

# IN THE BLOOD

A THRILLER

# JACK CARR

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ATRIA

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For Michael Goodboe  
July 6, 1966–November 24, 2020

Warrior  
and

For all those at the Central Intelligence Agency whose  
lives are memorialized with stars

*For the wages of sin is death.*

—ROMANS 6:23

# PREFACE

IT IS OFTEN SAID that you don't hear the bullet that kills you, the idea being that the projectile is traveling faster than the speed of sound and therefore a well-placed head shot will put your target in the dirt before the vibrations of the bullet traveling through the atmosphere reach the tympanic membrane. Hence the devastating psychological impact and terror that can be achieved by a single sniper firing one shot and then disappearing into the bush. The enemy never knows when he might be in the crosshairs. He could be drawing breath, full of life, joking with a comrade one second, and gone the next, his soul snatched by an invisible demon behind the scope a mile away.

But this is more than a novel about snipers, more than a thriller about two men hunting each other across the globe. This is a novel of violent resolutions, but also one of forgiveness. At first glance those two themes might seem diametrically opposed, and you would be right. Often, dichotomies help us better understand ourselves and our impact on those around us. There is an advantage in eliminating a targeted individual on the battlefield and there is power in forgiveness. James Reece is a man struggling with those dichotomies.

By the time you read this, Navy SEAL Sniper James Reece may be on screens across the world, brought to life by Chris Pratt in the Amazon Prime Video series adaptation of *The Terminal List*. Why has this character resonated? My suspicion is that it's because he is on a journey, as are we all. And, just like each of us, he strives to learn, to evolve, to apply the wisdom of his experiences to the decisions and the threats of tomorrow. Reece resonates because within each of us there is a warrior and a hunter. It is in our DNA, suppressed by "progress" perhaps, but there nonetheless. Our ancestors were skilled in both disciplines, or we would not be here today. They fought and killed to protect their families and tribes. They hunted to provide sustenance. In more recent times they fought and killed for freedom.

Some critics do not like James Reece. He makes them uncomfortable. I have found that most of those he triggers are the most disconnected from the land and the animals that inhabit it. Putting food on the table is the job of a farmer somewhere between New York and Los Angeles. Many don't feel a responsibility to be prepared to protect their spouses and children when that primal task can be outsourced; just call 911. A moral vanity has trumped the obligation to protect their lives and the lives of those they love; that is the job of the police in a *civilized* society, after all. If that describes you, and you are picking this book up for the first time, perhaps you should put it down. You might not identify with, you might even despise, the protagonist in these pages. Self-reliant men, capable of extreme violence in defense of their lives, their families, and of freedom makes some people nervous.

I quote Robert E. Howard from *The Tower of the Elephant* in my third novel, *Savage Son*: "Civilized men are more discourteous than savages because they know they can be impolite without having their skulls split, as a general thing."

*As a general thing...*

I try to be thoughtful in all I do, whether it's the prose in these pages, the research for the novels, a social media post, a question for a guest on

my Danger Close Podcast, or an answer to an interview question. I feel an obligation to put the requisite time, energy, and effort into these endeavors, because you, the reader, have trusted me with your time—time you will never get back. I want my character to embody that quality as well. He is thoughtful yet deadly. He is a student of war and of the hunt. He is also searching, searching as we all are, for meaning, for purpose, for a mission. Will that mission always require the gun? Will Reece ever be able to stop killing for God and country? Will he become so disenfranchised by the political machine that he will lay down his weapons and retreat to the mountains of Montana?

In my previous book, *The Devil's Hand*, I explored what the enemy has learned by watching the United States on the field of battle for the previous twenty years at war. I put myself in their shoes. That research led me to believe that if I was a state or non-state adversary, I might just observe for a while; we are doing a good job at tearing ourselves apart from the inside.

In the course of writing this book, I watched the botched withdrawal from Afghanistan in disbelief, although I should not have been surprised—our elected representatives, appointed bureaucrats, and senior level military leaders have a twenty-year track record of failure with almost zero accountability. They have failed up. Understanding the nature of the conflict in which you are committing or have committed military forces is an essential element of leadership. As President Dwight D. Eisenhower said, “You know, farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil, and you’re a thousand miles from the corn field.” The same is true of warfare; it looks mighty easy when your rifle is a budget approval and you are six thousand miles from the battlefield.

These novels are also extremely therapeutic to write. Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, along with terrorist organizations and super-empowered individuals, certainly give me a lot to work with, but so do those in what Eisenhower coined the “military industrial complex.” It is

an ever-growing ecosystem of lobbyists, defense contractors, and flag-level military officers approving budgets in the Pentagon for the very companies they will advise as “members of the board” in retirement. Politicians and their relatives provide ample fodder as well, with elected officials who enter politics making between one hundred and two hundred thousand dollars a year, yet somehow amass wealth in the tens of millions over their tenure in government; aside from being humble public servants, apparently they are also astute investors. Politics is big business.

Is that a system worth serving? Is it one worth saving? Those are questions we must all ask and answer as citizens. As James Reece is pulled closer and closer to the heart of the American intelligence apparatus, they are ones he must ask and answer as well. What will be his answers? How much more power do we, the people, want to relinquish to what was intended to be a limited government? Our employees—elected representatives—rule by the “consent of the governed.” Those in positions of power would be wise to remember that as military and intelligence budgets inch closer to a trillion dollars a year, those investments resulted in two wars lost to insurgents wielding AKs and homemade IEDs working from caves and mud-walled compounds. Today, half the military budget and seventy percent of the intelligence budget goes to contractors. As a wise Marine Corps major general and Medal of Honor recipient once said, “War is a racket.”

James Reece has been a part of that system. He was betrayed by it just as were those who stepped up in service to the nation following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Read *The Afghanistan Papers* by Craig Whitlock for documentation. Reece has also been on the other side, becoming the terrorist, the insurgent, bringing the war home to the front doors of those whose decisions have sent young men and women to their deaths for two decades. Is James Reece now an instrument of those same political elites?



Before he can come to terms with questions of service, sacrifice, and the direction of his future path, Reece has business to attend to. He requires the resources of the very system he despises to put him in position; to get his crosshairs on a sniper, a sniper who is at this very moment also hunting him.

Which brings me back to the bullet that kills you. When it comes to the long-range dance of death, the victor may not always be the shooter most well-versed in the art and science of long-distance engagements. It's a thinking man's game. When two of the most lethal snipers on the planet face off, what will be the differentiator? When given the choice between answers or blood, what will James Reece choose? Turn the page to find out.

Jack Carr  
*February 16, 2022*  
Park City, Utah

# PROLOGUE

*Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, Africa*

SHE HAD BEEN STRIKINGLY beautiful once. At just over forty she still turned heads, a trait she often worked to her advantage both personally and professionally, but even as confident and, more importantly, competent as she was, it was not lost on her that fewer heads were turning these days. She was well aware that her looks had a limited shelf life. She accepted it. She had enjoyed them in her youth but now she had other, more valuable skills—skills she had put into practice hours earlier. As she waited her turn in line at the check-in counter at the Air France section of Thomas Sankara International Airport Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, no one would have guessed that earlier she had shot a man three times in the head with a Makarov 9x18mm pistol.

The Makarov would not have been her first choice but on assignments like this you used what was available. It had worked. The man was dead. The message had been sent.

Aliya Galin brushed her raven-black hair to the side and glanced at her smartphone, not because she wanted to know the time or scroll through a newsfeed or social media app, but because she did not want to stand out to local security forces as what she was, an assassin for the state of Israel. She needed to blend in with the masses, which meant

suppressing her natural predatory instincts. It was time to act like a sheep, nonattentive and relatively relaxed. She needed to look normal.

Had she been stopped and questioned, her backstory as a sales representative for a French financial firm would have checked out, as would her employment history, contacts, and references developed by the technical office just off the Glilot Ma'arav Interchange in Tel Aviv, home to the headquarters of the Mossad, the Israeli spy agency tasked with safeguarding the Jewish state. The laptop in her carry-on contained nothing that would betray her, no secret backdoor files storing incriminating information, no Internet searches for anything to do with Israel, terrorism, or her target. The computer was clean.

It was getting more difficult to travel internationally with the web of interconnected facial recognition cameras that continued to proliferate around the globe. Had it not been for the Mossad's Technology Department she would have been arrested many times over. The Israeli intelligence services had learned the lessons of facial recognition and passport forgery in the age of information the hard way on the international stage twelve years earlier, when twenty-six of their agents had been identified and implicated in the assassination of Mahmoud al-Mabhouh in a Dubai hotel room. Al-Mabhouh was the chief weapons procurement and logistics officer for the al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of the Hamas terrorist organization. The Mossad would not repeat the mistakes of Dubai.

Her French passport identified her as Mélanie Cotillard and if someone were to check her apartment in Batignolles-Monceau, they would find a flat commensurate with the income of a midlevel banker in the financial services industry. No disguises, weapons, or false walls would betray her true profession.

The man she had come to kill was responsible for the bombing of a Jewish day care center in Rabat, Morocco. Not all in the Arab world were supportive of Morocco recognizing Israel and establishing official diplo-

matic relations. If retribution was not swift, it emboldened the enemy, an enemy that wanted to see Israel wiped from the face of the earth. When Iranian-backed terrorists targeted Israeli children, justice was handled not by the courts but by Caesarea, an elite and secretive branch of the Mossad.

More and more, drones were becoming a viable option for targeted assassinations. They were getting smaller and easier to conceal. But, even with the options that came with the increasingly lethal UAV technology, the Mossad still preferred to keep some kills personal. Israel was a country built on the foundation of a targeted killing program, one that had continued to evolve, as did the threats to the nation. There was nothing that put as much fear in the hearts and minds of her enemies as an Israeli assassin.

Though Aliya maintained her dual U.S.-Israeli citizenship, she had not set foot in the United States in almost fifteen years. Israel was now home. Her parents had been born there and had been killed there, a suicide bomber from Hamas taking them from her just as they began to enjoy their retirement years. She had been in the Israel Defense Forces then, doing her duty with no intention of devoting her life to her adopted homeland. She would be back soon. She would quietly resign from her job in Paris, which had been set up for her by a *Sayan*, and return to Israel. *Sayanim* made up a global network of non-Israeli, though usually Jewish, assets that provided material and logistical support for Mossad operations, not for financial incentives but out of loyalty. Aliya planned to take time off to see her children and her sister who cared for them. She also planned to talk to the head of the special operations division about moving into management. She was getting tired. Perhaps this would be her final kill.

The assignment had been relatively straightforward. She did in fact have a legitimate meeting with a bank in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso's capital city. The instability inherent to the African continent also

provided opportunity for investment. Her cover for action intact, she had three days to locate and case the residence of Kofi Kouyaté. They called it a “close target reconnaissance” when she had worked with the Americans in Iraq. She reflected on the operational pace of those intense days often; the lessons learned, the relationships fostered.

Her days of seducing men in hotel bars were in the past, at least in this part of the world. Enough of them had ended up shot, stabbed, poisoned, or blown up after thinking with the small head between their legs that others became wary when a beautiful olive-skinned angel offered to buy them a drink.

The Mossad could have used a hit team of locals on this assignment, but her masters in Tel Aviv still preferred to send a message—hurt Israeli citizens and we will find you, no matter where you hide. Aliya’s generation of *Kidon*, assassins, had proven worthy inheritors of the legacy of Operation Wrath of God, which targeted those responsible for the 1972 massacre of Israeli athletes in Munich.

She had worked this job alone. No accomplice to turn her in or identify her to the infamous Burkina Faso internal state security service. If you were rolled up in this part of the world, you could look forward to an interrogation and torture worse than what you would experience in the West Bank. Out here, you would be questioned, beaten, burned, and mutilated before being gang raped until you were dead.

Though security was lax by internationally accepted standards, she still had to empty her purse and small suitcase onto a table beyond a metal detector that she had a strong suspicion was not plugged in. As the two security guards went through her bag, they paid a bit too much attention to her bras and underwear. Finding nothing suspicious that gave them an excuse to bring her into a back room for a secondary search, they let her proceed to her gate. Perhaps if she were younger they would have crafted an excuse. Aging in this business did have its benefits.

She was looking forward to leaving the African heat behind and set-

ting into her business-class seat on the air-conditioned Air France flight with service to Paris. She was ready for a drink. Air France still took pride in the French part of their lineage and served tolerable white wine even this early in the morning.

Waiting to board, she allowed her mind to wander to the past six months in France, the children she had left in the care of her younger sister in Israel, and a possible return to, no, not normalcy, as life had never been normal for Aliya, but possibly an evolution, yes, that was it, an evolution in her life. Maybe she would visit the United States, travel with her children, and introduce them to the country where she had lived with her parents until they returned to the Holy Land, when Aliya was ten. She smiled, imagining her son and daughter playing on the white sand beaches in the Florida sun. *Normal*. They were still young enough that she could be a mother to them. What would she do at headquarters? Work as an analyst in collections or as an advisor to the chief or deputy director? More appealing was a transfer out of operations and into training. Her hard-earned skills and experience would be put to good use at the Midrasha, the elite Mossad training academy. Would she be able to adjust after all these years in the field? Killing was all she knew.

As she boarded the flight, distracted by thoughts of the future, she failed to notice the man watching her from across the gate.

When she crossed the tarmac and disappeared into the plane, he placed a call.

. . .

Nizar Kattan studied the two men from neighboring Mali as they removed the Strela-2 missiles from the back of the Jeep.

A Soviet-era, shoulder-fired surface-to-air missile, the 9K32 Strela-2 was almost as common in sub-Saharan Africa as RPGs and AK variants. Nizar knew the Strela had been used to successfully shoot down multiple airliners over the years. It was a reliable missile system that had

proven its worth, but it was getting old. During the 2002 Mombasa attacks in Kenya that targeted an Israeli-owned hotel, the al-Qaeda inspired terrorists had fired two Strelas at an Israeli-chartered Boeing 747. Both missiles had missed the target. Having worked with enough indigenous talent over the years, Nizar chalked it up to operator error. Still, he wasn't going to take chances, which is why four of one of the Cold War's most prolific weapons would be used on this mission.

Nizar and his French accomplice had recruited the two patsies from the ranks of Nusrat al-Islam, or Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin to the initiated. The group formed when al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar al-Dine, and al-Mourabitoun merged in 2017. With a mandate that called for killing civilians from Western nations, they would be perfect. Still reverberating with the echoes of French colonial rule, insurgent groups in West Africa were ripe for exploitation. Financial incentives cemented the deal. In this case, Nusrat al-Islam thought they were striking a blow against their European oppressors in an operation organized by Nizar, who they believed to be an al-Qaeda facilitator. Their tasks were simple: They were to transport the four surface-to-air missiles from Mali into Burkina Faso, where they would link up with Nizar and the Frenchman and be given their target. Unbeknownst to them, their other task required them to die.

French special forces soldiers had proven extremely proficient in decimating the ranks of Nusrat al-Islam in Africa. Say what you will of the French, their operators were some of the best in the world. The officials meeting weekly in the Élysée Palace turned a blind eye to French military and intelligence actions in Africa. With few war correspondents covering what was essentially a forgotten conflict, French soldiers targeted and killed with impunity. Most of the developed world cared little for what transpired on the Dark Continent. The French government was smart enough to allow their citizens the freedom to travel, train, and join terror groups abroad. What they were loath to do within their own

borders even in the wake of the attacks in Nice and Paris, they were more than happy to do in their former colonies and protectorates, perhaps as a psychological fuck-you to those who had thrown them out in the wars of liberation that swept the continent in the mid to late twentieth century. In Europe, France was a liberal bastion of democratic socialism. Overseas they hunted their enemies with ruthless efficiency.

Jean-Pierre Le Drian was capable and resourceful. His former teammates would have described him as merciless. A former French Foreign Legion *maréchal des logis-chef*, he now found employment as a soldier of fortune, a mercenary with an axe to grind. Rather than face charges for an atrocity in Africa that was too much for even those fighting an expeditionary counterinsurgency, the former staff sergeant was on the run. And he was valuable. He knew just where to look to find black-market weapons and regional guns for hire in this forgotten corner of Africa.

Le Drian fancied himself a successor to the Waffen SS commandos who escaped Nazi Germany following World War II and found refuge in the Legion, fighting in Indochina in the Devil's Brigade. Were those stories fact or fiction? It didn't matter. Le Drian was guided by the myth. He was his own Devil's Brigade of the new century. He knew that he had done what was necessary. These savages deserved no respect. What was coming next would be easy for him.

Nizar could not care less about the plight of the locals. Africa was just as shitty as the places he had left behind in the Middle East. His assignments in Syria and Ukraine had not been out of allegiance to Allah but out of a desire to leave that world behind. He had feigned support and devotion to *the cause* time and time again, always wondering how those around him could be so naive. Allah didn't care for Nizar. The prophet and the cult that followed him were no different than adherents to any religion the world over, con artists in a protection racket just like he had witnessed in his time with the Bratva, the Russian mafia. Nizar was clear on where real power lay: in the dollar, the euro, the yuan, gold,



diamonds, silver, and now bitcoin. Enough of those and you could be a living, breathing god in the flesh.

What Nizar wanted, Allah could not deliver. Praying five times a day in accordance with the Five Pillars only wasted time. His skill with a rifle had been his ticket out of Syria and then to Russia and Montenegro. When his mentor had outlived his usefulness, Nizar had put him down with a shot from a suppressed Stechkin pistol, just as he'd been instructed by his then handler, General Qusim Yedid, a Syrian general who had been found shot in the knee and then poisoned with a highly toxic substance. Nizar had put enough of the story together to conclude that the general's death was the work of James Reece, the man he currently had in his sights. Nizar had escaped to Moscow and into the waiting hands of the Russian mafia before he struck out on his own, finding a home in Montenegro, a way station of illicit trade over millennia. He enjoyed the protection he received there but sensed it was time to move on. *Trust your instincts*. His next kill would allow him to relocate: Thailand, the Philippines, Argentina. He had not decided yet. This last payday, James Reece's death, would make it possible. It would also be his greatest challenge to date, as his prey might at this very moment be hunting him.

Fortunately for Nizar, James Reece was a man with enemies; enemies at senior levels of governments hostile to the United States, governments with intelligence services that had close ties to proxy terrorist groups. Nizar briefly wondered if the information that had led him to Burkina Faso had originated in Russia or Iran. No matter. It was time to move a pawn on the board. It was time to draw Reece out of the mountains of North America and onto the battlefield.

Nizar closed his eyes and took in the dry morning air. He was ready.

The men were dressed in the uniforms of the Burkina Faso security forces. They had parked off a red dirt road flanked by the long grasses of the savanna. Their position gave them a clear line of sight to aircraft departing Thomas Sankara International Airport.

The retainer money from Eric Sawyer that had been laundered through a construction company in Montenegro was not insignificant, but it was not quite enough. The former Army Ranger and private military company CEO had used Nizar to eliminate problems. He had died under suspicious circumstances on his island property in the West Indies, but not before he had set up a contract to eliminate James Reece. Was the CIA involved in Sawyer's death? Nizar could not be sure, but he had his suspicions. Had the retainer been a few more million, Nizar would have considered taking the money and not fulfilling the contract. With Sawyer dead, there would have been no repercussions. Perhaps if he were not on Reece's radar, Nizar would have walked. But he was. Nizar suspected that Reece had killed two of Nizar's past handlers. The former SEAL was a threat, one that needed to be dealt with. Putting him in the ground solved two problems: It eliminated an exceptionally competent professional targeting him and it unlocked the other half of Sawyer's money, allowing Nizar to disappear and to not have to go for his gun every time he caught movement in the shadows. If he was going to vanish and leave this life behind, he needed to kill James Reece.

The Frenchman had come to him courtesy of his new handler, the man in the wheelchair. They had met in person only once, in Dubrovnik. The coastal Croatian city was close enough to Montenegro that Nizar could make the trip with relatively few complications. His potential handler, on the other hand, had to travel by train and ferry from Turin, in northern Italy, to the Balkan state on the Adriatic. Nizar had watched him over the course of four days, looking for signs of surveillance. The man in the wheelchair was a veteran of the game; he knew Nizar was observing and vetting him. He was a professional and would have expected nothing less. Nizar found himself grudgingly gaining respect for the small man who pushed himself through the streets and hauled himself in and out of taxis and into restaurants and cafés without asking for help or letting a moment's worth of self-pity cross his face. The man wore

a different tailored suit every day, a bold silk ascot around his neck. Like Nizar, he stayed off cell phones and computers. He was a student of the old school. How he ended up in the wheelchair was a source of mystery and conjecture to those who lived and worked in the darker side of the clandestine economy. It was rumored he had been put there by a sniper.

Having established that the man was not bait, Nizar sat down with him over coffee, and they worked out their arrangement. Without Sawyer he needed someone else who could navigate the underworld, acquire weapons, and find additional talent. Additional talent would be necessary on this job. His one and only in-person meeting with his new handler had felt like a job interview, the small man confined to the chair studying him with those hawklike eyes, judging, assessing.

Nizar needed a partner on this mission, one with language abilities and a high level of martial prowess; the man in the wheelchair had delivered. If James Reece was as good as his track record would suggest, a second set of eyes and another scoped rifle in the fight would pay dividends.

Le Drian glanced at his watch and barked at the two “soldiers.” When operating in this part of the world it helped to have a French citizen on your side who also spoke Arabic and Mòoré. That he boasted a background in the French Foreign Legion, operating almost exclusively in Africa, made him worth the investment. That he had a beef with the French government only helped solidify his allegiance.

“Just a few more minutes,” the Frenchman said in flawless Arabic.

“Unless they are delayed,” Nizar responded.

“Yes, always a probability in this part of the world. *This is Africa*, after all.”

“Are they ready?” Nizar asked.

“Yes. They think they are making a statement, killing the colonial invaders, which, as you know, appeals to me.”

Le Drian could never set foot in France again, banned to the outer reaches of what had once been an empire. Even the French Foreign

Legion had standards. Hunting and killing were one thing, torture was another; the memory of Algeria had yet to fade.

“Get ready,” Nizar said. “Confirm the tail number and—”

The phone in the Frenchman’s pocket chirped. He spoke in Mòoré and hit the End button.

“She’s on board. Plane is taxiing.”

“Good. It is time.”

• • •

Aliya leaned back in her seat and took a sip of wine. It was just after 9:00 a.m.

The plane gained speed and lifted off, clearing the buildings at the east end of the runway and making a slow turn over the capital city.

The mission was *never* over. Not now. Not when she landed in France. Not when she returned to Israel. Not ever. This was a war and she was a combatant, something that was driven home in Iraq when the Mossad had detailed her to the Central Intelligence Agency. Her dual U.S.-Israeli citizenship allowed her to liaise between the Mossad and CIA on matters pertaining to the state of Israel. She missed those days. She missed *that* mission. It was straightforward. She missed the people she had worked with. She missed one in particular.

As the aircraft banked northward and gained altitude, she looked through her window. The buildings turned to huts; the semi-paved road of the capital morphed to red dirt and then to the grasses of the African plains. She wondered how long it would take them to find the man she had killed.

Had she not been a trained intelligence officer she might not have taken note of the green Jeep and faded purple van that stood out in contrast to the light brown grasses that surrounded them. At this low altitude she could still discern the outline of four men looking up at the gigantic plane headed for Europe. Had she not been on the receiving end

of RPGs and Katyusha rockets, she might have mistaken the four flashes for the glint off a windshield or perhaps a deformity in the thick plastic window at her shoulder. But she *was* a trained intelligence officer and she *had* been on the receiving end of enemy rockets and missiles.

She thought of her two children. She thought of her husband, who had preceded her in death. She closed her eyes.

*Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no harm, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff—they comfort . . .*

For the briefest of moments, she wondered if she was the intended target and just before the first missile impacted the fuselage, she determined that was the only logical conclusion. She was responsible for the innocent lives on the plane: mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, children, and grandparents, who would never take another breath. She wondered who had betrayed her and she went to her death with the weight of one hundred and twenty-eight additional souls on her already troubled conscience.

PART ONE

# ALIYA

THE OPERATIVE

FOR BY WISE GUIDANCE YOU CAN WAGE YOUR WAR.  
—PROVERBS 24:6 AND FORMER MOTTO OF THE MOSSAD

# CHAPTER 1

*Kumba Ranch, Flathead Valley, Montana*

“WHAT’S THAT HUNK OF steel on your hip?” Reece asked as his friend entered the cabin.

They called it “the cabin.” Most people would have called it a home but for the fact that it was on the Hastingses’ property and was originally built as a guest house. It wasn’t ostentatious by any stretch, but it certainly was not a hovel. Its log timber frame blended in with the environment with a beautiful stone fireplace and large wraparound deck. A sloping grass lawn led to a dock where James had been staying in shape with morning swims and kettlebell workouts.

“It’s good to see you, too, Reece.”

“So, what’s the pistol?”

“My 1911.”

“That is not your *old* 1911.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

Raife Hastings had been carrying the family heirloom for as long as Reece could remember. The pistol began its life as a commercial Colt 1911 .45 that made its way to Great Britain in the early 1940s under the Lend-Lease Act. Raife’s grandfather was issued the sidearm when he joined B Squadron of the Long Range Desert Group, an elite reconnaissance

unit that operated behind the lines against German and Italian forces in North Africa during World War II. He was a leader in the Special Air Service after returning to Rhodesia at the end of the war, and his handgun went with him. Raife's father, Jonathan Robin Hastings, had followed family custom, passing SAS selection in England. When Southern Rhodesia split from Great Britain to become its own, rogue nation, Jonathan stayed on with the now-independent SAS regiment and later helped found the famed Selous Scouts alongside Colonel Ronald Reid-Daly. The pistol was passed to Raife upon his graduation from BUD/S and he smuggled it downrange on each of his deployments to continue the tradition. It had served his family well and though he wouldn't admit it, he thought of it as a good-luck charm.

"Yes, I get it, Raife, but that's a *different* 1911."

What weapon a person carried and how they carried it told Reece a lot about them. Reece's eyes always went to the hands; the result of growing up with a father who served in the SEAL Teams in Vietnam and then transferred into the ranks of the Central Intelligence Agency. Right- or left-handed, concealed or open carry, appendix or 4–5 o'clock holster position, striker-fired polymer-frame pistol or cocked and locked 1911, Kydex or leather holster, type of knife clipped to pocket, shoes, pants, belt, hat, watch; *all of these things tell a story*, his father had said.

In Raife's case, he wore Courteney Selous boots, jeans, and a belt Reece knew was made from the hide of a Cape buffalo. A leather holster from Alessi sat just behind his right hip. Two inches taller than Reece's six feet, he radiated competence and strength and looked like he would feel right at home in the UFC's Octagon. His emerald-green eyes and tan face with a scar that ran from his left eye to his lip, camouflaged by three days of stubble, gave one the not-incorrect impression that Raife was a man of the land and someone not unfamiliar with violence.

Raife shook his head and looked to Katie, who was setting up a fly rod on the kitchen table.



“Since Reece is socially inept and is incapable of just saying ‘hello,’ I will tell *you*, Katie; I finally retired the old warhorse to the safe, at least until I can pass it along to my son.” Raife’s wife had given birth to a baby boy as Reece was emerging from the wilds of Siberia on a previous mission. “Your boyfriend keeps getting me into firefights, so instead of worrying about losing it, I had Jason Burton at Heirloom Precision build this for me.”

“Well, you will be happy to know that one of my goals is to keep him, and you, out of additional firefights. I think I’ve had enough of those to last a lifetime,” Katie said, remembering that her relationship with Reece had been interrupted on more than a few occasions by men with guns who wanted them dead.

“I have been doing quite well as of late, isn’t that right, Katie? I haven’t been shot at in at least two days.”

Katie rolled her eyes.

“Let me check it out,” Reece said, gesturing to his friend.

Raife drew the pistol, being sure to keep the muzzle in a safe direction. He removed the Wilson Combat magazine and placed it into his front pocket, pushed down on the thumb safety, and racked the slide to the rear, ejecting a .45-caliber round from the chamber before handing John Browning’s iconic masterpiece to his blood brother.

Reece inspected the pistol and let out a long whistle. “This must have cost you hundreds,” Reece said, knowing the pistol was essentially priceless, coming from one of the top 1911 gunsmiths in the world.

Now it was Raife’s turn to roll his eyes.

“Nice,” Reece said admiringly. “Jason Burton does incredible work. Pre-Series 70?”

“When did you become a 1911 expert?” Raife asked.

“Since you walked in here with this.”

“Base gun is a 1969 Colt Pre-Series 70,” Raife confirmed. “National Match-style slide with serrations which were most likely an overrun from a contract with the Army Marksmanship Unit.”

“Can I try the trigger?”

“Be my guest.”

Reece visually inspected the chamber and then rode the slide home out of respect for the masterpiece in his hands. He pointed it in a safe direction and pressed the trigger.

“Wow! Perfection,” he said, locking the slide to the rear and taking a closer look at the impeccable work.

“That action is smooth. Did you pin the safety?”

“Of course.”

“Short trigger, ivory grips, ambi-safety, Kart National Match barrel, flattened slide top with ‘arrowhead’ serrations, custom rear sight, gold-inlaid front sight, and maker’s mark under the grip panel. Classic. The rear slide serrations stop at the top of the frame rails—that’s a sweet touch.”

Raife’s eyes moved to Katie.

“Don’t look at me. He might as well be speaking Greek.”

“You know, I should get one of these. Good thing I have your dad’s credit card.”

Raife shook his head. “I don’t know why he did that.”

Reece could not help needling his friend. The only reason he had reluctantly accepted the card was so he could bring it up to get under Raife’s thick skin.

“And I quote,” Reece began as he handed the pistol back.

“Here he goes,” Katie said. “See what you’ve started.”

*“Thank you for saving my son’s life. You are welcome to stay in the cabin as long as you would like. That’s when he handed me the credit card, which I of course readily accepted.”*

“He’s going to regret that,” Raife said, tucking a strand of shoulder-length dark blond hair behind a cauliflower ear.

“It’s a distinct possibility. Right now, I’m using it to pay for physical therapy; my back’s still a little sore from carrying you up that mountain in Russia.”

“*Bloody hell,*” Raife replied. A hint of Rhodesia still slipped into his voice, especially when he was annoyed. “It was more like a hill.”

“Easy to say when you are passed out on my back for most of the climb.”

“You two are something else,” Katie said, getting to her feet. “Raife, can I get you something to drink? Beer? Wine? Beer might be easier to get to, as the wine is in the garage and is currently blocked in by about a hundred boxes of books James had shipped out from Virginia.”

“Oh yeah,” Reece interjected, “Jonathan also said that I could visit the wine cellar anytime I wish and that nothing was off-limits.”

“Now I know you are lying.”

“I might be paraphrasing a bit.”

“A bit?”

“Katie, spare no expense for our friend,” Reece shouted to Katie, who was going over the beer inventory in the kitchen refrigerator.

“He’s incorrigible,” Katie said to their guest.

“Katie, don’t use big words like that around Raife. He’s going to have to look them up later.”

The truth was that Raife was one of the smartest and toughest people Reece had ever met. From a family that defined the word *rugged*, the blood of Africa still flowed through his veins. In what was then Rhodesia, you didn’t call a plumber if a water pipe broke or an electrician if you lost power or a mechanic if your truck wouldn’t start. You fixed it yourself. If your home was attacked you didn’t call the police, you defended your land and your family. Then you dug a hole and buried the bodies. You were self-reliant as a practical necessity. Your very survival, and the survival of your family, depended on it.

“I’ll take a beer,” Raife said.

“IPA? Cloudcroft?” Katie asked, looking in the fridge.

“That’ll do.”

“James?”

“Sounds great.”

Katie grabbed three beers from the fridge, handing two off before opening one for herself.

“Cheers, boys. Raife, can you stay for dinner?” she asked, walking to the kitchen to start prepping.

“I’m going to need to get back. Just wanted to say a quick hello.”

“I believe Raife has diaper duty tonight. How’s the leg feeling today?” Reece asked with genuine concern. Just as Raife had helped Reece get back into fighting shape after his brain surgery, Reece had been hitting the trails with his friend, slowly upping the mileage and moving to progressively more difficult terrain as Raife’s leg continued its rehabilitation. The break from a fall on Medny Island, Russia, that almost killed him had taken its toll.

“Feels good, brother. It’s almost there.”

“Great, because tomorrow’s run will be one to remember.”

“Aren’t you guys worried about overtraining?” Katie asked from the kitchen.

“I’m not familiar with the term,” Reece quipped.

“I don’t know why I even try,” Katie muttered to herself.

“So,” Raife said, taking a seat. “Where is that Cabot?”

“That ol’ thing? I think it’s around here somewhere.”

That *ol’ thing* was relatively new. Reece had accompanied Raife and Jonathan down to Helena for the Montana Outfitter and Guides Association banquet to support Big Hearts Under the Big Sky, a program focused on children with life-threatening illnesses and military members who have provided extraordinary service to the country. An Apocalypse 1911, kindly donated by Rob Bianchin of Cabot Guns in Pennsylvania, went up for auction. Two cattle ranchers went head-to-head in a bidding war. The crusty old rancher who won promptly marched over to Reece and presented it to him. Apparently, after five or six too many Neversweat bourbons, Raife’s father had confirmed a rumor or two. Reece tried to

turn it down, but the old rancher would hear none of it. He finally turned to the elder Hastings and proclaimed: *Jonathan, I am sending this to you. Make sure the boy gets it. Now, I'll not hear another word about it.*

"Let's give them a run before we get too far into these beers, eh?" Raife said.

"Were you guys always this competitive?" Katie asked. "Never mind, rhetorical question."

"Why don't I just run my carry?" Reece asked.

"Still using that XL?" Raife asked, referring to the SIG Sauer P365 XL that Reece had taken a liking to over the past couple of years.

"Yep, I love this thing," Reece said, tapping the BlackPoint Tactical Mini WING holster on his belt. "Icarus Precision grip module, Parker Mountain Machine threaded barrel and comp, Trijicon RMRcc red dot."

"Did you go with the 3.25 or 6.5 MOA dot?"

Reece eyed his friend quizzically.

"Since when do you know anything about pistol red dots?"

Raife smiled and shrugged. "Think you remember how to use iron sights?" he asked.

"It's possible. Let me see if I can find that Cabot. I know it's around here somewhere."

Reece, of course, knew exactly where it was. Following their early morning trail runs, functional fitness routines, and shooting drills, Reece would bid his friend farewell and then put in another shooting session later in the day when Raife was in town, this time with the Cabot Apocalypse. Reece was starting to suspect that Raife might be doing something similar with red dot optics.

"Look at that, I found her," Reece said, returning from the bedroom. "Where is the safety on these things?"

"For Christ's sake. Let's do it. What course of fire?"

"Shooter's choice," Reece responded. "What are we shooting for?"

"I'd say pink slips, but your new ride leaves something to be desired,"

Raife said, referring to the 1985 Jeep Wagoneer that Reece had driven to Montana and that had limped its way into the barn off the driveway.

“You just don’t appreciate the golden age of SUVs.”

“You do know that ICON Land Cruiser you managed to destroy cost more than most people’s homes, right?”

“That’s the best part about it having been a gift,” Reece countered, getting to his feet and heading for the door.

Raife shook his head.

Katie forced a smile, remembering being trapped in her seat belt in the overturned vehicle, the blood running from her nose and mouth, Iranian assassins converging on the truck, the pistol thrust through the broken window in front of her face, Reece unconscious next to her. She turned her attention to the Bravo Company carbine in the corner of the room next to Reece’s LBT plate carrier, remembering something Reece’s CIA buddy “Ox” had told her as he put them through a team tactics course in Virginia: *The pistol is just to fight your way to the rifle. Then get to work.* The rifle’s magazine was loaded with Black Hills 77-grain cartridges. The rail held an Aimpoint Micro with magnifier, SureFire Scout light, Viking Tactics sling, and an ATPIAL infrared laser aiming device. Katie had an identical setup in the bedroom. *Just in case*, Reece liked to say.

“How about this: Whoever loses hosts the next wild game dinner,” Raife said.

“The next *three*,” Reece countered.

“The next three,” Raife agreed.

“I also would have pushed for pink slips, but I want a vehicle that works,” Reece said, alluding to Raife’s Defender 110. “Where is she anyway? In the shop?”

Raife looked back at Katie for help but she just shrugged.

“Keep me out of this. My 4Runner does just fine.”

“What’s that?” Reece asked, stopping dead in his tracks on the front

deck that overlooked the gravel driveway. “I thought Land Rover stopped making the old-school Defenders. Did they feel bad and want to put mechanics back to work?”

“It’s an INEOS Grenadier.”

“A what?”

“Some bloke in England wanted to build a truck that kept the look of the old Defenders but . . .”

“But actually worked?”

“*But* that were built to modern standards,” Raife corrected. “This is the first one in the States. My dad somehow got his hands on it.”

“I changed my mind. Let’s shoot for pink sli—”

The radio on the desk just inside the door interrupted them.

“Reece, Kumba Base, over. Boys, pick up.”

The tone in Jonathan’s voice indicated this was more than a simple check-in.

Reece moved to the radio, picked up the mic, and hit Transmit.

“Kumba, go for Reece. I’m here with Raife and Katie.”

“Turn on the telly, boys. Aircraft shot down back home.”

“We’ll check it out.”

“It’s on the BBC now,” Jonathan added.

“Roger. Katie, can you . . .”

Katie was already on it.

*“... 128 people are confirmed dead in Africa’s worst terrorist incident in recent memory. Early reports indicate that multiple missiles were launched from a nearby field. Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement saying the offensive will continue until French military forces and their civilian enablers have been pushed from West Africa: ‘French civilians are complicit in the massacres of our people and only when the last French citizen leaves Burkina Faso and Mali will our territory truly be liberated from French colonial oppression.’ In October of 2020, French special operations forces killed fifty militants in northern*

*Mali, including several key leaders of the JNIM organization. It is unclear at this time if this most recent terrorist attack is a direct retaliation for that engagement.”*

“Bloody tragic,” Raife said.

Reece looked to his friend and back to the BBC report.

“It’s someone else’s war, Reece,” his blood brother said, reading his friend’s mind.

Reece took a breath.

“Okay, let’s train,” he said. “Katie, we’ll be back in a few.”

They left the cabin and walked to the range Reece had set up just behind a barn that served as his functional fitness Sorinex gym, mixed martial arts training facility, and weapons cleaning area, but his mind was no longer on 1911s, courses of fire, or wild game dinners. It was on a plane, half a world away.

• • •

When they returned, Katie was preparing the grill.

“Raife, sure you can’t stay? Smoked trout.”

“I’m guessing you caught those. I’ve seen this guy attempt to fly-fish,” he responded, gesturing to Reece. “As much as I would love it, I’ll be getting home.”

“Next time,” Katie said.

“Any word on getting your own show?”

“I’ve been guest-hosting quite a bit so we will see.”

Investigative journalist Katie Buranek had burst into the media spotlight with a series of articles she had written exposing the lies surrounding the 2012 Benghazi fiasco. Her follow-on book, aptly titled *The Benghazi Betrayal*, uncovered the truth behind the attack in which the United States ambassador to Libya and a Foreign Service officer were killed. A small group of dedicated CIA contractors fought for their lives that day, abandoned by the elected and appointed officials in Washing-



ton, D.C. Reece had known the two SEALs killed during the thirteen-hour gun fight and was aware of Katie's reporting before she introduced herself on Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan after the ambush that killed Reece's SEAL Troop and changed the course of his life. Katie was thrust back into the headlines when she became part of the story involving the testing of drugs on the nation's most elite special operators. Her reporting on the conspiracy to cover up the effects of those experiments led to the resignation of a president. Katie was a thorn in the side of the political establishment and legacy media corporations more concerned with promoting an agenda than seeking truth, regardless of where it might lead. That made her dangerous.

"They'd give you your own show if they knew what was good for them."

"Thank you, Raife."

"Can I interest you in another beer?" Reece offered.

"I'll take one to go. Annika is feeling a little tired of late so I'm going to do my duty."

"Understood. Cheers, my friend," Reece said.

Raife's home was just a few miles away, higher up on the mountain and nestled back in the trees. Jonathan and Caroline Hastings wanted to create a place where their kids would want to return with their grandchildren. It had worked for the most part. Raife was home running the outfitting side of the business, building custom rifles, and caring for his young family. Victoria was in Connecticut and working in finance but a separate home for her and her family awaited anytime they returned for a visit. His youngest sibling, Hana, the wild child, had been abducted in Romania and then hunted for sport on an island off Kamchatka, Russia, by a man Reece had ultimately killed. She had launched herself off a cliff, taking her own life rather than allow Aleksandr Zharkov the satisfaction of the kill. Reece had shot the Russian intelligence officer twice through the chest with a recurve bow just as the monster was about to take Raife

to the grave. Caroline and Jonathan were bound to Reece in ways just as strong, if not stronger, than blood.

“Glad you have that Grenadier,” Reece called after his former Team-mate.

“Why’s that?”

“It means I can enjoy my evening with Katie and not have to tow you home in the Defender.”

Raife reached in his pocket as if he were searching for his keys and came out with his middle finger extended.

“You deserve it,” Katie said, smiling at Reece. “Please give Annika our best. Let’s get together for dinner tomorrow. I assume, because you shot 1911s, that we are hosting.”

“You assume correctly,” Raife confirmed.

“I just couldn’t bear the thought of us having to suffer through one of Raife’s meals,” Reece said. “Bring everyone down. Let’s do a mullie leg, Marin County-style on the Burch Barrel: rosemary mop, Flip Flop sauce, salt, pepper, Jonathan’s finest Cab.”

“We’ll be here. Let’s shoot with my dad before dinner. You have twenty-four hours to work on your skills.”

“Deal, loser has to—”

“Reece,” Raife interrupted, suddenly serious again.

Katie had left the TV on as she prepared dinner. It was turned to Fox News, where she continued to work as a contributor remotely from a studio in Whitefish.

Reece turned his head and then joined his friend behind the couch.

The network was running the names and photos of the victims.

“Katie, does this rewind?” Raife asked.

“Yes,” she said, walking over and handing Raife the remote.

Raife pointed it at the screen, the images now playing in reverse.

Katie looked at Reece. She had seen him like this before. He stared

at the screen as if nothing else mattered. Gone was the jovial man of mere moments ago. In his place stood someone who was all business and radiated death.

Raife paused on an image. The name Mélanie Cotillard was displayed under the photo of a woman in her late thirties or early forties. Dark hair. Olive skin. She was dressed in business attire and the photo appeared to be from a professional online bio.

“Is it her?” Raife asked.

Reece continued to stare at the screen. Eyes narrow and focused.

“Reece?” Katie asked, concern creeping into her voice.

Raife turned.

“Reece.”

But Reece wasn't in Montana. He was in an ambush in Baghdad. Bullets skipping off the street in front of him, a man to his left going down, the turret gunner from his vehicle taking a round to the throat, Reece returning fire at the muzzle flashes that lit up tubes of his night vision, scrambling into the vehicle to get behind the .50 caliber machine gun.

“Reece,” Raife said more firmly.

Reece was in the Combat Support Hospital in the Green Zone, covered in blood, sweat, dirt and grime, rifle still at his side, waiting for word from the trauma surgeons. The door opening. A dark-haired woman in civilian clothes moving toward him.

“*Reece*,” Raife said again.

“It's her,” Reece confirmed, not taking his eyes from the screen.

“Who? What's going on?” Katie asked. “Mélanie Cotillard? French citizen?”

Raife looked at Katie and then at Reece.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“I'm sure. But her name is not Mélanie Cotillard and she is not a French citizen.”

Katie wanted to press but restrained herself, knowing Reece was thinking something through.

“Her name is Aliya Galin. She’s an assassin.”

“*What?*” Katie said.

“I’m sorry, Katie. I need to get back to Langley.”

# CHAPTER 2

*SVR Headquarters, Yasenevo District, Moscow, Russia*

IT WAS RUMORED IN certain circles that the president of Russia was the richest man in the world. For the former KGB officer, his money meant power. When analysts at the CIA ventured that he was the most powerful individual on the planet, they were not far off.

As director of the SVR, Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, Mikhail Gromyko kept a close eye on reporting related to the financial history and status of his direct superior, the president. That his name was nowhere to be found on the Forbes World's Billionaires List only added to the mystery and the myth. Gromyko scoffed when he saw reports of a Western leader's son selling "art" for inflated prices to people hoping to influence the U.S. president. Stooping to such levels was embarrassing. Years ago, Gromyko would have instructed his service to ensure the buyer was a Russian asset. Today that wasn't necessary. There were other ways to exert influence.

The Americans still adhered to a set of rules. There was accountability, not for those who lost their wars, but built into the system in general, though it was getting harder to tell the difference between the U.S. system and that of the former Soviet Union. Had Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev known what the Americans would do to themselves of

their own accord in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, they would have played their cards differently during the Cold War. The irony was not lost on Gromyko that the Americans had won the Cold War just to slip closer and closer to a state that was not dissimilar to that of their old Soviet adversary.

What made a country? Borders, language, and culture. The Americans were doing away with all three. It would lead to their downfall, which made it all the more important to deal with James Reece.

Communism or capitalism: Both were about control. He hadn't always believed that. He was old enough to remember studying the American opposition, sometimes envious of the freedoms enshrined in their constitution. In the USSR of his youth, with few exceptions, you had to be born to that freedom. He was one of the lucky ones. He remembered the American-style cities the KGB had built for their trainees. Gromyko had been taught how to order a drink, pump gas, buy a burger, and light a cigarette. *American cigarettes*. Back then that training had been necessary. The simulated American cities the Academy of Foreign Intelligence had built in the 1960s and used through the 1980s still existed, though today they were life-sized intelligence museums, monuments of a bygone era. Gromyko would visit the sites from time to time when he needed to think. He would light a Marlboro the way he had been taught by his instructors and walk the now-deserted grounds, remembering the past to apply its lessons to the future.

The West believed they had won. It was that belief that allowed them to let down their guard, focus inward, find the wrongs in their society, and exploit and even exacerbate them for political gain. It was a myopic strategy. He had expected more of his Cold War rival. That they did not study or learn from their history did not bode well for their future. *The death of the West*. The USSR hadn't needed ballistic missile submarines or a nuclear arsenal larger than the United States'. All they had needed to defeat the Americans was patience.

Director Gromyko was a student of history. It had always been about the ruling class and those who served them. The Americans had just forgotten. In the early nineties, the director of the SVR thought he would not see the decline of the United States in his lifetime. Now he wasn't so sure. The cancer that sapped his strength was slow moving, possibly even survivable if he kept up his treatments—treatments that had to be kept secret: Any sign of weakness would diminish his power. At his age it might even be the type of cancer one died *with* rather than *from*. The Americans were also facing a cancer, one that was spreading faster than the tumor in his small intestine.

He had almost laughed when they told him. The doctor had been nervous. In Russia, when you diagnose the director of the SVR with a potentially fatal cancer, you possess knowledge that could be more deadly than the disease in your patient. Gromyko had always thought it would be lung cancer—his beloved Marlboros—taking him to the grave, courtesy of the Americans.

Not even his counterpart in the FSB, the Russian Federal Security Service, knew about his condition, and that was how Gromyko wanted to keep it. Pavel Dashkov as director of the FSB and responsible for internal state security matters, would see it as his job to know the health status of his counterpart in the SVR. They were both members of the Russian Security Council and appointed by the same Russian president. All three had trained at the Academy of Foreign Intelligence back when it went by a different name. The true power of the Russian state rested not in the council but in the three of them: the president and his two intelligence directors.

They had been relatively young operatives when President Ronald Reagan took the stage at Moscow State University in May 1988. Gromyko had been in the audience. He had listened to the speech and noted the reactions of the students. He had seen the writing on the wall, but his focus had been elsewhere. The KGB had a mission in those days, and

though the name of the country and the intelligence service charged with protecting it had changed, the mission had not.

The network of spies so carefully infiltrated into American society and curated over the years remained in place. As the KGB became the SVR and FSB, America turned its attention inward, distracted with troubles of its own making. When President George H. W. Bush called it a “New World Order,” he was right. That New World Order was one where money and data equaled power. Which military had the superior tank or plane was of little importance, as the Americans had discovered on their misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. The future was in data collection and its manipulation. But it was not only intelligence and information that determined the destiny of nations, it was the courage to act on it. The Americans had grown weak. Divide and conquer. Fake news, misinformation, social media, troll farms—all were weapons in the new war, but Gromyko had not forgotten that the future could also be altered by putting a bullet where it needed to go at precisely the right moment in history. The Russian president he served was not afraid to act.

The Americans had almost destroyed themselves with their COVID mandates; failed wars in a part of the world they would never understand; race riots; political upheaval; and a border policy of which Gromyko’s predecessors could only have dreamed. Russia would see the United States fall. They only had to nudge it along. Shadow governments, deep-state conspiracies, and political and social division were all perpetuated and encouraged by algorithms and “web brigades” of bots and trolls with global reach. Russian “hackers” had free rein to take advantage of the platforms created by American tech companies. Russia was using Americas’ own inventions to alter its destiny.

It was almost too easy. *Fools*. The people had the power, but they could not be trusted with it. That was the lesson. The American experiment had failed. Russia would be the beneficiary.

If only the conspiracy theorists knew how close some of their ideas



were to reality. Russian bots were hard at work to further marginalize and discredit anyone who inadvertently stumbled upon the truth. Globalization made it possible. The American oligarchy in Silicon Valley and Seattle were killing the very country that had given them the ability to accumulate wealth greater than most of the world's GDP. Some were on the payroll, but that number was limited. It was easier to let it play out naturally with just a nudge from those they controlled. It wasn't difficult. Many didn't even know who pulled their strings. America's affluence had ushered in a weakness that Russia could exploit; when a country became soft, it was not long for this earth.

However, there was the crucial issue of the letter. And the question of James Reece. The SVR had not known of the storage area rented by his father or else they would have burned it to the ground years ago after they had gotten rid of Thomas Reece, the CIA officer who had gotten too close. Had it been a few years later they would have used technical tools to marginalize him. Tom Reece had become an issue before using technology to solve problems became a possibility, which meant he needed to be eliminated. There were so many additional tools available now that had not been an option in the early years of the twenty-first century, when the SVR still bought or blackmailed journalists or politicians and their spouses and, on occasion, eliminated problems permanently.

The greatest irony of all was that none of it may have been necessary. The Americans would soon defeat themselves of their own accord.

But the son, James Reece. The son was proving to be a different matter. Did he know about the letter, the list?

The old Gromyko would have proposed capturing and torturing Reece for information, but that approach presented a host of problems. He had to remind himself that this wasn't the old days. The best solution was to remove him from the battlefield altogether but in a way that wouldn't lead to a new round of questions from Reece's minders at the CIA. Gromyko had devised a plan to draw the SEAL commander out

of the United States and kill him. Tie it to his past. Wrap it up in a nice package and be done with the Reece family forever.

The American president was a problem as well. Gromyko's intelligence service had not anticipated his presidency, something that had diminished his political capital on the Security Council. But that could wait. The more pressing issue was James Reece. Did he have the key to the safe-deposit box, and did he know where it was?

Gromyko had not discussed it with his peers on the council, rather, the James Reece situation had warranted a closed-door session with the Russian president and FSB director Dashkov. The three of them had put a plan in motion.

James Reece would die as his father had. In the line of duty. And as with his father, Reece's only remembrance would be on a wall at CIA headquarters, memorialized with a star.

# CHAPTER 3

*Kumba Ranch, Flathead Valley, Montana*

REECE OBSERVED THE TRAIL of dust as the faded, mustard-colored, seventies-era FJ40 Land Cruiser descended toward the cabin. He stood on the front porch to welcome his guest, the matriarch, and quite possibly the toughest member of the Hastings clan, Raife's mom, Caroline. She stepped from the vehicle, a wide-brim Resistol felt hat with a gros-grain band and feather shading her face. A red bandana protected her neck from the sun. Now in her mid-sixties, she appreciated her mother insisting she take those precautions under the African sun, habits Caroline had passed along to her daughters.

She paused at the door for a moment before saying, "Free."

An eighty-pound Rhodesian ridgeback leapt from the passenger seat, shook its wheaten coat, and looked up at Caroline. Jonathan's dog had taken a liking to his wife in recent years and only reluctantly left her side.

The dog nuzzled her leg and she bent down to scratch the back of his neck before saying "free" again and motioning with her hand to indicate the dog should explore. Instead, he looked to Reece and sprinted up the steps to the cabin in search of more affection, which he got as Reece took a knee and greeted the strong canine originally bred for hunting lions in the African bush.

“Hi, Zulu, good boy,” Reece said.

Caroline stopped at the base of the steps. She could pass for someone ten years her junior. Tending her garden and greenhouse, riding her horses, and helping with the mountain cattle operation kept her in top shape.

“Best be careful, or you and Katie might have a stowaway on your ride east,” Caroline said, the ties to old Rhodesia still strong in her voice.

“I’m not worried,” Reece said, continuing to rub the dog behind its ears. “Trust me, Zulu here wants nothing to do with D.C. How’s the Land Cruiser running?”

“Better than Raife’s Defender.”

They shared a laugh.

“I think part of the fun of it is all the time Raife and Jonathan got to spend working on those old Land Rovers together. If they had Cruisers, Raife wouldn’t have learned to fix engines. I think he also learned to swear handing Jonathan tools as a toddler.”

“It’s good to see you, Caroline.”

He stood and opened the front door.

“It’s a bit of a mess. Packing and all.”

The sliding glass doors that led to the back deck overlooking the lake were open, allowing a breeze to cool the inside of the cabin.

“Katie is up with Annika,” Reece said.

“I know. I wanted to speak with you privately.”

“Can I offer you anything? Beer, wine, water?” he asked, moving toward the kitchen.

“I’ll have a water, thank you.”

“Ice?”

“Please.”

Caroline took a seat at the kitchen table while Reece filled two glasses.

“Thank you for coming by. We are going to miss it here.”

"How long will you be gone?"

"I'm not sure."

"Jonathan won't ask you directly, but he thinks this has something to do with the plane shot down back home."

Both Caroline and Jonathan still referred to Africa as "back home."

"It does. I knew someone on board. I need to look into it."

"I see," Caroline said.

She took a sip of water, the large dog curled up at her feet.

"He never talks about it, but did you ever hear about how Jonathan's sister died?"

"I did, but not from Jonathan or Raife."

"Did Rich tell you?" Caroline asked, referring to Jonathan's brother, who still ran a hunting concession in Mozambique. Reece had sailed across the Atlantic and found refuge with Richard Hastings on the Niassa Game Reserve before Freddy Strain had tracked him down and recruited him for a job at the behest of the Central Intelligence Agency.

"No, it was one of the PHs," Reece said, using the shorthand for "professional hunter."

"I see," Caroline said. "What did they tell you?"

"Not much," Reece said. "Flight attendant. Air Rhodesia. Flight 825. They made sure to bring it up when Rich wasn't around."

"Yes. These Hastings men." Caroline smiled. "She was marvelous. Eileen. Full of life. Beautiful. We made quite the pair. She used to wear this tight white T-shirt with a plane on it, a Vickers Viscount, if memory serves. Do you know what it said?"

Reece shook his head.

"It said, 'we carry the goods' right across her chest. No bra." Caroline laughed at the memory. "It was the seventies after all. We'd go to 'Ladies Night' at Le Matelot in Salisbury together on Wednesdays. Those were good times, Reece. For a few hours we could let our hair down and forget about what was happening to our country."

She paused.

“I remember when we received word that we’d lost a plane. I knew in my heart she was gone.”

“I’m so sorry,” Reece said softly.

“Sunday evening, September third, 1978. I remember it so vividly. We called them ‘air hostesses’ then. She loved her job. Loved being independent. To this day I don’t know if she survived the initial crash. I’ve never asked Jonathan. He knows. He was at the crash site the following day. He identified her body.”

Caroline reached up to wipe away a tear.

“It still gets to me after all these years.”

“Caroline, you don’t have to—”

“No, I want you to hear this. ZIPRA, the *terrs*, shot down a civilian plane. It was flying its normal route between Victoria Falls and Salisbury. They hit it with a missile. Fifty-six people were on board, including Eileen. We don’t know how many burned to death in flight as the plane attempted an emergency landing or how many burned to death on the ground. We do know that eighteen people survived the crash.”

Reece swallowed.

“We know because what the world recognized as a ‘people’s revolutionary army’ took the survivors, women, children, and babies, and bayoneted them. Slaughtered them. Imagine seeing your baby bayoneted in front of you. Some were bludgeoned to death with clubs. A few were shot. Innocents. Their leader went on the BBC the next day. Do you know what he did when he claimed responsibility for the attack? He laughed. The *bloody bastard* laughed, and the international community did nothing. Not one country condemned the attack.”

She took another sip of water and returned her glass to the table.

“I tell you all this for a reason, Reece, because of what Jonathan and Rich did next.”

“What did they do?” Reece asked, though he suspected he already

knew, because it's what he would have done, what he *did* when his family was taken.

"They went hunting. The Scouts, SAS, RLI, they targeted and killed for months. The ZIRPA *terrs* responsible fled into Zambia and Moz. Some of what the Scouts did is public knowledge; some is not and will go to the grave with those who remember. We, the women and children, were left alone to defend the farms. They called us 'farming widows.' Our wounded would come home and relay messages, but news was harder to come by then. The land mines took a lot of the boys. Mines from the war are still out there today, killing and maiming."

Reece thought of the mines in Afghanistan, and the lives on both sides forever altered because of them.

Caroline cleared her throat.

"Attacks on the farms became an almost daily occurrence. We knew how to fight and we helped one another. We had radios to talk with neighbors, the police, the army. We all built bunkers; stocked them with rum, Coke, ammunition, food, playing cards, poker chips." She laughed at the memory. "We drank a lot of rum and Coke in those days. I had a Beretta shotgun, an Uzi, and a Brno in .375 H&H. If a nearby farm was attacked, we would get word on the radios and go help. During the day we trained with the local police and the army, took care of the crops and horses, kept the books up to date. At night, that's when the attacks would come."

She paused and took a sip of water.

"Were you scared?"

"At first, but then it became normal."

Reece understood.

"Everyone was dealing with it together," Caroline continued. "Like you and your SEAL Team; the families, your circle, you are all training and deploying in wartime. It's just normal. That's how it was for us. This may sound strange, Reece, but those were the best times of my life."

Reece thought back to the cycles of training and deployments; the operators staging in Iraq and Afghanistan solely focused on building target packages, exploiting intelligence, and planning missions to capture and kill the enemy—the spouses were left behind to deal with everything else.

“I remember a neighbor who couldn’t get to her radio in time. Sometimes the *terrs* could be extremely quiet. She was hard of hearing so might not have heard the dogs. She was gang raped before they bayoneted her to death. She was seventy-eight years old. They hung her from a beautiful Mukwa tree in her front yard. Then they burned her home to the ground. I saw the flames.”

Reece shook his head.

“I locked the kids in the bunker and rode my horse to her property. I didn’t take a truck as I was worried about the lights alerting the *terrs*.”

Reece nodded in understanding.

“I was the first of the neighbors to arrive. I found her hanging in the tree. Naked. Beaten. Bloody.”

She paused again and brought herself back from the memory.

“I tell you this because when Jonathan returned, he was a different man. Maybe I was a different woman. I think what it took to defend the farm was different than what it took to go on offense and take the fight to the *terrs* in the bush. It took a long time to get him back. We eventually left the farm and moved to South Africa, but even that was too close. I suspect he was biding his time.”

“For what?” Reece asked.

“Some things are best kept private, Reece. I’ve never spoken of this before, not even to Raife. I’ll never speak of it again. I expect this to stay between us.”

“It will,” Reece said.

“He was planning to kill the man who had laughed on BBC. It took



coming to the United States for him to do what you will need to do as well.”

“And what is that?”

“Forgive.”

Reece remembered his murdered wife, Lauren, her hair in a ponytail through the back of one of his old platoon hats, Lucy holding her hand as they walked toward their favorite park in Coronado.

“Seems so long ago but at the same time it feels like yesterday,” she said. “We thought we had left the violence behind when we came here but society is a fragile thing, Reece. We get accustomed to relative peace and prosperity, even affluence. It can be gone in a heartbeat.” Caroline snapped her fingers to illustrate her point, startling Zulu at her feet. “I now know the pain my parents felt in Old Africa watching everything they’d built taken from them and destroyed. I have not forgotten that pain, or the more recent agony of losing my daughter and almost my son.”

She paused.

“I lost Jonathan for so many years. I don’t want to lose you, too. And, let me tell you, neither does Katie.”

“I know,” Reece whispered.

“And by lose, I don’t mean death,” she continued.

“What do you mean?”

“I saw the war tear families apart: my parents, our land, our family farm. It almost killed Jonathan. I was bitter for a long time. So was he. It was the *hate*. I thought it gave me drive, gave me purpose, but it didn’t. What it really did was burn and destroy.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“You have faced loss that most will never fathom. I am not your mother, but I feel for you as though I am. I asked myself, if you were blood what would I do? I’d tell you what I’m telling you now. The hate that’s driven you this far, it won’t be enough for what’s next. It won’t be enough to drive you in the next chapter of your life. You will need more.”

Reece looked into his glass.

“Only you will know when it’s right, but let me tell you, when you feel it, trust it, don’t keep pushing. Come back to us. Come back to Katie. Not just physically, that’s the easy part, but here,” Caroline said, touching her hand to her heart. “When you are ready, open your heart. Open your soul.”

Reece understood.

“There is power in forgiveness, Reece.”

Reece thought of his pregnant wife and daughter. He thought of his SEAL Troop ambushed on a mountain in the Hindu Kush. He thought of Freddy cut down on a rooftop in Odessa by a sniper’s bullet and he thought of his promise to Freddy’s wife.

“There is something I still need to do. I made a promise,” Reece said.

“Well, when you have kept it, when whatever you need to do is done, we will be here. Now, I want you to promise *me* something.”

“Yes?”

“When you come back—*truly* come back.”

Reece looked at the woman before him. She had known loss, she had fought and killed on two continents, and she had prevailed.

He swallowed.

“I promise.”

“Good,” Caroline said, rising to her feet. “Then it’s settled. We will see you for dinner at six. *Zulu, come.*”

Reece escorted her to her vehicle and shut the door, watching the old 4x4 work its way back up the road until it disappeared over the rise.

He stood there staring as the dust rose and swirled, eventually vanishing in the late afternoon air. He reached into his pocket, his hand finding a safe-deposit box key left to him by his father along with a cryptic note that offered no clues as to the location of the lock it would turn. He thought of Katie and of what Caroline had said, and Reece wondered if he had just made a promise he was incapable of keeping.