

DEEP BLACK:
DEATH
WAVE

Stephen Coonts
and
William H. Keith

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PROLOGUE

THE CUMBRE VIEJA

LA PALMA

CANARY ISLANDS

TUESDAY, 1705 HOURS LOCAL TIME

The man stood on the rugged volcanic spine of the island, staring west into the sunset. At his feet, the ground dropped away sharply, leveling off eighteen hundred meters below in the green rectangles of banana plantations and tiny, tourist-oriented villages before reaching the ocean five kilometers away, where the piercingly blue waters of the Atlantic crashed endlessly against rock and black sand.

At his back, a drilling derrick towered against a cloud-crowded sky, the harsh, steady grinding of the drill head shattering the idyllic peace of the place. A large white sign in Spanish proclaimed the area off-limits to tourists, a special reserve for the Scientific Institute of Geological Research.

He called himself the Jackal.

That nom de guerre wasn't original, of course. Another man, a Venezuelan revolutionary, had carried that name many years earlier, before he'd been betrayed and sent to prison. Ibrahim Hussain Azhar had declared himself to be the new Jackal—"al-Wawi" in Arabic. He'd first taken that battle name when he'd led the band of Mujahideen that hijacked an Indian Airlines jetliner to Kandahar in 1999. Among

the prisoners freed by India in exchange for the hostages had been his brother, the cleric Maulana Masood Azhar.

This new Jackal drew himself up a bit taller as he recalled the thunderous cheers of ten thousand exultant Muslims in Karachi when the freed Maulana Azhar had addressed them. *I have come here because this is my duty to tell you that Muslims should not rest in peace until we have destroyed America and India*, he'd proclaimed.

The Azhar brothers had gone on to create the Jaish-e-Mohammad, the Army of Mohammad, in 2000. This group, based in the rugged mountain fastness of northeastern Pakistan, was dedicated to freeing the embattled state of Kashmir from India—but Ibrahim never forgot that the true, holy cause of militant Islam extended far beyond merely local politics, beyond the geopolitical concerns of borders and governments. India was the enemy of Pakistan, yes—but behind India were the far greater enemies of all of Islam: Israel and the despised United States of America.

When *those* enemies were swept away by the hand of Allah, the supreme, the powerful, the lesser foes of India and Russia would scatter and run like dogs.

Almighty God would reign supreme over a world at last cleansed of capitalism, of Western decadence, of Hindu polytheism, of Christian blasphemy.

A world under Sharia law, ruled by Allah alone, with Mohammad as His Prophet.

AYNI AIRFIELD
SOUTHWEST OF DUSHANBE
TAJIKISTAN
WEDNESDAY, 1452 HOURS LOCAL TIME

If I were a two-kiloton nuclear weapon disguised as a suitcase,” Charlie Dean said with a nonchalance he did not feel, “where would I hide?” “The cloakroom of the U.S. Capitol Building?” his partner replied over their radio link.

“Actually, I’d like to find the damned things *here*, Ilya. If they make it to D.C., it’s too late.”

Charlie Dean stood on the tarmac of an apparently deserted military airstrip, which shimmered beneath a harsh midafternoon sun. Sweat prickled at his spine beneath the khaki uniform blouse, the heat dragging at him, sucking the energy from his body.

He decided, yet again, that he was really getting too old for this sort of thing. A former U.S. Marine, he’d served in the Gulf, and later, before Bill Rubens had asked him to join Deep Black’s Desk Three, he’d worked with an independent intelligence service in Afghanistan. The heat reminded him of those deployments.

Dean didn’t look the part of one of the National Security Agency’s Deep Black senior field operators, though that, of course, was the idea. He was wearing the uniform of a wing commander in the Indian Air

Force, the equivalent of an American lieutenant colonel, with his skin and hair dyed dark to give him more of a subcontinental look.

“Hey, Charlie!” The voice of his partner sounded in his ear. “I’m picking something up over here.”

He could see the other man thirty yards away, standing next to a battered Russian-made ZiL-131 truck parked in the shade beside a shed. Charlie glanced around. No one else in sight. He started walking toward the other Desk Three operator.

His partner was Ilya Akulinin, sometimes called Sharkie, a reference to the English translation of his family name; when friends called him Ilya, it was with the proper Russian pronunciation, with the accent on the “ya.” His cover for this op was that of a major in the Russian Air Force, where pale skin and blond hair were not out of place. He looked the part, and he’d come by that honestly. Akulinin’s parents were Russian émigrés, living now in the Little Russia community of Brooklyn, New York.

Their current mission, code-named Haystack, had brought them to Ayni, a military and civil airport just fifteen kilometers outside of Dushanbe, the capital of the Republic of Tajikistan. A few years ago, Tajikistan had struck a deal with New Delhi to turn a dilapidated air base at Farkhor on the border with Afghanistan over to the Indian military. The arrangement had been intended to give India a greater military and political reach in the region, and Tajikistan greater security on its southern border with Afghanistan.

In 2007, New Delhi and Dushanbe had extended the arrangement to include Ayni, outside of Tajikistan’s capital. The agreement had been contentious at times. The Ayni base was supposed to be shared in rotation by India, Tajikistan, and Russia—but Russia, displeased with India’s recent political accommodations with the United States, had more than once tried to force the eviction of the Indian contingent.

India was still here, however. Plans to complete a natural gas pipeline from Central Asia south to India depended on the region’s security and political stability, and India’s military bases in Tajikistan were vital to those plans.

Thunder boomed overhead—a pair of Indian MiG-29s circling around to land. Twelve of the fighter jets were based here and at Farkhor, eighty-five miles to the southeast, along with an Indian Army security force.

“Whatcha got?” Dean asked as soon as the MiGs’ thunder dwindled into the distance. He spoke quietly, the words little more than subvocalization. The high-tech transceiver imbedded in bone behind his left ear picked up the words and transmitted them via the antenna in his belt.

“He’s getting something higher than background,” the voice of Jeff Rockman said in Dean’s ear. Their transmissions were also being relayed by communications satellite to the Art Room. The code name referred to the Deep Black ops center, located in the basement of the NSA’s headquarters building at Fort Meade, Maryland. Rockman was their handler for this part of the op, though Dean knew that the rest of the Art Room crew would be listening in as well—including Rubens, he was sure.

Dean didn’t like the real-time communications hookup, which allowed several dozen people to look over your shoulder while you worked. He would grudgingly admit that being able to talk via satellite with Fort Meade could be useful at times, but often it was a royal, high-tech pain in the ass.

“‘Something’ is right,” Akulinin added. “I think this might be the truck.”

Walking around to the rear of the vehicle, he jumped up onto the flatbed and moved up toward the cab. “A tarp . . . a big wooden crate. It’s empty. We couldn’t have gotten *that* lucky. Lots of chatter from the box, though. Hey . . . you people *sure* it’s safe to be here?”

“You’re getting less radiation right now, Mr. Akulinin,” a new voice said, “than you would flying in a jetliner at forty thousand feet.” That was William Rubens, deputy director of the National Security Agency and head of the highly secret department of the organization known as Desk Three, the NSA’s field operations unit.

“Well, you’re up early, sir,” Dean said. “What is it back there—five in the morning?”

“Six,” Rubens replied. “Nine hours’ difference. But who’s counting?”

Dean chuckled to himself. Ops in places like China and Tajikistan guaranteed that the micromanagers back home would be keeping graveyard shift hours.

Both Dean and Akulinin wore small but extremely sensitive Geiger counters strapped to their legs just above their ankles, hidden beneath their uniform trousers. The readout was audible only through their transceivers—a faint, rapid-fire clicking that Dean could hear through the implant as he walked beside the truck. By walking slowly across different parts of the airfield, they could pick up minute traces of radioactivity left behind by the shipment they were looking for. They’d already paced through two small storage sheds and a hangar, without result.

An informant in Kazakhstan had told them that their quarry had taken a military truck and headed for Dushanbe, where he would be meeting with persons unknown. This parked truck was the first indication that they weren’t on a wild-goose chase.

Akulinin jumped off the tailgate and rejoined Dean beside the cab. Thunder rolled once more across the airfield as one of the twin-tailed MiG-29s boomed out of the east and gently touched down on the tarmac. The Indian Air Force had sixty-nine of the aircraft—known as Fulcrums in the West but called Baaz in India, the Hindi word for hawk.

“So, anybody else shipping hot nuclear material through Ayni?” Dean asked as the rumble died away.

“Negative,” Rockman replied over the Art Room channel. “Nobody *official*, at any rate. Check the truck’s registration.”

Akulinin glanced around to be sure they weren’t being watched, then opened the passenger-side door to the cab. Inside the glove box, he found a plastic envelope with various cards and papers. He pulled a card out and glanced at it. “Here we go.” He read off the registration number.

“That checks,” Rockman told them. “That’s the truck checked out to Anatoli Zhernov two weeks ago at the motor pool in Stepnogorsk.”

Stepnogorsk was a town in Kazakhstan, nearly a thousand miles

to the north. Once, when it had been a part of the old Soviet Union, it had been a so-called secret town, operating under the code name of Tselinograd-25, and had been an important nuclear and biochemical manufacturing site.

“So where’s Zhernov now?” Dean asked.

Akulinin had one hand casually resting on the truck’s hood. “Engine’s cold. He could be anywhere.”

“More to the point,” Rubens said, “the *shipment* could be anywhere.”

“At least this confirms our intel that Zhernov was bringing the shipment here,” Dean said. “But who did he meet?” Who was he meeting?”

“If you find Zhernov, find out,” Rubens said curtly.

“You bet,” Dean replied blithely.

“It might help,” Akulinin said as he replaced the registration card in the truck’s glove compartment, “if we knew when Zhernov was here. When he handed off the shipment. Is it still here? Did it leave by air? By road?”

“We have our technical assets on it, gentlemen,” Rubens said. “In the meantime, you two keep looking for traces there. That could narrow down the field a bit.”

“That it would,” Dean agreed.

“You can also check the ops log at the Ayni tower,” Rubens suggested. “Get a list of all aircraft that have left Ayni for the past, oh, three . . . no, better make it five days.”

“I can do that,” Akulinin said. “These people are still scared shitless of Russians.”

“Besides, your Russian is a hell of a lot better than my Hindi,” Dean pointed out.

“Looks like you might get your chance to practice,” Akulinin said. “Company coming.”

A small party of men, all wearing Indian Air Force uniforms, had just emerged from the base of the control tower and were walking toward them. One wore a group captain’s epaulets, making him the equivalent of a colonel.

“We have an ID for you,” Rockman’s voice whispered in Dean’s ear. “That’s Group Captain Sharad Narayanan. He could be trouble. He’s a relative of India’s national security advisor—and he *hates* the Russians.”

“You there,” Narayanan called in singsong English. “What are you about?”

“Sir!” Dean said, snapping to crisp attention and saluting as the party reached them. “Wing Commander Salman Patel. I am on Air Vice Marshal Subarao’s staff.” He spoke the phrase in memorized Hindi, then added in English, “I am here to complete a materiel inspection of this base.”

The cover story had been carefully fabricated back at Fort Meade, and Dean had papers in his breast pocket to back it up. During the weeks before the op he’d actually gone through a crash course in Hindi. Although Hindi was one of the official national languages of India and by far the most popular, only about 40 percent of all Indians spoke it as a native tongue; English, also an official language, often served as a lingua franca among the diverse ethnic groups of the gigantic and incredibly diverse subcontinent, especially within the military.

“And this?” the group captain demanded, turning dark eyes on Akulinin. Although Russia and India had long been close allies, relations between the two nations had been strained for several years now, as Moscow tried to force Tajikistan to expel the IAF from the Tajik air bases. If Narayanan didn’t like Russians, it was probably because of that.

“*Maior* Sergei Golikov, sir,” Akulinin said in English, with a deliberately thick Russian accent layered on for effect. “Temporarily attached to Air Vice Marshal Subarao’s staff.”

“And what are you doing standing around out here?”

The second MiG dropped out of the sky and touched the tarmac, the thunder momentarily making conversation impossible.

“Staying in the shade, Group Captain,” Dean replied when the sound dwindled, “while we watch the MiGs land and talk about the possibility of expanding the facilities here at Ayni for the benefit of both India and Russia.”

The group captain seemed to relax slightly. The three-way political situation between Tajikistan, Russia, and India was delicate enough that he wouldn't want to get involved, not if his superiors were insisting that the IAF had to work smoothly with their Russian counterparts—and that much of the story was true.

"I . . . see." He snapped something at Dean in Hindi, the words too fast for him to catch.

"He just asked you, more or less, if you were giving away the store," another new voice with a soft lilt to it said in Dean's ear. A number of NSA linguists would be standing by, eavesdropping on Dean's conversations and translating when necessary.

"No, sir," Dean replied in Hindi. "The negotiations are going surprisingly well." His crash course in Hindi had included the memorization of twenty-five useful phrases, everything from "I will need to discuss that with my superiors" to "Can you direct me to the men's room?"

Narayanan barked something else.

"He just asked you where you're from," the linguist told him. "He says you have an unusual accent."

Big surprise there. "I was born in Himachal Pradesh. My parents spoke Punjabi at home."

Again the group captain seemed to relax very slightly. If he had to, Dean could spit back some memorized Punjabi as well, but Narayanan didn't seem interested in pursuing the matter.

"We have had reports, Wing Commander, of terrorist agents covertly on the base, possibly in disguise," Narayanan said in English. "The FSB warned us of an arms deal brokered here involving, shall we say, unconventional munitions. What have you heard of this?"

"Nothing, Group Captain," Dean lied. "*Sir.*"

"There have *always* been reports like this," Akulinin told the IAF officer. "Nothing has ever come of them."

"I hope you are right, Major," Narayanan said. "For all of our sakes, I hope you are right."

The Indians, Dean knew, were pursuing the investigation themselves, as were the Russians, but his orders were to keep Desk Three's

investigation carefully compartmentalized from those of both the Indian military and the Russian FSB, hence the lie. The FSB, the *Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federaciyi*, or Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, was the modern successor to the old KGB, and was riddled with Russian *mafija* influence, political infighting, and outright corruption. Desk Three believed that those unconventional weapons had been sold by members of the *mafija*—one of Russia’s organized crime families—to an Islamist terror group, using a Tajik criminal named Zhernov as the go-between.

Desk Three wanted to find both the buyer and the consignment without tipping off either the Russians or the Indians and thoroughly muddying the metaphorical waters of the case.

Tajikistan was a former member of the Soviet Union, and the Russians were still very much a part of both government and day-to-day life here. Dushanbe wanted to maintain its independence from Moscow—yet as the poorest of the Soviet Union’s successor states, Tajikistan desperately needed Russia to support its economy. Something like half of the country’s labor force actually worked abroad, especially in Russia, sending money home to their families.

India wanted to maintain a strong defense against its enemy-neighbor Pakistan and to extend its power into Central Asia, both for reasons of security and to protect its investment in natural gas coming south from Siberia.

As for Russia . . . as always, Russia was the real problem, with factions that sought to restore the old empire of the Soviets, factions seeking to protect the *Rodina* from Islamic revolution or attack, and predatory factions that include organized crime, corrupt politicians, and freebooting military units—and it seems these days that those last three are one and the same.

Dean and Akulinin were threading their way through a minefield.

“Carry on, then,” Narayanan said.

“*Sir!*” Dean said, cracking off another salute. The Indian Air Force was closely modeled on the RAF, with the same ranks, conventions, attitudes, and crisp attention to protocol. Akulinin saluted as well, but in a more laid-back manner.

“The man definitely has a stick up his ass,” Akulinin said quietly, after Narayanan and his entourage were out of earshot.

“The man is afraid of sabotage,” Rubens told him, “either from Russians or from Pakistanis. If he sounds paranoid, he has a right to be.”

“Let’s see if the tower will show us that flight log,” Dean said.

Together, they walked across shimmering tarmac toward the control tower building.

**OBHINKINGOW CANYON
CENTRAL TAJIKISTAN
WEDNESDAY, 1535 HOURS LOCAL TIME**

The ancient Daewoo Cielo took the next curve at almost ninety kilometers per hour, too fast for the narrow dirt road, sending up a dense cloud of white-ocher dust as it hugged the hillside to the left. Mountains thrust against the sky on all sides, the western fringes of the rugged, saw-toothed Pamir Mountains; to the east, at the bottom of the steep slope in the depths of the valley, flowed the waters of a deep and twisting river. The Tajiks called the river Vakhsh; the Russians used the ancient Persian name, Surkhob, the Red River.

Another curve in the dirt road, and the driver pulled hard on the wheel, bare rock blurring past the left side of the car. The drop-off on the right wasn’t vertical; the ground fell away with perhaps a forty-five-degree slope, the hillside punctuated here and there by scattered patches of scrub brush and stunted trees.

The drop was still easily steep enough to kill them all if the dark blue Cielo’s driver misjudged a turn and sent the vehicle tumbling down that hill.

The passenger leaned out of the window, staring not down into the valley but behind, through the billowing clouds of dust.

The helicopter was still there . . . closer now. Sunlight glinted from its canopy.

That the helicopter hadn't opened fire on the fleeing automobile was due to one of two possibilities. Either the Russians hadn't positively identified the car yet or they were biding their time, holding their fire until the car could be stopped without sending it crashing down the side of the rocky cliff and into the river below.

"You shouldn't have speeded up," the second passenger told the driver. He spoke Russian with a thick, atrocious accent. "You try to flee, they know you have something to hide."

"Too late," the driver replied, his Russian fluent. He was a rugged-faced Pashtun from Shaartuz, near the Afghan border, a member of the Organization since the days of the Soviet-Afghan War over twenty years before. "They knew who we were when we passed Khakimi. The bastards are *playing* with us."

"The police may have spotted us in Obigarm and called in the authorities," the passenger, Anatoli Zhern, added. For a moment, he lost sight of the pursuing helicopter. "Police or FSB."

The second passenger, in the back seat, grunted. "They can't find me here with you," he said. "You need to find a place to let us off. In these mountains—"

"—you wouldn't get half a kilometer before they picked you up," Zhern said, finishing the sentence. He snapped a curved black magazine into the receiver of the AKM assault rifle in his lap. "These hills have no cover, no place to hide. Unless you want to jump down *there*." He indicated the river below and to the right with a jerk of his head.

In the backseat, Kwok Chung On scowled. "Just get me to a place of safety."

Zhern snorted. Kwok was wearing civilian clothing, but he was a *shao xiao*, a major with the PLA, the Chinese military, and he obviously was used to having his orders obeyed instantly and without question.

A lot of good his rank would do him out *here*.

Zhern was a civilian, but he'd fought the Russians in Afghanistan twenty-five years ago, and he knew the importance of discipline. That knowledge had been honed sharper by his devotion to the Organization, the far-flung Russian *mafya*. His Russian name was Zhernov,

but the Tajiks had acquired the habit recently of dropping the Russian endings of their names in order to display their cultural independence. The president of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, had been born Rahmonov.

He would have to bring that helicopter down.

“Slow down,” Zhern told the driver, unfastening his seat belt so he could turn in his seat. “Let them get closer.”

The driver slowed somewhat but still took the next curve with a squeal of tires and a spray of gravel hurtling into the abyss alongside. Zhern braced himself against the car’s door, leaning through the window. It would be an awkward shot, firing left-handed from the passenger-side window.

The helicopter was closer now, an ancient Mi-8 in Russian Army camouflage. It appeared to be configured as a transport rather than a gunship. Thanks be to Allah, the compassionate, the merciful, for small favors . . .

Not that Anatoli Zhern gave any credence to the faith of his Sunni parents. The Organization took all of his time, all of his focus, a ready source of financial blessings, at least, that surpassed anything the mullahs could attribute to their God.

In Afghanistan, when he’d been a fighter with the Mujahideen, Zhern had once brought down an Mi-8 much like this one. His weapon then, though, had been one of the awesome American Stinger anti-aircraft missiles provided by their CIA, not an assault rifle, and he’d been firing from behind a massive boulder that gave him both cover and support, not trying to compensate for the jolts and swerves of a speeding automobile.

Bracing himself within the open window, he took careful aim, then clamped down on the trigger, sending a long, two-second volley spraying toward the aircraft, the AKM’s flat *crack-crack-crack* deafening inside the Cielo. He aimed high, trying to allow for the drop of the bullets, but so far as he could tell not a single round hit. The Mi-8 continued drifting closer . . .

Then it shot straight up just as the Cielo rounded another turn, and Zhern lost sight of it. Pulling back inside the car, he fumbled

with his weapon, dropping the empty magazine into the foot well and snapping home a fresh one.

The Cielo finished rounding the curve along the side of the mountain and the road straightened once more, the ground abruptly leveling off to either side as they raced across the crest of the hill. The helicopter was *there*, in front of them, hovering ten meters above the gravel of the roadway, turned broadside toward them as its rotor wash stirred up swirling clouds of dust. A muzzle flash flickered in the open cargo hatch door, and geysers of dirt snapped skyward to either side of the car. The windshield disintegrated in slivers of flying glass as the driver lurched back in the seat, blood splattering from face and throat.

Out of control now, the car plunged off the right side of the road, bouncing heavily across open ground that grew steeper, more precipitous, with every lurch and crash. Zhern threw up his arms, covering his face, and screamed. Kwok shouted something shrill from the backseat as more machine-gun bullets sprayed the plunging vehicle.

The Cielo slammed down hard, then rolled, every window shattering. It came to rest on its roof beneath a boiling cloud of ochre dust.

Kwok hung from his seat belt in the back, upside down, blood streaming up his face, his eyes glassy and wide open. Dead, then . . . his neck snapped in the crash, perhaps. Or he might have caught one of the bullets in that last volley.

Dazed and bruised, Zhern could still wiggle through the open window and crawl out into the harsh sunlight. Damn . . . *damn!* Where was his AKM? He'd lost it in the roll, didn't know where it was. Flat on his belly, he reached back through the window, groping for it.

No weapon—but he did find the briefcase and pull it out of the wreckage. He could hear the thunderous clatter of the helicopter coming closer. Blindly, he struggled to his feet and started to run. If he could make it down the slope toward the south, toward the river . . .

Submachine-gun fire rattled, and hammer blows against his back sent him tumbling down the hill. He came to rest on parched, barren dirt, unable to move.

Odd. There was no pain . . .

Within a very short time there was no feeling at all.

A man in civilian clothing walked up to the body moments later, nudging it with the toe of his shoe to roll it over. He squatted, then spent some moments comparing the man's face with the face on a black-and-white surveillance photo. Satisfied that this was Anatoli Zhern and that he was quite dead, the man reached down, retrieved the briefcase, and opened it. After checking through the contents—papers and a computer CD in its plastic jewel case—he snapped the briefcase shut and gestured to the men at his back. “Take him,” he said. “Take them all.”

“A nice haul, sir,” an aide said.

“It was not enough,” Lieutenant Colonel Pyotr Vasilyev replied, angry. “They have already made the handoff. We were too late. *Again.*”

The shipment, it seemed, had already been delivered. By now it might already be out of the country and on its way to its ultimate destination, wherever in an unforgiving hell that might be.

Someone—not the Russians, perhaps, but *someone*—was going to pay a very dear price because of that.