

# Mirage: Oregon Files

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Extract

## Chapter One

### North Siberia

#### Present Day

It was the landscape of another world. Towering black crags rose above vast glittering snowfields. Winds that could shriek out of the stillness blasted the air at over seventy miles per hour. A sky that was sometimes so clear it was as though the earth had no atmosphere. And sometimes clouds would cling to the land with such utter tenacity that the sun remained hidden for weeks on end.

It was a landscape not meant for human habitation. Even the hardiest natives avoided this location and lived far down the coast in tiny villages that they could pack up in pursuit of caribou herds.

All this made it the ideal spot for the Soviets to build a super-max prison in the early 1970s, a prison meant for the most dangerous criminals—the political kind. God and a few bureaucrats alone knew how many souls had perished behind the bleak concrete walls. The prison was built to hold five hundred men, and until it was shuttered in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a steady stream had been trucked in on the isolated access road to replace those who had succumbed to the cold and deprivation and brutality.

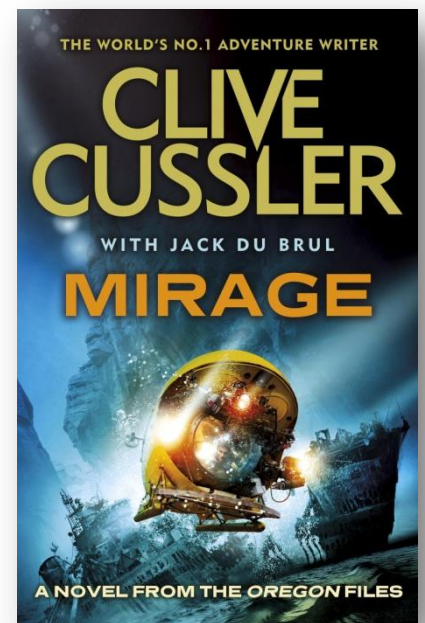
There were no graves to mark men's remains, only a pit of ashes from their cremated bodies—a very large pit—that now lay buried in the permafrost a short distance from the main gate.

For twenty years the facility remained abandoned and left to the vagaries of the weather, though Siberia's notorious winters could do little to erode the cement-and-steel structure. When people returned to reopen the prison, they found that it was exactly as it had been when it closed, immutable, impenetrable, and, most of all, inescapable.

A lone truck painted in matte green military livery wound its way toward the penitentiary that sat in the shadow of a singular mountain that looked as if it had been cleaved in two, with a sheer vertical face to the north, the Arctic Ocean some thirty miles away. The road was heavily rutted because in the summer parts of it turned into a swampy morass, and if crews didn't smooth it before the frosts came, it retained a corrugated texture. Blowing snow drifted across it in places where the plows hadn't opened the pathway far enough.

The sun hung low on the horizon, cold and distant. In a few weeks' time it would make its final plunge over the rim of the world and not reappear until the next spring. The temperature hovered just a tick above zero Fahrenheit.

The truck approached the slab-sided prison fortress, with its four guard towers rising like minarets. An outer ring of chain-link fence with razor wire circled the entire two-square-acre building. A sentry box sat just inside of the fence to the right of the access road. Between the box and the prison sat a humpbacked heavy-transport helicopter painted arctic white.



Only when the truck had come to a stop did a guard, bundled against the cold, waddle out of his little heated hut. He knew the truck was expected, but peering through the windshield he didn't recognize the drivers. He kept his AK-74, the updated version of Mikhail Kalashnikov's venerable AK-47, within easy reach on the strap dangling from his shoulder.

He motioned for the driver to step out of the cab.

With a resigned shrug, the driver opened his door, and his boots crunched into the compacted snow.

'Where's Dmitri?' the guard asked.

'Who's Dmitri?' the driver replied.

It had been a test. The regular drivers of the prison transfer truck were named Vasily and Anton.

The driver continued, 'If you mean Anton or Sasha'— Vasily's nickname—'Anton's wife had her baby, another boy, and Sash is down with pneumonia.'

The guard nodded and felt less ill at ease at having strangers coming out to the secret prison. They obviously belonged to the same squad as the regular crew. 'Show me your papers, and have your co-driver come out with his.'

A few moments later, the guard was satisfied with the men's bona fides. He swung his assault rifle farther onto his back and keyed open the gate. He pushed the gate outward, its mass of concertina wire jangling with dark resonance.

Exhaust burst into a white cloud as the driver accelerated through the gate and under an open portcullis that gave access to the central courtyard around which the four blocks of the prison had been built. Ahead were steps leading to the entrance, itself a door more befitting a bank vault than a building. Two guards in white camouflage were waiting by the door. The truck turned in a tight arc, then began backing slowly toward the men. When one of them judged it close enough, he held up a hand. The driver hit the brakes. It was against protocol for him to leave the engine idling, on the off chance a prisoner might manage to steal the truck, so he killed the ignition and pocketed the keys.

It was a separate key on a different fob that opened the rear doors. The two guards had their AKs at their shoulders when the doors creaked open.

Inside was a single prisoner, shackled at the wrists and ankles and chained to the floor. He wore prison blues, with a thinly padded jacket to ward off a little of the arctic air. At first, it looked as though he had tightly cropped dark hair, but, in fact, his head was perfectly shaved. It was the intricate design of interlacing tattoos covering his skull that made it look like he had hair. The tattoos continued around his throat and disappeared into the V of his prison shirt. He wasn't necessarily a big man, but there was a feral intensity to his glacial blue eyes that made him seem dangerous.

'Okay, my friend,' the driver said with mocking jocularly, 'you're home.' His tone darkened. 'Give us any trouble and you die here and now.'

The prisoner said nothing, but the ferocity of his glare eased like he'd dialed down some personal rheostat of rage. He nodded once, a signal that he would cooperate.

The driver stepped up into the truck and unlocked the chain that secured the prisoner to the windowless truck's floor. The driver backed out, and the prisoner shuffled after him. The prisoner winced when he jumped to the ground. He'd been locked in the same position for the past six torturous hours. The transfer would not be complete until he had changed out the shackles he wore, so all four men mounted the stairs and stepped into the prison.

The cinder-block walls of the receiving hall were painted a sickly green favored by all Soviet institutions. The floors were bare concrete, and the ceiling lofted ten feet. The room was little warmer than the outside air, but at least there was no wind. There was a barred cage to the right of the door. Inside were two additional men. They weren't dressed in uniforms but wore clothing not unlike the prisoner himself.

Both of them were massive, standing at least six foot six, with hands like sledgehammers and biceps and chests that strained the fabric of their shirts. Also like the newly arrived prisoner, their necks were adorned with prison tattoos, though one had a strand of barbed wire inked across his forehead that denoted he'd been sentenced to life with no possibility of parole.

The new prisoner was shepherded into the caged room. One of the armed guards handed his assault rifle to his companion and pulled a set of shackles off a peg above a bare desk. Together with the driver, they entered the enclosure and closed the barred door. The lock engaged automatically.

'This is a rather ugly new fish you brought us,' said the prisoner doing life. 'We were hoping for something prettier.'

'Beggars can't be choosy, Marko,' the prison guard told him. 'And with you, they are never pretty for long.'

The mountainous man shrugged as if agreeing. 'Let's see where you've been, little fish. Take off your shirt.'

Tattoos were like a résumé inside the Russian penal system, telling others how many years a man has been inside, what kinds of crimes he'd committed, who he had worked for on the outside, and all manner of other information. A cat tattoo meant the man had been a thief, and if he had more felines inked on his body, it meant he worked with a gang. A cross on his chest was usually applied involuntarily and meant he was someone's slave.

The driver glanced at the guard, who nodded at this slight deviation from procedure and proceeded to unlock the leg and wrist irons. When he was free, the prisoner stood as a statue, his eyes never leaving those of Marko, the lifer who sat at the apex of prison hierarchy and actually ran it for the guards.

'Take off your shirt or you won't leave this room alive,' Marko said.

If being threatened with death a second time in as many minutes intimidated the prisoner, it didn't show. He remained motionless and unblinking for a beat of ten seconds. Then, with slow deliberation as if it were his idea, he unzipped his thin jacket and languidly unbuttoned his shirt.

There were no crosses on his chest, though nearly every square inch of skin was decorated with ersatz prison ink.

Marko pushed himself from the wall, saying, 'Let's see what we have.'

The prisoner, one Ivan Karnov—though he had many names over the years, and given his southern rather than Slavic features, this too was no doubt an alias—knew what was coming. He knew prison culture, understood every subtext and nuanced meaning, and the next few seconds would determine how the rest of his time here would be spent.

Marko towered over Karnov as he sidled up behind him, and the stench of garlic that oozed out of his skin despite the chilled air was overpowering.

Ivan Karnov gamed it in his head, watched angles and postures, but mostly he kept his attention on Marko's consigliere. When his eyes widened just the tiniest amount, Karnov spun and grabbed at Marko's wrist an instant before he almost powered his massive fist into Karnov's kidney with a hammer blow that would have likely ruptured the organ. Next, Karnov's knee came up as he forced Marko's arm downward. The two bones, the radius and the ulna, shattered upon impact, and their sharpened ends erupted through the skin as the forearm was bent in half.

Karnov was in motion before Marko's nervous system told his brain of the massive damage. He was across the room in two strides and slammed his forehead into the other prison trustee's nose. The angle wasn't optimal because of the man's height, but the nose shattered anyway.

In a fight, this move accomplished one critical goal. No matter how big an opponent, or strong, the eyes watered copiously as an autonomic response. For the next few seconds, the man was effectively blind.

Marko's agonized roar filled the room as his mind finally reacted to the trauma.

Karnov pounded the second man's nose. Right, left, right, and then he slammed a stiffened hand into the guy's neck, shocking the muscles so they clamped down on the carotid artery. Starved of blood, the man's brain simply shut down, and he collapsed.

Elapsed time: four seconds.

More than enough for the driver and the prison guard to react. The driver had stepped back a pace while the guard had come forward, his hand on the lacquered black nightstick fitted through a ring on his utility belt. The guard was concentrating on making it a clean cross draw, knowing once he had the weapon out all advantage swung to him.

That was the mistake of thinking a weapon gave you an advantage before it was deployed. His concentration was on his own actions and not on those of his opponent.

Karnov got his hand on the nightstick's tip just before it pulled free of its restraining loop and crashed into the guard while his arm was drawn awkwardly between their chests. Both were solid men, and the impact when they hit the cage wall was more than enough to pop the ball joint at the top of the guard's humerus bone from the glenoid socket of his scapula and tear several connective muscles and fibers.

The guard outside the caged room had his rifle up to his shoulder and was shouting incoherent orders but had the presence of mind not to fire into a confined space where only one of the five men was a threat.

Karnov whirled to face the driver and had eight pounds of steel shackles swung at his head and nowhere near enough time to avoid them.

The blow sent him staggering as blood sprayed from where the sharp manacles had flayed open skin at his temple. The driver was on him even before he collapsed to the floor, not quite unconscious but not all there either. In quick, practiced moves, he had Karnov fully cuffed at the wrists and ankles.

Karnov began pressing himself up from the floor.

The driver stepped back and said softly, 'Good luck in here, my friend. You're going to need it.'

The outside guard finally thought about the alarm and tripped a switch under the desk. The klaxon brought a half dozen men within seconds. Karnov was on his feet now, but the defiance that had made his face such a mask was gone. He'd done what he needed to do—establish himself quickly. He was not a man to mess with, but his fight was with the other prisoners, not their guards. The dislocated shoulder was collateral damage only.

'I am done,' he said to the guards frothing to tear him apart. 'I will resist no more, and I am sorry for your man here.'

The first guard finally opened the door, and despite Karnov's words and passivity, the men wouldn't be denied. Karnov was only grateful as they swarmed him and began a vicious pummeling that they were using only their fists and not their nightsticks. And then a guard kicked the crown of Karnov's head with a steel-toed boot, and the beating faded away from his consciousness.

Time was meaningless after that, so Karnov had no idea how much had elapsed before he came to. His body ached all over, which told him the beating went on long after he'd been knocked out, but that was to be expected. He couldn't imagine mercy being a job requirement for a guard at a supermax prison at the ass end of the world.

His cell was tiny, barely big enough for him to stretch fully across its freezing floor. The walls were unadorned cinder blocks, and the door was solid metal, with a slot at the bottom for food and another at eye level for observation.

He was locked down in solitary.

Perfect, he thought.

He was still fully shackled, and in the confusion the guards hadn't realized that he still sported the transport manacles he'd had on at his arrival.

Perfect, he grinned.

Also in their anger and their desire to see the prisoner punished, the guards hadn't performed the customary full body search, otherwise they would have taken away his prosthetic leg.

Perfect. He knew he was home free.

Juan Cabrillo had busted out of more than one prison in his life, but this was the first time he'd ever busted *into* one.

The whole purpose of the fight had been to get himself thrown into solitary as soon as he arrived. Marko and his goon buddy had made perfect targets, but if necessary Cabrillo would have taken on the guards just as easily. None of them here were upstanding citizens doing a needed but dismal job. They were handpicked thugs who were pretty much part of a private army commanded by Pytor Kenin, a fleet admiral and perhaps the second-most-corrupt man on the planet. Cabrillo's whole plan was to bypass the prison indoctrination process entirely.

He touched the spot where he'd been hit with the shackles. The bleeding had mostly stopped. He looked down at his chest.

The tattoos did look real, even though they had been applied in four-hour-long sessions over the past week aboard the *Oregon*. Kevin Nixon, a former Hollywood special effects artist who'd painted on the special ink, had warned him that it would begin to fade quickly. Hence Cabrillo's desire to get himself tossed into solitary as soon as he arrived at the prison.

Juan rolled up his pant leg and checked the artificial limb that attached just below his knee. It was neither the most realistic of his collection of prosthetics nor even the most functional. This one was special built for this mission to allow him to smuggle in as much equipment as possible. The leg was almost a perfect cylinder, with only a slight indentation for an ankle. Had a guard slapped on the shackles, he would have been suspicious right away, but the driver who'd done the cuffing was on Cabrillo's payroll for this mission. Throughout the entire incident, only he had manacled Cabrillo's legs, as they had planned and choreographed over and over.

Juan fingered his bloody temple and wished they'd rehearsed that bit a little more.

Not knowing the prison's routine, he decided it best to wait for a while before making his move. It would also allow him some time to recover from the beating. The first part of the operation, hijacking the truck carrying the real Ivan Karnov, had gone off without a hitch. The two drivers and their prisoner were trussed up in an abandoned house at a largely forgotten port town that was the closest to the prison.

When this op was over, a call would be placed to the village's authorities, and Karnov would once again be headed to whatever fate awaited him here.

The second part, getting smuggled into the prison, had gone as well as to be expected. It was the third phase that gave Cabrillo pause. Max Hanley, Cabrillo's closest friend, second-in-command of their 550-foot freighter *Oregon*, and all-around curmudgeon, would call it insane.

But that's what Juan Cabrillo and his team did on a routine basis—pull off the impossible for the right reasons. And the right price.

And while this mission had a personal component for Cabrillo, he wasn't above accepting the rest of the twenty-five million dollars they'd been guaranteed.

Over the next thirty-six, frigid hours, Cabrillo figured out the routine for solitary confinement. There wasn't much to it.

At what he guessed was near noon, the slit at the base of his door was opened and a metal tray with thin gruel and a hunk of black bread the size and consistency of a hand grenade was passed through. He had as much time to eat as it took the jailor to feed the other prisoners on this level and empty the slop buckets the men passed out to him. Judging by the sounds of the guard doing this dreary work, there were six others in solitary. None of the prisoners spoke, which told Cabrillo that if he tried, there would be reprisals.

He remained silent, ignoring the food, and waited. A hairy hand reached back for the tray. The guard muttered, 'Suit yourself. The food ain't gonna get any better,' and the slot slid closed.

Knowing now that no one checked on the men down here other than the once-a-day feeding, Cabrillo set to work. After removing his artificial leg and opening its removable cover, he carefully set his equipment around him. He first used a key to unshackle himself from the irons. The key was a duplicate made from the original the driver carried. Not clanking around like the ghost of Jacob Marley was a relief unto itself. Putting on the shirt and jacket that had been dumped into the cell with him was sublime. Next from the leg came nearly a dozen tubes of a putty-like substance—the key to the whole operation. If this didn't work as advertised, if Mark Murphy and Eric Stone, Cabrillo's crackerjack researchers, had messed up, this would be the shortest prison break in history.

He strapped his leg in place and uncapped one of the tubes and applied a thin bead of the gel to the mortar seam between two of the cinder blocks nearest the floor.

All manner of horrible thoughts flashed through Cabrillo's mind when the gel didn't react as it had when they were experimenting back on the *Oregon*. But the brain can think up scary scenarios in fractions of seconds. The chemical reaction was a tad slower.

Stone and Murph had deduced the chemical makeup of the mortar used here by reading through thousands of pages of declassified documents in Archangel, where the company that had built the facility back in the '70s was located. (In truth, a team from the *Oregon* had broken into the facility and scanned the documents over a three-night period and fed them into the ship's mainframe computer for translation, and then Eric and Mark had gotten to work.)

In less than a minute, the acidic putty had completely broken down the mortar. Cabrillo then attached a probe to the tube, so he could stick it into the narrow slit he'd created, and applied more gel to etch away the remaining mortar on the far side of the block. When he was certain it was clear, he kicked the block into a narrow crawl space between his cell's wall and the prison's exterior basement wall. He peered into the gloomy space and saw that the next obstacle was a preformed slab of concrete resting on poured-cement footings. Each section probably weighed ten or so tons.

The mortar acid wouldn't work on it, but the pack of C-4 plastic explosives would more than do the job.

