



SAINT PETERSBURG

MOSCOW



BLOOD AND CAVIAR

NIKOLAY
IGNATIEV



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And to all my friends who never once questioned the sanity of my convictions.

When you try to control everything —

everything controls you

N. Ignatiev

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EPILOGUE



Prologue

St. Petersburg, Russian Federation
Late October 1993

The tiny apartment smelled of fresh paint, dust, and the faint promise of hope. Almost done mopping, Nina stood straight and stretched her back in a graceful, fluid motion. The mop handle vibrated with the memory of her grandmother's voice— "Death waits for no one, dear."

Babushka had said it so calmly that day, folding laundry as if discussing the weather. A month later, she was gone.

The lavender sachets still clung to the wardrobe's corners, their scent thinner now, like a voice fading down a long corridor. Nina pressed her forehead to the wood. Almost up.

Behind her, the kettle gently hissed on the stove, promising more hot tea and a long awaited first night in their own flat.

Nina wiped her hands on the front of her sweatshirt and glanced around. They were making good progress. Most of the things had already found a new place, leaving more than enough room for the rest of their belongings.

"That's the last of it."

Stepa hauled the final chair through the doorway, his impressive forearms flexing beneath a faded Made in USSR army tattoo. Even now, his body remembered how to carry weight.

His handsome face was flushed from the climb.

"Remind me again why we had to finish moving today?" He pushed the door shut with his leg.

"Because I can't spend another night in that dormitory," Nina said, straightening a curtain rod without curtains. "We finally have our own place, so no complaining.

Her warm smile eased his fatigue. "I'm not complaining."

He felt good. Whatever happened next, this apartment was theirs now—a fresh start, perhaps even a future.

"I hate moving." Vera dropped her purse onto the couch and flopped down beside it with a theatrical sigh.

She possessed a delicate beauty—large green eyes framed by soft caramel-brown curls—her presence luminous and tender, as if she'd been spun from starlight.

People felt an inexplicable urge to protect her.

Nina just sighed and handed her a teacup.

“This place definitely beats your old dorm room,” Vera said, stretching luxuriously, like a cat soaking in sunlight. “I certainly won’t miss those roommates of yours.”

Nina laughed. “Yeah, those cockroaches were huge, weren’t they?”

“Loud too,” Stepa added with a grin. “Wait—Nina, that’s too heavy for you!”

He gently moved her hand away from the box filled with dishes and was rewarded with a quick peck on the cheek.

“Wait. Stepa—your hands!” Nina grabbed his sleeve, eyes wide with sudden alarm.

He glanced down. A vivid red streak across his palms, looked like... blood. Stepa rubbed at it.

Nina leaned closer, squinting in the dim corridor light.

“Relax, it’s just paint from the box.” He held up his hands for her to see.

“Thank God.” She exhaled, releasing the tension. “Wash it off. Dinner’s almost ready.”

The television hissed in the corner, muted. Grainy footage from Moscow showed a large crowd in Red Square. Flags waved. Faces blurred. At the podium stood President Artem Likhovtsev, arms wide, proclaiming a new era.

His voice, even through static, carried certainty. Victory Democracy. Freedom.

“Nina, turn it up, please,” Stepa said—more to take a break than out of interest.

She did.

“Democracy will bring freedom and a better life for all Russians,” the president declared, his voice booming. “We have chosen freedom. The road will be difficult, but it will lead us to prosperity.”

Nina turned the volume back down.

“He should stop drinking and stop talking only about freedom and democracy,” she muttered. “You can’t spread either on a piece of bread.”

“She’s not wrong,” Vera said, sipping lukewarm tea. “Now they’re promising jobs and vacation homes for everyone—just like in America.”

“No, that was last week,” Stepa smirked. “This week it’s dignity, human rights, freedom, and liberty.”

“Did someone say luxury?” Vera grinned. “Where do I sign up?”

Nina stood by the window, arms crossed. She wasn't smiling.

"The factory offered to pay us in thread this week," she said, holding up a spool. "Maybe they want us to stitch a loaf of bread."

Stepa nodded. "The shipyard too. They're letting people go every week now. We don't know who's next."

"Look, guys," Vera cut in. "The new mayor of Moscow—Lubov, the hero of the people." She made a face. "Ugh... He looks like someone only a mother could love."

Then her tone shifted. "Well, hello there, good-looking... Who's that next to Lubov? He is yummy."

As if on cue, the camera panned, revealing a younger man in a sleek overcoat beside Mayor Lubov. He was tall, composed. Handsome. Intense eyes. Even among the suits, he stood out.

"I'd marry that one," Vera said with a smile. "He looks like a movie star."

Nina rolled her eyes. "Why don't you stop planning your wedding and help me unpack the kitchen?"

Stepa didn't hear them. His gaze lingered on the screen.

Something about that young man... a flicker of recognition.

"Just another suit," he muttered.

Vera leaned back.

"If that's what suits look like now, I'll start ironing my blouses."

Laughter rippled, but beneath it was the buzz of unease.

Vera set her tea down, voice quieter. "I'm serious, though. It's getting bad. Sveta's sister started escorting. Not... street stuff. Just dinners. Foreigners. She says it's better than starving."

Nina's face darkened. "You're not seriously thinking—"

"No. Not me." Vera shrugged. "I'll marry an oligarch and move to Paris."

"You're not serious, Vera," Stepa said.

"I'm seriously tired of counting kopeks, that's for sure."

Silence settled over the room. They could hear the president hit all the right talking points: Democracy. Freedom. Opportunity.

Then, almost absently, Stepa said, "There was another killing near the Commodity and Stock Exchange yesterday. Broad daylight. Guy walked right up to a Mercedes parked at the

entrance—three shots. Businessman, his wife, the driver. Then just strolled off. No mask. No running.”

Vera blinked. “Jesus. What is happening to our country?” she exhaled, eyes still on the grainy TV image. “Nina, remember the movie we went to last week? About the Italian mafia in New York.”

“Suits, cigars, body bags.”

“Yeah, exactly. I guess we don’t need to pay to watch now—we’re in the movie.”

Stepa smirked, nodding toward the TV. “Well, they did promise we’d start living like Americans soon.”

Vera raised her cup. “To living in America.”

“And democracy,” Nina added with a sad smile. “Now we can choose which gang runs our street.”

“To progress,” Vera echoed, then pointed at the screen.

“He says we’re free now. Are you feeling free, Nina?”

“I’m feeling broke.”

“Me too.”

Stepa stacked the last of the boxes near the wall. The sun was fading fast outside, casting the room in soft grey light.

He moved toward the window, watching night settle over the city like a thick, quiet warning. Behind him, Nina unpacked dishes, careful and methodical.

“Do you think it’ll get better?” he asked.

Nina didn’t answer right away. Then, softly:

“I think we’ll learn to survive it.”

She approached and met his eyes.

“I just hope it doesn’t get worse than this.”

On the TV, the young man beside Lubov stared silently out at the crowd, expression unreadable.

Kettle’s hiss sharpened, spiraled, then screamed like the air-raid sirens from a war movie.

“There goes the trumpet! Welcome to apocalypse!”

“Vera, bite your tongue!” Nina called, already rushing toward the kitchen. “It’s just a kettle.”

The whistle faded, but something in the silence it left behind quickened Stepa's heartbeat—as if the sound had stirred something buried deep inside him. His gaze stayed locked on the television, an odd shiver creeping up his spine.

It felt like a whisper from a future he couldn't yet understand.

He couldn't have known that the man on the screen would soon shape their destiny—and tear their world apart.

By the time they understood, it would already be too late.



Chapter 1

Broadway

St. Petersburg, Russian Federation

March 1995

Noticeably limping, Stepa crossed the living room and lowered himself onto one of the six mahogany chairs surrounding a heavy dining table. The moment his body weight shifted, alleviating the pressure on his legs, a soothing warmth spread through his left calf. It plunged gently to the tips of his toes, then surged back up, sending a tingle through his abdomen. Somewhere behind him, probably in the kitchen, an old wall clock monotonously counted the passing time. He could hear the familiar sound as the pendulum swung:

Tick-tock... Tick-tock... Tick-tock...

Reluctant to move, Stepa looked around. Everything in the vast room was of good quality, only old. Not antique. Just old. It had the distinct feeling of a hotel suite where no one lived, only visited.

Another carpet, similar to the one under his feet, was hanging on the wall. Partially hidden behind a tattered green couch, it still had enough life left to make its colors shine.

Stepa's mother used to have a carpet on her bedroom wall. He spent countless nights lying in her bed next to her, his tiny fingers following the endless labyrinth of the intricate design. Then, in the quiet stillness of the night, interrupted only by his mother's even breathing, the moonlight transformed the thick wool into enchanted forests, vast plains, and rivers inhabited by evil monsters and brave warriors. Night after night, they fought each other, invading young Stepa's dreams.

His mother died when he was eight years old. It happened suddenly, without warning. That day, in the early spring of 1973, Stepa came home from school, just like he had the day before and the one before that. When he entered their tiny apartment on the outskirts of Moscow, his father was already drunk and still drinking. Dressed in his usual well-worn jumpsuit with the shoe factory's logo over his heart, Stepa's old man was hunched over their tiny dining table, his

elbows firmly planted on the polished wood. Young Stepa wasn't surprised to see his dad drunk. He was surprised to see him drunk at three o'clock on a Wednesday.

"She is dead," his father growled. His angry, bloodshot eyes left the half-empty bottle of vodka in front of him and stared at the boy across the room. "Are you deaf? Didn't you hear me? She's DEAD!"

His books tucked under his arm, Stepa didn't know who was dead or why his father was screaming at him. Suddenly, he started crying, unable to move, unable to think, unable to speak.

As Stepa's eyes slowly swept across the faded carpet on the wall, he didn't recognize the enchanted forests, fields, and rivers. He didn't see any monsters or brave warriors. It was just a rug. Old. Damaged. A plain rug. Oddly, something about it seemed familiar.

"Shit! They're gone! All of them!" Kozak announced the obvious, emerging from one of the bedrooms.

Turning back toward the living room, Stepa took a deep breath. The foul smell of cheap *levaya*—bootleg—vodka left in glasses scattered on the table twisted his empty stomach. He lit a cigarette.

Kozak bounced across the carpet like a boxer, stocky and quick on his feet. An old, burnt-sienna leather jacket hung loosely down to his knees. He wore it over a black Adidas tracksuit, the pants tucked into his new black high-top sneakers. He looked like a huge brick. Hard. Sharp. And tough to get around.

Kozak, or Misha Gorodkov, as he was known only to his relatives and the police, was not a boxer, nor was he an athlete of any kind. His shadowboxing was just a show, an attempt to intimidate his opponents.

Still bouncing on his toes, his hands punching the air in front of him, Kozak reached the dining table. Breathing rapidly, he ran his stubby, tattooed fingers over his thick, dark brush cut. Then back. He did it again, then finally stood still.

"All five got the Broadway, just like last time," he said, agitated, his mind struggling to absorb the horror left in the bedroom. There, as Stepa had feared, another five young girls were lying in pools of blood—their stomachs slashed open, their intestines splattered on the floor next to them.

Kozak's small eyes, set close to his meaty nose, had the color of an overcast October sky. They kept darting around the room, periodically landing on Stepa's face. His Adam's apple

twitched as he swallowed, trying to suppress the vomit brought on by the toxic smell seeping from the bedroom.

Stepa leaned back in his chair, stretched his aching leg, and rested his elbow on the table. Fifteen inches—about a pound—of genuine Hungarian Teli salami was left on one of the dinner plates.

Ten thousand rubles, maybe more, and the bastards just left it. Threw it away.

“Did you see a phone anywhere?” Stepa asked, returning his gaze to the man in front of him.

Kozak shook his head.

“No,” he quickly offered. “My last phone bill came almost two months late. You leave a phone here, the renter checks out and stiffes you for thousands of rubles. No, thank you very much!” Kozak rambled on, wandering toward the windows draped with heavy dark green curtains.

Stepa glanced back at the salami.

Ten thousand rubles—almost a month’s pay at the shipyard. And they had just thrown it away.

“Wow! Great view! You can see the Winter Palace,” Kozak exclaimed. He stood still, staring out the window for a few moments before drawing the curtains.

Stepa watched him return to the table and kick one of the chairs aside.

“Nice spread.” Kozak snatched a glass off the table and pitched the leftover vodka onto the carpet. Eyes scanning the food, he sniffed one of the bottles. “*Levaya*—cheap bastards didn’t even spring for the real stuff.” Clearly disappointed, he refilled his glass anyway.

“You want some?”

Stepa shook his head. He wished the short man would just shut up, sit down, and stop moving altogether.

“Well, don’t mind if I do.” Kozak exhaled sharply, face twisting into a grimace of disgust.

“Dear Mother of God! This is really bad shit!” Kozak wheezed, struggling to catch his breath. Moving swiftly, his neglected fingernails blackened, Kozak shoveled food into his mouth with abandon. A pickle, then a slice of boiled ham, another pickle, and finally a piece of white bread disappeared rapidly. His jaw worked like a rusty hinge, popping noisily with every chew. Bits of food clung stubbornly to his stubble, flecks spraying outward with each grunt of satisfaction. The sound—wet, rhythmic, relentless—filled the narrow space between them.

“Damn it, how can you eat right now?” Stepa asked, incredulous.

Chewing even faster, Kozak shrugged. “I’m starving.”

It was more than hunger driving the man. Hunched like a coiled spring, Stepa stared, unblinking, at the relentless assault on the leftover food. The gnawing and slurping seemed to drill into his skull, each wet chomp scraping against his patience like sandpaper on raw nerves.

Kozak wiped an aluminum fork with the edge of the tablecloth and used it to retrieve a sardine from an open tin can. He swallowed the fish and took another piece of white bread. “They’re all dead. If I don’t eat it, the cops will. Fuck the pigs!”

Massaging his left thigh, Stepa closed his eyes. His lips pressed into a thin line, his fingers tapping rhythmically against the table—anything to drown out the sound. Yet there was no escaping it. Somewhere deep in his chest, irritation bloomed like a hot coal, glowing, threatening to ignite. But he said nothing. After all, what was a little smacking compared to the five girls lying dead in the next room?

“Aren’t you hungry? This ham is really good. You should try it.”

“I said I’m not hungry.” Eyes still closed, Stepa felt his stomach churning again. He could smell it now—not the levaya vodka, but the sweet, nauseating scent of violent death creeping onto his tongue, lingering in the back of his throat. He took another drag from his cigarette and left it stuck between his lips.

There was no need to rush. It would be another long, hard night. The two-week-old bullet wound that had drilled his left calf throbbed from climbing five flights of stairs. There was an elevator in the building, but they had taken the dark, urine-stenched stairway—Kozak first with his Makarov extended, then Stepa, twenty steps behind. One didn’t use elevators in St. Petersburg at two o’clock in the morning, especially in their line of work. Elevators got stopped in between floors; gasoline was poured down onto the people trapped inside, and then they were set on fire. It was called *katusha*—the easiest ambush in the world.

“Hey, Ace! Do you think somebody is moving in on us?”

Stepa reopened his eyes. “I don’t know,” he lied.

“It sure looks that way,” Kozak said, grabbing more food from the plates.

Somebody was making a move. Stepa had realized it two weeks ago, when the first five young prostitutes—the oldest twenty-five and the youngest sixteen—got the “Broadway” in an apartment just like this one, only twenty minutes away.

Three days after the first “Broadway,” four more girls got to “watch the show.” After today, the body count would be up to thirteen—all girls, all young. And the very last thing they saw was their own guts spilling through their fingers. It was a horrible way to die. Nobody ever screamed; the terror was paralyzing.

On all three occasions, the drivers who delivered the girls were shot while sitting in their cars nearby. The driver’s job was to collect the money and keep an eye on the girls. Prostitutes were paid by the hour. You could keep them all night, but before the meter started, they had to hand the money to the driver. These services were always paid in cash and upfront. The driver, equipped with a CB radio or a cellular phone, reported the ‘take’ to a centralized dispatcher. All three drivers had received two hours’ pay before they were killed. The money was left untouched—it was a message.

When, half an hour ago, a dispatcher had failed to reach one of the drivers, Stepa and Kozak were sent to check it out. Boris, a skinny-looking seventeen-year-old driver, was on delivery at 33 Novinskaya Street, where he had taken five girls to help some *inogorodnij*—out-of-town—businessmen celebrate a birthday. They found him sitting in his Lada parked near the front entrance. His head was tilted back. A clean bullet hole above his left eyebrow confirmed Stepa’s worst fears.

“Listen, Ace...”

Stepa heard a familiar voice penetrate his thoughts and looked across the table.

“I didn’t want to tell you... but I guess you’re going to find out anyway.” Kozak stopped chewing and uneasily shifted his body. “Vera is in there,” he finally said and took another long swig straight from the bottle.

Stepa closed his eyes.

“They got her sitting in the chair. Damn it, she’s got stuff hanging all the way down to her...”

“Shut up!” Stepa snapped, his eyes blazing at the short man.

Kozak nodded apologetically, then piled the last slice of ham onto a piece of bread. “I am sorry, Ace, but you’re going to see it... I just wanted to warn you, you know.” He shoved the food into his mouth.

Stepa’s heart skipped a beat, his breath caught for a few long seconds. The old clock in the kitchen was still counting. Muffled by the loud chewing across the table, he could hear it again:

Tick-tock...Tick-tock...Tick-tock...

A dull pain echoed all the way down into his calf.

I never even said hello to her.

He sucked hard on his cigarette, his eyes buried in the carpet under his feet.

Vera was a good friend of Stepa's wife, Nina. They used to work together at a sewing factory, and before that, they went to the same high school here in the city. Vera, a lovely brunette with big hazelnut eyes, a tall, slim body, and one of the most beautiful smiles, was only twenty-one years old. Two days ago, Stepa ran into her at the Seagull Restaurant on Nevsky Boulevard. Vera often picked up her clients there: wealthy foreigners hungry for affordable Russian flesh. That night, she was sitting at the busy bar next to an old, chubby, Scandinavian-looking executive. Visibly intoxicated, the Viking kept staring down her generous cleavage while playing with her hair. Stepa was there on an errand. As he walked by, Vera made a funny face, sickened by the prospect of her immediate future. Stepa smiled and waved back but didn't want to interrupt. She was working. Half an hour later, Vera was gone, and so was the fat Viking.

Stepa took one of the vodka bottles and wiped its rim with the tablecloth.

"Do it, Stepan Stepanovich!" Kozak called, using his full name. "The bitch bites, but the pain is soothing!" he added, howling like a hyena.

Stepa took a quick swig. The unfiltered alcohol hit him like a punch to the abdomen. He couldn't breathe. When the burning fluid reached his stomach, Stepa exhaled.

"Fuck!" He spat on the carpet, and lit another cigarette.

What was she doing here? She only worked for hard currency. Stupid girl probably needed more money to buy another flimsy dress.

Stepa was angry—angry because Vera hadn't listened, hadn't stopped, even after multiple warnings. Now she was dead. Stupid!

As far as Stepa was concerned, there were only two things wrong with Vera: she was single, and she was very naive. She kept telling them how one day she was going to marry an old Swedish millionaire. Vera often fantasized about living in a big house in Oslo. She knew exactly the colors she would have the rooms painted, the furniture she would buy, and where she would have her favorite red tulips planted in her garden.

It was a dangerous dream. Only a few had managed to achieve it. But it was the same dream that had led so many young Russian girls onto the streets and then straight into the morgue or, worse, to the bonfires of the city dump—the crematorium. Now, Vera, too, had joined that endless list of names.

“We should call it in.” Stepa retrieved his German-made cellular phone and tossed it across the table.

“Thanks, Ace.” Kozak’s small eyes lit up. Excited, he punched in the number, smiling like a kid, and brought the bulky set to his ear.

“Yeah! Kozak here!” he yelled into the phone. “Yeah!... Another Broadway!... Yeah! All five of them!... Yeah!... Boris is drilled...”

The door to the bedroom was partially open. Kozak had turned the light off, as if that would make it less real. The dark cavity stared at Stepa with unimaginable horror hidden inside. Captivated, his mind began to picture Vera sitting naked on the chair with her...

The anger inside him grew, suffocating him. He turned away and stared back at Kozak, who kept talking to one of the lieutenants in their gang. His partner periodically nodded, taking in what needed to be done.

What else was there to talk about? We’ve been through all this already. Twice.

Playing with a fork while listening, the short man grinned, showing off his four gold teeth. He seemed unfazed, as if the five dead bodies in the bedroom, the smell of violent death, and the gruesome job were just some sick creations of Stepa’s mind. It irritated Stepa, fueling his anguish.

Totally unaware of his partner’s internal struggle, Kozak continued to grin, nodding his head. Listening. All this was part of his life. He didn’t know any better. How could he? Born in a small village not far from Kiev, Kozak had very few options as a young man. Like all kids who had grown up before the Perestroika, he had acquired the mandatory eight grades of high school education. Kozak hadn’t received his diploma because he had actually learned something; he had graduated because everybody had to. The USSR used to manufacture kids with diplomas just like it did the ugly domestic cars—by the millions, yet still in vast demand.

Young Kozak was too lazy to study and finish the remaining two years of high school, which prepared the smarter kids for colleges and universities. The school system of “eight years plus two” was designed to provide the state with an endless flow of manual laborers. Failing to

score a “C” average on the final exams at the end of the eighth grade, millions of fifteen-year-old kids were automatically denied the right to a higher education. Instead, they were sent to trade schools to prep them for the life of a factory worker, welder, seamstress, or farmer—a life full of dreams with little hope. Then, all eighteen-year-old boys were required to serve mandatory two years in the military, which Kozak had spent in some godforsaken outpost in central Siberia. Once again, the great Soviet society decided what was best for young Kozak. It handed him a shovel and ordered him and his battalion to build a railroad. There, in the Siberian taiga, where winter temperatures dropped below 45 degrees Celsius, freezing diesel engines and turning tire rubber into crusty ashes, Kozak learned what it took to survive. Later, in the summer, fighting thick clouds of vicious mosquitoes, Kozak finally decided that the great Soviet state was his enemy. Fresh from the army, he joined one of the many quickly forming gangs in St. Petersburg. Perestroika was now on the way. Devastated by economic chaos, political disasters, and the collapse of everything and all, the great Soviet society finally gave people like Kozak their reward—the free market.

“God damn it!” Kozak finally hung up. “You were right, Ace. They can’t send anyone else. It’s just the two of us again.”

Stepa drew in a slow breath and lifted himself off the chair. “Okay, let’s get this show on the road,” he said, feeling the dull pain surge back up his left leg.

“Yeah, let’s rock and roll, baby!” Kozak picked up on the unintended pun. Eager to get going himself, Kozak jumped to his feet and tossed the phone back to his partner. “Let’s tag ’em and bag ’em.”

“I’ll go bring the van closer. You start here,” Stepa said, thumping his cigarette into a dinner plate.

“Sure, Ace. You’re the boss.” Bouncing on his toes again, swinging his fists, the short man headed back to the bedroom. Stepa dreaded climbing another five flights of stairs but hoped Kozak would finish with Vera before he returned. Stepa pulled out his PMM Makarov, pushed the safety off, and walked out of the apartment.

Before he closed the front door, Stepa heard the light switch flip. In the kitchen, the clock was still counting:

Tick-tock...Tick-tock...Tick-tock...

It took them three hours to “clean” the place. When Stepa returned to the apartment, Kozak had already wrapped Vera in a gray bedsheet and had dragged her out into the living room. A huge crimson stain spread over the fabric around the midsection of her body. Loosely tied with a rope, her bloodied feet sticking out, it was a sight Stepa knew he would never forget.

Jesus. It’s her birthday this Saturday, he suddenly remembered. It became hard to breathe.

Bastards! Goddamn bastards!

Pain, sorrow, and anger—all tangled up inside him in a tight knot. Clenching his fists, Stepa glanced over at the bedroom and forced himself to take the first step.

Barefoot, wearing only blue boxers with big yellow flowers, Kozak was kneeling over a petite redhead, spread-eagled in the middle of the small bedroom. A chubby brunette sat on the floor, leaning against the wall under the window. She wore a black bra and white pumps. Nothing else. Her chin planted into her chest, her face veiled by thin hair; she resembled a broken doll. So much blood. Everywhere.

Farther away from the window, a twin bed was pushed against the wall. Two naked, young, skinny, bleached blondes lay side by side on top of the twisted, blood-stained sheets, staring vacantly at the ceiling. Covered by the red blanket of death all the way to their toes, the girls just lay there. Quiet. Still. Dead. They seemed content, as if relieved to finally be beyond the pain and terror.

The aftermath of the third slaughter hit Stepa like a tidal wave, rocking him as if he were a moored vessel. Fighting quickly rising nausea, he felt his head spinning. He closed his eyes. The horrid images were still there, peering at him from the darkness. He could hear Kozak wrestle with the dead body on the floor, the wicked sound scraping Stepa’s raw nerves.

Standing in the doorway, unable to take another step, Stepa opened his mouth and drew in a shallow breath, then exhaled slowly.

“Thanks, man.”

“No sweat.” Kozak glanced up. “I knew you didn’t want to see her like that.” His heavily tattooed arms were covered with blood. With his knees planted in a puddle of putrid gore, he finished “re-packing” the redhead, then skillfully wrapped a towel around her abdominal section. A burning cigarette was sticking out of his mouth. Periodically puffing on it to suppress the foul stench, he looked like a small, vile vulture crouching over its dead prey.

His mind numb, his limbs still weakened, Stepa returned to the dining table and stripped down to his underwear. Once his clothes were neatly folded on the chair, he carefully tightened the bandage over his left calf, then soaked his white handkerchief with leftover vodka. His eyes stumbled upon the Hungarian Teli salami still lying on the dinner plate. Everything else was eaten. Kozak was right—the cops would take it.

Why them... Ah, what the hell! No one has to know.

He wrapped the hard roll in a newspaper, then shoved it into his jacket pocket.

Stepa crossed the threshold of the bedroom, affixing the handkerchief over his nose. No matter how bad the levaya vodka reeked, it was still better than the toxic odor trapped inside.

“Hello there!” Kozak looked up, rolling the redhead into a bedsheet. “Sorry, handsome, but you’ve missed the party!” He giggled, ashes falling from his cigarette.

“Knock it off.” Stepa breathed through his mouth. “Come on, let’s bag the blondes.” He stepped into the blood.

By the time they had carried all the bodies to the ground floor and loaded them into the back of their van, Stepa’s calf was burning. The last girl, the brunette, had to be wrapped in the carpet from the wall; there were no more bedsheets or towels left. It was heavy and awkward. They had to take a quick rest every other floor.

Finally, they loaded Boris on top of the girls and closed the van’s doors. Using a rubber hose, Kozak siphoned gasoline from Boris’s Lada into an aluminum soup pot found in the kitchen, then returned to the apartment for the last time.

Left alone, Stepa pulled up the collar of his jacket and stepped inside a dark arched entranceway that led to a courtyard. Leaning against the cold stones, finally relieving the pressure on his calf, he breathed rapidly, trying to expel the nauseating odors. It didn’t work. He lit a cigarette.

Underneath the starless sky, the city, like a treacherous swamp, spread around him. Cold gusts of salty air blowing from the Baltic Sea ruffled the huge puddles on the abandoned streets. It was quiet. Too quiet for a city. Deafeningly quiet for a city that was once called a “Northern Venice.” Most of it was now submerged in darkness; the price of electricity was up there with the rest of them. Even the dogs in the suburbs no longer barked at night. Perhaps they, too, were afraid to attract attention, or maybe they had all been eaten by the homeless.

Suddenly, the sound of squeaking rubber and brakes ruptured the silence. Still a couple of blocks away, a car turned the corner and, driving at twice the speed limit, headed toward the suburbs. A few moments later, the sound completely vanished. It was quiet again.

How could anyone do something like that? How could anyone kill another human being with such brutality? Not even the most vicious animals were capable of such senseless act.

What kind of demented, savage mind would contrive to sacrifice thirteen young girls just to send a message? It was beyond his comprehension. Yet, scanning the morose tenements, Stepa continued to struggle with the truth, as if understanding would make it easier to bear. Searching for a reason where there was none, he shifted his body. The pain was crawling through his leg like a thick worm. He tried to block it.

The darkness didn't frighten him. Even as a little boy, Stepa was never afraid of it. Instead, he felt a soothing relief every time the night came. For young Stepa, real fear had a face and a human voice. Hiding in the black void, he could not see it, and the fear couldn't find him.

Trying to keep his mind free from thoughts, which all led to the same dead-end emotions of anger and dread, Stepa listened to the sounds of darkness. The night was his domain, his shelter, and his friend. Plus, there was nothing really to be afraid of. Whoever killed the girls was long gone. The rival gangs were far away, busy in their own districts. The local cops, if they were to show up, could be easily bribed to leave them alone. And the neighbors would never get involved. City folks quickly learned that witnessing a crime was very dangerous. When the price of a human life on the streets plummeted to a couple hundred rubles or a bottle of vodka, everybody suddenly developed an acute case of blindness and deafness.

Stepa took another drag and lifted his gaze to the windows on the fifth floor. Faintly etched, they stared back at him with black bottomless cavities.

Come on, Kozak! What the hell are you doing up there? There was nothing left for you to eat.

Silently cursing his partner, Stepa closed his eyes. He felt tired. He wanted to lie down and fall asleep. Perhaps then he would finally be able to leave his pain and this madness behind. Perhaps, when he woke up, this would all be just another nightmare.

The gusty cold wind continued to brush against his face, numbing his muscles, chilling his body. May and real spring were just around the corner. Soon, a warm, gentle wind, sweet with the smell of blooming flowers, would flow through the city. Coming from the fields in the south,

it would breathe new life and bring new hopes. Soon, the weather would be warm enough for Stepa to go fishing in Krasnaya Polyana.

“Fire! Fire! Help! Apartment five eleven! Hurry! It’s burning!” Stepa suddenly heard loud cries. A few seconds later, Kozak emerged from the building. “Fire! Five eleven!” he screamed again, smiling like a kid. A couple of windows lit up above him.

Stepa stepped back into view.

“Jesus, Ace! You scared the shit out of me.” Kozak lowered his Makarov.

“Get the Lada and follow me.”

The short man nodded and dashed toward Boris’s car.

“Fire! Fire! Five eleven! Hurry!” Stepa heard behind him as he limped toward their van.

It was time to finally leave 33 Novinskaya Street. Stepa took the last drag of his cigarette, flicked it away, and climbed into the van. Behind him, Kozak was already flashing the headlights.

Idiot! Stepa turned the ignition key.

The apartment, especially the bedroom, had to be burned to destroy the evidence. They didn’t care about the cops; what they had to avoid was the publicity. Something like this would be taken as a sign of weakness by the rival gangs. To show your weakness was to send out an open invitation to attack. Whoever was responsible for the killings was not going to get the satisfaction of reading about it in the newspapers. Kozak had made sure of that. A small fire, skillfully set, was only going to damage the apartment before the neighbors put it out. By the time the fire department and the cops arrived, the evidence would be destroyed, and most valuables that survived the fire would be looted by the neighbors.

Driving a rusted green UAZ—a Russian-made cargo van—along the dark, empty streets of St. Petersburg, Stepa felt sharp pain every time he had to use his wounded leg to press the clutch. Each time he drove over a pothole, his body jerked as the corpses bounced on top of each other in the back. There were a lot of potholes.

By the time they left Kirovskiy district, it started to drizzle. Watching the wiper blades swipe in front of him and keeping an eye on Kozak in the rearview mirror, Stepa thought about how, only a year ago, he was a happy newlywed working as a welder at one of his country’s most famous shipyards—Severnaya Verf. His life was simple then. He mostly worked the night shift—which paid a couple of rubles more—welding together endless beams of galvanized steel.

At sunrise, Stepa would come home to their tiny apartment, and Nina would serve him eggs, fried potatoes, and onions. Sometimes even a piece of sausage, whenever she managed to buy one.

Tired, he would stumble off to bed, while Nina went to work at the sewing factory. Stepa would wake up around three o'clock in the afternoon and play dominoes in the yard with his co-workers. There, under the whispering birch trees, they drank warm beer, which was sold around the corner from a big steel drum attached to a set of wheels, and talked about soccer, movies, and everything else that was important then. It was all only a year ago, but it already seemed like another life.

At quarter past four, Stepa and Kozak finally reached the city dump, a large field located about thirty kilometers east of the city. The dirt road ended in front of tall, closed iron gates.

They were greeted by two gruesome-looking men. Holding burning torches in their hands, unshaven, dressed in dirty rags that barely resembled clothing, the *tarakaniy*—cockroaches—looked like creatures who had just crawled out from hell.

This was the crematorium. At least a hundred—some said as many as five hundred—people called the city dump their home. It was a strange world within a strange world, inhabited by strange people and governed by strange laws. Not even the cops dared to enter the crematorium grounds at night. Living off the huge warm, breathing, stinking pile of human trash, the *tarakaniy* collected leftover food and whatever else they could salvage to support themselves. And just like in any other part of the new Russia, the crematorium had its own elite and the slaves that supported it. The man who ruled the city dump, as though it were his own little kingdom, was called Gypsy. No one knew his age or what he looked like. Endless rumors floated around about his thirst for human blood and the immense wealth he had acquired. With no proof to support or refute these wild stories, it was impossible to separate fact from fiction. But this was the new Russia—a country where truth no longer played a role in everyday life.

The city dump was also called “Switzerland” or “holy ground”—no city gang was allowed to attack another while on crematorium grounds. It was one of the unspoken rules of St. Petersburg’s underworld. Here, every day, human bodies were brought for a quick and discreet burial—to be burned in the large steel drums that were once used to transport liquid cement.

One of the *tarakaniy* approached Stepa. A huge, soiled hood concealed most of his bearded face. Stepa paid him six hundred rubles—a hundred per body was the going rate. The man

quickly grabbed the money, stepped back, and made a sign with his torch. Responding to his signal, the gates began to slowly open, their metal hinges screaming in the night air. Then, a dozen shadows silently separated themselves from the darkness and poured out into the open. Behind them, Stepa could see the lights of the distant flickering fires.

Taking a step back, his hand moving closer to his Makarov, Stepa watched as the shadows silently approached the van.

Silently moving, the *tarakaniy* unloaded the bodies, then carried Vera along with the others into the night toward the bonfires.

With that, their work was finally done. Stepa shook Kozak's hand, climbed back into the van, and drove straight home.



Chapter 2

Between Two Worlds

St. Petersburg, Russian Federation

Stepa lived in an old, five-story building with no trash chutes, no elevators, no locks on the front entrance. His neighbors stole the lightbulbs from the stairways as soon as new ones were screwed in, so, understanding the futility of their task, management stopped replacing them a long time ago.

Walking up the dark, putrid stairway, Stepa felt truly grateful for having an apartment on the third floor. When he finally faced his four-inch-thick, solid steel door—guaranteed to stop any

type of bullet—Stepa knew he couldn't walk another flight of stairs, even with a gun pressed against his head.

On the inside, the door was padded with brown vinyl to muffle the sounds of the noisy stairway. As he turned the third lock, he heard footsteps behind him; Nina was awake. It didn't matter how quiet he was or how late he came home; she always got up to greet him.

Stepa took off his jacket, hung it on the wall, removed his shoes, and placed them below the jacket. He eased out of his holster, wrapped the reins over his gun, and put it on the small shelf above the jacket. Moving quietly in the dark, Stepa limped past the tiny bathroom, then the cramped toilet—so small he could almost rest his head against the door while sitting. One more step, and Stepa finally entered his kitchen.

It housed a double gas-burning stove, a small cast-iron sink, an old upright refrigerator, three cupboards, a table slightly bigger than two side-by-side chessboards, two stools that had to be kept under the table, one gardenia plant, and a window—all cramped into nine square meters. In the States, this type of room would have been used as a pantry. In the Soviet Union, it was a standard-sized kitchen.

Besides the bathroom, the toilet, and the kitchen, there were two more rooms in the apartment. An old twin-size bed, a matching dresser, and a nightstand left barely enough space to move around in the bedroom. The living room, the largest of them all, was crowded with a small sofa, a tiny dining table, an armchair, and an oak wall unit that stored their china, books, black-and-white TV, and the rest of their wardrobe. It felt like an obstacle course.

The whole apartment was only a few square meters larger than the dining room on 33 Novinskaya Street. It had to be the creation of some demented architect. But the Party had approved the design, and Nikita Khrushchev had ordered millions of them to be built all over the Soviet Union. His mission was to accommodate the millions who desperately needed their own roof over their heads—prioritizing not comfort but volume.

However, no matter how small their apartment was, it was still a great improvement over the room in the shipyard's Young Workers' Dormitory where Stepa and Nina had lived after they got married. Having their own tiny kitchen, toilet, and bathroom was still better than sharing a large one with a dozen other young couples who lived on the same floor. When Nina's grandmother died and left her apartment to her only granddaughter, Stepa and Nina thought they

had died and gone to heaven. This was communism: offer people nothing, make them get used to it, then give them a little more—so they are happy and forever grateful.

Nina, wearing her pale blue cotton nightgown, walked into the kitchen and turned on the light. Stepa closed his eyes. He heard the clock on the wall behind him, right above his head:

Tick-tock... Tick-tock... Tick-tock...

He opened his eyes and found his wife sitting across from him.

“Tough day?” Nina asked, her voice calm and soft. It was a soothing sound after a long day of loud screams, car horns, and gunshots.

Stepa nodded and forced a smile. Her big, dark chestnut eyes studied him, her mind still fighting the lingering dreams. Stepa liked to look at his wife. He liked to watch her full lips move when she spoke, and when she smiled, he liked the tiny dimples that appeared on her cheeks. But most of all, Stepa liked to feel his wife’s smooth, polished, marble-like skin.

Nina gathered her hair—faded honey and soft as light—lifting it from her face and knotting it behind her head. They had been married for almost two years, but he still didn’t know how she did it.

“Why don’t you eat something? I made chicken soup today,” Nina said, standing up.

Stepa was too tired to eat. He just wanted to sit, still and silent, watching her and listening to her talk, but he didn’t have the heart to say no. Nina waited all day for him to come home, to sit down and eat the chicken soup she made from scratch. Stepa knew his wife enjoyed watching him eat.

“I would love some,” he said, getting up to wash his hands in the kitchen sink.

Nina lit one of the gas burners, then opened the fridge and leaned inside. Her well-rounded buttocks pressed against the thin cotton of her nightgown, with nothing underneath. Stepa reached out with his right hand and gently stroked his wife’s behind. This was the only advantage of their small kitchen—everything was within arm’s reach.

Nina closed the door and looked at him over her shoulder.

“I see you’re not too tired.” She smiled and placed a small aluminum pot on the burner.

“No. Not too tired,” Stepa lied.

“We’ll see about that,” she teased, knowing all too well that he would be asleep before his head hit the pillow.

Soon, the smell of chicken soup lingered in the air. It was the scent of life, a stark contrast to the reek of death Stepa had breathed at 33 Novinskaya Street. Stepa slowly inhaled, savoring the scent, stretching out his aching limb under the table.

“How is it?” Nina asked, stirring the soup.

“Better.”

“Let me have a look,” she kneeled in front of him.

“Don’t worry, it’s fine.”

Stepa pulled her off the floor and onto his lap.

“I’m too heavy. The doctor said you should keep weight off it,” Nina protested, but she didn’t resist.

“Doctors... what the hell do they know?”

The extra one hundred and ten pounds pressing on his legs intensified his pain, but for the first time that day, it was worth it.

Nina stood at five foot eight, a full-figured woman with curves in all the right places. Two years spent operating fifty knitting machines at the sewing factory had hardened her body, making it strong and resilient. Yet, despite the grueling, physically demanding job, Nina’s touch remained light. It was the softness—the gentle way her fingers lingered against his skin, carrying warmth and care—that Stepa cherished most. In his arms, she fit perfectly, seamlessly, like two pieces of a puzzle crafted solely for each other. These quiet moments, wrapped in her tenderness, gave him the strength and purpose to overcome the evil they had come face to face with on Novinskaya Street.

Stepa slowly stroked Nina’s thigh with his right palm and gently felt the weight of her generous breasts with the other. Stepa smelled his wife’s favorite lavender shampoo as he soaked up the warmth of her body.

“I missed you.” His arms encircled her, pressing her tightly against his chest.

“Is everything all right, Stepa?” she asked, running her fingers through his thick, wavy brown hair. It was getting long again. Nina made a note to herself to trim it on the weekend.

“I’m just tired. That’s all.” Something in his voice weakened the conviction of his response.

“You sure now?”

“Yes.”

His big, dark pupils, set in a pink mist of fatigue, still looked at her with love and devotion. As always, they made her feel warm and vulnerable inside.

Suddenly, his eyes left her. They didn't just drift away; they fled like scared pigeons. A slight tremor jolted Nina's heart. It rippled through her, unsettling everything inside.

"You'd tell me if something was wrong, wouldn't you?"

Stepa lifted his gaze.

The same eyes were staring at her, only now they seemed to be far away. Distant and cold, they solemnly watched her, the light slowly fading in them. A stronger, more powerful tremor rocked Nina's whole body, and for the first time in their marriage, she felt scared.

"Nina, it's been one of those days—I can't even recall when it began." Stepa forced a smile, his voice firm, his hand gently stroking her thigh. "Right now, I just want to eat and go to bed."

Nina nodded, accepting it, still worried.

"Let me up—the soup's ready." She eased out of his arms.

A few moments later, dipping his spoon periodically into the bowl filled to the rim with Nina's hearty chicken soup, Stepa tried to erase from his memory the past seven months. But he couldn't get past the last four hours.

Sitting across the table, Nina quietly watched her husband.

"Misha called today," she finally said, yawning. "Oh, God. Sorry. I just can't wake up today," she added automatically.

Misha was Stepa's brother-in-law. He was a cop in Moscow. Misha was a good man. Hard, like stone, direct and honest, he had a wicked sense of humor—sometimes too wicked for a detective and a member of the Communist Party. But all that was two years ago; today, Misha was just another cop, someone he had to watch out for. Stepa believed that keeping secrets was dangerous. Just like water always finds its way through the cracks, secrets always seem to find their way out of people. But there were some secrets that one had to guard with his life... having a cop for a brother-in-law was one of them.

"You know, you don't have to wake up for me." The soup was, as always, delicious, and Stepa was glad Nina had made him eat it.

"But I do." Nina smiled softly, then added, "I don't see you that much anymore."

She wasn't complaining—Nina never complained. It was one of her many virtues. But Stepa could hear the faint sadness woven into her words.

It had been almost four months since Nina had stopped working at the sewing factory. She didn't quit because she didn't want to work anymore. God knows, they sure could have used the money. The factory had simply stopped paying the workers. Nina had worked for two months without pay, just like the rest of the employees, waiting and praying for management to fulfill their empty promises. But the money never came. Taking two buses, then the subway across the city cost money. It didn't make sense to Stepa anymore, so he asked her to quit.

As it turned out, it was a good decision. A few days ago, Nina had heard that the factory had finally agreed to pay out the salaries it had owed. The good news, however, was short-lived. The management had not pro-rated the amounts with the monthly inflation, which raged in the double digits. So, the five months of salary were hardly worth a month's pay. Angry workers demanded compensation; management, in turn, refused, and the workers went on strike.

"Misha got promoted. He got a new job here, in St. Petersburg." Nina spoke again.

Stepa stopped chewing for a moment.

"He asked me if he could spend a couple of nights with us. The militia dormitory is full. His new flat is not ready yet."

Stepa swallowed the last spoonful of soup, wiped the bowl clean with the last piece of rye bread, chewed it slowly, then looked at his wife.

Nina's eyes studied him, full of excitement. "I didn't say anything. I told him I had to speak to you."

Stepa nodded in appreciation. He knew how much Nina loved her brother—and how trapped she'd felt ever since she stopped working. Raised to believe that a good wife must work, she spent two months crisscrossing the city looking for another job. But with only ten years of high school education and no skills other than that of a knitting machine operator, there was nothing out there for her, except perhaps a waitressing job. Stepa knew too well that sooner or later Nina would have been asked to do more than just serve food and drinks. He had to say no. Even Vera offered to help get her a job, but they both agreed it was out of the question. And so Nina stayed at home, spending her days searching the shops for a rare bargain and her nights reading books, solving her favorite crossword puzzles, and watching TV. All her girlfriends were busy working, busy trying to stay alive. It seemed nobody had time for anything else anymore.

Nina had become an idle wife. In Stepa's mind, this was a difficult situation for a young woman. He had already decided that if she couldn't find a job by the end of May, they would

start a family. Nina had always wanted children. There was a silent envy in her eyes whenever she looked at the young mothers. His wife needed to fill the void in her life—either with a job or a child. The latter was something Stepa could help her with, at least he hoped so.

“Stepa, I know that with your work and everything, having Misha around might not be a good idea.” She was so smart. “But it’s only for a couple of days. I haven’t seen him for so long.”

There it was again: a sad shadow moving across her lovely eyes and halting her smile. Stepa reached out across the table and touched his wife’s hand.

“Misha is a good man, and he is your brother. Of course, he can stay with us—for as long as you want him to.”

“Oh, thank you, Stepa!” Nina jumped up, leaned across the table, and showered him with kisses. She was like a child whose dream had come true on Christmas Day. Stepa loved to see his wife happy.

“He can sleep on the sofa, or if it’s too small for him, I can make him a bed on the floor in the living room. Oh, I am so happy, Stepa! I shall make stuffed cabbages. You know, Misha told me I make them better than Mother. Oh, God, I hope I can find good cabbage at the market. You don’t even know what those crazy Georgians want for the fresh vegetables. It’s insane. Oh, Stepa, it will be so good to see him...” She went on and on, her mind already imagining their reunion.

Even though they had cleaned themselves of the blood and gore in the palatial bathroom on 33 Novinskaya, Stepa still decided to take a shower before going to bed. Standing in the small cast-iron bathtub with his elbows almost touching the opposite walls, he rinsed himself off for the last time and reached for the towel. The skin on Stepa’s back was covered with scars and kopeyka-sized black dots. It looked so bad, even Nina was afraid to touch it at first. She had asked him about it, wondering what could have caused so much damage. Stepa never told her. He didn’t lie. It was something that Stepa couldn’t share with anybody, even his wife.

He wiped himself dry, then unwrapped his left calf. It had been two weeks now, but it was still hard to look at the small, stitched-up cavities surrounded by swollen purple flesh. The exit wound on the other side of the calf seemed to be healing faster. All in all, in another week or so, he wouldn’t have to bother dressing it anymore. The flesh was healing. He only wished the other wound, the one that didn’t bleed, would heal as fast.

Every time Stepa looked at the holes left by 9mm rounds, his mind was dragged back to that grim day. Sharp, horrid images flashed before him, and he could almost hear the agonized whispers of dying men. Then, the weight of regret would crash over him—a flood of dread, sorrow, and anguish pulling him into a dark abyss. Only time could dull this kind of pain. How much time, if ever, he didn't know.

Stepa wrapped the wound with a clean, freshly washed bandage Nina had left for him, then made his way to the bedroom, finally leaving behind the steam, dampness, and hopefully, the horrid memories.

“Watch your leg,” Nina asked, pulling the blanket aside for him.

As soon as his body rested horizontally, Stepa felt fifty pounds lighter. The “worm” inside his calf finally stopped crawling. Nina rolled over, lifted her head, and kissed his cheek.

“Good night,” she whispered.

“Good night,” he kissed her back.

She watched him for a couple of seconds and then curled up tightly next to him.

“Stepa, please don't forget that Vera's birthday party is this Saturday. I promised her we would come.”

He nodded.

Stepa closed his eyes; this time, he kept them closed. The last sounds he heard before finally drifting to sleep were his wife's steady breathing and the clock in the kitchen counting time:

Tick-tock... Tick-tock... Tick-tock...



Chapter 3

Deals of Deception

Moscow, Russian Federation

All around, the gray skies were slowly turning purple. More of the same cold, monotonous rain was heading their way. The constantly shifting, bone-chilling winds—just like the country—seemed to have lost their sense of direction. Stacking heavy, dark clouds, they offered no hope to those below.

It had been weeks since the sun had looked upon the capital. It was the time of year when the gray, morbid city should have already burst into color with awakening flora. The old parks and peaceful alleys, the busy streets, and wide boulevards should have already been covered with new, fresh, succulent growth. Weeks ago, the lawns were usually transformed from muddy fields into bright green carpets. Flowers, millions of them, should have been blooming all over the city.

And most of all, the clear, warm breath of spring should have blown out the rotting stench of the city, which spread around like a decaying corpse.

It was already April, but winter seemed to have stopped time. Just like the past, it was refusing to surrender, keeping temperatures in the single digits Celsius. A few things, however, were beyond even Mother Nature's control. Inflation, crime, suicides, and prices rose simultaneously, continuing their relentless assault on the city. Tired of the long winter with its shortages of food, fuel, and paying jobs, Muscovites hoped that they would at least get an early spring to brighten up their lives. But the cold rain kept showering the streets, day after day, washing away the gray piles of slushy snow and vain hopes.

This is ridiculous. I've got to get away. I need sun. Vladimir Zolotov approached the floor-to-ceiling windows of his stately office. Located on the thirtieth floor of the former UEF (Union of Economic Federations) building, they offered a breathtaking view of the city.

Rocking back and forth on his toes, the deputy mayor stared in the direction where he would normally find the red bricks of the Kremlin walls and the colorful onion domes of St. Basil's Cathedral. Today, he couldn't see them—not Old Arbat Square at the end of Kalininsky Boulevard, nor even the Moscow River. Veiled by a thick, milky curtain, the city beneath seemed to have vanished.

Vlad, as he was known around the city, searched the pockets of his thousand-dollar dark-blue Italian suit for his gold Cartier lighter. He used it to light a genuine American Marlboro cigarette. The hazy smoke reflected off the glass as he slowly exhaled.

Next week, I will be in Spain. A couple of days there are exactly what I need...

The soft buzz of the intercom yanked him away from thoughts of sunny beaches. Back behind his desk, Vlad settled into his plush leather armchair and pressed a button on the high-tech phone console.

"Yes?"

"I have some documents for you to sign," his executive assistant said in her usual soft, businesslike voice.

"Fine. Bring them in."

A few moments later, the door at the other end quietly opened, and Varvara began her customary journey across the office. Tall, graceful, her heels barely touching the floor, she was a divine creature—a rare type of woman whose beauty effortlessly conquered men. Twenty-seven

years old and an honors graduate in political science from Lomonosov University, Varvara spoke fluent French, English, and enough Italian to get around. In a country where everything was for sale, it was hard to understand why she stayed married to a much older civil engineer.

Finally reaching Vlad's desk, Varvara bent forward slightly, sorting the documents into neat piles. A familiar, faint fragrance of exquisite perfume drifted through the air.

Varvara's cocoa-brown cashmere skirt fell a few inches below her knees, concealing most of her long, perfect legs. Beneath the matching jacket, the fabric gently shaped the contours of her firm body. She refused to wear short skirts or flimsy clothes—it was one of her original demands, and one she had ultimately kept.

As he leaned back, Vlad's right hand left the armrest, moved under her skirt, and embraced the back of her knee. Seemingly oblivious to his touch, Varvara continued sorting the documents. Feeling the silk hosiery, his palm slowly climbed up her inner thigh. She slightly parted her legs, allowing him to ascend higher. It took a moment longer for a page in her hand to reach its pile. The next arrived on time. A quiet sigh of neither pain nor pleasure escaped Varvara's lips. It seemed indifferent to the outcome of his next move.

That was the extent of her response to his physical contact. No matter what he did to her, or when he did it, Varvara would always give him satisfaction but never desired any herself. When she finally agreed to become his mistress, Varvara had entered into a business arrangement. She would only give him her body, not her soul, not her heart. At first, it seemed enough, but the more time they spent together, the stronger Vlad's need became to possess the rest. Unable to slake or satisfy his unquenchable thirst, he was unwittingly falling into his own trap.

Varvara placed the first petition, stamped "approved", on the desk. Vlad barely glanced at it before signing. She replaced it with the next one.

"Is everything ready for the three o'clock meeting?" Vlad asked.

"Everything's ready. Do you want to serve them anything?"

She was so close—her lips hovering above his ear, her breath warm against his skin.

"We'll see." Vlad scanned the page, then scribbled his signature. "If they play along, we'll give them coffee. If not..."

"And if they don't?" she asked, her voice cool and unflinching.

"We'll make them take the stairs on the way down."

Varvara smiled.

“Are you looking forward to Spain?” Vlad asked, his gaze lingering on her.

“Yes.” She placed the last page in front of him. “The sun will do me good.”

“It will do us both good.”

Varvara took the last signed document, slipped it into the folder with the rest, and headed back.

Vlad watched her move farther and farther away. Step by step, she left him as she always did—without regret, without hesitation.

It was quiet again. Unable to sit still, the deputy mayor left his desk and wandered toward the towering bookcases lining the opposite wall. His office, once belonging to the vice-president of the UEF, was big enough for an indoor soccer match. The size and location were carefully chosen to impress foreign dignitaries who once came here seeking deals with Eastern Bloc nations. All that had ended years ago. The union was abolished as the former European allies quickly turned to the West, seeking help to secure their independence from the Soviet Union. The grand white building, resembling a half-open book, sat staring at the capital and the river, destined to become a hotel or simply rot away. Then, one day, the Moscow mayor’s offices moved in, breathing new life into this once-important facility. The building was jointly owned by members of Eastern Bloc countries. Once dissolved, Russia simply expropriated the asset for less than \$100K, a tiny fraction of its \$200 million valuation. Former members of the Eastern Bloc were too busy forming their own democracies and plundering their own state-owned businesses and natural resources. No one cared about another fallen communist federation or union. This was the time when Russians began to understand the depth of hatred from so-called “brotherly” states.

Soon after quick renovations, the magnificent marble lobby was again beating with the hectic pulse of business life. The fast elevators pumped the endless flow of visitors and employees up and down the floors. Phones rang off their hooks, stirring the once-dormant giant.

When he accepted the position of deputy mayor, Vlad was only thirty-three years old. Tall, handsome, with an air of vibrant energy, he was already a veteran of the Russian free-market economy. From humble beginnings in a one-bedroom apartment in Mytishchi—a working-class district—Vlad swiftly rose to power and wealth. With only ten years of high school education, Vlad recognized the unique opportunity as the Soviet Union lived out the last decade of its existence. He was one of the first to register a trading company, which he formed with Claus von

Beesburg. Back then, the notorious German businessman was much like Vlad—driven and eager to succeed. They met at a discotheque in Moscow. Both chasing the same dream, the young entrepreneurs struck a deal: Claus would come up with ten thousand dollars for the start-up capital, and Vlad would deliver the connections necessary to make things happen. They peddled everything from spare car parts to flour, electronics, and beyond, seizing every opportunity the chaotic market offered. Within a few short years, Vlad and Claus entered the far more lucrative business of exporting Russia's vast natural resources.

The country was in chaos. Set free, the ruble had begun its steady descent into the abyss, which would culminate in the devastating default of 1998. But that was still years away. When Vlad entered the commodities market, the immense, complex system of the government's control had collapsed, creating a window of opportunity. Lumber, crude oil, copper, nickel, and aluminum, along with other ferrous and non-ferrous metals, found their way to foreign markets. Businessmen like Vlad exploited their country's turmoil for personal gain. The export quotas and licenses needed to sell the commodities were obtained with bribes. Hard cash, delivered in briefcases and bags to the general managers of the state-run corporations and the officials at the Ministry of Trade, opened the lucrative doors. Once-impenetrable borders suddenly burst open like floodgates, allowing Russian natural resources to flood the international markets. A new myth was born, akin to the Alaskan gold rush, drawing thousands to Russia's Klondike. Lured by tales of unprecedented profits, they flocked to the new Russia to strike it rich. Enormous fortunes were amassed within a few short years as the country was looted and robbed by ruthless entrepreneurs and corrupt politicians.

But no matter how lucrative the situation was, Vlad believed that sooner or later it would all end. The business of exporting natural resources would eventually be consolidated in the hands of the few who would remain alive. Some would be saved by their close ties to the government, others by sheer luck—most would perish, killed by assassins. Then, the government would regain control and close the floodgates. Before that could happen, the newly born Russian democracy had to finally eliminate its old enemy—the communists. The horrifying memories of tanks rolling down Kutuzovsky Boulevard and the burning 'White House' on Krasnopresnenskaya Embankment were still fresh in everyone's mind.

Yet, there was something beyond political instability that compelled Vlad to close his trading company.

Vladimir Zolotov saw that the notorious gangs were quickly taking over the booming commodities export business. Spreading like a plague, they had seized control over all the major seaports, airports, railroad stations, and most of the main roads, making it impossible to trade without their oversight.

It would be years before the world branded them the infamous Russian Mafia. Back then, they were just gangs of desperate men who saw no other way to make a living. Nevertheless, more and more businessmen like Vlad were being assassinated by gangs when they refused to share their profits. Often, gangs killed businessmen simply to send a message: pay for protection or die.

Vlad realized that a war was about to break out on thousands of invisible fronts all over Russia. Fierce battles were going to be waged over street corners, factories, towns, and provinces as the emerging armies of the underworld prepared to divide the Motherland. And so, Vlad quietly closed his export company, hid his millions in Swiss bank accounts, and then vanished from the spotlight.

His partner, fearing for his own safety, spent less and less time in Russia. Claus, managing their finances, preferred the safety of Zurich and the Cayman Islands to Moscow's treacherous streets. Vlad was not about to hide abroad and wait it out like his partner. The opportunities were still there; he just had to find a place that would guarantee him immunity in the upcoming war. It was then that Vlad turned his attention to the capital city and found his "Switzerland" in the deputy mayor's office.

A few well-placed gifts had secured Vlad an introduction to Anatoly Lubov. The forty-eight-year-old mayor of Moscow held the status of a national hero, earned by his steadfast support of the president during the critical political battles marking the beginning of the end. Lubov's loyalty was richly rewarded; when the communist opposition fell, his close friend, the president, appointed him to the powerful office of Moscow's mayor. Now, staring into the gray mist beyond the windows, it all felt like a different life in a different world. Perhaps it was.

Deep in thought, Vlad walked to the bookcases, neatly filled with textbooks on economics, politics, business, and international law—his personal library collected over the years. One book served as a secret lever; when pushed, it silently opened the middle bookcase, revealing a wet bar. Equipped with a sink, a tiny refrigerator, and illuminated glass shelves, it was stocked with expensive imported liqueurs. The bar, however, was rarely used; the deputy mayor didn't

drink—at least not like a typical Russian, often and to excess. The bar was installed to impress guests.

Vlad opened the small refrigerator and pulled out his lunch, prepared by Varvara as usual. He examined it dispassionately. Tiny, thinly sliced baguette pieces, bought from a hard-currency bakery, were glazed with whipped butter and topped with a thick layer of Beluga caviar.

Savoring the smooth, salty richness of the caviar, Vlad stared across the room. Facing Moscow, shrouded in a milky haze, the deputy mayor basked in the comfort of his office. Listening to the rain tap against the glass and feeling the warmth from the air vents, he couldn't shake the feeling of being trapped in a glass ball left at ground zero. This daunting premonition had weighed on him since he woke that morning.

A pragmatist, Vlad trusted only what had a solid scientific foundation. What he felt now had nothing to do with statistical analysis or logical deductions. His instincts warned him of something unseen, sending chills down his spine. Over the years, he had learned to trust these feelings.

Seeking distraction, Vlad glanced at his gold Rolex. As always, the tiny gold hand swept the dial, a masterpiece of simplicity. Precise and relentless, every tick marked a unique, irreversible moment. Vlad watched the present slip into the past, adrenaline surging through him.

In just one hour, representatives of Norway's largest hotel management company would walk through his doors. It was the moment Vlad had long prepared for. Even pressing city affairs were set aside for this occasion. When the deputy mayor ordered a million-dollar renovation of the executive floor six months ago, no one knew the real reason. The city budget couldn't justify such extravagance. Schools, kindergartens, hospitals, factories, the transportation system—the city was starved for funding just to survive. Once again, despite the obvious, Vlad found a way to bend Lubov to his will.

The most important business lesson Vlad had learned trading commodities was the power of leverage in negotiations. It came from two sources: knowledge and money—or at least, the appearance of the latter. Knowledge, he had acquired. Since no Russian textbooks in the Soviet Union taught capitalist finance, corporate management, or even basic business practices, Vlad had to learn English. From the day he started his trading company, Vlad had done two things: worked and studied, nothing else. He read everything: textbooks on macroeconomics and business management, biographies of leading entrepreneurs, and, three times a week, the *Wall*

Street Journal from cover to cover. It was a slow, time-consuming endeavor. At first, he spent more time flipping through the dictionary than reading. But Vlad was determined, and his efforts paid off. In two years, he spoke decent English and had gained a solid understanding of corporate enterprise, banking, and management.

The second attribute of leverage was money. The country was falling apart; negotiating from a vulnerable position was a losing proposition. To strengthen his hand, Vlad hired a renowned Swedish interior decorating firm. It took nearly five months, working around the clock, to transform the drab mayoral offices into a modern, state-of-the-art facility.

Vlad wanted to send a message to his future business partners: *I don't need you; I have it all.* He got more than that. Everything around him screamed: *This is my town, so screw you and the horse you rode in on!* The time had come to open the doors and let them in. Vlad was ready to negotiate.

Half an hour went by. Instructed to hold all calls before and during the meeting, Varvara stayed out of the office. Back at his desk, Vlad reviewed his notes one last time when a tiny light flashed on the phone console, followed by a soft buzz.

“What is it, Varvara?”

“Sorry. There’s a phone call for you.” Her voice lacked its usual cold indifference.

“I thought you were going to hold all my calls.”

“I believe you should take this one.”

“Who is it?”

“I don’t know. He wouldn’t give me his name. I told him you were busy. He insisted.”

She was scared. He could hear it now.

Who was this man? What had he said to frighten her?

Vlad looked at his watch. Twenty-five minutes and thirty seconds left before the meeting.

“Sir?” Varvara urged him. “Will you take the call?”

“Yes, put it through.” Vlad pressed the speaker button and leaned back in his chair.

“This is Vladimir Zolotov.”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Deputy Mayor.” He heard a calm voice. The reception was poor. There was static on the line—a cellular call. “I appreciate you taking my call.” The man had a distinct Georgian accent.

“Who is this?”

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather not mention names over the phone. But we’ve met once, about a month ago, at a charitable event. We spoke for a brief moment.”

“Which event?” Vlad was beginning to regret taking the call.

“A dinner to support the children of Chernobyl.”

Faces began to flash in Vlad’s mind. Something was wrong. He could feel it now. The dinner was a highly publicized event. Celebrities, prominent businessmen, powerful politicians representing all parties of all colors and shades, foreign dignitaries, and even notorious underworld figures—all had come to show their support and display their generosity at the sumptuous dinner.

Damn, I must have spoken to at least a hundred people.

Guessing correctly the cause of the silence, the man offered, “My table was right behind yours. As you remember, the service was awful. It seemed our table was missing a pepper shaker. I asked to use yours.”

Oh, God! No! Vlad suddenly remembered. A cold vise squeezed his heart. Like a rock that has suddenly lost its grip at the top of a cliff, he plummeted thirty stories down to the ground. He could see it: mud, rain puddles, blood...

The man who leaned over and politely asked Vlad for the pepper shaker was Maxim “Hammer” Bakalashvili, *vor v zakone*, a “capo di tutti” of the Russian underworld. After serving fifteen years, he was appointed by the criminals to oversee all the gangs in the country. It didn’t matter if they were Chechen, Georgian, Russian, Ukrainian, or just a bunch of desperate men who had formed their own gang; they all had to pay homage to the *vor v zakone*.

Personally controlling the downtown area, Hammer mediated their disputes and passed judgment when one was requested. His word was the only law that everyone obeyed. At forty-seven, the Georgian native was the most powerful man in the country, second only to the president. Vlad heard that, in his earlier days, the young Georgian had used a hammer to crush the heads of his enemies.

“Do you remember?” Hammer asked, his voice remaining calm and polite.

“Yes,” Vlad replied, dying for a drink... of anything. “What can I do for you?”

“If you don’t mind, I would like to explain that in person.”

God, what does he want? Vlad was struggling to maintain his composure. “Are you sure you can’t tell me over the phone?”

“If my intentions were other than talking, I wouldn’t have called you,” Hammer said, letting Vlad know he had no choice.

“When and where?”

“Tonight, at ten o’clock at the Solntsevo exit on the Ring.”

Hammer meant one of the two highways that circled Moscow. The old Ring, as the city grew, had become an unofficial border of downtown, while the new one marked the city limits from the suburbs. Built to divert the heavy transit traffic away from the capital, the new Ring was a popular meeting place for gangs. The highway was an open area, easy to survey. Nearly every morning, dead bodies were discovered on the new Ring. Apparently, some meetings hadn’t gone as planned.

Vlad hesitated, still hoping it was just a bad dream.

“Come alone,” Hammer instructed, erasing that hope.

“I have a driver,” Vlad tried.

“Do you trust your driver?”

“Yes.”

“Trust is the most expensive commodity nowadays, Mr. Deputy Mayor. Are you sure you can afford so much trust?” The static noise intensified. Hammer paused, waiting for it to subside; when it did, he added, “Come alone. Don’t forget—ten p.m., Solntsevo exit.”

His voice remained calm and polite. It was not an order, yet it was a request that could not be refused.

“I’ll be there.” Vlad exhaled.

“Thank you, Mr. Deputy Mayor. I look forward to seeing you.”

The line went dead, leaving only the crackling of static in Vlad’s ear. Ten minutes remained before the Norwegians arrived.

Vlad sank back into his armchair, his thoughts scattered. No matter how high he’d climbed, he realized that thirty floors weren’t high enough to escape the bloodbath on Moscow’s streets.

It was impossible to determine the purpose of the meeting with any certainty. Hammer hadn’t given him the slightest hint as to why he wanted to see him. The only reassurance Vlad clung to was that his life wasn’t in immediate danger—at least, not yet.

They need me. Of course. Why else would he want to meet?

But the thought did little to calm him, only sharpening his awareness of his own precarious hold on survival. Vlad couldn't kid himself.

Frustration, anger, and anguish seized his mind. He had come so close. His plan was working so well.

Stop this right now! You'll deal with it later.

He pushed the button on the phone console.

"Yes," Varvara answered.

"No more phone calls. And I mean it. I don't care if it's Jesus himself."

"Yes, sir." There was a hint of worry in her voice.

He liked it. "Cancel my dinner reservation at the Prague tonight."

"Should I reschedule?"

Vlad paused, thinking it over. "Yes. Tell Vadim to move it to midnight... I want the banquet hall instead. Gypsies too. I might just have a reason to celebrate."

"May I ask what the occasion is?"

Vlad actually smiled. "Life, Varvara. Good old life."

For the first time, Varvara's emotions betrayed her. "Is everything alright, Vladimir?"

Vlad continued to stare across the room at the spot beyond the walls where she was sitting behind her desk.

"Tell me, are you worried about me or your job?"

"Both." She was all ice again. "Is there any cause for me to be worried?"

"Of all people, Varvara, you should know—we all must worry. It is the sign of our times."

She pondered, hesitant to comment.

"Have the Vikings arrived yet?"

"Yes. They just called me from downstairs. I told them to wait."

He glanced at his watch. She was good. There were four more minutes left.

"Ask them to come up... in ten minutes." Vlad pressed the blinking button and reached for his cigarettes. His mind went back to deal with the business at hand. Whether it was his ability to control his fear, the sudden discovery of Varvara's vulnerability, or perhaps both, Vlad was ready to negotiate again.

At exactly five minutes past three, Simu Sandstrom, short in stature but very fit for a fifty-eight-year-old, entered Vlad's office. The president of Norway InterHotel Corporation was

accompanied by his vice president, Matt Samuelson, a tall, frail individual of thirty-nine. The Vikings were followed by a stern-looking, unattractive Russian secretary whose true age was impossible to determine.

Vlad had never met them before. The three months of negotiations preceding this meeting were conducted through lawyers. Now, finally facing them, Vlad was pleased to find the Vikings just as he had expected them to be. Their hundred-dollar haircuts trimmed their straight blond hair close to their scalps with surgical precision. The “armor” of their impeccable suits, snowy shirts, and elegant ties gleamed as they marched confidently across the vast room. Armed with expensive briefcases—no doubt containing slick laptops and other high-tech gadgets—they looked ready for battle. Their polished faces and self-assured smiles betrayed no emotions. Only in their eyes could one detect unease as they nervously surveyed the plush office, absorbing Vlad’s “message.” Even Varvara, who walked ahead of them, was unable to capture their attention.

Not quite the shabby Russian shack you expected, is it? Vlad smiled, enjoying the moment.

He waited for the Vikings to reach the middle of his office, then rose from his “throne.”

They shook hands, exchanging polite smiles that, in truth, only expressed their mutual contentment at finally meeting face-to-face. Then Vlad led them to his antique conference table, situated by the panoramic windows.

Like opposing armies filling trenches before battle, they took their seats on opposite sides of the table. The Vikings faced Moscow, and Vlad faced the Vikings.

“This is a beautiful office, Mr. Deputy Mayor,” Matt Samuelson spoke, breaking the silence and noticeably failing to control his emotions. The president’s small, dark blue eyes ordered the younger man to get a hold of himself.

“Thank you. I’m sure you’ll be pleased to know that your fellow company, Northern Aurora, was responsible for this masterpiece,” Vlad noted calmly.

Both Vikings nodded, managing polite smiles. They had heard that a million or so U.S. dollars had been paid to one of Europe’s most prestigious interior decorating firms to renovate the mayor’s offices.

Vlad looked at Varvara, the only other person sitting on his side of the table, and nodded. She rose from her seat, gracefully walked around the table, and handed out thick stacks of neatly

packaged documents: the latest agreements, contracts, business plans, and the approved colorful concept drawings.

Matt quickly flipped through the pages, glanced at his boss, and commenced his well-rehearsed opening speech. It was intended to reinforce their company's technical expertise, unique management, and financial capabilities in fulfilling the project's requirements. The vice president spoke calmly, slowly, and confidently, pausing in the right places to emphasize key points. His English, in which he chose to deliver the speech, was fluent. The Russian secretary translated it with equal eloquence. They were very good: professional, smart, and ruthless—just like Vlad wanted them to be.

He patiently listened. Smoking a cigarette, he occasionally glanced at Varvara taking notes next to him. As the vice president continued to speak, it became obvious that the president was growing increasingly nervous. His Russian opponent, who casually sat directly in front of him, was not acting as old Simu had anticipated. There wasn't the slightest hint of nervousness from the young, impeccably dressed deputy mayor. The calm eyes revealed no eagerness to close the deal and collect the small "prize" they had set aside for his signature on the contract. For the first time in his four years of doing business in Russia, Simu Sandstrom felt unexpected anxiety invade his mind.

"Gentlemen," Vlad suddenly spoke in English, interrupting Matt in the middle of a sentence. "I would like to point out that I am well aware of your company's ability to do the job. We wouldn't be talking if it were otherwise."

Stunned by his good English and the abrupt message, the Vikings exchanged nervous glances.

Vlad smiled at Varvara. "Would you be so kind as to show our lovely guest the rest of the offices?" He glanced across the table at the only other woman in the room. "I'm sure you'd find it much more interesting than listening to our boring business matters."

The Vikings' secretary frowned at Vlad. Not at all amused, she looked at her boss, her eyes silently seeking instructions. The president gave her a nod, and she finally rose from the table.

Varvara, on the other hand, knew she would have to leave. There was nothing left to negotiate except the final figures, which would never be part of any official document. Her curiosity was piqued; she wanted to stay. Instead, Varvara quickly gathered her notes and led her counterpart out of the office.

Vlad waited for the door to close, then looked across the table. “Let’s dispense with the bullshit, shall we?” he said, leaning forward and placing both elbows on the table. “As you well know, Kamenny Tsvetok is the crown jewel of Moscow hotels. Despite its current state, the facility still has a year-round, one hundred percent occupancy, with all accommodations paid in hard currency.”

The Vikings managed a nod, and Vlad continued, “This is what we have to offer.” He paused to light a cigarette. The men across the table twitched nervously in their seats.

“The Norway InterHotel Corporation will invest one hundred and twenty-five million dollars to renovate and upgrade the Kamenny Tsvetok to a five-star hotel. The joint venture which will own and operate the new facility will be structured as follows: twenty-five percent will be owned by the city of Moscow, forty-nine percent will belong to your corporation, and the remaining twenty-six percent will be owned by an offshore entity.”

Vlad’s last words rocked the Vikings like a solid punch. Up to this moment, they had been led to believe their stake would be sixty percent, for which they were prepared to wire-transfer Vlad half a million dollars anywhere in the world. That was how they had obtained their first two hotels; they had paid “peanuts,” making a nice killing for themselves in the process.

“I am sorry. There must have been a misunderstanding,” the old Simu Sandstrom finally spoke, trying to regain his composure. “Mr. von Beesburg assured us that our figures were in the ballpark and that you personally welcomed the deal.”

Vlad smiled. “Claus is an old acquaintance of mine. He is a very good businessman, but he has one tiny flaw—he can be too optimistic at times. We must forgive him.”

It was all part of the plan. The Vikings never saw it coming. Claus had played it beautifully, brokering the deal on their behalf. He had already received two hundred thousand dollars for getting them the deal and was getting another two hundred thousand upon the signing of the contract.

“With all due respect, gentlemen, how much would you expect to pay for forty-nine percent of a hotel with a similar location and physical plan as Kamenny Tsvetok in Paris, New York, or London?”

Matt smiled. “Mr. Deputy Mayor, this is not Paris. This is Moscow,” he said with youthful cockiness.

“You’re absolutely right—this *is* Moscow.” Vlad agreed unexpectedly. “That’s why you have to multiply the figure in your head by three.”

“This is absurd!” the old Simu erupted, totally frustrated. He’d really thought they had a deal. “You can’t be serious!”

Poor old bastard, Vlad thought, watching as the old man’s confident smile faded, replaced by a nervous flush.

“Let’s forget the hypothetical figures. Let us concentrate on the facts instead.” Vlad was back on the attack.

“The projections we both agreed on will show that your initial investment will be recouped in less than five years upon completion of the renovations. Your company stands to make a very healthy profit thereafter. We both know that this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

The Vikings listened, then Matt opened his briefcase and pulled out a slick IBM ThinkPad with a distinctive red TrackPoint. Originally brought along to impress and intimidate their opponents, the laptop was now needed to simply verify Vlad’s statement. Skipping the usual pompous pauses and heavy stares at the monitor, Matt quickly tapped on the keys, crunching the numbers. The old Simu nervously watched the screen.

Soon enough, they both realized that Vlad’s calculations were right on the money. The president stared across the table. He had to do something. Facing defeat, the old Simu was desperate. It showed.

“What would happen if someone, let’s say, high up in your government, should find out about your little arrangement?” The old Viking, a true warrior, smiled, trying to hide his panic. “I presume the offshore entity has nothing to do with the city of Moscow and would never be a part of any publicly known agreements here in Russia.”

Vlad put his cigarette into a crystal ashtray and lifted his gaze to Simu. “Are you threatening me?” Vlad asked matter-of-factly.

“Of course not. We just want to ensure that, if we proceed with this deal, it can withstand any scrutiny.”

This was a threat. It was well-disguised and well-delivered. Nevertheless, it was a desperate move by a desperate man—a mistake—which Vlad was going to make him pay for dearly.

“Let me put it this way,” Vlad spoke slowly, savoring every word. “Such an unfortunate turn of events would be very hard to overcome for a foreign company that already operates two hotels

in Moscow. The scandal, I am quite sure, would completely destroy any possibility for future business, as well as jeopardize any existing ones.”

The old Simu closed his eyes. It was a trap—a trap he himself had so willingly opened and then walked into. Vlad had given him an ultimatum: Take my deal, make a good profit, or lose your hotels. In a volatile country such as the new Russia, closing a couple of hotels was child’s play for a powerful man like Deputy Mayor Vladimir Zolotov.

Matt Samuelson, unaware of his boss’s realization, glanced nervously at the old man. Vlad watched patiently as the old Viking slowly lifted his head, eyes admitting his surrender. The time had finally come to deliver the knockout punch.

“Are you all right? Can I get you something?” Vlad asked, with a touch of politeness.

Simu shook his head. “No. Thank you. I’m fine.”

“Well.” Vlad lit another cigarette. “If you decide to accept my offer, I am sure you will understand that it took me a great deal of hard work to persuade certain people to make this opportunity available to you.” Leaning comfortably back, Vlad slowly exhaled a cloud of smoke with satisfaction.

“In any case, I will expect two million dollars deposited into my numbered account in Switzerland upon execution of this agreement,” Vlad finished with a polite smile.

Sorry, old man, but somebody has to pay for the renovations of my offices.

The old Simu closed his eyes again. Matt, forgetting all etiquette, leaned in and nervously whispered something to his boss in their native tongue. Simu abruptly lifted his hand, silencing his vice president.

Vlad had to give it to the old Viking; he knew how to take a punch. Outmaneuvered, outsmarted, and down on his knees, the old Simu still had enough pride left to end it with dignity.

“Thank you, Mr. Deputy Mayor,” he said calmly and rose to his feet. “We will let you know our decision by tomorrow morning.” He stretched his right hand across the table. “It was a pleasure doing business with you.”

Yeah, I’m sure of that!

Vlad smiled politely. “The pleasure was all mine,” he said, shaking Simu’s hand, which still had just enough strength left for one firm handshake.

Vlad shook Matt Samuelson’s hand, then walked his guests to the door.

The confidence in their steps was gone, and their “armor” no longer shone. Heads down, the Vikings left his office, recalculating their losses.