

ALEXANDRA MARININA

THE STYLIST

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The Stylist

«Автор»

1996

Маринина А.

The Stylist / А. Маринина — «Автор», 1996

Inspector Anastasia Kamenskaya of the Moscow Criminal Investigation Department in a series of psychological mysteries by ALEXANDRA MARININA. Concurrence of Circumstances 1993 Away Game 1993 Stolen Dream 1994 Unwilling Killer 1995 Death for Death's Sake 1995 Sixes Die First 1995 Death and a Little Love 1995 Black List 1995 Posthumous Image 1995 You Have To Pay For Everything 1995 A Stranger's Mask 1996 Don't Disturb the Executioner 1996 The Stylist 1996 Illusion of Sin 1996 The Radiant Face of Death 1996 Name of Victim — Nobody 1996 Men's Games 1997 I Died Yesterday 1997 Requiem 1998 The Ghost of Music 1998 Translated by Antonina W. Bouis All characters and events described in this book are fictional and any resemblance to actual people and events is purely coincidental.

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Alexandra Marinina

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Chapter 1

In recent months he had stopped liking the night. He was afraid of it. At night, he was more acutely aware of his helplessness and vulnerability. In the ensuing silence every sound, even the most innocent, was a harbinger of an invisible but inexorable danger. He chased the thoughts away, but they kept returning and there was no avoiding them.

But really, what was there to fear? He had nothing of value in the house, just some cash for expenses. He put his fees in the bank the day he received them, withdrawing the dividends every ten days. And that's what he lived on. How much did he need, a legless invalid? And what did anyone need with him? What was there to fear?

He did not know the answer. But he was still afraid. Every night. And he cursed the day that Nature endowed him with good hearing. Not supernatural hearing, just good. Normal. There were so many people in the world who started losing their hearing through illness or trauma! Why wasn't he one of them? If his hearing were slightly impaired, he would sleep soundly at night. No sounds would disturb him. But no, his legs couldn't walk, his kidneys were failing, even his vision was worse, but his hearing was like a newborn's. Fate was laughing at him.

He turned onto his other side, settling comfortably in the soft, cozy bed. His birthday was next week. Forty-three. Was that a lot? A little? Who knew... What would he be bringing to the annual passage?

He was well-to-do. Without a doubt. A two-story brick seemed to be a nice guy, maybe they should become closer friends and neighbors.

Tomorrow, he would tell Andrei, his new assistant, to be prepared for guests in case any should show up. He should get good drinks and drive over to the Praga Restaurant to pick up hors-d'oeuvres. He should buy a lot of things that would not spoil if no one ate them right away. If guests didn't show up, who cared? The time in the wheelchair had strongly changed Solovyov's perception of life. He couldn't blame people for avoiding a cripple. You can't expect them to come visit – there was no metro stop nearby, no bus lines, so only people with cars could visit him. And the trip took time.

Lord, why was he so scared at night?

* * *

The young men were still disappearing. Since September of last year – nine boys aged fourteen to seventeen. Naturally, they weren't the only ones disappearing. There were many more reports from parents that their sons "had left and not returned". But these nine were special. What set them apart from all the rest was that they had been found. Dead. And one more thing: all nine boys were amazingly similar – olive-skinned, dark-haired, Semitic-looking, with big dark eyes. Like brothers. And the cause of death was always the same – drug overdose. According to the autopsies, the rectums showed that the boys were active homosexuals. There was nothing unusual about a teenager abusing drugs and dying of an overdose. That happened all the time. And the fact that drugs and homosexual contacts were both present was also common. But the way they resembled one another was not.

Then a thin thread appeared, a tiny, tenuous one, and it wasn't at all clear that it came from the same ball of wool. On one of the avenues connecting midtown Moscow with the southern suburbs, a highway patrolman tried to stop a light blue Volga for speeding. The driver did not pull over and the sergeant radioed the next highway patrol post. However, the car did not go past.

The sergeant, who read all the wanted bulletins closely and dreamed of a career as a great detective, had noticed that a dark-haired teenager was in the passenger seat. He thought about it a bit and then reported the fact to Petrovka, Moscow's central police headquarters. When they learned that the light blue Volga never went past the second patrol point, they began searching the area. They found the car rather quickly – it was parked, sad and alone, while its owner was knocking on doors at the precinct of the North-West District asking them to find his car, which had been stolen that afternoon. The closest residential area to the abandoned car was a cottage complex with the romantic name “Daydream Estates”. That was the only clue in the case of the vanishing dark-eyed boys. When yet another report of a missing son came in a few days later, the photo of the boy was shown to the highway patrol sergeant. It was shown according to procedure, mixed in among several other photos, some of which were also of dark-haired, dusky teenagers.

“No,” the sergeant admitted honestly after a fifteen-minute perusal of the pictures. “The type is right, but I can't say for sure. The car was going fast. It's a good thing I have good vision. At least I saw the kid, but I didn't get a good look at his features.”

But the ephemeral connection between the missing boys and the cottages to the south of Moscow was better than nothing. So they took a look at the residents of Daydream Estates. Twenty two-story brick houses. Twenty families.

Information about the people living in the cottages collected every day on the desk of Senior CID Detective Anastasia Kamenskaya. Her colleague Kolya Seluyanov, a big fan of visual aids and maps, made her a huge, wall-size diagram of the estates and beneath each cottage attached an envelope into which the information on the owners could go. This seemed sensible to Nastya, and she accepted the fruit of Kolya's labors gratefully, immediately hanging the diagram on the office wall right opposite her desk. But she didn't have much faith in the results this approach would bring.

The main thrust of their work was on the environment of the missing boys. There had to be something they had in common. Friends? Interests? Where were they going the day they went missing? Were they involved in sports? There were a great many questions, getting the answers took time and effort, and the results were zero. There wasn't a single thing that united all the missing teenagers when they were alive. Not one. Besides their looks. But what kind of theory can you build with that?

“Maybe it's an underground gay brothel?” Yura Korotkov suggested.

“Then it's made for just one gay client,” Nastya replied. “All the missing boys have the same face. Various men would have various tastes. Blonds, brunets, redheads, fair-skinned, dark. But why are they pumped full of drugs? To keep them docile? To keep them on the needle and from running away? I could understand if the boys had been all different and were intended for many clients. But if it was all for just one man, I don't see the logic. Why does he need so many partners? All looking the same. He could find one and love him all he wanted.”

“Nastya, he's a madman. That's clear. And you're looking for logic.”

“I am.” She shook her head stubbornly. “Because madmen have logic, too. It's not like ours, but it exists.”

“And you think that this psycho lives in one of the Daydream cottages?”

“Not necessarily. It could be his accomplice, who finds the boys for him. Although you're right, Yura, madmen don't have accomplices. An accomplice works on the same project with the boss and he has to share his interests and in the profit somehow.”

She was silent, making herself instant coffee in a glass, stirred the sugar, and got herself a cigarette. She inhaled deeply and then exhaled.

“Or else, it's a very wealthy madmen. Who can hire an accomplice for a lot of money. If it all has to do with their looks, then he's really cracked. Look.”

She handed Korotkov a chart showing the dates of the teenagers' disappearance and the dates they were found dead in various parts of the city.

“This psycho, as you like to call him, finds his next victim while the first is still alive and well. And not alone. The first victim vanished in September and died in December, and by then three others had disappeared. Why does he gather this harem for himself, can you tell me that? I could understand if each new one disappeared after his predecessor died. So he likes dark boys, and they don’t want to have sex with him when they’re sober, so he gets them hooked on drugs. He keeps them stoned and in his bed. A boy OD’s, he needs a new one. Now there’s a logic in that. But this?”

She threw up her hand expressively sketching a confused shape in the air.

“Why do they all die of an overdose?”

“Maybe he kills them that way,” Korotkov proposed. “Say, he gets tired of them. ”

“Ah, tired of them,” Nastya repeated. “And he looks for a substitute just like the other. What’s the point of trading them in for the same thing? All right, say, he’s tired of a boy who losing his attractiveness because he’s strung out on drugs. But if he gets the next one on the needle, too, he knows that he’ll get sick of him soon, too. What is he planning to do, keep up this assembly line of wretched boys going all his life? Find one, bring him home, then a month later, a second one, even though the first is still alive and well, and in another month, a third boy. What does he do with the first two? They’re still there. They’re not going to die for a while... No, Yura, that doesn’t work. That’s not how it’s happening.”

“How then?”

“Right,” Nastya scowled. “If I knew how it was really happening, we wouldn’t be sitting here, a picture in brown study. Anyway, let’s drop the philosophizing and get down to work. Have you brought me anything?”

“But of course,” Yura said with a big smile. “The next installment of biographical gossip about the residents of the comfortable cottages.”

Nastya could never understand how Korotkov managed to work with abbreviated and disorganized notes and not get things mixed up. She was very careful with information, as if it were a fragile and expensive object that could change its significance with the change of a single letter, number, or comma and thereby lose its true value. Yura left a pile of papers on her desk – copies of applications and reports, sheets torn out of a notebook with hastily scrawled abbreviations. Nastya was terribly lazy in everything that did not concern work, and she could go without cleaning house a long time, but order reigned in her information. Therefore, sighing bitterly over the pile of papers, she took out clean sheets of paper and began copying down neatly and systematically all the new data on the Daydreamers.

Who were the basic inhabitants of those expensive little houses? “New Russians”, of course. The “old” ones couldn’t afford it. But the “new”, when they moved to the spacious brick cottages, usually left their parents behind in the city apartments. Of the twenty families, there were only three who had grandparents living in Daydream Estates, to baby-sit while the parents were at work in their offices. Nastya thought they could exclude those three families for now, it was unlikely that they would bring boys or teenagers to a house with elderly relatives. That left seventeen. Too many, especially if you bore in mind that it wasn’t clear at all that there was a connection between the abducted boys and the cottages. Time and effort would go into a thorough investigation of all the residents, and then they would find out that it was all in vain.

There was one circumstance that seriously hampered the work. No one else knew about the nine missing teenagers who stood out from the rest of missing kids, only the people working at CID Moscow in the serious violence squad. No other living soul knew, with the exception of course, of the criminals. Last year fifty-eight thousand people vanished without a trace in Russia, and forty-eight thousand the year before that. The figures were high for the capital, too. No one noticed those nine dark-haired, dark-eyed, olive-skinned boys in the general mass of the missing. No one but Anastasia Kamenskaya, who liked working with data and knew how to do it. She shared her suspicions with her chief, Colonel Gordeev, who heard her out and agreed that there was a case there. But there was not

enough to give this case official standing. There were a lot of young people who died of an overdose. Rarely did they die in their own warm and clean beds. However, it did happen often enough in a place where a body should not be found, and such corpses were moved far from the site of death. They were driven and dumped on streets, in parks, cellars, and courtyards. Tossed into the river. Left in the country. Many of them were habitual users and their lifestyle involved staying away from home for several days or even weeks, so that the formula “did not live at home and died from drugs” included a significant number of people. It would have never occurred to anyone to group several people by their appearance. If Nastya had even hinted any of this to the prosecutor’s investigator, he would have laughed at her. And if he didn’t, if he had seen the point and started a case on dark-haired, dusky boys, the case would have gone to Gordeev and his people. And then there would be demands for results and explanations of time and personnel. That’s why they were doing this on the quiet – to keep everyone out of their hair. In the framework of an investigation of a single fact: checking the light blue Volga’s involvement in the disappearance of sixteen-year-old Dima Vinogradov. The rest was partisan sneaking around.

Making a fair copy of the new information, Nastya thoughtfully regarded the piece of paper that said in large red letters:

Name Solovyov Vladimir

Date of Birth: 1953, 5 April

Place of Birth: Moscow

Occupation: translator

Family: widower

Family members there: none

Family living separately: son, Solovyov Igor, b. 1976.

April 5, Friday, was his birthday. I guess I’ll have to visit him, thought Nastya. To wish him a happy birthday and to take a look at this Dreamland.

* * *

The discussion on marketing the new titles was called for eleven in the morning, but it began, as usual, almost a half hour late. It is amazing that people who work in the same company and have offices on the same floor can never get together to start a meeting on time. You’d think they were coming from different cities. All it took was to walk ten yards from their rooms to the general director’s office.

The general director of Sherkhan Books, Kirill Esipov, a bearded young man of medium height, loved his child and nurtured the company zealously. He had started his career as an editor in a large publishing house and quite by accident came across a gold vein on which he staked his future, starting his own company. That vein was literature of the East. He named his company Sherkhan, after the famous tiger of the Indian jungle in Rudyard Kipling’s stories. Esipov began with a series called Eastern Best Seller, and he borrowed a lot of money. The first few books did not do very well, there weren’t many lovers of sophisticated Oriental prose in Russia, but Kirill believed in his star. He had no desire to inculcate love in the Russian reader for a complex literature that had unfamiliar images and turns of phrase. He published mysteries and thrillers and waited for them to find their readers. He was right. Mystery lovers at last “discovered” the series and enthusiastically began buying up books with the clever EBS logo. His investment paid off, and Esipov started a second series – Eastern Romances. Things started slowly here, too, but Kirill knew how to wait. He found the secret that would make these books popular. It was “Europeanization”. The only truly Oriental things in the books were the author’s names and a multitude of exotic details that ornamented the work. But the action usually took place in Europe and America and a significant proportion of the characters were not of Oriental descent. However, this prose was not very popular in its land of origin, for traditional literature was

revered in China and Japan, which was not very interesting to the modern reader brought up in the West. And really, there were not too many modern Russians who could appreciate an image like this: “I could not hold back the tear that fell on my cheek or forget the man who showed me that everything was but a handful of sand.”

Sherkhan Books was growing stronger and now they had the funds to advertise. This was a permanent stumbling block between Esipov and Avtayev, the commercial director, who hoarded every kopeck and feverishly counted every ruble. Today they were to discuss the advertising campaign for the new volume in the Eastern Best Seller series, and Esipov was prepared to spend a lot of time convincing the commercial director to invest the funds.

“The series is doing well as it is,” Grisha Avtayev said loudly in outraged tones. “Sales are fine and I don’t think we need any additional advertising.”

Average sales meant that books from the publisher’s warehouse were sold to wholesalers in under four months. Good sales meant the print run left the warehouse within two months, which made a quick return on the investment and a profit that was minimally affected by inflation.

“We have to try to raise the rate of sales,” Esipov said gently.

“That will happen anyway,” Avtayev insisted stubbornly. “The series is launched and the process will continue on its own. You know this happens in every house. The first few don’t go very well, then things improve completely independently of the quality of the books. That is an objective process. Why waste money on something that will happen anyway? I don’t get it.”

“Because I want to increase the printings. If we wait for the series to get popular on its own, we have to limit ourselves to a hundred or a hundred twenty thousand copies. I want to be able to print a hundred fifty thousand or two hundred thousand right away. And to be guaranteed that they will sell.”

“Sure,” Avtayev said, waving his arms in fear. “You’re going to put in that much money. What if it doesn’t sell? Nobody’s going to give you any guarantees.”

“There will be guarantees if we do the marketing right. Semyon,” Esipov said, turning to the managing editor, “have you selected excerpts for prepub serials?”

He had to argue with the managing editor, too, but over different issues. Semyon inevitably suggested the best parts for magazine publication, and Esipov had to disagree with him each time. He was the only one of the three who looked ahead. Both Avtayev and Semyon Voronets thought only of the shortterm gain and all their efforts were channeled on the production and sale of the book at hand. Naturally, for the best sales of a single book you had to give the best scene from it for serial rights. But what would happen next? Next, the reader who read that best scene in a newspaper or magazine would think that the whole book was on that level. Of course he would look for the book, run around town for it. But once he opened it and started reading, he would see that the rest was weaker and that the whole book was not about only that one excerpt. He would sigh, berate himself for being too trusting, and would no longer seek out the next volume in the series, no matter how extravagantly advertised. Who would trust a liar? Kirill Esipov felt that prepublication excerpts should use not the best scene but the most intriguing one, so that the reader will want to find out what else happens and how it all ends. Unfortunately, Semyon Voronets was unable to find excerpts like that. He was persistent and pushy, he knew how to negotiate with authors and translators, but he had no taste or understanding of literature. With enviable constancy he always selected the sexiest or most violent bits from upcoming manuscripts, which were rarely typical of the actual books. Lovers of that sort of thing would be disappointed if they believed the advertising. And more discerning readers who believed the advertising would not buy the book at all. But he never could beat that into Voronets’s pathologically thick skull. He still thought that a mountain of corpses and a sea of blood were the best bait; the general director thought the bait should be intrigue, conflict, mystery. A puzzle.

Besides printed excerpts in the papers, the marketing campaign used announcements of coming books in current volumes, as annotations that Voronets was supposed to write. His first few efforts showed that he could not do it well. Capturing the essence of the plot, retelling it briefly, in just a

few words, and adding mystery and intrigue was beyond his modest abilities. Semyon tried to get the translators to do it, but their annotations were not much better. Finally Esipov told him to find a copywriter who could skim a manuscript and write attractive copy. But then the cheapskate Avtayev got agitated. What, pay for something that could be done in-house! Never!

Esipov scanned the excerpt selected by Semyon to be printed in three segments in a popular daily. This isn't typical of the book, he thought drearily. Three martial artists fighting in a dark, rat-filled cellar. Creepy nonsense. One of them – the hero, he assumed – put the other two to eternal rest but had to stay in the cellar because the only one who knew the way out was one of the two dead men. So the hero stays down there with the rats looking for the way out. Now, who would want to buy this book? Only the people who thought it was devoted from first page to the last to fights and rats in a cellar. And how many readers were there like that?

"What is the novel about?" he asked, pushing away the computer-printed pages.

"The Japanese mafia in Hollywood," Voronets replied.

"And why can't you tell that from the excerpt? Where is the Yakuza? Where is Hollywood? What are we advertising here?"

"But this is the scariest scene," Voronets explained, truly not understanding what it was the general director wanted from him.

"God!" Esipov clutched his head. "How many times do I have to explain!"

In the end, Voronets promised to find another selection, but Kirill Esipov could see that he still had not figured out what was needed. Once again, he would probably bring him more garbage.

If only he could hire a good person to replace him, knowledgeable and with literary taste.

"Let's look at the annotations," Esipov said wearily.

The annotations were useless, too. Voronets hadn't learned to write them, either.

"We can't go on like this, Grisha," Kirill said to Avtayev. "We have to find a specialist and hire him. No one needs advertising like this. We're doing ourselves harm this way."

"We don't need any advertising at all," Avtayev was back on his hobby horse. "I've told you, it does itself..."

"I've said what we need and we'll have what I say," Esipov cut him off.

He wanted to add, "And if you don't agree, then go, find yourself another publishing house and economize there." But he couldn't say that.

"I am certain, Grisha," he added more calmly, "that in a very short time you will be convinced that we are doing the right thing, putting money into advertising. I promise you. By the way, you haven't forgotten that it's Volodya's birthday on Friday? Don't plan anything else for Friday afternoon, we'll have to go out there to congratulate him."

Avtayev made a face. A birthday present for the company's best translator was no joke. You couldn't make do with flowers and a bottle. They needed a good present. And who would pay? Would they have to all chip in again? You could go broke working here.

Watching Avtayev and Voronets leave his office, Sherkhan's general director thought with dismay that he would have to carry the whole load in this team. Because the team could not be changed. They were all mixed up in this too much. He was stuck with them.

* * *

Solovyov was having trouble getting used to his new assistant. Ever since he became trapped in his wheelchair, he had an assistant. Secretary, nanny, errand boy, chef, janitor and maid all in one. At first everyone recommended he hire a woman. After all, the functions were primarily female, there was hardly any real man's work, but Solovyov knew that he would not be able to stand having a woman around to take care of him and pity him. His memories were too strong of the days when women adored him and loved him for his strength, decisiveness, and courage.

The first one was a nice guy, who managed his duties well but whose normal male ambition got in the way of staying in a job with no career prospects. Solovyov paid a more than generous wage and threw in use of his car, but it turned out that the man had taken the job for a place to live. As soon as he had an opportunity to buy his own apartment, he quit. The publishers found him his second assistant – they sent over a young man who worked in their warehouse. He didn't last very long – he was sticky-fingered and dumb besides, forgetting to do half the things Solovyov told him. This was the third. The publishers had found him, too, apologizing all the while for the unsuccessful previous candidate and promising that the young one would be fine. His name was Andrei.

Solovyov was wary of him. In the last two years he had learned the full measure of his own vulnerability, involved with his inability to control the assistant and the need to rely on him completely. While the first attempt had been more or less successful, the second was a failure. Therefore, he decided to start by finding out why Andrei took the job.

“How old are you?” he asked Andrei when they met. “Twenty-five.”

“Do you have a family?”

“Parents. I'm not married yet.”

“Do you live with them?”

“No, I have my own place.”

“Education?”

“High school.”

“Army?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me, Andrei, what do you need this job for? It's not a career path.”

“I won't have a career anywhere,” he said with an easy smile. “That's not my character. You have to be aggressive, pushy, quick. I'm not like that.”

“You'll have to live here with me,” Solovyov warned.

“Yes, I know. They told me.”

“What else did they say?”

“That I'll have to drive, be able to cook decently, not drink, and be precise and careful with your work. To do what I'm told and not forget anything.”

“And do you think you can manage that?”

“I hope so. My mother says I should have been born a girl.” Andrei's eyeglasses lent him a serious and businesslike air. Solovyov thought that he had no choice anyway. So now the new assistant had been with him two weeks. There had been no problems as yet, but Solovyov, taught by experience, did not let up his vigilance. Andrei had gone into town that morning to buy food for the birthday party. He should have been back, Solovyov thought irritably, it was getting dark. He was afraid of being alone in the dark.

The sound of a car came through the window, the car door slammed, and the front door opened. Solovyov was in his study on the first floor and could hear his assistant's every footstep. Would he start unloading the car first or have the sense to come in and report?

Andrei had the sense to report, and Solovyov's irritation subsided.

“Good evening. I'm sorry for the delay.”

Ah, so he realizes he's late. That was good.

“What happened?” Solovyov asked as indifferently as he could. He didn't want the boy to see that he had been upset.

“They didn't have some of the hors-d'oeuvres you had ordered, and I had to wait while they made them up.”

“What, they made them specially for you?”

“No, specially for you,” Andrei replied with a smile. “I gave the department director your book and explained that it was your birthday. Her husband is a big fan of Eastern Best Seller, and she gladly took care of the order.”

“Where did you get the book? From my shelves?”

“No, I bought it along the way.”

“What for?”

“Just in case. And it did come in handy.”

The fellow had brains. And he wasn’t pushy, he bought the book himself, even though he could have asked Solovyov for a copy, he wouldn’t have refused.

“In any case, I managed to get everything you wanted. Food and drink. I’ll unload the car and then we’ll have dinner. Or would you rather eat first?”

“No, no. Go ahead. I’m not very hungry.”

Andrei left, and Solovyov returned to his translation. The book was due in two weeks, in mid-April, and he was right on schedule, but Solovyov did not like leaving things for the last minute and preferred to finish earlier than the publisher’s deadline, to have time to go over the manuscript one last time for the final touches.

After dinner, Solovyov settled down in the living room in front of the television set.

“Andrei!” he exclaimed. “I forgot to remind you this morning about the masseur. ”

“I called him,” the assistant replied. “You had told me about it two days ago. He’ll be here tomorrow morning at ten.” “Thanks,” Solovyov mumbled in relief.

The masseur came every other day at the same time, five p.m. But that might not be a good time tomorrow, since guests might have arrived by then. Solovyov had not invited anyone for a specific time, and anyone who wanted to come would be dropping in at any hour during the day. He did not want to miss his massage, because he felt like a new man afterward. Well, well, the boy was not forgetful, another point for him.

That night he had trouble falling asleep. For some reason he was worried about tomorrow. But why? There was nothing special, a day like any other. It wasn’t the first or last birthday he’d ever have. So why so upset? As if he were expecting disaster.

His bedroom was on the first floor, and Andrei’s room was on the second, right above him. Solovyov could see the light coming from Andrei’s window. The assistant was not asleep and that was upsetting, too. It was after one a.m., why wasn’t the lad sleepy? If he was what he tried to appear to be, not ambitious and without any other interests or occupation besides his work for Solovyov, he should sleep soundly at night. Or did he suffer from insomnia too? Why? Guilty conscience? Spiritual suffering? Lord, he was getting ridiculous!

The light went out on the second floor at last, and Solovyov calmed down. He had drifted off when he heard footsteps. Someone was carefully going down the ramp from the second floor. Someone! Why, who else could it be but Andrei? Solovyov opened his eyes, but there was no light coming from the window. Why didn’t he put on the light if he needed to go downstairs? Why was he walking around in the dark? His heart was thudding and his ears rang.

The steps got closer and, even though they were very cautious and quiet, Solovyov could hear them. They thundered in his ears. He couldn’t stand it.

“Andrei!” he called out, turning on the lamp over his head-board.

The door was flung open instantly. Andrei was on the doorstep wearing only his shorts. Solovyov noticed that his assistant was barefoot.

“Excuse me for disturbing you,” he said, embarrassed. “I thought you were asleep and I tried not to make any noise.”

“I’m not asleep,” Solovyov said dryly. “What happened? Why are you wandering around the house?”

“You know, I was falling asleep when I remembered that I hadn’t put the butter in the fridge. Was I really making so much noise?”

“No, but my hearing is very good,” Solovyov grumbled. “Put away the butter and go to bed.”

He put out the light and curled up under the covers. He was ashamed of himself. Like a baby, honestly, afraid of the slightest sound. He had to stop. He decided once and for all that there was nothing to be afraid of, there was nothing of value in the house and robbers wouldn’t come here. It was ridiculous being such a coward. He had to get hold of himself.

* * *

Contrary to his expectation, he woke up in a marvelous mood. The sun was shining and it was his birthday. He didn’t care that he was an invalid. It was holiday and he would celebrate.

Solovyov decided not to get up until the masseur came, since he would have to get undressed and get back into bed anyway. The masseur came at ten on the dot, as promised, and forty minutes later Solovyov felt his skin tingling and his weakened back muscles feeling stronger. After the massage, he had a bath and shampoo, shaved, put on a gray silk shirt with a beautiful dark gray pullover, and went to breakfast.

The first thing he saw was a huge bouquet in the middle of the table. Andrei was smiling, and Solovyov saw that he was holding a large gift.

“Happy birthday, Mr. Solovyov!” his assistant said, handing him the present. “I wish you all the best and hope that you spend the day so that you’ll enjoy looking back on it the whole year.”

Solovyov’s spirits soared, he felt so easy and happy, the night fears forgotten and gone, it seemed, forever. He was glad that Andrei shared his mood and was ready to celebrate.

He untied the package and almost gasped in amazement. It was lovely landscape, stylized in the traditional manner of Japanese prints. Solovyov had never considered himself an art connoisseur and always evaluated art on the simple test of whether or not he liked it. He liked this painting at first sight. He simply fell in love with it.

“Thank you, Andrei,” he said warmly. “Thank you so much. It’s a wonderful gift and a wonderful painting. Where do you think it would look best? I’d like to hang it in the study, since I spend most of my time in there, and it will give me pleasure to look at it.”

“All right,” Andrei said. “We’ll hang the painting in your study after breakfast. But now, a surprise.”

“Another one?”

“Since it’s already eleven thirty, instead of a light breakfast, we’ll have a real European lunch.”

And with those words the assistant took out a huge pizza from the oven and put it on the table. Just think, it was his favorite, Quattro stagione, the four seasons. How did he know?

“First a Caesar salad with tomatoes and cheese, then the pizza, then coffee with strudel. And without rushing, with feeling. We’ll stretch out the pleasure for at least an hour.”

“Great,” said Solovyov, suddenly realizing how hungry he was.

What an amusing young man! How subtly he sensed his mood and his tastes. Solovyov really enjoyed Italian cuisine, and Andrei must have been told that by the Sherkhan people. A long time ago, when they were just beginning to work together, they took a trip around Italy. Solovyov was with his wife, Svetlana, Kirill Esipov had his girl friend, and Grisha Avtayev, his son. What a wonderful time they had! It was very touching that they had gone to the trouble of telling the new assistant so much about him. What good people they were. They appreciated quality work.

The salad was authentic, and that was another pleasant surprise.

“Did you make the salad yourself?” he asked, helping himself to a second portion.

“Of course. Out of a cookbook. Is something wrong?”

“No, no, it’s perfect. Marvelous. What about the pizza?”

"The pizza is from the restaurant. I'm not good with the dough. Mr. Solovyov, Esipov called this morning to find out what time was convenient for you. I took the liberty of telling him any time after five. But if that doesn't suit you, I'll call them back."

"It's fine. Let them come after five. Did anyone else call?"

"No one."

For a moment, Solovyov was sad. There used to be a time when his phone started ringing early in the morning on his birthday. People called to wish him the best and to find out what time the meal was, and asking if they could bring a friend. And now...

He chased away the sad thoughts. Everything's fine, Solovyov, don't sulk, people don't like sorrow and you can't blame them for that. Why don't you think back how many times you called an old friend last year with birthday greetings? You're the one who moved and changed phone numbers, and even though Igor was still at the old apartment, you couldn't expect him to take the trouble to pass on your new number to callers. He lived in a permanent party state, and whoever was closest picked up the phone. All they say is that you don't live there anymore.

"Let's finish breakfast and go for a walk," he ordered. "The weather is fine. It's a shame to stay indoors on a day like this."

* * *

But his mood changed abruptly during the walk. And he couldn't say why. No one insulted him or upset him, but he felt depressed. It had been a mistake to want a celebration. A lonely invalid should lead a quiet hermit's life instead of trying to be like people who are healthy and independent.

Andrei was pushing his wheelchair along the paved path that circled Daydream Estates. The spring air was warm and delicious, and Solovyov took deep breaths with pleasure, but nevertheless he wanted to go back home, to his translations. It was only in his work that he felt independent and self-reliant and even more importantly, irreplaceable.

Solovyov was about to ask Andrei to turn back, but he changed his mind. Why let the boy know that his mood had soured. He had tried so hard to make this a special day, had bought him a present and cooked a great lunch. He would be saddened to see that his efforts had been in vain. "What's the matter with me?" thought Solovyov. "What do I care if his feelings are hurt? He's not a friend or relative, he works for me. And his feelings shouldn't effect me in the least."

"It's probably time to go back," he said calmly, so as not to reveal his sudden irritation. "I have work to do today."

"Of course, Mr. Solovyov. As you wish," Andrei replied, turning the wheelchair around.

At home Solovyov went straight to work and his depression and irritation quickly disappeared. He plunged into ideographs, reading them easily and turning them into polished, refined phrases in Russian, at the same time respecting the mastery with which the author developed the plot. He was distracted from his work by the sound of a car stopping outside, and he looked up at the clock in surprise. Was it already five o'clock and he had not noticed the time fly by? It was only a little after three. The doorbell rang, he heard Andrei's hurried steps and the click of the lock. Solovyov heard a woman's voice that did not seem familiar. It must be somebody lost and looking for a neighbor's house, thought Solovyov. However, a minute later the assistant was in his study.

"Mr. Solovyov, you have a guest."

Solovyov rolled out to the living room in his wheelchair. In the middle of the room stood a blonde woman in narrow trousers that hugged her slender hips and a loose white sweater. At first he did not recognize her. They had not seen each other in many years, and Solovyov had not thought of her in almost as long. He had simply erased her from his memory as something superfluous and unnecessary.

"Hello, Solovyov," she said softly. "Happy birthday."

His mouth went dry. Now he remembered her and recognized her.

“You?”

“Me, as you can see.”

Chapter 2

They drank coffee in the cozy living room, having sent Andrei upstairs to his room. Nastya observed the man she had not seen in more than ten years with curiosity. He had not changed much, except for the wheelchair. The handsome manly face was the same, and so were the gentle eyes that could look at you with such warmth and penetration. The light chestnut hair was still thick and there were very few gray hairs.

“What is the meaning of your visit?”

“A feminine whim,” she replied evasively.

“That’s something new,” Solovyov smiled tightly. “I don’t remember you being whimsical.”

“I’ve changed.”

“A lot?”

“Very much. You can’t even imagine, Volodya, how much I’ve changed.”

“But I was still happy to see you.”

“Thanks. I’m glad to hear it.”

“But why did you really come? You’ve never wished me a happy birthday since we broke up.”

“Why did I come? I don’t know. I wanted to see you, I guess, to see what you’re like after all these years. I loved you, although you may not want to remember that.”

“What I’m like now?” Solovyov asked angrily. “I’m a widower and a helpless invalid. Satisfied?”

“I’m very sorry,” she said softly, looking into his eyes. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No. It’s useless to talk about it, talking changes nothing.” “Well, then, don’t talk about it.”

His eyes grew warmer and for an instant Nastya fell under the spell of his incredible gray eyes.

“You haven’t changed a bit,” he said, almost cheerfully. “Same sneak. Catch me up and turn things around to your benefit. What are you doing? Raking in the bucks in some business?”

“Of course. All us lawyers are working in business now.”

“Especially with your knowledge of foreign languages. How many do you speak? Three, I seem to recall.”

“Five,” Nastya corrected him with a smile. “English, French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese. But actually, you’re right. The romance languages are so close you could consider them as one.”

“With your brains and languages, you’re really too good for the police. Remember how worried you were after graduation that you wouldn’t get a job with the police, that they would send you off to be a lawyer? You wanted to get into a uniform so badly then, I remember. Now you must laugh about it, right? Lawyers with experience are worth their weight in gold today, especially in domestic law and real estate. The richest people in Russia.”

Nastya had gotten used to this sort of conversation over the years. At first she would get very angry, but then she got used to the fact that a lot of people considered her love of police work unnatural somehow.

“And are you making a lot at your firm?”

“Not a lot. You know my passion for order. I wouldn’t work in a company that made a lot of money illegally. But working legally and paying taxes, you can’t make a lot of money nowadays.”

“Well, you’ve made enough to buy a car,” he noted.

“That’s my husband’s car.”

“So you’re married, too?”

He couldn’t conceal his surprise, and it took all she had to keep from laughing. Solovyov was always conceited. Did he really think that she would carry a torch for him to her dying day?

“And who’s the lucky man? Some ‘New Russian’ businessman, I’ll bet.”

“No. A Ph.D., a professor, prize winning academician, and so on. The whole thing. Plus a car.”

“A good deal,” he snorted. “Aren’t you worried about being a young widow, with such an elderly husband?”

“Not at all.”

She had followed his thinking. He was probably imagining that since her husband was so honored and so old, she, Nastya Kamenskaya, had decided to have an affair and wanted her old flame for the job. It was better than looking for a new lover. The old ones are tested, known, dependable. And so she had looked him up, having heard that he was widowed. But she hadn’t known that he was an invalid. And now he would definitely say something about it.

“You must be disappointed to find me like this.”

Right. There it was. He hadn’t changed at all in twelve years. She could still read his mind.

“I still don’t know what you’re like,” she replied softly. “We’ve only been chatting for a half hour. Shall I make some more coffee?”

“Don’t bother. Andrei will do it.”

Solovyov pushed a button on a small square box and footsteps came right away: the assistant was coming down from the second floor.

“You’ve become an aristocrat,” she joked. “You call on the help even to make coffee.”

He did not respond but stared at her. Once again she felt uncomfortable, as she had in those days, twelve years ago, when his eyes melted her. Could she really still have feelings for him? No, impossible. Couldn’t be. He had too much power over her then, when she was a twenty-three-year-old law school graduate. He could twist her into ropes then and use her as a floor mat. She put up with everything and forgave him everything because she was head over heels in love with him. Now she was different. She didn’t fall in love head over heels and she didn’t let anyone use her. Even those who were much stronger.

“Are you expecting guests?” she asked when Andrei brought coffee with fresh strudel and went back upstairs.

“A few people.” Solovyov nodded vaguely.

“At what time?”

“After five. Why do you ask?”

“If you don’t want your friends to see me here, tell me. I’ll leave early.”

“Nonsense. Why should I hide you?”

“I don’t know. Who knows what your situation is. Maybe your lady will be coming.”

“Relax, I’m expecting only men.”

“Well then, that makes me happy. That means my trip wasn’t in vain.”

She set her cup on the table, stood and came up behind him, putting her arm around his neck and pressing her cheek to his thick, wavy hair.

“Solovyov, you’re so stupid,” Nastya sighed. “Why haven’t you grown up in twelve years?”

She felt his muscles tense. Was he trying to hide the fact that her touch was unpleasant to him or was he fighting the desire to embrace her?

“Have you grown up?”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out. That’s why I came here today.”

“I’m missing something.”

His voice was tense, but his muscles had relaxed somewhat.

“I want to see if I’ve stopped reacting to you. You’ve bothered me all these years, Solovyov. I kept remembering how much I used to love you. And I want to know for certain that it’s over. Or not. One way or the other. It’s better to know the truth, even if I don’t like it, than to suffer through guesses and suppositions.”

“And what do you need this truth for?” He bent his head over so that his cheek rested on her hand. “How will it help?”

“It will help me understand whether I’ve grown out of that love or whether I’m still running around in training pants. I’m going to be thirty-six this year. A watershed year. I want to approach it with my life in order.”

Nastya did not know how much truth there was in what she was saying and how much was a lie. She had prepared the explanation ahead of time, because it fit her style and character and would not have surprised anyone who knew her well. But now as she spoke the words she had rehearsed in her mind, she began to believe them and she began to think that she really had come to her old lover for that. And not in order to solve the mystery of the disappearance of the olive-skinned, dark-haired boys. She liked the touch of his cheek on her hand, she liked the smell of his hair, she succumbed with pleasure to the warmth of his gaze. She liked being with this man, just as she had many years ago.

She heard quiet footsteps behind her and realized that Andrei had come downstairs. Without turning around, she leaned over Solovyov and gently kissed his lips.

“Excuse me,” Andrei said. “Should I set the table?”

Nastya slowly straightened and stretched deliciously.

“That’s a good idea, Solovyov. You have to feed guests. Even uninvited ones. Please forgive me, Andrei, but I won’t help you in the kitchen. I’m no cook. I’d better stay here with Volodya and enjoy his company, which I missed for so many years. You don’t mind, Solovyov?”

She sat back down on the couch and brought the cup of cold coffee to her lips.

“How’s your mother?” he asked.

“Flourishing. She was working in Sweden for a few years and now she’s back. Confess, Solovyov, you were secretly in love with her, weren’t you?”

He laughed, and his laughter was easy and joyful. He always enjoyed reminiscing about his graduate school days and his advisor, Nadezhda Kamenskaya, a woman as gifted in scholarship as she was beautiful and elegant.

“Right. All men from boy to geezer fell in love with her. But I adored her. And feared her terribly. By the way, Nastya, I’ve come across books where a certain Kamenskaya was listed as translator. Is that you?”

“Yes. Mother put so much effort into teaching me languages as a young child. I couldn’t let it go to waste. Fun for me, money for my wallet.”

Gradually they relaxed, the tension vanished, and during the meal they chatted as if there had been no long separation. Andrei’s face was inscrutable, as if their conversation had nothing to do with him. Nastya made a few clumsy attempts to draw him into the conversation, but the assistant politely responded briefly or not at all, going off to the stove or the refrigerator or the sink. When the door bell rang around 6.30 he seemed to sigh in relief.

Nastya regarded the new guests – the bosses of Sherkhan Books, with whom Solovyov worked so closely. They were typical “New Russians”, who had driven up in sparkling expensive foreign cars, who never put down their cellular phones, and who casually discussed loans in the millions, credit rates, and “corporate kickbacks”. She kept catching them watching her warily, even though all three tried very hard to pay no attention to her, speaking only with the birthday boy or his assistant and talking only about production and other topics that left her out. She quickly wearied of this demonstration of superiority. Under other circumstances she would have left long ago, but she was on duty. Therefore, emotions were set aside, no hurts or slights allowed, and ego hidden away. She needed this cottage estate, she needed this house. That meant she needed Solovyov, and she had to put up with however she was treated.

Trying not to make noise, she left the room and went out into the spacious and well-appointed hallway, got her jacket out of the closet, slipped it over her shoulders and went out on the porch which had steps on one side and a ramp for the wheelchair on the other. All the windows on the first floor were brightly lit, she could hear animated voices and laughter, and she suddenly felt terribly alone, unneeded, and superfluous.

Leaning on the railing, she took out her cigarettes and lit up. Who did they think they were, those publishers? What was she – a gold digger hoping to land a rich husband, taking advantage of the fact that he was handicapped and could hardly hope to find a young beauty? That must be how they saw her. That's why they gave her dirty looks, that's why they were demonstratively scornful. As to say, don't count on it, girlie, this isn't your speed. Rich Solovyov is as out of reach for you as the moon. She wondered how they would look at her if she bothered with makeup and put on the fancy clothes that her mother kept bringing her from Sweden. If she wanted to, she could look like a movie star. But the point was that she never wanted to do that. If the job called for it, well, then, of course. But on her own initiative, Nastya Kamenskaya never bothered. She simply wasn't interested.

"Taking a break from the festivities?" a voice spoke near her.

Nastya turned and saw an amusing man pushing forty, balding, with a thick long mustache like Cossacks wore in old paintings. The man was wearing a good suit and a tie and had a small package under his arm. He had come on foot and Nastya figured him for a neighbor.

"It's more like I'm giving the other guests a break from me," she replied amiably. "I'm very serious and that seems to put a damper on things."

"Are there a lot of people?" the "Cossack" asked in fear.

"No, no, only three. Come on in, please, the door is open."

"I'm not sure," he said. "I thought no one would be here yet, I just wanted to give Mr. Solovyov a present. But if there are people there, I don't think I'll go in."

"Why not?"

"Well." He grew even more embarrassed and suddenly Nastya found him very nice. "It's just uncomfortable. I don't know anyone there. No, I'll come back tomorrow."

"Nonsense," Nastya said. "A gift and congratulations are good on the birthday. They lose their special charm by the next day. I don't know anyone there, either. Let's get to know each other and we'll go together as a solid front against the strangers."

She winked merrily and extended her hand to the owner of the luxurious mustache.

"My name is Anastasia. I am an old friend of Solovyov's. He spent many years in graduate school studying with my mother."

"I'm a neighbor." He gave her a hearty handshake. "My name is Zhenya."

Nastya tucked her hand under his arm, tossed out her cigarette, and literally dragged the poor man into the house.

"I've brought a new guest," she announced in a loud voice from the doorway, enjoying the fleeting displeasure in the faces of the publishers. "This is Zhenya, he is a neighbor of Volodya's. Welcome him, please. Zhenya, it's your toast."

Andrei inscrutably poured champagne into a handsome glass and brought it over to the neighbor on a small tray. The Sherkhan troika reluctantly stopped its discussion of something vital, everyone raised a glass and looked expectantly at the "Cossack." That made him cringe and search for words.

"Volodya... Best wishes on your birthday... I don't even know what to wish you... I wanted to say... well, I'm very happy that you have friends and family who come to visit. It's very important to have people who need you and are interested in you and come not because they're supposed to but because they want to. After all, the most important thing in life is to be needed. My wish for you is that your house is never lonely and forgotten."

"Thanks, Zhenya," Solovyov said warmly. "I am very grateful that you came. And I drink to your words with pleasure."

"Let's get closer to the table," Nastya whispered to the neighbor. "They are having a production meeting, which is of no interest to us, but the table is filled with delicious stuff. Let them have their stupid business meeting."

Zhenya obediently followed her to the couch, where Nastya practically forced him to sit. It was obvious that he was uncomfortable and wanted to leave.

“Have you lived here long?” she asked, loading his plate with hors-d’oeuvres.

“From the very beginning, as soon as they started construction. I was one of the first to move in. Almost at the same time with Solovyov.”

Strange, Nastya thought. They’ve been living near each other for so long and he’s embarrassed to make a wrong move or say the wrong thing. As if this were the first day he met Solovyov. And it wasn’t clear how such a shy and unassuming man could end up owning an expensive and prestigious cottage in the new Russia. In order to make that kind of money, you had to be a shark, aggressive and with sharp teeth. Not him. “What do you do, Zhenya? Or am I being impolite in asking?” He got even more embarrassed. “Nothing, basically. I bring up the children, run the house. My wife is in business. And I just... I stay at home.”

She remembered. The Yakimovs. Cottage Number 12. The wife was general director of a large company selling furniture, bathroom fixtures, hardware and contracting renovations of office and residential properties. The husband did not work. So this was what it translated to in real life. Reading the documents and putting them into envelopes on the wall on the map of Daydream Estates, Nastya had imagined the family quite differently. She figured a calculating middle-aged businesswoman had bought herself a handsome, sexy husband and let him be a drone. Instead, they had simply switched roles. She made the money, he was the househusband. Well, maybe that was a good idea.

“How many children do you have?”

“Three.”

“Wow! You have your work cut out for you.”

“I manage.” He smiled shyly. “My wife isn’t complaining.” She managed to get him to talk about the residents. Unlike Solovyov, who lived a reclusive life and saw almost no one, Zhenya Yakimov knew practically everyone because he was here all day. People often asked him to baby-sit if they had to go away and they always called him if something broke.

Nastya worked, asking her prepared questions with a sweet smile, making brief, meaningless remarks that prompted Zhenya to tell her what she wanted to know. She could not write anything down and it was better not to ask him to repeat or expand on anything. The conversation had to seem unforced and she could not reveal her interest in Yakimov’s every word. She soaked up everything he said, every word, every interjection, all the time seeming to be eating the varied foods and only half-listening. She felt Solovyov’s unbelieving stare. After all, she had come to see him, personally, and not to join a party or talk to his guests. Why was she accepting his indifference to her, that he was totally monopolized by the three respectable businessmen, while she had to make do with the society of a neighbor she had just met and whom Solovyov barely knew? He could expect that from the old Nastya Kamenskaya, whom he had known many years ago, a girl madly in love with him, who had given up her pride and self-respect. But this Anastasia, who discussed her former feelings without a tremble and was ready to examine her present feelings under a microscope without any embarrassment, would hardly accept what she did not like. So, did this suit her then?

Solovyov kept looking over at her, losing the thread of the conversation with his publishers. After him the large tall man with the friendly face started looking at Nastya too. It was Sherkhan’s managing editor, Semyon Voronets. Stage one completed successfully, Nastya thought. They were realizing at last that I have the right to a private talk with the host. Get to work, Anastasia!

She slowly rose from the cushy caf6-au-lait leather couch and ambled over unhurriedly to Solovyov.

“Well, great genius of Oriental literature?” she asked mockingly. “Isn’t it time to give the lady a moment? Especially since she will be leaving soon.”

“Oh, forgive me,” the short, bearded Esipov blathered. “We’ve been exhausting poor Volodya with business. I’m so sorry you have to leave so early.”

“Really?” she asked innocently. “Why are you sorry? Were you planning to make a pass at me?” She looked down at Esipov meaningfully – he was almost a full head shorter.

“No, no, I wouldn’t dare,” Kirill replied quickly. “But Semyon, I think, is primed to take an interest. Have you noticed that he can’t keep his eyes off you?”

Got it. They were going to transfer her to the smiling editor. He was going to give her the rush now, trying to get her drunk and show her in a bad light to Solovyov, after which he would take her away in total certainty that the host would have lost all interest in her. It was a primitive plan, intended for idiots, but nevertheless it always worked. No man can stand having his woman kiss someone else. No matter what explanations are offered.

Look at how they watch over Solovyov! Three duennas in trousers. Why this hostility toward outsider women? Are they that close to Solovyov that they bear collective responsibility for him? No, that couldn’t be. “New Russians” weren’t capable of such noble feelings. It must have to do with some specific woman who was having an affair with Solovyov and whom the trio were defending. Maybe she was a close friend or relative of one of them. Maybe she and Solovyov were having a tiff, since she didn’t come here on his birthday, but the publishing boys were on the case, keeping strange women away from their translator. Or maybe there was no tiff and she was simply out of town on business or a vacation.

Nastya took the handles on the back of the wheelchair and violating the rules of etiquette, simply took Solovyov into the study. Shutting the door firmly, she wheeled the chair to the window and sat down on the low, wide sill facing Vladimir. “Let’s talk for ten minutes and then I’m off.”

“So soon?”

“It’s time for me. Listen, Solovyov, what do you say? Did I come here in vain today or not?”

“That’s up to you.”

He shrugged and tried to look indifferent, as if the answer did not interest him in the least.

“I’ll decide about me for myself. But what do you say?”

“I don’t understand what you want,” Solovyov said in irritation. “What do you want me to say? Ask your questions clearly, do me the favor.”

“All right.” She sighed. “Twelve years ago you did not love me, you did not need me, I was a burden. You were not interested in me in the least. But nevertheless you saw me and even made love to me. It took a long time for me to realize that you were doing it not because you liked me but because you were afraid of my mother. You were afraid to get me angry because you thought I might complain to her, make up stories about you, slander you, and then you would never get your degree. As soon as I figured out that unpleasant truth, I left you alone. I can’t say that it didn’t hurt. I suffered a lot, Solovyov. I loved you. Today I was trying to understand if my feelings had changed toward you and to my great pleasure I saw that I respond to you quite calmly. I no longer tremble from your gaze and I don’t go crazy when we touch. You’ve become someone else and so have I. To my surprise, I found that could fall in love with you again. I, a different woman, could love you, a different man. A new meeting of two other people.

“Nowadays, Solovyov, I can control my feelings. I repeat, I could love you again, but the question is whether or not I should. If I decide that I shouldn’t, I won’t do it. No problem. On the other hand, I may decide that I should but I won’t be able to. And now I want to hear your answer. You can reply without preamble and without long explanations of what happened many years ago. Just tell me, do you want me to come visit you. Or if you want me to leave now and never see me again.”

There, she had done everything she could to make him invite her to visit. She needed this house and its owner, and if she had to lie to be able to come here, she would lie. Pretend. Act as if she were in love. Once upon a time she had been hurt, so hurt that she thought she would not survive it. But that was over ten years ago, and in her heart there was no need for revenge, in her heart there was nothing for this man. Empty. As if nothing had ever happened. But if for her work she had to cause him pain, she would do it without a second’s thought. It could not possibly hurt any more than the pain she had experienced. And even that, as she learned from bitter experience, can be survived. And

so Solovyov would survive if he had to suffer a few unpleasant minutes when his eyes opened to the real feelings and motives of the woman to whom he was attracted.

Solovyov took her by the hand and pulled her toward him. Nastya jumped down from the low window sill and sat on his lap. He gave her a long, tender and very expert kiss, every now and then pulling away from her lips and moving his lips along her long neck. One hand was behind her back, the other caressed her breast under the loose sweater. Nastya paid attention to her reactions. She didn't feel a thing. God, twelve years ago she would have died from caresses and kisses like this. But now – nothing. It was not unpleasant, she did not want to tear away in a grimace of disgust, as she would have if it had been a stranger. But there was no delight as in days of old, either.

She pulled away carefully from his arms and went back to the window sill.

"I didn't hear an answer, Solovyov. I still don't know whether you want me to come back."

"You don't want to."

He looked at her closely and tenderly with his incredibly warm eyes.

"Don't kid yourself, Nastya. You don't need me. I'm a cripple and you're a young healthy woman with normal needs that I can't satisfy. You don't feel a thing when I embrace you. So what is this all about?"

"I told you that you haven't grown up. Sex is still the most important thing for you. You were a stud and you still are." She smiled and patted his hand. "And you haven't understood. I'm going back to my honored husband, and you take some time to think about what I said. I'll come back tomorrow, and we'll talk. I hope your business associates won't be in the way tomorrow. That's all, Solovyov, I'm off. Don't see me out, I'll leave quietly, so that I don't have to say good-bye to your sharks of capitalism. Is there only one door out of here – to the living room?"

"No, that door leads to the hallway."

"Until tomorrow, dear," she said mockingly, at the door.

He nodded without taking his wary eyes from her.

Nastya slipped quietly into the hallway. The door to the living room was open, and the voices carried clearly. Nastya took a few steps in the other direction and peeked into the kitchen. Andrei was having a peaceful talk there with the long-mustached Zhenya Yakimov. That meant that only the publishers were in the living room.

She got her jacket carefully from the closet, trying not to make any noise, and listened to their conversation.

"The Gazelle is what you need for that business," Avtayev the commercial director was saying. "We won't be able to manage otherwise."

"That's too complicated," Voronets replied uncertainly. "So much effort, and what if it's in vain?"

"There's nothing to discuss," Esipov cut him off. "There it is, and it has to be done. At whatever cost."

Easy to tell who's the boss, thought Nastya, deftly unlocking the front door.

* * *

Alexei Chistyakov lay on the couch watching a mystery on TV. On the floor next to the couch was a tray with empty dishes and a cup with dregs of tea. Nastya could tell that her husband had been in front of the TV for a long time, since lunch.

"What's the matter, Lyoshka?" she asked in concern "Are you sick?"

"Uh-uh." He shook his head of red hair. "I'm on strike."

"Why?"

"Those bastards at the college aren't paying for my course. They said they would pay after exams. In other words, they want to see how I taught the course and what the students learned."

“When are the exams?”

“May.”

“Great!” Nastya whistled. “We’ll be short again? That puts a damper on our anniversary trip.”

“Nice euphemism for coffin lid,” her husband commented.

They had gotten married last year on May 13. On the same day Nastya’s half-brother, her father’s son by a second marriage, got married too. Her brother was very happy, getting ready for a double wedding, and he made joking plans for joint celebrations of their first and all subsequent anniversaries. Alexander Kamensky insisted that all four of them go to Paris for the first anniversary, to Vienna for the second, and Rome for the third. Nastya paid no attention, knowing that she wouldn’t go anywhere on her brother’s money, and that they couldn’t afford such a trip on their own. Lyoshka could make a good salary if he accepted offers from universities abroad and signed contracts to work there. But he refused to move without Nastya, and Nastya refused to leave her job. And so they had to deal with holes in their budget almost every day.

“Are you going to have dinner?” Alexei asked, getting out from under the plaid blanket and feeling around with his feet for the slippers that always manage to escape.

“No thanks.”

“Where did you get fed? Didn’t you come straight from work?”

She no longer worried about whether she should lie or not when it came to her husband. The answer was always: don’t lie. First of all, Lyoshka had known her since she was fifteen, he knew her through and through, and he grew suspicious the moment she did anything out of character. Second, he was a truly gifted mathematician, a major scientist, and had a mind that was precise and unemotional, which made it very easy for him to see falsehood. And third, he knew what had happened between Nastya and Solovyov many years ago. He courageously hung on through it, but the suffering and fear he went through for a year and a half when it looked that he would lose the only woman he loved had left an ineradicable mark on his heart. With the slightest cause for suspicion, he became insanely jealous, everything inside him boiling and aching with the fear of losing the unpredictable, uncontrollable, and willful Anastasia, the only woman he needed in his life. Therefore Nastya knew that she could not give Lyoshka any cause for jealousy, because he would go crazy.

“I was at someone’s house.”

“During working hours?” He looked at her in surprise. Nastya didn’t do that. She never took care of personal things during work.

“It was for work. Lyoshka, I was at Solovyov’s.”

She didn’t need to ask if her husband remembered Vladimir Solovyov. She knew perfectly well that he did.

“Really?”

He tried to appear calm, and Nastya appreciated the effort.

“He lives where we are searching for criminals. I needed an excuse to be there. Moreover, I need an excuse to be there frequently until we clean up our case, and Solovyov is perfect for that. We had an affair which ended badly, but now he is a widower and it is quite natural for me to try to pick up where we left off. You do understand?”

“Yes, of course. It is completely natural. Shall I prepare for a divorce?”

“Lyoshka, shame on you!”

She sat down next to him on the couch, put her arms around his neck, and pressed her cheek on his shoulder.

“It’s work, Lyoshka. And nothing more. After so many years, Solovyov has no effect on me. I’m a big girl now. And I’m asking you – please, don’t worry about this. I could have hidden it from you, you know. You would have never learned. But I don’t see why I shouldn’t tell you. Solovyov means nothing to me now. Not a thing. The owner of a house where I must be regularly.”

Alexei said nothing, gently caressing his wife’s head.

“What about him? Does he know that your visits are just work?”

He went to the heart of it. Nastya snuggled closer. Try fooling someone like him. Of course, if Chistyakov hadn't been so smart, she would not have married him.

“No, sweetheart, he doesn't know.”

“So, he sees you as a former lover?”

“Lyoshka!”

“Nastya, we've known each other for twenty years, so let's not kid each other and pick our words when we're discussing important things. How did you explain your re-appearance to Solovyov?”

“Just as you think. I said that I wanted to make sure that I was over him. It was his birthday. I used that as an excuse to visit.”

“And, are you sure?”

“I am. Lyoshka, please, stop tormenting yourself. I knew that Solovyov was nothing to me a few years ago. I certainly didn't need to go to his house for that. But I needed an excuse.”

“Aren't you worried that now that he isn't married, he might explode with passion for you?”

“No, I'm not. If he couldn't love me then, he can't love me now. The world knows that the existence or absence of spouses has nothing to do with it. And then, I haven't told you this yet. He's an invalid. A cripple. He's in a wheelchair.”

“An accident?”

“I don't know yet. He didn't want to talk about it, and I didn't push it. But I can find out without him, that's no problem. Lyoshka, let's forget it, what do you say? Don't make a mountain out of a molehill. You asked me why I didn't want dinner, and I told you that I had been at Solovyov's. Fine, let's move on. I could have told you I had been visiting somebody else, and you would have slept well. Don't think about Solovyov. I love you, I married you, and I plan to go on living with you until we're little old people. Let's have some tea.”

She got up and pulled her husband by the arm. Looking at his disheveled hair, she involuntarily compared him with Solovyov. Yes, Volodya was handsomer. And Lyoshka's eyes were never as warm and enchanting. His hazel eyes could be serious, sarcastic, mocking, openly ridiculing, or tenderly concerned. But Chistyakov didn't have that male sexuality in his gaze that made your knees turn to jelly and your head spin. Maybe that's why Nastya loved him, her red-haired mathematical genius. She couldn't stand studs – men who were so sure that their sex appeal conquered all women, bending them to their will. Men who were certain that women were destined to have orgasms and bear children and that she had to obey the man who helped her or allowed her to fulfill her destiny.

* * *

The guests had left, but Solovyov was still in his study. He had sent away Andrei, saying that he would put himself to bed. Anastasia's visit had disconcerted him. He was ashamed of what had happened between them, and it was always unpleasant remembering it. And since it was so unpleasant, he didn't think about it.

He had never been a fighter, able to insist on what he thought was right and necessary. He always took the easy way, accepting circumstances rather than trying to change them to suit his desires and needs. Let things happen. Let things be. When he realized that the daughter of his advisor was madly in love with him, it was easier to let it happen, to have an unnecessary and burdensome affair with her, rather than take the trouble to gently move their relationship to friendship without hurting or wounding the young girl. He went with the flow, rather than against it.

Solovyov saw that she was suffering and he knew that he was the cause of her pain, first by letting her believe that he returned her love and then by not hiding the truth. But the consciousness of his guilt was a weight he preferred not to feel. Or remember. He managed to forget quite well.

Why was she here? To mock him? To enjoy the sight of his helplessness? But she no longer loved him, that was perfectly clear. However... who knew. Just because she didn't get turned on from a single caress, didn't mean anything. She was older. How old did she say? Almost thirty-six. She had grown cold and rational. Even a bit cynical, he thought. And very lovely. She was better-looking now than she had been twelve years ago. She was still colorless and not very striking, using no make-up, but Solovyov appreciated the purity of lines of her face and figure. Long slender legs, a thin waist, high breasts, luxuriant hair, long and thick, graceful hands, strong cheekbones, straight nose. Women like that are for connoisseurs. You don't notice them, you could walk past them ten times and never see them, and only a sophisticated and discerning eye could appreciate their charms.

She was coming tomorrow. Did that make him happy or would he prefer that she not come again? Solovyov tried to understand his own feelings, but as usual, he did not have the persistence. It was so nice just going with the flow, let Anastasia come, let her love him again. It wouldn't be a burden this time, for his status as an invalid freed Solovyov of any obligations toward women. He was lonely, and a woman in love with him would not be amiss. Especially since he lived so far away that she couldn't come visit every day. Plus she was married. Well then, he thought, it was all for the best.

Chapter 3

Nastya patiently waited for a moment when Solovyov would be out. It was two days after her last visit, and as soon as she saw Andrei take the wheelchair outside and go off on a walk with Vladimir, she rang the doorbell of cottage number 12. Children's voices responded instantly, the door was flung open, and a girl of about eight, covered with paints, appeared at the door.

"Here to see us?" the child demanded.

"Yes, if you'll let me in," Nastya replied with a smile.

Zhenya Yakimov appeared behind the young artist.

"Is that you?" he said in amazement. "To see me?" "Actually, to see Solovyov, but he's not in and I thought you might give me shelter until he returns."

"They're probably out for a walk," the long-mustached neighbor volunteered.

Nastya realized that he was about to suggest she go find them, even give her directions, since such walks couldn't be far-ranging.

"Probably," she agreed. "But my foot is killing me. I wore new shoes, and they hurt. May I come in?"

"Of course, of course," Zhenya said. "Come on in."

This cottage was laid out in a completely different way. The kitchen was much larger and the rest of the first floor was taken up by a huge living room, where all three offspring were located – twelve-year-old Mitya, who didn't resemble Zhenya in the least; the young art lover Lera; and a tiny creature with long reddish curls who upon closer examination turned out to be a boy named Fedya. Mitya was engrossed in a fascinating game with a computer opponent, while Lera, lying on the floor was trying to depict a Crocosaurus under the sensitive supervision of Fedya, serious beyond his years. This creature was the fruit of the boy's boundless imagination, and he was explaining to his sister how it looked, using mimicry, gestures, and a wealth of noises from bellowing to squeaking. The computer was making a lot of noise, too, and Mitya played with a running commentary and exclamations. The living room was a bedlam. Zhenya introduced the children to Nastya and led her away to the kitchen, which thanks to its size and European design could easily function as a dining room.

"You don't mind if I start cooking?" Yakimov asked shyly. "I have to feed the kids in an hour, and I haven't even started." They chatted peaceably about nothing, seemingly. What kind of people lived in the cottages? What did they do? Who did you have to be to be able to afford it? It wasn't very convenient without municipal transport, of course, but everyone here had a car, and sometimes more than one. The Yakimovs, for example, had two, one for the wife, the other for Zhenya – you never knew what could happen during the day, say, if he had to take one of the children to the doctor or make a quick trip to the store.

Nastya smoothly switched the conversation to Neighborhood Watch, which was used widely in many countries to prevent crime.

"Yes," Zhenya agreed, "in apartment houses that would hardly work, but in districts of individual houses there's a point to it. You can see the neighbors' houses well. And then, if you know the residents, a stranger stands out. Especially during the day when you know no one is home."

Five minutes later he told her that he rarely saw strangers in Daydream Estates, at least in the daytime. He couldn't say about the nights because it was dark and because even though they lived far from midtown Moscow, there were plenty of visitors, sometimes whole groups. No, he had never seen a stranger lurking with no apparent reason. Nastya explained her interest by saying she worked for an insurance company that planned to offer coverage to individual homes, including theft and robbery.

Suddenly Zhenya started listening warily. The sound coming from the living room had changed. There were no computer game noises anymore.

"Excuse me," he muttered and quickly left the kitchen.

He was back soon enough, but the reproach had not left his mobile features.

"Is something wrong?" Nastya inquired.

"Nothing special. Mitya was playing computer chess again."

"And that upset you? Is that bad?" she asked in surprise.

"It's too early for him to play chess," Yakimov announced firmly. "He must play games that develop and instruct, building his attention span, reflexes, and small motor movements and coordination."

Nastya was going to point out that if the boy played computer chess, that was proof that he was developed and instructed, but she held her tongue. After all, it was no business of hers. He was the father and he knew how to bring up his child. She should stay out of it with her views on intellectual development.

"Zhenya, what was your profession?" she asked.

"Engineer. I graduated from the Construction Engineering Institute."

"And what do you plan for your children?"

"Whatever they want," he replied, somehow reluctantly. "They haven't demonstrated any special talents. You know, the apples don't fall far from the oak."

"What did you say?" She laughed. "I never heard that expression. Is that a proverb?"

He smiled, as he went on mixing the meatloaf ingredients.

"At college we used to transform traditional sayings and proverbs. We even had competitions. For instance, 'Don't spit in the well, it won't learn new tricks.'"

"Cute. Any others?"

"Wednesday's child fell on its face."

It took Nastya a second to remember the verse: "Wednesday's child is full of grace."

"I like it!"

She could see Andrei pushing the wheelchair with Vladimir on the other side of the road. Yakimov had his back to the window, and didn't see them, so if she needed to, she could pretend not to have noticed and go on asking the father of the three sweet children about the residents of the cottages. But Nastya decided not to push it. All in good time.

"There they are," she said, getting up. "Thanks for taking me in, Zhenya."

* * *

She could not tell whether or not Solovyov was pleased by her arrival. But it was quite clear that his assistant Andrei definitely did not like it. Naturally, the young man did not say or do anything hostile, but Nastya could feel his displeasure the way young brides feel the dislike of even very polite and friendly mothers-in-law.

After the first visit to her former lover, Nastya tried to learn what disaster had befallen him, but she could not find out in two days. It was not the result of criminal violence: all information on murders and serious bodily harm in the Moscow region ended up on her desk and from there into various reports, tables, files, and eventually her home computer. She would not have missed the name Solovyov, even if she had wanted to. Her memory was always good, and she would certainly remember Volodya Solovyov as long as she lived. He had left too painful a mark to forget. Well then, his legs must have lost their mobility as the result of some illness. Could the illness be related to the death of his wife, Svetlana? What did she die of? As far as Nastya knew, Vladimir and his wife were the same age, and therefore, she had died quite young, still in her thirties.

"You promised to come on Saturday," Solovyov noted. "Have you become irresponsible?"

"I warned you that I had changed. I guess in some ways, for the worse. Did you wait for me?"

"I did."

He smiled so warmly and tenderly that for a second she forgot all about everything else.

"Your boy doesn't seem to share your feelings," she said evasively. "Do you think he's jealous?"

"What does he have to be jealous about?" Solovyov said in amazement. "He's not a son who gets upset when his widowed father brings home a new woman."

"He's not a son," Nastya thought. "But he could be homosexual. Just as you could be, my once passionately beloved Solovyov." But out loud she said something completely different.

"You know, when a man does woman's work, he develops a woman's psychology. Your Andrei feels like the lady of the house, he cooks and cleans and takes care of you, and suddenly some female shows up. She tracks in dirt, keeps you from your work, and he has to serve her coffee, yet."

"Don't be silly," Solovyov shrugged off the idea. "Why don't you tell me about yourself instead. How have you lived all these years, what have you been doing?"

"That's not interesting. I had a boring life, did the same old things, and in breaks moonlighted as a translator. How about you?"

"I..." He laughed strangely. "I led a frustrated life."

"What do you mean?"

"My life could have been completely different, but as a result became what it is."

"As a result of what?"

"Various events. I planned to move abroad twice, and twice I couldn't do it. There's a bad sign hanging over me. As a result I became an invalid and now I most certainly will never leave Moscow, much less Russia."

"And how did it happen? Did something stop you?" "Something?" he repeated sarcastically. "Fate. Fate stopped me. I wanted to get a divorce, marry another woman, and leave with her. Just then Svetlana died, and I could not leave my son here alone. The woman left as she had planned, and I remained."

"And the second time?"

"The second... My legs let me down. Where could I go in this condition?"

Nastya saw that he did not want to get into detail. All right, she could find out what she needed without him. But it was strange that he didn't want to share with her. As far as she knew Solovyov, he had always enjoyed whining and complaining, telling how miserable he was in great detail and how he had been hurt. He had always needed sympathy. Of course, that was twelve years ago. He was different now. As was she.

"What did you tell your husband when you came here?" Solovyov abruptly changed the subject.

"Some lie. It doesn't matter. He knows that I'm busy for days at a time with work and he does not try to control my time."

"You mean he's not the jealous type?"

"Absolutely not," Nastya lied without blinking an eye.

Poor Lyoshka! He was going crazy with jealousy, despite all her assurances and explanations. She was being forced to make him suffer so that she could solve the mystery of the missing teenagers. Was the answer worth his pain? Was there anything at all in the world worth hurting the person she loved most? Of course, Lyoshka would never say another word to her about it, and he would be angry and upset in silence. But did that make it any easier?

Nastya spent almost two hours with Solovyov. They talked, dined, reminisced about old friends, studiously avoiding topics that touched on their old relationship and possible relations today. Nastya noticed the assistant's wary looks, but tried to pay no attention. They parted amicably.

She got home late and rushed to call her mother.

"Mama, do you remember your graduate student Volodya Solovyov?"

Nadezhda's voice grew cold and tense. She knew all about their affair.

"I remember. But not as well as you do," she replied coolly.

"All right, all right, mother," Nastya said with a laugh. "It's not my fault that I have such a good memory, I don't forget anything."

"In what connection has he come up?" her mother persisted.

"I ran into him in connection with work. It turns out his wife recently died and he is an invalid now, unable to walk. Have you heard anything about it?"

"No."

"Could you find out? He's in your field, a linguist. Surely one of your colleagues must know the story."

"Why don't you ask him yourself?"

"I tried, but he's avoiding an answer. I don't want to push him. Come on, Mother."

"All right," Nadezhda said. "I'll try to find out. Has he been up to something?"

"No, not at all! What could Solovyov be up to? Before taking a step, he thinks for a century or so, and then doesn't do anything. It's just that I need the details so that I act accordingly. Otherwise I might say something that will upset him, and we won't make contact."

"Strange that you need additional terms for contact with him," her mother noted dryly. "It seems to me you used to have excellent contact."

"Mama!"

"All right, all right, don't be mad. I'll do what I can. Does Alexei know?"

"Of course."

"God, what a child I brought into this world!" Her mother sighed. "You never had any tact. Why are you tormenting him?"

"I'm working, Mother. I'm not enjoying myself with a former lover," Nastya said wearily.

She loved her mother. But in recent years, Nadezhda had stopped understanding her completely. Especially after the several years abroad. Nastya felt much more comfortable with her stepfather, who had been on the force all his life and understood her problems right off the bat.

* * *

Her mother called her at work late the next evening, just as Nastya was getting ready to leave.

"Do you know, it's a horrible story," Nadezhda announced in agitation. "It turns out, Volodya's wife went to a resort and vanished. They searched for almost a month and then found her body in the woods. Some creep wanted her camera. To be killed over some stupid camera! I can't accept that."

"Where did it happen?"

"I don't know, somewhere in Central Russia. On the Volga, that's for sure."

"What happened to his legs?"

"That's not clear. No one knows what's ailing him. He hasn't told anyone. One man said that Volodya had been beaten viciously."

"Who's the man?"

"You don't know him."

"That means I'll get to know him," Nastya insisted. "Who is he?"

"Malyshev. Artur Malyshev. He's a docent at the Institute of Foreign Languages. Are you going to get in touch with him?" "Absolutely."

"Why?"

"Because. It has to be done, Mother. If he was beaten, I want to know why the police have no record of it. And if he wasn't, I need to know why your Malyshev thinks he was." "What difference does it make why he thinks so if it's not true?"

"A big difference," Nastya explained patiently. "Even the wildest rumor starts somewhere. Someone made it up for some reason and told it to someone else. Even if there is no truth in it, somebody's idea was behind it. And if there is some truth, then it is always necessary to find out just what truth it is." "Well I hope that there won't be any problems for Malyshev if it turns out that the mugging was just a lie," her mother asked in concern.

“Relax, nothing will happen to him, to your precious Malyshev. Unless of course, he made it up himself. Are you going to give me his phone number or do I have to find it?”

Nadezhda sighed and dictated the address and telephone number. After she hung up, Nastya began getting ready to leave and was putting on her jacket when Yura Korotkov rushed into her office.

“Nastya, I think we’ve got a lead!” he burst out. “Oh, man, I’m exhausted, I’ve been running around all day. Make some coffee, be a pal.”

He plopped down on a chair and stretched out his legs blissfully. Nastya hung her jacket back in the closet and turned on the teapot. That meant her trip home was put off by at least an hour.

“Let me tell you,” Korotkov began triumphantly. “A week ago someone wiped out a video kiosk. Lots of fingerprints, but no match. The thief is new to us. The kiosk owner went through the inventory and said that what was stolen came from various sections. The tapes were selected. He made a list of the stolen tapes, but the principle of selection is not clear. Not all mysteries, or thrillers, or adventure, or science fiction, or erotica. A little bit of everything. Fourteen in all. And there was a clever cop on the team who said that naturally there wasn’t enough time to watch all fourteen films to find out what they had in common, but it was possible to look through the opening credits. They found a smart computer that can print stills from video, they looked and found that there was one actor in all the films. Not a star, of course, a bit player, unknown, and he’s on screen only five or seven minutes in each film. But his looks!” “You’re kidding,” Nastya said softly. “Does he really look like them?”

“Peas in a pod,” Korotkov said, sipping the steaming coffee. “I compared it to the photographs of the dead boys. He and Oleg Butenko have the same face.”

Oleg Butenko was the first of the missing boys. September 1995. Found dead in December. That meant it was a homosexual maniac. Nothing worse than a serial killer. Catching serial killers is hard, relentless work. There’s usually nothing to connect the maniac with the victims, often they did not know each other and there was no personal motive. How do you catch them? How do you prove it, if he doesn’t confess?

Of course, there were a few things in this case. First of all, the prints that the perpetrator left at the scene of the videotape theft. Second, he had to have a place where he kept the wretched boys until they died. And third, the thin, wavering track leading to the Daydream Estates.

Jostling in the empty metro car, Nastya mentally drew a chart of next steps. First: clear up the question of the kiosk’s security. Why was it so vulnerable that night? Did none of the kiosks there have an alarm system or just that one? Who could have known that the kiosk would be unprotected that night?

Second: why was that particular kiosk robbed? Not another in another part of town on another street? Because no one was guarding it or because the thief lived nearby?

Third: how did the thief know that the kiosk had the tapes he wanted? Did he come by and check it out? Or did he break in here knowing that the selection was pretty much the same all over town?

Fourth: did this kiosk rent tapes? If so, perhaps the thief had rented from them, more than once, and that’s why he knew their inventory. And if he frequented the place, he might have overheard information on the night-time security. All the video rental places had to be checked, they had to get their log books and copy down the names of people who rented those films. It was an ocean of work, but it had to be done. It was a real clue.

Fifth: why did he steal the tapes instead of simply buying them without any hassles? Too expensive? And keeping boys on drugs for weeks and weeks wasn’t expensive? Or he could have rented them, which was much cheaper, and made copies. Of course, he needed a second VCR for that. Didn’t he know anyone who could lend him one?

The man who robbed the kiosk didn’t fit Nastya’s idea of the man who abducted the boys and kept them for long periods in his home prison and stuffed them full of drugs. Of course, she shouldn’t

be trying to tie them together. The logic of madmen did not resemble the logic of normal people. Perhaps it was essential for him to steal the tapes. Maybe he got high on it.

When Nastya got out at the Shchelkovskaya station, it was dark. The workload and the many cigarettes of the day had given her a headache and she wanted a little walk. She started past the bus stop, but remembered that it was late and that Lyoshka would certainly be worried. Better take the bus. She had not borrowed her husband's car, so Alexei could be sure that she had not gone to see Solovyov. She wouldn't have gone all that way without a car. But he would be worried anyway. Especially since last year she was almost killed right in front of the house when she was coming home late from work. That time she was saved by a miracle, a man who then died a few days afterward. There wouldn't be a second miracle, no point in counting on that.

The bus ride was four stops. Nastya got out and into the wake of a couple headed in her direction. The road from the stop to the house was unpleasant in every way – unlit, deserted, full of potholes, so that a late evening walk brought no joy. The self-engrossed couple “walked” Nastya to her entrance and moved on, probably in search of happiness or at least some privacy.

It was dark in the entryway, too, but not as scary since it was home base. As she got out of the elevator on her floor, she suddenly flashed on Solovyov's house. The spacious hallway, the wide porch.

Her keys were hiding in the depths of her enormous bag, and Nastya couldn't get her hands on them. She gave up the fruitless search and rang the bell. To her surprise, it was quiet on the other side of the door. Maybe Lyoshka was watching TV and did not hear the bell? She rang again. No reaction. She had to find her keys.

Alexei was not home. Nastya remembered that their car had not been parked downstairs. That was strange and somehow unpleasant. She undressed quickly, wrapped up in a warm robe, and sat down in the kitchen in front of a large bowl of cut-up tomatoes and cucumbers with parsley and dill.

She liked her apartment, where she was always happy, cozy, and peaceful. Of course, it was tiny, a studio, where two people couldn't fit in the hallway, with a small bathroom, but Nastya didn't feel crowded. Even together with Lyoshka she felt comfortable. It was only after seeing Daydream Estates that her own apartment started seeming wrong. And not because Nastya had never seen good housing before. Not at all. Just take her half-brother's apartment – a palace, it took an hour to walk through it. She visited Alexander once or twice a month, but that never made her think the apartment on Shchelkovskaya was alien, dark, and ridiculous. Maybe because her brother was not like her in any way. He had a different education, a different worldview, a different profession. Alexander Kamensky was a businessman, a banker, a wealthy energetic man with a good head for commerce. So the fact that he lived in a different way seemed perfectly natural to her.

But Volodya Solovyov was of the same breed as Nastya. A man with a talent for foreign languages who made his living that way. An ordinary liberal arts person. Not an MBA. A translator. Nastya could work just like that in a publishing house, translating books, if she had not chosen the police, rotting corpses, weeping victims, and the dubious pleasures of exposing criminals. The fact that she could be living like Solovyov made her eye more critical as she looked around her apartment.

“Why do I live in a hovel?” she thought, chewing her salad without tasting it. “Why? I'm not poor, by general standards. Doctors and teachers make much less, not to mention pensioners. Where does the money go? I have just enough to last from paycheck to paycheck. I guess I just don't handle it right. And here's another problem: I don't have any free time. That means that I have to buy expensive food. When I was in college, I used to buy kidneys at the butcher store, which were very cheap but took a half day to prepare. First you had to soak them for four hours, then boil them, and then roast them. I don't have time for that now. I'm lucky to get home by ten and I leave at eight in the morning.”

She didn't have time to shop during the day and she had to shop in the convenience stalls near the metro, which were very expensive. In the olden days you could buy sausage that was mostly filler, disgusting stuff, but if you worked on it for a half hour you ended up with something edible. First you had to cook it in water with spices, then slice it and place on a thick piece of bread, add ketchup,

sprinkle on chopped herbs and garlic, cover with a slice of cheese and then pop into the oven or a covered skillet over low heat. After those manipulations the starchy sausage could be used for food with some pleasure, but it all took time. Who had time when you got home at ten fainting with hunger? That's why you buy prosciutto, which costs three times as much, but is delicious and does not require cooking. You slice and eat.

Anyway, even if Nastya started economizing on food, she would never save enough for a house like Solovyov's. It was a different level of income. She could not understand why a person knowing three languages could live in such a comfortable and beautiful house while another person knowing five languages and also of use to society by doing hard, dirty but very necessary work, why this second person was forced to live in a cramped tiny apartment. She did not doubt for a minute that her former lover was an honest man. He wasn't a crook or a cheat. And his money was clean, honestly earned. There was an injustice, an incorrectness, in our life today, that's all. And the result of that incorrectness was the difference between Nastya and Solovyov, which, really, should not have existed at all.

She caught herself thinking about Solovyov with pleasure. And of the fact that she would go see him again tomorrow.

"You are wrong, Anastasia," she said wearily to herself. "You should be working, but you keep thinking about pleasure. Toss that out of your head, you're not of an age when mistakes are easily forgiven. Especially, the second time around."

Nastya finished the salad, washed her bowl, stood under a hot shower for a quarter hour to relax and warm up, and crawled into bed. She was going to call her husband's parents in Zhukovsky – maybe he had gone to see them. She was reaching for the phone when she stopped herself. Don't. He might think she was checking up. And what if he weren't there and his parents didn't know where he was? Whatever else she may want, "catching" Lyoshka was not one of her goals. Not because she was a hundred percent sure of his fidelity. Alexei was a normal male who could fall for a beautiful, interesting, sexy woman, so unlike Nastya, who was unattractive, cool, and absolutely without sex appeal. From the point of view of probability, it was quite possible, but Nastya never felt that she had to know about it. What for? Of her almost thirty-six years, she had known Chistyakov twenty. More than half her life. They would grow old together, they would always be together, and no matter what happened, they would be best friends. This assertion had been tested by time and was unimpeachable. And then, was she herself without guilt? Certainly not.

In other words, she did not call Lyoshka's parents. But just as she was putting out the light, the phone rang.

"Nastya?" asked an uncertain voice.

It was Pavel Kamensky, Alexander's father. And Nastya's, naturally.

"Yes, it's me," she said, trying to hide her surprise.

Kamensky senior rarely called. He divorced Nastya's mother when Nastya was very small, and he communicated with his daughter on major holidays and then by phone. Of course, after Nastya became friends with Alexander, his son by a second marriage, and Alexander's wife, Dasha, Pavel started calling more frequently. But he was still a total stranger as far as Nastya was concerned – she felt nothing for him, neither warmth nor dislike. Nastya adored her mother's second husband, her stepfather, and had called him "Papa" all her life. Pavel Kamensky did not really exist for her.

"Nastya, I'm calling to warn you." He stopped for a bit. "There's a problem with little Dasha, and your Alexei went to help Alexander."

"What's the matter with Dasha?" Nastya asked quickly.

"Well, it's, uh, well —" Kamensky muttered, but Nastya understood.

Dasha was pregnant, in her fourth month. She must have miscarried.

"How did it happen?"

"I don't know. Alexander called about two hours ago from the hospital. He said that Alexei had to bring some important doctor. He asked me to call you so that you wouldn't worry. Don't be angry,

Nastya, that your husband was called out of the house at night, but Alexander is in such a panic, he's so worried about Dasha. Can Alexei stay with him a bit. Is that all right?"

"It's fine. Thanks for calling," Nastya said.

"Thanks for calling today instead of tomorrow," she added mentally. "I've been home an hour. If I were a different person, I would have gone nuts in the last hour wondering where my husband had gone without warning, without even a note. And you, daddy dear, instead of calling every five minutes trying to catch me the minute I walk in so that I'm spared worry, call only now. Were you watching a movie on TV? Lucky for you that I'm a calm person and don't panic at the drop of a hat. 'A problem with little Dasha...' You never called me little Nastya. I'm not jealous, God knows. Dasha is a marvelous creature, a living miracle with blue eyes, I love her myself and I can't imagine a person who wouldn't love her. But I'm your daughter. Or am I? Am I just the child of a woman you used to be married to, accidentally, stupidly, and for a very short time?"

It wasn't interesting thinking about Kamensky, he meant too little in Nastya's life. She was much more worried about her sister-in-law's health. Their first child, little Sasha, was under a year old, born in early June. Nastya had not been so sure that it was a good idea for Sasha to have a second baby so soon. But she really wanted a girl. And Alexander was so happy! Poor Dasha, it would be a pity if she lost the baby. However, she was still young. Twenty. She'd be able to have a dozen more if she wanted. The important thing was for nothing serious to happen that would affect her ability to conceive and carry full term.

So, Lyoshka was somewhere at a hospital with Alexander. Well, that was a good idea, Lyoshka was a rational and calm person, sometimes too much so, but in this case it was just what was needed to restrain panicky Alexander. And he did have superior physicians among his friends. He had once worked halftime at a medical technology institute, developing diagnostic computer programs. Ever since then Lyoshka had a wide circle of medical friends. He must have brought a luminary with him. Nastya imagined Alexander calling and shouting that Dasha was hemorrhaging and he didn't know what to do. Dasha was dying! Alexander Kamensky had the amazing ability to see the worst-case scenario and think that the situation was beyond repair. Interestingly, this did not extend to his business. It appeared only in regards to Dasha. He was probably madly in love with her, losing his reason when something happened to her. Naturally, Lyoshka rushed off to help his brother-in-law and handle things. No time for notes.

Suddenly Nastya put on the light and reached for the phone. She had dialed Solovyov's number before she could answer the question: why was she calling?

"Did I wake you?" she asked guiltily when she heard his soft voice.

"No, I go to bed late."

"How are things?"

"Fine, thanks. Is that why you called?"

"To tell the truth, I don't know why I called. But apparently, it was something I really wanted to do. Otherwise I wouldn't have done it."

"Makes sense," he chuckled. "Even in such subtle and emotional issues you seek to operate on logic. How are things with you?"

"Fine. As usual."

"Are you at home?"

"Of course. Where else would I be at this time of night?" "What about your husband? Aren't you worried that he might hear you talking to me?"

"No. If I were afraid, I wouldn't have called."

"More logic. In any case, I'm glad you called."

"Really?"

"Really."

She heard the intonation in his voice that used to make her head spin.

“Man gets used to good things very quickly,” Solovyov went on. “The day before yesterday you called me, yesterday you visited, and today I had the feeling that something was missing. You called just now and I realized what it was. I miss you.”

“Me too,” she said with a smile. “I’ll come over tomorrow if you don’t have any other plans.”

“What time?”

“Around eight. Is that all right?”

“I’ll be waiting.”

“Kisses,” she said softly. “Good night.”

There, Solovyov. You miss me already. And why? Let’s not think about me, I’ve always been a sucker where you were concerned. But you? You didn’t even think me human. I was nothing more than a dangerous daughter of my mother, someone who could cause a lot of trouble if not handled properly. A device. Back then, you were afraid of my mother, and you were afraid that if you rejected me, your advisor would be angry, and if you had an affair with me, she would bring up questions of divorce and marriage to me. You did not love me and did not want to marry me. But it never occurred to you that my mother would never hear of our affair. You were sure that I told her everything. Actually, I never had that habit. Mother learned about it many years later and, I must say, was very surprised. In other words, afraid of my mother, you started sleeping with me, and even more afraid of her, you broke it off. But now, a relationship with me is not threat to you at all. You’re not married, and I am. Therefore, you are insured against matrimonial demands from my side. And if they did come up, your illness is your best defense. No one could force you to marry anyone. So you can flirt. Your life is boring and lonely now, and even though you pretend not to need anyone, it’s not true. You were always the life of the party, the center of attention, and you can’t break the habits of a lifetime in just two years. You need to have a person who loves you around. And your feelings don’t matter here. You could deceive to get what you want. You say that you miss me? Perhaps. Tomorrow you’ll start acting as if you cared about me. And that won’t be true. You will pretend so that I keep coming back, so that you can feel my love once again, sense it and breathe it. You’re an emotional vampire. God, I used to love you so much.

Chapter 4

Artur Malyshev turned out to be a handsome fifty-year-old, trying to look younger, with an unexpectedly soft voice.

"I'm saving my throat," he explained, seeing that Nastya was straining to hear. "I lecture six hours a day – that's no joke. And I teach courses in the evenings, too, to help earn my daily bread. So between classes I try to keep it to a whisper."

He didn't know very much about Solovyov, they were never particularly friendly and belonged to different crowds. They had been in graduate school at the same time, but in different departments. He had learned about Solovyov's catastrophe from his wife, who had heard it from some acquaintance who worked in an ambulance service. The acquaintance was a fan of the Eastern Best Seller series, and so she remembered Solovyov in that great mass of people she delivered to the hospital.

"Could you remember exactly what your wife said this friend had said?" Nastya asked.

"Well, that the famous translator Solovyov had been beaten up by someone and that an ambulance had picked him up in the street. That was all, no other details."

"What about this acquaintance? Do you know her?"

"No, unfortunately. I don't even know her name."

"How can that be? You don't know your wife's friends?" "She's not a friend, just an acquaintance. My wife met her at the hospital. I think they may have called each other a few times after that, but this woman never came to our house." "Which hospital was this that they met?"

Malyshev looked very embarrassed. "I... I don't know." "Mr. Malyshev, that is impossible. Are you not telling me something?"

He blushed and looked furiously for his lighter, which was right in front of him.

"You see... Well, my wife was having an abortion. I was out of town then. She did not want me to know about it. Therefore, it's quite natural that I would not know which hospital she was in."

"But you still found out that she had had an abortion," Nastya pointed out.

"Yes."

Malyshev looked up and into her eyes. "There's no point in trying to hide it from you. You're with the police and you won't rest until you find out, right?"

"Got it in one."

"Especially since the whole institute knows about it anyway. My wife and I are divorced. She had a new man. It was his baby she was aborting. That's why she wanted to keep it from me. She managed for a while. But then the man asked her to marry him and move abroad. He has some big company in the Ivory Coast. There, that's it."

"Excuse me," Nastya apologized. "I didn't want to make you talk about unpleasant things. But I really have to find this acquaintance from the ambulance service. Is there anything you can suggest that will help?"

"No."

"And is there any way to get in touch with your wife?"

"I don't have her telephone. She's out there in Guyana. I mean, the Ivory Coast."

"I understand," she sighed. "Maybe your former wife has girl friends who might know what hospital she was in?"

Malyshev gave her several names, which Nastya carefully wrote down.

"But I'm not sure that this will help you," he warned. "My wife was very close-lipped and careful, she did not trust anyone, especially women. She tried to keep her relationship with that millionaire a secret and she managed to do it for a pretty long time. If she had shared secrets with her girl friends, it would have been known much sooner."

“Mr. Malyshev,” Nastya said with a smile. “I don’t want to disillusion you, but the husband is always the last to know. That’s an old clichè. Your circle may have known all about the affair for a while.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m certain that’s not the case.”

Nastya did not know on what he based his certainty, but she did not insist. Why traumatize the man any more?

However her hopes that the friends of docent Malyshev’s former wife would be helpful were shattered. Either they were not very close friends or the lady truly was very secretive, but none of them could name the hospital where she had the abortion. That was understandable, there were a lot of hospitals in Moscow and an abortion was not an occasion to bring a lot of visitors. You were in only three days, sometimes only one. Come in the morning, leave that night – outpatient surgery. There was only one thing to do: check all the hospitals one by one, looking for the one where Anna Malysheva stayed two years ago. Then take the list of all the women who were in the hospital at the same time, and look for one who works for the ambulance service. It was labor intensive, and what was the point? We weren’t looking for a criminal, just a woman who maintained that Solovyov had been beaten. And it isn’t even clear whether she was part of the team that took him to the hospital or whether she had it second-hand from a colleague. Well, and let’s say Nastya finds the woman and determines that Solovyov had been beaten. What then? What did that have to do with the missing boys? Or the madman who stole the videotapes from the kiosk? Nothing. And no one would ever let her use precious work time to find out the truth about a former lover who was not mixed up in anything criminal and was not even under suspicion.

But was he really not mixed up in anything or under suspicion?

Nastya Kamenskaya was not one who was afraid to tell herself the truth.

* * *

“Don’t bug them,” Victor Gordeev said angrily. “And don’t let them know your ideas.”

He had been in a foul mood in the morning, calming down a bit by evening, but there was still weary irritation in his voice.

Nastya had prepared a memo that morning with a list of preliminary measures for the search for the thief of the videotapes from the kiosk, and she had come in to see her boss and find out what, if anything, had been done about her memo. It turned out that almost nothing was done. Interdepartmental politics had gotten in the way. The video theft was small potatoes, local precinct stuff, and there was no way it could be of concern to Petrovka, CID headquarters, without some weighty reasons. Both Gordeev and Nastya had their reasons, but the problem was that the precinct administration did not report directly to them. And Colonel Gordeev was categorically opposed to making those reasons known to his bosses and demanding that the cases be connected.

“You have to understand,” he explained to Nastya, “that we are the only ones who know that the disappearance of the nine boys is the work of one person. And we don’t know that for sure, we merely suspect it. There are four of us. Korotkov, Seluyanov, and you and me. That’s it. Do you know what can happen if we make our dubious suspicions known? If we even hint today that among the masses of missing boys there is a group with Semitic features, all the scandal rags will print front-page stories tomorrow about an anti-Semitic underground organization at work in Moscow. What do those newspapers want? Circulation! And they’ll use whatever they can – unchecked information, unfounded rumors, outright lies. Just to get readers, who want a spicy story. Can you imagine what will happen next? The Jewish community in Moscow will be in a panic. They’ll demand emergency measures and insist that the authorities are not protecting them because they are Jewish. You can’t go off half-cocked, my dear, in such delicate matters. I’m not sure that we have enough wise and subtle politicians in the city to cool off a brewing scandal without insulting anyone. The ethnic issue

is always a problem. A tough one. It takes spiritual sensitivity, patience, and far-sightedness. And all our words that this is a maniac at work who simply likes boys who look like that no matter their nationality will be a cry in the wilderness. No one will hear it, because there will be lots of people who will benefit from reducing the problem to an ethnic issue and blowing it up to an enormous scandal. Elections aren't far away, don't forget."

"I haven't forgotten," Nastya sighed. "But the precinct isn't going to look for this thief. I mean really look for him. He's not important to them."

"What about the fellow who was smart enough to check the film credits? He seems intelligent. Do you think he won't be able to manage it?"

"Who'll let him!" She made a hopeless gesture with her hand. "No one will understand why he cares about this kiosk robbery. It's a petty crime. They'll load him up with a million other things, and he'll forget all about the thief in two days."

"Well, then, let's trick them," Gordeev proposed.

"How?"

"What district is that?"

"Western. Around the Molodezhnaya metro station. "

"Do we have any of our cases there?"

"Two," Nastya said, figuring out what her boss had in mind. "Seluyanov has a corpse, and Igor Lesnikov had another. Seluyanov's murder had expensive things, paintings and jewelry stolen from the apartment. Will that do?"

"It will. You catch on fast," Gordeev said, praising her.

A half hour later he had arranged to have a police officer from the Western district to follow the trail of the stolen goods. The very one he wanted. And now no one could blame the young officer for following the orders of the detectives from Petrovka.

Nastya put off meeting him until tomorrow and went to see Solovyov.

* * *

"Come on," Nastya said jokingly, as she sat in the comfortable armchair, "tell me how much you missed me."

"A lot," Solovyov said in the same bantering tone.

He seemed a bit different today, not like he had been on his birthday. In a dark blue sweater, hair rumpled and eyes laughing, he was more like the Solovyov she used to know many years ago – confident, happy with life, always ready for a joke and a smile.

Andrei was not home, he had gone to the publishing house to pick copies of the new book. Without him around, Nastya felt much freer. She could not handle hostility, even well-hidden hostility. They settled in the living room, bringing coffee and sandwiches from the kitchen. Nastya was going to offer to make dinner, since there was a lot of food, but said nothing figuring that the assistant would not be happy seeing someone else taking charge.

"Did you miss me?" Vladimir asked.

"A little," she said with a smile. "In between urgent work, negotiations, and preparing contracts. Are we going to talk about us or can we pick a more interesting topic?"

"Our relationship is the most interesting. Isn't it?"

Nastya gave Solovyov a close look. Was he seriously planning to make her fall for him again? What conceit!

"Probably," she agreed. "But you know that you can't step into the same river twice. We've both changed. So there's no point in talking about our former relationship, and we don't know each other well enough to talk about a new one. If we do decide that our present relationship is a subject for discussion, then we need to talk about each other."

"You're impossible!" Solovyov laughed. "You've lost all your romanticism over the years and you've become terribly dry, businesslike, and terrifyingly logical. Why do you think that I've changed? I'm the same. I'm exactly the same Solovyov that you used to love."

"That can't be," she noted gently. "Many things have happened in your life over the years and in mine. And it's left its mark – a quite noticeable one, I might add. You've lived through a tragedy, losing your wife. You've become rich and rather famous. How can you say that you haven't changed?"

"You're right about the money, but I doubt that I'm famous."

"What about the wife and illness?" Nastya thought. "Pretending not to have heard? Why? Why are you avoiding the discussion?"

"No doubts about it," she replied quickly. "The readers know you."

"What makes you say that?"

Nastya saw unfeigned interest in his eyes. Solovyov had always been vain and he liked to talk about fame. But in this case he wasn't acting coy, he really did want to know.

"The doctor in the ambulance that took you to hospital is a big fan of yours."

Now his face showed anger, his features seemed sharper and frozen, as if he was controlling himself to keep from saying something harsh.

"She started calling up all her friends to tell them that the Solovyov who translates Eastern Best Seller had been viciously mugged on the street. She was so sorry for you. She suffered so much over you."

Now Nastya was completely sure that the talk of the mugging was true. But why hadn't it appeared in the reports? This was a serious crime, to leave the victim an invalid. You could get eight years for that. Solovyov was protecting the criminal, that was clear. That's why he didn't want to talk about it. Who was it? His son? Maybe. But what about the doctors? They were required to report a viciously beaten patient to the police. Why hadn't they? Because no one cared anymore. For the last few years nobody did what the law or the regulations demanded. Because everyone was out for himself and didn't care about anyone else. The country was going to hell in a handbasket.

"She called me then, too," Nastya continued without a pause, as if nothing were wrong. "Actually, it was then that I started thinking about coming to see you."

"It was a long think," he replied dryly. "Almost two years."

"Yes," she agreed. "It was. I was planning to get married then and I couldn't decide whether I should come see you. I didn't know that Svetlana was gone. I thought and thought, vacillating. Then I cooled off somehow, and then there were the wedding preparations and the honeymoon. But you see, I did come."

"And you did the right thing. You can't even imagine how happy I am that you are back in my life."

Nastya could see that he wanted to change the topic and she did not resist. But she had no intention of talking about feelings, either.

"Tell me, please, which of the Oriental books you think is best?" she asked. "I trust your taste. I'll read whichever you say."

"Read the whole series, you can't go wrong. They're all great. Plot, characters, dialogue."

"But there has to be one that's the best," Nastya persisted. "Your favorite."

"My favorite? Then read *The Blade*. But it's out of print by now, it was hot last year. If you want to read it, I'll give you my copy."

"Thanks, I certainly will read it."

Of course, she would. She'd read *The Blade* and all the others he translated. Simply to understand why he considered this one his favorite. Tell me which book you like and I'll tell what you were thinking when you read it.

"Wait!" she said to herself. What are you doing? Why do you need to know what he was thinking and feeling when he translated the book? Are you planning to work on him? Why? Just

because he is trying to hide the fact that he was beaten? Get a grip, Anastasia. Be honest: are you interested in him? Are you falling for him again? If so, then you're a fool, sad to say. If not, then leave him alone and don't try to get inside his head.

* * *

Gennady Svalov, the officer from the Western District was young and looked more like a New Russian than a traditional policeman. Strong, stocky, and with very short hair, he drove a sweet blue VW and never parted from his cell phone. Nastya knew that each minute on the phone cost a dollar, which made it expensive on a policeman's salary. The fellow had to be moonlighting somewhere, she thought with disapproval.

"I remember you," he announced happily. "You ran the criminology course at the police college."

Quite possible. Every year before the graduates were sent on their first cadet posting, Nastya arranged to give a few practical lab exercises. The point was to find the students who were brighter and did not think in standard ways. After that Gordeev got involved, making sure that they got the pick of the litter for their department. For two reasons: first of all, they were always short-handed, and second, they picked their new recruits from these cadets.

"You took Oleg Meshcherinov as a cadet for your department, remember?" Svalov continued.

She remembered. It was one of her worst memories. Oleg seemed quick and bright in his studies, and she selected him alone from the entire class. But it turned out that Meshcherinov used those qualities not only to fight crime. Oleg became a turncoat, working for the enemy, interfered with the course of an investigation and in the end... Meshcherinov killed Zhenya Morozov, a cop, and Major Lartsev was crippled, and Oleg was dead. They shot at each other, and Lartsev was a better shot. He was good with hand guns. Nastya wondered if Svalov knew the circumstances of his classmate's death.

She explained her plan for gathering information that might lead to the identification of the film-loving thief. The work was hard and apparently did not elicit Gennady's enthusiasm. Moreover, it didn't seem to Nastya that he was following her reasoning very well.

"You mean go to all the rental places?" he drawled unhappily.

"Not only go there, but write down the names of the people who rented the films that interest us."

"They don't ask for ID, people can use any name they want."

"That's not your problem. First we have to get all the names and then we'll think about how to use them," Nastya explained patiently.

"How can you use them if they're fake?" Gennady wondered sincerely.

Nastya was getting angry. This fellow wanted to take the easy way. Strange, how did he have the sense to check the fourteen films. Did someone else suggest that to him?

"First of all, we don't know whether the thief used a false name or not. Perhaps he saw no need to do that. Secondly, we don't even know if he rented any videos at all."

"Then, you mean, all this work could be for nothing?"

"Maybe," Nastya said. "But it still has to be done. We're talking about a possible killer and we have to do anything we can to find him. And remember this, please: don't talk about this. I mean the missing and dead teenagers. Do you understand?"

She had the feeling that he had understood absolutely nothing. It looked as if they had made a mistake with this Svalov, but it was too late now. He was part of the group and he knew everything about the poor boys. No retreat.

* * *

In the evening, Nastya went to the hospital to visit her sister-in-law. Her brother had done his best, naturally, and Dasha was in a private room with a television set and refrigerator. One look at the young woman's pale face, Nastya felt a jab in her heart. She could tell that they couldn't save the baby.

"You're so young, Dasha dear," she said gently. "You're only twenty. You have time to have as many babies as you want."

"I wanted this one so much," Dasha whispered. "It was such a marvelous day when Alexander and I... well, you know."

"Dearest, you and Alexander love each other so much that you'll have plenty of marvelous days in your life. Please, don't despair. You're planning to go to Paris for your anniversary, right? Think how lovely it would be to bring back a baby from Paris."

"I can't," Dasha whispered sadly. "The anniversary is next month. We can't. The doctor said I have to be careful for three months."

Tears started flowing from her huge blue eyes, even though Dasha bravely tried to smile with trembling lips. Nastya's heart ached for her.

"When are they letting you go home?"

"Next week, if there are no complications. I'm sorry." Dasha sat up and wiped her tears. "I'll try to stop crying. It's my own fault, no point in wailing now. I shouldn't have moved that stupid machine."

Nastya knew from her husband that the accident happened when Dasha tried moving the washing machine in a burst of housewifely energy. It really was her fault. Though that didn't make Nastya any less sorry for her.

In the corridor she ran into her brother, who was carrying two huge shopping bags filled with fruit.

"Why don't you bring her a good book instead?" Nastya said, kissing his cheek. "She needs distraction."

"I've brought her books. She doesn't want to read."

"Make her. Are you the husband or what? Use your manly powers. It's not good for her to lie around all day thinking about the lost baby. And get her home as soon as you can. She'll sicken here. She just lies around and weeps from morning till night. That's no good."

"I know that," Alexander sighed. "Are you in a hurry?"

"Not especially. Why?"

"Let's go back in to see Dasha. I've been twice today. I'll just give her the fruit, we'll sit another ten minutes, and I'll drive you home."

They went back in. Dasha, not expecting any more visitors, was weeping inconsolably. It was unbearable to watch. Nastya tiptoed out into the hallway, leaving her brother alone with his weeping wife. About twenty minutes later Alexander came out.

"You're right," he said on the stairs. "I have to get her out of here. I'll go to the chief surgeon tomorrow morning and demand they release her on my recognizance. It's better for her to be at home, with the baby. Her mother will take better care of her than any doctor. A mother's care is always best."

Nastya didn't doubt that he'd do exactly that. If they refused to release her, he'd bring out the money. Her brother wouldn't balk at any sum when it came to his wife and son. He was a young and successful entrepreneur, wealthy and certain that money could solve any problem.

On the way to Nastya's house, he was quiet and then suddenly asked, "Is everything all right with you and Lyoshka?" "Of course. Why do you ask?"

"He seemed tense to me. You haven't had a fight?" "Alexander, we never fight, you know that. Maybe he was tired."

"Nastya, don't try to kid me. I know what your husband is like when he's tired. He was upset by something."

"Nonsense," she said, knowing full well what was upsetting Alexei. Her work with Solovyov. "Why don't you tell me instead if a lady by the name Yakimova is known in the business world?"

"Yana?"

"Yes, Yanina Yakimova."

"She's a tiger." Alexander smiled for the first time. "Iron grip. Incredibly lucky. And incredibly rich. What do you want with her?"

"Just curiosity. I ran into her husband recently. But please, my interest in her is totally private. I hope you understand that. As far as her husband is concerned, I'm not a detective, but a lawyer."

"They say he stays at home with the kids. Is that true?"

"It is. He drives them to play group and school, picks them up, cooks meals. Have you ever seen her?"

"Of course. More than once."

"What's she like?"

"Watch out! She's scary. Beautiful. But overwhelming. She's too tall, too large, too loud, too much hair. If you could reduce her by a third she'd be perfect."

"Any gossip?"

"How can I put it. Yes and no."

"Elucidate."

"It's not easy," her brother said with another smile. "For instance, when she succeeded in a deal that should not have worked, according to all the prognoses, it was rumored that she was using illegal methods to coerce her subagents. But it was only rumored, because no one could prove that she hired strongmen or blackmailers to achieve her aims."

"Maybe there were personal elements in that deal?" Nastya suggested. "Something intimate."

"No way," Alexander replied categorically. "No one even hinted at that. Yana has a reputation as the perfect wife. And you wouldn't have asked if you ever saw her. The man who would make a pass at her would have to be a kamikaze, at least. He would have to be six foot six, weigh 250 pounds, and have about ten million dollars. And be single. And between forty-five and fifty, no older than that. With a masterful personality and a strong hand. That would give him a chance. And where are there any men like that?"

"All right, all right," Nastya said doubtfully. "Don't exaggerate. Do you know what her husband is like? Shorter than me, half-bald, sweet and shy. A very nice man. Busy with the children and house. With no personal income, I don't think." "Exactly. What does she need another one for? Lovers are supposed to be different from the husbands."

"You may be right," she agreed thoughtfully.

They pulled up at her house.

"Come on up," Nastya invited. "Why should you be all alone at home? Your little Sasha is with Dasha's parents anyway." "Fine," Alexander said.

It would be hard to believe that the half-siblings had known each other only eighteen months, before that knowing of the other's existence but never meeting or even speaking on the telephone. Alexander was eight years younger. They had the same father, but different mothers. Their acquaintance began with a rather unpleasant event, but soon grew into a warm mutual liking and then into sincere affection. Nastya and Lyoshka came to love Dasha, at the time Alexander's girl friend, and later fiancée and wife. Alexander and Nastya were both only children of their parents, and they both eagerly accepted each other – related by blood and similar in looks and personality, despite being brought up in different families. They resembled their father, Pavel Kamensky – tall, fair, thin, with almost colorless brows and eyelashes. Both were on the cold side, slightly cynical, reserved, and

ruthless toward themselves. But they both were capable of overwhelming compassion and sympathy for the suffering of their loved ones.

* * *

Nastya couldn't stand being late. She always tried to leave early, with a cushion for unexpected complications like stuck metros in a tunnel or traffic that would tie up her bus. She made an appointment to meet with Gennady Svalov at Komsomolskaya Station, but she was twenty-five minutes early and she decided to wander around the square outside to check out the multitude of book sellers.

There were a lot of Sherkhan books, they were easy to spot because of their bright and recognizable format. To her surprise, Nastya saw *The Blade*, the book Solovyov told her was out of print since last year. "Volodya clearly overestimates the series' popularity," she thought with a chuckle. She bought one anyway, even though Solovyov had given her his own copy. She would keep this one and return his, rather than risk harming it in some way. While she was at it, Nastya bought another three novels from the Eastern Best Seller series. Solovyov had said that they were all well-written, and she and her husband enjoyed mystery books.

The seller, noting her interest in the series, got into a conversation with her.

"You're lucky, you bought the last copy of *Secret of Time*. It's selling very well, I've sold six copies today."

"How's the series doing?" Nastya asked.

"Great! You know, people snap it up! They wait for the new ones, they keep asking, and my regulars ask me to put them aside for them."

"And is this *Secret of Time* really the last copy?" she asked curiously. "The very-very last copy?"

"For today, yes. They'll bring more tomorrow. We take three or four of each title for a day's work. If it's a popular book, we take more, maybe ten. If they don't do well, we take one."

"How long have you been selling *Secret*?"

"Almost a month."

Nastya walked around the square, looking over the selection in the other stalls. There were copies with the elegant EBS logo everywhere, and all the sellers assured her that the series went like hot cakes. Well then, no wonder Solovyov was rich. Apparently, his fees were better than good. Especially if he didn't get an outright fee but a royalty based on sales.

Putting the books in her bag, she walked to the rendezvous spot. Gennady was late, it was already five minutes past the time. Nastya made a face. She liked punctuality.

At last, fifteen minutes late, the young policeman showed up. He didn't even think to apologize and with a businesslike air began pulling papers out of his case. His expression was not very friendly, in fact, it was almost disgusted.

"Here are notes from the registers of thirty video rental places. I killed two days on that."

"And how many are there in all?" Nastya asked innocently.

"Seventy-four."

"That means you'll kill another three days," she said calmly. "And don't give me that look as if I made you spend your working hours on my personal problems."

"I have a very heavy load as it is," Svalov grumbled.

"Just imagine – so do I. And this maniac wandering the city freely is our headache. Not someone else's, but yours and mine. Let's try to keep that in mind all the time, all right?"

Nastya took the papers and went back to Petrovka Street to take care of urgent cases. By the time she got home, it was almost ten. There was a note on the kitchen table: I'm teaching tonight. Dinner is in the oven, don't be lazy, please, and heat it up. Love.

Lyoshka knew his wife well, no denying it. Nastya's famous indolence sometimes found paradoxical manifestations, and being too lazy to heat up food was a usual occurrence. If a dish could be eaten cold, she did, and if it really needed to be hot, and Lyoshka wasn't there to supervise, she preferred a hunk of bread with cheese or sausage and a cup of strong coffee.

The struggle between hunger and laziness lasted about a minute, whereupon Nastya adopted a compromise: she quickly stuffed the traditional sandwich into her mouth and then patiently waited for husband's return to have dinner with him. With her bread and salami, she got comfortable, stretched out her legs with her feet on another chair and opened the best seller she bought at the railroad station *The Blade*. The book was beautifully written, the plot developed quickly, and she was captivated from the first few pages.

A while later Nastya noticed that her fingertip, with which she turned pages, had turned black. Was the ink rubbing off? She rubbed with another finger. The white page now had smudges. Nastya brought the book close to her face and sniffed – it had that smell of freshly printed books.

She looked at the publishing information in the back. It was sent to the compositor on January 26, 1995, and signed off for the printer of March 3, 1995. That was over a year ago, and the ink was still rubbing off. And there was the smell. That wasn't possible. This must be a second printing. But why was the old information on the page? It looked like the leftover print run from last year.

She rummaged in her purse and got out the second copy – the one Solovyov gave her from his shelves. The books were exactly the same, with the same publishing information. But this book did not smell of fresh ink and did not smudge. How could that be if both books were printed at the same time, a year ago?

Then her mind moved to the mathematical. The book seller had told her that popular books went at a rate of ten a day. All right, say five. And how many book stalls were there in Moscow? Around three hundred. Say only two hundred. Five books at two hundred stalls is a thousand a day. How many were printed? The information said 70,000 copies. That's seventy days of sales. And only in Moscow. But Sherkhan sold books in other cities, too. That information page listed their official dealers – twelve companies in twelve regions of Russia. Assume that half the print run stayed in Moscow and the other half was sent out to the other cities. Thirty-five thousand in Moscow. Thirty-five days of sales. What if they sold five a day only the first week and then it slowed down? But the book seller at the station said that *Secret of Time* had been in print around a month and he had sold seven books just today. No, it didn't work. *The Blade* could not be available on the shelves for a year if they printed only 70,000 copies. It should have stopped selling last May or June. Say, even August. But this was April... Where did this book she bought at the station come from?

The key turned in the lock and Lyoshka was home.

"How was your lecture?" Nastya asked, rubbing her cheek against his shoulder.

"Fine. Why haven't you eaten, you brazen thing?"

"I was waiting for you. You know I can't eat alone, it's too boring. We'll eat together."

"Yeah, yeah," Chistyakov snorted. "Good old Lyoshka will heat it up and serve it and then we'll eat. All right, stay where you are, I know you're never going to change. What are you reading?"

"An Eastern Best Seller from Japanese-American life."

"And the second book?"

"Same thing. They're the same."

"Did you buy it for someone?"

"No. Listen, let me run something past you."

Lyoshka had already started reheating the hash and was slicing tomatoes on the cutting board, his back to Nastya.

"I'm listening," he said without turning.

"You have to look at something."

"Then wait a bit."

He finished the salad, wiped his hands on a towel, and came over to the table.

“Take a look at these two books, please,” Nastya asked. “Tell me what you think.”

“Other than the fact that they are exactly the same?”

“Yes.”

Lyoshka opened both books and read the title page closely. Nastya didn't think there was anything interesting there. On top in black letters was the author's name, Akira Hakahara. In the middle of the page, the title, *The Blade*. On the bottom the logo of Sherkhan Books, the face of a roaring tiger.

“But they are different,” he said, looking up in surprise at his wife.

“What makes you say so.”

“They are made differently. This one” – he showed her Solovyov's copy, “is printed photomechanically, and the other photoelectrically.”

“I don't see it. What shows that?”

“The letters are colored in different ways. With the photomechanical method, the ink is even, but here, in the second book, you can see that the ink is much paler on the bottom half of the letters than the top. Take a look.”

Now Nastya could see it. Rather, she had seen it before, but a person who didn't know about printing would not have paid any attention.

“What does it mean?” she asked slowly, realizing that she had come across something important.

“It means that these books are not from the same print run.

By the way, why are you asking? Do you have a suspicion about something?”

“The ink is smudging,” she explained, showing him her blackened fingertip. “It's completely fresh. But the publishing information says that it was printed a year ago. Oh, Lyoshka, something's burning!”

“Damn!” He moved to the stove and turned off the flame under the skillet. “The hash is burnt. You and your printing mystery.”

“I'm sorry,” Nastya said piteously. “I didn't mean to.”

They ate in silence but then Nastya said, “Lyoshka, what is a photomechanical method?”

“Forget it. It's too long and hard to explain.”

“Make it short and simple, for dummies. Very general. I just want to know what distinguishes one method from the other.” “Why do you care so much?”

“Not so much, but I do want to know. Not for any crime that I'm working on. But you know that I don't like not understanding.”

“First the manuscript is composed on a computer and an original mock up is made. Then film – slides – is made from the original. Got that?”

“So far.”

“That part is the same for both methods. Then come the differences. With the mechanical process, they make a matrix from the slides. A matrix is good for about fifty thousand prints. If the print run is for more than fifty thousand, they made a second matrix. With electrography, copies are made with photocopying technology. A kind of risograph, if you know what that is.”

“I don't, but that's not really important. I've grasped the main differences. Lyoshka, why have a print run that's not divisible by fifty thousand?”

“What do you mean, why? Pass the ketchup, please.”

“Here. I want to know why people print more than fifty thousand but less than one hundred thousand. If you have to make a second set of matrices anyway, why not use them fully. Right?”

“It may not pay,” he said with a shrug. “They may not be able to sell a hundred thousand, so the cost of paper and jackets is wasted and the books will just take up space in a warehouse. Fifty is not enough, a hundred too much. That's all.”

"Then there's something else I don't get. Why print a book by photocopy if you have the matrices for another thirty thousand copies. Are the matrices destroyed once a book has been printed?"

"Depends on the contract. They might, they might not. Why are you hung up on this?"

"Curiosity. Lyoshka, it looks like we have tax evasion here, pure and simple. The publishing house is not as stupid as your wife. They probably use the matrices all the way and print a hundred thousand. But in the information they put seventy thousand, and that's their tax base. The remaining thirty thousand they sell but don't pay taxes on. After a while they take the slides and do copies. The publishing information is the same and everybody thinks that they're still selling remaining parts of the original print run, which was actually completed and taxed. It's important that the book be a popular one. Good idea, huh?" "Yep," he agreed. "I just don't understand what's it to you. Are you planning to switch jobs and move to the tax police? Or be a publishing lawyer?"

"No, honey, I'm not going anywhere. I'm just solving a puzzle for my mental exercise."

"Really?" Lyoshka raised his eyebrows. "And here I thought you planning to defend your friend Solovyov, who was being hurt by the big bad greedy publishers."

She flushed. He was wrong, she hadn't been thinking of Solovyov at all. Moreover, judging from his lifestyle, the publishers weren't cheating him. But Lyoshka was suspicious anyway. He seemed hurt, even. How could she have been so clumsy? What had made her discuss these books with him?

"You're wrong, darling," she said in a steady voice. "Solovyov has nothing to do with it. It's a coincidence that it's his books we're discussing."

"Fine," he said. "If you say so. What are your plans for Saturday? Going to work?"

"No, I'm home tomorrow. I need to use the computer." "When's the next visit to Solovyov's?"

"Lyoshka!"

"Now, now, I'm as cool as a frozen mammoth. I just need to know for the car. When will you need it?"

"If you don't mind, I'd like to go Sunday afternoon. But if you need the car, I can go tomorrow or Monday."

"Do what you were planning," he said. "I'll be home Sunday." "Thanks."

The air was thick with tension and Nastya tried to think of a way of discharging it. But nothing original came to mind.

"Lyoshka, I can't stand to watch you torture yourself," she said decisively. "I've told you that we're dealing here with a serious crime. Nine boys have died, teenagers who were missing persons. Somewhere in Moscow or nearby there is a monster who keeps them locked up, pumping them full of drugs, sleeping with them until they die of an overdose. He is crazy, a maniac. Every day I live in horror that more parents will show up to report yet another missing boy. The only lead I have is connected to the place where Solovyov lives. I have to go there, please understand. It's my duty. It's my responsibility before the poor parents who wait months for word of their son and find only his corpse. But your feelings are just as important to me. You are my husband, I love you, and for your peace of mind I am ready to do anything. I don't want you to suffer from baseless jealousy. But if you can't stop yourself, then I'll have to stop." "What are you trying to say?"

"I'll stop going to Solovyov's."

"What about the boys? Their parents?"

"Nothing. Let someone else look for the maniac, someone whose husband isn't so jealous."

Lyoshka smiled in chagrin, but with evident relief. He seemed embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, Nastya. I didn't think it upset you so much. No more, I'll stop."

"And I can see Solovyov?"

"As much as you like."

"And you won't have fits over it?"

“I will.” He burst out laughing. “Strictly out of stubbornness. To spite you. So that you see what it’s like for me when you’re upset and I don’t know why or how to help.”

“Being difficult, eh?”

Nastya knew it was over. The conflict had been brewing for a week, since last Friday, when she first went to see Solovyov and wish him a happy birthday. Wariness, tension, and cool alienation had hung over the apartment for a week, even though they both behaved normally – calm, peaceful, and amiable. Hidden conflicts are very dangerous, leaving permanent wounds, despite the absence of shouting, yelling, or other loud and colorful manifestations. She remembered a line from a section of *The Blade* she had just read: “A person with sad eyes is a person who never cried as a child when scolded or beaten.” The line seemed vaguely familiar, but Nastya wasn’t in a mood to dig around in her memories.

Chapter 5

The era of video technology brought with it many changes. The first and most noticeable was the transformation of movie theaters from places where films were shown into showrooms for furniture, automobiles, electronics, and even wedding dresses. The spacious and once festive lobbies were now filled with computer games and neon signs advertising “Currency Exchange” and there was no reminder that once film had reigned here – once considered an art form. Unfortunately, it had long been the norm for commerce and primitive amusements to crowd out art.

The second consequence that everyone noticed was the gradual shift of teenagers from the street into apartments. Naturally, if they could have played a VCR on a bench in the park, kids would do that, because watching movies was much better outdoors, in a group, with a cigarette between your teeth and a glass of fake winelike crap in your hand, and most importantly, without parental controls. However, since technological progress had not yet caught up with the needs of minors, movies had to be watched at home. Parents were pleased – the kids weren’t out in the streets, and the kids in turn were pleased that they could relax and have fun instead of reading boring fat books about some war and peace. Inspectors from the prevention of crimes by minors units breathed a sigh of relief. Teachers shrugged hopelessly, tired of waiting for their students to deign to read the required literature. With every year, children read less and made more grammatical errors in their written work.

You could buy videotapes on every corner. And in almost each of those places you could rent videos. There were two kinds of rentals – the nameless trusting one, that is, not serious and expensive, and the registered, that is, serious and cheap. In the former, a person came to the video store, took a video, leaving a down payment equal to the cost of the video, which he got back when he returned the tape, less the cost of the rental. And you could stick whatever you wanted into the brightly labeled box, for instance, you could keep the latest hit and return something very old and non-box-office. A variant of this not very nice behavior was returning not the cassette you had received but a copy made on very poor equipment and therefore streaked, tinny sounding, and otherwise marred. The tapes were not checked when they were returned. But the cost of rental in these places was high: the owner knew his level of risk, because when he did discover a switch he was not able to find the sneaky client, and therefore he hiked the price of rental to have a financial reserve to buy new copies in these situations.

With the register system, the rental personnel actually asked the clients for their names and even asked for identification with address. And they charged almost nothing for the rental. But that was on paper. In fact, it was quite different. They did not always ask for ID, even though they did write down the name. And they charged a bit more for the rental than they were supposed to when the client showed a passport, but of course, not as much as the no-name places. Somewhere in the middle. And there were seventy-four such rental places that used registers in the capital. And Nastya was going to work on the materials from the thirty that Gennady Svalov had visited.

The day couldn’t have been better for staying home and working diligently. Just yesterday the sun had shone brightly, casting doubt on the ability of some weak-willed citizens to withstand the lure of a leisurely walk. But the weather on Saturday morning wasn’t luring anyone anywhere. Beneath the lowering clouds it was grim, gray, damp, and drizzling, and the thought of a walk did not elicit any pleasant associations.

Nastya, naturally, could not resist pampering herself a little and slept until ten-thirty. She liked sleeping late, especially on such dark rainy days. Alexei had gotten up much earlier, and when she finally forced her eyes open she saw that her husband had had breakfast and was in the kitchen working on a lecture he was giving that evening at some commercial school that prepared economists and included a required course in higher mathematics.

Dragging her feet and feeling achy all over, Nastya got in the shower and started waking up. In order to get her brain going, she tried to remember the titles of all fourteen films stolen by the strange thief. Not only the titles, but the genres as well. At the third title she turned the knob a bit, slightly lowering the water temperature. At the seventh title, the process stalled: the title was long and complicated. Angrily, Nastya twisted the knob with the blue circle and under the streams of suddenly cold water, the difficult title floated to the surface of her memory. Her body was covered in goose bumps, but she bravely tormented her half-awakened brain until she got all fourteen titles.

However, after the execution by shower, she showed up in the kitchen with rosy cheeks and glimmering eyes. Alexei pushed his papers to one side, making room for his wife's breakfast.

"Lyoshka, why don't I make something special for dinner tonight, your choice," Nastya offered.

After yesterday's talk she still felt guilty for making her husband go through so much anxiety, and she wanted to smooth it over somehow.

Alexei looked up at her with interest.

"For instance?"

"Well, I don't know. You choose. What would you like?"

"Sturgeon. On a skewer, if possible. Can you handle that?"

"I'll try," she said bravely.

Nastya was not at all sure she could cook sturgeon on a skewer, but the main thing was to get started, and then she'd see – after all she could check a cookbook or ask him. She savored her two cups of strong coffee, had a cheese sandwich, and got dressed to go to the store. Alexei watched her with undisguised mockery, good-humored, of course. When the wife decides to go to the store every three months or so without the husband, it can be amusing. Usually they went marketing on the weekend together or, if Nastya was working, Alexei did it himself.

Wearing her jacket and running shoes, she peeked into the kitchen. "Lyoshka, what should I get?"

"There's a fine howdy-do." He made a production of exasperation. "What are you planning to use in the grilled sturgeon – veal cutlets?"

"Come on," she wailed. "I don't know what kind of sturgeon to get. Frozen, fresh, in a box, filets, who knows."

Alexei sighed bitterly and gave a detailed explanation of the closest place to get the kind of fish they needed, how much to get, and how to select it.

"And don't forget tomatoes, cucumbers, herbs, potatoes, and a can of mushrooms. And if you see any marinated julienne beets, get some."

"What for?" Nastya asked.

"For a side dish. If we're spending money on sturgeon, we should serve it properly. Do what your elders tell you and don't get smart."

"Big deal!" she snorted as she put some plastic shopping bags into her purse. "Eight months, that's all you have on me, and you act as if..."

"Take the car, my adult darling," Chistyakov said. "You need to get a lot of vegetables, for the whole week."

"I don't need it," Nastya insisted.

"You do. Or your back will go out again. Don't argue with me, please."

"I don't like taking the car to the market. It's showing off somehow. And then, you have to find a parking space, it's crowded, you know. I just don't want to."

Alexei tossed the pen down on the table and rolled his eyes to the ceiling.

"Lord, why didn't you give me the smart woman I had chosen and waited for so many years and stuck me with this brainless dummy instead? Now I'll have to drop my lecture, get dressed, and go marketing with her because the silly bint isn't supposed to carry anything over 5 pounds, otherwise she gets a backache. But she doesn't want to take the car, it's this feeling she woke up with this

morning. And because of that her miserable husband either has to go with her to carry the bags or prepare himself for several days of whining, moaning and groaning, pathetic attempts to get his pity and sympathy. Which one should I pick, oh, Lord?”

Nastya knew he was joking, but she could tell that he was beginning to be annoyed. She really did not like driving, it made her tired, but now it looked like she'd have to take the car, otherwise Lyoshka would go with her instead of working on his lecture. That wouldn't be good.

The market wasn't too far and the trip did not take long. An hour later Nastya was unloading her purchases in the kitchen under Alexei's demanding eye. To her great amazement, she had picked the sturgeon properly and had gotten everything on the list, without forgetting anything or mixing things up.

“All right, go work now,” Chistyakov said generously. “I'll do the cooking. You're bound to destroy an expensive dish.”

She gave her husband a joyous kiss on the cheek and rushed to the bedroom. The unpleasant but necessary part was done, now she could get on with the pleasant, interesting, and satisfying part – her job.

Nastya turned on the computer and began by creating a chart with fourteen columns – one for each stolen film. She put the title at the top of each column and then made lines. Ten administrative districts. The name at the left of the lines. Then we take each rental place, check the address to see which police district it's in, and enter the data in the right box. For now there were thirty video rental places, but by Tuesday she hoped to have another forty-four.

When Nastya worked on something, she did not like to think that she might be doing it in vain. She firmly believed that there was no useless work. Even if it did not yield the desired result, there would definitely be some result that she had not expected at all. The film-loving thief could have rented where it was more expensive but no name was required. He could have. Easily. And then Nastya's attempt to find him among the multitudes who rented in cheap places was doomed to failure. But she kept in mind the fact that he had stolen them, when it was simpler to buy them. And if there were financial reasons for it, then he probably rented where it was cheaper. Of course, the theft might not be connected to money, but the criminal's mind. In any case, she had to work with the names. If she got nothing, it meant the thief rented where it was more expensive, or did not rent at all, getting tapes from another source. That would mean different working hypotheses and more work for her. There was no useless work. A negative result was still a result, as Nastya Kamenskaya liked to say.

* * *

It had warmed up, and Kirill Esipov, general director of Sherkhan Books, decided to start the dacha season. He left for his dacha, or summer house, outside Moscow along the Yaroslavl Road on Friday evening, expecting his two colleagues – Grisha Avtayev and Semyon Voronets – for lunch on Saturday. Esipov was not married, but he had a relationship with the same woman for the last two years. Tall, a full head taller than him, long-legged Oxana was a model. Esipov's six-foot-six bodyguard Vovchik had been eying her for a long time.

The central heating had warmed up the house, and Oxana was walking around in shorts and a thin-strapped T-shirt, which exposed a rather broad expanse of smooth skin on her taut belly.

“What time are they coming?” she asked, coming over and sitting on Kirill's lap.

“Three. Why? Do you have plans?”

“No plans, I just want to get dressed before they get here.”

“Why the modesty?” Esipov chuckled.

“Because,” the girl replied in an injured tone. “I don't like the way your idiot Voronets undresses me with his eyes.”

“He undresses you?” Kirill asked, still lazily.

“Haven’t you noticed? Or maybe you think just because the three of you are so rich and such close friends, I’m supposed to belong to all of you? You get first dibs since you’re the captain of the team, and then they get sloppy seconds. Is that what you think?”

“Oxana, Oxana.” He caressed her back and shoulders with a gentle, soothing rhythm. “Don’t be like that. You’re a beauty and it’s not surprising that men drool over you. It’s completely natural, and you shouldn’t take offense. Just as you shouldn’t get mad at me that I don’t punch every man who looks at you. I can’t beat up half of Russia, now can I?”

“But you have to tell your Voronets to stop staring at me,” Oxana insisted, cuddling closer. “He’s disgusting and I don’t like it.”

“Now, Oxana, darling, that’s silly. And really, it’s unprofessional. You’re a model and you have to be used to everyone looking at you, not just those you find personally attractive.”

“All right.” She made a joke sigh and kissed him on the top of his head. “I’ll put up with your Semyon in the name of the majesty of my profession.”

Oxana was no dummy, even though she liked to coo and act the little fool. Behind the broad calm forehead without a single line lay the pragmatic mind of a girl who knew what was what, and what the value of various services and favors cost. She was tactful and educated enough so that Esipov could take her to social events. At the same time she had a good sense of social distance. After all, she could lodge the same complaint about Vovchik as about Semyon, but she never complained about Vovchik to Esipov. Vovchik was a servant, the lower class, and if she said one word he’d be fired without regrets or severance pay. And why should the guy suffer? For having a normal, male reaction that did not distinguish between an ordinary girl and boss’s girl? Semyon Voronets was another matter. Nothing threatened him, Kirill wouldn’t part with him for anything, they were old friends and business partners, so she could complain about him. It did Semyon no harm, but at least she got it off her chest, she couldn’t carry it around inside all the time. And then, it was a shame to complain about Vovchik, he was a nice guy, and most importantly, he knew that he didn’t have a chance against his boss. While Semyon Voronets thought he was irresistible and for some reason saw nothing wrong with screwing the girl of his friend and partner. And there was nothing irresistible about him.

By the time Avtayev and Voronets arrived, Oxana had changed into jeans and a heavy, long-sleeved T-shirt. After the requisite ten minutes with the guests, she politely excused herself, smiled sweetly, and left the room.

Vovchik the bodyguard was in the spacious kitchen working assiduously on the crossword puzzle. Hearing steps, he looked up and smiled welcomingly.

“Did they say when they were going to eat?” he asked, giving the girl a carnivorous look.

“In about twenty minutes. They’re having drinks. They’ve picked up all these European habits, but they still haven’t learned to eat in the evening,” Oxana said with a snicker. “Do you need help with lunch?”

“No thanks, it’s all ready. Sit with me. Let’s do the crossword together. Sit on my lap, you’ll have a better view.”

“And what am I supposed to see better? The letters or your passionate love?” she said sarcastically. “I’ve told you a hundred times, keep your hands off.”

“I am.”

He extended his hands and waved them playfully. “I’m inviting you to sit on my lap. As for my hands, here they are.”

They laughed at the silly joke. It never occurred to Oxana to respond to the bodyguard’s desire. Even when she argued with Kirill, even when she felt unjustly and bitterly hurt, she never thought about cheating on Esipov with his bodyguard for revenge or plain nastiness. Her beautiful slender body was a professional weapon, a tool, it existed to wear extravagant fashion, making it even more attractive, even more striking. She became a model while she was still in school and she was

accustomed to use her beautiful body for work and not for getting even or any other inappropriate goals.

Oxana poured tea into a large beautiful cup with golden tulips and moved a pack of crackers closer. Vovchik was not surprised, he knew that she was on a strict diet and never, except in the most necessary times, joined the guests at the table. She had a healthy appetite, and sticking to her diet required significant stress and will power, and so Oxana tried to avoid temptation by avoiding the sight of such delicious, such accessible and such harmful dishes. Vovchik understood and was sympathetic, as if it were a serious disease that it would be tacky to make fun of. He loved eating heartily and he truly pitied the girl who had to deny herself one of life's pleasures.

"Turn around," he said in a while. "I'm starting to bring it out."

"You're a decent guy," Oxana said gratefully, moving to a chair by the window and turning her back to the refrigerator-freezer combo, from which Vovchik would be removing delicious and forbidden foods.

The kitchen, like the rest of the house, was hot, and after the hot tea Oxana wanted to cool off. She unlocked the window and flung open both sides. Kneeling on a chair, she rested her arms on the windowsill and stuck her head outside. Refreshing raindrops drizzled on her hot cheeks. Kirill and his guests were out on the veranda, they had overdone the heating last night, and now they were all looking for cooler spots. But yesterday, although sunny, had been cold, below freezing with a north wind. Who knew that the weather would change so quickly, going up to 40 by morning and the low sixties by the afternoon?

Tire voices reached her clearly, as if she were with them on the veranda.

"No one's ever thought of that yet," Kirill Esipov was saying. "Everyone wants to make more profit, but they're too cheap to spend money on a reader poll. Grisha, you're going to be stubborn again, I know. You have to understand that we have to make a conscious choice to spend money so that we can increase our profits later."

"And how much do you estimate this will cost?" came the unhappy voice of Grigory Avtayev, the commercial director of Sherkhan.

"Let's add it up. The poll has to be done in Moscow and major cities with our dealers and with colleges. Students and high school kids will be happy to do the questionnaires to pick up some money. If we pay a thousand rubles for every questionnaire, they'll work hard. They'll stand next to a book stall and ask questions of the shoppers. I think that they could interview fifty people a day. If necessary, they can work two or three days."

"And how many questionnaires do you want to get?" Avtayev's voice went on.

"I figure five thousand will be enough to get a good idea, first of all, of the general picture of the demand for literature, and second, of our readers, the ones who buy our books."

"Five million rubles!" Avtayev gasped. "That's a thousand dollars. You're going to throw away a thousand dollars on a poll nobody needs! Never."

"Come on, Grisha," Esipov said with a laugh. "It'll be much more than that. First of all, the questionnaires have to be written properly. That requires special knowledge. If the questions are wrong, you don't get anything useful from it. Then we have to pay the people who find the impoverished students, to explain to them what needs to be done and how to do it, and most importantly, to supervise them. You know what today's students are like. They'll stay at home, fill out fifty questionnaires themselves in ten minutes and go take a nap, and that evening they'll deliver the questionnaires and demand their fifty thousand rubles. No, my friends, the student has to stand behind the counter with the seller and honestly work with the buyers, and the supervisor had to go from stall to stall and make sure it's done right. And that costs money, too. Next. The questionnaires have to be worked on. That means the data has to be entered in a computer. Semyon, do you know how to use a program that works with questionnaires?"

"Huh?" Voronets asked.

Oxana smiled. She was feeling happy. She understood every word Kirill was saying, she saw him come up with idea, and Kirill had discussed it with her many times. But stupid Voronets didn't get it. He probably didn't even know how to turn on a computer.

"Nothing," Esipov said rudely. "How about you, Grisha?" "How much?" came the mumbled reply from the commercial director, who realized where the general director was headed.

"At least another thousand dollars. That's intellectual labor, and it's expensive."

"A thousand?" Avtayev cried. "For what?"

"For entering the questionnaires in the computer, doing the calculations, tables with results, and a summary. For all that, a thousand. No one would take the job for less."

"Maybe we could look around?" Grisha said hopefully. "Maybe we can find someone cheaper?"

"I've already looked. Basically, the only people who have questionnaire programs are the people who work with them. It's a large program that takes up a lot of computer memory, and people who don't work with statistics don't install it. The ones who do work with questionnaires know the value of their results, and you can't sucker them. They know better than we do that we're talking about increasing profits here, and they won't do the work for small sums of money."

From the jangle of cutlery and crockery, Oxana could tell that they had started eating. She sat back down on the chair, elbow on the broad sill, resting her head on her hand. Her face was wet but she did not wipe it with a towel – the moisture was good for her skin. When Vovchik returned to the kitchen, she said, "Vovchik, could you throw some diet stuff into a bowl for me? But no bread and no mayo."

A few minutes later the bodyguard gave her a large, deep dish with lettuce, chunks of peaches and apricots, and dry oatmeal flakes. He could not understand how anyone could eat that, and he felt deep sympathy for her.

Oxana, however, did not share his feelings. She knew that this strange salad had loads of vitamins for the hair and skin and almost no calories. So she ate without disgust, actually feeling a high. However, she knew the high was from what she had overheard of the conversation. Her Kirill was so much smarter and farseeing than his partners! She was always aware of that. From the very beginning, from the very first day, when she met all three. She had been told then, "Pick whichever one you want. Whichever one you like. It's important for me that you be with one of them all the time, and you can pick the one. All three of them are as one, they have no secrets from one another."

She had taken a long look at the three directors of Sherkhan Books. First, naturally, her eye fell on Semyon Voronets, tall and broad-shouldered. Oxana was 5'10", the right height for a model, and Voronets was a suitable match. But after a few minutes of chitchat, the girl realized that he was thick-headed. Grisha Avtayev was quite good-looking, but by then Oxana knew what it was like being the mistress of a man, who wanted to preserve his reputation as a faithful husband and caring father. Constant fear of exposure, covert and sometimes quite open glances at the clock, endless stories about the little one's illnesses and the school successes of the older one. Nothing but humiliations and no pleasure.

It was only at the end that she noticed Esipov. The shortest of the three and the youngest. The most inappropriate for her in terms of height and age. Oxana always liked men who were taller and at least ten years older – and more was even better. Kirill was six inches shorter and only three years older. But Oxana chose him. And she did not regret it.

At first she did not quite get why she was assigned to Esipov. She only had the broadest outline of the plot. The man who hired her knew how to make publishing truly profitable, he kept coming up with new ideas. Her job was to comprehend those ideas and then deftly, almost in passing, slip them to Esipov in way that made him think they were his own.

"I want Sherkhan Books to become the richest and most prestigious publishing house in Moscow, perhaps in all of Russia," her employer told Oxana then.

“What is it to you?” she wondered. “Why do you care? If you know how to make a publishing house profitable, then do it yourself. Why give the profit to someone else?”

“Who told you that I plan to give it away?” he laughed. “I intend to get it for myself. But before getting it, I want it to be large and handsome. Understand?”

“Yes,” Oxana said.

“And you have to try, my pet, to make the profit at Sherkhan truly large and handsome. Because when I come to take it, you get a cut. How much do you want?”

“Twenty percent,” the girl said after some thought. “I think that’s fair. The ideas are yours, no argument there, and I would never come up with them myself. But the execution is mine. And I’ll have to sleep with him. I can’t say that I’m dying of passion for him, he’s a bit too small for me.”

“You’re a good girl,” the employer said with a satisfied smile, and Oxana could see that he was truly pleased, although she couldn’t guess why. “You are intelligent and not greedy. You asked for the very percent I was planning to offer you. That means that you and I think alike. And therefore, our cooperation will be fruitful.”

Two years passed since then, and Oxana could see how right he had been. He explained to her how to build up a publishing house, she casually passed on those ideas to Esipov, and then at the next informal meeting of the three directors, Oxana would hear that profits were up, that in a month’s time they made so much from this edition and that much from another.

And just now she heard Kirill clearly explain to his partners the idea of a sociological poll of their readers to see who buys Sherkhan’s books, what parts of the population are interested in East Best Seller, which ones have not been touched, and why not. Do the readers like hard cover books or do they prefer small cover pocket books, which are cheaper and fit easily in pocket or purse. The research would give them answers to many questions, and the first seed of this plan Oxana had planted in Esipov’s head.

She had begun the week before with an innocent remark. “You know, today I saw a woman not buy Secret of Time. She held it in her hands, twirled it around, oohed a bit, and then put it back.”

“Was it too expensive?” Kirill wondered.

“No, it didn’t fit in her purse. The lady was quite decent looking and she had gold jewelry and expensive clothes. And a tiny purse. I was very surprised that she had even considered buying Secret of Time.”

“Surprised? Why?”

“Well...” Oxana paused as if looking for the right words. In fact she prepared the whole conversation in her head the day before. “I always thought that Eastern Best Seller was intended for a certain audience and a woman like that was not part of the audience. I guess I was wrong.”

That had been enough to start Esipov thinking about how well he knew his readership. A few more calculated remarks were required for him to come up with the questionnaire idea. And now today, here was the result in the form of a business conversation with his partners. She couldn’t even believe that just a week ago, Kirill hadn’t been thinking along those lines at all. The ideas had been placed in his head carefully and cleverly by his young mistress, the model Oxana.

* * *

On such a cloudy rainy day there wasn’t enough daylight for work and the lights had been since morning in the study – a ceiling light and a desk lamp, which shed additional light on the computer keyboard. Solovyov liked soft, warm weather, slightly muted but at least devoid of frivolous merriment.

The work was going well, and as usual, brought him satisfaction. He was looking at the manuscript pages, covered with Japanese characters and clipped to a special holder, while white letters appeared on the blue background of the screen, forming the text of an exciting novel – a best

seller to be. Solovyov was in the throes of a creative upswing, the unexpected appearance of Anastasia in his life had turned his thoughts to a new track, gave birth to new images and ideas. He had even lost his appetite, so engrossed was he in his translation.

Around five o'clock Andrei finally got him to eat some lunch. Solovyov wheeled himself into the kitchen, quickly ate everything his assistant had prepared without even tasting it, thanked him dryly and hurried back to the study, even though he usually liked to relax over a cup of coffee and chat with Andrei, smoking and sipping cognac from a snifter.

But his hopes for fruitful work that day were shattered. When he came back to the study, Solovyov saw to his dismay a small green square in the middle of the screen – a sign that the computer had crashed. He pushed the reboot button, but when it displayed files he realized to his horror that everything he had done today was gone. Yesterday's text was unharmed, but there wasn't even a trace of today's. Solovyov made a few pathetic attempts to restore the loss using "Unerase", but nothing helped.

The machine had a virus that destroyed current work. Or maybe it did some other terrible things, too. There was a rule that said: if you have a virus in your computer turn it off right away, if you don't know how to cure it. The virus breeds and eats program and text files only when the computer is on. It can have a long latent period, when it lives in the hard disk and gives no sign of its existence, and one fine day it comes to the surface and starts destroying everything in its path with the subtlety of a herd of young, hungry bison.

Solovyov turned off the computer and called in his assistant.

"Andrei, we need to call computer first aid. Do you have numbers of companies that work on the weekend?"

"No, but I'll find one," the assistant replied. "What happened? What do I tell them?"

"Tell them that the computer has a virus that is erasing current work."

Solovyov went back into the study, took a book from the shelf, and got lost in his reading. Through the head he heard Andrei's muffled voice, calling various companies that repaired and serviced computers. Solovyov's mood was spoiled and he was sorry he had made a date with Anastasia for Sunday. It would be better if she came today, since he couldn't work anyway, and had time to play.

"Mr. Solovyov, the service person will be here tomorrow at three."

"Why can't they come today?" Solovyov grumbled.

"They had a lot of calls. They're the only ones who work weekends. And they're sending someone tomorrow as a big favor. First they said they didn't have anyone before Thursday.

I promised to pay extra. Is that all right?"

"Fine," Solovyov barked. "Damn it. Now the work will be stuck until tomorrow. And more importantly, I had promised to give you the day off tomorrow from breakfast until late evening. Anastasia is coming tomorrow, and we can manage lunch without you, and you could take care of your own affairs. Now because the repairman is coming at three, you'll have to stay."

"Of course, I'll stay, Mr. Solovyov." Andrei smiled. "I can take care of my things another day, there's nothing urgent about them. If you'll be busy with your guest, the stranger in the house will be unsupervised. That's no good."

Solovyov could not deal with the anger he felt over the disruption in his work schedule and his plans. He saw Andrei's hostility toward Nastya as well as the fact that it annoyed her, and he had wanted to arrange things so that they would not meet on Sunday. And now everything was changed because of some stupid virus that got into his computer somehow. What if he were to ask Nastya to come today? Yes, that was it. Not tomorrow, when Andrei would be home all day, but today, and he could give Andrei the evening off. Or send him on some errand.

He quickly dialed her number. A man answered, and Solovyov noted that for an elderly and respected professor he had a very young voice. Or was her husband out and this was a lover? "Hello," he heard her calm, low voice at last.

"It's me," Solovyov said hurriedly. "Forgive me for calling you, and at such a time."

"It's all right. Go ahead."

"How are you about tomorrow's plans?" he began cautiously.

"Fine, as we agreed. What's the matter, has something changed for you?"

"No. I mean, yes, I mean... Listen, could you come today? It's not late yet. We could have a lovely evening."

"Do you have a problem with tomorrow?"

"No," Solovyov lied. "It's just that I miss you. I want to see you and I can't wait until tomorrow."

"I'm very sorry," she replied, still very calmly. "I can't come today. It's out of the question. If you have a problem and we can't meet tomorrow, then we'll meet another day. But not today." "Nastya, I really want to see you... You're right, I do have a problem with tomorrow, but I don't want to put off our meeting. Come over tonight, please. Will you?"

"No."

"But we can't see each other tomorrow."

"Then we won't."

"When, then?"

"I don't know. But not today. It's not open for discussion."

"You can't leave because of your husband?" Solovyov said finally.

"It has nothing to do with my husband," she replied coldly. "I have work, and I have to do it. Today."

"So you can do it tomorrow." He didn't know why he was making such an issue out of it. "If we don't meet tomorrow, you'll have half a day free."

"I told you already, Solovyov, it is not possible. Out of the question. So, then I won't come tomorrow?"

He was silent for a bit. Then he said angrily, "Come. I'll be waiting for you."

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