

# ONE

THE RUSTING RUSSIAN-BUILT GAZ-66 truck groaned up the steep incline following the track to what looked like a redundant quarry in the half-light of dusk.

Jack was thinking.

Here he was, in the back of a clapped-out flat-bed lorry with an arched tarpaulin over the back, with five others who he had met hours earlier who could only be identified by their first names. God, after a few hours in this sort of comfort, he needed more than a cushion to sit on to stop his bum aching. But that was the least of it; despite being apprehensive, they were still alive.

Who were they again? He was trying to fix the names to the faces. The biggest, predictably looking like the Action Man of the group, was simply introduced as 'Dave'. He didn't look like someone he would want to have a disagreement with. Dressed in khaki fatigues, chiselled features and shaved pate, Dave either had a military background or the look of an extra in a Vin Diesel movie.

Preoccupied, this man didn't look the type to engage in small talk. At least, having spent the past five hours in the back of a truck, he had not spoken. His face was expressionless, but his eyes revealed an intensity – no, anger – which did not encourage dialogue.

The person next to him went by the name of Joe.

A slight figure (compared to Dave next to him), he chewed gum, had tied back brown hair and, judging by the amount of effort he put into it, didn't have time for a chat. He was fidgeting – tapping his fingers to some strange rhythm that would have looked OK if he had headphones – but didn't.

Next to him was Rodger – 'Rodg' – who, somehow, was managing to sleep through the quieter parts of the journey, although, a bit like a snake, he seemed to have perfected the art of snoozing with one eye open. Bookish, almost professor-like, with slightly greying hair, cropped beard and glasses, Rodg appeared to be the most unlikely member of the group. Complete with a knitted black 'beanie' hat, his gaping mouth exposed teeth that were his only bright feature, not dissimilar to the sharp pointed outcrops they were passing along the dirt track.

'Gil' sat to the right of Jack, closest to the exit, which had been reassuring. He had seemed more relaxed than most, probably because his hands were wrapped around an M16 carbine, and seemed quite happy to make small talk, especially football and Liverpool in particular. Listening to him, and the negative body language of some of the others, Jack soon remembered he had been warned to be careful about talking, in terms of both topic and language.

When the members of the group had signed up, they had been told to keep chat to a minimum and not to ask too many questions of each other. Really? Isn't that the natural thing to do when you get to meet people? Not in this case, evidently.

The final member of the assembled 'happy band' was clearly not fully Caucasian, but looked as though he could have been from a number of different countries on the edge of southern Europe or the Middle East. He showed little interest in Jack's attempt at banter; in fact, he started to wonder if he spoke English at all. They had been told to call him 'Fawaz' and all he did was to play with some worry beads tied to his left wrist.

The drive down from Baku had provided a cautionary introduction to their mission.

They had boarded the truck at an agreed meeting point, outside a warehouse on the private General Aviation side of the airfield. There was no other truck in the vicinity to create confusion, but it looked odd, a red-headed man who certainly didn't look like an olive-skinned local, dressed casually in Western clothes at the wheel of an old military vehicle. Seeing some of his prospective charges approaching, he had jumped out of the cab and come to meet them. Like any good tour guide, he had a piece of paper with some scribbled names upon it. As each of his prospective passengers arrived, he checked their passports and ticked them off his list. In the front passenger seat was a dark-haired woman wearing a forest-green T-shirt, who looked disinterested in her colleague's administrative duties and made no effort to climb out to say hello. Despite there being only six of them, space was limited as they had to fit round the sides in the back, as wooden boxes, covered by rugs and blankets took up much of the space in the middle.

A bit like the aircrew on a departing flight, their driver, a slightly overweight man with an Irish accent in jeans and a red check shirt, had taken the opportunity to explain about what to do in an emergency, before his passengers clambered in the back.

The man in the check shirt explained:

"Depending on potential bottlenecks, it will take between five and six hours to get to your destination. Once we get out into the country, the roads become a bit narrower and we won't be able to drive as fast. Also, some of the territory we are crossing can get a bit lawless in places, with local militia acting as the police. At the moment, we've heard there is a guy called Ruslanov whose causing trouble for the authorities on our route. Occasionally, his people stop vehicles and search them, sometimes taking anything which takes their fancy. We will resist them, but there may be some shooting. Those people like to feel important, so you should expect to hear some fire, but don't be frightened. They're shit shots, but you could catch a stray. If I think we are headed into trouble, I will bang three times on the back of the cab. If I do that, you lie on the floor and keep absolutely quiet. When the danger is passed, I will tap twice, meaning you can return to your normal sitting position."

He nodded to a stocky, tanned, bald-headed man in a flak jacket, finishing a cigarette a short distance away.

"If there is any shooting to do, leave it to us. Gil over there is here for your protection and will provide any other covering fire that may be required."

It would be a test to see whether there was sufficient floorspace for at least five of them to lie flat, if necessary. A few cushions had been thrown in to soften the likely numbing effect of sitting on the steel floor of the interior for what was going to be a number of hours. Jack soon realised

they also provided some protection from the shaking and vibration of the crank shaft below as the ageing truck was stirred into life.

The first three hours or so had been uneventful. Lots of different vistas and sounds kept the uninitiated interested, but, as Jack had already discovered, did not do much to increase his circle of friends or their conversation. As they had been warned, the truck soon seemed to be occupying lower gear ratios and the road was becoming subject to more twists and turns. Through the gap in the rear tarpaulin, it was clear the daylight was fading and they could have little idea where they were, other than a general realisation they were a couple of hours away from journey's end.

That's when the threatened three bangs on the back of the cab was heard, creating an awkward scramble as five of the six passengers attempted to get down on the floor without landing on top of each other. It seemed to take an age for them to do this, but at least it was done. The truck's engine suddenly dropped a couple of octaves and above the roar there was, for the first time, a series of shouts and then the first "rat-a-tats" of automatic fire. Combined with the flash of sparks, the sounds of ricocheting bullets and the popping of a myriad of holes being punched through the higher levels of their tarpaulin cover, they understood what it was like to be under attack. Then, by way of response, a burst of outward fire which seemed very close, even if it hadn't come from the rear of their truck. The only person who had not gone to the floor was Gil, who had now wedged himself against a side panel, having got his carbine through the gap at the back of the tarpaulin. Although it was impossible to tell from Jack's position, he assumed these bandits were now giving chase and Gil was about to discourage them, by loosing off a few rounds in their general direction.

All went quiet soon after, but nobody moved, waiting for the agreed 'all clear' signal. It didn't happen for a good twenty minutes and, shortly after, they were surprised their vehicle came to a stop at the side of the road.

Their driver, 'Mr Check Shirt', came to the back of the truck with a torch and muttered briefly to Gil before announcing to the company: "We have passed the danger area, but one of our fuel tanks has been holed. At least they didn't get our tyres. We have a spare jerry-can to get through, but it will take me a few minutes to plug it. If you need a pee, this is your best chance. Don't go far from the truck and come back quickly. Gil will keep watch and we'll get moving again soon as possible."

As good as his word, he had them on the move after some twenty minutes.

Although they had not talked much, a moment of adversity was creating a bond between them.

This little group had shared each other's company in a cramped truck, packed with equipment, with the opportunity of looking at each other (or in some cases getting uncomfortably close) for over five hours, which was pretty good going, and they had only stopped once for a comfort break.

The occupants of the truck still had no sense about what each other were supposed to be doing.

Now they were here. Not at their ultimate destination, but at the true start of the adventure, in an old quarry 'heaven knew where'. They had lurched to a halt. Given the parlous sound of the engine on the incline, they weren't sure if they were the victims of circumstance or whether the act of the engine dying was premeditated, assisted by leaking diesel. Jack opted for the latter in response to more staccato banging, this time on the side of the truck with what sounded like a blunt instrument.

The instruction made complete sense to Fawaz, who was first to jump out, followed by Rodg and Gil.

The group were greeted again by their driver, and his assistant, the woman in forest-green combat uniform, now with an AK-47 sub-machine gun across her shoulder, which looked ready for use. Under normal circumstances, these two looked like a couple on an adventure weekend, but, so far, this could not be described as "normal".

"Welcome to Barthaz," the man said, in his soft Irish lilt.

Where? Jack thought. There were precious few landmarks that he could see which would turn his vision of Barthaz into reality. Behind them was the track which had weaved its way along the valley between two sets of high hills (not quite mountains, but wouldn't have looked out of place in the Cairngorms). To his right, a sheer cliff which looked like it had been shaped by an angle grinder and, to his left, low ground going into the blackness; but, most of all, the overriding first impression of Barthaz was the silence. Without the sound of their truck's wheezing engine and clanking gearbox, there was no other distraction.

In common with every other experience he had had on this trip, Mr Check Shirt wasted no time on introductions. Based on his initial experience, Jack now understood why it was important for all involved in this exercise to be anonymous – to know as little as possible about each other, just in case. But who were they planning on meeting and talking to? Although he had been tempted to ask for formal introductions, it became abundantly clear that information would not be offered, and the mere request would be unwelcome.

Their host (in the check shirt) continued:

"We did our best to get you as close as possible to your destination by road, but this is as far as we can go. We have about an hour's walk down there to your jumping off point, where we can get you properly kitted out. Don't worry about the truck – we'll take care of that. Follow me."

And with that he set off with the passengers following in single file led by 'Big Dave', as Jack had decided to call him. Although Jack's eyes were acclimatised to the dark, it paid to concentrate on following the person in front. A casual look behind convinced him of this, when he saw the outline of the woman with the machine gun moving a few paces behind. The ground was rocky and difficult to walk on without stumbling, but started to give way to thick, knee-high grasses which seemed to grow taller as their journey on foot progressed.

If the prospect of having some chat in the truck had been difficult, it was now certain that maintaining the silence of their surroundings was the order of the day.

