

RED SPECTER

OTHER TITLES BY
BRIAN ANDREWS
AND JEFFREY WILSON

Tier One Series

Tier One
War Shadows
Crusader One
American Operator

WRITING AS ALEX RYAN

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Beijing Red
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The Traiteur's Ring
The Donors
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War Torn

RED SPECTER

A TIER ONE THRILLER

ANDREWS & WILSON



THOMAS & MERCER

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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For Gina

Note to the Reader

We've provided a glossary in the back of this book to define the acronyms, military lingo, and abbreviations used herein.

PART I

Your own prison you shall not make.

—*The Code of Thieves, Vorovskoy Mir*

CHAPTER 1

Kreenholmi Joala Abandoned Textile Factory

Narva, Estonia

Five Hundred Feet from the Russian Border

June 10

0400 Local Time

“It’s a trap,” said the voice in his ear.

“Let’s try not to jump to premature conclusions,” John Dempsey replied as he piloted the silver Mercedes-Benz Sprinter around a tight fishhook turn. The panel van’s tires grumbled in protest as he maneuvered off Kreenholmi Street onto the pothole-ridden dirt-and-gravel stretch that led to an abandoned Estonian textile factory complex. Despite the early hour, the sun was already breaching the horizon, painting the Baltic sky with brilliant pink and orange hues. The city of Narva was north of the fifty-ninth parallel, putting it a degree north of Juneau, Alaska, in latitude. Thankfully, it was summer, and it didn’t feel like he was operating in Alaska.

“Another SUV just pulled up and parked behind the building. That makes three vehicles. I’m telling you, you’re walking into a

trap,” Elizabeth Grimes repeated with annoyed, persistent conviction. Grimes—the team’s designated sniper, overwatch, and devil’s advocate in residence—was communicating via the microtransmitter stuffed deep in his left ear canal. When he didn’t respond, she sighed and added, “This is one of your worst plans ever, you know that?”

Dempsey glanced at Dan Munn, who was riding in the back of the van. The former Navy SEAL and combat surgeon did a chatter-box impersonation with his right hand, his fingers and thumb forming a squawking bird beak. Munn and Dempsey had served together at the Tier One back in the day, in what felt like another lifetime. At the Teams, Dempsey had been a tool of the Joint Special Operations Command, fulfilling a role as one of America’s most lethal special operators. Now, he was a tactical spook—an operator playing dress-up and taking on the identity the mission du jour demanded.

They named people like him Smith, Jones, or Johnson. In fact, John Dempsey wasn’t even his real name, just the thing he called himself in this second incarnation of his life. As the head of Task Force Ember’s Special Activities Division, the nation’s best-kept counterterrorism secret, Dempsey was whoever America needed him to be to get the job done. Today, America needed him to be a scumbag bodyguard, and America needed Munn to pose as his boss, an even bigger scumbag international arms buyer. The pretext for the meeting was to inspect samples of the latest Russian weapons technology before placing a large order. The seller, Matvei Amarov, was one of Russia’s most powerful Mafia bosses, known for his ruthless practices and propensity for extreme violence. But it was all good . . . this was just another day at the office catfishing the most dangerous, sadistic, and vile players in the world’s criminal and terrorist underground.

Munn flashed Dempsey a crooked grin and said, “Dude, you know she’s usually right.”

“I know, but I’ll never admit that,” he whispered. Then, loud enough for Grimes to hear, he said, “I appreciate your concern, Alpha,

but these Vory guys are famously paranoid. I mean, how many guys could Amarov have possibly brought?”

“Since you asked, let me tell you,” said Ian Baldwin, Ember’s SIGINT chief back in Virginia. “There’s the vehicle up front, which you see, but a second arrived at the same time and parked behind the north corner of the building. We hold one thermal signature in each vehicle—the drivers—and the two *gentlemen* standing out front to meet you. That makes four. There are four more signatures inside the building, who appear to be setting up equipment. For what it’s worth, we observed them unload three crates from the second vehicle and carry them inside . . . They have one additional body on the roof, and a tenth patrolling the perimeter—although this last fellow is presently urinating on the wall at the north corner. The third SUV that Alpha just reported is hidden from your line of sight and has five signatures inside. This is probably their QRF on standby in the unlikely scenario that the two of you decide, despite being dreadfully outnumbered, to pick a gunfight.”

“What the hell?” Munn said, shaking his head. “Amarov insisted that I come with a single bodyguard while he brings an army. Remind me why we agreed to follow the instructions of Russia’s most ruthless Vory boss to the letter?”

“Well, we didn’t follow them *to the letter*,” Dempsey said. “We brought Long-Gun Lizzie with us, which, if you consider her KIA average per engagement, probably gives us a slight edge.”

“While I appreciate your faith in me, Bravo, keep in mind that *Long-Gun Lizzie* is working with razor-thin margins,” Grimes said from her sniper hide. “A millimeter could mean the difference between covering your ass and accidentally putting you six feet under. Might wanna remember that when you’re testing out new nicknames for me.”

Grimes had been in position for an hour, after making her infil on foot when it was still dark. Dempsey glanced toward the upper level of a squat building. He pictured her lying on a table, or a stack of boxes, draped over the Heckler & Koch M110A1 sniper rifle she seemed to

prefer lately. The HK was lighter than the bolt-action Remington, and semiautomatic, which saved her precious time between shots. Her angle was good, but the building unfortunately offered her no height advantage.

Dempsey pursed his lips as he slowed the van's approach to the south corner of their target building and contemplated the tactical picture Baldwin had just painted.

It's a lot of guys, he thought, before shrugging it off. *Doesn't matter. If today's the day I get my ticket punched, so be it. I don't care.*

This had been his mantra ever since the disastrous mission in Tehran. It wasn't that he had nothing left to live for. On the contrary, his life was about as good as it could get for a forty-year-old door-kicker divorcé who was officially dead to the world. He had a job that challenged him and made a difference in the world, teammates he both liked and respected, and a purpose. But if he was being honest with himself—something he was getting better at with age—it was time to recognize that he was past his expiration date. How many more missions could he play Russian roulette and spin that cylinder before fate finally got sick of saving his grumpy old ass and just let the hammer strike put him in the ground?

An uncomfortable quiet hung on the line, and Dempsey suddenly got the distinct feeling that everyone was waiting on *him* to say something.

"I wouldn't overthink it, guys. They're just being careful. If they wanted to kill us, they could have done it with one well-placed sniper sequence on our approach. As long as we don't pick a fight, everything will go fine. I have a good feeling about this meet." The last statement wasn't true, but Dempsey said it anyway.

"Alpha, how are your lines?" Munn asked Grimes, his own misgivings clearly not assuaged by Dempsey's *good feeling*.

"I have easy lines on their roving patrol and the guy on the roof, but I'm no help once you get inside," Grimes answered. "Unless all their

shooters decide to hang out by the windows, there's not a whole lot I can do. Step through that door and you're taking your lives out of my hands and placing them entirely in Amarov's."

Dempsey nodded at the comment, despite the fact Grimes couldn't see him. He looked in the rearview mirror at the back seat. Munn, who normally was dressed and groomed like a lumberjack, was fresh-shaven, his hair slicked back and dyed for the role he was playing today.

"What's your gut sayin'?" Dempsey asked.

"My gut is saying I wish we had a Reaper in orbit with Hellfire missiles," Munn said.

"I was very clear in the pre-op that orbiting an armed Reaper five hundred feet from Russian airspace was liable to start an international incid—"

"We know," Dempsey said, cutting Baldwin off. "We're not blaming you." He looked back at Munn. "So, do we fish or cut bait?"

"Even with you on the SCAR, we're still just two guys—and only one of us with a rifle. If things turn ugly, our only hope is to talk our way out. Shooting our way to freedom is probably a nonstarter."

Dempsey tapped his fingers on the steering wheel and looked at the desert-tan SCAR-H model assault rifle leaning against the passenger seat beside him. Grimes and Munn were right; once they got inside, the factory floor would be nothing but wide-open space. They'd have no hides and no backup shooters to provide cover fire or watch their six. If the Vory surrounded them, they'd never survive. Whether they walked out alive or not came down to Amarov's motives and endgame. It wasn't surprising that Amarov had brought additional personnel, but more than a dozen?

Amarov was a big fish in the Vory sea. Geographically speaking, his operation was concentrated in the Baltics—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—with nearby Saint Petersburg serving as his home and Klaipėda as his logistical hub. When Ember's Operations Officer, Simon Adamo, discovered that Amarov had a history of transactions with a

Chechen arms dealer and human trafficker named Malik, Dempsey had pushed aggressively for a meet and greet.

It was Malik who had orchestrated last month's murder of the American Ambassador to Turkey and kidnapped the Ambassador's Chief of Staff, Amanda Allen. It was Malik who had tortured Allen while holding her hostage in Syria. It was Malik who had arranged for an assassination attempt on the President of the United States and the Director of National Intelligence. And finally, it was Malik who had shot Munn in the neck, nearly killing Dempsey's best friend, and then slipped through Dempsey's fingers after a harrowing chase through the streets of Istanbul.

Malik had smarts and skills, and he was one of the most dangerous adversaries Dempsey had faced in his long and decorated career. Everyone in Ember and all the way up the chain of command to President Warner himself wanted this guy found. The problem was, since Istanbul, Malik had been a ghost. So Adamo had decided to change tack. If they couldn't find Malik, then they would try to develop a relationship with someone who would know where to look. Dempsey prayed Amarov would be that asset, but first they had to establish trust and confidence.

"Omega, any chatter we should know about?" he asked Baldwin.

"Nothing of concern, Bravo," Baldwin said. "Just personnel positioning instructions. Nothing to indicate your NOC is compromised."

"I still vote we abort, Bravo," Grimes said, her voice soft but insistent. "We should reschedule this meeting on neutral ground, or at least somewhere we can bring a bigger team."

Dempsey gritted his teeth. She made a good point, but what if this was the only shot Amarov was willing to give them? The Russian had been adamant about meeting at this derelict factory, only a stone's throw from the Russian border. If they burned this opportunity with Amarov, who would they try next? How long would it delay the search for Malik?

Dempsey eased the van to a stop five meters from where two of Amarov's armed thugs stood waiting outside the south building. His gaze fixed out the windshield, he said, "Amarov is the only vetted and viable lead we have. We don't have a fallback option. If we want to find Malik, I think our only choice is to see this through."

"Check," Grimes said, her tone resigned but full of disapproval.

Dempsey looked over his shoulder and locked eyes with Munn, who was stroking his chin. Munn nodded. "Let's get it on."

Dempsey swept his gaze across the scene one last time, then grabbed the SCAR and stepped out of the van. He closed the driver's side door and walked around to open the rear door for his "boss," an international arms dealer known in the underground simply as "the American." Munn was dressed in black jeans and black ostrich cowboy boots, and a silver chain hung around his neck. The black silk shirt he wore perfectly concealed the low-profile body armor beneath. A polished chrome Beretta 92G Elite—with a pearl handle, of course—was on display in a black leather shoulder rig, and he clutched a steel briefcase in his left hand.

He looked ridiculous.

Munn took a deep breath, stepped out, and combed his slicked-back hair with ring-covered fingers. With a scowl on his face, he cleared his throat and spat a loogie on the dusty gravel next to his boot. "The American" was a NOC carefully curated and used by the CIA over the years. Langley had been adamant that the officer currently living the legend participate in the op, but the DNI had pulled rank and now here they were.

The two waiting Russians approached, both holding state-of-the-art AK-12 assault rifles pointing up at a forty-five, but firmly in two-handed grips. Two new guys emerged from the building fifteen meters away, cradling compact machine pistols. Dempsey clutched his own assault rifle in a combat carry, ready to put it on target, while Munn walked with unbridled swagger, the pistol under his left armpit no more

help than if it had been left in the van. One of the Russians let go of his forward grip and raised his hand, either in greeting or as a gesture for them to stop—his intention unclear.

Munn stopped and looked the two thugs up and down. The bigger of the two Russians muttered something to his comrade, and they both laughed.

Baldwin translated in their ears. “He said, ‘Oh look, it’s the American and his doggie.’”

Munn looked sideways at Dempsey, who raised his rifle, pointing it directly at the man’s head. Munn then hollered back the only phrases in Russian he knew, “*Vy budete govorit’ po-angliyski po do . . . i proyavit’ nekotorye uvazheniye.*”

“He just told them to speak English and show respect,” Baldwin translated, although Dempsey knew this one because he’d listened to Munn practice it at least a hundred and fifty times.

The Vory enforcer’s grin disappeared and he raised both hands casually, though his eyes still flickered with a malicious fire. “Of course, of course,” he said with a thick Russian accent. “We are meaning no offense. Mr. Amarov is excited to meeting the American. You are well known to us, and we are delighting to doing business. We are all same here.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Dempsey said under his breath, stepping a half pace ahead of Munn but not lowering his rifle. He noted the sleeve of ornate Vory tattoos on the enforcer’s forearms.

“All right, are we just going to stand outside pointing guns at each other, or are we going to do business?” Munn said in the relaxed, unflappable voice of a man who’d participated in a hundred armed standoffs like this and walked away from all of them.

“Yes, of course, but your bodyguard is very serious. Perhaps if he is to aiming his rifle away from my face?” the Russian said.

Munn nodded at Dempsey, and Dempsey lowered his rifle, pointing it at the ground between them.

“Where is Amarov?” Munn demanded. “It was agreed we meet in person. I do not negotiate with intermediaries. My time is too valuable to deal with *minions*.”

The man laughed and commented in Russian to his colleague, who responded with a series of shoulder-shaking grunts.

“Aldy laughs out of not disrespect. He loves American movie about the minions.” When Munn remained stern, the Russian said, “I assuring you we are being more than minions. You are to be working closely with Aldy and me if moving forward with our product. My name is Trak. We are—how do you say—managers for distribution in these region.”

“Unacceptable. Where is Amarov?”

“Amarov is inside building,” Trak said and reached inside the flap of his coat. Dempsey raised his rifle and pointed it center mass as the Russian’s hand came out to reveal a mobile phone. “*Gde nakhoditsya doveriye?* Where is trust?” he said through a laugh and snapped a picture of them.

“Omega, Alpha. Amarov’s guys just took Bravo’s picture,” Grimes reported back to the Ember TOC, her voice tense. “If they have an image database on the American, we’re fucked.”

“What are you doing?” Munn asked, his gaze locked on Trak.

“Before meeting Amarov, we make sure you are who you say,” Trak said. “Is normal procedure.”

Dempsey’s throat tightened. Time shifted into slow motion, and his senses kicked in to that hyperaware perceptual state he experienced whenever Death was about to join the party.

“Someone inside the building is making a call,” Baldwin reported.

“Bravo, this is Omega Actual,” came a voice over the comms circuit. Shane Smith, Ember’s Director. “I don’t like it. I’m calling it. Mission abort. Bravo, it’s time to start talking your way out of there. If this thing deteriorates on us, it’s going to get real ugly real fast.”

Dempsey glanced up at the roofline of the building and spied the barrel of the Russian sniper’s rifle pointed down at them. Movement

to his left caught his attention, and he saw the driver of the Vory SUV parked on their side of the building step out of the vehicle. The driver was holding an AK-12 and took up a firing position using the hood to support his elbow. Aldy and Trak still held their weapons in casual carries, and the two thugs guarding the door to the building behind them were still at combat ready but not sighting in. Grimes was good, but between the Vory sniper, the driver with a bead on them, and the four other shooters outside, the odds of escaping without being shot were low.

Dempsey looked at Munn, who despite the confidence he was projecting had worried eyes. “Hey, boss, we don’t need this shit. I say we hit the road. These guys clearly aren’t interested in your business.”

Before Munn could respond to Dempsey’s prompt, Trak said, “Good news. Mr. Amarov has agreed to see you.” Then, flashing them a vulpine grin, the Russian added, “We have demonstration to be showing you inside. Then you be taking your sample weapons and leave us your deposit. Yes?”

“That is good news,” Munn said, his voice hard. “But why don’t you invite Mr. Amarov to join us outside. We can shake hands, breathe the fresh air, and look at the merchandise out here in the light.”

“No, no, I am sorry, but we cannot do these things under watchful eyes from satellites overhead. American CIA and the Russian FSB might both be looking down on us—bad for everyone’s business, you agree? Come inside and we are having vodka, a show, and all will be well. You must be trusting us.”

“That’s the problem. I can’t trust you. We agreed to come as two, but you have brought many,” Munn said, gesturing to all the Vory shooters. “Mr. Amarov clearly doesn’t trust me, or he wouldn’t be hiding inside the warehouse. So, you tell your boss that if he wants my million dollar deposit,” he said, lifting the steel case and tapping it with his right hand, “he can come out here, apologize to my face, and tell all the men with guns pointed at my head to lower their weapons.”

A strange expression washed over Trak's face, and in that moment, everything clicked in Dempsey's head. This wasn't a meet and greet, and it wasn't about the money. This was a snatch and grab—and he and Munn were the targets. That's why Amarov had picked a location so close to the Russian border, and why he'd brought so many men and vehicles. If Malik had made the same one-degree-of-separation deduction as Adamo—suspecting that this meeting was a covert operation to use Amarov to get to him—then it stood to reason that he would direct Amarov to take preemptive measures. Malik had seen both their faces in Istanbul, and Trak had just taken their pictures. After getting confirmation, all Amarov had to do was force them into a vehicle at gunpoint, and five minutes later they'd be in Russia, never to be seen or heard from again.

Grimes was right.

They had walked into a trap.

Dempsey leaned into his shooting stance, pressing the stock of the SCAR-H firmly to his cheek while putting the floating red dot of his holosight in the center of Trak's chest. Simultaneously, Munn drew the Beretta from its holster and aimed at the big Russian's head. In that moment, their minds were one. All the missions they'd run together, all the ops they'd planned, all the evil bastards they'd hunted in the suck together had synchronized their thoughts. Munn had experienced the same epiphany as Dempsey, and Dempsey knew the next line out of his teammate's mouth before Munn said it.

“Your shooters will get one of us, maybe both,” Munn said with stone-cold certainty, “but not before one of us ends you.”

Gravel crunched underfoot as they took a cautious and synchronized step backward toward their van.

CHAPTER 2

Grimes tensed on the long, low table where she lay watching the events below through her spotter scope. This op was now a shit show of epic proportions. If Dempsey survived, she would tell him that, and then, she would punch him in his big, stupid face for putting her through this hell.

Focus, she told herself. He needs me in the game.

She exhaled slowly while counting to four, calming herself.

She shifted her attention to the Vory on the roof. The sniper was watching the scene below through his oversize optics just like she had been, but nothing in his body language suggested he was about to engage. She was at the same elevation as the other sniper, and to keep a line on him and on the shooters on the ground required her to be closer to the window than she liked. She tilted her head to peer around her scope and keep tabs on the scene down below. Dempsey and Munn were slowly backpedaling, their weapons still pointed at Trak. The other Russian up front, Aldy, had brought his AK-12 up and was sighting on Dempsey. The two guards behind them were fanning out right and left so their bosses wouldn't be in their line of fire if this standoff turned into a shoot-out.

“Shit, this is not good,” she cursed under her breath, belatedly aware that the whole team could hear her.

She leaned in to sight through her scope and positioned the dimly lit red arrow on the side of the Vory sniper’s head. This guy was the biggest problem and she would have to take him first, but her mind quickly went to work, planning her follow-on sequence of shots. Dempsey and Munn were best positioned to kill Trak and Aldy, which were their closest and most immediate threats. Munn was stuck with a pistol so, knowing Dempsey, after shooting Trak he would slide left to take out both the two rear shooters. That left the driver leaning against the hood of the Russian SUV free to cut them down, which made that guy her second priority. The rear shooter on Munn’s side was the third biggest threat, in case he took cover or Dempsey missed. Last were the reinforcements inside the building who would rush to engage and the roving patrol who she presently couldn’t see. She scratched an annoying itch on the left side of her nose and decided on her kill sequence: one—rooftop sniper; two—SUV driver; three—door guards; four—clear the field of reinforcements as required.

She tilted her head off the scope for another look below. Trak lifted a closed fist high over his head and then glanced over his shoulder at the guards behind him, who both froze and lowered their weapons.

“Wait, wait,” Trak said.

She could hear the Russian in her earpiece from Dempsey and Munn’s ultrasensitive transmitters. “Let me telling Amarov. Let me using my phone. I am sure he had no idea this would upset you. No need to leave. Wait please.”

Everyone down below froze except for Trak, who raised his phone to his ear and began talking.

She leaned into her scope to check the Vory roof sniper and found him tight in on his rifle now.

Damn it, she cursed, this time in her head. That sealed it. She was going to have to draw first blood. Otherwise, one of her boys was getting shot.

“Trak is saying Bravo is spooked and will not come inside,” Baldwin translated in her ear. “I can’t hear the reply . . . Oh wait, looks like we have an inbound call from a prefix in Vyborg, Russia, but we don’t have decryption.”

Several long, tense seconds passed before Trak signed off his call and lowered the phone from his ear. “Amarov is coming, my friend. We are being apologizing. We are meaning not discourtesy, I am assuring you.” When neither Munn nor Dempsey reacted, he said, “Perhaps you could be lowering your weapons?”

When neither man complied, Trak took two paces to Dempsey’s right, his hands still up and off his slung rifle.

What’s he up to?

Still off her scope, Grimes shifted her gaze from the parking area to the rooftop sniper, assessing the firing angle, and she understood.

“Bravo, Trak is opening a lane between you guys and their sniper,” she said, her voice tight as she eased her cheek against her weapon. She exhaled a long, slow breath and steadied her red arrow on the head of the Russian sniper and pulled gentle tension into her trigger finger.

“And I have more bad news,” Baldwin said. “Thermals are moving inside the building. Three bodies leaving and two coming toward you. And uh-oh, they just mobilized their QRF vehicle. It’s circling northwest to flank you and block your exit.”

“Alpha, this is Omega,” Smith’s voice said in her ear. “You’re clear to engage.”

“Roger,” she said. “Bravo, call the ball.”

The urge to check the scene below was overpowering, but she didn’t dare take her eye off her optics. No matter what, no exceptions, she had to take the first shot . . . but she had to give Dempsey and Munn the opportunity to work the angles and the tactical situation on the ground to their optimal advantage before the shooting started.

“Forgive me, my new friend,” Munn said to Trak. “I have been betrayed before, and it cost me the lives of my men. I’m sure you

understand. So, as a gesture of good will, let me open the case and show you the money . . .”

She imagined Munn setting the steel briefcase down on the ground and slowly opening the lid. The point of all this showmanship was not to stall but to reposition in a way that would change the Russian sniper’s firing angle. This was invaluable information that she could not ascertain from her perpendicular perspective: Who was the Russian sniper’s primary target—Munn or Dempsey?

You’re a genius, Dan, she thought as she watched the Russian shooter hold perfectly still.

“Bravo Two is the target,” Grimes said, letting the team know Dempsey was the primary.

“This way we can have trust,” Munn continued. “You can count the money and tell Amarov that everything is legitimate.”

“I am sure that is not being necessary,” Trak said, moving slightly back to the left. “We trust you have been bringing what you have said. Mr. Amarov bringing sample missile and then we can concluding our business for the day. Perhaps we are having more trust in next time we are meeting.”

The red arrow centered on the Russian sniper’s temple and, as she slowed her breathing and pulse, it slowed its bounce, finally becoming still. She watched the Russian press in on his own rifle, and she took a long breath.

“The window is closing, Alpha. The QRF is rounding the building,” Baldwin said with uncharacteristic urgency.

“Ready,” Grimes said. She was in her zone now, her voice ice.

“Take him,” Dempsey said softly.

“What?” Trak said, confused.

She exhaled and squeezed the trigger.

The sniper’s head barfed up a red cloud, and his rifle slipped from his grip, clattering over the tile roof and catching on a vent pipe by its sling. His dead body slowly slid down the roof after it.

Trak turned and looked over his right shoulder and shouted at the Russian sniper he thought had fired. “*Prekrati idiot! My dolzhny ikh v zhivyykh!*” Then he turned back, and his eyebrows arched in surprise to see Dempsey and Munn still standing.

“He is telling them they were supposed to take you alive,” Baldwin reported in her ear, but she didn’t care. Speed and accuracy were all that mattered. She was a killing machine now as she swept the barrel of her rifle onto her next target, the shooter crouched behind the Russian SUV.

Her targeting arrow found the shooter’s forehead . . .

Exhale.

Trigger squeeze.

The Russian’s head exploded like a piñata, and she swept her sight toward her third planned target, the rear shooter on Munn’s side. As she whisked across the field of battle, her brain rapidly reconstructed the blur of imagery into a comprehensible picture. She’d seen a muzzle flare from Dempsey’s SCAR as he shot Trak. She’d noted Munn using the steel briefcase as a shield as he unloaded on Aldy, and that was it. She made a quick correction while leading the flanking Russian shooter on Munn’s side and dropped him with a headshot. She scanned up, worried that the other might have the jump on Dempsey, but saw the man’s body crumple amid a volley from the SCAR. She scanned right, back to the building entrance, just in time to catch two shooters squirting out the door, shoulder to shoulder, with guns blazing.

Trigger squeeze.

Trigger squeeze.

She dropped both shooters in succession. Less than two seconds had elapsed.

Five rounds left in this magazine.

“Alpha, Russian QRF vehicle is engaging. Will be in your line of sight in three . . .”

She trained her sight to the expected elevation of the driver's side window . . .

“Two . . .”

Dialed in a small correction for the range . . .

“One.”

The Russian 4x4 came tearing around the corner of the building. Her elevation estimate was off, but she quickly compensated, exhaled, and squeezed the trigger. The round punched a hole in the driver's side window and slammed into his head just above the ear. The vehicle slowed and abruptly veered right, turning away from her before she could pop the other occupants. Instead of wasting bullets, she waited for them to climb out.

“Bravo, we hold three thermals moving toward the rear exit,” Baldwin reported. “I assume they are exfilling Amarov to vehicle number two, which is waiting on the other side of the building at idle with a driver ready.”

Grimes followed Baldwin's report with, “Bravo, Alpha, I'm on the QRF vehicle. The driver is dead, and I have your backs if the shooters exit. You are clear to egress to the van and bug out.”

But Dempsey wasn't running to the van. He was staring at the factory building.

“What are you doing?” she barked into her mike. “Get the hell out of there!”

CHAPTER 3

Dempsey looked down at the kneeling Trak, and the Russian glared up at him. Blood was pouring down Trak's right arm, but he tried to raise his rifle anyway. Dempsey squeezed once on the trigger, the SCAR burped, and the Vory man fell forward, dead at his feet. Dempsey snatched the man's rifle, put a foot on his chest, and wrenched it free of the sling. He tossed the rifle to Munn and scanned the building in front of him.

"What are you doing?" Grimes hollered. "Get the hell out of there!"

"I'm going after Amarov," he growled. And then he shouted, "Follow me," to Munn as he took off at a sprint. His plan was to loop around the building and intercept Amarov's vehicle from the other direction, flanking Amarov and putting the building between him and the QRF vehicle Grimes had pinned down.

Munn was beside him in a flash. "Dude, there's only two of us."

"I don't care," Dempsey fired back. "I want to take Amarov."

"Bravo, this is ill advised," Grimes protested in his ear. "I can't protect you on the other side of the building."

"Copy, Alpha. Good shooting, but it's time for you to get out of here and move south to the secondary exfil."

“What about you?” she said.

“Not sure. Depends on how this goes down,” he said. “Stay fluid.”

Dempsey heard her unload four rounds behind him, likely at the QRF vehicle.

“Shit,” she murmured on the open channel. “They dumped the driver and they’re circling northwest back around the building to meet up with Amarov or intercept you. I put four rounds into the cabin before I lost my line. Overwatch is out.”

“Check.”

Dempsey rounded the corner of the building, his assault rifle up, and scanned back and forth as he hunched in a combat shuffle with Munn right behind him. He stayed tight against the filthy brick wall.

“Status?” Munn asked, prompting Baldwin for a bird’s-eye-view report.

“Amarov has just climbed into a black UAZ Patriot. As Alpha reported, the QRF vehicle is going to provide cover fire to safeguard his escape. You have seconds to disable Amarov’s vehicle before he’s on the move,” Baldwin reported.

Without a word, Dempsey surged forward, his SCAR blazing. Munn was at his right shoulder, unloading a prolonged volley with his AK-12 at the tires and engine compartment of the Russian-made 4x4. The barrage didn’t last long, however, because the QRF vehicle drove into the line of fire, shielding Amarov’s vehicle.

Vory shooters emptied out of the QRF vehicle to engage Dempsey and Munn, while the vehicle with Amarov inside sped away leaving a trail of dust behind it.

“Damn it,” Dempsey cursed as he dropped the shooter from the front passenger seat with a headshot. “We gotta get back to our van and pursue.”

“Negative, Bravo,” said Smith, sounding very much in charge. “Too risky for too little return. Get back to your vehicle and—”

An explosion on the other side of the building sent a fireball skyward, followed by a pillar of black smoke.

“What the fuck was that?” Munn asked as he and Dempsey backpedaled to the corner of the building for cover. Two Vory shooters were still engaging them from the QRF vehicle, one crouched behind the back bumper and one at the front.

“That was your van,” Smith said. “Someone just blew it up with a rocket fired from inside the building.”

“What someone?” Dempsey snapped. “I thought you said the three remaining shooters exited with Amarov.”

“It appears I was mistaken,” Baldwin said. “It is a very old building, brick construction, with a lot of interference. One may have remained behind, or there may have been an additional shooter we missed.”

“Well, now we know the sample we were going to buy works,” Munn said with a sarcastic smile.

“Do you think he has another one?” Dempsey said, taking a knee and sighting a half foot left of the Russian SUV’s rear bumper.

“I fucking hope not,” Munn said. “But just in case, we should probably get the hell out of here.”

The QRF shooter popped out for a volley, and Dempsey split his head open with a perfectly placed round. “All right, let’s go,” he said.

“Bravo, you’re about to be flanked,” Smith said. “The shooter from inside just stepped out. He’s sweeping around the corner behind you.”

“Copy that,” Dempsey grumbled in reply to Smith. “You take him, Dan. I’ll get this last asshole over here.”

“Check.”

Dempsey’s SCAR burped out a 7.62 round, and the higher-pitched bark of a 5.45 x 39 mm round from Munn’s AK-12 followed a half second later, both targets downed instantly.

“We’re done here,” Dempsey barked. “Secondary exfil. Omega, remind the boat captain to stay on the Estonian side of the river mouth, please.”

“Copy, Bravo,” came Baldwin’s reply.

“Do you hold any more signatures in the building? Do you think this guy Munn capped was the dude who fired the rocket?”

“Eighty-five percent probability. I hold no other thermals inside.”

“That’s what he said last time, too,” Munn grumbled.

“Alpha, report?” Dempsey said as he picked up the weapon from the thug Munn had shot. The Russian was lying facedown in the dirt, but he was still alive.

“I’m three minutes away,” Grimes replied breathlessly. Then, using the evac boat’s call sign, added, “Charlie is in position and standing by.”

“Check,” Dempsey said, standing over the Russian, who was bleeding and squirming at his feet.

“Dude, what are you doing?” Munn said.

“I wanna take this guy with us,” Dempsey said, ejecting the magazine from the AK-12 he’d picked up and passing it to Munn.

“What? No, this guy is nobody. We gotta go, bro.”

“I want to find out what he knows. I want to know why Amarov was going to take us,” Dempsey said.

“Oh dear,” Baldwin said, sounding like jelly had just dripped off his English muffin and landed smack-dab in the middle of his favorite necktie. But Dempsey had been working with the Ember Signals Chief for over two years, and he knew better.

“Oh dear what?”

“I hold multiple heat signatures across the Narva River coming from the *east*.”

“From the east? You mean from Russia?” Dempsey asked.

“Yes, Bravo, from Russia.”

“Another QRF?” Munn asked.

“I think this *is* the QRF,” Smith said. “The guys we were calling the QRF before were just the B-team.”

“Help me get this fucker up,” Dempsey said. Munn hoisted the wounded Vory to his feet, and Dempsey slung the dude’s arm around

his neck. The guy groaned in pain and protested feebly. “I don’t speak Russian,” Dempsey said, “but it’s simple. I leave you here, you bleed to death and die. Come with us, you live.”

The Vory man nodded and got his legs moving in a respectable hobbling run, with Dempsey providing the lion’s share of the locomotion. With Munn leading, they pushed through the trees surrounding the factory lot to the rocky, mostly dried-up riverbed. Dempsey scanned a wide arc but didn’t see the approaching assaulters.

“SITREP, Omega?”

“I have multiple—make that seven—signatures. They are north and east of you, and I don’t think they see you yet . . . Oh, disregard. They see you now . . . They’re coming.”

“Awesome,” Munn said as they picked up the pace, pushing south. “I’ll cover our six; just go.”

“We’re not going to make Charlie pickup,” Dempsey said, humping it over the rocky riverbed, his boots splashing in and out of puddles. “The boat is going to have to come to us.”

“Copy, Bravo,” Grimes said over the roar of a revving marine engine. “Charlie is en route.”

“Fast-water exfil,” he shouted over his shoulder at Munn. “Just like the good old days.”

Munn mumbled something, but all Dempsey could make out was “drown” and “ass.”

“Hurry, gentlemen,” Baldwin said. “The shooters behind you are splitting into east and west teams. It appears they intend to box you in and cut off both avenues of escape. They probably don’t suspect we have a boat, so we have that going for us at least.”

“Oh and look, there’s a rainbow on the horizon,” Munn grumbled.

“C’mon, asshole,” Dempsey barked at the Russian, who was beginning to drag now. “Move your feet!”

Dempsey contemplated carrying the Russian as the trio ditched the open riverbed for a little finger of trees that stretched south to where

two branches of the shallow river flowed into Narva Reservoir, a third of which was in Estonia, the remainder in Russia. Gunfire erupted from his right as he ran, and bits of bark blinded him for a moment as a high-velocity round tore apart a chunk of tree just inches from his face.

“Shit,” he hissed and lowered his body in an awkward crouch.

“Bravo, hold,” Grimes’s voice said in his ear, confident and in control. His lips curled up into a grin. His guardian angel of death was back. He took a knee, scanning right through the trees, and again felt Munn spin around beside him, checking to their left.

“Now what?” Munn said. “They’re closing in on both sides.”

“Now, I go to work,” Grimes said, answering for Dempsey.

Dempsey heard a far-off whump—the sound of salvation—followed by a dangerously close whistle on the other side of the trees.

“One,” Grimes said softly.

Another whump from her sniper rifle. Another scream.

“Two . . .”

“The west team is pulling back towards the building. The east team is in the riverbed and, well, I think the expression is ‘shit out of luck,’” Baldwin said with bravado as sniper rounds continued to fly from the south.

Dempsey needed no further encouragement. He tapped Munn on the leg as he pressed up to his feet, now hauling the full weight of the Russian. Munn fired several rounds out of the woods toward the factory to keep the western team pressed back, while Grimes picked off eastern assaulters. They ran south. A few yards later the tree line thickened, giving them decent cover. Dempsey was full-tilt sprinting now as two more sniper shots, less than two seconds apart, echoed from the lake.

“Three . . . four,” Grimes said, a deadly satisfaction in her voice. “Five . . . the east side is clear. There’s a pair on the west, but I can’t see them.”

“Shit-hot shooting, girl,” Munn huffed. “Where are you going to pick us up?”

“On the point, past that railroad bridge,” she said. “Go now.”

Dempsey grunted and they made the break from the woods toward the water. The boat was turning a fishhook in the dark-green lake only twenty-five yards beyond a field of calf-high grass—only twenty-five yards, but twenty-five wide-open unprotected yards. Their Russian captive was all deadweight now, and Dempsey was beginning to run out of gas. He glanced and saw the man’s shirt was completely soaked in blood and his skin had gone an unnatural pale. “You dead?” he shouted and to his surprise got a grumbled response from the thug. Suddenly, the load got exponentially lighter as Munn fell in on the other side and hooked his arm under the Russian’s armpit. Dempsey looked sideways at his brother, and Munn smiled at him.

A beat later, Munn’s smile disappeared and he made a dull “nuh” sound and stumbled in the grass, just as the throaty crack of a high-power rifle shot echoed behind them. Losing Munn sent their human tripod off balance, and Dempsey barely managed to stay on his feet.

“Munn!” Dempsey shouted, turning to look at his friend.

“Dude, keep going,” Munn choked, scrambling to his feet. “Got me in the SAPI plate. I’m in the fight—but, ow—shit, that hurts.”

Another crack reverberated and Dempsey tensed, waiting for the high-velocity round to smack into the back of his skull and put out his lights once and for all. Instead, his new Russian friend lost his head, and his body collapsed face-first into the dirt at Dempsey’s feet.

“Alpha, we’re in trouble. Unless you can kill the motherfucker sniping us, we’re not making the exfil,” Dempsey said, dropping prone in the weeds next to Munn.

“Apparently, one of the two western assaulters has obtained a position of elevation inside the factory building,” Baldwin said.

“No shit, Sherlock,” Dempsey fired back.

Another crack sounded as a puff of green kicked up just ahead of him and off to the left.

“I can’t see him, Omega,” Grimes said. “A little help.”

“Southeast corner of the building. Can’t tell which floor.”

“All right . . . still can’t see him, but I can keep him pinned down,” she said.

A split second later there was the steady *whump whump whump* of her long gun and muzzle flashes from the approaching speedboat. Dempsey grabbed Munn by the sleeve and broke in a straight line to the water’s edge.

“Let go, bro,” Munn shouted with irritation and shook his arm free as they both dove into the frigid green water.

The cold took Dempsey’s breath away as he dove deep, dropping the SCAR and pulling the water with long symmetrical underwater strokes at an angle from the boat, knowing the Russian sniper would fire on that line. No bullets shot past him in the murky water, but he pulled hard, over and over, to separate himself from his point of entry. Then he angled back toward the center of his course, knowing Munn would do the same. Three seconds later they broke the surface, side by side, nearly simultaneously.

Dempsey inhaled deeply, again expecting a high-velocity round to hit the back of his head, but it didn’t come. Instead, a thick green rope looped around them like an anaconda as the thirty-seven-foot Venegy executed a tight power turn fifteen feet away, kicking up a monster rooster tail of spray. Dempsey clutched the rope in his ungloved hand and grimaced in preparation for the brick wall of pain that would hit when the Venegy pulled all the slack from the rope.

“You on?” Dempsey called to Munn.

“Yeah—on . . .,” Munn bubbled from beside him.

Dempsey tightened his grip, twisting both hands outward to make the grip as firm as possible, and then felt a wrenching pain in his shoulders as the boat jerked them forward, pulling his face into a large wake of water. He exhaled from his mouth and nose as his body became a helpless human torpedo and then scissored his legs and pulled hard with his right arm, rotating his body until he was being dragged on his back.

He tucked his chin to his chest, forming a little cocoon of water around his head where he could breathe. As the boat accelerated, the strain on his arms from the drag became almost unbearable.

Despite the exhaustion, despite the pain, he refused to let go.

The Venegy dragged them through the frigid water for what seemed like a half hour but was doubtless less than two minutes. Finally, the boat slowed, then stopped. Dempsey held the rope loosely and kicked his legs in small circles to stay atop the water as the sleek white-and-mahogany cruiser drifted beside him. He looked up and two dudes he did not recognize, standing shoulder to shoulder, leaned over the side. Hands pulled at his armpits and he scissor-kicked hard, propelling himself up and over the edge of the boat and falling with a wet splat on the deck. Moments later Munn was half beside him and half on top of him.

“Hit it,” one of the crew yelled, and the pilot punched the throttle.

Dempsey and Munn lay in a clump of tangled, exhausted flesh as the boat accelerated to safety. He blinked the lake water from his eyes and looked up to see Grimes peering down at him.

“That went well,” she chided.

Dempsey gave her a tight-lipped grin and struggled to his knees as the rocking boat angled south to clear a long, thin island of trees. The man at the wheel gave him a grin and a two-finger salute, and Dempsey nodded his thanks back to the man, who he was sure, from both his appearance and the way he handled the boat, must be a SWCC operator—the expert boat handlers from Naval Special Warfare who support the SEALs. The bearded man beside him, arm draped over an assault rifle on his chest, leaned in and said something to the pilot. Dempsey couldn’t hear over the wind and the roar of the engine, but both the young operators laughed. Dempsey turned to Munn, who was half sitting against the rear bench seat, his face contorted in pain, and snorted. Had they been that young once? It seemed like yesterday they were in their first platoon together at SEAL Team Four. And now . . .

“Talk to me, Dan,” Dempsey said, reaching a hand behind the former combat surgeon, his ice-cold fingers checking for warm blood under Munn’s vest.

“It didn’t penetrate. It just—ow, shit dude. That’s the spot. Might have cracked a rib . . . Dude, your hands are fucking freezing.”

Dempsey felt a hard, swollen knot under the skin of Munn’s back, just to the left, but no hole and no blood.

“Omega, everyone is five by five,” Dempsey announced on the open channel.

“Excellent,” Baldwin said in his ear, sounding like a proud parent whose kid had won first place at the science fair.

“Yeah, thanks for having our backs,” Dempsey said, steadying himself on the gunwale and then pulling himself to his feet. He immediately felt Grimes’s reproachful stare. “What?”

She held his gaze for a painfully long moment, lips pursed. Finally, she said, “We were very, very lucky today. Promise me we’ll never do something like that again.”

He shook his head. “That’s one promise I can’t make. Sorry, Elizabeth.”

“If I hadn’t been there—”

“I’d be dead, I know,” he said, cutting her off. “But you were there, and you did your job perfectly, which is why I’m not. That’s why we’re a team. This is what we do.”

After a long pause she said, “I don’t think Amarov was being paranoid or overly cautious. And it wasn’t intended to be a hit job. From what I saw, this whole meeting was a ploy to take you. The location, the way the vehicles were positioned, the way Amarov stayed inside and used a welcome party to coax you in . . .”

“They brought real merchandise,” Munn chimed in. “The rocket that blew up our Sprinter was the sample unit.”

“I know,” Grimes said. “They set the table to play the game until the very end, but I’m convinced the ultimate plan was to take you.”

“I came to the same conclusion,” Dempsey said, nodding.

“The empirical evidence suggests you’re right, but the NOC was solid,” Baldwin weighed in, even though they weren’t talking to him. “Why would Amarov want to kidnap the American?”

Dempsey looked over his shoulder at the derelict textile factory complex fading away in the growing sunlight. “Maybe the American wasn’t Amarov’s target . . . maybe it was *us*.”

“Impossible,” Baldwin said. “He doesn’t know you exist.”

“He took our picture,” Dempsey countered.

“Yes, but that was after your arrival, which means the picture was taken for confirmation to go ahead with a plan already in place.”

“What if Malik thought of the same thing we did—that we might try to go through one of his associates to get to him?” Dempsey said.

“I suppose it’s possible, but that still begs the question how he knew you were coming. Someone would have had to photograph you in your NOCs and pass that on to Malik, and you’ve only met with one other contact while posing as the American and his bodyguard.”

Dempsey’s face flashed hot and he turned to look at Munn, who was sitting on the bench seat taking long, slow breaths. “That sneaky, double-dealing . . .”

“Backstabbing German,” Munn said, completing Dempsey’s sentence.

“Michael the Broker?” Grimes asked, pronouncing the name *mish-ay-el*.

“Michael the fucking Broker,” Dempsey grumbled through gritted teeth. “I think it’s time me and *Mish-ay-el* have a little talk—one lying asshole to another.”

CHAPTER 4

Saint Petersburg, Russia

June 11

1530 Local Time

“Mr. Malik,” the female attendant said, glancing at his face but then quickly averting her eyes. “She’s ready for you.”

“No matter what you hear, we are not to be interrupted. Is that understood?” Malik instructed, his glacier-blue eyes boring into her. Malik wasn’t his real name, merely the legend he occupied. The number of people who knew him as Valerian Kobak he could probably count on two hands—a natural repercussion of his profession. As a member of Spetsgruppa Zeta, Russia’s most elite and covert black ops activity, he’d been forced to disavow his old life and say goodbye to his friends and family forever. Thankfully, he didn’t have either friends or family to worry about.

“I understand,” she said before scurrying away, mumbling in Russian under her breath.

With a surge of anticipation, he pulled the key from his pocket, unlocked the door to the room at the end of the hall, and stepped

inside. The room was completely devoid of furniture, the hardwood floor scraped and worn. The faded wallpaper, printed with a braided-rope and fleur-de-lis pattern, was peeling, and the smooth plaster ceiling was stained yellow with cigarette smoke. The only light in the room came from twin slivers of daylight streaming between the closed exterior shutters on two windows. Huddled in the corner sat a young woman clutching her knees, naked and shivering. A dingy metal pail sat in the corner opposite.

Valerian walked over and looked down into the pail. Finding it empty, he picked it up by the curved wire handle and carried it over to the girl.

She did not look up at him but made no effort to hide the scowl she wore.

He flipped the bucket upside down, placed it on the floor a meter from her, and sat on it.

“Hello, Amanda,” he greeted her in English.

She didn’t answer him.

“What? No smile? You’re not happy to see me today?”

“Fuck you,” she growled.

“Maybe later,” he said and readjusted his hips to aid retrieval of a bag of walnuts from his pocket. “But first, you’re going to tell me how you’re feeling right now. I want you to be honest. I want to know what it feels like to be the American whore that you are. How does it feel to betray your friends and your principles for me?”

The girl reached up and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. He saw that her eyes were beginning to rim with tears.

“That’s good, Amanda. Let it all out . . .”

“You make me feel dirty and cheap,” she said, her American accent leaving much to be desired. “Worse than other men. Worse than all men.”

He nodded and popped a walnut half into his mouth. “Go on . . .”

“I feel revulsion the moment you walk into the room. Especially here, in my chest,” she said, pressing her right hand to her sternum between her small, shapely breasts. “It’s like a black vine, strangling my heart, making it hard to breathe.”

“And yet you want to please me?”

She nodded. “Yes, and that makes me ashamed.”

“That’s very good, Amanda. I know that was hard for you.” He extended the open mouth of the bag toward her. “Walnut?”

She glared at it as if he’d just offered her dog food. “No, thank you.”

“Stand up,” he said. “I want to take a look at you.”

She did as ordered, folding her arms across her chest to cover her nakedness.

“Turn in a circle.”

She hesitated a beat, then did as instructed.

“You look thinner. Have you not been eating? And what are those bruises on your back and buttocks?”

She started to answer him; then her face contorted with sudden rage. “Fuck this shit,” she cursed in Russian, then reached up, ripped the blonde wig off her head, and tossed it at him. “You’re sick. This is not normal; I’m not doing it anymore.”

The wig hit him in the chest and fell into his lap. He picked it up, then glared at her as she ran her fingers through her real hair, which was a dull auburn, cut short at his behest.

“You will do whatever I tell you, Veronika, because I am paying a king’s ransom for the pleasure of your company.” He tossed the wig back at her. “Now put that back on and never break character again. Do you understand me, you fucking whore?”

With seething ire only a real Russian woman was capable of, the prostitute he’d conscripted for the role of Amanda Allen glared at him. Given the chance, this one would slit his throat.

Hmmm, maybe there is a place for Veronika in Zeta. We need women like her. Corrupted, yet incorruptible.

She was already in the right line of work; maybe she'd simply fallen in with the wrong master.

His mobile phone vibrated in his pocket. With a sigh, he got to his feet and fished out the infernal device to check the caller ID. He knew the number.

"Yes," he said, taking the call.

"You're not alone," said the familiar baritone Russian voice on the line. The voice belonged to his boss, Arkady Zhukov, the brainchild and director of Spetsgruppa Zeta.

"Correct."

"We talked about this," the old spymaster said, the disappointment evident in his voice. "It's not sustainable. You need to purge your obsession with this American woman. Do you understand me?"

"I understand," Valerian said. There was no point denying where he was or what he was doing. Every Zeta operative was tracked. Even Zeta Prime. It had taken him ten years to ascend to the top of the field operations hierarchy, and it was a distinction he would not forfeit no matter the personal cost. He was the best of all of them, feared and envied . . . Arkady's favored son. No Zeta would wrest the title of Prime from him, at least not while his heart beat inside his chest.

"I need you back in Moscow."

"When?"

"Now. There's a car waiting outside for you."

"Is there a *problem*?"

"*Da* . . . and I have a job for you."

He resisted the urge to sigh and simply said, "On my way."

Still holding the wig defiantly, Veronika looked at him expectantly. "You're leaving?"

He nodded.

"So, are we *never* going to fuck?" she asked, tugging the wig back on.

With a tight smile, he stepped up and grabbed her forcefully under the jaw. "I thought you found me revolting?"

“*Amanda* finds you revolting,” she said.

“What about Veronika?”

“Veronika wants to see what you’re made of,” she said, jerking her chin free from his grip.

He looked her up and down. She was very attractive, for a prostitute. “Maybe next time,” he said and turned to leave. At the door, he paused and tossed a crumpled 100 euro note on the floor. “Work on your American accent. It’s terrible.”

On the way out, the madam who ran Saint Petersburg’s most expensive escort service trotted after him and stopped him with a hand on the shoulder. “How was your experience today, Mr. Malik? Did it live up to your expectations?”

“Veronika’s accent is shit,” he said, glowering at her. “And somebody is hitting her; find out who. Nobody hits Veronika but me. Is that understood?”

The madam nodded.

“In fact, cancel all her clients. From now on, she’s mine and only mine.”

The woman screwed up her face and started to laugh. “The only way I will agree to that is if you pay me up front for the lost revenue.”

“I know.”

“It will be very expensive.”

“I understand.”

“And her regulars . . . they’re not going to like it. Several of them could be a problem for me. You’re not the only gangster in Russia, Mr. Malik.”

The madam was nervous. He could see she was contemplating how to manage the demand he had just made of her. Right now, she was probably thinking she would pare Veronika’s client list to the bare minimum and then lie to him about those who were simply too dangerous to refuse.

“You just tell them that Veronika belongs to Anzor Malik and if they don’t like it, they can come and talk to me,” he said with a cool smile. “And you also tell them, if they touch one hair on either of your heads, they will end up like Jora Kuznetsov.” At her blank expression, he added, “Trust me, they will know what you’re talking about.”

“All right, I will tell Veronika the news. When can we expect to see you again? I want to make sure she is prepared next time.”

“Probably a week, maybe more. I don’t know.” Then he pushed his way out the doors and headed toward the black Mercedes sedan idling at the curb.

CHAPTER 5

1650 Tysons Boulevard

McLean, Virginia

June 11

0432 Local Time

The nightmare was a horror show—the sum of all his fears.

“Kelso, wake up,” Petra said, rousing him. “Breathe, Kelso, breathe.”

“Where am I?” Jarvis gasped, trying to clear his throat.

“You’re at home, in bed. You’re safe,” she whispered. “Try to breathe; it’s just a dream.”

He found her hand on his chest and clasped his palm against the back of hers. Even through her hand, he could feel his heart pounding like a war drum. He tried to sit up and felt a stab of pain in his chest from the still-healing bullet wound he’d received in Istanbul only a month ago, when he and the President had been the targets of an assassination attempt. He had never been prone to nightmares—not as a young SEAL officer, not as the CSO of the Tier One, not even as director of Task Force Ember. Only now as the Director of National Intelligence, years removed from the thick of action and violence, did

the nightmares come. But these nightmares were not the product of his warrior past; they were not sins relived. The dreams that haunted his nights were twisted things born from a different kind of fear—a malignancy growing inside him that no matter how hard he tried, he could not purge.

“Ow,” he said, settling back down, the pain clearing away the fog of sleep and disorientation from the nightmare.

He turned and found her eyes in the dark.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked, her head and torso propped up by a wedge of three pillows beside him.

“No,” he grumbled. “And . . . yes.”

She didn’t say anything else, just gave his left pectoral muscle a gentle little *whenever you’re ready* squeeze.

“I was in the White House,” he began, turning away from her to look up at the ceiling. “In the Oval Office, in fact, waiting to brief the President. The whole gang was there, SecDef, the Vice President, Secretary of State Barnes, the National Security Advisor, and so on, and then I realize that they’re all looking at me, waiting for *me* to say something. I look around and they all have this terrible, worried look on their faces. Only then do I realize that I’m the one sitting at the *Resolute* desk. Then Catherine Morgan steps up. ‘Mr. President, can you hear me?’ she says, waving her hand in front of my face. ‘Mr. President, are you okay?’ I try to speak, but my lips and tongue aren’t working properly. Drool starts running down my chin. I try to move, wipe my mouth, do something, anything, but my muscles are like jelly. I can’t even support my own weight and I flop over in the chair, like . . . like an invalid . . . it felt so real, Petra.”

She didn’t comment, just tenderly rubbed his chest.

“I lost my balance yesterday, getting up after the national security brief,” he said. “Fell right back into my chair. Did you see that?”

“Yes,” she said. “But I don’t think anybody else noticed.”

“Secretary Baker did. He asked me if I’d been out partying too late the night before.”

“It wasn’t mean-spirited,” she said.

“I know,” Jarvis grumbled. “He was giving me an opportunity to save face, which is even worse.”

She didn’t take the bait, wisely not encouraging this particular tangent.

“Well, aren’t you going to say something?” he finally asked, his irritation growing.

“We’re going to beat this, Kelso,” she said with a certainty and confidence that woke him up like a bucket of cold water to the face.

He turned to look at her. She’d said “we.” It was a simple distinction, yet one with profound implications. “We” was a pledge. “We” was a promise. “We” was a statement of solidarity. By uttering that one little word, she’d proclaimed her intention to go to war at his side. And in doing so, she’d set the expectation that he man up and do the same.

“It’s time,” he said with newfound strength and determinism. “I need to know what’s happening to me. These dreams I’ve been having are a subconscious call to action. A SEAL doesn’t run from a fight. A SEAL doesn’t hide from the enemy. I need to stop living in denial and develop a battle plan to beat this.”

“I agree,” she said without a hint of patronization or “it’s about time-ism” in her voice. “Early intervention increases our treatment options and is more likely to slow the progression.”

“Let’s schedule that appointment with that neurologist at Walter Reed you’ve been bugging—er, I mean, encouraging me to see.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure it’s handled discreetly. No one will find out who we don’t want to find out,” she said.

In that moment, Jarvis realized the confidence in her voice was far more soothing than the feel of her warm hand on his chest. Petra had been downrange with the Tier One as an analyst, back in the day. She had gathered specialized intelligence and conducted fieldwork with

Naval Special Warfare Group Ten and then later with the Office of Naval Intelligence. Women did not serve as SEALs, but her pedigree working in the community for two decades made her part of the brotherhood. She had served with the same warriors, helped plan the same operations, and hunted the same enemies side by side. She understood him better than any other woman ever could, and now they were teammates in this new and very different kind of fight.

He blew air through pursed lips and stared at her. There were so many things he wanted to say to her, strong and intimate things he could have, should have said, but what came out was: “Speaking of being discreet—we can’t keep doing this, not like this anyway. It will get out and then—”

“I know,” she said, without bitterness. “But it doesn’t change the truth.”

“And what truth is that?”

“That we need each other . . . more than either of us dares to admit except maybe here and now, in the vulnerable privacy of the dark.”

He didn’t argue with her, didn’t even try, because she spoke the truth. He’d never needed anyone like he needed this woman, and not just because of whatever insidious condition was lurking inside him, eroding his central nervous system. No, it was so much more than that. This bold and brilliant woman had stepped into the line of fire to take a bullet for him. And that bullet, which had been on target to kill him, instead punched a hole through her lung and exited her back before hitting him, changing trajectory so that he might live. Her blood now ran forever in his veins, a reminder with every heartbeat of the debt he owed her.

It was macabre, beautiful poetry.

Petra’s hospital stay had been three days longer than his, but her first night home she’d come to him. He’d let her into his apartment, and they’d wordlessly celebrated their victory over death and terror like two kindred souls—through embrace and togetherness. They’d not made

love yet—neither of them was in a condition for that—but that glorious communion would happen when it happened. They were bonded now. Where before they had been two, now they were one.

“Do you want to hear a strange confession?” he said.

She nodded.

“Until this moment, I always believed I was incapable of love. My mind isn’t wired like other people’s minds. I don’t feel and perceive things the same way normal people do. Sensory data gets entwined and layered and transmuted.”

“Your synesthesia,” she replied. “I know.”

“I’ve never told you that.”

“You didn’t have to. It’s obvious.”

“Oh,” he uttered, taken aback and impressed by her insight.

“Is that all you wanted to tell me?”

“No, it’s just the tip of the iceberg. This is going to sound strange, but there’s not just one Kelso Jarvis. I’ve never felt like I could be just one person. To fit in, to be effective as a leader and a strategist, I became a chameleon—a collection of characters and personas adapted to foster constructive interaction with the people around me. I’ve worn so many masks for so long, I worry that I’ve lost the original one.” He turned to her and gave her an uncertain smile. “Lying here with you, I can’t help but wonder which of my personas you’ve fallen for.”

“Hmmm, then we might have a problem,” she said, twirling his chest hair with her fingertips. “Because I didn’t realize I had to choose just one.”

He stared at her, dumbfounded, because while he had not intended his confession to be a test, she had passed it nonetheless, by saying the one and only thing that proved she understood him better than anyone else in the entire world.

When he couldn’t find the words, she simply said, “Call me greedy, but I want all of you.”

He reached for her hand. “You might come to regret that decision.”

“I doubt it,” she said with a little smile, “but you are right about one thing.”

“Which is?”

“That we can’t keep doing *this*. It’s a violation of your own fraternization policy, and we can’t let each other become hypocrites. I’ll start looking for my replacement. Once I resign, we can pick up where we left off, but until then no more sleepovers. Agreed?”

“I don’t want another Chief of Staff,” he grumbled, “I want *you*.”

“Then you can have me, but in that case, we have to put *this* on the back burner until you either get promoted or fired. We’re together either way,” she said. “I’ll let you decide the nuance.”

“I can’t do the job without you,” he said.

“Okay, then it’s decided,” she said and carefully, gingerly scooted up against him until her breasts were pressed against his left arm. “We work and we wait.”

“And you’re not upset?”

“I’m not going to lie, I want to be with you, but we have more important things to do than snuggle and make pillow talk. The country needs us, Director Jarvis. The world needs us . . .”

She was right; they both knew it.

“All right, we’ve made our decision.” He wanted to lean in to kiss her but then stopped himself. She would let him do it, but it would be a mistake, a self-inflicted wound weakening their resolve in the months to come. So instead he said, “Let’s talk about Russia.”

“You know how I love it when you talk dirty,” she said, deadpan.

A beat later, they both started laughing. “See,” he said, “this is exactly why we’re meant for each other.”

Despite the dark, her eyes seem to brighten at this, and he took a mental snapshot of her to both document and commemorate this moment—the moment he unequivocally committed himself to a woman for the first time in his life.

“Russia . . . you were saying?” she prompted.

“Petrov is winning,” he said, the muscles in his jaw tightening. “The Kremlin seems to be keeping one step ahead of us, and I’m not sure if the root cause is systemic or acute. After what happened in Turkey, I’m beginning to worry that we have a mole operating in the upper echelons of our government. We know from the debriefs with Amanda Allen that Russia was the puppet master pulling the strings behind the events in Ankara and Istanbul last month. But what I still don’t understand is how they knew the President was coming to Turkey. That trip was a short-fuse decision—less than twenty-four hours from the moment Warner said he wanted to meet with Erodan, we were on the ground in Istanbul, but they were ready for us. That assassination attempt was planned and executed with the maximum amount of advanced notice.”

“You’re right, they were ready for us, but let me play devil’s advocate for a moment. It doesn’t necessarily imply we have a mole. You’ve heard of the term ‘big data,’ right?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“I’m no data scientist, but it seems to me that we, as a nation, emote a tremendous amount of data these days. And I choose that word, ‘emote,’ quite intentionally. The Justice Department, the CIA, the FBI—all have Twitter accounts run by professional social media moderators. My concern is that, even without releasing confidential information, we telegraph our intentions . . . like a poker player with a tell that he’s not aware of but that his opponent can recognize and reliably exploit. Our military-industrial complex is so open and integrated into our economy that the chatter itself is a vulnerability. Before mobile phones and social media, chatter was distributed across the system. It could not be aggregated or effectively captured. Chatter was just what its name implied—background noise that was always present and yet continuously fading out of existence. But not anymore. NSA is always collecting, and so are the Russians. What if Russia has figured out a way to use that data to make accurate predictions about all kinds of things—from things as broad as the capabilities of the Joint Strike Fighter to

things as specific as President Warner's itinerary for an emergency trip to Turkey? Look at what Ian Baldwin does over at Ember with mathematical algorithms to interpret raw data. It's incredible, and we'd be delusional to think there is only one Ian Baldwin, or that all of the Baldwins out there work only for the good guys. We've suddenly found ourselves in the middle of Cold War 2.0, but we're still stuck in a Cold War 1.0 mentality. This isn't a Ludlum novel, Kelso. I think we need to worry less about some Russian superspy who might have infiltrated our ranks and more about the possibility that the US intelligence community in aggregate is unwittingly undermining itself in the course of conducting everyday business. All it would have taken was one White House staffer to post something to a social media channel about a trip to Istanbul and the Kremlin gets a predictive data point to add to dozens of others, which, when considered together, gives them prescient predictive power."

Jarvis considered her theory. "All right, let's assume everything you just said is true. From a tactical perspective, how do we defend against this phenomenon?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "There's no one-size-fits-all Band-Aid. We live in a digital world now, and America—with our democratic, capitalistic system—has chosen the path of open source. Russia and China have gone the other direction, compartmentalizing data and limiting the free flow of information. That's created an asymmetrical battle space in the war for information, but it's the reality we live in. Social media is here to stay. Email, texting, blogging, photo sharing—none of these things are going away."

"Well, we're not going to solve the problem in bed tonight, but I don't think we table it, either. I think we need to put a team on this. Maybe this is something Catherine Morgan, as Deputy Director of Intelligence Integration, can work on."

“No,” Petra said sharply, and then after an awkward beat added, “What I mean is I was kind of hoping that this was something I could spearhead.”

“Are you sure you want to take this on? Your plate is pretty full, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“True, but my evenings are about to free up,” she said with a coy smile, “now that you’re breaking up with me.”

“In that case, Miss Felsk, consider yourself officially tasked with figuring out how to stop Russia from slurping up all our critical data,” he said. “We’re going to make a damn good team together.”

“Going to?” she said with playful sarcasm. “I think it’s pretty damn obvious we already do.”

“Thanks for being here for me,” he said, his voice going serious as he pulled her in tight for a hug.

“You’re welcome,” she said, hugging him back. Then, with a smile on her face, she laid her head on his shoulder and drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 6

The Kremlin
Office of the President
Moscow, Russia
June 11
1410 Local Time

Petrov threw the book at him.

Not figuratively—literally.

Arkady Zhukov ducked as the latest unflattering hardcover biography written about the Russian President sailed over his head and slammed into the door behind him with a thud.

“I’m going to fucking kill this guy,” Petrov said and began pacing behind his desk.

Arkady stooped and picked up the book. The title, *Cult of Personality—a Profile of Vladimir Petrov*, was printed in large block font, superimposed atop an unflattering photograph of the man. An incendiary subtitle read: *Strongman, Tactician, or Global Menace?* And below that, the author’s name, an American Arkady did not recognize.

“That could probably be arranged,” Arkady said, tucking the book under his arm and walking to one of two vacant chairs opposite the President’s desk. “But we should wait awhile, until this is forgotten.”

“Not that piece of shit,” Petrov said, slamming his fist down on the desk. “I’m talking about President Warner. Have you heard the news?”

“You mean the new sanctions levied by Washington to stall the Nord Stream 2 pipeline?”

“Not to stall, to kill,” Petrov said, red-faced. “He’s trying to kill it.”

“Germany won’t let that happen. There’s too much momentum.”

“First, Warner tried to strong-arm Germany using the media. When that didn’t work, he tried to prompt the EU to investigate Gazprom, hoping the EU would view Nord Stream 2 as cementing our unfair monopoly on natural gas. And now that’s failed, so he’s using sanctions and claiming that Nord Stream 2 is a threat to the stability of NATO. If he can’t use the bankers to bully Chancellor Mercer, then he’s going to use her generals to do it. At the same time, he’s pushing American natural gas exports everywhere he can. The US has a piece of every natural gas terminal under development in Europe. Six are already in the works, and there are talks about six more. Warner needs to go, my friend. It’s that simple.”

“He’s in his second term,” Arkady said, setting the book on the corner of Petrov’s desk with practiced nonchalance. “He’ll be gone in eighteen months regardless of what we do. The Americans change leaders like socks—it is one of their weaknesses that we exploit. What we need to be focusing on is who we want to promote as his successor. We’re laying the groundwork for the next election’s cyber campaign right now. I don’t like any of the candidates but one.”

Petrov sat down, and as he did his normal coloring returned to his face, the hot anger giving way to his trademark icy malice. Petrov *permitted* himself to lose his temper only in the company of trusted advisors and members of his innermost circle. “And then there’s Lithuania,”

Petrov said, either not listening to or not caring about Arkady's conversational lure.

"What about Lithuania?"

"Their state utility company signed a two-year import agreement with Lone Star Energy out of Texas. The Lithuanian President then signed a \$300 million infrastructure improvement bill so they can reexport American gas to Latvia. Poland is building a gas terminal with the same aspirations, and Estonia is working with Finland on the Baltic-connector pipeline to cut us out completely. Moscow may be Russia's beating heart, but oil and gas exports are her blood. Our economy cannot survive if we cede our monopoly of the European gas market to foreign powers. Warner knows this, which is why he's hitting us where it hurts."

"I agree, so what do you want to do about it?"

Petrov glared at him, apparently not liking the subtext of this comment.

"Let me rephrase," Arkady said with a deferential smile. "What I meant to say is what do you want *me* to do about it?"

"I want you to make them all pay. I want you to make them think twice about the next time they try to poke the bear. And I want you to do it in such a way that Russia does not come out looking like we always do—the big bully on the block."

A knock sounded on the door to the President's office.

"Come," barked Petrov.

A very tall, and very fine-looking, young woman entered carrying a beverage tray. She paused just past the threshold, her body language alone asking the question.

"Yes, yes," Petrov said, waving her in. "Your timing is perfect as always, Tatia."

Arkady moved the offensive book from the corner of the President's desk to make room, and Tatia set the tray in that exact spot. "Tea, the way that you like it, Mr. President, and coffee for you, Minister Arkady."

Arkady smiled at her. He hated tea. “Ah, you remembered, thank you.”

She nodded at him with a little look that said, *Of course I remembered; you think this is all I'm capable of?* Then she turned to Petrov. “Is there anything else, Mr. President?”

“No, not now,” Petrov said, staring at her with equal parts judgment and lust.

She nodded, turned, and let herself out.

Arkady raised his eyebrows at Petrov once the door was shut.

“Of course I am,” the President said, while taking zero pleasure in the gloating.

That is when you know a man has no soul left, Arkady thought, studying Petrov's eyes. *There's no pleasure left in life that sates him. He is a fire in a freezer, burning and consuming, yet providing no heat or light.*

“What?” Petrov snapped. “Why are you looking at me that way?”

“I have an idea,” Arkady said, rubbing his chin. “As you know, Lithuania's entire natural gas operation is dependent upon the FSRU *Independence* at the port in Klaipėda. This one ship is everything: floating storage and regasification unit. It's quite brilliant, actually. All a country needs is a pier and voilà—instant LNG terminal. Carrier ships moor alongside the *Independence*, which receives liquefied natural gas, then evaporates it to its original form and supplies it to the main transmission system for distribution to the rest of the country.”

“I'm not an idiot, Arkady,” Petrov said through a sigh. “Take out the *Independence* and you take out Lithuania's entire ability to import gas.”

The spymaster nodded. “That's right.”

“I assume you're proposing a false-flag terrorist operation? Make it look like jihadists have attacked the *Independence* for reasons of their own.”

“No, I think this time we go small. Industrial sabotage made to look like equipment failure, followed by human error leading to the sinking of the vessel at the pier.”

Petrov nodded. “If you sink it, it can be repaired. Why not blow it up?”

“*Da*, it could be repaired, but at what cost? On what timeline? If we do this properly, the rehabilitation cost might exceed the cost of replacement. And remember, the *Independence* is being leased from the Swedes. Just think about the circus once the lawyers get involved. It will take a year minimum, maybe longer. And it will be an environmental nightmare. There’s a good chance when this is all over, Klaipėda as a natural gas import terminal will be done forever.”

Petrov nodded but said nothing, so Arkady kept talking, kept selling.

“In the beginning, right after the accident, Russia will step in and offer a new one-year emergency supply contract with Gazprom to help the Lithuanians deal with this terrible crisis. Gazprom agrees to lock in the price at a favorable rate, and Russia looks like the hero to the rescue.”

“Yes, I like this,” said Petrov. “We can even offer technical support and equipment to help with the cleanup. Better yet, we help with the investigation. We can send engineers, divers, system experts from Gazprom and the Russian Navy to help find the cause of the accident.”

“Exactly,” Arkady said.

“Okay, you have the green light, but don’t fuck this up, Arkady. The Americans know it was us behind the assassination attempt in Turkey. That’s why Warner is throwing everything he has at taking Russia down while he’s still in power. There can be no traces back to us.”

“Understood, Mr. President,” he said, showing the deference Petrov craved.

“Is that all you have for me?” Petrov asked.

It wasn’t all he had, not by a mile. There was the incident in Narva he’d purposely neglected to share, and there was the ever-growing paranoia he felt that the Americans were closing in on Spetsgruppa Zeta, the ultrasecret task force he commanded. In his last communication

with Catherine Morgan, she'd assured him that neither DNI Jarvis nor Task Force Ember had pierced Malik's legend. More important, Arkady himself was still completely off their radars as they prowled for clues as to who had conducted the attacks in Turkey. But Ember: they were tenacious, smart—nearly as much so as Zeta—and operated with a virtually unlimited budget. It was only a matter of time before they came knocking on his door, something he needed to preemptively circumvent. Even now he was moving chess pieces on American soil. When the time came, he, not Kelso Jarvis, would have the assets in position to deliver a death strike. Only one king could rule the board, and that king was him.

Arkady met Petrov's blue-eyed gaze. "I have nothing else, Mr. President."

"Very well," Petrov said, signaling that the meeting was over.

Arkady drained the remainder of his coffee, stood, and, tucking the biography under his arm, turned to leave.

"*Aht, aht,*" Petrov tsked. "That's my book."

"Oh, my apologies. I thought when you threw it at me, it was meant to be a gift," Arkady said with a brother's smile.

"It's autographed," Petrov said with a fox's smile. "It goes on the shelf with the others." Arkady chuckled and handed it back to the man he both loved and despised—a product of his tutelage and the worst and best thing to ever happen to Russia. As the book changed hands, Arkady's gaze lingered on the subtitle, *Strongman, Tactician, or Global Menace?*

The answer was all three, of course. Something everyone knew . . . including the man behind the desk.