

Blind Target

By Brent Ladd

A Codi Sanders Adventure Thriller

Chapter One

October 1957 – Umnak Island, Aleutian Islands, Alaska – 4:14 a.m.

Engineer Marshal Sergei Popov swallowed back the bile that pushed at the back of his esophagus. Twenty minutes of bobbing up and down in an inflatable raft waiting for the all clear was taking its toll. His moss green face seemed to glow in the dwindling moonlight, as he tried to concentrate on the nodding coastline in the distance. His round face and large eyes made him look frog-like, but his aberrant fear of the water had him clinging to the craft's seat with rigid white knuckles.

A thin, black, mottled silhouette in the distance buoyed up and down with the shadowy sea. It was a land beyond desolate, where few men came and fewer survived—Umnak Island. Popov's vision clouded with darkness in the periphery as his head started to spin. He blinked it away and sipped a lung-full of arctic air. Somebody next to him mumbled something and the raft started to move. *Thank God*, he breathed to no one. Popov was a holdout to the Russian Orthodox faith in an otherwise godless country, a place where the good of the state took priority over all. He turned back to see their leader, Colonel Tolya Alexeev, focused on the growing coastline. The man looked stoic and determined. If anyone could see them through this it would be the colonel.

The eight-man rubber raft pushed through the choppy water and pointed towards a small cove just visible ahead. *America*, Tolya, thought to himself. *Doesn't look like much.*

Tolya removed his goggles for a moment to rub the stinging sensation from his blue-gray eyes. Only moments before, the goggles had protected him from pelting airborne ice crystals. Five degrees below zero with a thirty-mile-an-hour wind was no picnic, but he had seen it all before. And if the reports were correct it was only going to get worse. He absently scratched at an old scar that ran along one side of his strong cleft chin.

Their eight-man state-of-the-art raft was made of a new synthetic rubber designed to provide twice the strength of any previous model. The compartmentalized air pockets allowed it to skim across the water with ease. But it was susceptible to wind, and Tolya struggled to keep it on course. His goggles immediately started to fog.

“Clear,” Tolya said, and the raft picked up speed.

Tolya squinted through drifting clouds. Operation Blind Pig. Tolya smiled. It had to have been named after one of the politburo's wives. He looked over his squad. Three were well-trained men, all Alpha group, OBSP, formed by Minister Zhukov himself. Each had arctic training from the 379th special purpose detachment.

Corporal Misha Ivanov, a six-foot-one battle-hardened commando, had been under Tolya's command during the messy Hungarian Revolution a short while back. Misha's kind brown eyes belied the true fighter inside. He was a man Tolya could trust, an extremely rare trait in Moscow's current political landscape.

Sergeant Kazimir Yegor, or Kaz, as he was called, was the pessimist of the bunch. The man never smiled, but he made up for it by anticipating anything to go wrong at any moment. He was wound as tight as a longbow with a short string. His no-nonsense attitude kept everyone in

line. Kaz was probably the most loyal comrade soldier Tolya had ever known. And one day, over several shots of vodka, he just might see the man smile.

Private Andrei Tatter was a promising cadet from the Suvorov Military School in Leningrad. He even spoke some English. The boy was from solid Russian stock, sinewy, fast like a cheetah, with a perfect smile and biting sarcasm. Something very few Russians seemed to have. He watched as the boy took a nervous swig of water from his canteen to wash the dried salt from his lips.

These were the best the Soviets had to offer. Tolya could have no better company on any mission, even to an island that time had forgotten.

The rest of Colonel Tolya Alexeev's team was a mixed bag of unknowns. He looked across the unit. Each wore snow camouflage outerwear with a large fur-rimmed parka hood, and had no identification of any kind. Identical all, except for one man.

Seated on the starboard second seat, looking more like a refugee from a comedy show than a squad member, was their guide, Chikuk, a Siberian Yupik Eskimo from Inupiaq Island off the coast of Siberia. Chikuk had refused the camouflage clothing in favor of his own winter gear of sealskin and caribou, and no amount of discussion could change his mind. The man had lived and thrived in some of the harshest winter conditions on the planet. He wore a perpetually disdainful expression, as though everyone around him was inept. But if anyone could guide them through this arctic winter operation on foot, it was he.

“Ah,” a man called out.

The raft had hit a particularly large crest, and subzero-degree water breached over the gunwale. Tolya watched as the man next to Chikuk lifted his feet in the air, fearful of the cold. Zampolit Traktor Yashin was what every special forces squad going to America required—a

political officer. Traktor was missing most of his hair and all of a personality. He wore a scowl he had been nursing since fifty-two. His beady black eyes seemed to take in everything around him and yet managed to see nothing. For Tolya, he was a 100-kg anchor on a 5-kg boat, and if he thought he could get away with it, he would have pushed the man over the side an hour ago. Ideology and indoctrination had no place on this mission, but the Deputy Chairman of the MPA in the Ministry of Defense had insisted. Tolya was almost positive Traktor was the man's nephew.

Good old Mother Russia, ever fearful of defectors and the bad press it carried, suffered from a terminal case of paranoia. Tolya scoffed at the thought that these men would defect. They were battle-hardened Soviet soldiers. They bled Russian red and would give their lives for the motherland.

The man who looked like he was about to vomit was Engineer Marshal Sergei Popov. A transfer from the science and engineering corps, Popov was the key to this operation, and Tolya's personal responsibility. In his arms Popov clutched a waterproof canvas package that held the latest in Russian technology. An electrical leach, he called it. No matter what lay ahead, Colonel Tolya Alexeev had one responsibility: make sure that leach was activated.

Visibility dropped to near zero as the clouds finally won their battle and filled the world with billowy cotton. It was a total whiteout with visibility mere meters. The new-generation optics was a joke. Sure, it helped block ultraviolet radiation, and the second-generation polarization cut snow glare significantly, but it was useless in these conditions. The damn thing kept fogging up. The GSS's science division was great at theory, but their lack of practical application often made men like Tolya guinea pigs. As he tried to navigate, he pictured the scientists here now giving their new equipment a try. His chapped lips cracked as he smiled.

“*Click.*” Chikuk made a soft clicking sound as the Yupik Eskimos do. He pointed with a flat vertical palm.

Tolya adjusted his course. Almost immediately, a dark mass pushed through the low clouds, and a small black rock cove covered mostly in ice appeared. The lava-strewn beach was a battle of black versus white, truly inhospitable. Tolya readied himself. This was what he was made for, the apex of extreme, living on the razor’s edge with a life-and-death mission to fulfill.

He cut the engine and coasted towards the hummock-lined shore. They must operate in total silence.

Misha leaned over the front of the raft and, using an oar, broke through the hoarfrost to carve a path.

Once they reached more substantial ice, the team disembarked. Like a well-practiced drill, all gear and personnel was unloaded and moved across the frozen sea and up to the shore. The crunching of rocks and the cracking of ice underfoot was masked by the crashing of waves against the perpetually frozen barrier. A mix of stacked ice and frozen sea foam covered the shore, eventually transitioning to polished, rime-covered rocks.

Tolya glanced over at Chikuk who knelt briefly and mumbled some sort of prayer or greeting. The Eskimo then selected a smooth pebble, scraped the ice from it, placed it in his pocket, and stood for a brief moment, unmoving. Then, just as quickly, he was back helping the others drag the gear up the beach and onto the snow-covered landscape beyond the shore.

Traktor tried to stifle a sneeze as he moved empty-handed to the high-tidemark. He bent at the waist and tried to flick off the slush that had accumulated on his boots. He then stamped his feet up and down as though the American soil had tainted his soles.

Tolya looked around at the near whiteout conditions and felt confident their actions had not been seen. Given the choice, he would have approached this mission very differently, including the team selection. But the powers-that-be had turned a deaf ear to his ideas and dictated the terms. This was a “yes, sir” assignment right from the beginning. This new-fangled “cold war” was nothing like Tolya had experienced. He would have faced his enemy rather than steal around in the shadows. But different times called for different strategies. Still, he was not about to step foot on foreign soil without something to connect him to Mother Russia. He fingered his Order of Lenin medal he kept hidden away in his breast pocket, a reminder of home and why he was here.

His mind started to drift to a past mission—death, screaming, blood—so much blood. The screams of the innocent blended with the wind fighting its way up the cove.

“Colonel.” Kaz was looking at him. “We’re ready.”

Tolya pulled himself back to the moment and gave Kaz a curt nod. Without hesitation, Kaz ran to the sea. He spun the black raft around, pointing the bow out to open ocean. He pulled out his DV-1 combat knife and made several slashes in the raft. He started the motor and released it.

The squad watched as the craft moved past the waves and finally succumbed to the impassionate sea, sinking out of sight with a gurgle and a sputter from the drowning motor.

The group stood in silence. They had reached the point of no return.

Colonel Tolya Alexeev looked at Engineer Marshal Sergei Popov. “You ready?”

His pale white face with nervous brown eyes nodded. Popov held his canvas bag close.

The squad reconfigured their gear and set off at a brisk pace with Chikuk in the lead, and Kaz, his bushy eyebrows already frosted over, taking up the rear.

Here at the top of the world, the wind and clouds were a living, breathing entity in itself. It was the ultimate hunter: cruel, unceasing, inescapable. The beast slowed the squad down, blowing and scouring the ground like a ravenous creature.

Chikuk looked back and called out, “Stay close. It’s not the cold that kills, it’s the wind.”

The ground was relatively flat but frozen so hard it was like walking on slippery uneven concrete. The sun had risen to its pinnacle for the day, just inches above the horizon. It cast a greenish-orange anemic glow as it played peek-a-boo with the transient clouds. This time of year the sun was up for only a few hours, traveling low across the horizon and providing almost no warmth. The rock-covered tundra gave way to multiple snowdrifts that had to be skirted or climbed. After eighteen miles of dragging gear and coping with the bitter cold, the team’s progress had slowed dramatically.

Tolya stopped them. He crept up behind a large volcanic boulder and took out his binoculars. He could no longer feel his fingers and wondered how the rest of his squad was coping. A large steel-gray monolith, near completion, stood in the distance. It was a testament to modern man. Here on Umnak Island, thousands of miles from anything, was the most sophisticated piece of electrical engineering in the world—the DEW Line, as the Americans called it, or, Distant Early Warning System.

Tolya was proud in his belief that it was the superior military strength of Russia that had caused the paranoid American bastards to build an 800-mile chain of radar tracking and alerting stations. With it they could detect a plane crossing the Arctic Circle out of Soviet Russia, and then scramble their jets to intercept. “All that ends today,” Tolya said to himself.

He panned the binoculars and focused on the base where three men worked. He saw that a single guard was stationed nearby, his eyes glazed with boredom. Tolya turned and headed back to his huddled team.

Chikuk secured the last post on a black and white camouflaged dome tent. It was a new design that could withstand extreme weather. They had placed it in a small depression, and from fifty feet away, it was invisible. Tolya stepped through the flap and was greeted with a wall of warm air that smelled of burnt tobacco and fear, and for the first time in nine hours, no wind. It was a balmy minus five degrees Celsius inside, but it felt like summer to him.

Engineer Popov's color had returned to his face. He was hunched over, inspecting and organizing his gear: three gray boxes the size of a loaf of bread with odd connectors attached at both ends, two for the mission and one as backup. These were his charge and the entire mission depended on his unique skill set. Though not a social person by nature, Popov lived in the here-and-now of electrical science. Capacitors, resistors and circuits were his domain.

In the middle of the tent, Traktor was hunched over and scribbling in a little black notebook he kept in his breast pocket. His eyes darted from person to person, then back to his writing. The political officer's patented dour expression was relentlessly on display, a shield to keep the curious away.

Tolya moved to his second in command, Sergeant Kazimir, "How's the radio working, Kaz?"

"I'm getting a ping from our shadow."

Tolya nodded as he took off his arctic combat boots and rubbed the circulation back into his toes. The boots were made of a new kind of vulcanized rubber with an inflatable bladder to

act as a weather barrier. There was little doubt of their effectiveness, but still, subarctic cold had a way of infiltrating everything, even your bones.

Chikuk was off to one side eating some kind of dried meat. He seemed unfazed by the day's activities and looked as if he could do it all again. Misha moved over and sat next to him. He held out his canteen and offered Chikuk a drink. In return, Chikuk offered him some of his mystery meat. Misha took the dark chunk in his hand and sniffed it.

Chikuk smiled at his hesitation. "Walrus mixed with crowberry. It's good."

Misha took a bite and tried to make a pleasant face. "Have you ever been to America before?" he whispered. He glanced over his shoulder, concerned that the political officer might be listening.

"I have cousins that live a couple of islands to the north from here." Chikuk gestured with his hands. "We have met for hunts in the summer. Good hunting there."

"I like to hunt," Misha said.

Chikuk reached over and squeezed his arm. "Hunting keep you strong." His cheeks spread into a smile revealing a missing front tooth and genuine care.

Misha returned it with an effervescent smile of his own.

Tolya was touched. Two men, worlds apart, finding common ground.

Chapter Two

October 1957 – Umnak Island – 4:12 p.m. – That Afternoon

The wiper worked overtime against a losing battle, as a mix of airborne snow and sleet attacked the windshield. Four separate thousand-watt headlamps pierced the dusk as the last rays of the day's paltry sun dipped below the horizon.

Private Jenkins gazed out of the fogged-up side window of the Le Toureau Logistical Car VC-22 Sno-Freighter, as it moved along the ice and lava rock coast. It was a unique land train built to cross deep rivers and snow while pulling 150 tons of equipment. The cockpit of the VC-22 sat fifteen feet up in the air, and the segmented windshield angled forward, giving the vehicle the appearance of a praying mantis. But it was no insect, with eight-hundred horsepower powering twenty-four electric motors, one for each wheel including the five trail cars behind it. The VC-22 was truly a train without a track. The Sno-Freighter had high ground clearance, with eight-foot-tall tires that allowed it to clear debris up to four feet in height, and all at subarctic temperatures.

Jenkins had spent the last four hours wondering how he had gotten to this place in his life. Things used to be good for him. He was respected in certain circles of Chicago. Now he was a bottom-rung private caught up in some mad race against the Soviets.

As a flyweight fighter, Jenkins had proven himself in the ring. It was a skill brought on by desperation. He was the only provider for his family. His mother Agatha and little sister Penny depended on him for everything. Agatha had lost a leg from type-one diabetes and found work to be impossible for a one-legged black woman. And as much as she hated her son Jenkins fighting, she knew it was the street for all of them if he failed.

Jenkins had excelled for a time, eventually becoming a local favorite. He leveraged that success into a chance at the national stage. That was before a bad decision and trouble with the law left him a choice: jail or the army. Now, every penny he could spare from his private's salary went to his family. When his new orders came through to this posting, he'd been furious. But when he learned it meant a bump in pay, he was all in.

The Sno-Freighter jostled through a ravine, banging Jenkins back to the present. Up ahead he could see a massive, partially-illuminated structure. Towering sixty feet in the air, its concave surface was painted navy gray. A smaller column stood at its midpoint, pointing a receiver at the huge reflecting dish.

The tungsten work light rattled as the Sno-Freighter came to a stop next to the load-out area of DEW LRR Site 42. Jenkins climbed down the exit ladder from the cockpit and jumped the last two feet to the frozen ground. He stomped his feet and looked back up at the odd vehicle. Written in a mix of yellow cursive and block letters was the company's logo, Alaska Freightline Inc. With a practiced motion, he tapped out a single Lucky Strike from his pack and ducked behind the tall front tire to block the wind from his lighter. The sweet acrid smoke filled his lungs and calmed his frenzied nerves. He had arrived.

He watched as men and equipment unloaded the Sno-Freighter. The navy gray structure towered up into the clouds. It was constructed of individual steel plates making the surface look

like a one-color jigsaw puzzle, where all the pieces were rectangles. Off to his right was an unpainted wooden building about the size of a four-car garage, and beyond that was nothing but ice and lava rock. Jenkins took another draw on his cigarette and exhaled decisively. The cold here made a bad Chicago winter look like swimsuit weather. He must have really pissed off somebody to deserve this posting.

Inside the wooden building was a common area with a small well stocked bar. The walls were unfinished plywood, and the floor was covered with thin green linoleum. There was a pool table and a reading area. The duty officer's desk was to the left. Beyond that, several doors led to sleeping quarters and a communal head. Jenkins reported to the commanding officer and was issued a cot and guard duty. Two shifts, four hours on, four hours off. Nobody stayed out in the cold longer than four hours. This was a standing order based on an incident three months back. His cot was a two-tiered affair that was shared with three other workers. Privacy was a thing of the past.

Chikuk leaned against the wind with his nose held high. He took a deliberate sniff. Then, with a curt hand gesture, pointed the squad in an arc around to the left.

The sun had long since gone down and the temperature was continuing to plummet. There were no workers on the grounds of the DEW LRR Site 42, only one guard.

Corporal Misha Ivanov stayed low in a crouch as he took his time moving silently through the loose rock, his trusted DV-1 combat blade in one hand and a grapefruit-size rock in the other.

The silhouetted figure next to a burning drum was facing away. Tolya watched, longing for the man to stay just like that. The fifty-five-gallon steel drum popped and hissed as the fire devoured the wood inside. The wind had died to a constant thirty kilometers per hour.

The plan was simple. Misha was to take out the guard, making it look like an accident, and get Popov and his gizmo in and out of the facility as quickly as possible.

But plans have a way of falling apart the moment you make contact with the enemy. Whatever the reason, no one would ever know, maybe the man's back was cold, but the soldier turned from the fire and stared right at Misha.

Misha froze. At first the soldier seemed not to notice him in the dark. He continued to puff on his cigarette, staring out into the night, right in his direction.

Colonel Tolya Alexeev tensed as the squad helplessly watched the machinations play out from a distance. Kaz pulled his Makarov MP-71 and put the bead on the soldier's heart. Tolya raised his hand to stop him. The meaning was clear: no unnecessary gunplay or noise.

Private Jenkins paused to brush at a bit of tobacco stuck on his tongue, the cold nearly freezing his open mouth. The roaring fire did little to abate the encroaching chill. He imagined himself a rotisserie chicken roasting as it slowly turned in the flames. Only in this case it was to keep from freezing.

Jenkins leaned back, looking up at a spectacle of colored flames slowly dancing across the black sky. The collage flowed and wavered in an incandescent aura of azures and deep reds. The local Inuit called them spirit lights, but he knew them as the aurora borealis. It was a spectacular sight.

Jenkins drew the last puff on the spent cigarette and flicked it. As he watched the glowing ember spin through the air, something caught his attention. Something was wrong.

Two human eyes with a feral look stared back at him in the span between flame and blackness. This was no fellow coworker. The man stood stock still, holding a large knife in his left hand. Jenkins quickly moved to unsling his M-1 rifle and call out an alarm, but his voice failed and only an unintelligible squawk came out that was quickly carried away by the wind.

The intruder didn't hesitate. Like a cat touching fire for the first time, he leaped headlong. But the loose rocks and ice gave way and he lost purchase. Jenkins reacted fast by pulling the rifle off his parka and taking a quick shot from the hip.

Click.

He quickly realized he hadn't chambered a round. If this was a drill, he just failed. In one practiced motion he put his mitten in his mouth, bit down and pulled it off. He racked the bolt on his rifle and chambered a round. He scarcely noticed the skin on his hand as it ripped free, sticking to the frozen metal of his weapon. But he did notice that this wasn't over.

The man hurled his rock attempting to delay the rifle's firing, but Jenkins feinted left and it flew past harmlessly. The man jabbed his blade, aiming for Jenkins' ribs, but ended up getting nothing but air.

Jenkins' mind and body instantly switched to autopilot. He dropped his stance, spread his legs and returned to his days fighting in the ring. His movements came without thinking. He used his rifle to parry the man and his knife to the side and swept the butt of the rifle around bringing it full force on the back of the intruder's head.

Gore and white matter from the back of the man's head was clearly visible. Jenkins stared down at the unmoving man. He tapped him with his boot, his stomach convulsing at the sight.

Suddenly, another man came from nowhere, followed by more men.

Jenkins spun around, still in shock. The world had gone deathly silent and seemed to slowly spin. He placed his now frostbitten hand up to his mouth to call for help. From some primitive place in his brain, there grew a crunching noise, but by the time he turned, the wind was pushed from his lungs as he took flight and landed hard.

He struggled against overwhelming odds. One of the men said something in Russian. The reality of it hit. This was no drill.

Tolya tackled the soldier at full pace, and five more of his men followed behind. The guard was immediately overwhelmed. They held him tight to the ground while one man covered his mouth and nose.

Within moments the team had suffocated the guard. They quickly moved to Misha and rolled him over. Tatter held the man's head in his arms. There was no movement.

Misha, the man who had been loyal to a tee, was no more. Strangely, he wore a slight smile on his rapidly cooling face. Corporal Misha Ivanov had died doing what he loved most.

Colonel Tolya Alexeev kicked the ground in anger and loosed a few choice words. It was an unimaginable disaster, but something they had all trained for. He would have to refocus the squad quickly, or face losing them. Later he would grieve for his friend and one of the fiercest warriors he had ever known.

Suddenly, Chikuk ran off into the stygian night. "What is he doing?" Tolya asked.

"Taking a piss," said Tatter, ever the sarcastic wit.

“Unbelievable. Tell him to fucking hold it. We have a major problem on our hands.”

Tolya turned to Engineer Marshal Sergei Popov. “You have five minutes, not a second more. Understand?”

His tone left no doubt. Popov dashed off with his canvas bag in hand.

“Tatter, go with him.”

Private Tatter gave a quick nod as he ran off in the engineer’s footsteps.

“Colonel.” Chikuk had returned and was motioning to the remaining team.

“What now?” Tolya said.

“Bring body.”

The team quickly cleaned the site, grabbed the two bodies and moved off with Chikuk.

There in the snow was a pool of frozen yellow. It took a second, but Tolya understood Chikuk’s plan. They unzipped the soldier’s parka, took off his gloves, and lowered his zipper. The next shift would find him frozen while taking a piss too far from the fire. They would claim it a rookie mistake and think nothing more of it. At least that was the hope.

Popov stopped at the bottom of the radar tower where a small pyramid-shaped structure housed and connected all the wiring before sending it to the building next door. He stooped by the metal double doors that held the wiring for the antenna’s receiver.

The tall tower sprouted straight up from the roof of the metal pyramid. A highly-tuned receiving unit collected waves that reflected from the surface of the immense dish. It could pick up even the faintest of distant sounds and distinguish what they were through a collection of sophisticated vacuum-tube electronics stored in the nearby building. This information was then relayed to other stations along the chain and ultimately to a quick-response base located in Fairbanks.

Picking a simple padlock was easy, but not at minus ten in the wind. Popov finally heard the click as the hasp gave way. He quickly opened the doors and climbed inside. Tatter kept watch from just outside.

Popov pulled off his mittens and rubbed his hands together trying to bring them back to functionality. He clicked on his flashlight with the red lens to protect his night vision. Popov selected one of the gray boxes from his bag and began the process of installing it between the receiving console and the output cable. He stood on top of the radio box and unscrewed the twenty-eight-wire-pin coupling that attached the antenna to the console. He quickly inspected the pin configuration and admired the level of intel they were working from. Satisfied they were a match, he reattached each end of the connector to the electrical leach and hid the whole thing in a mass of wires that ran back to the receiver.

He climbed down to the floor and sat next to a console, and pulled out his portable battery-operated oscilloscope, a marvel of modern technology. He connected it to the wires leading to the transmitter and hit the selector knob. The signal coming into the unit showed a strong, consistent, cycling green wave, like a never-ending snake. Popov then flipped a switch on the scope and the same sine wave now had a small but definite spike on the upper arch of each wave. Satisfied that his job here was done, he packed up his equipment and left the compartment.

The squad met up back in the domed tent. Misha's body lay wrapped in a tarp off to one side, a sharp reminder of what was at stake for them all. Tolya knelt next to the body. He pulled back the tarp. A stone stared back at him. His friend was no longer human. The cold had claimed him. It would probably take them all before this job was done.

Tolya bowed his head in deep respect, thinking, “Of all the unlucky...” He stopped this train of thought, as it would do him no good. He slipped the red and gold medal with the profile of Vladimir Lenin from his pocket and held it in his hand. He whispered, “You deserve this more than I, Misha.” He slipped his Order of Lenin medal into Misha’s breast pocket, touched the dead soldier’s face for a brief moment, and finally pulled the tarp back over his head.

“Comrade Alexeev,” the political officer stepped towards Tolya, attempting to engage him.

“It’s *Colonel* Alexeev.” Tolya put his hand up to stop him from continuing. “And we can discuss this later.”

Tolya turned to the whole team, and said, “I want everything packed up now. We must be miles from here when they find that body. We leave in ten.”

Tolya looked to the now-stationary Zampolit Traktor Yashin, his face betraying the challenge he had intended for Tolya. “You best get a move on, ‘Comrade,’” he said. “This is a bad place to be left behind.” With that, he turned his back on Traktor and went to grab his gear.

“Colonel, what do we do with Misha?” Private Tatter asked.

“We bring him with us. No evidence of any kind gets left behind.”

“Understood, sir.”

The whiteout was complete. Snow, clouds, and wind mixed together against the black of night. Tolya reconfigured his parka for the third time in an attempt to block out the cold. The squad pushed against the merciless gale, their quick march doing little to maintain core temperature. And after six hours battling the harsh conditions it was taking its toll. Tolya could no longer feel his extremities.

The group had slowed, moving at about forty percent of their original pace. All except for Chikuk. He looked like he was just getting started. They had over twenty miles still to go and less than forty-eight hours to do it in. It was an impossible task. Tolya gave them a thirty percent chance of success. They were poor odds, but based on their situation and what was at stake, he would take them.

Sergeant Kazimir Yegor scooted next to Tolya and pointed a small flashlight covered with a red lens at his compass. "It says we need to go in this direction."

Tolya glanced down at the needle pointing off to his left.

"This far north the declination could be as much as seventy degrees off, Kaz. I recommend continuing up this grade." He pointed towards what looked like the beginning of a hill where, just visible through the gloom, was Chikuk.

"Just keep the wind on your left," said Tolya. "It's better than a compass up here."

Kaz nodded and returned the compass to his pocket.

Tatter abruptly appeared from out of the gloom, pulling a small sled with Misha's body, his red flashlight barely illuminating the ground around him. He bent at the waist trying to catch his breath. He wore a grim expression.

Chikuk, who carried no flashlight, suddenly returned. "We need to go around," Chikuk said. "Sludge ice ahead, very dangerous."

Traktor piped up. "What's sludge ice?"

Tolya looked to the political officer and said, "I don't know, and I don't want to know." Turning back to Tatter, he said, "Do what Chikuk says."

Tolya looked at his wristwatch and did a quick calculation in his head. "We have about two hours left before sunrise. And stay together. Do not lose sight of the man in front of you."

The team moved northwest in an attempt to skirt the problem that lay ahead, sludge ice. Each step was now labored as they moved against the heartless arctic wind.

“Comrade Alexeev.”

Tolya kept marching, his eyes fixed on Tatter five meters in front of him, nothing more than a fuzzy red shape.

“Comrade Alexeev!” Zampolit Traktor Yashin ran forward, now matching his stride, huffing with desperation.

Tolya gave him the briefest of glances. “What do you need, Political Officer Yashin?”

“This is madness. We need to stop. My hands, the pain.”

Tolya could tell the man was struggling, but had no sympathy for a government stooge.

“I’ll decide when we stop. Let me know if the pain stops. That’s when you need to worry.”

“No mission is worth a man’s life, comrade.”

“Tell that to your uncle.” Tolya glanced at the man.

Traktor fought for every breath. “He sent us here to get a leg up on the Americans, not to die on their soil and create an international incident.”

Tolya trudged on mechanically. Finally, he stopped and turned to Traktor, freezing him in his steps. “Comrade, I have no plans to die here, but if you do, I’ll be sure to put you on a sled and bring you back to your family.”

Traktor stiffened. “You know I have orders to kill anyone who even looks at the Americans with envy.”

Tolya let the comment sit for a second, continuing to move forward. “Is that so? Well, I have orders to kill anyone who interferes with this mission, and right now that’s *you*.” The wind howled, emphasizing that last word.

Tolya continued on, then looked back over his shoulder and called, “Besides, what do the Americans have to envy? More money than sense if they are wasting it on this silly endeavor. They will surely lose in the end.”

The colonel stopped and looked straight at Traktor. “Zampolit Traktor Yashin, please get back in line before I put a bullet in your head. Oh, and please remember to put all this in your little report.”

Traktor straightened and looked at Tolya with black eyes that could kill. He slowly reached for his pocket.

“Please try it,” Tolya said.

Tolya shot a furtive glance just beyond Traktor, which made Traktor look over. Walking just off to his side was Kaz, and in his hand was a large pistol pointed straight at the Political Officer’s spine.

“Now get your ass back in line, ‘Comrade.’”

Traktor remained defiant and unmoving as he watched Tolya turn his back and disappear into the night.

Anger flushed Traktor’s frostbitten face, focusing him to a single conclusion. This mission was doomed under the command of Colonel Tolya Alexeev. The arrogant ass was going to get them all killed. What Operation Blind Pig needed was the finesse and cunning of a man like himself. Not some blunt-nosed instrument like Tolya.

It was his duty to Mother Russia to remove that swine from command. He pondered at several possibilities, each ending up with the death of Colonel Tolya Alexeev. This made him smile as he savored the feeling, slowly lowering his pulsing blood pressure.

Traktor looked up. There was no one ahead in the gloom. Nothing but the unbroken parade of clouds as they whisked past the meager glow of his red-lensed flashlight. They seemed to be in a foolish hurry to some unknown destination. He blinked the frost from his eyes and spun behind him. No one behind him. Panic began to crawl up his spine as uncontrollable shivers set in. He called out several times, but only the lonely call of a howling wind replied. It seemed to laugh and mock him with its high-pitched scream. He looked to the frozen ground, but the blowing snow had erased any footsteps. How long had he been standing there thinking of Tolya's demise?

Traktor ran forward, shouting, "Comrades!"

Again, his words were grabbed and pulled away by the gale. He continued blindly forward as he pulled out his hand compass. It pointed off to his right. He adjusted accordingly and quickly trudged forward. As he moved he noticed a change in the ice. It had taken on a honey-like consistency. He continued through it, his rubberized boots temporarily holding the wetness at bay.

Then, for a brief moment, the blowing clouds parted and visibility jumped to nearly a thousand meters. A pool of moonlight speared what looked like the edge of a small shallow inlet in front of him. On the other side of the inlet was the red glow of his team's flashlights. The surface of the inlet was greasy in appearance, not solid. He screamed for all he was worth but the team continued on, unaware.

Traktor pulled his pistol out and raised it in the air. Then, remembering their strict orders about gunplay, he put it away. He quickly started moving through the slushy water around the shallow inlet to catch up with his team. It was only about twelve inches deep and his boots were holding up just fine. The Eskimo was an idiot. The political officer was saving significant distance by going this way. All he had to do was catch up before the whiteout returned.

Just as quickly as the team had appeared, the indifferent clouds once again swallowed them up. Traktor sloshed through the slushy conditions as fast as his legs would carry him. A surge of sudden adrenaline briefly warmed his core as he redoubled his efforts. He would not be left behind.

A sound like cracking ice came from behind him, spurring him on. Suddenly, the sound came from all around him. The slush began freezing at an alarming rate. Zampolit Traktor Yashin felt bile and fear stab at his guts. He panicked and sprinted for the shoreline. Then, like a shadow of a bird passing overhead, the slush transitioned from a semi-liquid to a solid. In an instant, Traktor was snared mid-calf, both legs gripped solidly by the ice. He tried to move, but he was caught like a fly in amber.

He thrashed wildly but his lower legs held firm in the grasp of the freeze. The cold fought through the layers of his clothing seeking warm skin. He screamed and pulled his Tokarev TT-30 from its holster with swollen, numb fingers. He emptied the magazine in the direction he had last seen the squad, secrecy be damned.

Tolya put his hand to his mouth and gave a quick whistle. The action caused a blast of pain across his cracked lips. The squad came to a stop and gathered together.

“Do you hear that?” he asked.

In the distance a faint clap of thunder popped. Kaz lifted his head. “Is that gunfire?” he said.

“Colonel!” Engineer Marshal Sergei Popov stepped over to the group looking around. “Political Leader Traktor Yashin is missing.”

“How is that possible?” Tolya asked Popov.

“I was just following the man in front of me and...”

Before he could finish, Tolya backhanded him across the face, dropping the man like a sack of rotted meat. Being new to Tolya’s team, Engineer Popov didn’t know his commander’s dislike for excuses. In his squad you owned up to your mistakes.

“Form a search grid from right here, two by two,” Tolya said. “Tatter, Chikuk, grid one.” Tolya pointed in the direction they should search.

“Kaz, Popov, grid two. Be back here in ten minutes. Then we’ll move to the next sections.”

The men ran off, side by side, searching their quadrant. Tolya, as the anchor person could only pace and wait, muttering to himself, “Damn it, we don’t have time for this.” He looked down at the tarp that held Misha’s body. The cost of this mission was already too high.

Traktor sat down on the now hard surface of the inlet. He processed his predicament. Luckily, he was actually feeling warm so he didn’t have to worry about the cold anymore. He took out his knife and started chipping away at the ice that held his feet. As he worked, he felt his body get hot. He took off his parka so he could move more freely.

One leg was almost free; he could see the top of his shoe through the ice. He stifled a yawn; he was tired. This had been an arduous journey. After a short rest, he would start back up.

He lay back on the ice and rested his eyes for just a moment. His hands felt too warm so he took off his gloves. *Ah, better.*

He thought of his summers back in Dzhubga, along the Black Sea. It was a small town formed by Cossacks in the 1860's, and it was his family's favorite getaway. They had a small birch cabin on a hill that had the most incredible sunset views. He could picture the orange glow across the dark water as his mother and father sat side by side on a carved bench sharing tea as black as the ocean at midnight. He would run through the woods and pick wildflowers for the table. His mother was always so proud of him.

Traktor had an odd thought... *sludge ice very dangerous*, before drifting off.

After the second grid search, Chikuk and Tatter returned with the news. They had found their political officer.

Tolya looked down at their missing team member, lying on his back frozen solid. His feet were still trapped in the ice; his parka, gloves, and hat were off to the side.

Kaz mumbled, "Paradoxical undressing, one of the last signs of hypothermia."

Tatter looked confused, but he couldn't take his eyes off of the frozen man on the ice.

Kaz looked up at the boy and continued. "You think you're warm so you take off your clothes."

An awkward silence hung in the mourning wind. Tolya broke it. "Get him out of there."

Kaz looked at the Traktor's trapped legs. "What about his feet?"

"Cut 'em off. We've wasted enough time here." Tolya turned and walked away. He should have pushed the man overboard when he had the chance. Now they would have to drag two bodies with them.

Chikuk took out an ice saw and started on Traktor's left leg.