

**Excerpt from “Chaos,” a novel
ghostwritten by The Visions Group**

CHAOS

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PROLOGUE

April 2nd, dawn, northern Kazakhstan

Five exquisitely trained Taliban operatives buried charges of C-4 in the mountainside, following the mission diagram exactly. The C-4 blast would toss rocks and boulders as if they were pebbles and alter the barren landscape forever. More important, it would unearth the means to alter the world forever.

They were about to recover something worth a fortune to al Qaeda, though these men had not been told what they were after or for what purpose it would be used. Not even their leader, Jawid Fazlullah, knew. He had been recruited by al Qaeda and told to put

together a trusted Taliban team to carry out a mission. He was told the mission would lead to the total destruction of the Great Satan and its allies. It would be Al Qaeda's greatest moment, beyond even the attacks of 2001.

As Fazlullah moved to the master detonator, a shadow on the ground drew his attention. He gazed into the dawn sky where a bird of prey circled, a peregrine falcon. The raptor excited memories of his childhood. His father had trained falcons to hunt, and Fazlullah had helped him and learned the technique. His eyes followed the bird as it wheeled overhead and dived on another bird, snatching it in flight, then flew off toward home. The sight comforted Fazlullah, for surely this was a good omen. The bird was his brother hunter. And like his brother, he sought unwary prey.

Fazlullah triggered the detonator. With a thunderous explosion, the side of the mountain shattered. A fire column shot several hundred feet into the air, stabbing the sky like a molten sword. The ground shook and rumbled as if a major quake were trying to tear the earth apart. The five men clasped hands over their ears to block the pain of the concussion that echoed off granite walls and through rugged valleys. Stones pummeled them. Dust blew into their hair, their eyes, their ears, their clothing. Despite the distance they had put between themselves and the explosion, three of the men were knocked to the ground. The two who remained standing used their truck as a shield. Finally, the earth calmed, and the world went silent. The men looked to Fazlullah, who gave a signal. They moved carefully up the side of the mountain, making their way over rubble, slipping occasionally on loose earth and pebbles.

When they reached the blast epicenter they found more rock, though one of them noticed a dark void behind the boulders. Using caution, they widened the hole until they could see they had uncovered a cave.

Fazlullah smiled. Inside the cave, buried for almost 70 years, was a heavy wooden crate, the object of their mission. When the cave opening was wide enough they crawled inside and approached the box. Fazlullah checked the words stenciled on the top against a paper he'd been given. The writing was Cyrillic, the alphabet of Old Russia and dozens of other Slavic nations. Only Fazlullah could translate it:

"Utmost secret. Highly dangerous. Do not touch. A.S."

He had no idea what was inside, or to whom the initials belonged, but he knew the content was the prize al Qaeda had paid him a great deal to find.

As he emerged from the cave, his men carrying the crate behind him, Fazlullah looked once again skyward and spotted his brother, the falcon. A good omen, indeed.

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April 5th, late morning, Northern Virginia

A peregrine falcon flew high above a heavily wooded area a few miles northwest of Washington, D.C. The keen-eyed predator digested the last of a pigeon snatched from the parking lot of a fast-food restaurant. The peregrine watched for one more target of opportunity before returning to its home, a scrape in the rocks above Mather Gorge, where the Potomac River raged over 20-foot waterfalls and around boulders the size of moving vans.

While the falcon preferred birds, it would take small mammals from time to time. This was what doomed the cottontail darting through short grass along a stretch of pavement leading to a non-descript building hidden in a heavily forested area not far from the Cabin John Bridge. Had the rabbit been aware of the falcon, it could have veered to its left, into high brush and the safety of cover. But the falcon's dive was silent and into the sun, so its shadow fell behind the rabbit and therefore gave no warning. With the cottontail in its talons, the falcon used its powerful hooked beak to snap the animal's spinal cord. The bird wheeled on the wind, flattening out its flight path on a vector that would take it directly over the flat grey-green building.

That the structure even existed was known to only a handful of men and women with the nation's highest security clearance. And most of them didn't know the building's location.

Within the structure, behind a window of one-way glass, a pair of hooded gray human eyes followed the falcon's ascent after witnessing the hunt and the kill. The eyes belonged to one of the few people familiar with the concealed facility. He wondered if the gory scene outside was a metaphor for his future. And if it was, which role will befall him, predator or prey?

Violent scenarios were very much on his mind at the moment. His top advisors had just briefed him. What began as an investigation of a possible seismic disturbance in southeastern Russia had morphed into concerns about renewed underground nuclear testing somewhere near Kazakhstan. Maybe China. Maybe Russia. The truth turned out to be worse than either of those scenarios.

For the man behind the hooded gray eyes, his worst nightmare was about to come true. And he knew for a certainty that if the world was to come to an end, this was the building in which the apocalypse might begin.