

SPASM

A Novel

Robin Cook

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CHAPTER 1

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**491 Edgewood Road
Essex Falls, Hamilton County, New York**

Ethan Jameson's phone alarm had to sound for almost a full minute before the jangle was able to penetrate his sleeping brain, as he'd not slipped between the sheets until after four am. Into the wee hours of Monday morning he'd been totally involved in a major, nighttime operation with his local and beloved militia group, the Diehard Patriots. The entire contingent of seventeen members dressed in full combat fatigues and under the watchful eye of two of their four Russian advisors had staged a full-scale mock assault of an empty home and barn with their AR-15 rifles and side arms fully loaded to rescue a captive family being detained by an overzealous, left-wing government. The entire complicated maneuver had gone off like clockwork without so much as a single hitch. All seventeen Diehard Patriots had gone through several AR-15 magazines without so much as one misfire, a testament to their progress.

Once conscious of the shrill, disagreeable clamor, Ethan sat bolt upright, grabbed the offending phone off the night table and had to restrain himself from throwing the blasted thing against the far wall.

Still holding his phone after silencing it, Ethan glanced over at the opposite side of the bed, expecting to see the sleeping form of his girlfriend, Janet Huber, as it was her house and he was a relatively recent invitee. But the light cotton covers were turned back, and her side of the bed was empty. By cocking his head to the side, he could hear the shower going, which reminded him that she'd planned on heading into her parents' convenience store early that morning. During the school year, Janet was a

third-grade teacher, but during the summer months, she helped in the family store as she had from an early age.

Both Ethan and Janet had grown up in Essex Falls, Ethan a year ahead. Back then they'd had little to do with each other mainly due to Ethan having had a reputation as an antisocial, slightly overweight 'bad boy' whereas Janet was the opposite and considered outgoing, traditionally attractive, blond, and popular. On top of that, Janet had been a good student, particularly compared to Ethan who was more into hunting and fishing, online gaming, and dark web trolling than anything to do with school or academics or social interaction.

It hadn't been until Janet returned to Essex Falls to become one of the town's third grade teachers after going away to nearby Hamilton College and obtaining a teaching degree that they reconnected. Ethan had never left Essex Falls after high school, finding employment with the American Pest Control Company as a technician servicing the local apple and dairy farmers. To both Janet and Ethan's surprise, they had 'clicked' when they unexpectedly ran into each other, at least enough for Janet—after a few weeks—to invite him to move into the cottage she'd rented just outside of town.

The stimulus for the abrupt change of heart was the recognition as adults that both of them had shared and emotional trauma, as had most of their friends, from the major economic and social upheaval that had befallen their town and ultimately their lives when they were age nine and ten and in the fourth and fifth grades respectively. At the time the Bennet Shoe company suddenly went out of business with little warning,

after struggling for some time as it had become impossible for the business to compete with the avalanche of cheap, foreign-made sneakers flooding the country.

Up until its sudden demise, the Bennet Shoe company had been a rock-solid fixture in Essex Falls. In many ways it and the town were synonymous, as the company employed— at any given time and over multiple generations—nearly three quarters of the town's working age population to the point that during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Bennet family were considered something akin to royalty. The company had been founded in what had been previously a one-horse town sited in the gorgeous wilds of the New York State Adirondack Mountains by Ambrose Bennet, a year after the California gold rush, presumably with the help of some of the California gold. Its founding had required damming the Roaring Fork River to create a scenic reservoir both for waterpower to run the factory's sewing machines and as the domestic water source for an expanding population.

The creation of the company also necessitated the construction of what would become the largest, multistoried, red-brick mill building north of Albany, New York, complete with an impressive clock tower modeled after the bell tower in Saint Mark's Square, Venice. It also resulted in an explosive growth of the town, including the formation of an urban appearing Main Street lined with two-story brick storefronts with popular employee living quarters above. Within ten years, Essex Falls had a population nearing five thousand, matching the combined total of the entire rest of Hamilton County, the sparsest populated but arguably most beautiful county in all of New York State with its densely forested mountains, crystal clear unspoiled lakes, and wildly cascading rivers.

The social consequences for Essex Falls of the precipitous loss of the town's largest employer were monumental particularly because of the town's isolation. A few families were lucky when the breadwinner found a job 26 miles west at the Rubington Paper Mill in Eastham or 28 miles north at the Schörgers Lumber mill near Ducksbury. The rest of the laid off workers went without or moved away. Those who stayed and couldn't find work suffered, mainly with alcohol abuse and one of its associated stigmas: domestic violence.

This common legacy fueled Ethan and Janet's reconnection at least initially, as both their families suffered similar hardships, although Janet's was lately coming to fear two aphorisms: 'like father like son' and 'leopards don't change their spots.' Two weeks previously she'd been shocked and dismayed when Ethan had lost control and struck her over what was a rather insignificant disagreement, evoking disturbing memories of her father's behavior. Although Ethan had effusively apologized, the episode undermined Janet's confidence. It did the same to Ethan's, making him aware he was living on borrowed time psychologically unless he did something rather dramatic to reestablish his sense of masculinity. In truth the episode had surprised him almost as much as it had Janet, and although he promised himself he was going to control what had always been his fiery temperament, he wasn't entirely confident. As a teenager he'd been in his share of fights, and even though he was 100% smarter now, he didn't know for certain how he'd react when pressed. Besides, deep down Ethan felt the entire country of America was on the wrong track in just about every way.

Shrugging his shoulders at the unknown, Ethan threw back the covers, swung his legs and feet over the side of the bed, and stood up. He peeled off his pajama top and

tossed it behind him onto the bed, raising his arms skyward over his head and stretching to relieve the tightness of his shoulder muscles. Over the last year he'd gotten into body building along with his dedication to his militia duties, which dominated his life, and in the process he'd had become noticeably more buff with bulging pecs and biceps and remarkably less belly fat.

As his mind cleared, Ethan recalled with instant irritation exactly how angry he'd been when he'd gotten home around 4:00 am from the militia maneuvers. Although the operation had gone well, the fact that once again only two out of the four Russian far-right paramilitary specialists had shown up to observe and provide feedback on the Diehard Patriots' performance was infuriating because that was why they were there and why the Diehard Patriots were monetarily supporting their visit.

Ethan had been one of the creators of the Diehard Patriots as a homegrown paramilitary group. Starting the organization had been his idea after watching with a combination of shock and awe the storming of the US Capital in 2021. What he'd immediately recognized from that disturbing episode was just how vulnerable the citizens of Essex Falls were in their self-imposed isolation, tucked away in the the Adirondack Mountains, especially considering how the US Government had essentially allowed and even helped the Chinese destroy the Bennet Shoe Company.

Within days of the capital storming, Ethan had begun a massive online search of everything there was to know about militias. Because he had spent countless hours online as a teenager, he didn't have any problem learning what he needed to learn and then some, especially on the dark web. Armed with what he'd been able to put together, he then founded with two of his closest friends the Diehard Patriots, and began the

process of soliciting members, obtaining weaponry, particularly AR-15s, and lots of ammunition along with various military gear including night vision goggles and camouflage apparel. Within six months he had a dozen eager and equivalently disillusioned members and within a year the current total of seventeen. For Ethan, the payoff had been immense. The Diehard Patriots offered him a sense of identity that he would be able to protect his community from potential future threats from a system that he believed had betrayed the town in the past and might do so again.

Struggling with another sudden, intense wave of anger at the Russians for not showing up the night before, particularly the Russian commander and his lieutenant, Ethan stared out the window with unseeing eyes while his mind churned and his irritation deepened. There was something about the Russians, particularly the commander, that didn't make sense, and it involved the marked difference between his original expressed interest in coming to Essex Falls compared to his behavior once they had arrived.

As the avowed Commander of the Diehard Patriots, Ethan was responsible for the Russians' presence as he had been the one to invite them. He had met them purely by chance online. He had spent countless hours on social media platforms associated with far-right paramilitary organizations like the Russian VKontakte, OK.RU, and Telegram all in hopes of learning about combat tactics, survival skills, and other military activities. He'd been impressed from the get-go with how closely the various Russian far-right groups shared his ideologies, especially about how the world had changed for the worse, as well as how far ahead they were in their paramilitary organization in comparison to their American counterparts.

Then out of the blue, Ethan had been contacted via Telegram by a Viktor Mikhailov, a spare-time commander of a highly organized, well-established Russian paramilitary organization in Koltsovo, Russia, which Ethan had located with Google maps. Flattered by the attention, Ethan had ended up talking directly with the man on multiple occasions, which was made easy by the Russian's ability to speak flawless English, although with a decidedly British accent. The man explained that he had spent several years in the UK under a work-study program a decade previously.

Impressed by Viktor's gifted dialogue as well as his apparent paramilitary experience and knowledge, Ethan was eager to chat over the course of several days. In the process he didn't mind being peppered with questions about Essex Falls' size, population, layout and its reservoir. Then Viktor completely took Ethan aback by offering to travel to Essex Falls along with three of his staff and remain for a month or so for the sole purpose of training the Diehard Patriots, turning the group into a true fighting force, provided Ethan could guarantee him a few non-negotiable conditions.

Although suspicious as to what the non-negotiable conditions might be, Ethan was immediately intrigued. He was already convinced from his online research that the Russian right-wing paramilitary groups were some of the most experienced in the world and the opportunity for the Diehard Patriots to be trained by the commanders of one was like manna from heaven. When Ethan asked what the conditions were, he was immediately relieved. Viktor told him there were only two. He explained that under current world tensions, he and his staff would not be able travel to the United States under Russian passports but instead would be required to come as Netherlander citizens with Netherlands' papers. He then asked if Ethan would agree not to reveal their

true origins to anyone whatsoever including fellow Diehard Patriots, just to avoid potential misunderstandings and immigration problems. Before Ethan could even respond, Viktor added the second, that he and his staff would need Ethan to provide them with a vehicle capable of accommodating all four of them as well as a large, isolated residence, preferably one with a functional outbuilding like a barn or a large shed.

Relieved by the ease of fulfilling such conditions, Ethan had agreed immediately and the rest was history. The four Russians did arrive via Montreal in mid-June, requiring Ethan to drive up to Champlain, NY, to pick them up in his Ford F-150, which turned out to be a mild problem. Although Viktor was slight enough for Ethan to describe as scrawny and of moderate height despite his deep, baritone voice and who appeared older than he claimed, the other three were sizable and muscular, especially the two younger ones, Alexei and Dmitry who were both in their late twenties and considerably over six feet. The third, Nikolai, who was about thirty was close to six feet exactly, which Ethan could tell because Ethan himself was six feet precisely.

With Viktor insisting on riding shot-gun, the other three had to literally squeeze into Ethan's rear bench seat for the two-and-a-half-hour ride back to Essex Falls. During the ride, after they had all introduced themselves, Ethan became progressively optimistic about their visit, especially after learning that they all spoke flawless English so communication was not going to be a problem. And they all expressed sincere eagerness to begin a militia training program to turn Ethan and his group into a true fighting force.

During the rest of that trip, Ethan was treated to a series of humorous stories of the groups' trials and tribulations of getting there by first traveling to Amsterdam via Istanbul, of all places, which Ethan wouldn't be able to find on a map. To his surprise, the group had had to cross the US Canadian border on foot and then hitch-hike to Champlain, New York. Since he personally had never been out of the United States, Ethan recognized he was totally unfamiliar with international travel, and he took it all on face value, especially since, at the time, he was pleased and super thankful for all the obvious effort the group had made to get there.

When they had arrived at Essex Falls, Viktor insisted on a tour of the town, which Ethan was happy to provide. Most of what the commander wanted to see, Ethan understood: the supermarket, the hardware store, and the liquor shop. What Ethan found a bit strange was his interest in the town's Municipal Water Department and his question about the fastest route to Albany. But Ethan didn't care one way or the other. At the time he was enormously pleased they were there and had high hopes that there would be enormous benefits.

After the rapid tour, Ethan had driven the group the four miles out of town to the Bennet Estate, the large and elaborate Victorian house with a sizeable barn that the Diehard Patriots had rented for their use, paying by the week. He also gave them the keys to a four-year-old Dodge Ram pickup truck, and then told them he'd be back at five to take them to a celebratory dinner in town at Ted's Diner, the oldest restaurant in Essex Falls, where they would have an opportunity to meet the other two founders of the Diehard Patriots. As far as the lectures, seminars, demonstrations, and full-scale paramilitary operations and tactics were concerned, they would start the following days.

“Oh, glory be, he’s awake,” Janet Huber said superciliously, interrupting Ethan’s thoughts. The edge to her voice was immediately obvious as she emerged from the bathroom dressed in a bright, floral sundress. She’d caught him shirtless and dressed only in pajama bottoms while staring out the window as if in a trance. Everting her eyes, she headed over to the bureau to grab her shoulder bag.

“Don’t tell me you’re still irritated?” Ethan shot back with an equivalent edge.

“Of course I’m still irritated,” Janet said, turning to look at him and putting her knuckles on her hips. “What do you expect after you’re barging into the house at 4:00 am, crashing around, making a racket, and waking me up out of a sound sleep. I mean it’s one thing if you boys insist on running around in the woods for half the night, but it’s quite another if you don’t have the sense and decency to come into the house without disturbing me. I am, after all, the one paying the rent.”

“We were on a major militia maneuver, not ‘playing games,’” Ethan snapped, struggling to corral his own growing anger at her obvious disrespect. “And I was furious for good reason. Only half of our supposed instructors showed up. And let me tell you, we made a lot of effort and used up a lot of ammunition. The whole deal was one hell-of-a-major undertaking.”

“From my perspective, it was just a bunch of men acting like adolescents, making fools of themselves,” Janet said dismissively with an accompanying wave. “But be that as it may, you should be glad no one got hurt. And why does it matter if only half of the instructors showed up if the operation went as planned?”

“Because the two instructors that didn’t show up are the commander and his lieutenant, and we are paying good money for them to be here. I’ve insisted they show

up countless times, but Viktor, the commander, and Nikolai, his side kick, are more interested in a brewery that they set up in the Bennet barn than helping the Diehard Patriots, which is the whole reason they're here."

"A brewery?" Janet questioned with obvious ridicule. "Why, in God's, name have they bothered to set up a brewery? "

"I've got no clue. And I don't even know it's a brewery to be entirely honest. That's just what JD said he was told by one of them he plays basketball with occasionally. But, you know what? At this point it doesn't matter. I've had it! Last night was the absolute final time they are going to stand us up! When the operation was over, I took one of them aside and told him on no uncertain terms that their visit to Essex Falls was over and done and that they had to get their asses out of the Bennet Estate today the latest. And I made it crystal clear that I would I go to the police and get the police involved if they didn't vacate immediately. And to be sure I got their attention I said that I'd let the police know there was something hinky about their IDs. And let me tell you, I'm truly serious!"

"Whatever," Janet said with a roll of her eyes. "I'm out of here. But closer to home, let me warn you, mister, that you'd better mend your ways in general or you will be packing yourself. You're skating on thin ice here!" She then spun on her heels and walked out of the room.

For a second Ethan was stunned at Janet's dismissal. There was no way he could allow her to get away with how she was currently treating him because if he did, it would only get worse.

For a second Ethan looked around the room for something to smash.

Unfortunately, there was nothing immediately available, and instead he became aware of the time, knowing that if he didn't pull himself together, he'd be late for work yet again. Since he was not on the best of terms with his immediate supervisor, he needed to hurry. Quickly searching under the camouflage military gear that he'd pulled off early that morning and tossed onto the only chair in the room, he found the clean tee shirt and jeans he'd put out to wear that day. Since he was well aware of the toxicity of some of the products he used at work, he was a stickler about showering and washing his clothes when he got home every day. In the bathroom he smoothed out his hair with a wet palm and splashed some water on his face.

Heading out the side door, he hurried over to his black F-150, which had his AR-15 on a rack mounted in the back of the cab. As he grabbed the door handle and depressed the release button to yank open the door, he hesitated. Some weird sticky substance coated the handgrip. Releasing his grip with mild difficulty, he stared down at his open palm. Whatever the sticky material was, it was clear and colorless. Lifting his hand to his nose, he smelled it, but it was odorless. Gingerly using the index finger of his left hand, he repeatedly touched the door handle to check the extent of the mysterious sticky material, but while it couldn't be very much in total, it covered its entirety.

Who the hell had the nerve to disrespect his favorite possession he questioned? On top of the irritation he was feeling from Janet's attitude, he was beside himself with this new personal transgression and let out a string of curse words. Then, after a moment of indecision, he reckoned he couldn't leave whatever it was on his beloved

truck's door handle. Running back into the kitchen and grabbing the spray bottle of glass cleaner from under the sink along with a handful of paper towels, he made short work of removing the sticky stuff. After tossing the dirty paper towels in the nearby trash barrel, he climbed in behind the wheel.

Backing out from Janet's cottage onto a gravel road, he gunned the F-150. By the time he got to the paved road, he was going at a good clip and had to abruptly brake before pulling out to head north. The American Pest Control Company was six miles up the road in the direction of the town of Livermore.

Within seconds Ethan was going well over the speed limit as he nervously glanced at the time. It was going to be close, but if there were no unforeseen obstacles, he would make it just barely. He certainly hoped he wasn't going to be late because in his current mood, he might not be able to withstand one of Art Sorenson's tongue lashing. Art was Ethan's supervisor, and he and Ethan didn't see eye-to-eye on a host of issues.

It might have been an emotionally trying morning in many respects, but at least for a moment he could calm down and appreciate that it was one fantastically gorgeous late July day. The sky was entirely cloudless and, thanks to the morning dew, the sunlight was sparkling like diamonds in all the open fields. The trees comprising the dense, temperate-rain forests lining the road and extending up the various craggy mountains were as lush as he could remember. But such comforting, pleasant thoughts didn't last long. Despite the gorgeous scenery, his being major-league pissed at Viktor and Nikolai for again failing to show up and for Janet's disrespect came back in a flash.

There was no doubt in Ethan's mind that both situations needed to be rectified and immediately.

Ethan headed into the last curve in the road before the American Pest Control Company and took his foot off the accelerator. But the moment he did, he began to experience a strange sensation in the palm of his right hand that quickly spread out onto all five of his fingers. The sensation was akin to pins-and-needles but different and less agreeable, more like a kind of pain. Although he had never considered 'pins-and-needles' to be pleasant, he certainly never considered them disturbing. Yet this current sensation somehow seemed particularly unpleasant, making him take his hand off the steering wheel to examine it briefly. To his surprise, in spite of the intensity of the sensation, he saw nothing amiss. Quickly he regressed the steering wheel and redirected his attention back out the windshield as he closed in on his destination. His truck had slowed considerably.

Rapidly Ethan pulled off the road and coasted into his usual parking spot. The moment he came to a full stop, he glanced back down at his hand. Once again it appeared entirely normal, yet the unpleasant sensation had intensified and even begun to travel up his arm. It had now morphed into something more like pain but still not pain, per se. The muscles in his forearm began to twitch, progressing quickly to multiple, individual, localized spasms, and it was occurring in his fingers now as well. Suddenly certain fingers began snapping into a kind of spasm, each finger contracting into a claw, causing sharp pain like a 'charley-horse', but then, just as suddenly, relax before another sharp jolt of electric-like discomfort.

As all these various symptoms rapidly progressed, particularly the spasms, Ethan felt an overpowering sense of anxiety settle over him like a smothering blanket. All at once he found himself unable to think much at all, let alone clearly. Instinctively he knew he needed medical attention and needed it fast. He had to get himself to the office of Dr. Robert Nielson, the only doctor in town, and he had to get there fast.

Since he hadn't turned off his truck's engine, Ethan threw the shift into reverse and spun his tires as he pulled back out into the road without even checking for traffic. Luckily there was none. Then as quickly as he could, he turned the truck around and accelerated back the way he'd come.

Fighting through spasms, sharp pain, and overwhelming anxiety, fear, and confusion, Ethan raced past the turn off to Janet's house and headed directly into the village center, where half the businesses were vacant and the other half mere shadows of their former selves. Only Daniels Hardware, which belonged to Ethan's friend JD's parents, the Huber Convenience, which belonged to Janet's parents, and Ted's Diner looked somewhat similar to how they'd always looked. All the others were mere shadows of their former selves, including the huge, empty Bennet Shoe Factory itself.

Screeching to a stop outside the old Bennet Shoe Factory Clinic building, which Dr. Nielson occupied after taking it over when the mill closed, Ethan stumbled out of the cab and on shaky legs immediately made his way inside. Staggering into Dr. Nielson's office, Ethan confronted Melanie Hopkins, the doctor's nurse/secretary.

"I'm sick and in awful pain," Ethan managed to garble while trying to steady himself, leaning on the front of Melanie's desk. "I'm also going crazy." Several patients in the waiting area all looking up from their phones.

Melanie saw the involuntary spasms Ethan was fighting against extending up both arms and portions of his agonized face. The second thing she noticed was that his pupils were smaller than any pupils she'd ever seen, like periods at the end of a printed sentence.

Leaping up out of her seat, Melanie rushed around the desk and directed Ethan into one of the examination rooms, which he was able to do with significant difficulty. While she quickly donned sterile gloves, she directed him to climb up on the exam table where he ended up writhing around in pain and terror. Melanie secured him by quickly raising the guard rails on both sides of the examination table.

"What's wrong and what happened?" she demanded nervously. "The doctor will need to know because at the moment he's doing his rounds at the Clinton Hospital."

"I don't know what's wrong and, as far as I know, nothing happened," Ethan squeaked. "Everything was fine. I was just driving to work, and it hit me like a ton of bricks. Truly. I'm bad, and it all came out of the blue. As I said, I'm going crazy. I can't stand it."

"Had you already been out on a job spraying this morning?" Melanie demanded.

"No, I hadn't even gotten to work yet"

Quickly Melanie took Ethan's pulse and then blood pressure, leaving the cuff in place. His pulse was rapid but regular and although the blood pressure was elevated, it wasn't that far out of normal.

"You have to help me," Ethan managed through grimaces of pain and a terrifying sense of impending doom. "Please! Everything seems to be going haywire in my body, even my mouth."

“What’s wrong with your mouth?” Melanie asked as she used her cell to dial the doctor. As an experienced nurse, she could see that Ethan, although conscious, was in extremis, but she had no idea why—there was no blood loss or signs of trauma. Could it be psychosomatic? She doubted it, not with all the visible spasms on his arms and face. She’d never seen such symptoms in a patient in all her six years of training in New York, where she thought she’d seen everything.

“There’s too much saliva,” Ethan complained. “I feel like I’m going to drown. It’s even difficult to talk.”

“Oh, thank God you answered,” Melanie said the moment she heard the doctor’s voice. Turning her back on Ethan, she began a rapid description of Ethan’s mysterious state and her confusion about what to do. She specifically asked if she should call the police and get Chief Hargrove to get out the old ambulance.

“Sounds like it could be organophosphate poisoning,” Dr. Nielson said with urgency. He knew the toxicity of some of the products the American Pest Control Company used. “Put on some gloves immediately!”

“I did!”

“First give him some atropine. Next, get him into the shower to scrub everything and bag his clothes. I’m on my way!”

“The shower might be difficult.”

“Do the best you can! I’ll be there just as soon as possible.”