

*VorkutLag 51 Strict Regime Penal Colony, Komi Autonomous
Soviet Socialist Republic, USSR, June 1963*

In the pale twilight of an Arctic summer night, three men ran for their lives through an endless sea of knee-high shrubs and scrub grass. Far behind them a huddle of prison buildings encircled in barbed wire stood like a lighted island in the surrounding gloom. A signal rocket soared into the sky and descended slowly, casting hard black shadows in the half-light.

High in a watchtower the penal colony's commander focused his binoculars on the fleeing figures, ignoring the mosquitoes which swarmed in clouds around him. By his side, his second-in-command shaded his eyes against the flare light and squinted at the retreating figures.

"Troika. Classic." The burly officer's voice was hoarse as rusty nails in a bucket. "Two old lags and a young kid. The cow."

The commandant lowered his field glasses and eyed his deputy with distaste.

"The *cow*, Major Chemizov?"

"If they don't find food within a couple of days, they smash the kid's head in and eat him. The cow."

"And where would they find food, out there in the tundra?"

Chemizov shrugged.

"Might find some native herders. Cut their throats, steal their food. Happened a couple of years back."

"Did they make it to freedom?"

"Freedom? The dead herders' relatives hunted them down, stripped 'em naked, and left them hog-tied in the tundra. Mosquitoes and

crows ate them alive.” Chemizov peered once more at the men’s retreating figures as they shimmered and slurred into the twilight. “Range six . . . seven hundred meters, Comrade Colonel. We’ll lose them in the undergrowth in a minute.”

Wearily, the commander turned to a young soldier who had been keeping his sniper rifle beaded on the fleeing men as his superiors spoke.

“Very well,” said Colonel Alexander Vasin. “Fire at will.”

2

Leningrad, USSR, September 1963

A pool of lamplight illuminated a cluttered dressing table covered in scribbled notes. Andrei Fyodorov crushed out a cigarette on the upturned lid of a face powder tin and lit another. Inhaling deeply, he leaned forward and examined his own reflection in the glass of the grimy windowpane.

Christ, he thought. You look like shit. Even for a dead man.

Behind him a key fumbled in the door lock. Startled, Fyodorov hurriedly scooped his papers into a pile and turned them over, spilling ash and sending cosmetics rolling across the floor.

“Who is it?”

“*Andrei?* Is that you?”

Fyodorov picked up his chair, crossed the room, and wedged it under the door handle before opening the door a crack. A tall woman, gray-eyed and slim, stood alone in the brightly lit corridor. Ksenia.

Kicking the chair aside, Fyodorov opened the door and pulled the woman inside before relocking it. Ksenia reached for the light switch, but he seized her wrist. Her gaze traveled across Fyodorov’s haggard face for a long moment before she pulled her hand free and embraced him.

“My God, Andrei! What are you doing here? How—”

Fyodorov silenced her with a lingering kiss before pushing her gently away.

“Were you followed?”

She shook her head but kept her eyes fixed on his.

“What happened? You’re meant to be in America.”

“I can’t tell you.”

“You said you’d be away for months. It’s been three weeks.”

“I was given new orders. Orders I could not follow.”

“What do you mean? What did they want you to do?”

“All you need to know is that . . . I could not.”

“Couldn’t or wouldn’t?”

In the shaded lamplight, Fyodorov smiled tightly in answer. Ksenia took two steps backward and sat heavily on a bed covered in scattered clothes. Her eyes glistened bright in the lamplight.

“You refused orders. From the KGB.”

“Yes.”

“How much time do we have?”

“I don’t know, Ksenia. But I need you to hide some documents for me. I’ll tell you where. Don’t read them. Promise me. You can’t read them.”

“You’re in danger.” Ksenia’s voice was hollow and flat. Her pale gaze, meeting his, was like a splash of cold water. Fyodorov turned to the window and ran his hands slowly through his hair.

“Correct. You won’t see me for a while. But I have a plan.”

Silently, Ksenia stood once more and embraced Fyodorov from behind, her face laid against his back. The sound of passing traffic rose from the street. From somewhere down the corridor came a muffled cacophony of martial music as one of Ksenia’s neighbors turned on the radio.

“Andrei. Are they going to kill you?”

“They’re going to try.”

PART ONE

22 NOVEMBER—
5 DECEMBER
1963

You are strong only as long as you don't deprive people of everything. For a person you've taken everything from is no longer in your power. He's free all over again.

—ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN,
The First Circle

VorkutLag 51, 22 November 1963

The news came over Soviet State Radio Mayak, blaring in the empty officers' mess as Vasin sat at a plain wooden table, eating alone.

“Comrade radio listeners. We have interrupted our broadcast because of a distressing report we have just received from New York.”

Vasin looked up abruptly at the bulky speaker, as if at a television.

“It has been officially announced that US President John Kennedy has died in a hospital after having been the victim of an attack by, it is supposed, persons from extreme right-wing elements. US President John Kennedy and Texas Governor John Connally fell under the bullets of assassins while driving in an open car through the streets of Dallas. There were three shots. One of the bullets struck the President in the head . . .”

The report might have come from the moon, or some other distant planet of warmth and light. Somewhere, beyond hundreds of kilometers of tundra and boreal forest, there was a world where great events happened. Vasin understood the words of the news bulletin, but his mind could not put images to them, or meaning. He tried to turn his attention back to his cabbage soup but found his appetite had vanished.

For nearly a year, the VorkutLag 51 Strict Regime Penal Colony had been Vasin's kingdom—and his personal calvary. The American spy Oleg Morozov had been arrested and executed. Morozov's unwitting protector General Ivan Serov was removed from his post as the head of Soviet military intelligence and expelled from the Party. All thanks to KGB Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander Vasin.

But to accomplish his last mission Vasin had broken rules, burned bridges—even committed what some would call treason.

What his boss, General Orlov, head of the KGB's secretive Special Cases Department, *did* call treason.

As Vasin had always feared, Orlov's revenge had been particularly exquisite. He had sent his rebellious subordinate to VorkutLag, the Soviet Union's most notorious prison colony. Not as an inmate—General Orlov had at least spared him that—but as a camp commandant. The promotion was in reality a prison sentence. In this frozen world two hundred kilometers north of the tree line and four days by train from Moscow, Vasin felt more of a prisoner than the convicts under his charge.

In its heyday in the 1940s, VorkutLag had been a vast archipelago of coal mines and penal colonies that spread hundreds of kilometers across the swath of barren Arctic scrubland. Over the years of Stalin's rule some eighteen million Soviet citizens, most of them political prisoners, had passed through the gulag system—six hundred thousand of them in Vorkuta alone. At least a million and a half had perished. But on Stalin's death ten years before, the new Party boss, Nikita Khrushchev, had ordered the political prisoners freed. Now, VorkutLag was, for the most part, a wasteland of empty barracks crumbling into the swamps of the Pechora Basin. The coal mines around the city of Vorkuta itself remained open but were now manned by free laborers lured to the Arctic by the promise of high wages and long vacations in the south. Of the once sprawling camp complex that surrounded Vorkuta only Camp 51 and a handful like it remained, each housing some five hundred of the most violent criminals in the Soviet Union.

Vasin was the ghost-king of a ghost-camp, a vestige of a vanished prison empire clinging to the edge of the world. A place so remote that in winter the sun deigned to shine for only the briefest of spans before abandoning Vorkuta to its blue bowl of near-perpetual Arctic night.

Outside the officers' mess, a muffled klaxon wailed. A haggard woman in a gray smock and grimy apron approached Vasin—Tatiana, the commander's *bufetshitsa*, his personal cook and maid.

Moving carefully, she placed a china cup of steaming tea on the table and a saucer with two chocolates and a slice of lemon arranged on it. Vasin pushed away his chipped soup bowl and sipped the tea without looking up.

Shadows of black-clad prisoners flitted past the windows as they hurried to the evening roll call. Draining his tea, Vasin stood wearily. He joined a dozen officers in the vestibule as they chatted and laughed coarsely. To a man, they ignored their commandant as he tugged on his heavy sheepskin coat and buckled his pistol belt.

For all the attention his subordinates paid him, Colonel Vasin might have been made of cabbage steam and cigarette smoke.

2

The stumpy steam locomotive pulling a small train of prison wagons arrived from the Vorkuta railhead late. It plowed laboriously through the snowdrifts that obscured the branch line, the camp's only link to the outside world. The region had been battered for days by the scything winds of an Arctic ice storm that hurled freezing shards sharp as ground glass into Vasin's face while he tramped out into the rail yard to receive the convoy. The prisoners were unloaded one by one from the individual wire cages in the cars and led, heads down with their hands cuffed behind their backs, into the disinfection barrack.

Three men caught Vasin's attention as they clambered out of the rearmost car, reserved for the convoy's guards. Two of them were uniformed KGB officers, a captain and a senior sergeant. The third wore a padded black prison uniform but walked free, uncuffed. The senior KGB officer approached Vasin through the swirling snow.

"Urgent orders for the commander," the man shouted over the wind. "Concerning a special prisoner."

"I'm the commander."

The Captain, his pale face pinched with the cold, handed over a heavy attaché case secured by two wired lead seals. Vasin tugged off

one mitten with his teeth and struggled with the fastenings. Bared to the wind, his hand went instantly numb. Inside the case was a slim and expensive leather document folder with a combination lock. Chalked on the cover were two words: NIKITA'S BIRTHDAY.

Nikita. The fourteen-year-old son Vasin had left behind in Moscow. Whatever was inside the file could only be a message from his old boss, General Orlov. Vasin struggled and failed to keep the anger out of his voice.

“Follow. Bring your prisoner with you.”

3

In the welcome heat of his office, Vasin turned the dials on the lock to his son's birthday—17/08—and the mechanism snapped open. Inside was an envelope addressed to him, marked EYES ONLY in Orlov's looping handwriting. Vasin had to fight down a desire to throw the letter into the stove. Nonetheless, for perhaps the thousandth time since he arrived in VorkutLag, Vasin forced himself into obedience. He opened the note.

My dear Sasha. I hope you are keeping well in your new home. I am entrusting you with a delicate and most important mission. Keep this prisoner safe, comfortable, and alive at all costs. Secrecy is essential. Wait for my further orders—nobody else's. The two escorting soldiers must be eliminated immediately. You will find the discreet means to accomplish this inside this case. Your official report of the escorting officers' deaths will serve as acknowledgment that you have received and understood. Yu. O.

Vasin looked up at the Captain sharply. A flash of recognition: he'd seen this man before in Orlov's Special Cases offices on the ninth floor of KGB headquarters in Moscow. Vasin rummaged in

the briefcase and his fingers closed around two small, cold metal cylinders taped to the bottom. The officer's pale blue eyes were on him.

"We were told to expect a written acknowledgment that the orders have been received, Comrade Colonel."

"Of course."

Vasin breathed deep. Orlov had ordered him to kill this man. Did Vasin dare defy him? Did the visitor from Moscow have orders to eliminate *him* if he refused to cooperate? Vasin knew his old boss all too well. If these men were not to be his executioners, someone else would be. And the message of the combination, Nikita's birthday, could not be clearer.

Vasin collected himself. "Captain, why don't you invite your comrade up here to have a drink. You've both had a long journey."

"Yes, Colonel."

"Cuff the convict to a radiator in the corridor, tell the duty sergeant to enter him on the books as a trusted prisoner, and find him a cot downstairs in the administration building."

Vasin waited a moment for the man to leave, then picked up the attaché case. Turning to the bookshelf behind his desk where he kept his private vodka supply, he slipped the two cold steel capsules into the palm of his left hand. Then he took down three grubby shot glasses and a bottle of Stolichnaya.

4

The camp doctor, a cadaverous drunk, lurched unsteadily in Vasin's office doorway. His lab coat was stained, and his eyes were blood-shot from a hangover that looked like it had been ongoing for years.

"Morning, Comrade Colonel. The two escort officers from Moscow are dead. Both suffered fatal cardiac infarction in the night."

Vasin pursed his lips in a struggle to keep emotion out of his face.

"*Both* of them?"

After years in the gulag system, nothing seemed to surprise the doctor. He merely shrugged.

“Both. Shall I draw up the death certificates?”

“Do that, Comrade Doctor.”

As the door closed, Vasin slumped back in his chair. He tried to picture the faces of the dead officers he'd drunk with only the previous night, but they were already indistinct in his memory. The men had blank, hard faces, like those of all Orlov's thugs from the ninth floor. Unlovable men, though wives and children as yet oblivious to their coming loss probably did love them. Vasin would never know. Two bodies now lay in the camp morgue, dead by his hand, on Orlov's orders. He felt nothing but a numbed revulsion. Vorkuta's biting frosts had turned him cold. Vasin had forgotten a language he had once known, the moral vocabulary of a distant, normal world that had faded from his memory.

Orlov had been right, as usual. The poison was discreet.

Vasin picked up the telephone handset on his desk and ordered the special prisoner be brought up from the cell where he had spent the night. As he waited, Vasin flipped through the man's file. Lazar Samuilovich Berezovsky, born in Rostov-on-Don in March 1910. Convicted in May 1963 for large-scale financial fraud, illegal commercial speculation, handling smuggled goods and black-market foreign currency, plus membership in a criminal organization. Sentence: fifteen years of hard labor.

A gangster, then. To be precise, evidently a gangster's *koshelek*: literally a purse, a crime gang's moneymen. But there was no clue in the file as to why Orlov would send him to Vorkuta. Or why this man merited such deadly precautions to protect the fact of his presence.

A knock on the door interrupted Vasin's reading. Without waiting for his commander's permission, the duty sergeant barged in leading the handcuffed prisoner.

“Com' Colonel, Convict S-8859.”

Berezovsky was a tall, well-built man with a week-old beard and

with his thinning hair neatly cut, not close shaven—which meant he hadn't come from inside the gulag system. He was fit and could not yet be forty, though the date of birth listed in the file put him as over fifty.

The man stood upright and impassive as he waited for his handcuffs to be removed, fixing Vasin with deep-set black eyes. Once the sergeant had left them Berezovsky rubbed his wrists and looked around Vasin's office with normal human curiosity. No sign of tattoos on his hands, no sullen hangdog subordination typical of a convict. He stared at Vasin with a frank directness no real con would ever dare. Definitely no jailbird, then. And maybe no gangster, either.

"You have something to tell me, prisoner? A message?"

Berezovsky narrowed his eyes.

"No message. Just a question. My escort?"

"Dead, both of them. Terrible accident."

The prisoner nodded slowly and relaxed, taking a seat without permission.

"Good," he said. "Good. You have an accounting department here, I presume?"

Vasin blinked in surprise, momentarily unsure of how to react to the man's confident authority.

"Because you are an accountant." Vasin gestured to the personnel file lying open on his desk. "Supposedly."

The prisoner returned his gaze but did not answer.

"How old are you, Prisoner Berezovsky?"

"Fifty-three years, eight months, and nine days old, Colonel."

"Very good. From Stavropol, correct?"

"Rostov-on-Don. Sir."

Vasin flipped the file shut. He closed his eyes for a long moment. *Orlov*. The boss and his fucking lethal games.

"You going to tell me what this is about, Berezovsky? Not that your name is Berezovsky, of course."

The prisoner did not break eye contact.

"Colonel, I understand you have some instructions from Moscow

concerning how I am to be treated here? We will both be better off if you just follow them. *Continue* to follow them, I should say.”

There was an edge of knowing complacency in the man's tone that caught on something deep inside Vasin. Do what you're told. Don't ask questions. The injunctions that had kindled fury in him from his early boyhood. Vasin stood, abruptly, savoring the sudden look of consternation in Berezovsky's face. Being manipulated by Orlov was bad enough. But to be told what to do by a damn convict was too much for what remained of Vasin's fractured ego. This place might be a shithole at the end of the earth. But this shithole was Vasin's kingdom. A little, miserable world where Orlov had allowed him a tiny measure of power. A power that he had been provoked into exercising, the feelings of Orlov's precious pet prisoner be damned.

“*Ladno, molchi dalshe, golubchik,*” grunted Vasin, slipping into the rough jargon spoken by prisoners and guards alike. “Fine, keep your silence, little pigeon.”

He slammed his palm on a buzzer on his desk.

“Wait. Commander, I'm *kontora*. *Kontora*, you hear?” The *kontora*: literally, “the office.” The KGB's jargon for itself.

Vasin felt his face tighten. Did this man imagine that he had any love left for the fucking *kontora*? The duty sergeant appeared at the door.

“You rang, respected Comrade Colonel?” A bad running joke among Vasin's staff, taking the piss out of their boss from Moscow by addressing him with exaggerated pre-Revolutionary formality.

“Yes. Punishment block for this man until I tell you to let him out.”

Both commander and sergeant turned to the prisoner, who remained defiantly seated. The sergeant shot his boss an uncomprehending look.

“Fine, Vasin. Have it your way.” Berezovsky raised a peremptory hand to wave the minion away. His familiar tone and sheer chutzpah stunned both officers. “Just don't say I didn't warn you.”

Vasin hesitated for a second, utterly confounded. A word from the commander could cast this man into a nightmare world of

violence, hunger, rape, and degradation. But Berezovsky remained utterly cool.

Are you one of them, Vasin? was the man's unspoken question. Or one of us?

“Leave us, Sergeant.”

5

Moscow, USSR

KGB Major Gleb Kozlov peered out of the net curtains onto the arc-lit depths of a building site at the top of Metrostroyevskaya Street. A new overpass spanning Moscow's Garden Ring was under construction, and the din of cement mixers continued late into the night. Kozlov flicked back the curtain and sighed. The usual Soviet story. Work done in a mad rush just before the first hard frosts of winter after a summer dawdling around waiting for men, equipment, supplies that never arrived.

He stood in the once-grand upstairs hallway of a pre-Revolutionary mansion. The place was decorated with Soviet institutional pomposity—red carpets, polished pine flooring, ruched-up curtains. Only a large bust of Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Bolsheviks' first secret police, betrayed the building's purpose as the personal preserve of the head of the First Chief Directorate of the Committee for State Security. The arm of the KGB charged with gathering foreign intelligence.

A bustle of doors opening and closing, followed by muttering, obsequious voices, rose up the stairs. Kozlov smoothed his hair and stiffened to attention as his boss lumbered upward. Boris Pashkov was a seriously obese man, his tiny frame inflated as though by an air pump. In private, his subordinates called him *pelmenchik*, the Siberian dumpling. Pashkov's face, as he narrowed his eyes to take in Kozlov, was pale and puffy as doughballs.