

Falling out of a plane at night, above a raging sea, lived up to its reputation. Sergei had said the chute would open after ten seconds, long enough to get below the wake from the propellers but not drift too far from the drop zone. But Nadia couldn't count. She was too busy trying to catch her breath as the wind tore at her mouth.

Goggles protected her eyes, though she could barely see anything as she plummeted through gun-metal-grey clouds. She bit down on an urge to scream, panic rising from her heart up into her throat. Freefalling. It was so damned dark. The sea was racing towards her, but all she saw below was blackness. A cloudy night, no stars, no moon. Must have been eight seconds by now. Nine. Ten. She braced herself for the chute opening.

Nothing.

Where was Sergei? He'd been right beside her on the plane. *He was heavier.* He'd be below her, wouldn't he? Or did everyone fall at the same rate? She couldn't remember. He could be above her if his chute had opened. She looked up. Nothing, just the wind howling in her ears through her neoprene dive hood. How high had they been? How long before she'd hit the water?

At this speed her harness with its air tank would snap her back in two on impact. She had no emergency cord to operate the chute. He'd said it wouldn't fail. The chute would open. Fifteen seconds now, for sure. Another five and she'd be splattered on the wave-tops. Sergei, where the fuck...

He slammed into her from behind, then spun her around as effortlessly as if they were trapeze artists in that sweet spot where gravity blinks. But they were plunging at terminal velocity, close to two hundred kilometres an hour. His face loomed close, but he was looking down at her chest. He hit her. No, he thumped the buckle to release the failed chute. She slipped away from him. *Shit!* She lunged for one of his shoulder straps, grabbed it, tugged herself towards him, flailing in the wind like a rag doll. They twisted in mid-air, no longer falling feet first. He looped an arm around her, pulled her close to him, yanked something, and then Nadia realised how the end of a bullwhip felt when it was cracked.

It winded her, but Sergei's arm pressed her against him, locking them together. Her left hand clung to his harness strap; the other gripped the back of his tank. Finally he looked at her. And smiled. He fucking smiled. Cool bastard. He mouthed something. Then something else. *Two. One.* She took an urgent breath.

The surface of the sea whacked into her, pounded her feet, ripped off her goggles. The rushing wind was replaced by the soft, numbing sounds of the undersea that she'd loved since her first dive in the Volga at the age of eight. But it was cold, bloody cold. She fumbled for the regulator pinned to her chest, exhaled once to flush out the water, then breathed in. Air – the only thing that really mattered underwater.

Eyes still closed, she fished inside her jacket pocket for her dive mask, donned it, tilted her head back and breathed out through her nose to clear the mask of seawater, equalising pressure in her nose and ears at the same time. She opened her eyes and blinked hard to rinse out the stinging salt water. Sergei was attaching his fins, a torch in his hand.

She unfastened the fins strapped tight around her calves, slipped them on, then found her own halogen lamp. At least the seawater inside her wetsuit had warmed a little from her body heat. Sergei shone a cone of light down into the gloom. He put his hand in the beam and gave her the OK signal. She did the same, careful not to shine it anywhere near his face and render him temporarily night-blind. His smile had gone.

To business.

She checked her depth on the dive computer attached to her left wrist. Fifteen metres. The swell from the roiling waves above swayed her gently, rocking her. But she knew they must be off-course due to the late opening of her chute. The drop had been carefully calculated – vertical height, wind strength and direction, sea state – and now they might be up to half a mile in the wrong place. Sergei showed his hand in the light, fingers spread open, palm down. *Stay*. Of course. The others had sleds. Let them come to us.

A dull buzzing interrupted her thoughts. Sergei was staring behind her. She finned to spin around and saw a light, then two. The sleds, two divers apiece, one on top, one hanging at the side. They didn't slow down. A sled approached, and she finned to get a head start, and then grabbed the sled's rail as it passed. Sergei was on the sled in front. He glanced back once to check she was aboard, then both sleds accelerated to make up for lost time. They stayed at fifteen metres for a good ten minutes, then she felt the pressure on her ears increase, and cleared them – they were descending.

They hit thirty-five metres and levelled off. Still she saw nothing, but the sleds both slowed, and then she saw why. The forward light picked up the huge black tail fin of the Borei Class nuclear submarine, like the fin of a shark, which happened to be the nickname for this class of sub. Sergei's sled circled behind, his forward beam illuminating the massive propeller. She tried to gauge how long each blade was. Maybe three metres.

Sergei took point again, and fired a flare that fizzed forward like a lazy yellow firework. The sub was one hundred and seventy metres long, only slightly shorter than its predecessor, the Typhoon. But seeing it, positioned at one end while the flare swept forward over its dark beauty, was something else. The flare continued its arc over the conning tower, all the way to the prow, her destination. The light faded and plunged them back into darkness save for the sled's lights. But the after-image was etched onto her retinas. Russian subs didn't really go in for names, they were usually referred to as *Projects* and given a number, but Sergei had told her this one was the *Yuri Gagarin*. He'd have been proud.

Yet shark was the right label, too. Subs like the *Yuri* were the ultimate predator, patrolling the oceans, undetectable yet carrying Armageddon on their backs, a dozen missiles, any one of which could obliterate a major city, incinerating hundreds of thousands of people in a heartbeat. They had to stop its warheads falling into the wrong hands.

They picked up speed, the sleds' beams angled downwards, two ellipses of light tracing the narrow walkway on the foredeck. Both sleds slowed as they reached the missile hatches, a dozen lined up in neat pairs. One was open.

Sergei descended from the sled to the deck, and peered inside with his torch. Nadia wanted to take a look, but the sled driver's hand clasped around hers, welding it to the sled's rail. Sergei could clearly see something, but she had no way of knowing what. He rejoined his sled, and both sleds surged forward. She glanced down as she passed the open tube, but could see nothing there, not even the tell-tale white and red cone of the missile itself. She felt a shiver. It looked as if at least one warhead was already missing.

They arrived at the conning tower, its antennae bending in the current, a sturdy metal ladder running down the outside. She wondered how Sergei and the other two were going to board the sub through the conning tower. They tethered their sled to the tower, and as her sled continued its journey, she glanced back, watching Sergei and the others setting up some equipment. She realised two things. The first was that they could easily be killed as soon as they entered the sub. The second was that she didn't want that to happen, not to Sergei at any rate. She turned her gaze forwards.

The foredeck began to narrow in the beam of light, until it reached the sleek prow of one of Russia's finest. As they drifted down to the torpedo hatches, she realised she couldn't see the sea floor. Which didn't make sense. The sled driver evidently had the same concern. He circled the sled while the second diver fired up a flare, then let it drop. It fell for a full minute before it was lost in the depths. *Shit.*

The driver gunned the motor and they levelled off on the starboard side with nothing beneath them but a yawning abyss. He fired a flare horizontally, along the sub's hull, and she watched, unbelieving. *Nearly half the sub was hanging over an underwater cliff.*