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The Russians call their Kamov-50 helicopter gunship Chernaya Akula—Black Shark. The name suits it, because it is sleek and fast, and it moves with cunning and agility, and, above all, it is a supremely efficient killer of its prey.

A pair of Black Sharks emerged from a predawn fog bank and shot through the moonless sky at two hundred knots, just ten meters above the hard earth of the valley floor. Together they raced through the dark in a tight, staggered formation with their outboard lights extinguished. They flew nap-of-the-earth, following a dry streambed through the valley, skirting thirty kilometers to the northwest of Argvani, the nearest major village here in western Dagestan.

The KA-50's contra-rotating coaxial rotors chopped the thin mountain air. The unique twin-rotor design negated the need for a tail rotor, and this made these aircraft faster, as more of the engine's power could then be applied to propulsion, and it also made these aircraft less susceptible to ground fire, as it reduced by one the points on the big machine where a hit will cause a devastating malfunction.

This trait, along with other redundant systems, a self-sealing fuel tank, and an airframe built partially from composites, including Kevlar, makes the Black Shark an exceptionally hearty combat weapon, but as strong as the KA-50 is, it is equally deadly. The two helos streaking toward their target in Russia's North Caucasus had a full load-out of air-to-ground munitions: Each carried four hundred fifty thirty-millimeter rounds for their underbelly cannon, forty eighty-millimeter unguided finned rockets loaded into two outboard pods, and a dozen AT-16 guided air-to-ground missiles hanging off two outboard pylons.

These two KA-50s were Nochny (night) models, and they were comfortable in the black. As they closed on their objective, only the pilots' night-vision equipment, their ABRIS Moving Map Display, and their FLIR (Forward-Looking Infrared Radar) kept the helos from slamming into each other, the sheer rock walls on either side of the valley, or the undulating landscape below.

The lead pilot checked his time to target, then spoke into his headset's microphone. "*Semi minute.*" Seven minutes.

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"*Ponial*"—Got it—came the reply from the Black Shark behind him.

In the village that would burn in seven minutes, the roosters slept.

There, in a barn at the center of the cluster of buildings on the rocky hillside, Israpil Nabiyev lay on a wool blanket above a bed of straw, and he tried to sleep. He tucked his head into his coat, crossed his arms tightly and wrapped them around the gear strapped to his chest. His thick beard insulated his cheeks, but the tip of his nose stung; his gloves kept his fingers warm, but a cold draft through the barn blew up his sleeves to his elbows.

Nabiyev was from the city, from Makhachkala on the shore of the Caspian Sea. He'd slept in his share of barns and caves and tents and mud trenches under the open sky, but he had been raised in a concrete apartment block with electricity and water and plumbing and television, and he missed those comforts right now. Still, he kept his complaints to himself. He knew this excursion was necessary. It was part of his job to make the rounds and visit his forces every few months, like it or not.

At least he wasn't suffering alone. Nabiyev never went *anywhere* alone. Five members of his security detail were bunked with him in the cold barn. Though it was pitch black,

he could hear their snores and he could smell their bodies and the gun oil from their Kalashnikovs. The other five men who'd accompanied him from Makhachkala would be outside on guard, along with half of the local force. Each man awake, his rifle in his lap, a pot of hot tea close by.

Israpil kept his own rifle within arm's reach, as it was his last line of defense. He carried the AK-74U, a cut-down-barrel variant of the venerable but potent Kalashnikov. As he rolled onto his side to turn away from the draft, he reached out and put a gloved hand on the plastic pistol grip and pulled the weapon closer. He fidgeted for another moment like this, then rolled onto his back. With his boots laced on his feet, his pistol belt around his waist, and his chest harness full of rifle magazines strapped to his upper torso, it was damn hard to get comfortable.

And it was not just the discomforts of the barn and his gear that kept him awake. No, it was the gnawing constant worry of attack.

Israpil knew well that he was a prime target of the Russians, because he knew what they were saying about him—that *he* was the future of the resistance. The future of his people. Not just the future of Islamic Dagestan, but the future of an Islamic caliphate in the Caucasus.

Nabiyev was a top-priority target for Moscow, because he'd spent virtually his entire life at war with them. He'd been fighting since he was eleven. He'd killed his first Russian in Nagorno-Karabakh in 1993 when he was only fifteen,

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and he'd killed many Russians since, in Grozny, and in Tbilisi, and in Tskhinvali, and in Makhachkala.

Now, not yet thirty-five years old, he served as the military operational commander of the Dagestani Islamic organization Jamaat Shariat, the "Islamic Law Community," and he commanded fighters from the Caspian Sea in the east to Chechnya and Georgia and Ossetia in the west, all fighting for the same goal: the expulsion of the invaders and the establishment of Sharia.

And, God willing, soon Israpil Nabiyeu would unite all the organizations of the Caucasus and see his dream fulfilled.

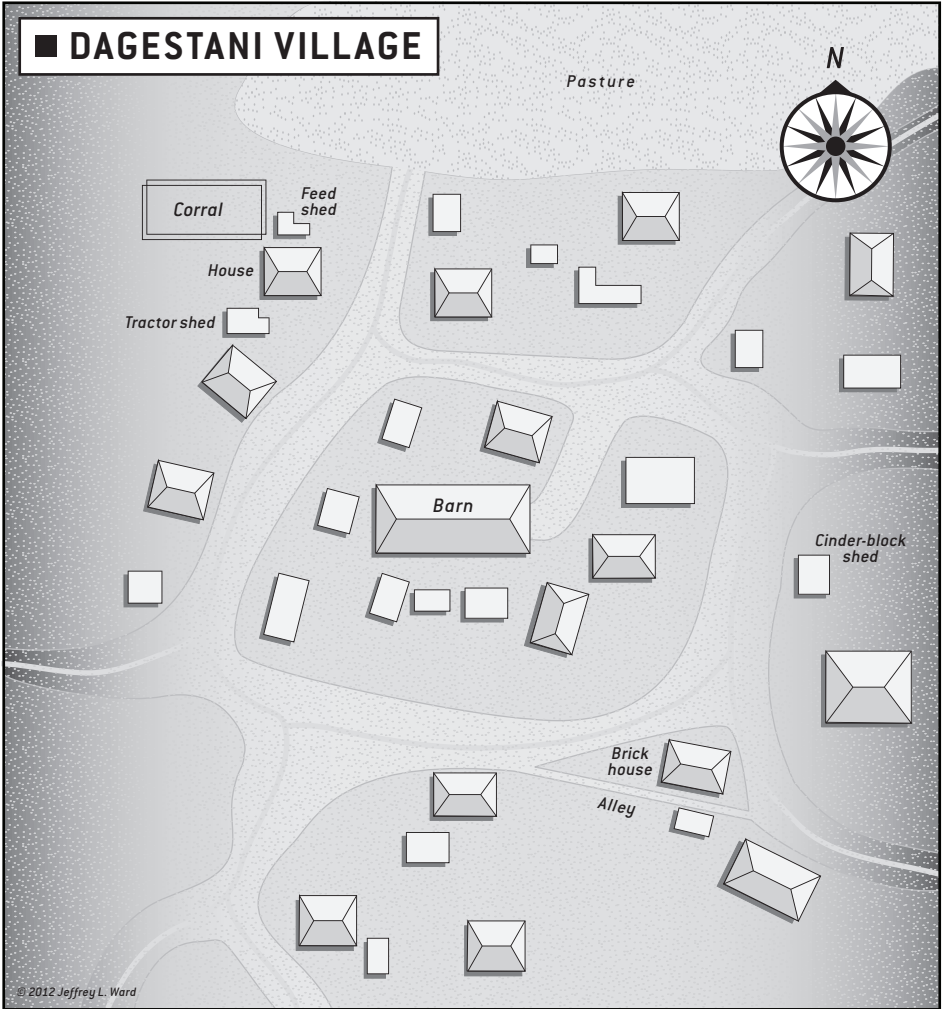
As the Russians said, he *was* the future of the resistance.

And his own people knew this, too, which made his hard life easier. The ten soldiers in his security force, along with thirteen militants of the local Argvani cell—each and every one of these men would proudly lay down his life for Israpil.

He flipped his body around again to shield it from the draft, moving the rifle with him as he tried to find some elusive comfort. He pulled the wool blanket over his shoulder and flicked the straw from his beard that came with it.

Oh, well, he thought to himself. He hoped none of his men would have to lay down his life before daybreak.

Israpil Nabiyeu drifted to sleep in the darkness as a rooster crowed on the hillside just above the village.



. . .

The crowing of the rooster interrupted the transmission of the Russian lying in the weeds a few meters away from the big bird. He waited for a second and a third call from the rooster, and then he put his lips back to the radio attached to his chest harness. "Alpha team to overwatch. We have you in sight and will pass your location in one minute."

There was no verbal response. The sniper overwatch team had been forced to close to within ten meters of the edge of a cinder-block shack in order to get a line of sight on the objective, another one hundred meters on. They would not speak, not even whisper, so near to unfriendlies. The spotter just pressed his transmit button twice, broadcasting a pair of clicks as confirmation that he'd received Alpha's message in his earpiece.

Above the spotter, higher on the steep hillside, eight men heard the two clicks, and then they slowly approached in the black.

The eight men, along with the two-man sniper team, were troops from Russia's Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti, their Federal Security Service. Specifically, this team was part of the Alpha Directorate of the FSB's Special Operations Center. The most elite of all Russian Spetsnaz units, the FSB's Alpha Group were experts in counterterror operations, hostage rescue, urban assault, and a vast array of additional deadly arts.

All the men in this unit were alpinists, as well, though

they possessed more mountain training than they needed for this hit. The peaks behind them, toward the north, were much higher than the hills of this valley.

But it was the other training these men possessed that made them the ideal fit for the mission. Firearms, edged weapons, hand-to-hand, explosives. This Alpha team comprised hard-core select killers. Silent movers, black operators.

Through the night the Russians had advanced slowly, all senses on alert despite the hardships their bodies were forced to endure on the journey. The infiltration had been clean; in their six-hour insertion to their objective waypoint they had smelled nothing but forest and had seen nothing but animals: cows sleeping upright or grazing unattended in meadows, foxes darting into and out of the foliage, even large horned ibex high on the rocks of sheer mountain passes.

Alpha Group were no strangers to Dagestan, but they had more experience operating in nearby Chechnya because, frankly, there were more terrorists to kill in Chechnya than in Dagestan, though Jamaat Shariat seemed to be doing its best to catch up to their Muslim brothers to the west. Chechnya was more mountains and forest, the major conflict zones of Dagestan more urban, but this location, tonight's Omega, or objective, split the difference. Wooded hills of rock all around a tight cluster of dwellings bifurcated by dirt roads, each road sporting a trench down the middle to drain the rainfall lower toward the river.

The soldiers had dropped their three-day packs a kilometer back, removing from their bodies everything save for

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tools of war. Now they moved with supreme stealth, low crawling through the pasture just above the village and then bounding in two-man teams through a corral. They passed their sniper team at the edge of the village and began darting between the structures: a feed shed, an outhouse, a single-family dwelling, and then a baked-brick and tin-roofed tractor shed. As they progressed, the men eyed every corner, every road, every black window, with their NODs—night observation devices.

They carried AK-105 rifles, hundreds of rounds of extra 5.45x39-millimeter cartridges in low-profile magazine chest rigs that allowed them to lie flat on the ground to hide from either a sentry's eyes or an enemy's gunfire. Their green tunics and green vests of body armor were smeared with mud and covered with grass stains and wet with melted snow and the sweat of their exertion, even out here in the cold.

On their belts, holsters held .40-caliber pistols, the Russian Varjag model MP-445. A few also carried suppressed .22-caliber pistols to muzzle guard dogs with a hushed 45-grain hollow-point admonishment to the head.

They found their target's location, and they saw movement in front of the barn. Sentries. There would be others in nearby buildings; some would be awake, though their alertness would suffer at this time of the early morning.

The Russians made a wide arc around the target, cradling their rifles and crawling on their elbows for a minute before going to their hands and knees for two minutes more. A donkey stirred, a dog barked, a goat bleated, but nothing

out of the ordinary for early morning in a farm village. Finally the eight soldiers spread around the back of the building, four groups of two, covering predetermined fields of fire with their Russian rifles, each weapon topped with an American EOTech holographic laser sight. The men peered intently at the red laser aiming reticle, or, more specifically, at the piece of window or door or alleyway that the red laser aiming reticle covered.

Then, and only then, did the team leader whisper into his radio: "In position."

If this was a regular hit on a terrorist stronghold, Alpha would have arrived in big armored personnel carriers or helicopters, and airplanes would have rained rockets on the village while Alpha leapt from their APCs or rappelled to the ground from their transport helos.

But this was no regular hit. They'd been ordered to attempt to take their target alive.

FSB intelligence sources said the man they were after knew the names, locations, and affiliations of virtually all the jihadist leadership in Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia. If he was picked up and drained of his intelligence value, the FSB could deal a virtual death blow to the Islamic cause. To this end, the eight men who crouched in the dark twenty-five meters from the rear of the target building were a blocking force. The attackers were on their way, also on foot and moving along the valley from the west. The attackers would, if the real world bared any resemblance to the op-plan, lead the target into the trap set at the back of the barn.

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The op-plan was hopeful, Alpha Group decided, but it was based on knowledge of militant tactics here in the Caucasus. When ambushed by a larger force, the leadership would run. It was not that the Dagestani and Chechens were cowards. No, courage they possessed in spades. But their leaders were precious to them. The foot soldiers would engage the attackers, manning outbuildings and sandbagged bunkers. From there a single man with a single weapon could hold off an entire raiding force for the time it took the leader and his close protection detail to flee into impenetrable mountains that they would likely know as well as they knew the contours of their lovers' bodies.

So the eight men of the Spetsnaz blocking force waited, controlled their breathing and the beating of their hearts, and prepared to capture one man.

In the administrative pouches of their ballistic plate carriers, each operator on the mission carried a beige laminated card with a photograph of the face of Israpil Nabiyev.

To be captured by these Russian Special Forces and have your face match the photo of the man they sought would be an unenviable fate.

But to be captured by these Russian Special Forces and have your face *not* match the photo of the man they sought would be even worse, because these Russians needed only one man in this village alive.

2



The dogs were the first to react. A growl from a large Caucasian sheepdog started a chorus from other animals around the village. They had not alerted to the smell of the Russians, because the Spetsnaz men masked their scents with chemicals and silver-lined underwear that held in body odors, but the dogs sensed movement, and they began to bark in numbers that spared them from the .22 pistols.

The Dagestani sentries at the front of the barn looked around, a few waved flashlights in bored arcs, one yelled at the animals to shut up. But when the barking turned into a sustained chorus, when a few of the animals began howling, then the sentries stood, and rifles were brought to shoulders.

Only then did the thump of the rotors fill the valley.

. . .

Israpil had fallen asleep, but now he found himself up, standing before fully awake, moving before fully aware of what, exactly, had roused him.

“Russian choppers!” someone shouted, which was plain enough at this point, because Nabiyev could hear the thumping rotors across the valley and nobody save for the Russians had any helicopters around here. Israpil knew they had seconds to flee, and he gave the order to do just that. The leader of his security force shouted into his radio, ordered the Argvani cell to grab their rocket-propelled grenade launchers and get into the open to engage the approaching aircraft, then he told the two drivers to bring their pickups right up to the front door of the barn.

Israpil was fully alert now. He thumbed the safety down on his short-barreled AK and moved toward the front of the barn with the weapon at his shoulder. He knew the sound of choppers would resonate in the valley for another minute before the Russians would actually arrive overhead. He’d spent the past two decades ducking Russian helos, and he was an expert on their abilities and shortcomings.

The first truck arrived at the front of the barn thirty seconds later. One of the guards outside opened the passenger door and then leapt up into the bed behind. Then two more men opened the front door to the barn, not twenty feet away.

Israpil was the third man out the door; he’d taken no

more than two steps into the early-morning air when the supersonic cracks of small-arms fire erupted nearby. At first he thought it was one of his men shooting blindly into the dark, but a hot, wet slap of blood against his face dispelled him of that notion. One of his guards had been shot, his ripped chest spewing blood as he heaved and fell.

Israpil crouched and ran on, but more bursts of gunfire erupted, tearing through the metal and glass of the truck. The military commander of Jamaat Shariat saw muzzle flashes in the road next to a tin shack some twenty-five meters up the hill. The man standing in the truck bed fired a single shot of return fire before he tumbled off the side and down into the muddy ditch in the center of the road. The incoming gunfire continued, and Nabiyev recognized the reports as several Kalashnikovs and a single Russian PPM light machine gun. As he turned, he was showered with sparks from copper-jacketed bullets impacting the stone wall of the barn. He ducked lower and crashed into his protection detail as he shoved them back into the barn.

He and two others ran through the dark structure, shoved past a pair of donkeys tied on the western wall, making for a large window, but an explosion stopped them in their tracks. Nabiyev pulled away from his men, ran to the stone wall, and peered out through a wide crack that had been torturing him with a draft throughout the night. Above the village, hanging over the valley, two helicopter gunships arrived on station. Their silhouettes were just blacker than the

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black sky, until each fired another salvo of rockets from their pylons. Then the metal beasts were illuminated, the streaks of flame raced toward the village ahead of white plumes, and earth-shaking explosions rocked a building a hundred meters to the west.

“Black Sharks!” he called out to the room.

“Back door!” one of his men yelled as he ran, and Nabiyevev followed, although he now knew his position would be surrounded. No one would crawl for miles to hit this place, as he was now certain the Russians had done, only to forget to cut off his escape route. Still, there were no options; the next rocket salvo could hit this barn and martyr him and his men without them allowing them the opportunity to take some infidels with them.

The Russians at the back of the barn stayed low and silent in their four groups of two, waiting patiently while the attack commenced up the hill and the Black Sharks arrived on station and began dispensing death through their rocket pods.

Alpha Group had positioned two of their men to secure their six-o'clock position, to keep an eye out for any mujahideen or armed civilians moving up the hill through the village, but the two-man team with that duty did not have line of sight on a small cinder-block shack just to the southeast of

the easternmost pair of Spetsnaz operators. From a dark open window the muzzle of a bolt-action rifle inched out, aimed at the nearest Russian, and just as the back door of the barn opened, the bolt-action rifle barked. The Alpha Group man was hit in the steel plate on his back, and the round knocked him forward onto his chest. His partner spun toward the threat and opened up on the cinder-block shack, and the rebels escaping out the back of the barn had a moment's warning that they were stumbling into a trap. All five Dagestanis entered the open space behind the barn with their fingers on their triggers, Kalashnikov rounds spraying left and right, peppering everything ahead of them in the dark as they stumbled through the doorway.

One Spetsnaz officer took a chunk of copper—a hot, twisted fragment from a 7.62-millimeter ricochet off of a stone in front of him—directly into his throat, tearing through his Adam's apple and then severing his carotid artery. He fell backward, clutching his neck and writhing in his death throes. All pretense of a capture mission disappeared in that moment, and his men returned fire on the terrorists in the road as more mujahideen gunmen poured out of the doorway of the stone barn.

The leader of Nabiyev's security detail shielded him with his body when the Russians started shooting. The man was hit within a second of doing so, his torso riddled with

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5.45 caliber rounds. More of Nabiyev's men fell around him, but the team kept up the fire as their leader desperately tried to get away. He dove to the side, rolled in the dirt away from the barn door, and then climbed back up to his feet while blasting the night with his AK-74U. He emptied his weapon while running parallel to the wall of the barn, then stumbled into a dark alleyway between two long tin storage huts. He had the sense he was alone now, but he did not slow his breakneck sprint to look around. He just kept running, amazed that he had not been hit in the same fusillade of bullets that had raked through his men. As he fled, he banged against both of the tin walls, and he stumbled again. His eyes were fixed on the opening twenty meters ahead; his hands struggled to pull a fresh magazine for his rifle from his chest rig. His rifle, its barrel blisteringly hot from his having just fired thirty rounds through it at full auto, steamed in the chilly morning.

Israpil lost his balance a third time as he seated the magazine and pulled back the Kalashnikov's charging handle; he fell all the way to his knees now, the rifle almost tumbling out of his gloved hands, but he caught it and regained his feet. He stopped at the edge of the tin storage shacks, looked around the corner, and saw no one in his path. The automatic gunfire behind him continued, and the sound of booming explosions from the helos' rockets impacting the hillside beat against the valley walls and bounced off them, each salvo assaulting his ears numerous times as the sound waves moved back and forth through the village.

The radio on the shoulder strap of his chest harness squawked as men shouted to one another all over the area. He ignored the communications and kept running.

He made his way into a burning baked-brick house lower on the hill. It had taken a Russian rocket through its roof, and the contents of the one-room home burned and smoldered. There would be bodies in here, but he did not slow to look around, he just continued on to an open back window, and, once there, he leapt through it.

Israpil's trailing leg caught the window ledge, and he tumbled onto his face outside. Again, he struggled to stand up; with all the adrenaline pumping through his body, the fact he'd tripped and fallen four times in the past thirty seconds did not even register.

Until he fell again.

Running on a straight stretch of dirt alleyway one hundred meters from the stone barn, his right leg gave out and he fell and tumbled, a complete forward roll, and he ended up on his back. It had not occurred to him that he'd been shot by the Russians at the barn. There was no pain. But when he tried again to climb to his feet, his gloved hand pushed on his leg and he felt it slick. Looking down, he saw his blood flowing from a jagged hole in the threadbare cotton. He took a moment to stare at the blood, glistening from the firelight of a burning pickup truck just ahead. The wound was to the thigh, just above the knee, and the shimmering blood covered his camouflaged pants all the way down to his boot.

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Somehow he made it back to his feet again, took a tentative step forward using his rifle as a crutch, and then found himself bathed in the brightest, hottest white light that he'd ever known. The beam came from the sky, a spotlight from a Black Shark two hundred meters ahead.

Israpil Nabiyev knew that if the KA-50 had a light trained on him, it also had a 30-millimeter cannon trained on him, and he knew that in seconds he would be *shahid*. A martyr.

This filled him with pride.

He exhaled, prepared to lift his rifle up to the big Black Shark, but then the butt of an AK-105 slammed into his skull from directly behind, and everything in Israpil Nabiyev's world went dark.

He awoke in pain. His head hurt, a dull ache deep in his brain as well as a sharp pain on the surface of his scalp. A tourniquet had been cinched tight high on his right leg; it stanching the blood flow from his wound. His arms were wrenched back behind him; his shoulders felt as if they would snap. Cold iron cuffs had been fastened on his wrists; shouting men pulled him this way and that as he was yanked to his feet and pressed against a stone wall.

A flashlight shone in his face, and he recoiled from the light.

“They all look alike,” came a voice in Russian behind the light. “Line them up.”

Using the flashlight’s beam, he saw he was still in the village on the hill. In the distance, he heard continued, sporadic shooting. Mopping-up operations by the Russians.

Four other Jemaat Shariat survivors of the firefight were pushed up to the wall next to him. Israpil Nabiyeu knew exactly what the Russians were doing. These Spetsnaz men had been ordered to take him alive, but with the dirt and perspiration and beards on their faces and the low predawn light, the Russians were having trouble identifying the man they were looking for. Israpil looked around at the others. Two were from his security detail; two more were Argvani cell members he did not know. They all wore their hair long and their black beards full, as did he.

The Russians stood the five men up, shoulder to shoulder, against the cold stone wall, held them there with the muzzles of their rifles. A gloved hand grabbed the first Dagestani by the hair and pulled his head high. Another Alpha Group operator shined a flashlight on the mujahideen. A third held a laminated card next to the rebel’s face. The photo of a bearded man looked back from the card.

“*Nyet,*” said someone in the group.

Without hesitation, the black barrel of a Varjag .40-caliber pistol appeared in the light, and the weapon snapped. With a flash and a crack that echoed in the alleyway, the bearded terrorist’s head snapped back, and he dropped, leaving blood and bone on the wall behind him.

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The laminated photo was held up to the second rebel. Again, the man's head was pulled taught to display his face. He squinted in the flashlight's white beam.

"Nyet."

The automatic pistol appeared and shot him through the forehead.

The third bearded Dagestani was Israpil. A gloved hand pulled matted hair from his eyes and smeared dirt off his cheeks.

"Ny"— . . . *Mozhet byt*"—maybe—said the voice. Then, "I think so." A pause. "Israpil Nabiyev?"

Israpil did not answer.

"Yes . . . it is him." The flashlight lowered and then a rifle rose toward the two Jamaat Shariat rebels on Israpil's left.

Boom! Boom!

The men slammed back against the wall and then fell forward, down onto the mud at Israpil's feet.

Nabiyev stood alone against the wall for a moment, and then he was grabbed by the back of the neck and pulled toward a helicopter landing in a cow pasture lower in the valley.

The two Black Sharks hung in the air above, their cannons burping at irregular intervals now as they ripped buildings apart and killed humans and animals alike. They would do this for a few minutes more. They would not kill every last soul—that would take more time and effort than they wanted to expend.

But they were doing their best to systematically destroy the village that had been hosting the leader of the Dagestani resistance.

Nabiyev was stripped to his underwear and carried down the hill, through the loud and violent rotor wash of an Mi-8 transport helicopter. The soldiers sat him on a bench and handcuffed him to the inner wall of the fuselage. He sat there sandwiched between two filthy Alpha Group men in black ski masks, and he looked out the open door. Outside, as dawn just began to lighten the smoke-filled air in the valley, Spetsnaz men lined up the bodies of Nabiyev's dead comrades, and they used digital cameras to photograph their faces. Then they used ink pads and paper to fingerprint his dead brothers-in-arms.

The Mi-8 lifted off.

The Spetsnaz operator on Nabiyev's right leaned in to his ear and shouted in Russian, "They said you were the future of your movement. You just became the past."

Israpil smiled, and the Spetsnaz sergeant saw this. He jabbed his rifle into the Muslim's ribs. "What's so funny?"

"I am thinking of everything my people will do to get me back."

"Maybe you are right. Maybe I should just kill you now."

Israpil smiled again. "Now I am thinking about everything my people would do in my memory. You cannot win, Russian soldier. You cannot win."

The Russian's blue irises glared through the eye ports of

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the ski mask for a long moment as the Mi-8 gained altitude. Finally he jabbed Israpil in the ribs again with his rifle and then leaned back against the fuselage with a shrug.

As the helicopter rose out of the valley and began heading north, the village below it burned.

3



Presidential candidate John Patrick Ryan stood alone in the men's locker room of a high school gymnasium in Carbondale, Illinois. His suit coat hung from a hanger on a rolling clothes rack next to him, but he was otherwise well dressed in a burgundy tie, a lightly starched cream-colored French-cuff shirt, and pressed charcoal dress pants.

He sipped bottled water and held a mobile phone to his ear.

There was a gentle, almost apologetic, knock on the door, and then it cracked open. A young woman wearing a microphone headset leaned in; just behind her Jack could see the left shoulder of his lead Secret Service agent, Andrea Price-O'Day. Others milled around farther down the hallway that

led to the school's packed gymnasium, from where a raucous crowd cheered and clapped, and brassy amplified music blared.

The young woman said, "We're ready whenever you are, Mr. President."

Jack smiled politely and nodded, "Be right there, Emily."

Emily's head withdrew and the door shut. Jack kept the phone to his ear, listening for his son's recorded voice.

"Hi, you have reached Jack Ryan Jr. You know what to do."

The beep followed.

Jack Sr. adopted a light and airy tone that belied his true mood. "Hey, sport. Just checking in. I talked to your mom and she said you've been busy and had to cancel your lunch date with her today. Hope everything is going okay." He paused, then picked back up. "I'm in Carbondale at the moment; we'll be heading to Chicago later tonight. I'll be there all day and then Mom will meet me in Cleveland tomorrow night for the debate on Wednesday. Okay . . . Just wanted to touch base with you. Call me or Mom when you can, okay? Bye." Ryan disconnected the call and tossed the phone onto a sofa that had been placed, along with the clothes rack and several other pieces of furniture, into the makeshift dressing room. Jack wouldn't dare put his phone back in his pocket, even on vibrate, lest he forget to take it out before walking onstage. If someone called he'd be in trouble. Those lapel microphones picked up damn near everything, and, undoubtedly, the press corps traveling with him would report to the

world that he had uncontrollable gas and was therefore unfit to lead.

Jack looked into a full-length mirror positioned between two American flags, and he forced a smile. He would have been self-conscious doing this in front of others, but Cathy had been prodding him of late, telling him that he was losing his “Jack Ryan cool” when talking about the policies of his opponent, President Ed Kealty. He’d have to work on that before the debate, when he sat onstage with Kealty himself.

He was in a sour mood this evening, and he needed to shake it off before he hit the stage. He hadn’t talked to his son, Jack Junior, in weeks—just a couple of short-and-sweet e-mails. This happened from time to time; Ryan Sr. knew he wasn’t exactly the easiest person to get in touch with while out on the campaign trail. But his wife, Cathy, had mentioned just minutes before that Jack hadn’t been able to get away from work to meet up with her in Baltimore that afternoon, and that worried him a little.

Though there was nothing unusual about parents wanting to stay in touch with their adult child, the presidential candidate and his wife had added reason for concern because they both knew what their son did for a living. Well, Jack Sr. thought to himself, *he* knew what his son did, more or less, and his wife knew . . . to an extent. Several months back, Sr. and Jr. had sat Cathy down with high hopes of explaining. They’d planned on laying out Jack Junior’s occupation as an analyst and operative for an “off-the-books” spy agency formed by Sr. himself and helmed by former senator Gerry

Hendley. The conversation had started off well enough, but the two men began equivocating under the powerful gaze of Dr. Cathy Ryan, and in the end they'd stammered out something about clandestine intelligence analysis that made it sound as if Jack Junior spent his days with his elbows propped on a desk reading computer files looking for ne'er-do-well financiers and money launderers, work that would expose him to no more danger than carpal tunnel syndrome and paper cuts.

If only that were the truth, Jack Sr. thought to himself as a fresh wash of stomach acid burned into his gut.

No, the conversation with his wife had not gone particularly well, Jack Sr. admitted to himself afterward. He'd broached the subject a couple of times since. He hoped he'd been able to peel back another layer of the onion for Cathy; just maybe she was beginning to get the idea that her son was involved in some real intelligence fieldwork, but again, Ryan Sr. had just made it sound like Ryan Jr. occasionally traveled to European capitals, dined with politicians and bureaucrats, and then wrote reports about their conversations on his laptop while sipping burgundy and watching CNN.

Oh, well, thought Jack. *What she doesn't know won't hurt her*. And if she did know? *Jesus*. With Kyle and Katie still at home, she had enough on her plate without her having to also worry about her twenty-six-year-old son, didn't she?

Jack Sr. told himself that worrying about Jack Junior's profession would be *his* burden, not Cathy's, and it was a burden that he had to shake off for the time being.

He had an election to win.

Ryan's mood brightened a little. Things were looking good for his campaign. The latest Pew poll had Ryan up by thirteen percent; Gallup was right there at plus eleven. The networks had done their own polling, and all three were slightly lower, probably due to some selection bias that his campaign manager, Arnold van Dam, and his people had not bothered to research yet because Ryan was so far ahead.

The electoral college race was tighter, Jack knew, but it always was. He and Arnie both felt he needed a good showing in the next debate to keep some momentum for the home stretch of the campaign, or at least until the last debate. Most races tighten up in the final month or so. Pollsters call it the Labor Day spread, as the narrowing in the polls usually begins around Labor Day and continues on until Election Day on the first Tuesday in November.

Statisticians and pundits differ on the reasons for this phenomenon. Was it that likely voters who had switched sides were now getting cold feet and returning to their original candidate? Could there be more independent thinking in the summer than there was in November, now closer to the time when answering a pollster's questions had actual consequences? Was it the near wall-to-wall news coverage on the frontrunner as Election Day approached that tended to highlight more gaffes for the leading candidate?

Ryan tended to agree with Arnie on the subject, as there were few people on earth who knew more about matters related to campaigns and elections than Arnie van Damm.

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Arnie explained it away as simple math. The candidate leading the race had more people polling in his favor than the candidate trailing. Therefore, if ten percent of both voters shifted allegiance in the last month of a race, the candidate with more initial voters would lose more votes.

Simple math, Ryan suspected, nothing more. But simple math would not keep the talking heads on television talking or the twenty-four/seven political blogs blogging, so theories and conspiracies were ginned up by America's bloviating class.

Ryan put down his water bottle, grabbed his coat and slipped it on, then headed for the door. He felt a little better, but anxiety about his son kept his stomach churning.

Hopefully, thought Ryan, Jack Junior was just out tonight enjoying himself, maybe on a date with someone special.

Yeah, Senior said to himself. Surely that's all.

Twenty-six-year-old Jack Ryan Jr. sensed movement on his right, and he spun away from it, twisted his body clear of the knife's blade as it made to plunge into his chest. As he continued his rotation he brought up his left forearm, knocked his attacker's hand away as he grabbed the man's wrist with his right hand. Then Ryan heaved his body forward, into his attacker's chest, and this sent the man tumbling backward toward the floor.

Jack immediately went for his gun, but the falling man

took hold of Ryan's shirt and brought Ryan down with him. Jack Junior lost the space he'd created from his enemy that he needed to draw his pistol from his inside-the-waistband holster, and now, as they crashed to the floor together, he knew the opportunity was lost.

He'd just have to fight this battle hand to hand.

The attacker went for Jack's throat, fingernails digging into his skin, and again Jack had to knock away the threat with a violent arm sweep. The assailant flipped from a sitting position to his knees, and then hopped up again to his feet. Ryan was below him now, and vulnerable. With no other options, Jack went for his pistol, but he had to roll onto his left hip to free the weapon from its holster.

In the time it took to execute this move, his attacker had pulled his own gun from the small of his back, and he shot Ryan five times in the chest.

Pain stitched across Jack's body with the impact of the projectiles.

"Dammit!" He yelled.

Ryan was shouting at the pain, yes. But more than this, he was shouting with the frustration of losing the fight.

Again.

Ryan ripped the goggles off his eyes and sat up. A hand came down to assist him, and he took it, regained his feet, and reholstered his weapon—an Airsoft version of the Glock 19 that used compressed air to fire plastic projectiles that stung like hell but did not injure.

His "attacker" took off his own eye protection and then

retrieved the rubber knife from the floor. "Sorry about the scratches, old boy," the man said, his Welsh accent obvious, even buried as it was behind his heavy breathing.

Jack wasn't paying attention. "Too slow!" he shouted at himself, his adrenaline from the hand-to-hand melee mixing with his frustration.

But the Welshman, in stark contrast to his American student, was calm, as if he'd just stood after sitting on a park bench feeding pigeons. "No worries. Go tend to your wounds and come back so I can tell you what you did wrong."

Ryan shook his head. "Tell me now." He was mad at himself; the cuts on his neck, as well as the scrapes and bruises all over his body, were the least of his concerns.

James Buck wiped a thin sheen of sweat from his brow and nodded. "All right. First, your assumption is off. There is nothing wrong with your reflexes, which is what you are talking about when you say you are too slow. Your speed of *action* is good. Better than good, actually. Your body can move as quick as you please, and your dexterity and agility and athleticism are quite impressive. But the trouble, lad, is your speed of thought. You are hesitant, unsure. You are thinking about your next move when you need to be full-tilt action. You are giving off subtle little clues with your thoughts, and you are broadcasting your next move in advance."

Ryan cocked his head, and sweat dripped from his face. He said, "Can you give me an example?"

"Yes. Look at this last engagement. Your body language did you in. Your hand twitched toward your hip twice during

the fray. Your gun was well hidden in your waistband and under your shirt, but you revealed its existence by thinking about drawing it and then changing your mind. If your assailant didn't know you had a gun, he would have just fallen to the ground and climbed back up. But I already knew about the gun because you 'told' me about it with your actions. So when I started to fall back, I knew to pull you down with me so you wouldn't get the space you needed to draw. Make sense?"

Ryan sighed. It did make sense, though, in actuality, James Buck knew about the pistol under Ryan's T-shirt because James Buck had given it to Ryan before the exercise. Still, Jack conceded, an incredibly savvy enemy could possibly discern Ryan's thinking about making a play for a hidden weapon on his hip.

Shit, Ryan thought. His enemy would have to be almost psychic to pick up that tell. But that's why Ryan had been spending the vast majority of his nights and weekends with trainers hired by The Campus. To learn how to tackle the incredibly savvy enemies.

James Buck was ex-SAS and ex-Rainbow, a hand-to-hand and bladed weapons expert, among other cruel specialties. He'd been hired by the director of The Campus, Gerry Hendley, to work with Ryan on his martial skills.

A year earlier, Ryan had told Gerry Hendley that he wanted more fieldwork to go along with his analytical role at The Campus. He'd gotten more fieldwork, almost more than he'd bargained for, and he'd done well, but he did not have

the same level of training as the other operators in his organization.

He knew it and Hendley knew it, and they also knew their options for training were somewhat limited. The Campus did not officially exist, it did not belong to the U.S. government, so any formal training by FBI, CIA, or the military was absolutely out of the question.

So Jack and Gerry and Sam Granger, The Campus's chief of operations, decided to seek other avenues of instruction. They went to the veterans in The Campus' stable of operators, John Clark and Domingo Chavez, and they sketched out a plan for young Ryan, a training regimen for him to undergo in his off-hours over the next year or more.

And all this hard work had paid off. Jack Junior was a better operator for all the training he'd undergone, even if the training itself was humbling. Buck, and others like him, had been doing this all their adult lives, and their expertise showed. Ryan was improving, no question, but improving against men like James Buck did not mean defeating them, it merely meant "dying" less often and forcing Buck and the others to work harder in order to defeat him.

Buck must have seen the frustration on Ryan's face, because he patted him on the shoulder, a gesture of understanding. The Welshman could be vicious and cruel at times, but on other occasions he was fatherly, even friendly. Jack didn't know which of the two personalities was the "put-on," or if they were both necessary aspects of his training, a sort of carrot-and-stick approach. "Chin up, old boy," Buck said.

“Heaps better than when you started. You’ve got the physical assets you need to handle yourself, and you’ve got the smarts to learn. We just have to keep working on you, continue to build on your technical proficiency and mind-set. You’re already a sharper tack than ninety-nine percent of the blokes out there. But that one percent remaining are right bastards, so let’s keep at it until we have you ready for them, all right?”

Jack nodded. Humility was not his strong suit, but learning and improving was. He was smart enough to know that James Buck was right, even Jack he wasn’t crazy about the prospect of getting his ass kicked a few thousand more times in pursuit of excellence.

Jack put his eye protection back on. James Buck smacked the side of Ryan’s head with his open hand playfully. “That’s it, lad. You ready to go again?”

Jack nodded again, this time more emphatically. “Hell, yes.”