

ONLY THE DEAD

A THRILLER

JACK CARR

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For Thomas M. Rice
14 August 1921–17 November 2022
101st Airborne Division
501st Parachute Infantry Regiment
First in his stick out of his C-47 over Normandy, France,
June 6, 1944
We have the watch,
and
For all those who stand vigilant in the shadows.

Only the dead have seen the end of war.

—GEORGE SANTAYANA, COMMONLY MISATTRIBUTED TO PLATO

*I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend
the Constitution of the United States . . .*

Against all enemies . . .

Foreign . . .

And domestic . . .

—OATH TAKEN BY MEMBERS OF THE UNITED STATES ARMED FORCES,
THE VICE PRESIDENT, AND EVERY MEMBER OF CONGRESS

*“Against all enemies, foreign and domestic” is not included in the
president’s oath of office as specified by Article II, Section 1,
Clause 8, of the Constitution of the United States.*

PREFACE

“WE MAKE OUR DECISIONS. And then our decisions turn around and make us.” Those wise words from F. W. Boreham are as true for each and every one of us as they are for James Reece, the protagonist in these pages.

Perhaps that is why Reece has resonated with readers of the series and with the audience that tuned in to watch Chris Pratt stack bodies as former Navy SEAL Sniper James Reece in the Amazon Prime Video series adaptation of *The Terminal List*.

Reece is on a journey, as are we all. That is something that brings us all together; it is something we all have in common—we are all on a journey. But our journeys are finite. Tomorrow is not guaranteed for James Reece, just as tomorrow is not guaranteed for any of us. If you have read my previous novels, you have noticed that time plays a central role. The essence of time is physically manifested through Reece’s watch and theoretically manifested through lessons from Reece’s father—*You are fast, James. I’ve seen you run, but even you can’t outrun time*. None of us can outrun time.

James Reece is also evolving over the course of his journey. In this

novel, he is not the same Reece as he was in *In the Blood*, just as that James Reece was not exactly the same as he was in *The Devil's Hand*. He is learning, evolving, becoming wiser, and he is applying the lessons of the past to his decisions in the present. Those decisions are “making him.”

But we don't make decisions out of the blue. James Reece makes decisions based on a foundation that guides him. Decisions that come from solid foundations allow us to survive more experiences and hence gain additional wisdom. But Reece's goal is not just to survive. It is to prevail. He is a warrior, hunter, protector, and student. Always a student, he is constantly learning along his journey, arming himself with the tools he needs to prevail when the chips are down.

He is also human. The protagonist in these pages is not a superhero. If you are looking for highly sanitized depictions of combat, I suggest you look elsewhere. Through the medium of popular fiction, I explore the mind and heart of a warrior. I don't interview snipers who worked in Ramadi, Mosul, or Najaf, ask them what it was like to press the trigger in combat, and then try to describe it on the page. Nor do I talk with operators who were once trapped in an ambush in Baghdad in an attempt to pull from them how they felt and reacted in the moment. Rather, I remember. I remember what it was like to be a sniper in Ramadi, and I remember what I did on the receiving end of a night ambush in Baghdad. I then apply those feelings and emotions to a fictional narrative. The feelings and emotions in these pages are real. They come from my heart and soul and flow directly onto the page. If you are looking for a little more fiction and a little less emotion and truth, I recommend you put this book down now and pick up another. James Reece is not for everyone.

Each of my novels has a theme that guides the writing process. *The Terminal List* was a story of revenge without constraint. For my second novel, *True Believer*, I thought it would be disingenuous to just drop Reece right into his next adventure after the traumatic events of

The Terminal List. He needed to learn to live again. He needed to find purpose. He needed a mission, so I took readers along with Reece on a journey of violent redemption. *Savage Son* explored the dark side of man through the dynamic of hunter and hunted. In *The Devil's Hand* I looked at the United States through the eyes of an enemy that had twenty years to observe the American military on the field of battle and incorporate what they learned into their battle plans. *In the Blood* put Reece behind the scope for a sniper-centric novel of violent resolutions. The novel you hold in your hands is one of truth and consequences.

How much of what follows is fiction and how much is truth?

You will know when you turn the final page.

Enjoy the journey. Time is ticking.

Jack Carr

February 21, 2023

Park City, Utah

PROLOGUE

Newport, Rhode Island

1980

WALTER STOWE DEFTLY PILOTED the thirty-six-foot trawler through Vineyard Sound past Nashawena Island and into Rhode Island Sound. He kept Castle Hill Lighthouse to the boat's starboard side as he navigated a northeasterly course toward their destination. He had become quite adept at maneuvering small watercraft in dangerous waters, though the seas between Edgartown Yacht Club on Martha's Vineyard and Station 10, the New York Yacht Club's property in Newport, were not nearly as dangerous as the waters he had navigated ten years earlier, inserting and extracting Navy SEALs in the Mekong Delta. The route ahead clear, Walt turned from the helm to look at his wife. Martha sat behind him on the flybridge, her tan legs outstretched on the cushioned aft-facing bench seat, her face upturned to catch the fading rays of the late summer sun.

"Trawler" was a bit of a misnomer. It was a Grand Banks 36, and though it resembled the trawlers of Walt's youth, this vessel was built with comfort and touring in mind, not hauling in a catch in the hopes of making ends meet. A more than capable craft, bloody decks were foreign to her. This boat was built to impress the East Coast's prestigious yachting community.

The boat was hers, or, to be more precise, it belonged to her family—a family of means. A family with history.

Martha's grandfather had made his money investing in commodities. He had then used that fortune to purchase commercial real estate in New York City. It was rumored that he had run a profitable bootlegging business during Prohibition. That mythology naturally led to whispers of mob connections in Manhattan and Chicago. Her family had even been accused of delivering the Windy City vote in a presidential election for another high-profile Massachusetts family two decades earlier, when Martha was still in middle school. She had never witnessed her father or grandfather dispel those rumors. She suspected that a connection to the mob, real or imagined, didn't hurt in certain business dealings.

While blue blood ran strong through her stock, Martha had diluted the perceived nobility of the line when she married Walter.

The Stowes were seafarers. Walt and his brothers had grown up fishing and checking traps off the coast of Cape Cod. Most people associate lobsters with Maine, but as Walt and his brothers knew, wooden lath traps were first used in their Massachusetts home waters in 1810. The traps Walt would use over a century later operated in much the same fashion as their predecessors: A lobster would be lured through a funnel, unable to resist the temptation of the mackerel and herring bait. The smaller crustaceans could escape through vents, but the larger ones would remain imprisoned in their wood and metal cells until Walt and his brothers pulled them to the surface.

Wychmere Harbor in Harwich Port was their base of operations, and in a fickle industry with innumerable variables, Walt learned that in some years the catch was not enough to feed a young family. He had watched as his father took odd jobs around town to make ends meet, working as a handyman and bartender as finances and seasons dictated. The man never complained. From bullraking for littleneck clams to chasing striped bass to roofing, shingling, and a bit of carpentry, the

elder Stowe put food on the table and a roof over the heads of his wife and sons.

All three Stowe boys believed their paths were preordained. The sea was calling. That was, until they started hearing about a country called Vietnam.

Because the United States never formally declared war on North Vietnam, Walt's older brother was one of the 2.2 million Americans conscripted for service in Southeast Asia under the peacetime draft established by the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940. The working-class Stowe family knew it was only a matter of time before Walt was drafted, so his father recommended his middle child enlist in the Navy. Rather than rolling the dice with the Army, the elder Stowe believed a ship off the coast would be a much safer way to ride out a tour in Vietnam. Neither Walt nor his father had ever heard of the Brown Water Navy.

Within the year, Walt found himself on a Mark II PBR in the Mekong Delta, learning the ropes from a weathered first-class petty officer—the boat's captain. Walt and the captain were augmented by a gunner's mate to run and maintain the twin .50-caliber machine guns and an engine-man to keep the new Jacuzzi water jet propulsion system operational.

With the .50s in the bow and a .30-caliber M1919AH mounted to the stern, along with a hand-cranked Mk 18 40x46mm grenade launcher, the patrol boat and its crew of river rats operated throughout South Vietnam's extensive river systems, which cut through the country from the South China Sea all the way to Cambodia. With roads and rail lines still in rudimentary stages of development, it was the veins of rivers and canals that provided the lifeblood of Vietnam's economy via access to resources. Those who controlled the waterways controlled the country. It was upon returning from a patrol that he received a letter from his mother letting him know that his younger brother had been drafted by the country's first lottery. He wouldn't last three weeks in Vietnam.

Walt's commanding officer summoned Walt to his hooch in April 1970 to inform him of his brother's death. That same officer would summon him back a week later with news that Stowe was going home; his older brother was also dead, one of 1,448 service members to be killed on their last day "in country" and making the Stowe family one of thirty-one families to lose two brothers in the conflict.

Walt had a mission growing up in a family of lobstermen, and he had a mission in the Navy; the deaths of his siblings changed the course of his life and gave it new purpose. He returned from Vietnam and made use of the GI Bill, attending the State University of New York while working odd jobs in the city and earning his degree in three years. Walt could smoke dope and protest, or he could make changes from the inside. He chose to head into government. He thought his path to instigating change would be through the State Department, believing he could work his way up the ranks and help prevent another war that he viewed as a waste of blood and treasure, needless and avoidable, a permanent scar on the nation. He soon learned that rising to a position of influence would take longer than his patience would allow and that coveted ambassadorships were, for the most part, reserved for campaign donors and for people with recognizable last names. Ambassadors did not come from families who trolled and checked traps; they came from those who paid top dollar for the catch to be served at private dinner parties in second, third, and fourth homes from the Hamptons to Martha's Vineyard. He needed another avenue if he wanted to keep his government in check. He found it in politics.

The State Department had opened that door, as it was at a State Department function that he met Martha Stirling. Looking like she would rather have been anywhere else, her outward demeanor matched Walt's internal disposition. They hit it off immediately.

All of Martha's sisters had been married off to suitors approved of, and possibly arranged by, her father—suitors from other prominent, con-

nected East Coast families of means, influence, and generational wealth. Martha was the problem child: Brown University, a Peace Corps mission to India, and antiwar protests across the nation formed the foundation of her rebellious tendencies. Men with what her parents and grandparents considered the “right pedigree” bored her to tears. Walt was the one. Plus, he was a lobsterman. Her parents would *hate* that. But, rather than being disavowed, Walt was accepted into the family. Martha suspected it was because her father thought he might end up being useful. It couldn’t hurt to have a politician in the family, especially if you funded his campaign. *Favors*. Walt proposed under a tree she had climbed as a child on the Stirlings’ estate on Martha’s Vineyard, and they were married on the property the following spring. Walt knew fewer than a third of those in attendance, but he was well aware that he was marrying more than Martha. He was marrying into something bigger.

Martha tilted her head back, admiring her husband at the wheel. They had been married for just over six years and had two children to show for it. As a congressman from Massachusetts’s 12th District, elected to the House just two years prior, Walter’s star was on the rise. His background resonated with blue-collar workers, and his new affiliation with one of America’s wealthiest and most connected families immersed him in the world of the political elite. He had already made waves as a staffer for Representative Otis Pike of New York, who led the United States House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. Better known as the Pike Committee, it was established to investigate overreach by certain agencies of the federal government, including the FBI, NSA, and CIA. The Pike Committee was the House’s version of the Senate’s Church Committee, a key difference being that while the findings of the committee chaired by Senator Frank Church were made public, the findings of the Pike Committee were suppressed for reasons of national security. It was as part of those investigations that Walt began to have recurring meetings that were not recorded on his official or personal

calendars. At first, Martha thought he might be having an affair. That would not have been unusual for a man in his position. Martha's father was a well-known philanderer. Both of her sisters' husbands had strayed, but her sisters had, of course, looked the other way, as had their mother, following Jackie Kennedy's, now Jackie O's, example.

Secrets.

Martha despised secrets. She came from a family of secrets and swore she would not continue the tradition. She and her husband were partners. With Walt's reputation as a "man of the people," along with his political instincts and her family's fortune, they were a team. She was not about to be relegated to the backseat, as her mother and sisters had been.

As the former Navy man guided the boat around Fort Adams and into Brenton Cove, she thought back to the night she had begun to unravel the mysteries of his clandestine world. They had been staying in her family's Upper East Side building when he abruptly announced that he needed to meet with a potential donor late one evening. He had been having more of those recently. In her experience, meetings at odd hours meant a mistress. She was disappointed but not surprised. She hailed a cab, seconds behind his.

"Follow that cab."

"Are you serious?"

Her look told her driver that she was.

"Okay, lady." Walt's cab headed west through Central Park via the Seventy-Ninth Street Transverse and then took a right in the direction of the Upper West Side.

Where are you going?

A few blocks later, his cab pulled over. She watched her husband exit the yellow vehicle and run across the street, quickly ducking into another taxi. Thrusting a twenty-dollar bill at her driver, she asked him to make a U-turn.

“That’s illegal,” he said.

She shoved another twenty in his face; he cranked the wheel to a chorus of blaring horns.

Walt’s new cab maneuvered through traffic toward the Hudson River, turning south onto State Route 9A. Fortunately for Martha, she was in the most common vehicle in New York; she was invisible.

Who is she?

Do I confront her? Him? Of course I do.

Bastard!

They continued south past Hell’s Kitchen, Chelsea, and the Meat-packing District before making a U-turn on Clarkson Street and cutting right on Morton into Greenwich Village.

Walt’s cab then took a left on Bedford Street and came to a stop in front of a lime-green building in the West Village sandwiched between two brownstones, marked only with the number 86.

“Keep driving,” Martha ordered, turning in her seat as her husband exited his cab and stepped onto the curb.

“Pull over here,” she said.

“Whatever you say.”

She watched Walt approach a dark wooden door and disappear inside.

“Meter’s running, lady.”

“Keep it running.”

Stay? Go inside? Leave? Turn a blind eye?

She glanced down at the gold Girard-Perregaux watch on her wrist.

Ten minutes.

She snatched two more twenties from her purse, handed them to her cabdriver, and pushed open the door.

Martha walked to the nondescript structure and closed her eyes to steady herself in preparation for what she was certain she was about to witness. Then she reached for the handle. What greeted her was not

row upon row of doors to apartments, nor a foyer, as she had expected. Instead, she heard the hum of conversation, not between a man and a woman but the low, steady drone of a crowd.

She pushed the heavy red velvet curtain in front of her aside and stepped into a dark, smoke-filled room poorly illuminated by dim lights on the walls and ceiling. Two bartenders mixed drinks for patrons across a weathered wooden bar, and Martha noticed framed dust jackets of works from Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Salinger, Steinbeck, Cather, and Cummings adorning the walls. Tables lined the establishment, with drinkers who looked to be regulars deep in conversation. Very few were women. One man with a stack of legal pads next to him seemed to be writing.

What is this place?

She took in the scene, her eyes shifting from the bar to the tables until they settled on the corner booth. Walt's back was to her, but she recognized his jacket. She locked eyes with the man sitting across from him. The stranger wore a dark wool coat, its collar turned up, obscuring the lower part of his face. He zeroed in on the newcomer and then looked to Walt, who turned around. An expression of surprise was quickly replaced by resignation, and he waved her over. Stale air, thick with the smells of tobacco, sweat, and the damp, musty odor of whiskey barrels, parted way as she crossed the room.

Walt scooted to the side under a framed dust jacket of Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*.

"Martha," he said, as she slid into the booth. "Welcome to Chumley's."

"Hello, darling," she said. "Charming place. Old speakeasy? It's good to see your meeting is not with a woman ten years my junior."

She took stock of the man across the table. He wasn't smiling. The eyes weren't so much cold as they were perceptive and alert. *Penetrating*. She had not seen eyes like that before. "I'm Martha Stowe," she said, more of a pronouncement, reaching across the table. "And you are?"

The man's left hand was on the table attached to a coffee mug. His right was out of sight. A stainless-steel Rolex was on his wrist. When you grew up the way she did, you noticed things like that. The Rolex had become popular with Hollywood stars like Newman, Redford, and McQueen, ever since Connery had given it screen time in his early outings as Bond. The dive watches were even starting to adorn the wrists of New York City's financial class, but unlike the ones she had seen worn by Wall Street bankers, this crystal was worn and scratched.

Walt looked at his companion and raised an eyebrow. The man nodded.

"True name?" Walt asked.

The man's eyes had not left Martha's. He nodded again. "Martha, this is Tom Reece."

"Mr. Reece, I'm Martha Stowe. It's a pleasure to meet you. What, pray tell, are you and my husband discussing this evening?"

Tom hesitated, then reached his right hand across the table.

"Mrs. Stowe," he acknowledged, clearly less than pleased at the intrusion.

"Call me Martha, please. If you are working with my husband on what I think you are, you can use my first name."

"Martha," he said.

"May I call you Tom?"

"You may."

"Are you married?"

"Martha, *Jesus*," Walter said, shaking his head.

"Well, if you are meeting surreptitiously with someone who I can only assume is either a reporter or works for one of our government agencies, I'd like to know what he has to lose. He doesn't look like a reporter." She turned back to the man across the table.

His eyes took measure, evaluating, thoughtful. She caught a flicker of acceptance as he moved his left hand to his coat pocket and removed

a pack of Marlboro Reds. He shook out a cigarette and placed the filtered end between his lips. He then tossed the pack on the table and pulled a worn silver Zippo lighter from his right pocket. As the flint wheel ignited the wick, she noted an insignia on its side—a red shield highlighted in yellow with what looked like a skull wearing a green beret. She couldn't quite make out the letters at its base, but the last three appeared to be *SOG*.

“Well?”

“Well?” Tom asked back before taking a long drag on his cigarette. “Am I married? Not yet.”

She thought she caught the hint of a smile, as if a fond memory had risen from his subconscious.

“I see. So, you have nothing to lose.”

“We *all* have something to lose.”

“How right you are. I'll be direct. Anything you are doing, any trouble you may cause, doesn't just impact you. It impacts me. It impacts my children. It impacts my family. I just want us to be clear. Are we clear, Tom?”

“We are.”

“Good. Now, what do I need to know?”

That had been five years ago. Tonight, Walt would give a speech at the New York Yacht Club's Newport clubhouse. He was young, but there was already talk of his future as a presidential hopeful, so campaigning outside of Massachusetts was good business. The comparisons to Camelot were not unfounded: an attractive political couple, a war veteran who happened to have served on the modern equivalent of a PT boat, and a family connected to bootlegging and the mob. If they played their cards right, there was the possibility of a run for the White House; the country missed Camelot. It was still two, possibly even four election cycles away, but in politics you had to play the long game.

After the speech and an hour of shaking hands, she planned to retire to their room while Walt would excuse himself and relocate to the

White Horse Tavern for a drink and a bite to eat. There he would meet with Tom Reece.

Walt did not share everything with his wife, but he shared enough. He thought it would alleviate her worries. In fact, it did the opposite.

The Church Committee's report and what had been leaked from the Pike Committee had exposed the dark underbelly of the intelligence community to the American public. She knew that it had also illuminated something more.

Martha understood that she did not have the full picture of what Walt was doing in his meetings with the man she now knew worked for the CIA, the very agency at the center of the investigations. Her husband had emerged as a strong and ardent voice for reform on the campaign trail for the passage of FISA—the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. The threat was communism, and those in power at the highest levels of the country's intelligence apparatus would stop at nothing to curtail its advance; that included encroaching on the rights and privacy of U.S. citizens, politicians, reporters, and Supreme Court justices.

What else had Walt learned in the course of the House investigations? What was it that kept him awake? She had arisen in the middle of the night on multiple occasions to find him standing at the window, a bourbon in hand, staring into the night. Was it nightmares? The war? Work? What was it that scared him enough to go outside of official channels to meet with a renegade CIA officer? What was he doing with Tom Reece?

She knew they had met in Vietnam when Tom was a SEAL and had reconnected in the course of events surrounding the Pike Committee. She assumed that he was a source, but Walt kept the specifics of their dealings close. There were some matters he was not allowed to discuss with her, or so went the line. She could tell he was keeping things from her for her own protection. He promised he would tell her one day soon, that he just needed a little more time, an explanation she accepted as much as she disliked it.

Walt pulled back on the throttle and decreased speed, first to ten knots and then to five as they approached the long dock extending from the manicured grounds of the club. Martha stood and joined her husband at the helm.

“Want to dock her?” he asked.

“You know I do.” She smiled.

With the children in the care of multiple nannies at her parents’ estate on Martha’s Vineyard, they were free—well, almost free. Campaigning was still work, but she knew it was in pursuit of the ideals she had shouted for in the antiwar rallies of the late 1960s. Rather than just be the recipient of the wealth that her family had accumulated and live a life parading from one social event to the next, she would have real influence. She could prevent conflicts like the war in Vietnam from happening again. She could fight to ensure that her children, and one day her grandchildren, would not die in an ill-conceived war, as had Walt’s brothers.

Martha was confident behind the controls of the yacht and knew the waters in between the island and Newport the way most people know the roads of their hometowns.

Slipping the boat into neutral, she coasted toward the berth while Walt descended to the starboard-side deck, pushing rubber fenders over the side to prepare for docking. They were an hour early, which would allow them time to freshen up before the evening’s event. She then moved the throttle into reverse and guided the craft alongside the pier. Walt leapt from the boat to the dock, pulling the bowline taut and expertly lashing it to a cleat. He did the same with the stern line, examining his work to be sure the boat was secure before reboarding the vessel.

“Great job,” he called up to his wife on the flybridge.

“I know, dear.”

Walt disappeared below deck to retrieve their overnight bags. Martha shut down the engines.

“Ready?” Walt called up as he emerged from the trawler’s interior.

“Give me a minute,” she said, rummaging through a storage compartment in search of her purse.

She heard the gate to the pier open and glanced up to see a man with a clipboard walking down the dock, the harbormaster coming to greet them.

“Hello,” she heard her husband say. “Mind if I pass you these bags? Alan not working tonight?”

When Martha turned and looked back down at the dock, the harbormaster was no longer holding a clipboard. In his outstretched hand was a pistol with a long cylindrical attachment she knew as a silencer.

Walt slowly raised his hands and shook his head. “Don’t.”

The assassin fired. Due to the downward angle, the round entered near the top of Walter’s head. It cut its way through the frontal, parietal, and occipital lobes, removing a large portion of the back of his skull on the way out, coating the lower portions of the side bridge windows with gray brain matter and bone fragments. Martha heard her husband’s lifeless body drop straight to the deck.

Visions of her two young children overwhelmed her and locked her in place. Paralyzed and unable to react, she witnessed the assassin fire two additional suppressed rounds into her husband.

As the business end of the weapon swung upward, she gazed from the black pistol to her executioner’s dead eyes. *Italian? Russian?* Martha was a good fifteen feet above the assassin. The setting sun was to her back. He held the pistol at her head and then dropped it to her upper chest and pressed the trigger.

It felt like she had been hit with a sledgehammer, her body contorting around the entrance wound.

The kids.

Walter.

Her parents.

As her body twisted, a swell rocked the boat and her knees buckled, which caused her to stumble backward and to the side. She felt another bullet impact her left arm and then had the brief sensation of falling. She collided with the safety rail that extended from the bulwark of the main deck before crashing into the waters of Brenton Cove.

As Martha sank into the darkness, she found herself thinking of someone else. A man she knew had experience with violence. A man her husband would have seen later that evening. A man with ties to the military and to the Central Intelligence Agency. A man named Thomas Reece.

PART ONE

EXILE

*The important thing to know about an assassination is
not who fired the shot, but who paid for the bullet.*

—ERIC AMBLER, *A COFFIN FOR DIMITRIOS*

CHAPTER 1

*United States Penitentiary
Florence Administrative Maximum Facility
Range 13
Special Housing Unit
Fremont County, Colorado*

DARKNESS.

Suffering.

Prison.

Of the mind.

His soul in chains.

His body in solitary confinement.

Nothing but darkness.

All life is suffering, Reece remembered.

How long have I been in here? Days? Weeks? Certainly not a month.

It was hard to tell when you were living in darkness.

But he wasn't living in silence.

The voices were his companions.

What are you looking for?

"Salvation," Reece said.

What truth do you seek?

"I seek a reckoning."

You've found it.

"Have I?"

You are going to die in here, Reece. You deserve to die in here. In the dark. Alone. Your wife died alone.

"No, she didn't. She had Lucy."

And an unborn child. You failed them, Reece. You failed them all. Just as you failed your men in Afghanistan. Freddy died on that rooftop in Odessa because of you. You deserve what's coming.

"And what is that? The grave?"

Death would be too merciful for you. You killed them, Reece.

"No!"

You are beyond redemption. You killed your wife and daughter. Had you been home, had you hung up the gun years earlier, they would still be alive. It was an unwinnable war. You knew that from the start. You studied your history. Those who sent you neglected to study theirs.

"Imperial hubris," Reece whispered.

They failed you and those they sent to fight. For twenty years. They filled the coffers of their defense industry allies, enjoying dinners and drinks with lobbyists, none of whom had the balls to step into the breach. You knew it. You went anyway. And you didn't do it for God and country.

"Then who did I do it for?"

You did it for you.

"No."

Where is your faith?

"It's gone."

Gone or dormant?

"I don't know."

It never fully disappears.

"I feel forsaken."

You should. By surviving the ambush in Afghanistan, you sentenced

your family to death. Had you died in the Hindu Kush, they would not have been killed in your home. You know it's true.

"I wanted to hold those responsible accountable."

But accountability wasn't enough, was it?

"There needed to be consequences."

Consequences?

"Yes. I believe in consequences. Judgment."

Darkness.

Pain.

Suffering.

Is vengeance yours? How does it feel?

"I did what was necessary."

Did you?

"Yes."

Or was it because that is all you know? Because that is what you do best? Because that is where you feel most alive?

"I wanted to die."

You needed to die. Death becomes you, Reece. War—it's in your blood. You became war.

"It was the only way."

And you are beyond redemption.

"I know."

You brought it home. You brought war home to those who sent a generation into combat. You put the fear of God into those growing fat off the dividends of death. You got what you wanted.

"I wanted justice."

No, you didn't.

"I wanted revenge."

You became vengeance.

"A reckoning."

Did you get it? And what of Katie?

Reece tensed.

If you stay with Katie, she will die.

“I’ll protect her.”

The way you protected your wife and daughter? The way you protected your troop? The way you covered Freddy on that rooftop?

“I need to get out of here.”

You won’t leave this cell. Its walls are already closing in. Soon, even you won’t be able to survive.

“I will.”

Are you a survivor, Reece?

“I’m a fighter.”

Every fighter goes down.

“But they get back up.”

Darkness. Welcome it. Become it. Get comfortable being uncomfortable. You are sealed in your tomb. Forever.

“Bullshit.”

Life is pain. Life is suffering. Why didn’t they just kill you? Why didn’t you kill yourself? Save Katie. She deserves her life.

“There’s a safe-deposit box I need to find.”

What’s inside is poison. And now Katie has the safe-deposit box key. A key to a box you will never find. You put her in danger again. If she dies, you are responsible.

“What’s in it?”

Your father knew.

“What was his tie to Russian intelligence?”

What do you think?

“I don’t know.”

You will rot in this cell, Reece. You will die in darkness. You will never get answers.

“Where there is darkness, there is light.”

Somewhere, but you will never see it again. Death is on the wind.

“No.”

Yes.

“Then this is what I deserve.”

It is what you deserve.

Suffering.

Darkness.

This room will drive you to madness.

“I know.”

All you have is your mind. Your mind and one meal a day. Why do they want you locked up?

“Who is ‘they’?”

Did Alice betray you?

“She warned me.”

Maybe she did both. Is she friend or foe?

“Alice, where are you?”

All those who killed Lauren and Lucy are dead.

“I know.”

You killed them. The man behind 9/11; you killed him, too.

“I did.”

The man responsible for Freddy Strain’s death.

“Dead.”

The man responsible for your father’s death?

“Dead.”

Is he?

“They are all dead.”

Then what of Russian intelligence? Why would Mikhail Gromyko take his own life? The head of the SVR, Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service, went to the grave with your father’s list on his last breath. The list and Thomas Reece. What was Gromyko protecting? Who was he protecting? You will never know, Reece.

“I will.”

You are not leaving this cell alive. Be it a day or decades, you will die here. Your brain will deteriorate, and you will spend whatever time you have descending into madness. You should smash your head against the wall until death comes. Force yourself to choke on what passes for food. Get creative. End it. Everyone will be better off without you.

"They will."

No one even knows where you are.

"Someone knows I am here."

You don't exist.

"The food coming in once a day tells me someone knows where I am. Existence is enough."

Is it?

"It has to be. There is still work to do."

You will never do it.

"Katie is looking for me. She will find me."

Then she will die.

"No."

Just like all those you have loved. Dead.

"No!"

You are granite, Reece. You will not change. But those who love you—Katie, the Hastings family—they will be battered to death against you, protecting you. Save them now.

"That's not true."

It doesn't matter. You are locked in this cell. A prisoner of your own mind.

"Freedom."

No.

"Hope."

No.

"To exist. That is enough."

*Pain is life. Life is pain. Suffering and pain. That was your life out there.
That is your life in here.*

“Someone killed the president.”

Someone killed him and framed you.

“Why?”

The answers are out there.

“I am in here.”

You need to get out.

“I do.”

You will never get out. That is your truth.

“What is truth?”

Give up.

“No.”

Quit.

“No.”

Fail.

“No.”

Die.

“Not today.”

Suffering.

Nothing but darkness.

Life is darkness.

All life is suffering.

“It must be enough to exist.”

*For now. But if you once again see the light of day, existence won't be
enough.*

Reece felt the cold concrete wall against his back.

“No. But it's enough for today. I'll get out and get my answers. And when I do, there will be a reckoning.”

CHAPTER 2

*The Residence at Cape Idokopas
Krasnodar Krai, Russia*

PERCHED ON A CLIFF overlooking the Black Sea and sitting on 168 acres heavily forested with Turkish pines is a lavish estate protected by walls, sensors, and drones. The perimeter security and barricades along connecting roads are manned by enough armed uniformed guards to rival any military base in the world. Residents of the nearby resort village of Gelendzhik first suspected it could be a new hotel complex, then concluded it was to be a vacation home for one of the oligarchs, but as construction continued and rumors swirled, it became apparent that this property was for one man in particular, the president of the Russian Federation. Ownership of the estate is hidden through a myriad of corporations, shell companies, and offshore holding firms all put in place to give the actual owner plausible deniability, especially when its construction cost the Russian people the equivalent of \$1.4 billion in U.S. dollars.

Protected by a natural reef near the base of the cliffs and prohibited special-use airspace above, more commonly referred to as a “no-fly zone,” the structure draws inspiration from nineteenth-century Italianate architecture. The sprawling 191,000-square-foot residence boasts

a host of amenities, including swimming pools, spas, saunas, a greenhouse, bars, a casino, an underground ice hockey rink, a shooting range, multiple wine cellars, a hookah bar, game rooms, theaters, a library with reading room, a 2,800-square-foot master bedroom, guest rooms to accommodate the entire Russian Security Council, and a strip club to keep them busy. The grounds contain multiple helipads, an airstrip, a chapel, a teahouse connected to the main structure via a bridge, an outdoor amphitheater, barracks, and administrative buildings. Bordering properties are owned either by Russian oligarchs or the FSB, Russia's internal security service. A marina at the base of the cliffs allows access to the surrounding waters by security boats of the Federal Protective Service (FSO). In addition to the impressive array of structures aboveground, an entrance dug into the hillside off the marina leads into an underground bunker complex designed to withstand a nuclear detonation. It was within one of those underground rooms that Pavel Dashkov and his longtime secretary Kira Borisova waited.

An electric rail system had transported them from just inside the entrance deeper into the bunker system to one of the conference rooms. Kira had taken a seat against the wall. She knew when to let her boss think and when she needed to intrude in order to keep him on schedule. Today was one of those rare times when he was on someone else's time.

The war in Ukraine was not going well from a tactical perspective. From a strategic perspective it had succeeded beyond their expectations. The Americans were drawn in, funding the corrupt Ukrainian government at levels unheard of even at the height of their follies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Unfortunately, the brinkmanship of the Cold War was back. Nuclear options were on the table, something that astounded even Dashkov. Until recently, he had been content to continue his tenure as the director of the FSB and a member of the Security Council. As long as he kept internal disruptions to a minimum, he could stay engrossed in premium vodka, gluttonous meals, and young hookers. It was not a bad

life. If internal dissent grew too loud or threatened the Russian president in a way he perceived would weaken his hold on power or even degrade his authority in the eyes of the oligarchy, Dashkov knew he could find himself not just on the outs with the president but quite possibly in one of his own holding cells or, more likely, the unwitting recipient of an accidental fall from a Moscow high-rise or victim of a suspicious poisoning. Poisonings happened frequently to those who ran afoul of the president. Dashkov should know. It was he and his former counterpart in the SVR, Russia's external security apparatus, who issued the orders to eliminate threats to the motherland. It was not lost on Dashkov how quickly one could find themselves on the wrong side of the president.

Gromyko. Exactly why he ended up taking his own life with the cyanide cigarettes issued back when the KGB and GRU protected the nation remained a mystery. His body had been found unceremoniously dumped in the bushes in a particularly dark section of Gorky Park. Dashkov had met his counterpart there many times over the years; neutral ground. He had quite enjoyed their rivalry. What he did not enjoy was the mystery behind who had killed him. Officially Gromyko had died of the cancer that had slowly been eating away at him for years. *Natural causes.* Unofficially, the classified police report acknowledged that a black zip-tie had been secured around his neck. In his mouth were flakes of tobacco. The autopsy had confirmed that the cause of death was suffocation, not due to the zip-tie's restriction of blood to his brain and air to his lungs but due to cyanide poisoning. Gromyko had taken his life the way they had been taught as new recruits at the Elk Island training center outside of Moscow. *Why?* That was the question. And what did he give up before he died? Could his executioner have been James Reece?

In a closed-door session with the president, they had decided with high probability that Gromyko's murderer was the CIA assassin. Their previous attempts to put James Reece in the ground had failed, which meant the possibility remained, however slim, that he would eventually

find the list and documents hidden by Thomas Reece before his death. The former SEAL was proving to be more of a thorn in their sides than had his father. *What was it with this Reece clan?* Thomas Reece first came to the attention of the KGB and GRU in Vietnam. He had stayed on the radar of Russian intelligence services up until the day he was killed. The son was continuing the family tradition. How fitting that he would meet the same fate at the hands of the very same organizations.

Russia had another problem. They needed to shift U.S. attention away from the war in Ukraine. As with the JFK assassination a generation prior, the Russian puppet masters would turn America's attention inward to a homegrown enemy. The Russians had given them James Reece.

Armed with information the SVR and FSB had extracted from a talkative Edward Snowden, now a full Russian citizen, and building on the expertise of the Spetssviaz bot farms and Russia's Internet Research Agency, they had created an electronic signature that put James Reece in the center of a conspiracy to assassinate the president of the United States. Of course, that plan, minus the James Reece patsy element, had been formulated by Gromyko a decade ago. Assassinations external to the state were the purview of the SVR, but, as one of the three ranking members of the Security Council, Dashkov had his part to play. Though he would never show the Russian president anything but unwavering confidence, in actuality he couldn't believe they had pulled it off.

It had worked beautifully. America had turned in on itself as social media erupted with conspiracy theories, all building on the internal division the Americans had proven so adept at creating among themselves: race riots, rampant inflation, a dependence on foreign energy sources, what amounted to an open border, even distrust in their own elections results—elections that had once been the model for emerging democratic republics the world over. They could agree upon nothing. They were eating their own, victims of their own success. What the

Americans were fond of calling their “Greatest Generation” had fought and built the United States into a beacon of democratic ideals. The current generation had inherited that greatness only to squander the sacrifices of generations past. It was good that Americans placed no value on history. Had they picked their heads up from their social media posts they might have had time to read about the fate that befell the Roman Empire and realize they were on the same path.

Had they learned nothing from the collapse of the Soviet Union? They kept spending money they didn’t have, throwing gasoline on the coals of inflation, ostensibly increasing the gap between the rich and poor intentionally. They couldn’t seem to find a war they didn’t like. Politicians on both sides of the aisle, encouraged in no small part by the defense industry lobbyists who supported them, voted for massive spending bills in support of the corrupt regime in Ukraine. Billions of tax dollars. *Fools*. Their defense industry had reaped incredible profits over America’s two-decade misadventure in Afghanistan and Iraq. Those profit and growth projections were on a trajectory that must not be allowed to wane. A war in Ukraine would help. New NATO countries were required to purchase NATO-compatible armaments; just the thing to keep the gravy train flowing. Their corporate media knew a good thing when they saw it. Even pundits who years earlier had been up in arms against the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq now called for the United States to unconditionally support Ukraine. Anyone who asked uncomfortable questions about that support or the possibility of auditing exactly where U.S. tax dollars were going was immediately labeled a “Russian apologist” or “Russian agent” or was “doing Russia’s bidding.” A blue and yellow flag became almost mandatory in Americans’ social media profile pictures, and #SupportUkraine littered the posts of Americans who just months prior couldn’t find the former Soviet socialist republic on a map; virtue signaling was the flavor of the day. The Congressional Progressive Caucus even quietly rescinded a letter they had sent to the American presi-

dent months earlier urging for a negotiated end to the war in Ukraine by working directly with Russia. That wouldn't help defense industry profits. The lobbyists had done their jobs. The war machine rumbled on. The lobbyists and lawyers were well worth the investment.

The U.S. response to Russian actions in Ukraine had been a miscalculation on the council's part. Chaired by the president, in conception, the Security Council of the Russian Federation was composed of the ranking members of the intelligence community and defense establishment, along with top state officials and representatives from the federal districts. In reality, the power rested with the director of the FSB, director of the SVR, and deputy chairman. Their counsel would inform the president's decision-making. The others were just for show. Inaction by the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) following the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia and the 2014 invasion of Crimea, along with the 2013 "red line" bluff in Syria, indicated that the U.S. and her European allies would follow suit with condemnation and sanctions. What the council had not considered was that in 2008, 2013, and 2014, the United States was bogged down in Central Asia and the Middle East. To give Russia free rein in Ukraine, America needed another war. The council had agreed on that. What they had yet to develop was a plan for how to make it happen.

The U.S. "sanctions" had the opposite purported effect, regardless of what politicians in Washington, D.C., continued to say on cable news. Russia's Central Bank posted an account surplus in the first half of the year of more than \$110 billion. The ruble was now the strongest it had been in close to a decade, and the nation was posting a massive trade surplus, billions of dollars higher than before the special operation to retake Ukraine began. Russia's exports now exceeded its imports, creating an inflow of domestic currency; the exact opposite was happening in the United States. No wonder the entrenched Washington political elite wanted to distract the populace with the Russian menace, even if it was

a world away in Ukraine. The Americans were fools. But were they foolish enough to push Russia into a nuclear confrontation? That remained to be seen.

Could NATO, not see that sanctions had inadvertently made the Russian president, and the oligarchy he protected, richer than they could have possibly imagined? Anyone with the most basic understanding of economics and geopolitics, not to mention common sense, would know that Russia was the world's largest gas exporter and second-largest oil exporter. Who is the primary customer for that gas and oil? The European Union, the same EU that was also sending money from their coffers to Ukraine without any ability to audit. Because of their dependence on Russian energy, the EU was transferring more cash to Russia to fund the special operation in Ukraine than they were sending to Ukraine to fight the Russian military. In the first hundred days of the war, the Russian Federation made \$98 billion in U.S. dollars from energy exports and was currently bringing in over \$1 billion every day.

Oligarchs, senior politicians, intelligence directors, military leaders, and other friends of the Russian president had all pre-positioned assets around the world a year before taking action in Ukraine. Some of that wealth was diversified through investments in U.S.-based tech companies. Though headquartered in the United States, they were in all actuality global corporations with no loyalty to the country that allowed for such prosperity. Would the American public even care that billions belonging to Russia's elite were invested in the same companies that poisoned their children and divided their nation? They hardly noticed when a former president received \$500,000 for a 2010 speech at the Renaissance Capital Bank in Moscow when his wife was serving as secretary of state. She opposed sanctions on Russia back then, and her family made half a million dollars for a forty-five-minute speech for which Dashkov was in attendance. The speech was quite forgettable; something about global cooperation.

This massive increase in wealth among the elites had allowed the Russian president to consolidate his hold on power. It was true that the oligarchs had been inconvenienced; yachts and homes had been seized. That was the price they paid. Sudden and unexpected deaths had befallen more than a few dissenters, which had encouraged others upset about a missed vacation in Ibiza to get back in line. Strokes, heart attacks, poisonings, suicides, drownings, falls, and illnesses had struck down more than a few of those critical of the Russian president.

And what of America? She had once been a respected foe. Now the once-great nation teetered on the brink of a precipice, the weakest she had been since her rise in the dark days of the Great Patriotic War.

The American vice president had assumed the presidency soon after the assassination of President Christensen and had done her best to quell the voices of disruption and bring the country together, but President Gale Olsen was out of her depth. She was also an unknown entity without the baggage of decades navigating the political landscape. The previous president had chosen her to deliver her home state of Florida. The world knew it, as did the American people. She still needed to prove herself. What was she prepared to do? Dashkov was not sure.

America had ushered the world into a new age by dropping two atomic weapons on Japan. They remained the only nation on earth to have used offensive atomic weapons. The arms race that followed saw the creation and testing of nuclear weapons 6,600 times more powerful than those used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Russia had only recently declassified information on the Tsar Bomba, a 50-megaton test conducted over the Novaya Zemlya islands in the Arctic in 1961. Dashkov had read the classified reports from Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and knew the United States had been in the early stages of developing a 10,000-megaton bomb, a weapon it was said would “contaminate the earth.” It was a wonder anyone survived the U.S. and Soviet nuclear tests in the 1950s and 1960s. Though France, the United

Kingdom, India, Pakistan, Israel, Iran, North Korea, and China all had nuclear weapons at their disposal, it was only the arsenals of the U.S. and Russia that could destroy the world many times over.

The daisy-chained EFPs, explosively formed penetrators, that had been used to kill President Christensen bore the hallmarks of the improvised explosive devices (IEDs) so common in Iraq. Did that indicate that Islamist extremists were to blame? Or was it disenchanted veterans of the global war on terror? Or was it something else? That was the genius of the plan: confusion, division, “misinformation.” For a day or two, American flags once again lined every Main Street in the country just as they had after the attacks of 9/11. But even quicker than Dashkov had predicted, fingers were pointed, wagons were circled, accusations were made, insults were hurled, and the nation was once again divided along party lines.

The cell was kept small by design. Even Dashkov didn’t have all the details. The operation required his approval but, really, who would go against the Russian president? Patsies were identified via social channels, patsies who had already forecasted their distrust of the federal government online and at protests. The Americans were already focused inward. They seemed incapable of finding common political ground. The opposition needed to be destroyed. The free exchange in the marketplace of ideas, the very foundation that had made America such a formidable adversary during the Cold War, was a thing of the past. All it took was planted digital and physical evidence. The Russian assets took care of the rest.

What concerned Dashkov was that James Reece had not been publicly identified as a conspirator in the assassination. The best and brightest of the Spetssviaz—the Special Communications and Information Service—and the Russian Internet Research Agency had served him up on a silver platter, as the Americans were fond of saying. His past played right into the narrative: a deep distrust of the federal government, a gov-

ernment he blamed for the deaths of his SEAL Team in Afghanistan. He also had the training and experience to pull it off. He had the means. He had the motive. The Russians just needed to create and manufacture the opportunity.

The SVR reported that there had been a large law enforcement operation in northern Montana the night of the assassination—just hours after President Alex Christensen had been pronounced dead and the vice president had taken the oath of office. Then James Reece had disappeared. The psychological profile in his file indicated that he would go down fighting. Some on the council conjectured that he had been killed, but Dashkov knew better. And he had confirmed it hours earlier. What would the council do with the information that Reece had survived? Dashkov would relay that information shortly. He also wanted the newly appointed interim director of the SVR to know that although Dashkov headed the internal security apparatus of the Russian Federation, he had been at this game long enough to have sources abroad.

Rostya Levitsky had most recently served as the deputy director of the SVR under Michael Gromyko. Dashkov had an extensive file on the interim SVR director and deduced that Levitsky had risen through the ranks due to his loyalty to his superiors and, more importantly, to the Russian president rather than from operational successes or exploits in the field.

Dashkov heard the door open and looked up to see his counterpart in the SVR enter the room. Younger than Dashkov by a decade, Levitsky managed to walk the line between deference and arrogance with an unassuming half smile that crept up from the left side of his mouth. His crisply tailored suit and blood-red tie sat in stark contrast with Dashkov's wrinkled dark sport coat and white shirt that stretched over his robust midsection. It was rumored that he was up at 3:30 a.m. every morning and started the day with a brisk ten-kilometer run before thirty minutes of weight training, followed by sauna and cold bath immersions.

Dashkov unconsciously rubbed his perpetual five-o'clock shadow, noting that Levitsky appeared to have shaved just prior to the meeting.

Levitsky extended his hand and nodded in deference to the older FSB director, who remained seated.

"Good evening, comrade."

The ever-present smile might have been meant to disarm, but Dashkov reminded himself that, even though separated by years, they had received similar training. Dashkov would keep his guard up. They also shared lineage in the dark arts of espionage. Their ultimate goal was to subvert the West through active measures of sabotage, disinformation campaigns, assassinations, destabilization operations, and coups. They had just pulled off one of the most successful assassinations in history.

"Give us the room," Dashkov said without taking his eyes off his counterpart.

Levitsky nodded politely as Kira gathered her things and made her exit. He took a seat across from Dashkov, both of them wisely leaving the head of the table vacant.

"It is good to see you, comrade," Levitsky continued.

Whether that was true or not, Levitsky could very well move from interim director to director, depending on his relationship with the president. He appeared confident and spry for someone in his late fifties. His outward demeanor betrayed none of the stress most would feel in his position, something that put the older man on edge.

Though both agencies were born of the KGB, the SVR and FSB maintained cordial but at times adversarial relations. Dashkov knew that Levitsky had championed the twenty-first-century use of micro-waves aimed at U.S. embassies and CIA annexes around the world, resulting in what the Americans had dubbed "Havana syndrome," to disrupt American intelligence-gathering operations and cause internal strife in U.S. intelligence and diplomatic circles. Truth be told, it was a

weapon and a technology that had been in use throughout the Cold War under a variety of code names. Dashkov had read the top secret American files originating at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency on projects BIZARRE and PANDORA while still in training, courtesy of a highly placed deep-penetration asset, a spy who to this day had never been caught. What the American press neglected to report was that the CIA had been using that same technology against Soviet spies and diplomats since the 1960s.

“Any new information on the death of your predecessor?”

Dashkov could play the game as well.

Levitsky took a breath.

“I am afraid not, comrade. Cyanide ‘L-pill’ in his cigarette’s filter. Suicide. Though the zip-tie around his neck indicates he was under duress. By whom and for what purpose is unknown. I know you have your theory, a theory we took extreme measures to act upon, though nothing officially ties James Reece to the murder. Gorky Park falls under your purview as FSB director, but my agency is at your disposal should you need additional resources.”

Little shit.

“Since you bring him up, what have you learned about his current whereabouts and disposition? Foreign entanglements being the purview of the SVR.”

“No chatter, no additional signals intelligence, and nothing from our sources in U.S. intelligence circles. Nothing since the arrest in Montana,” Levitsky said.

“Remember, comrade, his arrest was not confirmed. He seems to have disappeared. Like a ghost.”

“He is but a man, Director Dashkov. Men don’t just disappear, unless *we* make them.”

Dashkov had been on edge since the discovery of Gromyko’s body in Gorky Park. They shared a long history together, and he had been given

a dose of mortality tinged with paranoia, both newfound traits he intended to conceal from the rest of the council.

“Director Gromyko and I successfully ran the intelligence apparatus for years,” Dashkov reminded the younger man. “I trust we will work together for the benefit of Mother Russia. Can I count on your cooperation, comrade? Regardless of how long you remain in your seat.”

“You shall have it, and so shall Mother Russia.”

“Good. Now, before we have an audience with the president, bring me up to speed on intelligence operations too sensitive for electronic communications.”