Prologue

"Special Military Operation"

Kramatorsk, Eastern Ukraine, 24 February 2022

The text message landed with a piercing *ding* in the silent darkness. It was 4:36 a.m., but I was lying wide awake and fully dressed on the bed in my kitschy fifth-floor room inside Hotel Kramatorsk, situated in the northern portion of Donetsk oblast, eastern Ukraine. The eyes of an oil-painted, voluptuous nude bathing in the surf of some tranquil beach gazed down at me.

"You OK?" the text read.

The sender was Alexander Vindman, retired US Army lieutenant colonel and former director of European Affairs for the National Security Council, and he was checking in from Washington. Like the rest of the world, the Kyiv-born military man who had recently served on the White House National Security Council was waiting with bated breath to see what Russian President Vladimir Putin's military was about to do.

"Yeah. Quiet here in Kramatorsk," I replied with false confidence. "But don't think many people are sleeping."

"Glad that's the case," Vindman texted back. "As an infantryman, we sleep when we can. Get rest. I fear you'll need it."

It was impossible to sleep, though. My heart was pounding through my chest. Over the course of the last three days, a feeling of impending doom had swept over the country.

In an unusual move, the United States had gone to unusually great lengths in the weeks before to declassify and publicly share intelligence that showed Russia would soon launch a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, and that it had formalized lists of enemies in the country to capture or kill. Ukrainians received the news with skepticism, especially

as their president, Volodymyr Zelensky, was calling for the Biden administration to pipe down, as this could cause panic and hurt the country's economy.

"What, exactly, is news? Hasn't this been a reality for eight years? Didn't the invasion begin in 2014? Did the threat of a large-scale war appear only now?" Zelensky told Ukrainians in a 19 January address.

He assured them that they'd be barbecuing kebabs in the spring, not fighting a new war.

"In May, as always, there is sun, weekends, barbecues, and, of course, Victory Day," he said.

But then on 21 February, Putin recognized the "independence" of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts – the two areas that belonged to Ukraine but saw large swathes seized by Russian troops and their separatist puppets during the war that started in 2014. And those puppet leaders had sent hastily orchestrated requests to the Kremlin "to assist in repelling aggression from the Armed Forces of Ukraine in order to avoid civilian casualties and prevent a humanitarian catastrophe" in the Donbas, as the eastern regions are collectively known.

It was an ominous sign. Having covered Russia's war in Ukraine since the start in 2014, I sensed that we were on the brink of a bigger, bloodier phase of the conflict that would erupt at any moment – and very likely right outside my window.

Any lingering doubts were dashed just minutes before Alexander sent his text. Putin, sitting at a desk in the Kremlin and flanked by the white, blue, and red Russian tricolor, had addressed the nation on state television, telling them about his aims in Ukraine. He was giving the military a green light for a "special military operation" on the bogus grounds that "the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine," which had become an "anti-Russia" state supplied with "the most modern weapons" from NATO, was needed to ensure the security of Russia and its people. He urged Zelensky and his army to surrender.

The moment I heard that I jumped in the shower. With shit about to hit the fan, I knew it might be my last chance for one in a while. Then I packed my bags and placed them by the door. I took a quick glance out of the window, which I had earlier taped in a criss-cross pattern so that it wouldn't explode and send shards of glass flying everywhere if we were bombed. Lights were on in kitchens and bedrooms in the apartment building across the way and I could see people sitting and scanning their phones, the blue screens illuminating their faces. The

streets were empty and the sky was pitch black. Then I took my position on the bed and waited:

Shwooo … BOOM! Shwooo … BOOM!

Then a few seconds' pause:

Shwooo … BOOM! Shwooo … BOOM!

Sixteen agonizing minutes after my exchange with Alexander, four successive explosions from Russian cruise missiles struck the Kramatorsk airbase just 2,000 feet away.

The blasts illuminated the sky with such an intense glow that it penetrated the thick curtains on my windows and shot out of the cracks at their sides like lasers. Each shockwave from the blast hit the hotel with a massive thud and shook it violently.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins. I rolled from the bed onto the ground, scrambling on all fours to the door. When I opened it and looked down the hallway, a pair of foreign journalists were spinning confusingly around in just their underwear.

"What the fuck just happened?" one of them shouted at me, totally dazed.

"We're being attacked," I said.

"What?" the man replied.

"Russia's invading Ukraine," I told him.

"Yeah?" the other man said.

"Yeah, man!" I shouted back.

The door of the room across the hall from me opened and the front-desk receptionist strolled calmly out, tying her hair up. She'd been getting a few winks before the morning shift.

"Boys!" she hollered to the journalists in Russian. "Stay calm. Go to the bomb shelter."

The men stood there squinting at her with their arms at their sides.

"She said to get down to the bomb shelter," I told them.

They darted back into their rooms to dress and gather their things.

"*Yolky palky*," the receptionist muttered, using a Russian expression that translates literally as "pine trees and sticks" but is used to express bewilderment much like we might say in English, "Jesus Christ!" or even "For fuck's sake!"

"We will be fine," she assured me, speaking in Russian. "Get to the basement."

I appreciated her assurance and confidence in that moment but everything definitely *did not* feel fine. These were cruise missiles being fired at us, not mortar rounds or even tank shells. War on a terrifying new level had just broken out.

But she had lived in a war zone for eight long years.

"You worked here in 2014, right?" I asked her as we walked to the twist of stairs. I had recognized her from the last time I had stayed at the hotel and found myself caught up in a Russian invasion, with soldiers spilling into the streets from atop tanks and armored personnel carriers.

"Yes," she answered. "We've been through this before."

Journalists were filing into the bomb shelter and strapping on their body armor. That's where I found Pete Kiehart, an American photographer, and Isobel Koshiw, a British reporter. Both were part of my team covering the tense lead-up to this morning for BuzzFeed News. They had been staying on lower floors of Hotel Kramatorsk and were quick to collect their gear and get underground.

"Welp, things are looking pretty bad, huh?" said Pete, a master of understatement. "That was really fucking loud."

Isobel was less composed. She was visibly shaken and had a terrified look in her eyes. She was worried about Anatoliy, a family friend in his fifties who we'd hired as our driver.

"Have you seen Anatoliy?" she asked, checking her phone for a text. "He was here and then just disappeared."

"I'll go look for him," I said.

The hotel lobby was in chaos. Staff and security were trying to keep order in a room full of journalists who were simultaneously filled with dread and exhilarated by the promise of a huge story they were smack in the middle of. They fumbled around with their gear and spun in circles trying to locate their Ukrainian fixers. Several journalists paced back and forth outside the entrance, chain smoking while calling their editors in London, Paris, Berlin, and other European hubs.

Among the few calm foreigners was Lindsey Hilsum, a veteran war correspondent for Britain's Channel 4. Like everyone else, she wasn't sure what to do or where to go exactly. But she kept her cool and settled into the well-worn sofa in the hotel foyer, where she began typing up notes on her laptop.

"I'm in the right place if you're here," she said to me.

"That all depends on what you're looking for," I said.

"A war story," she replied.

By and large the Ukrainian journalists among us were the most composed. Like the receptionist, they carried themselves with the stoicism of veterans who had been at war for the better part of a decade. Looking for Anatoliy outside, I spotted Anastasia Vlasova, a Ukrainian photographer with whom I had covered the first Russian invasion eight years earlier. Her body armor hung from her arm and she was smoking at the bottom of the stairs.

"Oh, hello!" she said to me with a wide smile as she took a deep puff and exhaled into the winter air. "Look who is here!"

Around us, foreign TV reporters clambered over tangles of wires and camera equipment as they set up their live shots.

"Here we go again!" Anastasia quipped, rattling off an anecdote about a previous time we were someplace nearby during a gun battle and narrowly made it out unscathed.

I found Anatoliy cleaning the windshield of our Honda SUV, taping the letters "PRESS" to the hood and sides, and filling the washer fluid reserve. As he turned to wave at me, two fighter jets came screaming overhead. They were so low they almost scraped the rooftops of the surrounding buildings. The TV reporters dropped their microphones and sprinted inside the hotel, screaming, "Jets! Jets! Jets!" A crowd of them stumbled down the stairs to the bomb shelter.

"It's OK!" Anatoliy yelled with excitement and a deep chortle. "*Nashi*" – ours – "Ukrainian Su-27s!"

He had served in the Soviet Army and was well acquainted with Ukraine's Armed Forces. He recognized the blue color scheme and markings on the bellies of the jets. Gazing at them as they roared toward the eastern horizon, he clicked his tongue in astonishment.

I was surprised to see that the hotel canteen was opening. Journalists spilled in to fill up on coffee and breakfast. Anatoliy piled milk sausages and sunny-side-up eggs onto his plate with a side of sliced tomatoes. As I ate a banana and sipped an Americano, he asked if he could tell me a joke. He had a way of choosing the worst possible moments to share his favorite anecdotes, most of which didn't translate well from Russian to English. I told him that it wasn't really the time and we should think about getting back to Kyiv, a nine-hour drive west. He said he was up for driving and could get us there quickly.

Reports were coming in that battles were unfolding in Kyiv Oblast. Certainly that would be the story, if the country's center of power were

attacked, encircled, or worse – captured. Plus, in those first hours, it felt entirely possible that the might of the Russian Army could come barreling through Ukrainian lines in the Donbas and show up on our street. After all, we were only 40 miles west of where they had been dug in for the past eight years, and where for the past several months they had been massing fresh troops and armor.

A dozen journalists banged away on their laptops and phones in the musty bomb shelter. Pete and Isobel were contacting sources and scanning social media for news of attacks elsewhere. Twitter was flooded with images of destruction from Russian cruise missile strikes in every corner of the country. Black plumes of smoke filled the skies. Ukraine was burning.

Security camera footage shared by Ukrainian Border Guards captured hundreds of Russian tanks and military trucks rolling through border crossings from Belarus in the north, Russia in the east, and Moscow-controlled Crimea in the south. They even came barreling through the radioactive Chornobyl exclusion zone.

More videos showed dozens of Russian military helicopters swooping south through the Dnipro river valley toward the Hostomel airbase outside Kyiv. And rumors swirled that a gun battle was underway in the government quarter near the presidential administration. *Were the Russians about to nab Zelensky?* I wondered.

The shape and scale of Putin's invasion was becoming terrifyingly clear. This was not a "special operation" focused on the Donbas – this was an all-out assault meant to destroy Ukraine. A Second World War-style blitzkrieg was unfolding before our eyes.

In that moment, seeing Pete and Isobel hiding underground and dressed in their 20 pounds of body armor, wondering whether a bomb was going to fall on our heads and kill us all, everything seemed unreal. Just hours earlier we had been celebrating a strong reporting week with cocktails and steaks around the corner at RIA Pizza, the local journalists' haunt. Then, because I had used up all my reporter's notebooks, I visited a stationery shop, where I watched a young girl plead with her mother to buy her a pen with a teddy bear on it. I thought about them at that moment, possibly the last truly normal one before the bombs started falling.

The world had been turned upside down overnight.

Dressed in a black suit and tie, President Zelensky went on TV to address the nation. He hadn't been captured. We watched on our phones as he spoke directly into the camera.

"Today I initiated a phone call with the president of the Russian Federation," he began. "The result was silence."

Putin didn't want to talk – he wanted Zelensky's complete and unconditional surrender.

Zelensky announced he was imposing martial law and had ordered Ukraine's armories to open their doors and stocks to "all patriots" willing to defend freedom and democracy against Russian tyranny and terrorism.

I had no idea what would happen at that point. But rushing back to Kyiv made sense, since it was possible that the Ukrainian authorities could lock down the city. I told Pete, Isobel, and Anatoliy to get ready.

Anatoliy sped through the streets as I navigated from the passenger seat. On the way out of Kramatorsk, heading west, Ukrainian tanks and armored personnel carriers rumbled past us, heading east and carrying soldiers on top. It reminded me of similar scenes in May 2014, when I witnessed Russians and Ukrainians fighting on the very same Kramatorsk roads. Trolley buses and checkpoints were in flames, a tanker truck sat idle in the road, ripped open like the top of a sardine tin after a massive blast, and troops ran around shooting anti-tank rockets wildly between apartment blocks. *Were the Russians already on the ground and close by?* I wondered.

The city was in a frenzy. Long queues had formed at ATMs, pharmacies, and gas stations. People were dashing in and out of supermarkets, stocking up on goods. The roads were jammed with cars carrying anyone with the means to flee and the few possessions they had managed to scrape together in a hurry. So many people were staring toward the sky, fearful of what the Russians might unleash on them from above.

We were nearly running on fumes a few hours later when we found a gas station with a line of vehicles just 300 meters long. It took an hour to get to the pump. Anatoliy filled the tank while Isobel and I chatted with a group of local men on the roadside. They were discussing setting up their own defense force to protect their homes from the Russian Army. They had no weapons but were prepared to hurl Molotov cocktails at the invaders if they had to.

As we continued our journey in the direction of Kyiv, I made calls to Ukrainian sources. One of the first to answer was Ukraine's deputy minister of foreign affairs, Emine Dzhaparova. She described seeing a Russian missile fly overhead and then crash into a building in Kyiv. She was shaken up and worried about whether the country's Western allies would move

quickly enough to help Ukraine. She had been on the phone all morning with her interlocutors in Europe, trying to mobilize them.

Two officials in Zelensky's office responded ominously to my text messages.

"Do not quote me. We don't want to cause panic," one replied. "But it is very bad. Total war."

"God help us!" wrote another from inside the fortified presidential bunker.

Traffic was at a standstill when we reached Boryspil, a suburb on the eastern edge of Kyiv that is home to the country's biggest international airport. Stopped at a light, I looked to my left and noticed that the local government building had already been barricaded with concrete blocks and sandbags and was being guarded by armed troops.

Police and military forces had set up a checkpoint at the entrance to Kyiv just beyond that and vehicles were backed up for miles waiting to get through. Everyone was trying to get to the west of the country, as close to the EU border as possible.

Anatoliy zipped around the line of vehicles, nearly scraping our SUV against the metal guardrail until we reached the front.

"Press!" he shouted at the Kalashnikov-wielding police officer even before fully rolling down his window. We quickly flashed our passports and press badges and were waved through.

It was 6:30 p.m. when we pulled into Kyiv and the sun had set. Crossing the bridge over the Dnipro river, the city was darker than usual. I couldn't make out the towering Motherland monument or the golden domes of the historic Pechersk Lavra Eastern Orthodox Christian monastery that stand on the hillside.

When we arrived at the Radisson Blu hotel in Kyiv's city center, we pulled into the underground parking garage to find that hotel staff had transformed it into a bomb shelter. There were chairs and boxes of bedding, tables with water and sandwiches. Guests were trying to make themselves comfortable between elevator rooms, furnaces, and Škodas.

I went up to my room on the fourth floor to get some clean clothes and extra power banks to charge my phone and laptop. Waiting for me on the table beside the bed was a small, round cake topped with a drizzle of chocolate, fresh berries, and gold leaf. My birthday had been one week earlier. Despite everything, the staff had placed it there in anticipation of my return. A handwritten note accompanying the cake read, "Welcome back to Kyiv!"

I looked at my phone and saw more than 100 missed calls and unanswered text messages. Family and friends in the United States wanted to know if I was safe. My Ukrainian friends wanted information and advice.

In Bakhmut, eastern Ukraine, the mother of my friend Vika was terrified and unsure of what to do. She had worked for years in Moscow and refused to believe her daughter, now living in Munich with her partner, when she warned her mother days in advance that a new Russian invasion was likely imminent.

"I just don't know what to tell her. She's totally brainwashed," Vika had told me in one of our many calls leading up to the invasion. "I'm desperate to get her out but she won't listen. She's in denial."

Now the missiles had started falling and she wanted out.

"*Now* she wants to go!" Vika screamed into the phone when I called her. "Chris, tell me, is it possible? How can she leave now?"

"Vika, I really don't know," I said. "She needs to find a friend with a car or else hunker down in a basement tonight."

Others had similar questions. Should they stay where they were? Or take their chance in the open, with jets and missiles flying overhead and stuck in traffic jams with hundreds of thousands of cars, maybe never to return home?

Being unable to offer much help in that moment was hard.

I tried sleeping inside our SUV in the car park that night, partly to keep warm, partly because it was more comfortable than lying atop a couple of thin blankets on a concrete floor. But again, I struggled to calm my mind enough to get any real shut-eye. I pulled my hat over my eyes and attempted to conjure memories of myself with Ukrainian friends before the war came to us, as if to return briefly to a Ukraine I knew was gone forever.