved into the room and joined the stoic figure already watching over him. Grey was frisked for the third time, thoroughly and

professionally. A few seconds later the door opened, and two more bodyguards entered, stepping aside to flank the opening.

Though Grey was familiar with the details of the man who walked through the door, thanks to his former duties as a senior analyst on the Russian Desk at the CIA, he was not at all prepared for who entered the room. Written reports and long-lens photographs from surveillance footage only told you so much, which is why Grey had always envied the men and women on the ground who gathered human intelligence; the people who looked their subjects in the eye. Instead of an imposing figure who instilled fear, he beheld a man of slight build and of medium height; this was no track-suit-wearing thug. Ivan Zharkov was also older than Grey expected, with a handsome face and thoughtful blue eyes.

*A wolf in sheep's clothing?*

Grey expected false bravado and swagger, but instead Zharkov walked with grace and poise. He wore a suit of thick charcoal cashmere with a burgundy silk tie knotted neatly at his throat. His beard was trimmed, his mustache purposefully bushier and more prominent. His hair had gone almost white. It was combed and parted neatly above his right eye. Grey couldn't help but think that Zharkov looked much the way Czar Nicholas II might have looked in his sixties had he not been shot by Bolsheviks in a basement alongside his wife and children.

His handshake was firm and his expression was warm as he invited Grey to take a seat. It seemed somewhat odd to Grey that he wasn't offered coffee or tea, though after his journey across the globe, he wasn't quite sure if it was time for breakfast or cocktails.

"Thank you so much for meeting me, *Pakhan*." Grey spoke first using the Russian term for "boss" and showing off his command of the Russian language that he'd spoken exclusively in his childhood home in Pennsylvania.

"It is I who should be thanking you, Mr. Grey. You have come such a long way."

"It was nothing," Grey lied.

"I was very sorry to hear about Colonel Andrenov's death. He was a friend of my business, and I know that he was like a father to you. You have my condolences."

"Thank you, *Pakhan*, that means a great deal to me. The colonel spoke highly of you."

“He exaggerated, I am sure. He did the country a great service by removing our president. He was a weak man who was selling us out to the Americans. I know you played a significant role in the operation. Blaming it on the Muslim savages was a touch of genius.”

Grey nodded, taking credit for what had not been his idea.

“What has brought you from such a warm and pleasant climate to such a cold one? You have risked a great deal by making this journey.”

Oliver had practiced his pitch many times during the past weeks. “I have, *Pakhan*, but it will be worth it, for us both. I know the capabilities of the U.S. intelligence community. I spent my entire career using all of their tools to track and analyze Russian people of interest. I’m offering that expertise to you. The Americans trained me well, *Pakhan*. I know everything there is to know about your rivals, about your critics in Moscow, and about the weaknesses of the Western nations’ law enforcement efforts.”

“You have my ear,” the mafia leader acknowledged.

“I know where your rival organization, the Solntsevskaya Gang, is exposed and I know which members of your organization are working with the FBI and CIA.”

Zharkov spoke without shifting his eyes from Grey. “Order some breakfast for our friend here.”

One of his men nodded in response and swiftly left the room.

“Go on, Oliver.”

The shift to his given name was not lost on the wayward spy.

A hearty breakfast was rolled into the room by one of Zharkov’s bodyguards within minutes, the waiter having been stopped and searched by the security men in the hallway. Zharkov took only coffee for himself but an impressive spread of vegetables, cold meats, eggs, and pastries was presented to the famished CIA man. Grey ate quickly and drained the Bloody Mary as soon as he realized that it contained more than tomato juice. Zharkov ordered his bodyguards to keep the drinks flowing. When Grey put down his fork and took a breath, Zharkov continued the conversation.

“You’ve promised much, Oliver, and I’m willing to pay a fair price for the

kind of information you claim to have. My father was a grain buyer when the communists were in power. He could have rubber-stamped the purchases, but he took pride in his work and only bought the best crops. He demanded a sample from every bushel that he could inspect. I need a morsel, Oliver, a sample of your wares.”

Grey was prepared for the challenge. “I understand, *Pakhan*. I have information on Melor Sokolov of the Solntsevskaya Gang. Despite appearances, he is a homosexual.”

“Interesting.”

“He’s a *suka*, too, a bitch.”

“As much as that kind of behavior disgusts me, Oliver, men who have been in prison do such things. This is not shocking.”

“I agree, *Pakhan*, but the man who puts him on his belly is a flight attendant for Air France. He is also an asset of DGSE. He’s French intelligence. They know every move that the Solntsevskaya Gang makes and report much of it to the U.S.”

“Now *that*, Oliver, is fascinating,” Zharkov confirmed.

“I believe in long-term relationships, *Pakhan*.”

“As do I, Oliver.”

“I would like to become a permanent asset to you, to your organization.”

Zharkov’s bushy gray eyebrows arched upward before his eyes followed them to the ceiling, considering the proposal.

“I must ask you, Oliver, and I hope that you will forgive me for being direct, how can I be assured that you will not betray me the way you betrayed the Americans? How can I know that this is not an elaborate ruse to put a mole inside my business?”

Oliver was prepared for this as well. “I will not betray you because I am Russian. My mother was Russian. My grandparents who raised me were Russian. My *soul* is Russian. No, I will not betray you, *Pakhan*. Besides, where else would I go?”

Zharkov stared at Grey for a long moment, his eyes studying him for any hint of deception. There was no blink, no darting of the eyes, no twitch of the tiny facial muscles, nothing.

“What do you propose?”

“Just a fair stipend and an apartment with a view.”

Zharkov considered the proposition.

“Twenty million rubles a year and a comfortable flat in one of my buildings where you will be safe.”

Grey would have taken less but didn't want to see overly eager. Twenty million rubles was roughly \$300,000 U.S. Not bad for a wanted man.

“That is very generous of you, *Pakhan*, but there is one other thing.”

“Which is?”

“I want a man dead.”

# CHAPTER 4

*Kumba Ranch, Flathead Valley, Montana*

REECE SETTLED INTO THE cabin and put what few possessions he had into the bedroom's dresser drawers and closet. He was struck by how quiet it was. He liked it. There was no television, Wi-Fi, or cell service. The Hastings family used two-way radios to communicate on the ranch, as they were the only reliable means of staying in touch. Repeater stations placed upon various peaks and ridges ensured that one was usually in range.

He opened the French doors that led toward the lake and walked toward the shoreline in the crisp, clean air. There were a pair of Adirondack chairs near a stone fire ring just feet from the water's edge. Reece took a seat and admired the view. Who would occupy the other? His pregnant wife, Lauren, and their daughter, Lucy, had been gone for almost two years now, murdered in their home as part of the cover-up of a deep-state medical experiment gone wrong. Avenging their deaths had brought him closure. *Or, had it?* His mission accomplished; what he hadn't expected was to live. He'd thought he was dying, a tumor slowly killing him from within. He had counted on joining his wife and daughter in the afterlife.

Africa had taught Reece to live again, but the Agency had tracked him down in Mozambique, sending his old sniper school partner Freddy Strain to recruit him. The carrot was that he could have his life back; the stick was that those who

had helped him would go down. Reece chose the carrot. He had done what was asked of him; he'd killed the terrorist leader whose attacks had put the continent of Europe under siege, as well as the former GRU colonel who had masterminded the campaign of terror in an attempt to pave the way for his triumphant return to lead Russia back from the brink. Freddy had died saving the life of the president of the United States, taken by a sniper's bullet, a sniper who still walked free. A sniper Reece planned to kill. Reece would find him and the CIA mole who had provided the intelligence for the operation. In time, both would die.

His debt to America having been paid following the events in Odessa, Reece's new boss at the CIA, Vic Rodriguez, provided a safe house in Annapolis that Reece could use while he prepared for, and recovered from, surgery. Vic was slowly turning up the pressure, continuing his personal recruitment efforts on the former SEAL, who remained noncommittal.

Reece's friend Katie Buranek was like a guardian angel; she'd been by his side as he was wheeled into surgery and stood vigil while he recovered. She lived nearby in Old Town Alexandria. There she could work the D.C. Fox News desk and commute to their New York headquarters. It also allowed them to pick up where their friendship had left off. She had helped him unravel the conspiracy that launched him on his mission of vengeance, and she had paid the price, almost losing her life in the process. Unbeknownst to the former frogman, the tough young journalist had questions she needed answered; in matters of the heart, trust was paramount.

. . .

Snow was falling on a morning when Katie came to see Reece after one of his physical therapy sessions. He was only a week out from surgery and would soon be leaving for Montana. Katie knew that Reece had a continued affiliation with the darkest side of the U.S. intelligence apparatus, though she hadn't probed. She'd seen a man she recognized as the head of the CIA's Special Activities Division with Reece's doctor at Walter Reed. As a journalist, and with her family's history with the Agency during the Cold War, she was not a believer in coincidence.

She also knew there was a place Reece needed to visit before he left for the mountains. Reece accepted their destination in silent resignation. It was time to say good-bye to someone.

Katie drove south, crossing the Potomac River, and traversed from Interstate 495 onto George Washington Memorial Parkway. The road wound through leafless oaks, the tall modern skyline of Rosslyn, Virginia, visible through the frosted passenger side window, Pierre L'Enfant's iconic neoclassical tribute to the republic across the river to the left. Reece never tired of seeing America's symbols of freedom: the Capitol dome, the Washington Monument, and the Lincoln Memorial.

Planes on final approach to Reagan National Airport roared overhead as Katie exited GW Parkway and steered her 4Runner through a plowed asphalt path that would have, at one point, been in Robert E. Lee's front yard.

Reece had been a casket bearer for too many funerals at Arlington National Cemetery over the years; consequences of a life at war. Katie pulled her SUV curbside on Pershing Drive and shut off the motor. Reece let her lead the way. Neither spoke. He knew where they were going. The sound of their footsteps in the freshly fallen snow was a haunting reminder that beneath this hallowed ground rested generations of America's bravest warriors.

Reece paused among the granite headstones in silent recognition at the grave of Johnny "Mike" Spann, the CIA officer killed by Al Qaeda at Qala-i-Jangi in Afghanistan. The Alabama native had been the first American to die in combat during the War on Terror. In the nearly two decades since, he had been joined by a legion of heroes who had given their last full measure for the nation.

Reece turned and looked toward Katie. She stood to the side of two headstones on the oak-shaded hillside. Reece approached and bowed his head at his father's final resting place.

THOMAS

REECE

JR.

MASTER CHIEF PETTY OFFICER

JACK CARR

US NAVY  
SEAL TEAM TWO  
MAY 12 1946  
JULY 9 2003  
VIETNAM  
COLD WAR  
NAVY CROSS

Reece had visited his father's grave only once since the funeral in 2003. He could hardly believe it had been that long since he'd lost the old warrior. He pushed the mystery surrounding his father's death to the side and slowly turned his head to read the marker just beside it, a newer slab of granite stabbed into the cold ground.

JUDITH  
FRANCES  
REECE  
MARCH 2 1951  
APRIL 24 2018  
DEVOTED WIFE  
MOTHER

Despite the cold, Reece's entire body flushed with warmth. He fought back tears as he knelt in front of the stone tribute, a lifetime summed up by a few simple lines. His mother had suffered from dementia for several years and had lived her life in an Arizona nursing home after his father's death. Reece had, in many ways, mourned her since the cruel disease had robbed her memory. He had secretly held out hope that some miracle treatment could bring her back to him; now she was gone forever, back at his father's side. He treasured his last visit with her, when, in a moment of lucidity, she'd recognized her only son, reminding him of Gideon's mission in Judges. *"You've always been one of the few, James. Keep watching the horizon."*

Reece closed his eyes and whispered a silent prayer, asking his late mother and father to take care of his wife and daughter until he got there to take the watch.

*I love you.*

He wiped his eyes on his sleeve as he rose to his feet and felt Katie's gloved hand slip inside the crook of his elbow.

"I'm sorry, James," was all she said before turning to walk toward her waiting vehicle.

# CHAPTER 5

## *Central African Republic*

THE TRIP TO THE Ukrainian mines in the Christian-controlled district of Bakouma involved a two-hour flight east in the King Air turboprop. Two matching planes carried the envoy at 265 miles per hour toward their destination. Aleksandr had never hunted in CAR. Poaching and years of civil strife had decimated the game population, though he had hunted the jungles of neighboring Cameroon for bongo, sitatunga, duikers, and the elusive dwarf forest buffalo. He briefly entertained the thought of going after a giant forest hog while he was in the area, but the prospect of another rare game animal for his trophy room didn't excite him as it had in his youth. Now he required something more.

Aleksandr admired the rugged beauty of the African landscape. From the air it was easy to dismiss the reality on the ground, a place where the people had yet to progress past the foundation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. A thousand feet below, malaria remained the leading cause of death, sanitary drinking water was scarce, accusations of witchcraft resulted in mob justice, HIV/AIDS affected at least 5 percent of the population, and women not only suffered the highest percentage of genital mutilation in the world but also endured one of the highest maternal mortality rates. The Central African Republic was not kind to its people.

Outside the few cities, the country remained embroiled in civil war, with

fourteen separate factions of Muslim Séléka and Christian Anti-Balaka militias still vying for contested areas and set on wiping the others from existence. Ethnic cleansing in Africa was the default setting of strife, one that tended to turn on the swing of the machete.

The two turboprops touched down on a small dirt strip and taxied to the mine administration building. Under the watchful eye of no fewer than fifty armed Russian soldiers, groups of men labored in the sun extending the runway and constructing additional infrastructure to accommodate the ongoing rape of natural resources. Aleksandr noted the handful of local militia who were clearly outmanned and outgunned by their Russian advisors.

“We will see two mines today, Director Zharkov. We will start with the uranium mines and then move to the diamond mines as you requested.”

“*Da.*” Aleksandr nodded, his mind working through the possibilities.

The Toyota Land Cruisers they were being shuttled in were a far cry from the newer armored Hiluxes they’d used in the capital, but their low torque and unmatched reliability made them the vehicle of choice this far from civilization. Even with the windows down Dobrynin’s suit was soaked with sweat and Aleksandr wondered why the diplomat insisted on clinging to the formal trappings of Mother Russia. No matter; Aleksandr just needed to tour the operations, make his decision, then issue his directive.

Their three-vehicle convoy was led by a camouflage Peugeot P4 manned by two of the Russian advisors and one of the local militia leaders. Based on the venerable Mercedes G wagon, the P4 was the French version of a “jeep.” Aleksandr smiled knowing Peugeot did not have an export agreement with Mercedes. *Never trust the French.* Trailing the convoy was an olive-drab Renault troop carrier with eight local militia members and four additional Russian troops. As they maneuvered the rutted roads toward the mines, Aleksandr noticed young men and boys turn away, ducking behind corners as the envoy passed. The counter-insurgency tactics of the *spetsnaz* were working; fear reigned supreme.

They sped through local villages as quickly as the low-torqued machines allowed, the front and rear vehicles bristling with overt weapons. The message was clear: do not fuck with this convoy. The poverty was not shocking to Alek-

sandr: thatched roofs, the occasional malnourished cow, dirty ditches oozing with excrement, and old men and women hovering near death in the dirty streets. As in developing countries the world over, the only smiles belonged to the children playing in the grime.

. . .

The uranium mine radiated destitution. The workers that Aleksandr observed lining up to enter the shafts looked like zombies. Even children had been consigned as forced labor, the cost of a village overrun by HIV and AIDS. As the raw ore was raised by hand in wooden buckets or pushed on a crude railway in rickety carts, it was heaped outside the entrance in large piles. Aleksandr was cautioned to stay on the observation platform, as the radiation level was toxic closer to the piles of ore.

“What’s their life expectancy?” Aleksandr asked his host, observing the workers covered in boils and blisters.

“Less than a year,” Dobrynin confirmed. “Luckily, conscript labor is not a rare commodity in this part of Africa.”

It reminded Aleksandr of the corrective labor camps, what the West insisted on calling *gulags* after Solzhenitsyn received the Nobel Prize in literature for his *The Gulag Archipelago*. Solzhenitsyn was right about one thing: the prisoners were given the opportunity to work to death.

“I’ve seen enough. Take me to the diamond mines.”

. . .

The convoy continued another two hours, as they pushed deeper into the hills, the vehicles making slower progress. Aleksandr wondered if the reporters who had “disappeared” a few months earlier were killed because they ran into the wrong militia or were targeted by *spetsnaz* for asking too many questions about the mines. No matter. What did they expect, poking around in what amounted to a war zone in Central Africa?

A large white man who Aleksandr deduced to be from the Ural Mountains greeted them at the vehicles, shaking hands and introducing himself as Krysov Petrovich.

“Comrade Petrovich runs the mining operation. In the past seven months he has turned this into the most efficient and profitable diamond mining operation in the country,” Dobrynin declared.

Petrovich wiped his sweaty forehead with a dirty rag and stuffed it back in his pocket. Aleksandr noticed Dobrynin fish a bottle of hand sanitizer out of his suit pocket and squeeze a liberal amount into his palm.

“The workers are paid a generous sum for their labor, generous for this part of the world, anyway,” he continued.

“And theft? Is that a problem or are the wages enough to counter the temptation?” Aleksandr asked.

“Theft will always be a problem, Mister Zharkov,” Petrovich said. “We have the unfortunate task of using unorthodox methods to deal with thieves. Come.”

Petrovich led the way to what Aleksandr assumed to be roughly the center of the aboveground operation.

“These ungrateful savages still swallow raw diamonds to smuggle them out to sell on the black market. Every few months we need to remind the rest what happens to those who steal.”

Aleksandr watched as thirty workers exited the mine, filthy and thin, their eyes darting about like cornered animals. *Desperate*. Russian troops lined them up and shackled them to a rail obviously put there for this very reason. Each of the chained men was given a liter of a magnesium sulfate solution to drink, the equivalent of a medical bowel prep. Within twenty minutes, violent cramps preceded an eruption of watery human excrement. Three were found to have expelled the raw stones after the local guards sifted through the malodorous mess.

“What will happen to them?” Aleksandr asked as the three offenders were led away.

“It’s best if we show you,” Petrovich replied. “In the meantime, follow me.”

Aleksandr took the guided tour. Though he listened respectfully to the briefing on diamond mine production and expected output for the coming year, his

mind was on the three men who had been removed for stealing; they looked fit enough, and living in this area meant they should have tracking and hunting skills.

*Ideal candidates.*

At the end of the shift, the entire workforce was assembled a few hundred yards away from the mine entrance, at the edge of a pit. They were addressed in their native dialect by the local militia leader under direct supervision of a Russian advisor. Aleksandr noted the quiet gloom that fell over the crowd. Death was in the air.

“What did he say?” Aleksandr asked.

“He said, ‘This is what happens to thieves.’”

“Who are they?” Aleksandr asked, pointing to three people lined up across the pit from the gathered crowd: a woman who appeared to be in her thirties, an old man, and a boy who could not have been much more than ten. Their hands and feet were bound, and one leg was secured via chain to rusting chunks of metal. They were naked.

“Those are relatives of the three pilferers. The militia pulled them from the villages. This is the only language these barbarians understand.”

The crowd started to protest and were silenced by a burst of automatic fire from a Russian advisor’s AK fired skyward.

Aleksandr watched as a beat-up pickup truck was backed through the crowd, the three diamond thieves shackled naked to its bed. When they saw their relatives at the edge of the pit their primal screams pierced the air, arms tugging in a futile attempt to break free.

“Quite the deterrent,” Dobrynin stated.

“*Da*, unpleasant but necessary,” responded Petrovich.

Aleksandr remained unfazed, even as three guards climbed into the truck, grabbing the heads of the shackled prisoners and forcing them to watch their relatives across the pit be beaten with clubs until they could no longer resist. The woman was the strongest; it took several clubs to the head before her will to fight subsided enough for the men to pick up the heavy metal objects to which they were shackled and throw them into the pit.

The Dorylus, better known as safari ants, are found primarily in Central and

East Africa. Living in twenty-million-strong colonies they typically move from food source to food source throughout the year. These particular ants were fed well by design. They had no need to move. Their sting is incredibly painful, but the ants seldom use it; their jaws are strong enough to tear through the flesh of their prey. Indigenous people use them to close cuts that would require stitches in the developed world. Here, in the African bush, they would force the ant to bite on either side of a wound, breaking off the body and leaving the powerful mandibles in place to create a makeshift suture that could close the cut for days at a time.

The three thieves were forced to watch their loved ones thrash helplessly about on the floor of the pit, the ravenous safari ants quickly covering their bodies. With no way to swat them off and anchored to the pit with what amounted to a ball and shackle, they endured the torture of being eaten alive. The old man's heart gave out well before the ants found their way into his brain through his eye sockets. The woman was lucky; she was all but brain dead from her clubbing before she hit the bottom of the pit. The boy, though, the boy's screams would haunt the crowd for the remainder of their lives, his high-pitched cries lasting over twenty minutes as he was slowly eaten by the insatiable insects. When his screams turned to a whimper and finally ended, the three thieves were shackled to iron balls that were then thrown into the pit, where they endured the same slow deaths as their relatives. Within minutes the three workers were covered with ants. Vain attempts to pull the shackles off amid primal screams and groans filled the evening air. Death took twenty minutes. Within an hour, bones were all that remained.

"That should keep them in line for another month," Petrovich stated.

"Do you have any other questions?" Dobrynin asked his guest.

Aleksandr shook his head.

Yes, the diamond mines would be perfect. Of those scheduled for execution for smuggling the precious stones, Petrovich could keep one every now and then to feed to the ants as a warning. Those of sound mind and body would be airlifted to Aleksandr in Kamchatka, and then on to Medny Island.

There they would at least have a sporting chance.

# CHAPTER 6

*Old Town Alexandria, Virginia*

KATIE BURANEK LEANED AGAINST the wall of her Old Town condo lost in thought, watching the raindrops hit the window and slide down to pool on the ledge. She cradled a glass of white wine in one hand while rubbing the cross around her neck with the other. She should have been contemplating her next move at the network. Did she want her own show or was she content to investigate the stories that interested her; ones she believed were of importance to the American people? Instead she was thinking of Reece, recovering in Montana and coming to terms with a future he thought didn't exist. Was she a part of that equation? Would he forever be haunted by visions of his wife and daughter, taken from him by a consortium of politicians, military officers, and private sector financiers? Or was Reece learning to live with their memory, his life a positive testament to their legacy?

Katie's eyes focused on a drop of rain as it hit the glass and trickled down the pane, weaving its way among its relatives, all born of the same gray clouds.

Thinking back to Reece's surgery, she felt a tinge of guilt for what she'd done afterwards, but before she could surrender to her feelings, she had needed to know the truth.

• • •

“Can I see him now?” Katie asked the doctor.

It had not been lost on the reporter that establishing a relationship with Reece’s female surgeon might allow her access not normally granted to non-family members. She had made sure the doctor had seen her with Reece on each of his visits for updated MRIs, CT Scans, X-rays, and pre-op procedures. Looking the part of the devoted girlfriend was intentional. She needed answers.

“He’s just coming back out from under anesthesia. He’ll be a bit groggy, but I know he can have visitors now.”

It didn’t hurt that Dr. Rosen was a big fan of Katie’s book. The surgeon had seen enough soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines come through Bethesda over the years to feel a kinship with them and know how they felt about Benghazi. Katie Buranek’s debut nonfiction account, aptly titled *The Benghazi Betrayal*, pulled back the curtain on what had happened in the lead-up to the thirteen hours when a small group of CIA contractors fought for their lives while politicians half a world away, in no danger of being overrun, could hardly be bothered to respond to requests for reinforcements. The surgeon would not forget one of the SEALs who was killed that day. He was a corpsman she’d had the pleasure of getting to know in this very hospital when he was recovering from wounds sustained in Afghanistan before joining the Agency. Katie would get special treatment.

“How did it go,” the young reporter asked.

“All things considered, I am extremely optimistic. Brain surgery of this type has evolved exponentially in recent years. We had an option to actually do this with a local anesthesia, though we usually do those for tumors situated close to the section of the brain that controls speech. In this case, due to the size and location we opted for general anesthesia, so he’s been out for close to four hours now.”

“Any side effects we need to worry about?” Katie asked, deliberately using “we.”

“Well, he might not like his new haircut. We had to shave his head to remove a flap of bone to give us access to the brain to remove the meningioma. Everything is back in place. We’ll keep him here tonight, maybe tomorrow depending on how he does, but he can start light exercise in about three weeks and ramp it up to his normal regimen in about six.”

“Thank you for taking such good care of him.”

“It’s our pleasure, Katie.”

“I’d love to be there for him when he wakes up.”

“He’s just down the hall. I’ll be in to check on him shortly.”

Katie slipped her laptop back into a bag and made her way down to the recovery room.

She shot a smile at the anesthesiologist as she entered.

“Hey, Dr. Port. How’s our SEAL doing?”

“Just bringing him back now, Katie.”

Dr. Port was a Katie fan as well. In his off time, he volunteered with the Maryland State Police SWAT team as a medic, so he was well acquainted with the community of law enforcement tactical response units often made up of military veterans. He was there to ensure nothing went wrong with his newest patient, who had become something of a legend in the small fraternity of special operations.

“He’ll be dazed for a few minutes as the anesthesia wears off but will be back to his old self in no time. You’re welcome to hang out here as long as you’d like. A nurse will be checking periodically, and Dr. Rosen will be in soon to evaluate. I’m sure they told you we will be keeping him overnight for observation but from what I understand, the surgery was extremely successful.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Katie said, touching her hand to her heart.

“This is what we do, Katie. Dr. Rosen is one of the best in the world. Reece here was in good hands. I’ll be back in a few.”

Alone in the room, Katie looked down at the man who had saved her life more than a year ago. Bound and gagged, she remembered being forced to kneel on the floor of the Fishers Island mansion with strands of explosive det cord wrapped tightly around her neck. A CIA assassin in the employ of the federal government had pressed the button on a remote detonator connected to the explosive flexible cord. If his finger came off the button, she was dead. She was an insurance policy to ensure Reece did the right thing that night. She was in the room with him now to find out if he had.

Young for what she had accomplished thus far as a journalist, her series of stories on the Benghazi fiasco and the resulting bestseller opened doors and es-

tablished her as an investigative journalist who would follow the truth, regardless of where it led. That is what she was after today: truth.

*Who was James Reece?* she wondered. Was he a domestic terrorist, as the government had proclaimed when they were desperately trying to find and kill him? A vigilante hell-bent on avenging his murdered wife, daughter, and unborn son? Was he a disgruntled veteran who brought the wars to the home front after the ambush of his SEAL Team in the mountains of Afghanistan? Was he her savior? Or would he have blown her head off to avenge his family? Was nothing sacred in that quest, including her?

Looking up and down the hall outside his room, she softly closed the door. Taking a seat next to his bed she took his hand in hers. Thumbs gently stroking either side of the IV imbedded in his vein, she thought back to that rainy night off the coast of Connecticut. She had been in a state of shock, her face bruised and bloodied, as Reece loaded her aboard a Pilatus aircraft that was to be their extract. She moved up the steps in a daze, her body exhausted as the adrenaline that had sustained her through the violence of the previous hours subsided. Her mind barely discerned the voices; they sounded muffled as if she were submerged in water with someone shouting at her from above. It had somehow registered that Reece was not coming with them.

As Reece stepped back to close the door, Katie had turned sharply in her seat and snapped out of her trance.

“Reece, how did you know Ben didn’t have that detonator connected? How did you know he wouldn’t blow my head off?”

Reece had paused, looked Katie in the eye, and over the sound of the wind, the propeller, and the rain, replied, “I didn’t,” before shutting the door and moving off at a run toward the marina.

*I didn’t.* Those words had haunted Katie ever since.

She had masked her uncertainty since their reunion, waiting for the right time to conduct this interview. Her father had taught her that trust is the foundation of any relationship. He’d been a spy whose family was extracted from what was then Czechoslovakia by Reece’s father. She knew Tom Reece had defied orders to bring them out and that if he hadn’t, her father would have been

executed and she would never have been born. Escaping to the United States in the 1980s, Katie's father had been, and still was, a big Ronald Reagan fan. *Trust but verify*, he had told his children.

Katie intended to verify.

Reece stirred, his eyes flittered, once, twice, and then opened to take in the vision that was Katie Buranek.

"Hey, sailor," she joked, knowing that even though Reece had spent his entire adult life in the navy, he would never consider himself a sailor. These days, the navy plowed through the world's oceans on computer chips powered by nuclear reactors; wind and sails were of a bygone era.

"Katie, you didn't have to wait." His voice was raspy from the breathing tubes that had kept him alive during the almost four-hour surgery. "But I'm glad you did," he added with a smile.

"Well, the anesthesiologist is kind of cute, so . . ."

*Now was the moment of truth.*

Having a father who had passed medical information to the Americans on top Czech party officials in the name of freedom meant she was well versed in the worlds of medicine and espionage. Katie had listened and learned.

Witnessing the Warsaw Pact's response to the Prague Spring in 1968, a young Dr. Buranek decided he did not want his family to live as he had under the iron fist of Soviet Bloc repression. The winds of change had started to blow. His position as a physician and surgeon for the party elite gave him access to medical records and sometimes put him in a position to ask certain questions after a surgery as his patients emerged from the fog of general anesthesia. The post-anesthesia phase, when they were uninhibited, was the time to elicit key pieces of information of interest to the CIA. Party officials were always guarded during medical procedures, but per human nature, the thugs in dark suits would occasionally slip up and turn away to flirt with a nurse, sneak a cigarette, or go to the bathroom. That was when Katie's father would work in a question passed to him by the Central Intelligence Agency. Reece was in that same phase of the post op drug sequence, though since the introduction of Versed fentanyl in 1990, the effects were even more dramatic. Sometimes called truth serum, Versed fentanyl

was used for pain control and sedation in postop, a time when Reece would be most vulnerable and susceptible to questioning. Fentanyl was an opioid painkiller while the Versed was an amnesic sedative that left a target ripe for an exploitation they would never remember; a controlled amnesia.

Of course, Katie could have just asked Reece over a dinner in Georgetown but then she remembered his eyes that night on Fishers Island as he fired four rounds into Ben Edwards's face. They were ice cold. No remorse. She needed to know with absolute certainty and the "truth serum" provided her the opportunity she needed. Katie knew the clock was ticking. With every second that went by the effects of the drugs would lessen. It was now or never.

"Reece," Katie inquired as naturally as possible, as if she were asking where he wanted to go for lunch, "when we were on Fishers Island, I asked you how you knew Ben didn't have the detonator connected to the explosives around my neck. Do you remember that?"

Reece's smile faded. He closed his eyes and nodded his head.

"Stay with me, Reece," she continued in her most soothing voice, continuing to stroke his hand. "Did you know it wasn't connected?"

Reece's eyes stayed closed and Katie was worried he had drifted off.

*Damn it, this is my only chance.*

"Reece, did you think it was connected?" Katie pressed.

"I knew," Reece said, opening his eyes to look into hers, before closing them again.

*Shit, rookie move, which question was he answering? Did he know or not?*

Katie's head snapped toward the door at the sound of approaching voices. *Shit.*

They'd be at the room any moment. She had to know.

She just needed a few more seconds.

Spinning in her chair, she looked for a way to lock the door. *Nothing. Are you kidding me?* Frantically she scanned the room. She had been with her father in enough hospitals to know that as high-occupancy facilities, the doors were all required to be auto closing. However, the fire code and the practical necessities of efficiently running a hospital were often at odds. In violation of the fire code, auto-closing doors had to be kept manually open so doctors and nurses could

move up and down the halls checking on patients. Seeing a rubber door stop, she grabbed it and shoved it under the door, kicking it securely in place before once again taking up her position at Reece's bedside.

"You knew what, Reece?" she asked, switching back to a calm, inquisitive tone.

Reece murmured something almost inaudible.

"What?" she asked, leaning in closer.

"I knew it wasn't connected."

Katie's body visibly trembled. All the months of pent-up wonder and doubt were answered through the side effects of narcotically induced slumber.

She heard a hand shaking the doorknob followed by the concerned voice of the nurse, "Excuse me. Excuse me!" She heard from the hallway.

Just a few more questions. *Damn it.*

"Reece, how did you know?"

Nothing.

"How did you know, Reece?" Katie pressed on, now hearing another set of hands rapping urgently on the door frame and knowing she had only a scant few moments before Reece emerged from his haze.

In a whisper Reece answered through the drugs, "Ben was standing too close. The blasting cap. The PETN in the det cord. He was too close."

The knocks were now joined by another voice at the door.

She would not get another chance, so she pressed on ignoring what now must have been causing a scene in the hallway.

"Reece," Katie continued with a bit more urgency in her voice, "why did you say that night on Fishers that you didn't know? Why did you make me think that all these months?"

Still in the land between dreams and reality, the Versed fentanyl lowering inhibitions to a level where, no matter the answer, all would be right with the world, Reece responded truthfully, "I didn't want you waiting on me, Katie. I was going to die that night and I didn't want you to feel loss the way I had."

Katie gulped, her eyes misting over, suddenly aware of a tightening in her chest.

Suddenly aware again of the banging outside, she rose and gracefully crossed the room, opening the door to the concerned faces of Dr. Rosen, Dr. Port, the nurse, and a security guard.

"I am so sorry. We just needed some privacy."

"Ms. Buranek, you can't block the door to the room," a clearly agitated Dr. Rosen lectured, as she and Dr. Port moved to Reece's side to check the monitors attached via wires and tubes to his body.

Putting on her most demure and apologetic smile, Katie lowered her head. "I really do apologize. I just did not want a special moment interrupted."

"It's okay, Doc," Reece said groggily, struggling to push himself up to his elbows, "We had to discuss something here in the SCIF"

Dr. Rosen's demeanor softened. "Well, don't do that again, frogman, or I'll have you keel-hauled."

"Aye, aye, Doc." Reece smiled, attempting to raise his hand in salute but only managing to lift it a few inches off the bed.

"It's okay," Dr. Rosen assured the security guard who didn't know quite what to do in the presence of the cable news personality and the man whose face had been plastered on televisions and newspapers across the country just over a year ago. "I'll take it from here."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, walking back into the hall.

"You just rest up, Commander," the doctor said, switching into military mode. "Katie, you can stay here with him if you'd like. Just promise me you will not bar the door again, no matter what powers of persuasion he attempts to exert."

"I'll be on my guard."

As Dr. Port injected a micro dose of narcotic into Reece's IV to assist with the transition out of his dream state, Dr. Rosen turned to Katie. "He'll be up and walking around in a few hours, if you can believe that. He's going to be fine."

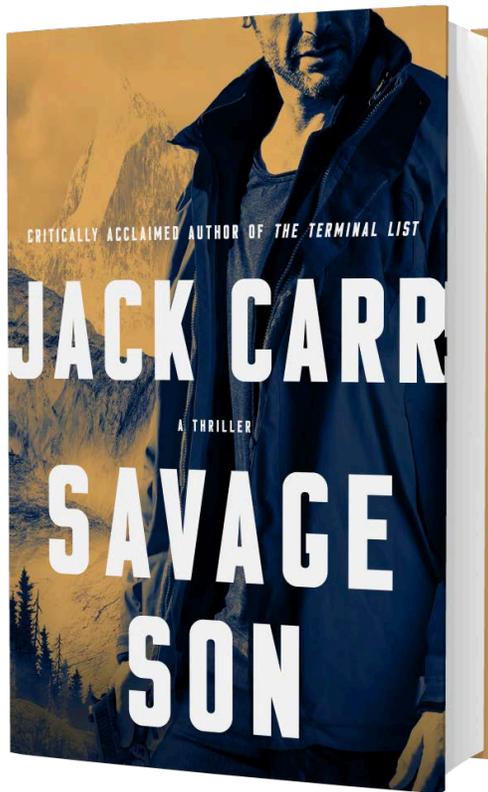
"Thank you, Doctor."

Moving toward the hallway with Dr. Port, the surgeon stopped and turned back toward Katie, who had again taken up residence at Reece's side. "I hope you got the answer you were looking for, Ms. Buranek."

Not taking her eyes off the frogman who had appeared to drift back to sleep, Katie replied, "I did."

Alone again in the recovery room, Katie wondered if Reece remembered her questions. If so, she knew that memory would soon dissolve along with the remaining mixture of Versed fentanyl.

"Rest up, James. I'll be here when you wake up."



[CLICK TO ORDER SAVAGE SON](#)