

Prologue

Vladimir was cuffed and hooded, but his guards had made a fatal mistake. His hands were behind him, but not attached to the inner structure of the military van, a standard Russian UAZ 452 – he'd know those rickety creaks and the pungent blend of oil and diesel anywhere. The vehicle trundled towards some unknown destination where he would be interrogated, beaten some more, then shot in the back of the head.

Three of the four men chattered as they picked up speed down a straighter road. Their second mistake. Clearly they weren't Special Forces – *Spetsnaz* – like he'd been until recently. They were regular army. He'd only seen the two heavies who'd snatched him from his home in a dawn raid. Now he knew there were four – one other had engaged in the banter, another had remained silent but was referred to as the butt of several bawdy jokes. The hierarchy of the men was also clear. The leader was in the front passenger seat, the silent one the driver, leaving the two musclemen in the back with him.

He waited. They'd been driving for an hour or so, initially dirt tracks, now a highway, which meant they were on the E119 to Vostok. If they turned right, he had a chance, as they would have to cross the Volga River. Then he would make his move.

If they turned left, he was a dead man.

Vladimir wasn't one for options, or for hedging his bets. Not a question of making the right choice, but of making the choice right. In all his missions he'd never cared much for a Plan B. Leave too many options open, and events control you. You invite failure.

The van *would* turn right.

Vladimir mapped the van inside his head. The van layout was standard: two seats in the front facing forward, two benches in the back facing each other. Two front doors on the driver and passenger side, a double door at the rear. He was on the left-side bench, a heavy beside him, one opposite. The leader was in the left-hand front seat, the driver on the right. He needed to know if there was anything between him and the driver, in front on the opposite side, such as a vertical strut, or a metal grill. Because if there was either of those things, his plan wouldn't work.

Nobody had talked to him since his arrest. Why talk to a hooded, dead man? But they were military, or at least they had been at one stage or another, so it should work. He waited for a pause in their talk fuelled by bravado – they were probably wondering which one of them would get to pop him in the skull. He reckoned they'd make the driver do it. A rite of passage. Probably a rookie, not yet blooded.

The pause came.

'Cigarette?' he asked, nodding through his hood to the one opposite. 'My last, we all know that.'

Silence, except for the van's creaking suspension and the drone of its throaty engine. He imagined questioning looks from the musclemen to the leader, the driver fixing his eyes on the road, maybe a glance in the rear-view mirror.

The dead man had spoken.

A sigh, the rustle of clothing, a pocket unzipped, the sound of a cigarette tapped from the pack. He could smell the nicotine despite the strong diesel fumes. A hand heavy on his shoulder – the muscleman by his side – while the hood was pulled up, just above his mouth, by the one opposite. Vladimir felt cool air on his lips, and smelt the stale coffee breath of the man about to give him a cigarette.

The smack in the mouth wasn't entirely unexpected. Stunned him all the same. He slid off the bench onto the floor, and while three of the men burst out laughing, he stretched out his left leg towards the rear of the driver's seat – nothing in the way, no vertical strut. But there could still be a wire mesh separating the rear compartment from the front. He rocked back onto his knees, and addressed the one who'd hit him. He lowered his head, *bychit*-style, a bull about to charge, and spat out the words amidst spittle and blood from a split lip.

'Mudak, suka, blyad!'

This time the punch was fully expected. He railed back and up, travelling with the force of the uppercut, his head in the gap between the driver and the leader. That cost him a whack from the latter on the top of his head. Didn't matter. *No wire mesh*. Rough hands slotted him back on the bench where he'd started. Profanities poured forth. Nothing he hadn't heard before, or said himself. His face stung. He ignored it. Things settled down. The banter resumed.

He began drawing long breaths, oxygenating his body. He was chilled, because he had no coat. The other men were wrapped in thick commando jackets. It was early spring, still cold. The Volga would be near freezing. Not a problem, he bathed in it every morning. For them, though, it was going to be a different story.

The van slowed. The tick, tick, tick of the indicator. They slowed down further. Stopped. A truck passed fast ahead of them, rocking the high suspension van in its wake. The leader bellowed a command, though he wasn't stupid enough to name the destination. 'This way, this way.' Another lorry – no, a tractor, given the smell of manure – the leader cursing the young driver for not pulling out sooner. The engine revved, the gears engaged, the van pulled forward.

And turned right.

After five minutes the squeaking of the suspension was replaced by hammering as the van powered onto a timber bridge across one of the tributaries to the Volga. Probably towards deserted marshlands where they wouldn't have to dig too deep to bury him. He'd been keeping time in his head, knew roughly where they were – there weren't too many bridges before Vostok.

His father had taken him fishing on this one in the summer, a lifetime ago. Lightweight, wood and iron, swirling rapids below as the chill waters funnelled towards a large basin. Two hundred metres shore to shore, five metres deep with the spring run-off. Deepest point in the middle, which was also the highest point of the bridge. Every ten seconds, the *daka-daka-daka-dak* of tyres running over logs shifted to a metallic *shring*, as the van skipped over the reinforced sections where iron girders spiked down into the riverbed.

He counted. As they approached midway he exhaled fully, emptying his lungs. The instinct to breathe in was based not on lack of oxygen, but on the carbon dioxide in the bloodstream. An apnoea diver's secret. He'd spent time in a naval unit, and could hold his breath for two minutes. But the cuffs around his wrists were a problem. He had to get his

hands in front. In his younger days he'd been able to do it, earning the nickname *Zmiya* – serpent – for his ability to worm out of restraints. He hadn't tried it for years.

Midpoint arrived. He inhaled fully.

He readied his stomach muscles and edged forward on the bench. His thighs engaged to take his weight. *Shring*. He took three fast in-breaths, then pushed off the bench in a spiral and shot out his left leg behind him. The heel of his boot cannoned through the driver's headrest, whacking the young soldier's head into the windscreen.

The two in the back grabbed Vladimir – as he'd predicted they would – which actually stabilised him. His boot back-kicked viciously into the leader's face, then flicked forwards to the driver's head just as it was rebounding off the glass. The driver squealed. The van swerved and crashed through the guard rail, the soldiers' panicked shouts lost amidst the sound of tearing metal and the engine whine as the van's axles spun furiously in mid-air.

Right now, hooded was better.

The other men would see the world spinning around them. One of them screamed. Vladimir, on the other hand, had only to pay attention to the vestibular system in his ears to tell him the position of the van as it slowly somersaulted and yawed to the right. It would fall for less than two seconds. He held his breath. The van was going to strike the water on its right side. He focused on the man opposite, listening in case he moved. Vladimir brought his knees up to his chest.

The van smacked onto the river. Vladimir shot forward. His knees crushed the chest of the guy who had slapped and punched him earlier, imploding his lungs. The thug would drown in his own blood before the water had a chance to kill him. The one who'd been next to Vladimir grunted as his skull smashed into the side of the van, then went silent. Freezing water seeped in. The leader cursed, his seat belt jammed, while the driver made moaning noises. The van began to sink, amidst a loud hissing as water flashed to steam on the engine block.

He had to get the hood off his face before the windows caved in. He rolled onto his back, banging his head against the rear doors, brought his knees up until they touched his chin, then worked his handcuffed wrists over his buttocks and behind his knees. Scrunching himself into as tight a ball as he could, he got them past his boots. He pulled off the hood.

The leader sawed frantically at his seat belt with a serrated knife. Then he turned towards Vladimir. More expletives, and then his final mistake. He stuck the knife into the dashboard so he could take out his pistol to shoot his prisoner. The driver-side window was a quarter open, and the water pouring in made the van roll until it was upside down. The bullet grazed Vladimir's shoulder and shattered the rear window behind. Water gushed inside, rising quickly.

Vladimir waded past the two floating bodies and stood behind the leader, now hanging upside down, trapped by his seat belt. Vladimir leaned forward, retrieved the knife from the dashboard, and slit the man's throat. Searching inside his jacket pocket, he found the keys to the cuffs. The van pitched upwards, so that he had to hang on to the front seats. He worked methodically to get the cuffs off, then took a deep breath as the van gave one last gulp and slipped beneath the surface.

He blinked hard in the stinging, ice-cold water. That was when he noticed the face of the unconscious driver. A girl, not much older than his eldest. What the fuck were they thinking, bringing her on such a mission? He made his decision, and sealed his hand over her mouth and nose to stop her drowning. Luckily she'd not been wearing her seat belt.

But it was going to be a real bitch towing her to shore.