

## Chapter One

*August 14, 1961*

A sonic boom trailed the tiny Vostok space capsule as it plummeted through the stratosphere, its once-polished hull now carbonized black from the heat of re-entry. As it slowed in the thickening atmosphere, explosive bolts holding the hatch in place fired, blowing the disc-shaped door up and away, exposing the capsule's interior. Two seconds later, pyrotechnic charges fired underneath the seat of the capsule's sole occupant, cosmonaut Victoria "Vika" Petrovna Rusanova, ejecting both seat and cosmonaut through the opening and into the night sky. Once clear of the capsule, her seat separated and tumbled away. With only a pressure suit between her and the thin, frigid air, she watched the spherical capsule fall away, unfurl its own parachute, and then descend below and away from her until it was swallowed by the night sky.

Vika's parachute deployed, rippled like a long white silk ribbon, and then finally caught in the thin air, billowing and yanking her upwards to slow her descent. Several kilometers below her, a thunderstorm roiled in the darkness, an expectant maw revealing itself only in flashes of

lightning that seared across and through its bruised, gunmetal clouds. She clutched the parachute risers as they twanged furiously against the increasingly violent updrafts and turbulence that lifted and dropped her. The hairs on her arms prickled against the fabric of her pressure suit. The storm rose to meet her.

Jagged shards of lightning burst everywhere, popping against the clouds like flashbulbs, crackling with an energy she felt in her bones. The wind and rain slammed into her, tossing her through the elements as if she were a mayfly caught in a Spring rain, powerless and directionless. She clutched the chute's risers harder and leaned her head into her fogging visor to look up into the parachute canopy. The white silk whipped and twisted, threatening to collapse, billowing, then sagging, over and over.

*God, what if it tears?* She thought.

An object, small and hard, pelted the back of her helmet, snapping her head forward as if she'd been shot. She gasped. Something else impacted her thigh, the padding underneath her pressure suit doing little to soften the impact.

Another pulse of lightning lit the clouds around her, illuminating the sheets of rain and the brighter, bullet-like streaks of what she now realized was hail. In moments, she was pelted from all directions. Some were absorbed by her undersuit; others stung like hornets. She gasped as what felt like a fist-sized ball of hail shot into her side.

She looked up to see if her chute was still intact. Confusion, pain, and alarm assaulted her senses when a frozen rock of ice shattered her visor and smacked into her eye. The higher-pressure air inside her suit rushed past her face in a cold whoosh; her ears popped, and the breath in her lungs was pulled through her throat and tossed into the maelstrom.

White-hot pain filled her vision. She cried out, trying to process what had happened,

coughing and choking as she breathed in a deluge of water now cascading past the shattered visor, splashing against her face in torrential icy needles. She coughed up a mouthful of water, trying to breathe around the relentless downpour, tensing her stomach muscles, fighting the thought that she might drown.

Vika found that she could inhale short, unobstructed breaths if she timed it between torrents of water cascading down her face. She sucked in air when she could and held her breath when the water pouring through her faceplate overwhelmed her, submerging her face in the icy spray. Pain rippled through her right eye. She kept it closed, fearing it might not be there anymore.

The world continued to light up in staccato pops, followed rapidly by ear-splitting rolls of thunder that howled like a pack of frenzied, hungry beasts. Hail, rain, and wind pummeled her from every direction. Her skin crawled as the air ionized around her, and the metallic scent of ozone filled her nostrils.

A chill bloomed across her chest and crept down her legs as rainwater gushed through the hole in her visor, down her neck, and into her pressure suit. If her suit filled with the icy water, she'd succumb to hypothermia, then death would almost certainly follow. This descent would be her last moment on Earth, and failure would be her legacy.

Only days earlier, Karpov had rapped his knuckles against her helmet, then pushed his sneering face into her field of view. She had been boarding the bus to the launch pad.

*"Remember, Comrade Lieutenant. You are nothing. The mission is everything."* She hated him, but he was right.

She took slow breaths, trying to calm herself and keep her chin raised above the sheets of water splashing into her helmet. If she panicked now, she would die. Vika loosened her grip on

the riser and fumbled in her utility pocket. Her fingers shook from the cold, blunted by the pressure suit glove. The pocket was flat.

Where was that knife? She had gone through every checklist at least a dozen times. Had she really forgotten it?

But then, her numb, gloved fingers found the lanyard. Vika pulled, dragging the knife out of her pocket and into her hand. She shivered and fumbled with the snap on the sheath; all sense of touch was dulled by the bulky gloves of her pressure suit.

The water was up to her waist now. Her legs were numbing, and she couldn't feel her toes anymore. Bearing down with both hands, Vika released the knife from its sheath...only to have it snatched from her hands by the turbulent winds.

"No!" she screamed. Her teeth chattered uncontrollably. She bit her lower lip, took a deep breath, and forced herself to calm down and think. She hadn't trained for this, but—

Leo's voice sounded in her mind: *Calm your heart, rest your breath. Only then, work your hands.* A Georgian proverb he'd shared with the candidates.

Vika's stomach lurched again as another gust jerked her up. For an instant, her parachute risers slackened, then stiffened again. The water in her pressure suit was up to her chest now, wrapping her in its frigid coils. She took a breath and tried to calm herself.

The knife wasn't gone, she remembered. It was attached to a lanyard, still anchored to her suit, whipping through the rain and air. She found the tether point on her suit and ran her gloved fingers along the lanyard until she held the knife again. Rain and hail continued to beat down on her from every direction.

Grunting with the effort, she pulled her leg up as close to her chest as she could manage, then jabbed the knife's point into the outer nylon layer of the suit against her thigh. She stabbed

and wriggled the blade until the knife tip found purchase. She dragged the blade down, widening the hole, then pushed deeper, pivoting the tip back and forth through the inner liners until the water level, now at her neck, stopped rising. She pulled on the blade further still until water poured from the cut. The water level in her suit lowered, and the chill in her chest subsided.

It had worked, but was it enough? She was shivering uncontrollably, numb in her legs and arms, and possibly hypothermic. And if she had accidentally cut through her suit and deep into her leg—

She took another deep breath, letting Leo into her head again. *If you can't control it, put it out of your mind. Focus on what you can control.*

She had to think about the inevitable conclusion to this nightmare: the landing. Could she even land on legs and feet that felt like blocks of ice? And that was assuming she hadn't de-orbited over an ocean. Her suit had an inflatable collar for such an event—if it was still even intact—but nobody knew to look for her. She might drift for days until succumbing to exposure and thirst. The thought terrified her; she tried to push it from her mind. *Focus on what you can control.*

For an interminable time, she endured the competing elements until, with a final strong gust of wind, the air shifted. The rain turned to a light patter on her helmet; the river pouring through her broken visor slowed, and the air beneath the anvil of the storm above her warmed.

She craned her head forward against the smashed visor again, looking up with her one good eye through the blood and pain. The storm raged above her, silver-gray and indifferent. The parachute had held, and the rigging lines remained untangled. But with her one good eye, she couldn't see how much damage the hail had done to the canopy. She had no sight lines, nothing in the blackness below her to measure her rate of fall, and she reasoned that her senses might not

be trustworthy after the beating she had just taken.

And then, a thumbnail sliver of sunlight lit the horizon, pencil-sharp in its division between the blackness below and the indigo of the sky beyond the storm. A twinkle in the distance caught her eye. The capsule, with its trove of surveillance film, she hoped. *You are nothing. The mission is everything.*

The horizon gave a rough sense of her sink rate as it moved up rapidly. She must be close now. She couldn't smell the salty air of an ocean, but the coppery taste of her own blood overwhelmed her sense of smell. She would assume she was over land until proven otherwise.

Vika took a deep, ragged breath. *Just land now, without breaking—*

There was no warning—no shift in the air or darkness. She slammed into something hard. It gave, but only reluctantly. A cacophony of cracking and splintering filled her ears, and pain shot through her shoulder with a sickening pop. Then she continued to fall.

Time stopped...rolled back...three years ago. *From behind her, Yelena screamed over the roaring of the piston engine as Vika tried frantically to control their descent, pulling and pushing on the old biplane's control stick, stabbing the rudders with her feet. The ground and sky whirled crazily around her...but how? Yelena was dead.* Vika looked back—

—and hit the ground. Air *whuffed!* from her lungs. A cow lowed in the darkness. Vika smelled dirt and straw mixed with the scent of her own blood before she surrendered to oblivion.