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The School

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On the first day of school in 2004, a Chechen terrorist group struck the Russian town of Beslan. Targeting children, they took more than eleven hundred hostages. The attack represented a horrifying innovation in human brutality. Here, an extraordinary accounting of the experience of terror in the age of terrorism.

SEPTEMBER 1. AFTERNOON. THE GYM. Kazbek Misikov stared at the bomb hanging above his family. It was a simple device, a plastic bucket packed with explosive paste, nails, and small metal balls. It weighed perhaps eight pounds. The existence of this bomb had become a central focus of his life. If it exploded, Kazbek knew, it would blast shrapnel into the heads of his wife and two sons, and into him as well, killing them all.

Throughout the day he had memorized the bomb, down to the blue electrical wire linking it to the network of explosives the terrorists had strung around them hours before. Now his eyes wandered, panning the crowd of more than eleven hundred hostages who had been seized in the morning outside the school. The majority were children, crouched with their parents and teachers on the basketball court. The temperature had risen with the passing hours, and their impromptu jail had become fetid and stinking with urine and fear. Many children had undressed. Sweat ran down their bare backs.

His eyes settled on his captors. Most of the terrorists had left the gym for defensive positions in the main school building, leaving behind a handful of men in athletic suits or camouflage pants. These were their guards. They wore ammunition vests and slung Kalashnikov rifles. A few were hidden behind ski masks, but as the temperature had risen, most had removed them, revealing faces. They were young. Some had the bearing of experienced fighters. Others seemed like semiliterate thugs, the sort of criminal that had radiated from Chechnya and Russia's North Caucasus during a decade of war. Two were women wearing explosive belts.

Kazbek studied the group, committing to memory their weapons, their behavior, their relations to one another, and the configuration of their bombs. A diagram of their handiwork had formed in his head, an intricate map that existed nowhere else. With it was a mental blueprint of the school, in which he had studied as a boy. This was useful information, if he could share it, and Kazbek thought of fleeing, hoping he might give the Special Forces gathering outside a description of the bombs and defenses. Already Kazbek assumed this siege would end in a fight, and he knew that when Russia's soldiers rushed these rooms, their attack would be overpowering and imprecise. He knew this because he once was a Russian soldier himself.

He evaluated the options. *How does my family get out?* Escape? Passivity? Resistance? His wife, Irina Dzutseva, and their sons, Batraz, fifteen, and Atsamaz, seven, were beside him. Kazbek was a tall man with neat dark hair and a mustache, and Batraz, who was growing tall as well, had the hint of a beard. Kazbek had made him remove his shirt, exposing a boyish frame. He hoped this would convince the terrorists that, unlike his father, Batraz was not a threat, and he would not be rounded up with the men. Kazbek's mind was engaged in this sort of agonizing calculus, trying to determine the best way to save his children from a horror with too many variables and too many unknowns. How best to act? Yes, he had information to share. But even if he escaped, he thought, the terrorists might identify his wife and sons. And then kill them. They had already shot several people, including Ruslan Betrozov, who had done nothing more than speak. No, Kazbek thought, he could not run. He also knew that any uprising by the hostages would have to be swift and complete. There were few terrorists in the gym, but by Kazbek's count at least thirty more roamed the school. How could all of these terrorists be overcome by an unarmed crowd, especially when even before rigging the bombs the terrorists had created an immeasurable psychological advantage? "If any of you resists us," one had warned, "we will kill children and leave the one who resists alive." There would be no resistance. Who, after all, would lead it? Already the adult male captives were dying. Many had been executed. Most of the others were in the main hall, kneeling, hands clasped behind their heads.

Kazbek was lucky. The terrorists had overlooked him during the last roundup. He had been spared execution.

Now his mind worked methodically. He wanted no one to see what he planned to do. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, his hand moved over the floor to the blue wire. Kazbek was forty-three. He had been a Soviet sapper as a younger man. He knew how bombs worked. He also knew how to disable them. The bomb overhead was part of a simple system, an open electric circuit rigged to a motor-vehicle battery. If the terrorists closed the circuit, current would flow from the battery through the wires and detonate the bombs. But if Kazbek pulled apart the wire inside its insulation, no current could flow. Then, he knew, if the circuit snapped closed, the bomb above his family would not explode. Kazbek had spent much of the day folding the wire back and forth, making a crimp. It was only a matter of time.

He lifted the wire. Back and forth he folded the notch, working it, looking directly at the men who would kill him if they knew what he was doing. He would disconnect this bomb. It was a step. Every step counted. His mind kept working. *How does my family get out?*

9:10 A.M. THE SCHOOLYARD. Morning marked a new school year at School No. 1 in Beslan, beginning with rituals of years past. Returning students, second through twelfth graders, had lined up in a horseshoe formation beside the red brick building. They wore uniforms: girls in dark dresses, boys in dark pants and white shirts. The forecast had predicted hot weather; only the day before, the administration had pushed the schedule an hour earlier, to the relative cool of 9:00 A.M. Students fidgeted with flowers, chocolates, and balloons, waiting for the annual presentation, when first graders would march before their schoolmates for the opening of their academic lives.

Zalina Levina took a seat behind the rostrum and greeted the milling parents. Beslan is an industrial and agricultural town of about thirty-five thousand people on the plain beneath the Caucasus ridge, part of the Russian republic of North Ossetia and one of the few places in the region with a modicum of jobs. For the moment, work seemed forgotten. Parents had come to celebrate. Irina Naldikoyeva sat with her daughter, Alana, four, and glimpsed her son, Kazbek, seven, in the formation with his second-grade class. Aida Archegova had two sons in the assembly. Zalina was baby-sitting her two-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter, Amina. They had not planned on attending, but the child had heard music and seen children streaming toward the school. "Grandma," she had said, "let's go dance." Zalina put on a denim dress and joined the flow. Already it was warm. The first graders were about to step forward. The school year had begun.

The terrorists appeared as if from nowhere. A military truck stopped near the school and men leapt from the cargo bed, firing rifles and shouting, "*Allahu akhbar!*" They moved with speed and certitude, as if every step had been rehearsed. The first few sprinted between the formation and the schoolyard gate, blocking escape. There was almost no resistance. Ruslan Frayev, a local man who had come with several members of his family, drew a pistol and began to fire. He was killed.

The terrorists seemed to be everywhere. Zalina saw a man in a mask sprinting with a rifle. Then another. And a third. Many students in the formation had their backs to the advancing gun-men, but one side did not, and as Zalina sat confused, those students broke and ran. The formation disintegrated. Scores of balloons floated skyward as children released them. A cultivated sense of order became bedlam.

Dzera Kudzayeva, seven, had been selected for a role in which she would be carried on the shoulders of a senior and strike a bell to start the new school year. Her father, Aslan Kudzayev, had hired Karen Mdinardze, a video cameraman for a nearby soccer team, to record the big day. Dzera wore a blue dress with a white apron and had two white bows in her hair, and was on the senior's shoulders when the terrorists arrived. They were quickly caught.

For many other hostages, recognition came slowly. Aida Archegova thought she was in a counterterrorism drill. Beslan is roughly 950 miles south of Moscow, in a zone destabilized by the Chechen wars. Police actions were part of life. "Is it exercises?" she asked a terrorist as he bounded past.

He stopped. "What are you, a fool?" he said.

The terrorists herded the panicked crowd into a rear courtyard, a place with no outlet. An attached building housed the boiler room, and Zalina ran there with others to hide. The room had no rear exit. They were trapped. The door opened. A man in a tracksuit stood at the entrance. "Get out or I will start shooting," he said.

Zalina did not move. She thought she would beg for mercy. Her granddaughter was with her, and a baby must mean a pass. She froze until only she and Amina remained. The terrorist glared. "You need a special invitation?" he said. "I will shoot you right here."

Speechless with fear, she stepped out, joining a mass of people as obedient as if they had been tamed. The terrorists had forced the crowd against the school's brick wall and were driving it through a door. The people could not file in quickly enough, and the men broke windows and handed children in. Already there seemed to be dozens of the terrorists. They lined the hall, redirecting the people into the gym. "We are from Chechnya," one said. "This is a seizure. We are here to start the withdrawal of troops and the liberation of Chechnya."

As the hostages filed onto the basketball court, more terrorists came in. One fired into the ceiling. "Everybody be silent!" he said. "You have been taken hostage. Calm down. Stop the panic and nobody will be hurt. We are going to issue our demands, and if the demands are implemented, we will let the children out."

Rules were laid down. There would be no talking without permission. All speech would be in Russian, not Ossetian, so the terrorists could understand it, too. The hostages would turn in their cell phones, cameras, and video cameras. Any effort to resist would be met with mass executions, including of women and children.

When the terrorist had finished, Ruslan Betrozov, a father who had brought his two sons to class, stood and translated the instructions into Ossetian. He was a serious man, forty-four years old and with a controlled demeanor. The terrorists let him speak. When he stopped, one approached.

"Are you finished?" he asked. "Have you said everything you want to say?"

Betrozov nodded. The terrorist shot him in the head.

9:20 A.M. THE ADMINISTRATOR'S OFFICE . Irina Dzutseva, Kazbek Misikov's wife, huddled near the desk, embracing Atsamaz, her first-grade son. Atsamaz was quiet and waiflike but dressed like a gentleman in black suit and white shirt. Irina could feel his fear. They hid amid papers and textbooks, listening to the long corridor. Doors were being opened, then slammed. They heard gunshots. Atsamaz clung to a balloon. "Where are Papa and Batik?" he asked. "Were they killed?"

The first graders and their parents had been standing at the main entrance and were among the first to see the attack. Irina had turned back into the school and bolted down the corridor as the shooting began, charging down the hall in high heels, pulling her son by his hand. She heard screams and a window shatter. Glass tinkled on the floor. The corridor was long and still; their footfalls echoed as they passed each door, the entrance to the gym, the cafeteria, and the restrooms. At the end of the hall they rushed upstairs to the auditorium and crouched behind the maroon curtain on the stage with other mothers and students. Balloons were taped to the ceiling. Posters decorated the wall. Behind the curtain was a door, and they pushed in and settled into an office packed with books. *Short Stories by Russian Writers. Methods of Teaching. Literature 5*. Irina looked at the others: four adults and six children. They were cut off and could only guess at what was happening outside. They sat in the stillness, waiting to be saved.

After about half an hour, someone pushed against the door. A child called out hopefully: "Are you ours?"

The door swung open. Three terrorists stood before them, beards hanging beneath masks. "God forbid that we are yours," one said, and the group was marched down to the gym with terrorists firing rifles into the ceiling.

In the gym they encountered a scene beyond their imagination. Almost the entire student body had been taken captive, a mass of distraught human life trapped as if it were under a box. Children's cries filled the air. The gym was roughly twenty-eight yards long by fifteen yards wide, and its longer sides each had a bank of four windows, ten feet by ten feet, with panes made from opaque plastic. Light came in as a glow. A wide streak of blood marked the area where Betrozov's corpse had been dragged. Irina hurried with Atsamaz to the far corner and found Batraz, her older son. She understood that their lives would be leveraged in a test of wills against the Kremlin. Hope rested with negotiations, or with Russia's security forces, not known for tactical precision or regard for civilian life. The last time a Chechen group had seized hundreds of hostages, at a theater in Moscow in 2002, Russian commandos attacked with poisonous gas. At least 129 hostages died.

Two young women wearing explosive belts roamed the wooden floor, wraithlike figures dressed in black, their faces hidden by veils. Irina shuddered. Russia has an enduring capacity to produce ghastly social phenomena; these were the latest occurrence of the *shahidka*, female Islamic martyrs who had sown fear during the second Chechen war. The Russian news called them black widows, women driven to militant Islam and vengeance by the loss of Chechnya's young men. The hostages noticed an incongruity: The black veil worn by one *shahidka* framed the neatly sculpted eyebrows of what seemed a teenager who had recently visited a beauty salon.

Two terrorists entered the room with backpacks and began unloading equipment: wire and cable on wooden spools, bombs of different sizes, including several made from plastic soda bottles and two rectangular charges, each the size of a briefcase. With pliers and wire cutters, they set to work, assembling the components into a system. Their plans became clear. Many of the small bombs would be daisy-chained together and hoisted above the crowd, and a line of larger explosives would be set on the floor. The hanging bombs served two purposes: They were a source of mass fear, forcing obedience from the hostages underneath. And elevation ensured that if the bombs were to explode, they would blast shrapnel down from above, allowing for no cover. Virtually everyone would be struck by the nuts, bolts, ball bearings, and nails packed inside. The terrorists assigned the tallest hostages, including Kazbek, who is six foot three, to lift the bombs. The choice of suspension showed malign ingenuity: They strung cables from one basketball hoop to the other, dangling the bombs on hooks. Kazbek

realized the terrorists had inside information. Not only had they planned the basketball hoops into their design, but the cables and wires were precut to size, as if they knew the dimensions before they arrived. The bombs were a custom fit.

The weight of the rig at first caused bombs to sag near the children's heads. "Do not touch them," a terrorist warned, and then instructed Kazbek and others to pull the slack out of the system. The network was raised higher, higher, and then nearly taut, until the deadly web was up and out of reach. Kazbek assessed the trap: It was like a string of Christmas lights, except where each bulb would go was a suspended bomb. A terrorist stood on the trigger, and the system was connected to a battery. If the triggerman were to release his foot, Kazbek knew, the circuit would close. Electricity would flow. The bombs would explode.

AFTERNOON. THE MAIN HALL. Aslan Kudzayev carried a chair through the long blue hall under the watch of his guards. He was hurrying through his tasks. He had been put in a work gang the terrorists formed from adult male hostages and ordered to barricade the classroom windows. The terrorists worried that Russian Special Forces would attack. The hostages proved to be a useful labor pool. Aslan wore white pants, a white shirt, and white shoes. He was thirty-three and lanky, with short brown hair. As he lugged the chair, a terrorist with a bandaged arm pointed a Makarov 9mm pistol in his face. Aslan stopped. "You have short hair," the terrorist said. "You are a cop."

Aslan shook his head. "No," he said. "No."

The terrorist told him to empty his pockets, and Aslan showed him a wallet, money, and keys. He owned a building-supply store. Nothing about him said cop. The terrorist signaled him to return to work.

Once the windows were blocked, the men were ordered to sit in the hall, hands behind their heads. By now the terrorists were emerging as individuals; the hostages were forming a sense of their captors. There were the leaders and the led, and the led were organized into teams. Some specialized in explosives. Others were jailers, controlling the hostages in the gym. The largest group was in the main building: a platoon preparing to fight off a Russian assault. They had come with packs of food, coffee, and candy, as well as sleeping bags, gas masks, and first-aid kits. Each had a rifle and wore a vest bulging with ammunition. Some had hand grenades. A few had 40mm grenade launchers mounted under their rifle barrels.

Aslan began to understand their command structure. All of them deferred to a light-footed and muscular man with a bushy reddish beard whom they called the Colonel. He paced the corridor with a cocky strut, his shaved head topped with a black skullcap, exuding the dark charisma of the captain of a pirate sloop. He was charged with energy and power and seemed fired with glee. Beneath him were midlevel commanders, including a Slav who used the name Abdullah and had pointed the pistol at Aslan's face. Aslan grudgingly marveled at their discipline and skill. They had taken the school, laced it with bombs, and made it a bunker in half a day. *Say what you want about these bastards, but they are not stupid, he thought. They know what to do.*

He and two other hostages were ordered to their feet and taken down the hall to the library, where they were given axes and picks and told to tear up the floorboards. Aslan wondered whether the terrorists had a cache of weapons under the planks, but he could see nothing in the hole he made and was led back to sit. Captive in the corridor, growing tired and cramped, Aslan realized he had come to the end of his life. He fell to reverie. Slowly he reviewed the things that made him what he had been: his marriage, the birth of his two daughters, the success of his business. He felt regret that he had not yet had a son. An Ossetian was supposed to have a son. Now and then he was startled by nearby rifle fire, but he could not tell where it came from. He returned to daydreaming. He thought: *What will they say at my funeral?*

EARLY AFTERNOON. THE GYM. The terrorist was sick of Larisa Kudziyeva. She had been shouting, even after they had ordered everyone to be quiet. She was lean and beautiful in a quintessentially Caucasus way, with fine skin and dark hair and brown eyes, a look intensified by her black blouse and skirt. She did not look her thirty-eight years. The terrorist was one of the young men guarding the hostages. He wore his mask. He walked toward her to quiet her, for good.

Larisa had spent the first hours of captivity tending to Vadim Bolloyev, a father who had been shot near the right shoulder. He lay on the basketball court silently, holding in his pain. His white shirt was soaked red. He was growing weak. "Why did they shoot you?" she had asked him.

"I refused to kneel," he said.

Larisa urged him to lie back and placed her purse under his head. She inspected his wound. The bone had been shattered. Blood flowed freely. She tried using a belt as a tourniquet but could not position it. Sweat beaded his forehead. His son, Sarmat, six, sat beside him in a white shirt and black vest, watching his father slip away.

Larisa had not wanted to come to school that day. Her six-year-old son, Zaurbek, was starting first grade, but she had asked Madina, her nineteen-year-old daughter, to bring him. Her husband had died

of stomach cancer in April. She was in mourning and felt no urge to celebrate. But after they left, Larisa looked outside at the crowds moving to the school. Go with them, a voice told her, and she rushed to her balcony. "Wait for me!" she called down.

Now she leaned over a bleeding man, struggling to save him. Her daughter was enrolled at a medical academy. "You are a future doctor," Larisa whispered.

"What do I do?"

"There is no way to save him," Madina said. "His artery is damaged. He needs an operation."

Larisa felt fury. She would not let him die. She shouted at a terrorist across the room. "We need water and bandages!" she said. No one answered. She shouted again. She was breaking rules. The terrorist approached. "Why are you yelling?" he said.

"I need bandages," she said.

"Are you the bravest person here, or the smartest?" he said. "We will check. "His voice turned sharp: "Stand up!"

Bolloyev grabbed her shirt. "Do not go," he said. Larisa slipped free and stood, and the terrorist shoved her with his rifle toward a corner where confiscated cameras and phones had been piled and smashed.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

He ordered her to kneel. "No," she said.

For this Bolloyev had been shot. "I told you," he said. "Get on your knees."

"No," she said.

For a moment they faced each other, the terrorist and the mother, locked in mental battle. She looked into his mask; freckles were visible near his eyes. A hush fell over the gym. The hostages had seen Betrozov's murder. Now came Larisa's turn. The terrorist raised his Kalashnikov, past her chest, past her face, stopping at her forehead. He pressed the muzzle against her brow. Larisa felt the circle of steel on her skin.

Bolloyev propped himself on an elbow. Larisa's children looked on. She reached up, grasped the barrel, and moved it away. "What kind of spectacle are you playing here, and in front of whom?" she snapped. "There are women and children here who are already scared."

The terrorist paused. Thinking quickly, she tried to convince him that Ossetians were not enemies of Chechens, a difficult task, given that enmity between Ossetians, a Christian people with a history of fidelity to Moscow, and the Islamic Chechens and Ingush, who have long been persecuted, is deep. "Your children rest in our sanatoriums," she said. "Your women give birth here."

"Not our wives and children," the terrorist said. "They are the spawn of Kadyrov."

The word stung. *Kadyrov*—the surname of former rebels who aligned with Russia and became the Kremlin's proxies. The separatists despised them with a loathing reserved for traitors. Larisa was stumped. Abdullah had been rushing across the gym; he stepped beside them. "What is happening here?" he said.

"This guy wants to execute me because I asked for water and bandages for the wounded," she said. Abdullah studied the two: his young gunman, the woman who stared him down.

"There is nothing for you here," he said. "Go back and sit down and shut up."

She pointed to his bloodied arm. "Your arm is bandaged," she said. "Give me some of those bandages."

"You did not understand me?" he said. "There is nothing for you here. Go back and sit down and shut up."

Larisa returned to her place. Her children stared at her. Bolloyev lay back down. His lips were violet, his forehead coated in sweat. His death could not be far away. She was enraged.

AFTERNOON. THE GYM. Zalina Levina could not console her granddaughter, Amina, and did not know what to do. She had stripped the pink skirt and red shirt from the toddler's sweaty skin. It was not enough. Amina cried on, filling Zalina with dread. The terrorists had grown more irritable, and their threats were multiplying. "Shut your bastards up or I will calm them down fast," one had said. Zalina worried the child would be shot.

Zalina knew Chechnya firsthand, having lived in Grozny, its capital, before the Soviet Union collapsed. She remembered its mountain vistas and orderly atmosphere. The city had industry, a university, an oil institute, a circus, a soccer stadium, and rows of apartment buildings on tree-lined streets. She also

remembered its brutality. Nationalism had sprouted anew as Moscow's grip weakened. Old animosities reemerged. In the early 1990s, before the first Chechen war, a group of Chechen men had stolen her brother-in-law's car. "We give you a month to leave," one had said, "or we will return and burn down your house." The family fled to Beslan, sixty-five miles away, across what would become a military front. Zalina thought she had escaped the war.

Now Amina kept crying and Zalina's anxiety grew. There seemed no reason for hope. The terrorists were demanding a withdrawal of federal troops from Chechnya, and if the hostages knew anything about Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, they knew he was unlikely to do this. Putin's success rested in part on his reputation for toughness. He was not one to grant concessions, certainly not to separatists, for whom his disdain was well-known.

As they waited, the hostages were miserable in the heat. The gym was too crowded to allow for much movement, which forced them to take turns extending their legs. Others leaned back-to-back. The terrorists gave little relief. Sometimes they made everyone display their hands on their heads, fingers upright, like rabbit ears. Other times, when the gym became noisy with crying children, they selected a hostage to stand, then warned everyone: Shut up or he will be shot. But silence, like a federal withdrawal, was an almost impossible demand. Children can stay quiet for only so long.

Amina cried and cried. *I have to save this child*, Zalina thought. She opened her dress and placed a nipple under Amina's nose. Zalina was forty-one years old and not the toddler's mother. But she thought that maybe Amina was young enough, and a warm nipple familiar enough, that any nipple, even her dry nipple, would provide comfort. Naked and sweaty, Amina took the breast. She began to suck. Her breathing slowed. Her body relaxed. She fell asleep. *Be still*, Zalina thought. *Be still*.

AFTERNOON. THE GYM. Larisa Kudziyeva's defiance made her known to her captors, and in the hours after she was nearly shot, she noticed a terrorist staring at her. He was not wearing a mask and often turned his eyes toward her. He was just less than six feet tall, thick-armed and meticulous, possessing a seriousness the other terrorists seemed to respect. His camouflage pants were pressed. His black boots were laced tight. He had a freshly trimmed beard and eyes that lacked some of the bloodlust evident in the others. Larisa thought he must be in his early thirties, old enough to have waged guerrilla war for ten years. He was a negotiator and spent much of the time talking on a mobile phone with Russians outside. Between calls his eyes settled on Larisa.

Her anger had not subsided. She had kept working on Bolloyev, pressing rags to his wound. Each came away soaked. The blood grew sticky and spoiled in the heat; Larisa never knew a man's blood could smell so bad, like a butcher's drain. She shouted for aid again, for water, for bandages, but no one listened. As he was dying, Bolloyev asked for his daughters, who were also in the gym, and Larisa called to them. The terrorists punished her by posting a *shahidka* beside her with a pistol and instructions to shoot if she made another noise. Bolloyev weakened further and asked his son, Sarmat, to recite his address and names of relatives, as if he knew he would die and wanted the boy to rehearse his lines to rescuers, should they find him alone.

As Bolloyev faded, pallid and shivering, Abdullah ordered him dragged away. "Where are you taking him?" Larisa demanded.

"To the hospital," he said.

She knew it was not true, and fumed. Later, as the temperature soared, she took a group of children to the bathroom. Returning, she sat beside the one who stared. There was a connection here. She intended to use it.

"You are probably the only person who can tell us something about our fate," she said.

He looked at her, up close for the first time. She had washed away Bolloyev's blood. "You will stay here until the last federal troops leave Chechnya," he said.

"That is not a one-day matter," she said

"Once negotiations start, you will have everything," he said. "Food. Water. Everything."

He sat with his rifle and phone, an underground fighter who had stepped into view. Men like this lived in Russia's shadows, biding time, praying, emerging on occasion to kill. Once a constant presence on television, they had disappeared into their insurgency. Now the hostages' lives were under his control. "What is your name?" she asked.

"Ali," he said. It was not a name common to the mountains.

"Is that a name or a nickname?"

"I see you are a wise woman," he said.

"Answer the question," she said. "A man should have a name. This is what differentiates him from an animal."

"It is a nickname," he said. "Now I am Ali. In the previous time, I was Baisangur."

"And your real name?" she said.

"I no longer need it," he said. "There is not a person left alive who can call me by my name."

Baisangur—a legendary Chechen warrior who had fought Russia in the nineteenth century, part of a generation revered in separatist lore. The most famous of these fighters had been Imam Shamil, whose name passed through generations to Shamil Basayev, the one-footed separatist commander whose wisecracking practice of terrorism made him Russia's most wanted man. Basayev planned hostage seizures and recruited *shahidkas*; the terrorists in this gym prepared under his command. Baisangur's martial pedigree was more pure. The original Shamil had been captured and accepted a pardon from the czar. Baisangur fought to his death.

Yes, once he had been Baisangur, and before that he used his real name. But years ago, Ali said, as Russia was trying to quell their rebellion, a warplane took off from this area and dropped bombs on a Chechen village. There were no men where the bombs landed. But the village was not empty. It was crowded with families. Those bombs, he said, exploded among his wife and five children. Everyone who loved him was dead. He looked at Larisa, the incandescent one. "My wife looked just like you," he said. "Even twins do not look so alike."

Larisa needed information; she pushed. "What is the name of your village?" she asked.

"You do not need to know it," he said. "You do not know what is happening in Chechnya."

SHORTLY AFTER DAWN. CHECHNYA. The road to Grozny runs southward across a plain toward the sparkling and snowcapped Caucasus ridge, a setting so empyreal that had history been different it might be a land of fable. As the road continues on, crossing the swirling Terek River, bunkers and checkpoints appear, first occasionally and then frequently, from which sun-burned Slavic soldiers look wearily. Chechnya is a dot on Russia's vastness, an internal republic the size of Connecticut. But the Kremlin covets and fears it, and has flowed soldiers and po-lice over its borders, ringing it with layers of security and deny-ing most access to outsiders. It is a war zone and a region whose recent inner workings are largely unknown.

Short of the capital, the terrain becomes steep and scarred with artillery trenches, from which Russian batteries long ago fired their barrages. The city beyond these hills is a ruin, a warren of rubble and shattered buildings in which many of the remaining inhabitants camp in the wreckage of their homes. In the annals of recent conflict, few places have seen such a multiplicity of horrors and then fallen so swiftly from the public discourse. After Chechnya declared independence in 1991, prompting Russia to invade three years later, the Chechens became a source of fasci-nation in the West. They were tribesmen who merged mountain traditions with modern life, an Islamic people speaking their own language, bound by ancient codes of honor and hospitality, and seeking independence as they fought armored columns in front of their homes. Their symbol was the wolf, but they were under-dogs, local people who seemed to win skirmishes against a world power with little more than rifles and the force of will.

No matter those moments of military success, the Chechens' separatist urges have led nearly to their destruction. Russia and the rebels signed a cease-fire in 1996, and the Russian military withdrew, leaving behind a rebel-led government. Chechen independence and self-governance had been born. The result was disastrous. The young government, which inherited formidable problems and had little aid or revenue, was largely abandoned by the Kremlin, which seemed eager for it to fail. Inexperienced and prone to internal quarrels, it proved barely capable of governing and flashed an affinity for ancient notions of Islamic law, going so far as to show public executions on TV. Crime soared, corrup-tion was unchecked, and ransom kidnappings became common enough to have the feel of an approved line of work.

Whatever the merits of the conventional portrait of the Chechen rebel, war and rackets warped many of them out of popular form, leading them to lives of thuggery and organized crime. Chechnya's people waited for autonomy to improve their lot. But nationalism led to warlordism, and warlordism to more sinister associations. Some prominent commanders, including Shamil Basayev, allied themselves with international Islamic movements that had taken root in Pakistan and Afghanistan, steering the republic deeper into isolation and attracting foreign jihadis to the slopes of the Caucasus. With Basayev's blessing, a dark-maned Arab field commander who used the name Ibn al-Khattab and had fought in Afghanistan and Tajikistan opened training camps in the mountains. Recruits arrived from Chechnya and elsewhere in the Caucasus, especially from nearby Ingushetia, and from Turkey, Central Asia, and Arabia. They studied weapons, tactics, and the manufacture of bombs. Under the sway of fighters, autonomous Chechnya was recognized by only one foreign government: Afghanistan's Taliban.

Spurred by Prime Minister Putin, who was soon to become president, Russia sent its armor back to Chechnya in 1999. This time Russia fought unsparingly. With little regard for life or proper-ty, its military surrounded Grozny and pounded the capital with rockets, artillery, and aircraft, collapsing the city around the rebels. Sweeps and barrages destroyed villages and towns. The destruction was of an

order not seen since World War II; Grozny's sagging hulks invited comparisons to Warsaw, 1944. The city fell early in 2000, and Putin, by then president, declared the battle ended. A new policy took shape. Russia would garrison troops and equipment and provide money, instructions, and political support. But local administration was to be handed over to Chechens deemed sufficiently loyal, a formula flowing from the institutional memory of a weakened empire. The appointment of proxies was accompanied by a message that became more hollow the more it was repeated on state TV: *There is no war. We have won.*

No verified casualty counts exist for the wars, but all agree the human toll has been vast, ranging from tens of thousands of Chechens killed to more than two hundred thousand. Setting aside the numbers, the years of violence and atrocities made clear that as public policy, little could be less wise than extensive killing in Chechnya, where tradition asks blood to be washed in blood. Chechens are bound by *adat*, an oral code that compels families to avenge the killing of their relatives. By the time President Putin claimed victory, enough blood had been spilled for a fury lasting generations. It mixed not just tribal urges for revenge and independence but racism and militant Islam.

The war that did not exist continued. Unable to defend Grozny conventionally, the rebels formed guerrilla bands, hiding amid the local populace and in nearby Russian republics and traveling between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey, where the Chechen diaspora is large. Islamic unrest expanded through Russia's territory in the Caucasus, and underground *jamaats* with connections to the Chechens formed in at least six of the region's internal republics. A rhythm emerged. Almost daily the separatists or their allies would stage small attacks or plant mines, and occasionally they would mass for large raids. In response to a spreading insurgency, the Russians set out to annihilate it, raiding homes in search of young men and generating complaints of rape, torture, robbery, and abduction. Macabre profiteering took hold, including sales of corpses back to families for burial.

Terrorism had been part of the separatists' struggle since before the first war. Basayev's debut was as an airplane hijacker in 1991; mass hostage-taking began in 1995. But as death tolls rose and separatists were driven further underground, more turned to terrorism, then suicide terrorism. The rebels destroyed Chechnya's seat of government with a truck bomb in 2002 and assassinated the Kremlin-backed president in 2004. At the center was Basayev, sardonic and lame. His terrorist group, the Riyadus-Salakhin Reconnaissance and Sabotage Battalion of Chechen Martyrs, included ethnic fighters from the Caucasus and foreigners, including Arabs and a few Europeans.

A nationalist turned nihilist, Basayev made clear he thought Russian civilians were fair targets. After scores of hostages died at the theater in Moscow, he suggested Russia suffered what it deserved. "It turned out that these were innocent civilians who had gone to the theater for recreation," he wrote. "In this regard, you have to ask yourself: Who are the more than three thousand children aged under ten who died during the three years of the brutal and bloody war in Chechnya? Who are the more than four thousand children who lost their legs, arms, eyes, who ended up paralyzed? Who are the thirty-five hundred missing people who have been abducted from their homes or detained in the streets by the Russian occupiers and whose fate remains a mystery? Who are the two hundred thousand slain women, elderly, ill, children, and men? Who are they?"

Blood meets blood. Such were the rules in Basayev's war. And this time he was not sending terrorists to a theater. He had ordered them to a school.

EVENING. THE EXECUTION ROOM. Sometime after 5:00 P.M., while sitting in the hall with other male hostages, Aslan Kudzayev overheard the terrorists listening to the news on a radio. The announcer was discussing the siege, and Aslan understood that the world knew the students of Beslan were hostages. It was his first taste of the outside world since the siege had enveloped them, and it gave him a vague sense that they would be helped.

A few minutes later the Colonel appeared and ordered him and Albert Sidakov, another hostage, down the hall. Their walk ended in a literature classroom on the second floor, where eight dead men, broken by bullets, lay in a pool of blood. A portrait of Vladimir Mayakovsky, the revolutionary poet, hung on the far wall, which had been chipped by bullet impacts. Aslan understood. Throughout the day, men had been led off in small groups. Those who had not returned had been taken here and shot. As he and the others had sat downstairs, fingers interlocked behind their necks, the terrorists had realized the job of fortifying the school was done. Male hostages had become expendable. They were being culled.

"Open the window and throw these corpses out," the Colonel said.

Aslan and Albert lifted the first body to the sill and shoved it out. They moved to the next. So this is how Aslan would spend the last minutes of his life: When the eighth body was pushed onto the grass, he knew, he and Albert would be shot. Time was short. He glanced around the room. The Colonel was gone. A lone terrorist guarded them. Aslan assumed the terrorists would not throw out the bodies themselves, for fear of snipers. He and Albert were valuable for a few minutes more. They pushed out two more of the bullet-riddled men, including one who seemed to still be alive. Aslan leaned and pretended to retch.

The terrorist had removed the magazine from his Kalashnikov and was reloading it, round by round. "Let's jump out the window," Aslan whispered to Albert.

Albert was silent. "Let's jump," he whispered again.

"How?" Albert said, looking overwhelmed.

Aslan realized that if he was going to leap, he was going to leap alone. Their guard's rifle was unloaded. This was it. He bent to another corpse, then rushed toward the bloody sill. He hit in a push-up position and propelled himself out. The drop was eighteen feet, and he descended and slammed onto the bodies in a crouch. A bone in his foot popped. He rolled toward the school wall, reducing the angle the terrorist would have to fire at him, and began crawling away from the window. He worried the terrorist would drop a grenade. Gunfire sounded.

The terrorist's mask appeared in the window. The wall was nearly two feet thick, making it difficult for him to fire near the foundation without leaning far. He opted to try. His barrel blasted. Bullets thudded near Aslan. Bits of soil and grass jumped beside him. He scurried to the building's corner. Before him was a parking lot. He crawled on, putting cars between him and the window. The terrorist did not know where he was and fired into several cars, searching.

Aslan heard shouts. At the edge of nearby buildings, local men with the police and soldiers waved him to safety. He was so close, but an instant from death. The police had been told that if they harmed a terrorist, hostages would be executed in return. They held their fire. More bullets struck cars. A soldier threw a smoke grenade, hoping to obscure the terrorist's line of sight. It sent up a plume, which drifted the wrong way. Someone threw another, and a third, and a cloud rose between Aslan and his tormentor. He crawled with all of his speed and reached a railroad ditch in front of the school. He rolled in and lay still on the dirt. His white outfit was covered with grass stains and blood. Aslan was out. His wife, two daughters, and mother-in-law were still inside.

EVENING. THE MAIN HALL AND EXECUTION ROOM. Karen Mdinardze was not supposed to be here. He kneeled in the hall, his nose near the plaster, hands behind his head. Male hostages were lined up the same way to his right. To his left was a thin older man. Beyond him stood a *shahidka*, keeping watch.

Karen's luck was worse than bad. He was not a resident of Beslan. He was a videographer, hired to videotape Aslan's daughter Dzera during her role as bell ringer. He had not wanted the job, but Aslan persisted, and finally Karen gave in. He had been framing the girl in his viewfinder when the terrorists arrived. So far he was untouched, but he suffered a banal affliction. Karen was highly allergic to pollen, and many children had come to school with flowers and had carried them to the gym when they were captured, surrounding him with irritants. His eyes had reddened. His breathing was short. He felt luck running down. At about 3:00 P.M. a terrorist ordered him to the hall. Although he looked strong—he was built like a wrestler—his allergies drained him. Fatigue settled over him with the arrival of dusk.

The woman near him exploded.

There had been no warning. One second she was standing there, a veiled woman in black. The next she was not, having been torn apart in a roaring flash. The explosives cut her to pieces, throwing her head and legs into the geography classroom. Much of her flesh splashed along the walls. Shrapnel and heat shot out from the belt, striking the men in the corridor as well as another terrorist who guarded them, who was knocked to the floor. The other *shahidka* was also pierced with shrapnel. She fell, blood running from her nose. Karen felt heat and debris smack his left side. His left eye went dim. But the older man between him and the *shahidka* had absorbed much of the shrapnel, creating a shadow in which Karen was spared the worst. He was briefly unconscious, but came to, slumped forward against the wall. He thought he was dying and traced his palms along his face and head. His eyelid was torn, and he had shrapnel in his face and left calf. Heat had seared his salt-and-pepper hair, making it feel like brittle wire. Someone handed him a handkerchief and he wiped his face, pulling out plaster. "If I die, tell my mother and wife I love them very much," he told the man.

He surveyed the gruesome space. The thin man beside him, who had shielded him, breathed fitfully. His hips and legs faced the wrong direction, as if his lower spine had spun around. Karen knew he was in the last minutes of life. The injured terrorist had been set on a door removed from its hinges, and Abdullah knelt beside him, reading in Arabic in the lilting rhythm of prayer. Someone produced a syringe. The terrorist was given an injection, became still, and was carried away. After a few minutes a terrorist addressed the wounded. "Go to the second floor and we will provide you medical assistance," he said.

Karen stood with those who were able and limped upstairs to the Russian-literature classroom, and saw dead hostages piled on the floor. The injured men were given an order: "Lie down."

Their lives ended in an instant. A masked terrorist stepped forward, shouted, "*Allahu akhbar!*" and fired bursts from fifteen feet away, sweeping his barrel back and forth. The air filled with their cries and the thwacks of bullets hitting heavy flesh. The men rolled and thrashed. Errant bullets pounded the wall. At last the hostages were motionless, and the terrorist released the trigger. He pulled a chair to the door and straddled it with the hot barrel resting in front of him. He was listening. A moan rose from the pile. He fired again.

He remained for a few minutes, watching, listening. The room fell still. The night was warm. He rose and walked away.

NIGHT. THE PALACE OF CULTURE. Outside the school, Russia's local and federal authorities struggled to react to the hostage crisis, whose scale and ferocity had overwhelmed them.

Although the main Beslan police station was practically next to the school, its officers had not mustered a coordinated effort to aid the women and children. Federal soldiers from the 58th Army in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia's capital, had flowed into Beslan during the day, joined by commandos from the former KGB, members of the famed units known as Alpha and Vypel. But so far the most anyone had done was form a disorganized perimeter, a cordon with uncertain orders and under uncertain command. The tactical leaders on the ground, in fact, seemed so unschooled in tactics that their cordon's outer limit was within range of the terrorists' small-arms fire, and families of the missing, who roamed the edges, were occasionally exposed to the 40mm grenades the terrorists fired out. A sense of logistics escaped these officials as well. No fire-fighting equipment was staged. There were few ambulances. Many of the soldiers were lightly equipped, without the helmets or body armor they would need in a close-quarters fight.

Just beyond the window from which Aslan Kudzayev had leapt, within earshot of the ex-executions, a vigil had formed. Relatives massed at the Palace of Culture, a grandly named Soviet movie house, consoling one another and worrying over the possibility of a Russian assault. They were a living picture of fear. Some were numb. Some were despondent. Hundreds paced. Many displayed the deflated calm of the helpless, people whose families were at stake but who had no influence over what came next. Now and then gunfire would sound. There would be a collective flinch. A few women would wail. Every few hours, Russian and local officials would leave the administration building, walk past the statue of Lenin, and brief the families in the palace. Each time they assured them they were doing all they could. And each time they said the terrorists had seized roughly 300 hostages, which was a lie.

NIGHT. THE EXECUTION ROOM. Karen Mdinardze lay in the spreading pool of blood. It was dark. The room was quiet. The terrorist had fired without taking precise aim, relying on the automatic rifle to cut through the pile of men, and had missed one man. As bullets killed everyone around Karen, he fell behind a man who must have weighed 285 pounds. This man had been struck. Karen was not. He survived his own execution. After his executioner walked away, he lost sense of time. He saw the chair in the doorway and the open window and wanted to leap out. But he heard footsteps and was afraid.

In time the terrorist returned with two more hostages and ordered them to dump the bodies. Corpse by corpse they lifted the dead to the sill and shoved them out. The pile grew on the grass below. Three corpses remained when they came to Karen. He did not know what to do. He assumed the two men would be shot when their task was done and assumed he would be shot if he was discovered alive. But he knew he could not be thrown out the window; the drop was eighteen feet. The men bent to lift him. He felt a pair of hands clasp behind his neck and hands tighten on his ankles. He rolled forward and stood.

The men gasped. Karen rocked on his feet.

The terrorist told Karen to come near and stared at him, eyes moving under his mask as he surveyed his intact frame. "You walk under Allah," he said.

"Now throw out the rest of the corpses and I will tell you what to do next."

Two bodies remained, including that of the heavy man behind whom Karen had fallen. He lifted him by the belt as the other two took the legs and head and pushed him out. Another terrorist appeared, and the two captors pointed excitedly; Karen realized they had decided not to kill him. The three hostages were ordered downstairs to wash, then led to the gym.

Karen sat. His head was cut and bruised, his left eye blinded, his clothes drenched in blood. A woman near him whispered—"Did they hit you with a rifle butt?"—and he passed out.

SEPTEMBER 2ND. BEFORE DAWN. THE BATHROOM. Zalina Levina rose at midnight. Rain was falling. Many of the children slept. The terrorists had not granted bathroom privileges for hours, but now the gym was quieter, and she wanted to try again. The bathroom was not lined with bombs; she thought she might hide with her granddaughter there. None of the terrorists stopped her, and she carried Amina into the room and sat. Her neighbor Fatima Tskayeva was already there, cradling her baby, Alyona, as rain pattered outside.

Whispering in the darkness, Fatima told of signs of dissent in the terrorists' ranks. The *shahidkas*, she said, seemed to have been deceived, as if they had not known they would be targeting children. One of them had used the bathroom in the evening, and was menstruating and upset. Now, Fatima said, the *shahidkas* were dead, killed in an explosion hours before. Fatima also said that some of their captors were capable of compassion. Her other daughter, Kristina, ten, whose heart was weak, had fainted earlier. Abdullah had picked up the girl and given her a tablet of validol, an herbal medicine for tension and heart pain. None of this made sense to Zalina, and she wondered about her own daughter. What would she think of Zalina bringing Amina to the school? Amina was not a student. There was no reason

for her to be here. *I have to save this child*, she thought.

Under a desk stacked in the barricade she saw a lump of dried chewing gum. Zalina peeled it free, rolled it into a ball, and put it in her mouth. Slowly she worked it between her teeth, softening it with saliva. A faint taste of sugar spread on her tongue. It was food. She kept pressing and rolling it between her teeth, restoring it to something like what it had been. The gum absorbed more saliva and softened. It was ready. She plucked it from her lips and fed it to the toddler in her arms.

MORNING. THE GYM. The Colonel stormed onto the court. Negotiations, he said, were failing. Russia was not responding, and was lying, saying only 354 hostages were in this room. "Your president is a coward," he snarled. "He does not answer the phone."

For these reasons, he said, he had announced a strike. There would be no more water and no food for the hostages. Bathroom privileges had ceased. The terrorists had told Russia's negotiators, he said, that in solidarity with their cause the hostages had agreed to these terms.

Abdullah pulled aside Larisa Kudziyeva, the commanding presence in a gym full of fear. He wanted to know who she was. A Chechen, or perhaps a member of another of the Islamic mountain people in the Caucasus?

"Do you have your passport with you?" he asked.

"Why should I bring my passport to a school?" she said.

"Are you Ingush?" he asked.

"No," she said.

"What is your last name?"

"Kudziyeva."

He studied her black clothes. "Why are you dressed like that?" he asked.

"It is how I choose," she said. Her defiance was almost reflexive.

Abdullah proceeded with his offer. The *shahidkas* were dead, but an explosive belt remained. This hostage, who could look into her executioner's barrel without flinching, was a candidate to wear it.

"We will release your children, and if you have relatives, we will release them, too," he said. "But for this you will have to put on a suicide belt and a veil and become one of our suicide bombers."

Larisa wondered about the *shahidkas*. "Where are yours?" she asked.

"Yesterday your soldiers tried to storm the building and they died," he said. It was a lie.

"I am afraid I may spoil everything—I am not a Muslim," she said. "How much time do I have to decide?"

"You have time," he said. "Sit down and think."

She returned to her children. The women nearby were curious. The temperature had risen again. The crowd was weak. "What did he want?" a woman asked. Larisa told them. "Do it," the woman said. "Maybe they will let us go."

AFTERNOON. THE GYM. Kazbek Misikov felt the wire separate between his fingers. His task was done: Inside its insulation, the wire had broken. But chance contact, he knew, might still allow a spark to jump across, and he needed to be sure the two ends could not meet incidentally. This required a finishing touch, and Kazbek grasped the blue plastic on either side of the crimp and stretched it like licorice, putting distance between the severed ends inside.

Now a new problem presented itself. Stretching the plastic had turned it a whitish blue. The defect was obvious. The terrorists had inspected the wires and bombs several times, and if they checked again, they would discover his subterfuge.

He felt a surge of worry. He and his wife had made it this far and had agreed on a plan: If the Russians attacked, Irina would help Batraz, their older son, and Kazbek would help Atsamaz, their first grader. Atsamaz was exhausted and dehydrated. Kazbek often looked into his eyes, and at times they seemed switched off. But he had found a way to keep him going. Other adults had whispered that it was possible to drink small amounts of urine. Kazbek had collected their pee. "I want a Coke," Atsamaz had said when told to drink it.

"After we leave, I will buy you a case of Coke," Kazbek said. The boy drank.

Now Kazbek had put them in fresh danger and would have to take another risk. When a terrorist

strolled past him, he addressed him politely. "This wire lies across the passage," he said. "They are tripping on it. Neither you nor we need these to explode."

"What can be done?" the terrorist said.

"If we had a nail, the wire could be hung," Kazbek said.

The terrorist returned with a hammer and spike. Kazbek stood and drove the spike into the wall. He lifted the wire from the floor and laid a few turns around the shank, taking care to wrap with the whitish-blue section. He put a wooden spool on the spike and pressed it tight. The severed portion of wire was hidden. Kazbek had succeeded. He sat back with his family beneath the disconnected bomb.

AFTERNOON. THE BATHROOM. Zalina Levina and Fatima Tskayeva hid in the bathroom with their small children. Hours passed; more breast-feeding mothers with babies pushed in, seeking relief from the heat. The place became a nursery.

Abdullah passed by and taunted them. "Maybe we have something to tell you," he said. Fatima begged for information. He laughed. Two hours later he offered a hint. "If they let him come in, maybe we will let the breast-fed children out," he said.

Zalina's mind whirled. *Who was coming?*

At about 3:00 P.M., a new man passed the door. He was tall and well built, with a thick mustache and graying hair. He wore a clean gray sport coat. They recognized him at once: Ruslan Aushev, the former president of Ingushetia, a republic bordering Chechnya, and a decorated Soviet veteran from Afghanistan. Aushev commanded respect among both his people and Chechnya's separatists. But he had been ousted by Putin, replaced by a loyalist from the KGB. Aushev's career stalled. In the nursery, he was the most important man in the world.

Zalina felt hope. *Aushev!* she thought. *We will be let go!* Applause sounded in the gym. Aushev stopped before them. A terrorist pointed in.

"Here are the women with breast-fed children," he said.

"Do you know who I am?" Aushev asked.

"Of course," a mother said. He turned and left. The women rose, holding their babies, shaking with anticipation. They had been captives for more than thirty hours, without food, with little water, and with no sleep. There had been shooting and explosions. Their babies could take no more. Soon they might start to die. Abdullah stood at the door. "We will release you," he said. "But if you point out our photographs to the police, we will know immediately, and we will kill fifty hostages. It will be on your conscience."

"Now," he said, "one breast-fed child with one woman." He motioned for them to go.

Fatima was near the door. She did not move.

"Let me take all of my children," she pleaded, reminding Abdullah of her two others, including Kristina, with the weak heart. "You helped her yourself," she said. "Let us all go."

"No," he said.

"Let my children out. I will stay."

"No."

Fatima sobbed now. "Then let Kristina leave with my baby," she begged.

Abdullah's anger flashed. "I told you, bitch, no," he said. "Now I am not releasing anyone because of you."

He looked at the other women. "Everyone back to the gym," he said. Panic flowed through Zalina. Sweeping up her granddaughter, she stepped past Abdullah.

Rather than turning left for the gym, she turned right, toward the main school. She had decided. *I am leaving*, she thought. *Let them shoot me in the back.*

Another terrorist blocked her. "Where are you going?" he said.

She tilted her head at Abdullah. "He allowed me," she said, and brushed past. The main hall was a few yards away. The walk seemed a kilometer. Zalina passed through the door and saw Aushev by the exit at the end of the hall. She moved toward him. He waved her on.

Zalina walked barefoot in quick strides, Amina's cheek tight to her own. Her heart pounded. Would she be shot? She did not look back. The corridor was littered with bits of glass. She did not feel it nicking

her feet. Behind her the other women followed. A chain of mothers and babies was making its way out, twenty-six people in all.

Zalina focused on the door. She passed Aushev, who stood with the Colonel. "Thank you very much," she said. The exit was barricaded with tables, and a terrorist slid them aside and opened the door. Air tumbled in, and light. She stepped out.

Behind her in the corridor, Fatima Tskayeva wailed as she carried Alyona, her infant. She could not go any more. Sobbing, she handed the baby to a terrorist in a black T-shirt and mask. She had two more children here. She had decided to stay. The terrorist carried Alyona down the hall to Aushev and handed him the child. Fatima's cries pierced the corridor.

Outside, Zalina rushed Amina past the place where the assembly had been the day before. Discarded flowers were on the ground. A man shouted from a roof.

"There are snipers," he said. "Run!"

The line of women followed, and together they approached the perimeter. An aid station was waiting with medicine, food, and water. Zalina knew nothing of it. She trotted for her apartment, which was inside the perimeter, reached the entrance, climbed the stairs, and stood at her door. She had no key. She banged. It had been a mistake to bring Amina to school. It had been a mistake to have been taken hostage. But the terrorists had mistaken her for a breast-feeding mother. It was their mistake that she was out. They were free. Amina was alive. Who had a key? She descended the stairs to the entrance. Four Russian troops approached.

"Give me the child," one said, extending his arms. Amina saw their camouflage and began to howl. "Do not touch her," Zalina snapped. "No one will touch her."

EVENING. THE GYM. Karen Mdinardze slipped in and out of consciousness. Once he awoke to see a woman over him, fanning him, another time to find children cleaning his wound with a cloth soaked in urine. He awoke again. A teenaged girl thrust an empty plastic bottle to him and asked him to urinate in it.

"Turn your eyes away," he said, and he pressed the bottle against himself and slowly peed. He finished and handed the bottle back. The girl and her friends thanked him and quickly poured drops to wash their faces. Then each sipped from the bottle, passing it among themselves, and returned it to him. Karen's dehydration was advanced; his throat burned. He poured a gulp of the warm liquid into his mouth and across his tongue, letting it pool around his epiglottis. The moisture alleviated some of the pain. He swallowed.

He looked at the bottle. A bit remained. A very old woman in a scarf was gesturing to him, asking for her turn. He passed the bottle on.

SEPTEMBER 3RD. PAST MIDNIGHT. THE WEIGHT ROOM. Irina Naldikoyeva picked her way by the hostages dozing on the floor. Her daughter, Alana, was feverish. The gym was connected to a small weight-lifting room, which had become an informal infirmary. Irina asked permission from a terrorist to move Alana there. He nodded, and she carried the drowsy child and laid her on the room's cool floor. Perhaps fifty people rested in the space, mostly children and elderly hostages.

A water pipe was leaking, and, unsolicited, a small boy came to them and gave Alana a cup of water. She drank thirstily and lay down. Gradually her breathing slowed and deepened. She drifted to sleep. Irina returned to the gym, retrieved her son, and placed him beside his sister.

After several hours caressing the children, Irina dozed off, the first time since they were taken hostage that she had slept. Her father appeared. He had died several months earlier, but his face hovered before her, an apparition with gray hair. He did not speak. Nor did she. They looked into each other's eyes.

After perhaps twenty minutes, she woke. Her father, Timofey Naldikoyev, had been a gentle man, quiet and kind. She had never dreamed of him before. She wondered: *What does it mean?*

MORNING. THE GYM. Forty-eight hours after the hostages had been taken captive, the survivors were sliding to despair. They were beginning their third day without food, and their second without water. Almost all had slept only in snatches through two nights. They were dehydrated, filthy, weak, and drained by fear. They slumped against one another and the walls. The terrorists seemed tired, too, frayed and aware that their demands were being ignored. They had become nastier and drove the hostages out of the weight room to the gym, shoving some with rifles.

As the sun climbed and the temperature again began to rise, the two terrorists who specialized in explosives roamed the court. Their explosives were arranged in at least two circuits—the more visible one connecting the hanging bombs. A second circuit wired together a string of bombs on the floor, including two large bombs. The terrorists moved this second chain near one of the walls. Irina Naldikoyeva watched, struggling to stay alert. She was massaging her son, waiting for a sign.

MINUTES AFTER 1:00 P.M. THE GYM. The explosion was a thunderclap, a flash of energy and heat, shaking the gym. Twenty-two seconds later a second blast rocked the gym again. Their combined force was ferocious. Together they blew open the structure, throwing out the plastic windows, splattering the walls with shrapnel, and heaving people and human remains through the room. One of the blasts punched a seventy-eight-inch-wide hole through a brick wall twenty-five inches thick, cascading bricks and mortar onto the lawn. It also lifted the roof and rafters above the hole, snapping open a corner of the building like a clam before gravity slammed the roof back down. Much of the ceiling fell onto the hostages below.

Scores of hostages were killed outright. Their remains were heaped near the fresh hole and scattered across the basketball court. But most survived, hundreds of people in various states of injury. At first they hardly moved. Many were knocked senseless. Some were paralyzed by fright. Others, worried about another blast, pressed to the floor. At last they began to stir, and escape.

Dzera Kudzayeva, the first-grade girl who was to have been the bell ringer, had been near the blast that knocked out the wall. She had been asleep under her grandmother, Tina Dudiyeva, whose body had seemed to rise above her with the shock wave. The child stood now, and seeing sunlight through the hole, she scampered out, over the shattered bricks and onto the lawn. She began to run. She had arrived on Wednesday in a dress with a white apron and ribbons; she left now in only panties, filthy, streaked in blood, sprinting. She crossed the open courtyard and lot and came to the soldiers who ringed the school. She was free. The sound of automatic weapons began to rise.

The hole was only one route. The pressure of the explosions had thrown the windowpanes clear of their frames, exposing the room to light and air. The hostages reacted instinctually. A desperate scramble began. The sills were a little more than four feet above the floor, and throughout the room many of those who were not badly injured rushed to the sills, pulled themselves up, and dropped out to the ground.

Karen Mdinardze had been unconscious on the floor and had not been struck by shrapnel. He woke, heard moaning, and found himself surrounded by gore. Human remains had rained down; two girls near him were covered by a rope of intestine. He saw people hurdling the windows, mustered his energy, stumbled to the sill, and followed them out.

He landed in the courtyard and ran in a panicked human herd. A mother weaved in front, pulling her small boy. Bullets snapped overhead. They dashed across the courtyard toward the far corner, following those in front toward a gap in the fence. The mother went down. Her son stopped. "Mama!" he screamed. Karen bent and scooped the boy with his right hand as he ran past, pulling him tight like a loose ball. He charged for the fence opening and passed through it and out of the line of fire. Beside him was a small metal garage. He placed the boy inside. The mother ran around the corner. She had not been shot. She had stumbled. She fell atop her boy, sobbing. Soldiers, police officers, and local men were hunched and running toward them; Karen stumbled on, one-eyed and bloody, until a man hooked an arm under him and steered him down the street to an ambulance, which drove him away.

The first rush of escapes was over. Back in the gym, Aida Archegova had been leaning against the wall opposite a large bomb and had been stunned by the explosions. A piece of ceiling had fallen on her. She woke to glimpse her older son, Arsen, eleven, scrambling out. She recognized him by his blue briefs, which she had folded dozens of times. She did not see her younger boy. She pushed aside the ceiling and scanned the room. *Where is Soslan?* Gunfire boomed. A terrorist stood at the door, shouting. "Those who are alive and want to live, move to the center of the gym," he said.

Aida picked her way through the corpses and mortally injured, looking for Soslan. He was not among them. A boy about four years old told her he was looking for his brother. She took his hand and led him to the door and told him to wait. Another boy approached her, and a girl about twelve. "I am scared," the boy said. The girl said her sister was dying. Bullets zipped through the gym, the tracers glowing red, smacking walls. "Lie down here and wait," she said. "You may be killed."

Terrorists clustered in the hall, and Abdullah approached and ordered the hostages to follow. They formed a line, and he led them down the long hall to the cafeteria, a light-blue room where perhaps forty hostages were sitting or lying on the floor. Terrorists ducked behind barricades at the windows, firing out. Buckets of water rested on the table, with cookies and salted cabbage. The children took bowls and dipped them. Some drank six or seven bowls, unable to slake their thirst, and then began to eat with their hands.

Abdullah ordered the women to the windows. "Put the children there as well," he said. Aida froze. Bullets buzzed and popped through the air, pecking the brick facade, pocking the plaster walls. "If children are there, then they will not shoot and you will be safe," Abdullah said.

Six large windows faced the front of the school, each with steel bars, which prevented escape. Aida stepped to a middle window, lifted a boy who appeared to be about seven, and laid him on the sill. She took her place beside him. She made a highly visible target, her black hair falling on a red blouse. Her feet were on broken glass. The Russians were advancing. Abdullah ordered her to shout to them. She found a piece of curtain and held it through the bars, waving it. Other mothers were being used the

same way. Beside her, Lora Karkuzashvili, a waitress at a local restaurant, frantically waved a strip of cloth. They were human shields. "Do not shoot!" the women screamed. "Do not shoot!"

1:10 P.M. THE GYM AND THE WEIGHT ROOM. Atsamaz stood over his unconscious father. "Papa!" he shouted. "Papa!"

His father, Kazbek, was stunned. Inside his haze he heard the boy and remembered his agreement with his wife. He was to get Atsamaz out. He opened his eyes. The bomb overhead had not exploded. It still hung there. He saw Atsamaz and looked for his wife, Irina, crawling to Batraz, their older son, who was curled lifelessly on the floor. She rolled him over. "Batik!" she screamed.

Both of her eardrums had been ruptured, making even her own voice seem muffled. "Batik!" she shouted. He did not move. He was wearing only black pants. Blood ran from his left knee. "Batik!"

Batraz stirred. Irina cradled him, urging him toward alertness.

The survivors were in motion. At the opposite wall, children were going out the window, using the body of a fat old woman as a step. One by one they scrambled over the corpse, becoming silhouettes in the window frame, and then were gone. Tracers zipped in; Kazbek worried his family would be shot.

He wrapped Atsamaz with his arms and lurched to the weight room. Putting Atsamaz down, he saw that the boy was covered in someone else's blood. Kazbek inspected himself. A chunk of his left forearm was gone, as if it had been cut away with a sharp scoop. Blood pulsed from the wound. His right arm was injured, too; a bullet, he thought, must have passed through it.

He felt weak. If he were to keep bleeding like this, he knew, he did not have much time. He pulled a bright orange curtain toward him, made bandages, and tried to stop his bleed-ing. His head was injured, too, with cuts and burns. After dressing his arms, he tied a piece across his scalp, making a garish turban, and sat down. There were three windows, each covered with bars. They were trapped.

About a dozen hostages were in the room, including Larisa Kudziyeva and her family, and Sarmat, Vadim Bolloyev's small son. Larisa had been at the entrance to the weight room at the instant of the first explosion, standing beside Ibragim, one of the terrorists. The blast had knocked them to the floor together and entangled their legs. Ibragim had seemed surprised. After the second blast, he rolled free of Larisa and stood. "Are you blowing us up?" she asked him.

"No, it is yours," he said.

Ibragim disconnected a bomb at the doorway and rested it on the floor. "Make sure the children do not touch it," he said to her, and left.

The terrorists had staged equipment in the weight room, and Larisa rummaged through their backpacks, finding candy, raisins, dried apricots, and cookies. She handed food to the hostages. The battle flowed around them; they devoured the terrorists' supplies. A boy came to Larisa. "Where is my mother?" he said.

"At this moment I am as good as your mother," she said. "Sit. Eat."

Kazbek was slumped on a wrestling mat, fighting for consciousness. His bandages were soaked. Shooting roared at the windows. He knew Russian soldiers were closing in. *Soon they will be tossing grenades through windows, he thought, and then asking who is inside.* His wife was nearby. Blood ran from her ears. A bone in her neck had been cracked. The building shook from explosions, and he was falling asleep. He saw Irina's face, her soft cheeks and warm brown eyes. It was beautiful.

"Do not die!" she said.

1:25. THE GYM. Irina Naldikoyeva had been lying among corpses for at least twenty minutes, covering her son, Kazbek. Her niece, Vika Dzutseva, fifteen, was beside her, in a sleeveless blue dress, with Alana. Flames were spreading in the ceiling. The children wore only soiled briefs.

The children had been asleep on the floor at the moment of the first explosion, and were protected. But the first blast sent shrapnel into Irina's leg; the second sent more metal into her neck and jaw. She was light-headed and unsure what to do. Helicopters thumped overhead. She worried one would be disabled and slam into the gym. She had watched other hostages being led away and was wary of following the terrorists, but was running out of choices. The gym was afire.

Abdullah entered, looking for survivors. "Those who are alive, stand and go to the cafeteria," he shouted. His eyes met Irina's. *This means you.*

She took Kazbek by his hand and told Vika to take Alana, and they made their way to him. Broken bodies were packed in a wide arc around the hole in the wall, so many that Irina and Vika had trouble finding places to put down their feet. Several times they had to lift the children over the tangle.

In the main hall Vika collapsed with Alana, but a terrorist drove Irina on to the cafeteria, where she

looked in and saw bloodied hostages and terrorists firing through the windows. Her instinct was to hide. She kept moving, heading upstairs to the auditorium and slipping behind the maroon curtain on the stage. Perhaps twenty hostages were there. A girl came to Irina, tore off a piece of her black skirt, and bandaged her leg. Irina held Kazbek and waited. Bullets pecked against the school's outer walls.

BEFORE 2:00 P.M. THE COACH'S OFFICE. With so many armed terrorists inside, School No. 1 was difficult for rescuers and the Special Forces to approach, especially because they had been caught unprepared. At the moment of the first explosion, two T-72 tanks had been parked with engines off on Komintern Street, one block east of the school. Their crews had reacted with as much astonishment as the civilians clustered nearby, and argued over what to do. Inside a five-story apartment building overlooking the gym from the northeast, a Russian sniper team had also been taken unaware, and rushed to a balcony to see what had happened. They began to provide covering fire to hostages climbing out. A group of Special Forces soldiers, who had been rotated from the perimeter to a training range at a nearby army base, began speeding back, scrambling to a fight that had started while they were out of position.

Along the uneven perimeter, held by a disorganized mix of Ossetian police officers, traffic cops, conscript soldiers, local men with rifles, and Special Forces teams, disorder and confusion reigned. Some men were ordered to advance, while men beside them were ordered to hold their fire. Gradually, however, a sense that the final battle had begun took hold, and the men moved forward. Volleys of bullets smacked into the school, kicking up red dust. Litter bearers followed.

After an hour the Russians were pressing near the gym, and the volume of their fire, coming from so many directions, had begun to reduce the terrorists' numbers and push them out from many rooms. Several terrorists were injured, and others were dead. The gym, with flames crackling on its ceiling, had become untenable to defend. The terrorists were making a stand in the cafeteria, where the windows had iron bars.

For this they wanted hostages as shields, and Ibragim returned to the weight room to retrieve the group hiding there. He was a dark-haired young man, appearing younger than twenty-five, wearing a T-shirt and an ammunition vest. He entered the room and shouted at the hostages on the floor. Kazbek was there, wrapped in orange bandages, looking near death. Others looked capable of walking out. "Those who want to live, come," he shouted. No one complied.

"Get the people out!" he shouted. "The ceiling is on fire."

"You leave," Larisa said. "We will stay."

"The roof will collapse," he said.

Larisa worried that if they did not follow his orders, Ibragim would begin to kill. She led a group to the door and was joined by Ivan Kanidi, the school's physical-education instructor. Ibragim signaled for them to move low along the wall, ducking at windows so no one would be shot. Heat radiated from above. Flaming pieces of ceiling fell. Larisa's daughter, Madina, held three children by the hand, but a boy shook free to hide among the dead.

Ibragim forced them on, mustering more hostages he found alive on the floor. At the far end of the gym, he directed them to the coach's office, where he looked out the window to see what he could of the Russian advance. When he turned, Ivan Kanidi lunged.

Ivan was seventy-four years old, but he retained the muscularity of a lifelong athlete. He seized Ibragim's rifle with two thick hands, trying to rip it from his grasp. The rifle barrel swung wildly as they struggled and spun. "Get the children out!" Ivan shouted.

"Let go, old man, or I will kill you!" Ibragim snarled.

Back and forth they fought, pushing and pulling each other around the room by the rifle. Basketballs and other sports equipment littered the floor. After what seemed a minute, Ivan fell backward with the rifle in his hands. He was a nimble man, big-chested but lean, with a finely trimmed gray mustache. Before he could turn the rifle, Ibragim drew a pistol and shot him in the chest. He was motionless. Ibragim leaned down, retrieved his rifle from the dead man's hands, and looked at the group. "Everybody out," he said.

They began the walk to the cafeteria. Kira Guldayeva, a grandmother Ibragim had roused from the gym, was suspicious, and when Ibragim looked away, she pulled her grandson, Georgy, six, into a classroom. Larisa and Madina remained under Ibragim's control, arriving at the cafeteria under his escort.

The place was a horror. Each element of the siege—from the capture of the children to the enforced conditions of their captivity among the bombs to the murders of their fathers and teachers in the literature classroom to the explosions that ripped apart people by the score—had been a descent deeper into cruelty, violence, and near-paralyzing fear. Now they had reached the worst. Women stood at windows, screaming and waving white cloths. Bullets struck the walls. Dust and smoke hung in the air.

Glass covered the floor, much of it splattered with blood. The room stunk of gunpowder, rotting food, and sweat. Terrorists raced through the haze, bearded, whooping, firing, and yelling instructions. Larisa had her son, Zaubek, by the hand, and apprehended their new conditions; Madina had the two children she had brought from the weight room. She did not know their names. They rushed around a corner near the dish-washing room, where at least twenty other hostages were massed tight. Two girls were trying to squeeze themselves into a massive soup pot. Dead women and children were strewn on the kitchen tiles. The Kudziyeva family took a place on the floor.

JUST AFTER 2:00 P.M. THE WEIGHT ROOM. Kazbek Misikov tried to focus. He had fainted from blood loss, but Atsamaz revived him by dumping water on his face. He knew he had to rally himself. Roughly a dozen hostages remained in the weight room, but only three were adults, and he was the only man. Heat and orange glow emanated from the gym. Sounds of battle boomed outside. They were in a seam, forgotten but alive.

The barred windows offered no escape. Irina found paper and made a sign with red lipstick. *DETI*, it read, Russian for "children." She held it up at a window so they would not be shot. Kazbek staggered beside her, put his head at the window, where it was exposed. "There are children here!" he shouted. "Do not shoot!"

He was wearing a bloody turban and wondered if he would be mistaken for an Arab. Peering into the narrow alley, he saw the district prosecutor looking back. They both were startled. "Alan!" Kazbek said.

The prosecutor rushed to the window. "What can we do?" he said.

He was accompanied by a man with a rifle, and Kazbek asked him to aim at the door, in case a terrorist returned. He was weak but managed to lift a barbell and pass it between the bars. The men outside used it as a lever and popped the frame free. An escape route was open. Irina started handing out children: First the little ones, and then the adults helped her with a badly burned teenage girl. When the last child was out, the adults followed.

The Misikovs emerged behind the school. Soldiers passed them going the other way, rushing to penetrate the building through the hole they had made. The fire in the gym roof, which had spread slowly, was now a conflagration. Smoke rose over the neighborhood. Kazbek moved woozily to a stretcher, lay down, and slipped out of consciousness.

The children were handed from rescuer to rescuer in a chain. Atsamaz was passed along with the others until he ended up in the arms of Slavik, his uncle, a face he knew in the chaos. Slavik embraced him. Atsamaz realized he had been saved. He clung to the man. "Papa promised me I could have a Coke," he said.

AFTER 2:00 P.M. THE CAFETERIA. Less than fifteen minutes after Irina Naldikoyeva and her son found refuge in the auditorium, the terrorists forced them downstairs to the cafeteria and its tableau of misery. Hostages crowded the room, partially dressed, soiled, riddled with shrapnel, shot, burned, dehydrated, and stunned. Irina saw her niece, Vika, slumped beneath a window, her long black hair matted with sweat. "Where is Alana?" she asked.

"Here," Vika said, pointing to a child, naked except for dirty panties, curled under a table.

Bullets were coming in from the Russians firing outside. Irina grabbed her children and scrambled with them along the floor, stop-ping against a large freezer, panting. A terrorist handed her a bucket of water, and she tilted it and gave each child a drink. They gulped voraciously. At last it was her turn, and she put the bucket to her lips, poured the cool water onto her tongue, eager for it to hit her parched throat. But instead the water splashed onto her floral blouse. Irina did not understand and reached under her chin and felt the place where shrapnel had passed through. The bottom of her mouth was an open hole. Blood and water soaked her torso. She put the bucket aside.

Around her were at least six dead children, and she knew this place was not safe. She crawled to the dish-washing room, pushed the children under the sinks, and lay her body across them. Bullets kept coming. Some skipped off window frames or iron bars and whirred by, ricochets. One plunked the sink above her son.

A terrorist was on his back on the floor, motionless with his mouth open, showing gold teeth. His head had been bandaged. In the cupboards along the floor were more small children, hiding with pots and pans. The terrorist stood and lurched back to fight. On the other side of the door, Lora Karkuzashvili stood at a window. Aida Archegova was to her right. Abdullah was ducking and shooting, moving between them. Ibragim was in the corner, firing through the bars, his arms streaked in blood. Volleys of bullets came back in. Lora was struck in the chest, dropped, and did not move. Aida was standing, shouting and waving a cloth. A boy sat beside her, exposed. "Do not shoot!" Aida screamed.

Aida had been at the window for at least twenty minutes; somehow the bullets missed her and the child. She did not know his name; only once had he spoken. "I do not want to die," he said. Every chance she had, she put him on the floor. Always Abdullah told her to put him back. But Abdullah looked away again, and Aida swung the boy off the sill and placed him under a table. She stood upright

and felt a tremendous slap on the left side of her face. The impact spun her head. Much of her jaw was gone. She had been hit. She looked at Abdullah, who was using her for cover. "May I sit now?" she tried to ask. "I am bad."

"I do not care if you are bad or good," he said. "Stand if you want to live."

She was dizzy. There was an explosion. Aida fell.

Everyone was wounded, cowering, or dead. A creaking and rumbling sounded outside, and the turret of a T-72 tank appeared near the fence bordering the school grounds. Its barrel flashed. There was a concussive boom. The entire facade shook. Dust fell from the ceiling. The shell had struck another room.

MIDAFTERNOON. THE GYM. Pushed away by flame, sniper fire, and charging infantry, the terrorists yielded the gym. The place in which they had confined more than eleven hundred people, the pen with its matrix of bombs, was no longer theirs. Flames rolled along its ceiling and roof. Beneath the fire, on the basketball court, corpses and gravely injured hostages were spread across the floorboards, partially dressed or nearly naked, twisted into unnatural shapes. Heat seared the room.

For a long time almost no one moved, but at last Marina Kanukova, a first-grade teacher who had been feigning death with a third-grade girl, stirred. The heat had become too much, and she had heard a soldier's voice telling those who were alive to crawl to safety. The bodies were too thick to crawl over, so she took the child by the hand, crouched, and with flames roaring overhead they stepped across the dead to the weight room, where they were met by soldiers and local men, who directed them out a window. Behind her, bit by bit, coals and the flaming roof were dropping onto the injured and the dead. The air filled with smells of burning plastic and roasting hair and flesh.

Flanked by the Special Forces, a BTR-80 had arrived on the gym's western side. An eight-wheeled armored vehicle with a 14.5mm machine gun on a turret, it rolled toward the door where the hostages had first been forced into the school, its gun firing as it advanced, and rammed the wall and windows.

Soldiers and local men climbed into the bathroom and freed a group of screaming, terrified hostages, many slicked in blood and shit. Teams of soldiers pushed into the school. The Russians were inside at last, possessing opposite ends of the gym. Their storm had come late. On the basketball court, burning bodies were before them by the score.

MIDAFTERNOON. THE CAFETERIA. The survivors slumped in the corner by the dish-washing room, perhaps twenty-five people crammed in a tiny space. Still the bullets kept coming. A crash sounded along the outside wall; they noticed that the iron bars on the window in the left corner were gone. Three Russian commandos climbed in.

They were a fit and nimble trio, carrying rifles and wearing body armor and helmets. They stood among the dead and the injured, weapons ready, blood, broken glass, and spent shells around their feet. One of them bled from his hand. "Where are the bastards?" one whispered.

A door to the storerooms swung open. Ibragim was there. Simultaneously, the commandos and the terrorist opened fire over the hostages. Ibragim stepped aside, then reappeared, holding two hand grenades. Bullets hit him as he let them go.

Time seemed to slow.

Larisa Kudziyeva watched one of the grenades, a smooth metal oval about the size of a lime, as it passed over her, fell to the floor, and bounced off the kitchen tile toward the soldiers. Her son was beneath her and her daughter beside her. She squeezed the boy, threw her leg and arm over him, and swung her other hand over her daughter's face.

A hand grenade is a small explosive charge surrounded by a metal shell, whose detonation is controlled by a fuse with a few-second delay. When the charge explodes, it shatters the metal exterior, turning it into bits of shrapnel that rush away at thousands of feet per second, accompanied by a shock wave and heat. It can kill a man fifteen yards away. The nook was less than six yards across.

The grenade exploded.

After the wave of metal hit her, Larisa was encased in something like silence, a state in which the absence of sound was overlaid by the ringing in her ears, leaving her to feel an effect like a struck crystal glass. *How easy it is to die*, she thought. But she did not die, not immediately, and as if in a dream she ran an arm over her son, who was beneath her. He was alive. "Mama," he said. "Mamochka."

The shrapnel had blasted the right side of her face, tearing part of it off, and ruined her right arm. Larisa did not want the boy to see what had become of her and turned away and raised her left hand to her face. Her fingertips felt wet flesh and exposed bone. The bone fragments were sharp enough to prick. She passed out.

Her daughter crawled to her. A teacher beside Larisa was missing a leg. One of the commandos was

dead. The children Madina had escorted in were dead. One of Larisa's neighbors was dead. Another teacher was dead. The grisly mess extended through the room.

Larisa looked dead, but Madina checked her pulse, finding life. More commandos climbed in. They told the survivors to follow them out. "My mother is still alive," Madina said.

"We will take care of her," a soldier said.

Madina picked up her little brother, handed him out the window to a man outside. The man helped her down, too, and the brother and sister ran out into the neighborhood. They were saved.

Inside the dish-washing room, Irina Naldikoyeva had felt the wall shake, but she remained on top of her children, holding them down, unsure what had happened. There were two doors into the tiny room, and after a few minutes a man's head appeared along the floor at one of them. It was a commando, crawling. He wore a helmet. His face was sweaty. Irina understood: Russians were inside. The children hiding with the pots understood, too. The cupboard doors flew open and they scuttled out and bounded past him, looking for a way out.

Irina followed with Kazbek and Alana, out the door, past the mangled corpses, to the window. She handed out the children and then shinnied down. She was out, in autumnal air, standing on grass. She walked unsteadily and turned the corner at the first house on Komintern Street. She did not know where her children had gone. She sat on the ground. Someone came and led her away. LATE AFTERNOON. A CLASSROOM. Kira Guldayereva hid with Georgy in the classroom as the sound of gunfire rose and fell. Six Kalashnikovs were stacked against the wall. Camouflage clothing was strewn on the floor. The walls were streaked with blood, as if during the battle injured terrorists had congregated here. Kira pulled Georgy close. He was a small boy, wearing only underpants. She checked him for injuries and found tiny holes where shrapnel had entered his back, buttocks, and one of his feet. Blood beaded from each wound. Her injuries were worse, a catalog of the afternoon's hazards: She had been shot twice, and one bullet had passed through her arm. Shrapnel had struck her shoulder. She had been burned.

She sat for a long time, afraid the terrorists might return and wondering when the rescuers might reach them. "Stay here," she told the boy, and crept to the door.

A Russian soldier stood across the hall. They appraised each other, two faces in the chaos. He dashed toward her.

As he crossed the open, gunfire boomed. A bullet slammed into his head. He staggered into the room, dropped his rifle, grasped for his helmet, and collapsed. He did not move. His dropped rifle pointed at Kira and Georgy; she pushed it away with a board.

Another soldier followed him in and leaned against the wall. He was injured, too. "Lie down," he said to them, and began applying a bandage to his leg. A microphone hung at his throat, into which he spoke in clipped tones. More soldiers entered. The school was falling under Russian control.

They put Kira and Georgy on stretchers, and she was handed through a window. Litter bearers ran with her, tripped, and dropped her to the ground. "Where is the boy?" she screamed. "Where is the boy?"

LATE AFTERNOON. THE CAFETERIA. Larisa Kudziyeva awoke, unsure how much time she had spent on the floor. The hostages near her were all dead. She tried to move, but her right arm felt as if someone were atop it.

Much of her face was gone; soldiers stepped past her as if she were a corpse. They seemed calmer, having for the moment taken control of the room. One stood above her, a blurry form. She raised her left hand to wipe blood from her eyes. He glanced down, surprised.

"Girl, be patient," he said. "They will bring stretchers."

His voice sounded kind. *If he can call me girl when I look like this*, she thought, *then I can wait*. She drifted to sleep.

LATE NIGHT. A HOSPITAL ROOM IN VLADIKAVKAZ Nikolai Albegov arrived at the door and surveyed his son's wife. He was sixty-six, a retired truck driver, fidgeting where he stood. The thin frame of Irina Naldikoyeva, his daughter-in-law, was extended on the bed. Her head and her neck were wrapped in gauze. She was foggy from painkillers. An IV snaked into her arm.

Throughout Beslan and Vladikavkaz a fresh horror was descending. The morgue in Beslan was overflowing, and bodies were laid on the grass. Vladikavkaz's morgue also had a growing display of corpses waiting to be claimed. The dashes out of the school, and the rescues, had been so spontaneous and disorganized that many families were not sure whether their spouses and children had survived. The families also heard of blackened remains encased on the basketball court under the collapsed roof. The living roamed among the dead, peering at the unclaimed, looking for their own.

Nikolai's family had been spared this. For nine years Irina had lived in his home. She had borne the

family a son and a daughter and performed much of the daily labor. Nikolai kept one of the most traditional households in Beslan, and under the mountain customs he observed, he was the *khozyain*, the elder of his domain. Irina was not allowed to address him. She had never spoken to him unless he had asked her a question. They had never embraced.

He stood at the door in a suit, a leathery, strong-handed old man in his very best clothes, assessing the woman who had come into his home. He did not yet know what had happened in the school. But she had brought his family out. Tears ran down his dark face. He walked to her bed, found a spot on her face where there was no bandage, and gave her a kiss.

SEPTEMBER 4. EVENING. A HOSPITAL IN VLADIKAVKAZ. The doctor assessed Larisa Kudziyeva. Twice they had operated on her, but she had remained in a coma. Shrapnel had cut too many holes through her; blood transfusions leaked out. Her blood pressure had sunk. She was near death. The hospital was overwhelmed with patients, and at last Larisa was triaged. Nurses washed her and put a tag on her toe.

But Larisa Kudziyeva would not die, and hours later another doctor found her alive where she had been left for dead. Early on September 4 she was put back on an operating table. Much of her eye socket was gone. The right side of her face was mashed. Her right arm was shredded and broken in three places. Her middle finger was snapped. Her side had absorbed a shock wave and shrapnel blast. But the metal had missed her main arteries and her right lung. She stabilized before sunrise.

Now she was awake, barely. The surgeon questioned her, running through a simple neurological exam.

"What is your birthday?" he asked.

"The fourteenth," she said.

"What month?"

"May," she said. It was true. But it was not.

"No, forget that day," the doctor said. "Your birthday is September fourth."

EPILOGUE. The Beslan siege claimed a greater toll of human life than all but one act of modern terrorism, the destruction of the World Trade Center. The terrorists' actions and the bungled rescue efforts ended with the deaths of 331 people, not counting the 31 terrorists the Russian government says were killed. Among the dead were 186 children and 10 members of Russia's Special Forces, whose individual acts of courage were undermined by the incompetence of their government's counterterrorism response. More than seven hundred other people were injured, most of them children.

The siege ended with no victor. Faith in Russia's government, and the ability of its security agencies to protect its citizens, has been shaken. Sympathy for Chechen independence has shrunk. Even some of Chechnya's separatist fighters, men claiming loyalty to Shamil Basayev, have questioned the utility and rationale of such tactics, although the underground rebel government, unwisely, has not distanced itself from Basayev, who was appointed its first deputy prime minister in 2005. His retention of such a post, no matter his earlier guerrilla prowess, discredits the separatists and is grounds for shame.

The Russian and North Ossetian parliaments have opened investigations into the terrorist act, which thus far have led to inconclusive findings and drawn accusations of cover-ups from survivors and the bereaved. Official lies have eroded public confidence, including the insistence during the siege that only 354 hostages were seized, and an enduring insistence that the T-72 tanks did not fire until all the survivors were out, which is false. It remains unclear, and a source of acrimonious debate, what caused the first two explosions and the fire in the gym, although the available evidence, on balance, suggests that the blast damage and the majority of the human injury were caused by the terrorists' bombs. There is similar uncertainty about the reason behind the explosion of the *shahidka*. Other points of contention include what help, if any, the terrorists received from inside Beslan, whether the terrorists hid weapons in the school before the attack, how many terrorists were present, and whether several of them escaped. A third of the dead terrorists have not been publicly identified, and their names are officially unknown. Ibragim was killed; this is clear. But many hostages, including Larisa Kudziyeva and Kazbek Misikov, have studied the known pictures of the dead terrorists and insist that Ali, previously known as Baisangur, and others were not among the dead and were not seen on the last day of the siege.

Almost all of the surviving hostages remain in North Ossetia, and many continue to receive treatment, including Larisa, who had endured fourteen surgeries through early April 2006 and is expecting two more. Aida Archegova, who became a human shield after searching for her son Soslan, was rescued and later learned that Soslan escaped. Her face has been rebuilt, with bone from her hip grafted to fashion a replacement jaw. She has never again seen the boy who was a human shield with her and does not know whether he is alive. Sarmat Bolloyev survived. Lora Karkuzashvili, the human shield shot in the chest by rescuers, did not. Alina Kudzayeva, the wife of Aslan Kudzayev, who jumped from the window of the literature classroom, was freed with their nineteen-month-old daughter and other breast-feeding mothers; the remains of her mother, Tina Dudiyeva, who shielded Dzera, the bell ringer, were found in the gym. Albert Sidakov, who opted not to jump with Aslan, was killed, as were both sons of Ruslan

Betrozov, the man who stood to translate the terrorists' instructions. Fatima Tskayeva, who sent out her infant but stayed behind with her two other children, died with her daughter Kristina. Makhar, Fatima's three-year-old son, was saved. Karen Mdinardze, who survived execution, was questioned by a detective at the hospital, who thought that he might be a terrorist masquerading as a fleeing hostage; he was eventually treated properly. His ruined left eye has been replaced with an artificial one. Even up close it looks real. Kazbek Misikov and his family recovered from most of their injuries, although Kazbek's arms remain damaged and he is classified an invalid. On January 22, 2006, his wife, Irina Dzutseva, gave birth to a third son, Elbrus, who is named, like his father, for a mountain that soars above the others on the Caucasus ridge.