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WIN AVERAGE

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Blown Coverage

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JASON ELAM

It is to the real Jesus that I dedicate this book.

STEVE YOHN

*To my mother,
who instilled in me the joy of reading.*

*And to my father,
who instilled in me the joy of writing.*

DEDICATION

LORD, WHEN WE ASKED, YOU ANSWERED. When we trusted, You were faithful. Thank You.

Thanks, also, to our wonderful families. It was your love, patience, advice, and encouragement that kept us going.

We are indebted to LTC Mark Elam for poking holes in our scenarios and filling them with the ways things really work; Troy Bisgard of the Denver Police Homicide Division for feeding us stories that kept us laughing until we were barely sucking air; and Afshin Ziafat for keeping us culturally and linguistically accurate.

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**TUESDAY, MARCH 31, 8:45 P.M. CEST
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Empty shell casings skittered across the cement floor, propelled by the underside of the mercenary's boots. As he strode down the hall, his eyes remained focused on the door at the end of the passageway—no need to look in the rooms to his right or left; his men were too good to have left any threat on his periphery.

The sooner I deal with this man, the sooner I'm out of this stinking cesspool, thought Lecha Abdalayev, trying hard not to breathe deep the smell of fresh blood and human waste.

Not that he was unfamiliar with those smells. As a veteran of both the First and Second Chechen Wars, he had seen his share of man's inhumanity against man. He himself had once been in a situation while a prisoner of the Russians when death would have seemed a much sweeter alternative to what he experienced in the daily interrogations. *But it wasn't long before I turned the tables and became the one holding the knife,* he gloated with a self-satisfied grunt.

When he reached the end of the hall, one of the two men walking with him slid a key into the lock on the solid metal cell door.

"Wait." Abdalayev took a moment to straighten the black beret that was sitting on his bald head. Then he ran a hand over his fatigues and smoothed his long, salt-and-pepper beard over his chest. "Okay."

The lock protested for just a moment; then the large door slid noisily to the left. Immediately, Abdalayev's senses were violently assaulted. The smell of human waste that had been strong in the hallway was overwhelming in this room. From somewhere in the room a blaring children's song came to an end, then just as quickly began again: "I love you; you love me . . ."

Abdalayev waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the brilliance of the four floodlights, then entered the room.

In the middle of the cell sat an ancient-looking man. He was FlexiCuffed by the wrists and ankles to a reversed metal chair, while a wide fabric belt held his chest tightly against the chair's back. Except for the restraints, he was completely naked.

The battle-scarred prisoner stared at Abdalayev with his one remaining eye. A crooked smile had spread across his mangled face. Hanging over his back were two I.V. bags—one attached to a line that went into the man's arm, the other positioned to slowly drip down his back. As Abdalayev watched, another drop released from the bag and fell onto a large red welt, causing the old man to wince and a tear to slide from his good eye. But he never lost his smile.

The Chechen renewed his determination to do this fast and get out. Drawing his pistol, he pointed it toward the prisoner. Abdalayev was gratified to see the sudden fear in the elder warrior's face—just a reminder of who was in charge of this operation. He pulled the trigger, shattering the portable CD player in the back of the room and finally putting an end to the music.

Looking to one of his men, he said, "Cover him." The soldier pulled a Mylar foil rescue blanket out of his pack and laid it over the old man's shoulders. Abdalayev settled his eyes upon the man in the chair. Reaching into his shirt, he pulled out a photograph. He examined the photo, then held it out so he could see both the picture and the prisoner's battered face at one time. Satisfied that they were one and the same, he tucked the picture away.

"My name is Lecha Abdalayev," the visitor said in accented

Arabic. "I am the commander of the Chechen Freedom Militia. We have been asked by your friends to assist them in retrieving you. Are you able—"

"Where am I?" the prisoner interrupted.

"You are just outside of Babrosty, Poland, in a prison belonging to the American CIA. Now, I respectfully ask you not to interrupt me. All your questions will be answered in due course. As you can imagine, time now is of the essence."

The old man nodded his acquiescence.

"It is obvious that you will not be able to travel unassisted. Do I have your permission to immobilize you?" Abdalayeve asked, knowing he was going to do it no matter the answer.

"Do what you must."

Abdalayeve waved to another mercenary who was standing just outside the door. The captive's eyes grew wide as the soldier walked rapidly across the room and plunged a large hypodermic syringe into his neck. Immediately, the old man's head slumped.

"Bundle him up, and let's go," Abdalayeve commanded, turning to walk away and wondering how much vodka it was going to take to get this visual out of his mind.

As he left the room, he was forced to step over the body of the man who had been guarding the cell—a quick glance wasn't enough to tell Abdalayeve whether he had been American or Polish. *Not that it matters—although there is something about killing Americans,* he thought with a small smile. *It's like the difference between shooting a common deer and hunting big game.*

As he walked, Abdalayeve took time to glance at the empty cells around him. Just inside one of these doors, the twisted bodies of two of his mercenaries and a guard were sprawled on top of each other in a spreading pool of blood that crossed the entire hall. Abdalayeve didn't bother checking on his men. *Dead or soon to be dead; not much difference today.* He continued on, leaving a trail of bloody bootprints behind him.

When he reached the main courtyard, the four other Arabs who had been held prisoner at the facility were lined up on their knees.

"*As-Salamu `Alaykum,*" he said to them, conveying the traditional Muslim greeting of peace.

"*Wa `Alaykum As-Salam,*" they replied, a look of hope in their swollen eyes.

Abdalayev briefly studied their faces. It was obvious that these men had been exposed to the same treatment given to the old man. He said a silent prayer for them, then told the soldier guarding them, "Kill them."

Abdalayev watched as the men's souls departed for paradise. *Insha'Allah*, Abdalayev thought, *it was obviously their time. If Allah has willed, who can change it? Allah wills some to live and some to die, some to serve and some to be served, some to be soldiers and some to be victims. Insha'Allah—it is as Allah wills.*

One thing every young Muslim learned growing up in Chechnya was that Allah often called the few to sacrifice for the many. These men were too infirm to travel on their own, and he couldn't just leave them here. The very fact that they were in this secret prison meant that they had access to vital information. If they were recaptured and put to the same treatment again, they would break—everyone broke eventually. It was best just to send them to their eternal reward while there was still a possibility that they might arrive with their honor intact.

When the last of the prisoners had stopped moving, Abdalayev said into his comm, "Finish up. Proceed to the rendezvous point immediately." The agreed-upon spot was a large dying oak tree half a kilometer away and just off the road.

After their arrival, the twelve remaining members of Abdalayev's team would clean themselves up and put on casual business attire. They would also do their best to make the old man look presentable—*I'm glad they mentioned the eye patch*, he thought.

From there, the team would divide into groups of four and head northeast for the Belarusian border in three rented Škoda Roomsters. This would hopefully draw any pursuit that might follow. Abdalayev and the former prisoner, meanwhile, would drive a BMW southeast into Ukraine. The mercenary commander was confident that he could make it across the border with his fake passports. It would be difficult for the Americans to raise much of an alert. What could they say—"A man who doesn't officially exist anymore was stolen from a prison that never existed to begin with"?

If only things had been this easy when he was defending Grozny back in 1996. If that had been successful, then maybe he would be home right now with a wife and sons instead of here with mud on his hands and blood on his boots.

But, as every Chechen knew, you took Allah's will as it came. Some days it brought freedom, and another day it brought a bullet in the back of the head for being in the wrong prison at the wrong time. *Insha'Allah*. Allah knew what was best; blessed be his name.

Today Allah's will had brought freedom for al-'Aqran, leader of the Cause.



JASON ELAM is a sixteen-year NFL veteran placekicker for the Atlanta Falcons.

He was born in Fort Walton Beach, Florida, and grew up in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1988, Jason received a full football scholarship to the University of Hawaii, where he played for four years, earning academic All-America and Kodak All-America honors. He graduated in 1992 with a bachelor's degree in communications and was drafted in the third round of the 1993 NFL draft by the Denver Broncos, where he played for 15 years.

In 1997 and 1998, Jason won back-to-back world championships with the Broncos and was selected to the Pro Bowl in 1995, 1998, and 2001. He is currently working on a master's degree in global apologetics at Liberty Theological Seminary and has an abiding interest in Middle East affairs, the study of Scripture, and defending the Christian faith. Jason is a licensed commercial airplane pilot, and he and his wife, Tamy, have four children.



STEVE YOHN grew up as a pastor's kid in Fresno, California, and both of those facts contributed significantly to his slightly warped perspective on life. Steve graduated from Multnomah Bible College with a bachelor's degree in biblical studies and barely survived a stint as a youth pastor.

While studying at Denver Seminary, Steve worked as a videographer for Youth for Christ International, traveling throughout the world to capture the ministry's global impact. With more than two decades of ministry experience, both inside and outside the church, Steve has discovered his greatest satisfactions lie in writing, speaking, and one-on-one mentoring.

Surprisingly, although his hobbies are reading classic literature, translating the New Testament from the Greek, and maintaining a list of political leaders of every country of the world over the last twenty-five years, he still occasionally gets invited to parties and has a few friends. His wife, Nancy, and their daughter are the joys of his life.