

Rattlesnake Island

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Prologue

Washington, DC: On the Potomac River

OFFICER VANYA PETROVA, of the Metropolitan Police Department's Harbor Patrol Unit, assessed the situation through her spotting scope as Sergeant McKenzie maneuvered their patrol boat to a stop a hundred yards off the starboard quarter of their target: a twenty-nine-foot Larson inboard that two men had commandeered several hours ago.

A boat now disabled.

A boat about to change Officer Petrova's life.

While munching on a slice of cold anchovy and mushroom pizza, Petrova alternated between studying the boat through her spotting scope and running down a mental checklist of what she knew so far: two Russian men onboard holding a five-year-old boy hostage, demanding two million dollars and a fueled long-endurance boat, or the boy would die. She also knew that in hostage negotiations, some demands are nonnegotiable. And providing an escape vehicle is at the top of the list.

They were not going to get their boat. So the negotiators needed to free the boy. If they failed, it was going to turn ugly.

She trained her scope on the boy for the first time and gagged on a bite of pizza. Spitting it overboard, she called over the commset attached to her ear, "Sarg. The boy. He . . . he's Logan Mattson."

"Yeah, I know," McKenzie said. "The attorney general's grandson. That's why this is such a high-profile case."

She blinked and focused on her little Logan. The love of her life. The son she never had—would never have. "Sarg, you don't understand. Logan's my godson. He calls me Auntie Vanya. He—"

"I darn well understand that we just rolled onto an aggravated kidnapping, and we better free that boy or our butts are toast. I'll be fired for sure, and the captain will pack your little Russian butt

back to the motherland. Just focus on those two men and prepare to drop them before the boy becomes a vic.”

Petrova struggled to process the nightmare unfolding before her. She tried to tell herself she needed to be strong for Logan, that she will get him out of this mess, and this will end well, and she and Logan will go fishing Saturday, and he will soon forget about this horrid ordeal.

But she couldn't.

She knew by the boy's eyes that this nightmare would never go away.

For either of them.

She forced herself to shake the thoughts of Logan and focus tactically on how to get him safely off the boat. She glanced to her right, where two FBI negotiators in a nearby boat labored to cut a deal with the men holding Logan—thinking for the first time that this standoff might not be a coincidence. How could it be? She, herself a Russian, facing off against two Russians holding her Logan hostage. The hair on the nape of her neck snapped up.

As the minutes ticked off in stalemate, the hostage takers grew increasingly desperate and unstable. To make matters worse, three helicopters from local news channels dug circles in the air—swooping, hovering, buzzing—as irritating as a swarm of gnats. She wished they'd run out of fuel and crash.

Now she studied the two men through her rifle scope. One of them, the size of an NFL tackle with tattoos covering both arms, held a vice-grip on Logan's neck, pressing a pistol to his head, threatening to shoot the boy if the money and the boat didn't arrive in thirty minutes. The other had similar tattoos, the kind received in a Russian prison. Marks of a *Vor*—Russian Mafiya. She was certain these two animals were *Vory*—dangerous, deadly, unforgiving, and ruthless killers. And this *Vor* rummaged in a green duffle bag, promptly yanking out a vest.

Petrova instantly knew what this meant, and it terrified her. Her heart pounded in her chest. Her mouth grew chalky. And she became agitated at the fact that she had rolled on scene as a rescue diver not a sniper. *What's Command up to?* she thought. While SWAT sniper certified, she wasn't full-on SWAT.

She now trained her rifle scope crosshairs from one Russian's face to the other; trying to read their eyes, gauge their minds. What could they possibly be thinking? Demanding another boat in which to escape? They'd never make it to the Chesapeake, let alone the open waters of the Atlantic.

She knew the mouths of the Potomac and Chesapeake were blocked by several police and coast guard boats.

The men were surrounded. Trapped. And they knew it.

Petrova was also keenly aware from studying their darting eyes that they were under phenomenal stress and not acting rationally.

She slid her eye from her rifle scope back to the spotting scope attached by a small tripod to the boat's gunnel. She focused the scope on Logan's face and cringed at his wide, terrified eyes, his thin blond hair blowing in the breeze. She knew the situation turned fatal the moment that animal put a pistol to Logan's head and the other pulled out that vest. She called over her commset, "Sarg, I rolled on scene as a rescue diver not a SWAT sniper. Why me?"

"Because those Russian apes demanded you by name. Besides, you're a better sniper than any officer on SWAT. Heck, you taught those boys a few things. So, do you know those gorillas?"

"*Nyet, Nyet!* Not on your life."

"Right, then. I don't give a rat's butt how they know you, or why. You and your partner just take 'em down. You got that?"

She blew out a sigh. "Copy, Sarg. Two dirt naps coming up."

Returning to her spotting scope, she studied Logan. Terrified, shaking and sobbing . . . he had soiled his pants. She took it all in and it devastated her. A stream of unexpected tears blurred her vision. She desperately wanted to whisk Logan into her arms and spirit him to safety. But first, she needed to shoot these two men—the animals.

Tearing off her patrol cap, she wiped sweat from her brow with the sleeve of her black tactical duty uniform shirt and placed the cap back on, bill to the rear. She then retrained her rifle on the man holding Logan.

The sun hovered low in the sky, indicating she would soon lose her light. To make matters worse, thunder boomed like distant mortar fire. She flinched, thinking of her husband flying relentless and dangerous combat missions in a horrid war. *Calm down*, she told herself. *He's okay.*

You're okay. And Logan will be okay.

The wind velocity rose from a moderate breeze to an intense buffeting, thrashing the waters into angry waves. She inhaled, smelling the ozone-soaked air, knowing the storm was near.

The patrol boat rocked as each swell rolled under its hull, making it nearly impossible for her to maintain an accurate aim.

“Sarg,” she called, “these waves are impossible. I can’t hold a solid sight picture. Back us off and dump Jimmy and me on shore. We can take the shots easy from there, even at the increased range.”

“Negative. Their exact demand was for your Russian keister to be this close and on a boat.”

“That’s crazy. Do they *want* to be killed?”

McKenzie held up a palm in her direction, his attention drawn to his cell phone. After a moment he radioed, “Feds say the situation is in meltdown mode. Negotiations are over. Those goons are going to kill the boy. Shoot them now.”

“I can’t. We’re bobbing in this tub like freakin’ corks in a tsunami.”

“I thought you Russians had *cajones* the size of Lenin’s tomb. Take the shot, Petrova.”

She turned and scowled at him. “Don’t get all snarky on me, Sarg. Not now.”

Her right elbow throbbed from the weight of her rifle pressing it down onto the boat’s gunnel. She stretched her arms to relieve her aching muscles and then slewed her rifle left until the second man entered her scope’s field of view.

“Sarg! You see that? The other toad just strapped on that explosive vest.”

“Yeah, I see it. Drop them right now. Sack of potatoes.”

She glanced at her partner up in the bow of the boat—the only SWAT member in the game. “Jimmy, how’s your angle on the freak holding the boy?”

“I’ve got a perfect sight picture. On your mark.”

“Copy that. I’ll drop the toad with the vest.”

“Roger.”

She sighted down on the Russian wearing the explosive vest—a black nylon tactical rig laden across the front, back, and sides with eight-inch gray metal pipes, capped at each end, with red and purple wires snaking out. She guessed maybe twenty, twenty-five pipes in all. And she knew from experience they were likely packed with C-4 or Semtex plastic explosive, and some sort of deadly projectiles. If the vest detonated, it would devastate most all life within fifty yards.

She placed the scope’s crosshairs on the man’s hands. He held an igniter switch in his left; his thumb twitching over it like a spring door-stopper in an earthquake. If she didn’t act now, disaster will be the endgame. She aimed dead center on his forehead. It had to be a head shot—instant death. Anything else and he’d detonate the vest.

“Move a centimeter, you vile animal,” she muttered in Russian. “Just a centimeter and I’ll punch a hollow-point slug through your brain bucket.”

Without breaking eye contact with her target, she reached up and dialed in a click of left windage on her scope to adjust for the increase in wind velocity. Satisfied with the zero, she called to her partner. “Jimmy, on one.”

She applied pressure to the trigger.

“Three . . . two . . .” She held her breath, prepared to squeeze off a round, but the boat rocked from another wave.

Govno!

She released her finger.

Petrova’s earpiece filled with her sergeant’s voice. “If you don’t drop these goons right now, they’re gonna blow the boat and kill the kid. Just ventilate these guys and get this over with.”

She raked her eye from the scope and studied the wave patterns. She had to judge the timing perfectly or she’d miss the shot. Once satisfied she had the wave timing right she sighted down on her man and concentrated on feeling the waves pass under the boat’s hull, trying to roll steady with each wave, straining to keep her crosshairs dead center on the man’s forehead. *Head shot or nothing. Save little Logan.*

“Okay, Jimmy. We rock their world right now, right here. You got yours?”

“Copy, partner. Dead center. Your call.”

The boat heeled over hard on its port freeboard, nearly pitching her over the rail.

“Hold a sec, Jimmy. Let this round of waves pass.”

The sun slid low on the city skyline, ambient light fading by the minute. She knew if the standoff lasted a few more minutes she’d have to switch to her night scope, costing precious seconds. Seconds Logan didn’t have.

The wind suddenly changed direction, and rain began falling on their position, further exacerbating her aim. And the fact that the hostage was her little Logan made her shake with rage and fear. A bad combination for a sniper. To top it off, she now had a full crossing wind from the west at half value. While monitoring her sight picture, she adjusted to a myriad of values: distance, wind, temperature, humidity, and boat rock. She typed her observations into a targeting app on her iPod, compensated for all variables and confirmed her scope’s zero before breaking the shot.

McKenzie's hushed voice spilled over her commset. "Do it now, ya little Ruskie. We're out of time. You can do this. I believe in you. You're DC's best shot."

"*Da, da, da.* I'm taking the shot."

She let the next round of waves pass under the hull, waiting for the boat to steady.

"Jimmy, we shoot on one." She received the *click, click* affirmative.

"Three . . . two . . ." She adjusted for the boat's rocking, keeping her crosshairs steady on the man's forehead, her confidence in the shot high.

"One."

She gently squeezed the trigger.

But at the microsecond the firing pin released, a large wave hit the boat, throwing off her aim. She gawped in horror as the 250-grain hollow-point Lapua round tore through flesh and bone of the big Russian's right shoulder. He rocked back from the massive impact, regained his balance, and glared at her, a wide maniacal grin spreading across his face. Then he pressed the igniter switch, detonating the vest bomb. Petrova ducked involuntarily as the bomb exploded, rocketing hundreds of steel ball bearings and nails at a deadly velocity, eviscerating everything in their flight path: canvas, fiberglass, human flesh, human bone, human organs.

Before she could comprehend what had happened, the boat's fuel tank erupted. Angry orange flames leaped into the air and spread throughout the vessel, turning it into a funeral pyre. She dropped flat to the deck as the boat exploded. Pieces of the disintegrating boat and human remains rained down around her position, hitting her patrol boat, bouncing off the deck. Something white-hot burned her cheek.

Oh, God. Oh, God. I failed Logan.

Within minutes, the hungry Potomac waters snuffed out the inferno, swallowing the boat. Swallowing the love of her life. A scene of utter violence unfolded before her unbelieving eyes—a horrific scene replaced by gray smoke drifting on dark waters.

And silence. A shocking silence so loud it tore at her mind and soul.

HOURS LATER, SHE found herself alone on the DC Harbor Patrol docks, staring out onto an obsidian Potomac, her face stained with dry, salty tears. Too many emotions warred within her to think clearly.

How could I . . . ?

What will I . . . ?

Oh, God . . .

She hung her head, shaking so hard she had to sit on her hands to steady herself. She didn't know how she'd gotten there. But as she labored for each breath, her lungs burned like the fire on the boat. She believed she had another attack but couldn't remember if she'd even taken her medicine that morning. While rummaging through her TDU cargo pockets, desperate to find her rescue inhaler, she struggled to recall her dive below the Potomac to find her godson. She remembered, when she did find him, her dive mask streaked with tears. And at that very moment, her life—her soul—fractured.

She sat there shaking like a jackhammer, concentrating on breathing, trying to hear the city. But straining her ears, she heard nothing. Not the waves lapping against the dock. Not the Metro buses plying the drenched city streets. Not the taxi horns blaring or people laughing. The silence battered her. She simply couldn't believe that violence could cause so much silence. She buried her head in her hands.

A minute later her stomach heaved, and she bolted to the railing, vomiting into the Potomac. She hung her head for long moments. Finally wiping her mouth with her shirtsleeve, she didn't know whether the bout of puking had been caused by the anchovy pizza or the fact that she had killed Logan. But at that moment, she knew two things for certain: she would never again let a slice of pizza past her lips, and she would never again see her sweet Logan, never again play with him or tell him she loved him. The love of her life was gone, and she felt as if she had died with him.

When she finally pulled herself together, she turned and staggered into the Harbor Patrol station. Except for the duty officer, who sat glumly on a stool sipping black coffee from a Styrofoam cup, and the on-duty search-and-rescue team asleep in the bunk room, the station was deserted.

She shuffled into the squad room, logged onto a computer, and composed an e-mail to her husband, deployed aboard the aircraft carrier *USS Nimitz*, somewhere in the Arabian Sea.

Dearest Rick,

I've finally had it. No more drama for me. You know my health is failing, and the Doc said if I keep up this insanity it will kill me. We talked about this before you deployed, and we're in agreement. I need to reboot my life. So I'm taking that quiet marine police job on that resort lake up in New Hampshire. By the time you return, I'll have set up house in one of those

little Cape Cods on the mountainside overlooking the lake. Please fly safe,
and don't get shot down. I worry for you. Come home to me soon.

Much love, your Vanya

She hit Send and then composed a short letter to her captain and printed it. She trudged into the locker room, changed into street clothes, and packed a black duffel with her personal gear from her locker. Slinging the duffel over her shoulder, she headed to her captain's office, where she dropped her empty service pistol and three loaded magazines into his desk drawer and then placed her shield and resignation letter on the middle of his desktop blotter.

Sorry, Captain. But we talked about this possibility.

She wandered past the duty officer without a word, stepped out the door, and staggered down the rained-soaked DC streets to her METRO stop. Once there, she absentmindedly swiped her fare card through the turnstile, took the escalator down two flights, and stepped into a waiting train car. She slouched onto a bench, remembering part of a Russian Orthodox quote her mother had taught her when she was a little girl: "Prayer is a rich treasure, an undisturbed refuge, a cause of tranquility."

Her heart bursting over the loss of Logan, she desperately needed refuge and tranquility.

She tugged her gold cross out from under her shirt that hung from her neck on a gold chain. She studied its delicate features, kissed it, and prayed. She prayed that God would take Logan home to his destiny, to his peace. Then she prayed for her shattered soul.

IN THE EARLY MORNING HOURS, Vanya found herself slumped on her living room couch, sleep eluding her. Shock and despair rushing in on her like a derailed freight train; her heart bursting. She didn't know why, but somehow she had betrayed her godson's sacred trust. She had killed him. And worse yet, she couldn't put him back together again.

SLEEP EVENTUALLY CAME but with an immense cost. The nightmares began.

She fires her rifle; the boat rocks. The shot goes wide; the horrific explosion and fire. Bodies catapulting through the air; little Logan coming apart, the boat sinking.

She's falling, tumbling off the cliff's edge, flailing into a dark abyss.

Deadly silence. A dreadful silence.

Now, no other sound but the hissing of her regulator as she inhales and exhales, kicking down through cold, turbid waters, sweeping the bottom of the Potomac. Desperately searching for her broken Logan. Dark images glinting in the beam of her dive light, like demons ready to consume her soul.

Then she's floating over her Logan. He's lying supine and disfigured on the bottom, skin graying. His shattered little body.

She chokes on bile, nearly vomiting into her regulator.

His wide blue eyes follow her as she kicks toward him. His blue lips move, calling to her, "Auntie Vanya . . ."

She blinks and wipes her mask with the back of her neoprene-gloved hand. Impossible! He's on the bottom of the river. My baby's dead. I killed him.

He pleads over and over, "Auntie Vanya, save me. Please save me."

Even as she cradles his limp, deformed body in her arms, kicking hard to the surface, he begs, "Auntie Vanya, please save me from the bad men, please . . . please . . . please."