

ZULU VIRUS CHAPTERS FROM *BLACK FLAGGED REDUX*

(In chronological order as they appeared in the book)

Chapter One

Monchegorsk City Central First Aid Hospital Monchegorsk, Russia

Doctor Valeria Cherkasov approached the emergency room's wide automatic doors and paused. In all of her four years at the hospital, the doors had never functioned properly. Several bloody noses had taught her to never assume the doors would open swiftly. This evening was no exception, and her patience was rewarded when the doors hesitated on their tracks and struggled to open.

An ambulance pulled into one of three empty parking spaces, which were kept clear of cars by armed police officers. Its emergency strobe lights bathed the concrete walls of the ER parking alcove in icy blue flashes. More cases. Doctor Cherkasov walked through the door into the freezing night and followed a ramp down to the street level, wishing she had grabbed her winter coat.

She ducked behind the corner of the hospital and nearly ran into a couple smoking cigarettes. Vasily, an x-ray technician, and Mila, one of the ER's medical assistants, had formed the same idea as Cherkasov—a brief respite from the madness that had descended upon the hospital over the past forty-eight hours.

"I guess the secret is out," Cherkasov said, taking a pack of cigarettes out of the front pocket of her white lab coat.

"That you smoke? Not really. Though you've done a decent job of concealing it. A smoker can always spot another smoker," Vasily said, dragging deeply on his cigarette.

"Ironically, I didn't start smoking until medical school. Some example of health, huh?" she said.

"We won't hold it against you. I might shake you down for a few shots of vodka in town though," Mila said.

"A few shots of vodka sound pretty good right about now," Cherkasov said.

Vasily held an expensive-looking metal lighter out for the doctor, who accepted the offer and inhaled her first lungful of tobacco smoke in several hours. She closed her eyes for a moment as the nicotine did its job, briefly taking her away from the mayhem.

"Everyone will be smoking if this gets any worse. Any ideas, doctor?" he said.

"I've never seen anything like it. I thought it was the flu at first, but some of the patients are starting to show signs of sudden, severe aggression. Others go catatonic, then burst out of it in fits of nonsense. I've seen occasional cases of rabies that caused this kind of behavior, but nothing on this scale," she said.

The words "nothing on this scale" were an understatement given what they were seeing. The hospital had filled to capacity earlier in the day, finally overwhelmed by patients complaining of flu symptoms and severe headaches. City officials had

graciously opened an abandoned school building next door to the hospital, to serve as a makeshift site for less severe patients. It took a while for the heating system to be restored, but it now housed at least a hundred patients in cots supplied by the nearby Air Force base.

To Cherkasov, this looked like the beginnings of a pandemic and she had sent numerous samples to the main hospital in Murmansk, where they could be properly analyzed. The hospital laboratory here in Monchegorsk was still in the dark ages, and only the most obvious and basic lab confirmations could be made.

She had also insisted on sending several of the early patients to Murmansk, with the hopes of shedding light on the mystery disease's pathology. The signs of aggression in patients disturbed her the most, since it suggested a disease that could affect the brain's temporal lobe, like rabies or encephalitis. The hospital could conduct a spinal tap to collect cerebrospinal fluid, but they had no way to confirm the presence of either disease without a proper laboratory.

The facility in Murmansk was well equipped to do this and even had MRI capabilities, which could detect the temporal lobe damage that might explain the sudden aggressive behavioral swings. They hadn't heard anything definitive from the hospital in Murmansk, other than to stop sending patients.

"I heard that one of the nurses on the third floor was raped right inside a patient room," Mila said.

Dr. Cherkasov didn't want to start down this road, but she saw no real choice.

"It's true. The two men were removed very quickly by police, and the nurse is at a private facility. The hospital administration didn't want a panic among staff. We're taking precautions to prevent future attacks. More orderlies, two person rule..."

"Army soldiers and police," Vasily continued.

"Unfortunately. I heard they activated the military police component of the city's reserve army battalion. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing," the doctor said.

"It's better than getting raped in one of the hospital wards," Mila said.

"I agree, but I don't see the situation getting better any time soon," Cherkasov said, nodding at something down the street.

They all turned to look in the direction she indicated and saw several people walking down the street toward the hospital. Nothing to be alarmed about on the surface, but it signified an accelerating trend. The number of people walking in off the streets had increased significantly as the day progressed, and it appeared there was no break in sight. Maybe an armed company of military police wasn't such a bad idea after all.

The situation at the hospital could degrade very quickly at this rate. With a population of fifty-two thousand, they had barely scratched the surface with the few hundred patients housed within the hospital and the converted school. They were well above maximum capacity as it stood, and supplies were thinning quicker than anyone had ever imagined. Within twenty-four hours, they would have to turn people away and tell them to drink plenty of fluids.

She stared out over Lake Lumbolka, taking in the fading light of the northwestern skyline. The dark orange sun hovered on the horizon, radiating rich hues that competed with the bleak snow-covered landscape, casting a starkly

beautiful reflection over the blackish ice covering the lake. She loved the long days of spring and longed for the endless summer days. Her brief escape was shattered by the sound of gunfire in the distance, from the direction of the city, she thought. The people on the street looked behind them and started to shuffle quickly up the street. Dr. Cherkasov threw her cigarette to the ground and stepped on it.

"You're one of the doctors, right?" said a middle aged man bundled in warm clothing, holding a child in his arms.

"Yes. What's going on?" she said and heard some whimpering from the group behind the man and his child.

"My daughter has the flu and terrible headaches. We all have headaches, and one of the women was attacked. Stabbed in the arm. Things started to go crazy in our building. It's not safe to leave your apartment. We banded together to get some of the sickest people here to the hospital," he said.

"All right, let's get you inside. Come on, help me out with these people," she said to her companions.

Vasily and Mila extinguished their cigarettes and jumped into action, helping to herd the dozen civilians up the ramp toward the entrance. Halfway up the concrete ramp, Dr. Cherkasov was hit by a splitting pain in her head and for a moment thought she had been hit over the skull with a tire iron. She buckled slightly, but held it together, realizing she hadn't been hit with anything.

"You all right?" Vasily whispered.

"Fucking headache hit me like a hammer. I've felt like shit all day, but this was different," she said.

"Welcome to the club. We've all been getting them. Drink plenty of water...it seems to help," he said.

As the doctor approached the door, trailing the group of patients, she heard two more gunshots from the direction of the city.

"Stay alert. Things are getting worse," she said to the police officer directing the ambulance out of the parking lot.

He simply nodded.

Chapter Two

Monchegorsk City Central First Aid Hospital Monchegorsk, Russia

Dr. Valeria Cherkasov struggled up the poorly lit staircase to reach the third floor of the hospital. She had spent the last fourteen hours triaging patients in the overwhelmed ER and finally realized the futility of their efforts. Her trek up three flights of stairs, which was a physical feat in itself given her condition, was motivated by self-preservation more than any lofty Hippocratic ideals. The violence spilling off the streets had reached an unmanageable level, even for the heavily armed platoon assigned to the hospital from the reserve Military Police battalion. The ER served as a beacon for the entire city and had effectively become ground zero for the worst cases.

All of the other entrances to the hospital had been heavily barricaded, leaving the ER loading bay as the only point of entrance to the hospital. This had worked well for a while, since the steep ramp leading from the back street gave police officers and soldiers higher ground to control the massive crowd that extended nearly one hundred meters in each direction on the tight road. Once up the ramp, patients were corralled into the concrete walled ambulance parking area for initial inspection.

Triage efforts had devolved into more of an asylum process than a medical one, since the hospital had long ago ceased to exist as an effective medical facility. Patients were screened for severity of disease, with a focus on the far ends of the symptom display spectrum. Patients showing some promise of recovery were provided refuge on the third and fourth floor of the hospital, which were secured and patrolled by military reservists, augmented by the few remaining police officers. These patients were frequently reassessed for possible mental deterioration and removed if they started to exhibit violent or unpredictable behavior.

This represented the other end of the spectrum, and the second floor of the hospital had turned into a makeshift prison for the worst cases they could identify. Dr. Cherkasov and the remaining hospital staff had decided that this service would be just as important to the citizens of Monchegorsk. The second floor had previously contained an inpatient behavioral health ward and had been outfitted with security features not found on the other floors of the hospital.

The presence of such a large ward within the small hospital had surprised Cherkasov when she first reported to the hospital, but she soon came to terms with the fact that Monchegorsk had a history of neurological and behavioral disorders, which were most likely related to decades of heavy metal pollution from the Norval Nickel plant.

She reached the second floor landing and nodded at the two soldiers standing guard at the reinforced metal door. Three more guards were posted inside and guarded the controls to the door locking system for the entire floor. Another set of soldiers sat on the other side of the building, in the eastern stairwell, guarding the other exit. Within the ward, all of the patients were restrained to beds, chairs or anything solid and stationary. Occasionally over the past few days, a patient would get loose and try to kill another patient or charge the door. Their rage was usually met by a hail of gunfire, and the body was dumped out of a window.

Cherkasov coughed violently into her thin surgical mask. Since experiencing the first skull splitting headache a few days earlier, her condition had progressively worsened. Flu-like symptoms, just like everyone else. She knew the two soldiers were watching her closely for any signs of sudden unpredictable behavior.

Their platoon had suffered its share of casualties from violent behavior directed toward them. They had also seen the illness itself start to claim members of their tightly knit group, though in much smaller numbers. For whatever reason, most of the soldiers from the reserve Military Police battalion didn't get sick, and the ones that started showing signs of the mystery illness were significantly delayed from the general population of Monchegorsk.

Her symptoms had also been delayed compared to the majority of the hospital staff and citizens. She started to suspect that maybe the outbreak started while she

was visiting friends in St. Petersburg. Two weekends ago she had taken the train to meet up with a group of her medical school friends to celebrate their five-year graduation anniversary.

They had all completed the final internship requirements for St. Petersburg State I.P. Pavlov Medical University in 2002. She had been fine until the weekend. Now, less than a week after her first headache, she was coming apart mentally and physically. She struggled to hold it together as she approached the soldiers sitting on chairs at the door. She didn't want to end up tied to a water pipe on the second floor.

"Good evening, Dr. Cherkasov," one of the soldiers said, adjusting the assault rifle within easy grasp along the wall.

"I wish it were good, but I don't see an end in sight. Anything new in there?" she said.

"It's getting bad. We had three get loose in the last hour alone. They're chewing through their restraints...and limbs. We can't take any more patients on this floor," the sergeant said.

"I understand. I'm heading up to talk to your platoon commander. I just gave the order to stop taking any additional patients at the hospital," she said, squinting through the pain of a migraine headache.

"You all right, Doctor?" he said, glancing at the younger soldier.

"I'm fine for now. Anyway, I'm going up to discuss an exit strategy with your lieutenant. Once word hits the street that we're not accepting patients, all hell will break loose. Worse than it already is. Hell, we've been pulling the wool over their eyes for a few days now. Bringing people inside for nothing. Maybe we can get some of the people on the upper floors relocated. I don't know," she said.

Cherkasov raised her foot to start the climb toward the third floor when the stairwell went dark. Three seconds later, the emergency lights activated, bathing them in an eerie orange glow. She didn't feel panicked by the darkness, instead all she wanted to do was hug the young private who had advised her to take the stairs. At first she had wanted to punch the soldier, but when he told her that they had no way to get her out in case of a power failure, she had relented and shuffled over to the staircase. *At least something went right today.*

She started to laugh at the thought, but quickly changed the laugh into a cough. One inappropriate display of emotion could land her behind that metal door. Laughing in a dark stairwell during the middle of a pandemic easily qualified as improper. The sergeant's radio crackled and he brought it to his ear.

"Understood," he said and knocked on the metal door leading to the second floor.

He turned to Cherkasov.

"I'm pulling my men out of the ward. The locking mechanisms on these doors are dependent upon electricity, but they aren't connected to an emergency backup. Fucking idiots. We'll have to barricade from the outside to keep any of these crazies from escaping."

"Shit. All right. Good luck, sergeant."

Cherkasov continued her journey up the stairs, moving slowly through the severe muscle aches in her legs. She coughed most of the way up to the third floor landing. A bright light hit her face, followed by an authoritative announcement.

"Cherkasov is here," the guard said, lowering his assault rifle.

The light from the rifle's side-mounted flashlight left bright green splotches in her vision.

"Doctor, the lieutenant needs to talk to you immediately.

"Funny coincidence. I was just on my way up to see him."

Cherkasov passed the two grim-faced soldiers and entered the third floor. She was overcome by wailing and whimpering, as hospital staff tried to calm the patients crowded into every conceivable space offered by the modest hospital. Mattresses had been cannibalized from other floors to fill the gaps between beds. The staff and soldiers could barely move through the long hallway, which resembled a refugee camp dormitory. The two emergency lights on the floor, each located above the stairwell doors, barely cast enough light into the room.

To her immediate right, Lieutenant Altukhov and one other soldier sat huddled around a small coffee table that had been pushed into the corner. On the table sat an olive green communications backpack that held a military VHF radio. The lieutenant held the radio receiver to his ear, while furiously scribbling on a partially opened map with his other hand. The enlisted soldier held a flashlight over a map, illuminating the lieutenant's work.

"Hold on, Doc," the lieutenant said, still writing.

Gunfire erupted from below, catapulting the entire floor into hysterics. She could barely hear Lieutenant Altukhov yelling to her over the screams and cries for help.

"Doctor! The ER has been overrun. My men are retreating to the stairwells to cover our escape. It's time to abandon the hospital."

"Escape to where?" she said.

"Anywhere but here. My commander has lost all communications with the squad assigned to guard the power plant. There's no reason for the power to fail. He's pretty sure it was targeted."

"Targeted? By whom? How are we going to get all of these people out of here?"

"We're not. My orders are to leave immediately. Russian Federation forces have blocked all exits from the city and our observation posts report armored vehicles headed in this direction. The major is convinced that the government knocked out the power," the lieutenant said.

"Why would they do that?" she demanded.

The lieutenant folded the map and stood up from the table, issuing orders to the rest of the soldiers in the room. His radioman secured the radio and heaved the backpack onto his shoulders, handing him the receiver, which was attached to the radio by a thick elastic wire. The officer issued orders into the handset.

"What's going on?" she said, grabbing the young radioman.

"Ma'am. We're evacuating the hospital. The lieutenant is ordering the soldiers to hold the stairwells for two minutes. We'll all depart through the east stairwell," he said, pointing to the other side of the room.

"What about the patients?" she said, turning toward the room.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. We need to get out of here before Federation forces arrive," he said.

"Why? Aren't you Russian Federation military?" she said.

The lieutenant gave the handset back to the soldier and started walking toward the far stairwell exit while providing her with the answer to her last question.

"Not any more. Our unit was given orders to strip the armory and vacate the city two days ago. As you can see, we didn't obey that order...we all have families here. They'll shoot us on sight. They've already started to shoot civilians trying to drive north...before they hit the roadblocks."

"No. This can't be happening. I can't just leave these people," she said.

"The choice to stay is yours, but my men are leaving. We'll escort anyone who can move during the next two minutes. After that...they're on their own," he said and continued walking.

Cherkasov looked around for members of the hospital staff. She could see roughly a dozen men and women in green hospital scrubs engaged in calming the patients. She spent the next minute repeating what the lieutenant had told her, careful not to let any of the patients eavesdrop. Some of the staff were as sick as the patients and opted to stay. About half of them started to edge their way toward the eastern stairwell, torn between duty and personal safety. Once the soldiers disappeared, chaos would descend upon the entire hospital, pitting each of them against their own personal hell. Rape, torture, murder, burning...all at the hands of the deranged populace that was sure to swarm the hospital within minutes.

Valeria Cherkasov stood next to the door with the two soldiers left to guard their retreat down the stairwell. One of the men held a two-way radio to his ear, obviously not willing to take the slightest chance that he might miss the final withdrawal order. The radio chirped and he acknowledged the transmission before locking eyes with her.

"It's time," he said.

She glanced into the room one more time and saw one of the older nurses trying to calm a young mother who kept screaming. Her listless child lay with her on the mattress. She froze until the nurse turned her head and nodded, mouthing "go." Cherkasov found herself shuffling through the doorway and down the stairs. As she passed the metal door to the second floor, she heard gunshots inside. She paused on the landing and the sound of dampened gunshots continued. One of the soldiers prodded her with an elbow.

"Keep moving," she heard.

"What's happening in there?" she whispered.

"The right thing to do," one of the soldiers said.

Chapter Three

Filitov Prospect

Monchegorsk, Russian Federation

Valeria Cherkasov's eyes fluttered open. She could hear some kind of knocking, but couldn't make any sense of the sound. For a brief moment, she had no idea where she was. The sensory details started to return, beginning with her vision. She was in her apartment, or what remained of it. A fading light crept through the

shattered window in her living room, exposing the unbelievable amount of damage done to the apartment. A broken chair from her small kitchen table set lay on the floor under the window.

She smelled the smoky remains of a fire and wasn't surprised when further visual inspection of her surroundings revealed that the kitchen table had collapsed on itself, apparently due to a fire. The flames had cracked the bulb and melted part of the light fixture attached to the ceiling, leaving a massive charred area above the destroyed table. Just beyond the smell of fire was something else. It almost smelled like barbeque.

She now noticed that the room was freezing and that she was shivering. The thin wool blanket covering her on the small couch did little to deter the arctic air that freely poured into the room. Why wasn't she on her bed, under her thick down comforter? She heaved her legs over the side of the couch and stood up. All she could think about was getting under that comforter. She glanced at her hands and saw that they were bruised and scratched, dried blood coagulated in several places around the worst cuts. Walking toward the bedroom, she saw several blood smears on the cinderblock walls. *Did I punch the walls?* None of this made any sense to her.

When she reached the bedroom doorway, she realized why she was on the couch. The deeply charred wooden bed frame formed a shell around a large burned mass of mattress springs, feathers, pillows and dark unrecognized material. She didn't like the smell in this room. Some kind of combination of charcoal lighter fluid and meat. Disgusting. She stepped back into the first room and her senses homed in on the sound of knocking at her door. *How long had that been going on? Shit. That was what woke me in the first place.*

She walked over to the door and stared through the peephole, immediately recognizing one of the clinic doctors. She couldn't remember his name, but he was certainly familiar to her. They had dated off and on, until he settled down with a nurse from the hospital. She strained to remember if she knew what had happened to the nurse. She couldn't recall anything. Something was wrong with her detailed memory. She opened the door and registered the look of shock on his face.

"Are you all right, Valeria? I heard that you got out of the hospital. You're lucky you left. Army units showed up and nobody has heard any news from that part of town. What happened to you? You look like you've been attacked."

"I think I need to sit down," she said, straining to remember his name. Nothing.

"That's a good idea," he said, escorting her to the couch.

She wondered what he was doing here. It seemed odd to her that he would show up out of nowhere to check on her. Didn't he have a wife? Or did they ever get married?

She sat down on the far right side and felt a sharp pain in her right thigh. She didn't react to the pain, beyond slowly rising up to see what had happened. The man had turned his back on her, muttering something she couldn't hear. He glanced at the table and walls, furtively looking back at her. She caught this, but pretended to stare out of the window at the fading light. She turned her attention to the couch and her thigh, seeing fresh blood pour out of a shallow cut in her leg. The gleaming blade of a large butcher knife protruded between the cushion and the armrest of the couch. *Now, where did that come from? Oh, yeah. Now I remember.*

She glanced up at her friend, who was slowly approaching the bedroom door. Without thinking, she pulled the knife out of the couch by the flat side of the blade and stared at it. A crusted layer of dark red blood covered at least half of the blade. She hid it along the side of her bleeding leg and stood up slowly.

"Valeria, what in hell happened here?" he said, transfixed by the scene in the bedroom.

"Same thing that's gonna happen to you," she hissed into his ear.

Ten minutes later, after using the rest of the charcoal lighter fluid and most of the wood in the apartment to burn the man's body beyond recognition, she opened a small painted trunk next to the door and took out a warm fur hat and thick, fur-lined leather gloves. She took a moment to adjust everything before taking her favorite gray wool overcoat off one of the coat hooks next to the front door.

She pulled the coat over her bloodied hospital scrubs, wondering why she hadn't changed these yet. It didn't matter. She just needed to get out of her apartment and find a more secure place to stay. She knew the streets weren't safe, but neither was staying in her apartment. Since arriving from the hospital, her windows had been smashed in, and someone had thrown a small firebomb into her bedroom. It was only a matter of time before something more dangerous occurred. She was on the second floor and someone could easily climb in one of the broken windows. Maybe she could find a vacant apartment on an upper floor in her building. Even better, she might find someone that would take her in. She hated being alone.

A gunshot echoed through the open window, startling her. She turned toward the kitchen and walked over to the knife holder, searching for her favorite cutting knife. If she was going out into the darkness, she'd better arm herself. Failing to find the large butcher knife, she settled for the smaller one, which would be easier to hide in the spacious pockets on her jacket. She didn't want to walk around holding a knife. Someone might mistake her for one of the lunatics walking the streets.

Chapter Four

FSB (Federal Security Services of the Russian Federation) Headquarters Lubyanka Square, Moscow

Alexei Kaparov smashed his fourth cigarette of the morning into the impossibly full ashtray on his desk and dumped the precariously balanced contents into the dented gray trash bin to the right of his desk. The bin was emptied every evening, by someone eager to prevent another trash bin fire caused by his hastily extinguished Troikas. On the day that one of the fires spread to the paperwork on his desk, nearly engulfing the entire desktop in flames, his staff decided to empty the over-stuffed incendiary pile themselves. Kaparov chuckled at the pile of ashes and cigarette butts in the empty can. For two years he couldn't get the cleaning staff to empty the can on a regular basis. He had to nearly burn the building down to get it done. He started to wonder what he might need to do to have hot coffee waiting for him in the morning.

He lit another cigarette and returned his attention to the emails he had been following. Something was going on, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He was slowly being removed from the loop regarding Reznikov, relegated to providing background information and further field data analysis. In reality, this was his section's job, but Kaparov didn't like being marginalized in cases that directly involved possible WMD threats, and this one had the potential to be the biggest in years. The search for Reznikov was in different hands, but as the deputy director for Biological and Chemical Weapons of Mass Destruction, he needed to be directly involved with the case.

Lab results from samples taken at the Kazakhstan site had not arrived at his desk, and all of his attempts to secure the results had met with stalling. Kaparov was an expert in the field of withholding information and knew better than anyone when he was on the receiving end of these tactics. The fact that the findings were being actively withheld from him was an ominous development.

At least he wasn't the only one falling out of the loop. Information regarding Monchegorsk had also slowed to a trickle at every level. Reports had hit his section's desk with a fury the other day, triggered by every search parameter his analysts had programmed into the system. An infectious outbreak resembling a pandemic flu had filled Monchegorsk's hospital within the span of a day. Follow-on reports suggested strange symptoms, involving uncontrollable patients and citywide violence.

Patients had been sent to Murmansk for further testing, and within forty-eight hours, the roads leading out of Monchegorsk were secured. Only military traffic travelled into or out of the city. He had hand delivered his assessment to the director of Counter-Terrorism, which included the high likelihood of a link to Reznikov's recent activities. Since this delivery, information regarding the situation in Monchegorsk had become scarce for everyone. Now there was a new development.

Kaparov arrived at work early by most FSB agents' standards, but this morning he found parking to be an unusual challenge. His reserved place in the garage had been occupied, forcing him to drive to a space far from the entrance door. A minor inconvenience, but the significance hadn't been lost on him. He recognized many of the cars crowded into the coveted parking spaces. FSB Special Operations Division (SOD). He had placed his bare hands on a few of the car hoods and found them to be cold. Something important had dragged over twenty SOD personnel into headquarters in the middle of the night.

He had walked directly to their operations center, but had been politely turned away upon exiting the elevator. This wasn't unusual, but confirmed that a live operation was underway. He could only assume that it was related to Reznikov, but wouldn't be able to confirm it until the operation ended, when a sea of loose lips spilled out into the rest of the building. He had several good friends in the Special Operations Division and would find out soon enough, unless it was a Vympel or Alpha Group operation. If that was the case, he might have to rely on Prerovsky's female liaison. She had already provided more information than either of them had expected, and Kaparov was more than happy to fund another night on the town for Prerovsky and his lady friend.

His desk phone erupted, breaking the silence, and he glanced at his watch. 6:45. A little early for phone calls. He considered letting it go to voicemail. It certainly wasn't a courtesy call from the Special Operations Division with an update on their operation. He stared at the phone for a few more seconds and picked up the receiver out of curiosity.

"Deputy Director Kaparov."

"Alexei Kaparov. I can't believe you've lasted this long. I expected one of those ambitious youngsters to have taken your job by now," said the familiar voice in passable, academic Russian.

"The younger generation doesn't have what it takes to topple someone like me or you. Field work today doesn't build the same steely resilience. Sounds like you and I must have done something wrong back in Berlin. We're both chasing the same thing these days," Kaparov said.

"It wasn't what I did wrong back then. I think we both played the game pretty well."

"Indeed we did. To what do I owe the honor of a call from an old friend? I must admit that I find your timing a bit...shall we say, coincidental?"

"I didn't think you were a big believer in coincidences, Alexei."

"I'm not, but the new generation is softer, and I've already been to sensitivity training twice this year."

"Do you have time to talk to an old friend?" Karl said.

"Leave me a number and I'll call you in about ten minutes. I could use some fresh air," he said.

"You're not still smoking those horrible cigarettes?"

"Hey, I've cut down to two packs a day and I'm now considered a style icon. Troika cigarettes are all the rage now. All part of our nation's identity crisis. The youth are reaching back to their communist roots and embracing the worst cigarettes ever produced by mother Russia."

"Let's hope they don't reach too far back," Berg said.

"I'm not too worried. They don't have the stomach for those times. I'll call you when I'm out of here," he said and shuffled to the door to grab his warm wool overcoat.

Ten minutes later he strode across Lubyanka square, fighting a stiff, frigid wind to light another Troika. The wind was no match for the veteran smoker, and he thrust his bare hands back into the warm fur lining of his coat. The temperature had barely crested above freezing this morning, which was unseasonably cold for late April. Kaparov smoked about half of the cigarette, walking the outer edge of the square, gathering his thoughts. Finally, he called his former Cold War adversary, who answered on the first ring.

"So, why are you so eager to call me? It must be late there?" Kaparov said.

"I was hoping you could tell me. It sounds like the FSB or SVR is looking for someone important in the vicinity of Kazakhstan and possibly Monchegorsk," Berg said.

"It sounds like you are very well informed, as always. Unfortunately, I don't have much to add," Kaparov said.

"Won't add, or can't add?" Berg said.

"Neither. I assume we've come to the same conclusions about the 'someone important' you mentioned and his link to Monchegorsk?"

"And the lab site outside of Kurchatov?" Berg said.

"My God, you are well informed. What do you know about the site?"

"Enough to know that Monchegorsk might burn to the ground...if it's not bombed first."

Kaparov stared back at the Lubyanka Building and took a few seconds to process Berg's words.

"You still there, my friend?"

"I am. I am. Something big happened this morning. The lot was full when I arrived."

"What time did you arrive?"

"About six..."

"This morning? You just arrived? Alexei, don't fuck around with me. Do you know what happened in Kazakhstan today?"

Kaparov didn't want to admit that he was out of the loop on the Reznikov case, but he sensed something important in Berg's tone. They had played a brilliant cat and mouse game for three years in Berlin, then two more in Moscow before Berg vanished overnight. After spending five years scrutinizing Berg as a Cold War adversary, he could read the slightest change in tone or facial expression. Right now, Berg sounded truly surprised that he might be in the dark on Kazakhstan.

"Embarrassingly, I've been cut out of the loop, and this is what worries me the most. Tell me about Kazakhstan," Kaparov said.

"A small reconnaissance team of mine ran into a reinforced platoon of Russian Spetznaz in a small village called Kaynar...and a few helicopters. Kaynar is well over one hundred and fifty miles from the Kazakh-Russian border."

"What is the American reaction to the attack?" he said, sensing an impending international disaster.

"None. I'm running this off the books for now, and most of my team survived. Your side is looking at thirty-plus KIA and two downed helicopters. One of them was a Havoc."

"This isn't a joke or some kind of a trick? You've confirmed this?"

"I watched it happen on a live feed. I'm concerned, Alexei. If they're marginalizing you at this point, then we both know where this is headed."

"Straight under the rug," Kaparov added.

"The link back to Russia goes under the rug, and an unknown quantity of virus gets delivered to the United States and Europe, compliments of our radical friends in the Middle East."

"Karl, my hands are tied here right now, but I may be able to push my way back in. I can't threaten exposure or I'll end up in the Moscow River."

"You have to muscle your way back in somehow."

"It won't matter either way. Even if they let me in, I won't have any influence. This will be a joint investigation, involving assets that nobody cares to admit still exist."

"My team is still working this. If your people find Reznikov, it sounds like they'll kill him on the spot. I want a fighting chance to grab him first," Berg said.

"I'm sure they will. Let me put some thought into this. I have a very dangerous idea forming," Kaparov said.

"I like the sound of that. In the meantime, I'll keep you posted on my team's progress. If we work together, we can accomplish both countries' goals and avoid a nightmare. Do you know what type of virus we're up against?"

"Well, you and I have previously discussed what he tried to steal from the lab several years ago," Kaparov said.

"Partially weaponized encephalitis samples?"

"Hmm. Partially," he mumbled, not willing to say everything he had heard recently.

"What am I missing, Alexei?"

"Have you ever heard of the Lithuanian film director Jurgis Meras?"

"No. Dare I ask how this is related?"

"On November 3rd, 1969, Jurgis Meras was found in a park on the outskirts of Vilnius, with his throat slit from ear to ear. He lived with his parents, who disappeared that same night, leaving a ransacked apartment behind. Meras was a popular underground director, who didn't waste his talents producing seditious material like too many others. He stayed off mother Russia's radar for the most part. In early October of '69, one of his films became wildly popular in Vilnius, attracting the wrong kind of attention. According to my sources, the film was named "Ghouls of Vilnius" and it depicted a zombie outbreak. Not surprisingly, Meras was a big fan of American movies and had a sizeable collection of American film magazines to prove it."

"Alexei, I'm sort of following you on this, but I need you to get to the point."

"A lot of people connected to Meras vanished without a trace over the next few days, from Lithuania to Moscow, and it was no secret that the KGB had a hand in it."

"I'm sure he wasn't killed because he violated international copyright laws..."

"Of course not, but word of the movie had spread farther and wider than anyone had expected, and it obviously made somebody very nervous. These were some of the most paranoid times in our history, and our nation's bioweapons program was in full swing.

"Do you know what scientists at VECTOR informally called the weaponized encephalitis virus? Zoja. Zoja is the Russian phonetic military equivalent of your Zulu. I think we are looking at a virus that targets the temporal lobe and causes a rabies-like aggressive behavior. Meras's zombie hit a little too close to home in the Kremlin and triggered a violent response from Lubyanka Square. I'm afraid the government is preparing to do the same with the entire city of Monchegorsk. The initial hospital reports out of Monchegorsk are consistent with this. Starts with a fever and flu-like symptoms, and as the disease destroys the temporal lobe, unpredictable violent behavior ensues. This was the hallmark of certain encephalitis cases."

"This is worse than I imagined. If Al Qaeda is sitting on a stockpile of this stuff, we are all in deep shit, my friend."

"I agree. Unfortunately, I have no eyes on the ground in Monchegorsk, and the analysis of the samples our people brought back from Reznikov's lab is being withheld from me."

"I'm working on a plan to change all of that. I have a sample in the air as we speak, which will be in one of our labs by dawn. I also have a team approaching Monchegorsk. I should have a solid picture of what we're up against by late tomorrow evening my time," Berg said.

"I'll give my idea a shot over here and call you back later this afternoon with some new phone numbers to use. I don't trust anyone at this point. I've come too far along to end up feeding the fish."

"They still have fish in that river?" Berg said.

"The fish are making a comeback. Lots of bodies to keep them fat throughout the winter. I'll be in touch."

Kaparov wondered exactly how robust the FSB Special Operations Division internal security might be and knew exactly who to ask for this information. Then it would be up to Prerovsky. He would have to convince his lady friend to spy on her own people. This might be the biggest long shot he ever played, but it was worth the risk. He had always put mother Russian ahead of his own interests and this instinct had served him well. He wasn't about to make any changes to these guiding principles. He threw the exhausted cigarette stub to the pavement and walked back to the headquarters building, hopeful that Prerovsky wouldn't turn him over to Internal Affairs on the spot.

Chapter Five

Outskirts of Monchegorsk Kola Peninsula, Russian Federation

Daniel stood against a tall pine tree and programmed his GPS unit with the snowmobile hide site's coordinates. He was the last member of the team to complete this task, and once he finished, they would set off on skis toward Monchegorsk. The hide site was located deep within the woods of a small hill overlooking the city. They were still several kilometers west of the nearest city structure, which should have been enough distance to keep the whine of the snowmobile engines from drawing any attention in the city.

Daniel confirmed that the waypoint had been accepted and placed the GPS receiver in one of the front lower pouches on his gray-white camouflaged, military style harness. Another pouch contained a digital camera capable of taking high resolution pictures and video. Most of the lower pouches held ammunition for the forty-year-old AK-47 assault rifles slung over their shoulders.

Farrington carried a similar camera and the team's satellite radio, their only link to Sanderson and Berg. He also carried a suppressed PPS submachine gun, which would serve as their only covert weapon beyond the knives strapped to their legs. Sergei commented that the PPS had probably been produced in a Soviet factory before any of them had been born. In all reality, all of the weapons had likely been

buried in Finland before any of them were born. The team had spent a few hours removing the thick storage grease that had covered the weapons, inside and out. Once the weapons had been thoroughly cleaned, they tested each weapon's action and picked the five most reliable rifles. None of them cared to dwell on the viability of the ammunition found with the weapons.

They were all dressed in expensive, mobile cold weather clothing, covered by old Soviet Era winter camouflage and relatively modern harness gear. White wool watch caps with gray and brown camouflage specks topped each of their heads, along with simple black ski goggles. If they ran into a Russian patrol, they might actually pass for some twisted version of cold weather Spetznaz.

Once Daniel nodded, they conducted a communications check, speaking quietly and acknowledging each other. Each man wore a sophisticated throat microphone, with an invisible earbud for communication. The throat rig didn't require them to speak above a whisper, since it absorbed vibrations directly from the speaker's vocal cords through the neck. It also cut out almost all background noise, allowing them to talk under windy, extremely noisy conditions, like a firefight or snowmobile ride. The communications gear and cameras were the only items they carried that appeared to have been produced within the past two decades. Even their Telemark skis looked like ancient castaways, rivaling the age and condition of the snowmobiles provided by South Kola Limited.

Their CIA contact from the embassy in Helsinki had arranged everything and had stressed that they were lucky to get the snowmobiles. South Kola Limited had balked when he asked for maps of Russian trails leading to Monchegorsk and a covered sled to pull behind the snowmobiles. Though nobody at South Kola Limited's shop would speak of it, the CIA agent got the distinct impression that they knew Monchegorsk was off-limits, and as one of the premier snowmobile outfitters in the area, had been warned not to send anyone into the Kola Peninsula. An exorbitant amount of money had secured a waiver in the form of South Kola Limited turning a blind eye. The cost of this blind eye turned out to be the shittiest equipment in their inventory. Apparently, they weren't expecting any of it to return.

Gunshots echoed through the hills as the scene unfolded in the distance. The city of Monchegorsk was a stereotypical Soviet Bloc city, dominated by rows of ugly, tall, rectangular apartment buildings. Gray dominated every street, building and common area below them, all merged together perfectly by a blanket of dirty snow. A low cloud cover smothered the city and almost swallowed the tops of the several dozen smokestacks located northwest of the city. The faded red and white warning pattern painted on Norval Nickel's vast array of spires provided the only color he could find in the city, aside from an orange blaze consuming one of the apartment complexes. The industrial plant's tall stacks stood dormant against the sky. More gunshots drifted their way, and they searched for the source.

A dark green BTR-80 Armored Personnel Carrier raced onto one of the main boulevards followed by two GAZ 2975 'Tiger' Jeeps. The Tiger resembled an up-armored U.S. HMMWV (Humvee), but retained some of the boxy features normally associated with an armored car. Gunners on each of the vehicles fired at a three-story office building as the drivers formed a rough semi-circle around the southern end of the structure. Chunks of concrete exploded from the building's facade as

14.5mm projectiles from the BTR-80's turret tore into the cheap Cold War era construction. The 12.5mm heavy machine guns mounted on the Tigers concentrated on the ground level of the building, shattering glass and splintering wood frames.

After several seconds of continuous heavy machine-gun fire, heavily armed soldiers wearing green camouflage uniforms and helmets poured out of the vehicles. Several soldiers from the furthest Tiger disappeared out of sight around the back of the building, and a fierce firefight erupted out of Daniel's view. Successive explosions just out of view showered the Tiger in dust and debris. Soldiers huddled near the BTR-80 reacted swiftly. They stopped firing into the building and sprinted to the rear corner of the bullet-riddled building. From the cover of the intact corner, the soldiers fired at targets somewhere behind the building, most likely in support of the squad that had just disappeared. Through his binoculars, Daniel watched as figures emerged from the smoke.

The squad that had originally deployed behind the building carried three wounded soldiers toward their hastily drawn perimeter. The gunfire intensified and one of the pairs struggling toward the nearest vehicle suddenly dropped to the ground. More soldiers rushed forward to retrieve their wounded comrades.

"Looks like a rescue operation," Daniel remarked.

"Rescue from what?" Farrington replied.

A smoke trail raced out of the southern-facing wall and tore through the thin roof armor of the Tiger closest to the engaged troops, detonating inside. The gunner firing the heavy machine gun mounted on the Tiger disappeared in a fireball that shattered the truck and caused every soldier in sight to drop into a prone position. The BTR-80 started to back up, and Daniel sensed that they were about to withdraw. Heavy machine-gun fire intensified against the side of the building that had been used to fire a rocket propelled grenade at the platoon, and the Russian Federation soldiers scrambled to reach the two remaining vehicles. Simultaneously, everyone in Daniel's group heard the faint sound of helicopter blades. They exchanged uncomfortable glances. Far over Monchegorsk, two helicopters appeared, flying low.

"Two Havocs. Fuck. Seeing one up close was enough for me," Leo muttered.

"We'll have to be extremely careful at night. They'll be equipped with the latest thermal imaging equipment. Same with the armored personnel carriers," Farrington said.

They watched as the armored vehicles, jammed beyond their advertised troop carrying capacity, lurched down the road at top speed. All binoculars turned to find the helicopters, which grew in size as they approached, barely missing the tops of the tallest gray structures in the downtown area. Daniel lowered his binoculars and took in the entire scene.

The helicopters slowed to a hover several streets away and formed up side by side. Once the rear helicopter pulled up next to the lead Havoc, both helicopters fired dozens of unguided rockets at the building the soldiers had just left. The rockets slammed into the unobserved side of the building, followed by thunderous detonations that reached the side they could see. Most of the windows on the second and third floor of the building blew out onto the street, followed by flaming internal debris. Daniel saw at least two bodies sail out of the building among the flaming wreckage.

The Havocs fired another salvo that tore completely through the second floor and brought half of the third story down, raising an impenetrable cloud of concrete dust and smoke. They watched more smoke trails arc into the haze from the helicopters, followed by successive detonations that shook the forest floor. Daniel couldn't tell what happened, but it felt like an earthquake tremor. The helicopters started to drift toward the structure, falling back in a line as they intersected the main road recently travelled by the surviving Russian Army vehicles.

"They aren't fucking around. The entire building just collapsed," Leo said.

Daniel's attention drifted to several figures that emerged from the expanding wave of dust. They moved slowly, helping each other cross the street in front of the destroyed building. At least two members of the group carried assault rifles and wore the same camouflage uniform as the soldiers. Instead of helmets, they wore black watch caps, which were covered with the gray dust from the building. The two helicopters cruised up the street, and Daniel saw puffs of smoke trail the lead Havoc's forward mounted 30mm cannon.

The cannon's projectiles ripped into the group on the street before the sound reached Daniel's ears. The extended burst of cannon fire dropped all but one of the figures trying to reach the cover of smaller building across the road. The lone survivor of the Havoc's gun-run picked up one of the dead men's rifles and fired at the helicopter as it cruised overhead. The shooter disintegrated into a bloody mound of twisted limbs and exposed bone as the sound of the second helicopter's cannon washed over Daniel.

"They're not fucking around one bit," Petrovich reinforced.

"Did the local army garrison turn?" Leo said.

"It certainly looks that way. Berg said the garrison's base is fed by several wells and isn't connected to the city water supply. This is mainly a local unit and a majority of the personnel have families that live in Monchegorsk or nearby towns. He suspects that Russian leadership would try to simplify things and lump the entire garrison into any kind of quarantine effort. This doesn't look like your typical quarantine."

"More like an extermination," Leo said.

"Exactly. Like Parker said, we stick to the basics on this mission. Get in, figure out what the virus does and document as much evidence as possible. Our job is to get as much information to Berg as possible. The Russians are playing the containment game, and everyone else is in the dark. Berg wants enough evidence to crack this wide open," Petrovich said.

"All right, we'll approach the southwest end of town, stash the skis and set another GPS point," Farrington added.

They set off on skis as the two helicopters banked left and raced back toward the center of Monchegorsk. A loud explosion rocked the hills, and they turned in time to see another fireball reach skyward from a building several kilometers into the city, far from the two attack helicopters. They continued to follow the lightly travelled snowmobile trail that had brought them this far and would bring them to a point concealed in the forest, less than a half kilometer from a series of industrial buildings. They'd hide among the pine trees and wait for dark.

Chapter Six

Outskirts of Monchegorsk Kola Peninsula, Russian Federation

Petrovich sprinted for the rear corner of the building closest to the cluster of trees that had served as their final approach point to the outskirts of town. He reached the rusted metal edge of the prefabricated structure and stopped to scan the area beyond with his night vision. He listened to the area around the buildings, and after spending a few minutes of studying the green images produced by his handheld scope, he signaled for the rest of the team to join him. Sporadic distant gunfire drifted through the maze of structures, masking the direction of its origin.

From what he could tell, none of the action was focused on this part of town, which should simplify their approach to the apartment buildings on the southwest edge. Their main risk involved crossing Highway M18, which carried a steady stream of military traffic and patrols. There would be ample opportunity to cross unobserved, but it still made Daniel nervous. Unfortunately, every approach from the west crossed M18, but this route provided the cover of several lifeless buildings that were unlikely to attract any attention. Most of the windows were missing, and they saw no signs of recent human activity from their hide site in the forest. As the rest of the group stacked up along the concrete wall, Daniel checked the area again.

"We'll move up together through the buildings and approach the highway. We can watch a considerable stretch of road from ground level on either side. Once across, we'll hightail it to the abandoned gas station on the other side. Our goal is to find a way into one of the apartment buildings less than a mile from the station," he said and took off without warning.

The team worked its way through another five hundred meters of neglected gray buildings, dodging large heaps of scrap metal and discarded industrial materials. They moved as quietly as possible through pitch-black expanses, stopping momentarily to scan for sentries or anything out of place that might signify an early end to their trip.

By consensus, they had agreed to focus their attention on a block of several closely clustered five-story apartment buildings in the western suburbs of Monchegorsk. By day, the apartments looked like they might have been thoroughly evacuated, but as night descended, they picked up hints of light with their night vision through the thin curtains of several windows. They'd close in on the nearest building and find a place to observe the area for a while.

If they could see lights inside the apartments with second generation civilian night vision scopes, the Russians could see them, too. Russian units would be equipped with fourth generation night vision optics, thermal imaging equipment and infrared detection gear. Based on what they witnessed all afternoon, the Russians were scouring the city with no rules of engagement.

Upon reaching the last building before the highway, Daniel signaled for them all to hold at the corner. He lowered his body and crawled through the dirty snow along

a row of dead bushes to the front of the building. He raised his head far enough to see down the road to the south and did the same for the north. Nothing. No illumination or signs of movement. He pulled out his night vision scope and took a look in each direction.

The green image didn't reveal any hidden surprises, but it emphasized the limitations of their night vision gear. The persistent, thin haze blanketing Monchegorsk during the day remained at night to reduce the effective visual range through his scope. For longer distance spotting, they would be better off using the naked eye. The Russians wouldn't have this problem with the newer generation low-light technology. Daniel's team would have to be extremely cautious when making decisions based on long-range detection capabilities.

"One person at a time will crawl up. Stay low. If a vehicle approaches from the south, this wall will be exposed, but you should have enough cover. When you get to the corner, watch the road for a minute to be sure it's clear, then sprint across. Rally point is behind the gas station."

He heard the rest of the team whisper their acknowledgment and glanced down the road in each direction. All clear, he hoped. Daniel was on his feet in a flash, sprinting in the direction of the gas station. He crossed the road diagonally and skirted the edge of the station's parking lot, headed straight for a large trash dumpster behind the small building. He reached the back wall and slammed his left foot into the door, which gave slightly. He stepped back and kicked it again, splintering the door frame and sending the door inward. He unslung his rifle and moved quickly to the outside corner of the gas station.

"All clear at the station. The back door is open. Rally point inside," he said.

A figure appeared across the street, barreling in his direction. A few minutes later, they huddled inside the frigid gas station. Sergei was the last to arrive.

"I didn't see anything on the road. I think we're good," he said.

"All right. Let's move out. Schafer, you'll bring up the rear. Stay back far enough to watch over us and provide cover if anything pops up," Daniel said.

Schafer gave him a thumbs up that he could barely see in the dark.

"We all need to be on the lookout for snipers. If you hear a snap or see a flash...sprint for three hundred and sixty degree cover. Whatever you do, don't stay in place. I hunted groups like this for two years, and the only thing that ever saved my targets was an immediate panicked sprint for cover."

"I thought you didn't miss," Farrington said.

"I don't. I was talking about the only response that kept me from killing everyone in the group."

"We need to get moving," Farrington said.

"I'll take point. Farrington, Sergei and Leo bring up the middle. Schafer, you know what to do."

"You're never going to call me Yuri, are you?" Farrington said.

"Probably not. Move out," Daniel said and disappeared running.

Fifty minutes later, Daniel walked slowly through a small children's playground. An apartment building loomed overhead, yielding no signs of life. He scanned the windows, aiming the rifle where he looked. It looked dead, but they knew better. He slowly approached a door on the ground level and squinted intensely at the dark

gray and blue image provided by the naked eye. He could barely see twenty feet in front of him.

"Do you see anything on the ground level?"

"Negative. I still have a few windows on the third and fourth floor with activity," Schafer said from his over watch position in the distance.

"Roger."

He reached the door and leaned against the concrete wall to its right, extending his right hand to test the door handle. It didn't budge, but he could tell that the door opened inward, which was a good thing if they had to use brute force. Daniel removed both of his thin gray Nomex gloves and stuffed them into cargo pockets. He retrieved a small zippered kit from his backpack and started using the contents to open the door's lock. He tried several combinations of small tools until he felt the tumbler move. He squeezed the thumb mechanism on the top of the handle and pushed inward on the door, which moved effortlessly on its hinges. Perfect.

"We're in. Move the team up."

Daniel moved into the apartment, and noted that the temperature inside didn't improve much from the outside. The rancid smell of decomposition hit him suddenly, which sent a few waves of panic through him. He was in the dark with dead bodies. He put his gloves back on and took out a small flashlight. He turned it on and pointed it down the hallway. He saw dead bodies stacked floor to ceiling against the front doors of the building. Something yanked the flashlight out of his hand.

"Are you fucking crazy?" Farrington said. He turned the light off and handed it back to Petrovich. "Use your night vision."

The rest of the team assembled inside, except for Schafer, who would watch the building from the outside and provide early warning if the Russians approached. Using his night vision scope instead of a flashlight, Daniel could now see that this was the custodial level and contained no apartments. Large pipes attached to the ceiling ran the length of the hallway. The doors they could see would likely lead to large boilers or furnace equipment.

"We'll head up those stairs to the third floor and hit two rooms at once. Third door and eighth door on the right. I'll stack up with Leo on the far door. Yuri and Sergei take the closer one."

"If we have the doors right. Could be two or three windows per apartment," Leo said.

"We'll figure it out. We need to find what we're looking for in this building. The gunfire is increasing out there," Daniel said.

"I heard helicopters," Farrington said.

That was all anyone needed to say. The team jogged toward the staircase on the northern side of the building and opened the door. The staircase contained no windows, so Daniel flashed his light up the stairwell. Empty. They quietly climbed to the second floor and approached a door. Daniel peered through the window and saw nothing but darkness. He opened the door several inches and took another look with his night vision scope. He saw trash and assorted debris, but no bodies. They hadn't detected any signs of life on the second floor from the outside, and it looked to be no different on the inside.

"Clear," he whispered.

The team continued to the third floor, hugging the walls and keeping their weapons focused on the door leading into the third floor's main hallway. They had counted at least six sources of light on this level, so they approached the door cautiously. Daniel moved his hand to the door handle and pulled it gently, but it didn't move.

"Locked," he whispered.

Farrington moved to the other side of the door, followed closely by Sergei, who glanced up into the darkness of the stairwell toward the fourth floor. Farrington edged his head closer to the door's window and peeked into the hallway, pulling it back immediately. He shook his head and removed his night vision scope, placing it against the glass. He used his right hand to signal for Daniel to work on the door's lock. Daniel removed the same kit he used earlier from one of the pouches on his vest and started to use the two tools that had opened the ground level door. He knew exactly what he needed to do to manipulate the lock's tumblers.

As soon as he felt the tumblers move, the door slammed inward, knocking both Farrington and Petrovich to the concrete floor of the stairwell. Blinding lights and screams filled the stairwell from every direction, and Daniel felt himself ripped off the floor, onto his knees. Someone knelt on the back of his legs, holding them down, and his arms were quickly pinned behind him. The only thing he didn't hear was gunfire, which for the moment was a good thing.

He was too stunned to react and tried to look around before a dark bag was placed over his head. He felt hard metal press against the side of his skull and figured there was no point in trying to flip the guy restraining his arms. He hoped the rest of his team came to the same conclusion. If they had been captured by civilians, they had a good shot at surviving. When the yelling and struggling calmed, a thick, authoritarian Russian voice emerged.

"You'd all be dead by now if this one hadn't spoken English downstairs," the voice said.

"Even as you approached the building, a few of my people didn't think you were Russian. Who are you?"

"American Special Forces," Daniel said, in Russian.

"Now you speak Russian?" he said and ripped the hood off Daniel's head.

Someone aimed a flashlight directly in Daniel's eyes, partially blinding him, but he had seen enough to know that the rest of his team was on their knees with bags over their heads. Roughly a dozen loosely uniformed men crowded the stairwell landing. Most of them were occupied with restraining his team. A large man stood in front of him, wearing Russian Army camouflage and a large brown fur hat with side flaps. He held an AKS-74u fitted with a bipod and holographic sight. A large night vision rifle scope was tethered by a D-ring to a loop on his camouflage jacket.

"That scope should be attached to a rifle," Daniel said.

"Wouldn't do this crew any good on a rifle. You don't look like Special Forces. This rifle is older than you are and most of your outer gear is old Russian Army issue. What is your mission here?" the leader said.

"To assess and report. We suspect whatever happened here is linked to a rogue Russian bioweapons engineer," Daniel said.

The man exchanged glances with a few of his men and walked over to confer with a man standing halfway up the stairs. He asked a question from the stairs.

"Do they think this is contagious?"

"No. We think this is a form of weaponized encephalitis. Most likely delivered directly through the city's water supply."

"Encephalitis? Whatever it is, it's making people sick in the head. Half the city went crazy. What are you supposed to do with the information?"

"Transmit immediately via satellite and leave."

"You have a satellite phone?"

"Phone with high bandwidth rig," Daniel said.

He heard Farrington start to yell, but the operative was quickly muffled.

"We'll need to take that phone. The world needs to know what happened here. What our government is doing."

"How about we come to an agreement?"

"An agreement? We're in the position to be making demands, not the other way around," the man said.

"More or less true, but the phone isn't on either of us, and it'll disappear if we don't reach an agreement."

An excited voice yelled down the stairs. "Helicopters!"

"Where is the phone? With the other guy outside?"

"He's listening to this entire exchange, so I recommend we cut the shit. We're on the same side," Daniel said.

The man spoke into a small radio he had kept concealed in his camouflage jacket and listened for the faint reply.

"Fuck! Your man bolted. What do you want?" he said and issued orders down the stairs.

"I need to know exactly what happened here and I need tissue samples. Preferably a live sample," Daniel said.

"You want to take someone back with you?" the man said.

"Someone that can move on their own. One of your soldiers," Daniel said.

"These aren't all soldiers, but we have plenty of candidates for you to take back," he said. He cocked his head and listened to the radio. "Fucking helicopters are inbound. You need to get your guy into this building immediately. He won't last very long out there. Thermal imaging. 30mm guns will chew him up and spit him out," he said.

"Do we have a deal?" Daniel demanded.

"What do I get in return?"

"I'll give you the satellite rig."

"Can it scan documents?" the man said.

"It comes with a digital camera for that purpose. I can hear the helicopters now. We need to wrap this up and get my guy inside. He has the satellite phone," Daniel said.

"I'll need you to help me get documents," the man said.

"What kind of documents?"

"The kind you can only find in a command vehicle," he replied.

"You have plenty of soldiers for that," Daniel said.

"The soldiers I have are military police reservists. Most of the men and women fighting in the city are civilians. I need Special Forces types to take down a command BTR."

"Release my men immediately and return their weapons. Then we have a deal," Daniel said.

The man ordered their release and Daniel struggled to his feet.

Farrington immediately got in Daniel's face. "We don't have time for diversions or passengers. We need to take tissue samples, interrogate the locals and get the fuck out of here," he said.

"Hold on. Schafer, can you get back to the building without exposing yourself to the birds?"

"I'm on my way back. The sounds are still muffled. I should be fine. ETA, one minute."

He returned his attention to Farrington. "Yuri, it's too late for that. A deal's a deal. It's not like we had a lot of negotiating power. How long do you think it would have taken them to find the phone?" he asked, patting Farrington's chest.

"You were bluffing me?" the former soldier said.

"Not really. Schafer has the high bandwidth rig. Where do we go from here?"

"Out of this building. We moved our headquarters here earlier in the day, but it appears that we have attracted enough attention to bring them into the area."

"When are we getting our weapons back? They took them upstairs," Farrington demanded.

"You're not getting those rifles back," the man said.

"What the fuck? It was part of the deal and—"

"Those rifles are shit. We have better weapons for you...unless you want your forty-year-old Kalashnikov back. You should keep the PPS though. We can make use of that," he said.

Several armed civilians descended the stairs and stacked several weapons and new equipment along an empty wall on the landing. They continued down the stairs amidst the yelling and chaos of a general evacuation. Daniel spotted Schafer on the stairs, pushing his way through a mass of armed men flowing to the lower levels of the building. The man directed them toward the weapons and harness gear.

"Take your pick. Just make sure to swap out your rifle magazines. None of these will fire 7.62mm. Hurry up. I want to clear out of this building in a few minutes. The helicopters won't fire on the buildings before the ground troops arrive, unless they're fired upon first."

"We saw them take a building down about a mile from here. Earlier in the day," Farrington said.

"That was my fault. I had sent a squad to that neighborhood with the hopes of drawing their attention away from our headquarters move. The squad took it upon themselves to shoot up a foot patrol and got stuck in the building. We saw the building collapse from the rockets. Our squad never returned," the man said.

"They were all killed," Farrington said, grabbing a fully rigged AKS-74u.

"Along with everyone in the building. The government has switched from evacuation to extermination mode. Not that there was ever really a difference," the man said.

"What do you mean? Do you have any suppressors for these weapons, or long-range night scopes?" Daniel said, lifting a thick-barreled AK-74 from the stockpile.

A young man standing near the stairs answered. "No suppressors. We didn't have anything like that in our armory. We were lucky to have advanced sights for the weapons. I can get you a scope. I'm Sergeant Malyshev. One of the few regulars assigned to the battalion."

He walked over and extended his hand to Farrington, who shook it, followed by Daniel. After shaking the man's hand, Daniel became concerned. In the scattered light of several flashlights, he could see that the man's face was drained of color and his eyes were bloodshot. He coughed softly into the crook of his elbow.

"Sergeant Malyshev has been a blessing to the battalion. One of the few regulars with combat experience to ever be assigned to our unit...and the only regular to stay behind. He saw extensive combat in Chechnya. I'm assigning him to your group."

"We don't need any additional manpower," Daniel said.

"Trust me, you'll be glad to have this soldier backing you up. He knows the streets...and he can fight like the devil. You're taking him with you when you leave. He's your live sample."

It all made sense to Daniel now.

"How far along are you?" Daniel said, flashing his light in Malyshev's face.

"I'm still a day or so away from having real problems. Right now I just have flu symptoms. That's how it starts," he said.

"How did he get infected?" Sergei said.

"Many of the men refilled their canteens when we took to the city. Nobody at the base was initially infected. We're not on city water. Some got sick, some didn't. Maybe some houses had already flushed out all of the bad water and others hadn't. Bad luck? Who the fuck knows? I'm Maxim, by the way. Captain Maxim Sabitov. I commanded the 332nd Reserve Military Police Battalion...still do I guess.

"On Saturday, April 7th, most of the battalion remained overnight for our monthly drill. It's mostly administrative work this time of the year, so we let a number of the men return to their families off base on Saturday night. They all got sick over the course of the next week. The men who stayed on base that night were fine."

"How many men did you have under your command?" Farrington said.

"Three hundred and fifty-six. Forty-three went home that night. Forty of them got sick. About thirty complied with Russian Army Command's order to abandon the base, leaving me with roughly two hundred and eighty men."

"Abandon the base?" Daniel said.

"Of course. The situation in Monchegorsk had deteriorated significantly by then, and Moscow had three hundred armed soldiers assigned to the base. Most with families living in Monchegorsk. They didn't want us sticking around town to cause trouble, so they ordered us north. Only the unmarried soldiers obeyed. We made sure to secure the armory from the very outset. Most of us knew what was at stake here."

His radio chirped again and he put his hand on Daniel's shoulder. The deep, rhythmic thud of helicopter rotors intensified and passed, replaced by the steep

whine of the twin turboshaft engines. The entire building vibrated as the helicopter passed overhead.

"We need to get moving. I don't want to be responsible for bringing another building down on their heads," Maxim said, pulling Daniel toward the stairs.

"How many civilians are still around?" Farrington said.

"Hard to say. A few thousand maybe. Scattered everywhere. The Russians have started block by block sweeps to the northeast."

"That's a lot of people. Why doesn't the government just evacuate them?"

"Because nobody believes the government is actually evacuating them. From the very beginning, rumors have circulated that they just truck everyone over to the nickel pits and shoot them. Based on what I've seen in the city, I wouldn't be surprised. The other problem is that half of the people I've seen are violently insane and unpredictable. They can't effectively restrain the sick ones. You'll see what I mean. It's fucking crazy out there. Especially at night."

Chapter Seven

City of Monchegorsk Kola Peninsula, Russian Federation

Daniel Petrovich stepped out into the darkness and scanned the neighborhood. The crescent moon provided enough ambient light to outline the large hulks of more than a dozen apartment buildings, all tightly stuffed into an area Sabitov had called Katayev Prospekt.

They had met for a few minutes in the basement to discuss Sabitov's plan, which involved moving the bulk of his fighters to this development. From there, his fighters would put up a brief fight and disperse. Their goal was to occupy all of the Russian Army's attention, while Daniel's group tried to pull off the impossible.

"You ready for this? Walk in the park for Special Forces, right?" Sabitov said and slapped him on the back.

The rest of the team joined him and listened silently. They could hear rumbling in the distance and the distinct thud of helicopter rotors.

"Armor is moving in this direction, but the helicopters will track my people. Everything will be shifted to the Katayev Prospekt. I expect the entire Russian force to be concentrated on that area. Fifteen apartment buildings. Much larger than the one we left," he said.

"The helicopters don't shoot people on the streets?" Sergei asked.

"Not yet, but I suggest we move as discreetly as possible," Sabitov said.

"Lead the way," Petrovich said.

The group of nine men set off in a northeasterly direction, led by Major Sabitov and Sergeant Malyshev, who both carried loaded RPG launchers. Three additional soldiers had been added to the group to help Sabitov create a diversion. The soldiers were dressed in civilian clothes and carried additional rockets. Like Sabitov's

sergeant, they didn't sound very healthy. As long as they could do their jobs, Daniel wasn't concerned.

Daniel's team, which included Malyshev, would assault the vehicles. Daniel had made it clear that if the command BTR didn't take the bait, they would depart Monchegorsk immediately. Sabitov was convinced that the information found in the battalion commander's vehicle would be worth the risk. Daniel traded looks with Farrington as they sprinted off into the darkness. They were both thinking the same thing, but Daniel had no intention of double-crossing Sabitov. The man had stayed behind against overwhelming odds to protect his family, which was something Daniel could relate to.

They weaved their way through a maze of smaller buildings and snow-covered yards, occasionally ducking behind walls or kicking in doors to hide from the Mi-28 Havoc that screamed overhead. The helicopter was loud enough to hear from a distance, and they had no shortage of places to hide. Soon enough, they'd come up on an open area leading to a small cluster of apartment buildings and would have to carefully time their transit. Gunfire picked up to their front, punctuated by the loud crack of RPGs exploding. Sabitov listened to his radio.

"They've just ambushed the recon elements of the armor battalion. We wait here and see if they take the bait," Sabitov said.

"How far ahead are they?" Daniel said.

"Less than a mile. My teams will pull back to Katayev Prospekt and draw them into the area around the tall buildings. We'll have to time this carefully. We need to—"

A sudden growl stopped his sentence, followed by a horrifying scream and mumbled voices.

"What the fuck is that?" Leo said.

The Russians exchanged worried glances just as three screaming figures charged between the two structures behind them. They closed the short distance quicker than he'd expected, and he couldn't identify them in the darkness. Several gunshots exploded, and the attack stopped as quickly as it started. They heard demented laughter off in the distance.

"They must have followed us," Malyshev said.

"Who followed us?" Petrovich demanded.

"The sick ones. This is what happens," he said, kicking over one of the bodies.

Petrovich stared at a young woman's dead body, focused on the blood encrusted butcher knife near her hand. She was dressed in an unbuttoned gray overcoat, which covered blood-splattered, light green hospital scrubs. "Dr. Cherkasov" was embroidered over the left breast pocket.

"Don't ever be fooled. They're all armed with crazy shit like this. Mr. Petrovich, would you take one of your men back to those buildings with the PPS and scan the street for any additional followers? I can hear them," Sabitov said.

Daniel tugged at Leo's jacket, just as Farrington tossed the silenced PPS at them. Leo snatched it out of the air, and they both walked briskly between the buildings with their weapons held ready. He reached the end of the building and risked a peek around the corner. Through the darkness, he could see someone repeatedly stabbing another person about twenty feet down the street. Movement in his

peripheral vision alerted him to the presence of two figures emerging from the shadows of the buildings on the other side of the tight road. The Russians appeared to be the least of their problems at the moment.

"Two more walking down the middle of the road, dragging something behind them. Looks like half of a body. Fuck," Leo whispered.

"Take them down first, then hit the two across the street."

Daniel raised his rifle and turned the corner, immediately finding his target through the Russian made 3X PN23 night vision scope. He quickly centered the red dot on the side of the attacker's head and shot him. He heard several muffled shots from the PPS and shifted his rifle to the two figures across the street. Both targets appeared in the scope, and he chose the man to the right, who stood with his mouth open, twitching. The second man charged them, and Daniel shifted his scope to the runner, preparing to fire.

"A little help with this one," he said and took his eye off the scope to fire an unaided shot.

The PPS coughed an extended burst, and the man tumbled to the street, his riddled body feeding a rapidly expanding dark shadow in the snow. Daniel sighted in on the man across the street, who hadn't moved since they started shooting. He watched a line of bullets stitch across the man's chest, knocking him back into the shadows. Daniel picked up movement on the street from several directions at once.

"We need to get the fuck out of here," Leo said.

"Agreed. Farrington, inform Major Sabitov that we can't stay here," Daniel said.

His earpiece crackled. "Understood."

Daniel raced back to the group, and Sabitov informed them that the entire armor formation was headed toward Katayev Prospekt down one of the main roads. He predicted that the battalion would split up into three groups, about three hundred meters before reaching the large cluster of buildings. He'd watched them employ this same strategy three nights in a row and the command BTR always joined the group on the left flank. Last night, the BTR broke off on its own and drove one block to pursue a group of looters. The two GAZ-2975 Tiger jeeps assigned to escort the command BTR followed closely. He watched the three vehicles fire point blank into a group of several civilians and could barely believe his eyes when the soldiers in the BTR dismounted to check the bodies. He told them that their success hinged on the Russians' opening the BTR's hatch.

As they all started to run, Daniel grabbed Farrington. "How will they get the Russian commander to open up the hatch? If they come under attack, they'll stay buttoned up in the APC's. I think it might be time to pull the plug on this," Daniel said.

"I don't think the three soldiers will be returning with the rest of us," Farrington said and sprinted to catch up.

Daniel thought about this for a few seconds, until a maddened scream from the street behind him spurred him into action.