

CHAPTER 1

THE MASS GRAVE

'The fear of death is more to be dreaded than death itself.' —Horace

Southern Russia, August 1992

'You are a dead man, English. We know who you are, John Armstrong. You are spying on our people. Now you die.' Totally unexpected, the guttural east European accent, magnified by a tannoy, echoed round the hills. 'Now you die, now you die.'

John Armstrong, Mac as his colleagues in MI6 called him, drew himself up to his full six feet two inches, ran his fingers through his dark red hair, and flexed his muscles. Having only recently completed a training course with the Special Air Service, he felt physically fitter than ever before in his life. The guttural accent grated inside his head and burned its way into his mind. How could he ever forget such a chilling message?

So, they even knew his name. That is the name he currently chose to use. There is no John Armstrong or if there is, it belongs to someone else. Even so, it is a name he would teach them to remember.

As ordered by his head of section in MI6, he had booked in at the Radisson Hotel in Sochi. The security services had given him a telephone number to ring in case of trouble and advised, 'Just ask for Jane. Pretend she's your girlfriend—she'd like that—and we'll get your message.'

Soon after he checked into his room at the hotel, the telephone rang. 'Reception here. We have just been handed an urgent letter for you. Would you like me to send it up to your room, or are you coming down?'

'No. I will be down shortly.'

The receptionist handed him an envelope containing a short message. It read, 'Sergei will meet you tomorrow at Abgara near Sukhumi. Be there at dawn and wait for him.'

His route to Abgara in the middle of the night took him to a roadblock close to a hamlet. He stopped his hire car 200 yards short of it and climbed up a bank, where he could see through his night glasses a scene of 'ethnic cleansing' by Chechen terrorists. A number of villagers were being unceremoniously herded towards a mass grave. Shots rang out. Worse, he had stumbled upon the scene

just as men were shooting more victims and dumping their bodies into a huge pit.

Mac thought, 'Damn! I have to get away from here before the guards manning the barrier realise what I have discovered.'

He bolted away from the road and ran into a terrified Abkhaz youth hiding behind a tree. 'Come with me. They will find you if you stay here. We need to put as much distance as possible between us and this atrocity.'

A rustle in the undergrowth close by on his right startled him. It was only a fox. He said, 'Take care, fox, or they'll think you are me.'

'The man with the tannoy repeated his threat. 'You are a dead man, English. We know who you are. You cannot escape. We will track you down and kill you like the vermin you are. Now you will die.' The voice seemed to come from back near the mass grave.

He turned to the Abkhaz lad and enquired, 'Who are these people that are making such threats? How can they possibly know anything about me? I won't be as easy to eliminate as they seem to think. Come on. Keep going. Don't give up now. I'll look after you. Stay close and follow me. Just do as I say.'

After a few minutes the boy began to lag behind, his teeth chattering with fear. He kept glancing furtively at his watch. How could one so poor come to have an expensive watch like that? He must surely have stolen it from one of the dead villagers.

The youth grabbed his arm and spoke in a forced whisper, 'Chechens. They must not see me. The darkness and mist help, but it's not safe. Danger lurks all around. Look, the sun is rising. I can go no further with you. Go towards the ridge up there. You will soon be away from the village. I must leave you or they will kill me, too.' With a wave he ducked out of sight. It was impossible for anyone to stop him.

Mac swore under his breath and began clambering up the slope towards the trees on the ridge, forcing himself to stay calm and take advantage of what meagre cover the heather and gorse scrub growing in profusion on the hillside provided.

His training had drummed into him not to panic, so he clenched his fists, determined to make the best of a bad situation. 'A fat lot of comfort a call to

'Jane' would be out here in the wild with a pack of murderous Chechens hunting me down,' he mumbled.

At that moment a piercing scream shattered the quiet of the impending dawn, followed by a second scream which was silenced by a single shot. Mac thought, 'It's only three minutes ago that the lad was by my side. They could be less than half a mile behind me. Time to get going and fast. I'm already within range of their Kalashnikovs. I'll break cover and dash for the trees up there on the hill. It should only take two minutes, and with luck the mist, which seems to be thickening, will hide me.'

A voice was heard from the tannoy again "You are a dead man, English, a dead man. You spy on our people, you pay with your life. We make sure of that.'

Mac made the best use of the cover available, dodging behind the nearest clump of gorse, and froze. Would a searchlight come stabbing through the darkness to illuminate him for their snipers? He could learn to hate the man with the tannoy, no doubt about that.

How could they know anything about him unless Sergei had deliberately led him into a trap? Could Sergei be a traitor? MI6 knew so little about the man that it must be a serious possibility. He dismissed the thought, then realized that torture came easily to his pursuers. Was that what they had in mind for him?

Mac muttered, 'Kind of you to warn me, but I prefer to keep my whereabouts secret, and here you are broadcasting my presence to everyone in earshot.'

No sign of pursuit, or was there? He checked his revolver and his favourite weapons: three throwing knives, one in a sheath round his waist, one strapped to his leg, and the third in a holster in the small of his back.

He squared his shoulders and began quartering the bare hillside through his night glasses. Nothing. The swirling mist had blotted out the river and deadened any sound of pursuit. Impossible to be certain whether the Chechens had reached the spot where the boy had left him but they were out there somewhere and wanted blood – his blood. Moreover, they knew this hunting ground far better than he did.

Damn. The light drizzle trickling down his neck did not improve his mood. Mac thought, 'A pity I'm not wearing battle dress but at least my hiking boots can cope with the rocks. I must be positive; be thankful that summer is here and

the forecast promises a glorious day to come. Life is a lottery, play it to the full. Sukhumi and its beaches beckon even if they are a few miles away; the sea is warm – all I have to do is to stay alive and move myself out of here.'

Time to press on to the ridge up ahead; dawn could not be far away. He clawed his way rapidly up the immediate steep slope like a cat with its eye on an overweight pigeon.

He reflected, 'Enough moonlight is penetrating through gaps in the cloud for me to leave the path to my enemies. Wherever possible, make use of such cover as exists and pause frequently to listen for signs of anyone in the vicinity. Not a sound, only the steady drip of moisture from the trees. This is no place to get careless; one can die in these woods all too easily.'

'Odd, there seem to be two ridges; the ground dips slightly before rising to the main ridge which fills the skyline. My map shows no such feature. I must be too far west; slow down and avoid stepping on fallen twigs.'

A nervous squirrel making a mad scramble up the nearest tree made him pause and closely examine the way ahead. Lucky that he did; for down in a nearby hollow, he spotted a solitary figure leaning against a giant oak, motionless but alert, clutching a KMS-72 Assault Rifle and staring expectantly at the path.

Mac knew all about the KMS-72. Deadly, an improved version of the old Kalashnikov; far superior in killing power to his little Browning. The tattered camouflage uniform posed a puzzle – not Georgian, certainly not Russian; the man had to be a Chechen.

He wondered, 'Is that soldier alone? It seems unlikely; easy enough to imagine a whole phalanx of watchers in the woods, Kalashnikovs at the ready, tucked away out of sight. Perhaps the tannoy isn't just bravado. One way or another, they do not mean me to go any further.'

'Such thoughts lead to fear, the stuff of nightmares; I have no time now for such weakness. They remind me of the victims being pushed into the mass grave, unforgettable images of pure horror. A photographic memory can be a curse as well as a blessing.'

'Use your initiative; let this one enjoy a peaceful night and a hearty breakfast. Make a detour. I have no quarrel with the man, no evidence to suggest that he was involved in the atrocities back in the hamlet.'

Then fate intervened, a sudden puff of wind, a gap in the cloud cover – and there Mac stood silhouetted in the moonlight not thirty yards away from the Chechen. He swore, 'I've been damned careless; that comes of letting the mind wander from the serious business of survival. The man is shouting something at me in an incomprehensible dialect. What to do? I'll give the thumbs up sign and turn to go. A barked command by the Chechen and a meaningful motion with his KMS-72 rules that out. Tricky; field craft has always let me down.

'Putting a finger to his lips and smiling amiably, Mac stumbled towards the man muttering to himself, 'If that is what he wants, so be it – besides, his weapon will come in useful. All that shouting must have alerted the men who are hunting me.'

As he moved forward, Mac's right hand eased the throwing knife which nestled in the small of his back out of its sheath. All that training made its delivery automatic; a single movement of the arm – the slightest hesitation would have been fatal.

The Chechen only realized what was happening as the knife struck home. His eyes registered a mixture of shock and betrayal as they stared, transfixed with horror, straight at his killer. He slumped to the ground so quietly, with no more than a gurgling gasp, it took a moment for Mac to realise that the man had really died.

He could never forget the look of betrayal in the eyes of the Chechen; the look of a man who knew he was about to die. Their eyes had only locked together for a few seconds but Mac saw it all yet again, the man's shock at realising that he had been knifed and the unspoken accusation.

The thought of his encounter with the Chechen swept through his conscience. It all happened so fast, all that training had made his reactions automatic. Once he realised the man was dead, the shock hit home; he felt numb. What had he done? However, the body could so easily have been his own; indeed his would join it if the men with the tannoy caught up with him.

He reflected on every moment of the brief encounter, genuinely regretted his enemy's death. 'What if the man had simply wanted a cigarette; a smoke and it cost him his life. Just as it warns on the cigarette packets – 'smoking kills'. How am I going to live with that stare?'

Mac retrieved his knife, bundled the body into a thicket and moved on with the KMS-72 slung over his shoulder and two spare clips of ammunition in his jacket pocket. They could be useful but his primary objective remained to get away, not to fight a war of revenge.