

OUT OF THE BLU

A Science-Fiction Comedy Thriller

by Vitali Vitaliev

SAMPLE CHAPTER:

Chapter Two (the Cs)

A Gentle Collision

It all came – quite literally – out of the blue. It was a beautiful summer afternoon – one of those scorching days, rare even for the South of England, when the merciless red-hot disc of the sun, with a couple of small puffy clouds around it, resembled a portion of bacon and eggs on the azure frying pan of the sky. The air bursting from the rolled down car window (the old Volvo had no air-conditioning) was thick and hazy. It was hitting Victor's face, as if his right cheek was being repeatedly slapped with a hot wet rag, each time momentarily blocking his vision.

Having landed at Stansted airport an hour earlier, Victor Petrov and his wife Catherine were on their way home after a short holiday in Majorca. It had been a tradition with the Petrovs to take a weekend or so off every two or three months, rather than embarking on a two-week-long beach or cruising holiday once a year and using almost all of their modest leave allocations in one go. Another reason for taking several shorter holidays rather than a long one was Sharik, their beloved white poodle, who did not like being left in the company of Catherine's father for more than a few days, after which he would grow uncharacteristically quiet, as if indeed depressed, and would spend his days sitting on the patio and howling almost non-stop.

Normally, the Petrovs would fly somewhere warm and seaside-ish: Italy, South of France, Greece or Turkey. But on that occasion they chose the Balearics, or Majorca to be more precise – the island that always had a special attraction for Catherine since her parents used to take her there as a little girl. As for Victor, whose roots were in Central Russia, the island, with its mild subtropical climate and warm sea, represented a suppressed childhood dream of a paradise on earth, the dream that had finally come true...

The Petrovs had had a relaxing long weekend in Pollenca, with Victor sunbathing on the beach in between frequent dips into the emerald, but still cold, sea and brisk, yet powerful, swims to the buoy and back to the shore. Victor would turn up on the beach daily – just to lie in the sun, while Catherine read on the balcony, or took a bus to the ancient town of Alcudia where a spectacular Roman amphitheatre was being dug out by archaeologists. They would then meet up for lunch or dinner at one of the countless tapas restaurants lining the promenade. Five full days of such

unhurried lifestyle were usually enough to relax them completely and make them forget about their UK routine, with Victor working as editor of a small technology magazine, whose editorial offices were based in the town where they lived, and Catherine commuting to London by train and then taking the Tube to Hampstead where she worked as a medical secretary to a cardiac surgeon at the Royal Free Hospital near Belsize Park Tube station.

As they were spending their final day of holidays in the island's capital, Palma, they decided to visit the beach for the last time before flying back.

This time, Victor's usual far-from-the-shore swim ended badly: his right hand was rather painfully stung by a Portuguese Man of War jellyfish, hiding underneath the buoy, which Victor slapped inadvertently, or rather somewhat ostentatiously, for his wife on the shore to see: look how far away I am. It felt as if a sharp razor blade cut through the back of his palm. Catherine, who hated swimming and sunbathing, could hear him cry out in pain from the beach where she was sitting in the shade immersed in a book. They had to visit a pharmacy and buy a special anti-sting ointment, which did not stop Victor's stung hand from swelling.

The swelling was getting worse by the minute. It looked precarious and was painful to the touch. Victor was also feeling feverish – not up for flying, so the Petrovs had to cancel their return flight and let Victor recover first. They booked three nights at a two-star Horizonte hotel in the suburb of Iletas – just fifteen minutes by bus from the city centre. The hotel had cosy air-conditioned rooms, with calming views of the bay. After three days and nights of intense treatment, the swelling on Victor's hand disappeared, and he was strong enough to travel again. In fact, he felt better than ever – rested and relaxed after that unexpected spell of enforced procrastination.

Halfway into their newly booked return flight to London Stansted, the captain announced an approaching “slight turbulence” and advised the passengers to fasten their seat belts.

The Boeing was tossed about in the sky like a lump of ice in a cocktail mixing glass of that mighty bartender called God. Some bags and suitcases fell out of overhead lockers, which sprang open like flick-knife blades, and down onto the passengers' heads. Women were screaming...

Then it all suddenly stopped. The plane straightened up its course, and was floating smoothly through the deep-blue sky, interspersed with occasional tiny clouds.

They landed in Stansted without incident, found their old Volvo in the long-term car park and set off on a 40-minute-long drive back home.

Neither Catherine, dozing off in the passenger seat, nor Victor struggling not to succumb to drowsiness behind the wheel, could see the green Mini around a sharp bend in the road – and when they did, it was already too late. The little green car was probably overtaking another vehicle, or had simply lost direction, for otherwise why on earth did it suddenly find itself on the wrong side of the road straight in front of the Petrovs' old Volvo, so close that Victor didn't have any time left to swerve?

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