ONE CUP CHRONICLES:

Tales Within a Tale of the Russian Underworld

VLADIMIR ROSS

Vladimir Ross

One Cup Chronicles. Tales Within a Tale of the Russian Underworld

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Аннотация

How far from reality can you travel in 15 minutes? The stories of One Cup Chronicles take the reader on a gritty, in-depth tour of the Russian underworld, all in the amount of time it takes to drink a single cup of coffee. Discover the dark secret of a famous philanthropist, watch the downfall of a world-renowned gambler, or come along for the ride as a pickpocket accidentally gets tangled up in a malicious scheme – all before your coffee gets cold.

Содержание

Prologue 6
One Cup Chronicles 8
The hustler 11
Silver absolution 28
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 32

One Cup Chronicles Tales Within a Tale of the Russian Underworld

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Generals of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs made a fatal mistake. Some bureaucrat from the central department was zealous enough to contact publishers in Moscow with a strict forbiddance against the publications of writer Vladimir Ross. Without any hesitation the author moved to the United States. It was not long until an ardent address came from across the ocean. Opposition from Russian security forces had only encouraged

this cosmopolitan author to become more driven. Everything that he tactfully omitted while living in his homeland, the author now describes in all of its glory. And not only in his mighty native language. English has come into play. The first volume, “One Cup Chronicles,” is similar to the Russian collection of stories, “One Cup Chronicles,” published on Amazon and Ridero. In the near future the author will return to the public with his main novella forbidden in Russia, The Thief – a stumbling stone of all conflicts with authority. For now, you can enjoy the short, fascinating crime stories of the series “One Cup Chronicles.” A cup of coffee taken along with the new stories will especially emphasize a somewhat bitter taste of the criminal world.

Prologue

My first audience, critics as they were, have been gracious friends. As it happens, the earliest reading of my work was in a little café on the East River Side. There we gathered on that first extraordinary Tuesday, drinking coffee. I, overcoming my own embarrassment, humbly read the tale about a gentleman immigrant from the collection of "One Cup Chronicles." Having lived through similar experiences themselves, the two criminal authorities turned out to be a first-rate audience and knowledgeable critics. Fact keeps with fact. For me their opinions were more precious than all of the sales on Amazon. Senya arrived a few years ago in the first wave of immigrants. He was content and spoke a simple English. With first-hand knowledge of the docks, he reasoned about American politics. He had managed to marry a full-blooded American woman, and it was no surprise that he wanted to put in his rusty two cents on the tale.

"Valdemar, I say, this is nowhere near good enough! You write about the pickpocket as if he's a dead soul. Enliven him. Nazar is a man who deserves praise, and you make him out to be a common bandit. In the past at the Kolyma work camps, I knew many such men, punks of a noble and honorable nature. A righteous kind of thief, not associating himself with just any sort of brigand."

Ignoring his nonsense, I felt no need to defend myself against what he said, and yet at home I quickly wrote out a part of the narrative in accordance with his comments.

Anastas was much less expressive. Expelled from his homeland of Greece by Greek criminals, carrying only that which was in his pockets, he found refuge in the United States, just outside the range of the Greek community. He usually just nodded and grinned and, when my story caught his imagination, rubbed the bridge of his nose. He always listened through until the end of the story. He was growing acquainted with our Senya, whom I had known already for thirty years. I didn't know what the two of them had been occupying their time with, but the fact that they found time for a few cups of coffee and my ravings elevated them in my eyes, not because of anything concerning title or class. I am thankful for them. Perhaps it was because of them that the idea for the stories of "One Cup Chronicles" came to fruition.

One Cup Chronicles

Tuesday rolled around once more. We always gathered around midday. I hurried out the door, knowing that they wouldn't hesitate to start without me.

Near the café I already spotted Senya's blue Cadillac and its perpetual companion, the driver with the face of a bull terrier. Anastas lived not too far away, so he usually went to the café on foot. But I knew that he was already sitting at a table with Senya and the two were already actively discussing some problem or other of Greek society. The rich aroma of coffee made me quicken my steps, and we were soon greeting one another with warm embraces.

"Valdemar, my dear man, you're late. It isn't fit for an old criminal. Have you no respect?" Senya jibed.

Anastas, as he was wont to do, merely rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"My friends, I apologize. Please forgive me; it won't happen again. I was delayed by the 'Hustler' himself. I knew I had a highly respected critic to impress, and wished to put my best foot forward."

Senya grinned with delight. Either he was extremely thrilled to have been deemed a critic, or our friendship just brought him that much delight. After a moment his expression simply exuded a readiness to soak everything in, with the café and interesting

moments of new history.

I rarely use clichés when writing new stories. I like to use plain histories in my work. Now and again I simply take realistic embellishments, whitewash them, and construct them into a paragraph. From this process have emerged a great number of stories. And believe you me, a good half of their foundation is in reality, but in unique areas that don't cover the regular life of the common man. Plots such as this are simply reflected on. And I surely wouldn't want to disguise my stories likewise.

"Well that there is the 'The Hustler'."

I knew of the sublime capabilities Senya and Anastas had in card games. I knew of the weekly battles of these two old friends. And because of this they were twice as interested as I was to receive my new story. As the coffee gradually added to my confidence, I turned the pages of my handwritten sheet, raised my eyes and, seeing the expressions of joy on the faces of my friends, set about reciting the story.

THE HUSTLER

ONE CUP CHRONICLES SERIES

VLADIMIR ROSS

The hustler

In the criminal underworld, money goes by many names. Some use the term “dead presidents.” Others use less creative expressions – moolah, dough. One of the most distinctive names, however, is a rather practical description: bread. Along with the consumers of this bread, bread which is as necessary for life as its namesake, comes a game.

Alexei made his living as a gambler. It would be very difficult to find a game, no matter the rules, principles, or essences, with which Alexei was not completely familiar. A phenomenal memory and persistent lifelong training allowed him to easily conquer any challenge laid before him. His signature game, and his favored tool of profit-making and self-assertion, was backgammon.

Alexei was eight years old when he first saw his father – a man who, between jails and criminal work camps, had always been gone – a man who went by the name Big. He just turned up one day at the house of his son who, upon rushing to open the door, found himself face-to-face with a gray-haired man. He wore an elegant black suit paired with a brimmed felt hat; he was a man of both presentable appearance and worldly luck. The stranger’s smile formed two rows of gold crowns as he extended a tiny bundle to the boy, and asked, “Well what are you gawking at, boy? I’ll deal with you soon enough, now where’s your whore

of a mother?”

The boy went red. He wasn’t prepared to acknowledge such an insult. He turned his attention to unwrapping the gift. Fishing his hand inside the leather pouch he found some ordinary dice. Lyoshka threw the gift into the dustiest corner of the closet, when he was startled by a rude shout.

“You little bastard! I’ll beat the skin off a you, get over here!”

For the first time in his life, Lyoshka was truly frightened. He couldn’t begin to imagine what he should expect from his papa, who had only checkered his life with various obscenities and strange, confusing rules. Summoning up his courage, the boy tucked his head between his shoulders and went into his father’s room. Lyoshka came to a stop before him, peering at the intricate, well-worn frescoes adorning the walls. His father nodded toward the table where lay the already-familiar cubes and asked, “What are those?”

It seemed that those paternal eyes tossed lightning and that his voice boomed thunder.

“I threw them away,” the boy whispered.

“There’s no room for backtalk in my house. I’m only interested in whether or not you know what these are.”

“Cubes…”

“What? Cubes!?” His father almost had a stroke. His eyes bulging, he roared, “Or maybe they’re balls? No? Then remember, you dumbass, normal people call them ‘dice’.”

Lyoshka sniffed loudly. His father quickly calmed down,

sighed, and said warmly, “Son, it’s the bread that you eat. It’s the air that makes you a real man. Never, you hear me, never abuse them. Dice must be respected, and they’ll pay you back in kind.”

Lowering his eyes, the boy fell silent, not quite understanding what his father was trying to explain to him.

“I see. I arrived in time. Predict the stones!”

“Me?” replied Lyoshka, unsure.

“You and you alone. Come on, no stalling.”

Thinking for a moment, the boy blurted out, “Five – three.”

“Good choice,” his father beamed. And now, let’s see – he squeezed the dice in his hand, whispered some mysterious words and, much like a circus performer, threw the dice onto the coffee table with a flourish.

Lyoshka was stunned. Never again did the magic touch as deeply as it did then. He looked incredulously at the dice from every angle. No matter how he looked at them, the five and three stamped into the top of the dice never changed. Handing the dice back over to the sorcerer himself, he asked his father for a five – five.

His father held the boy’s gaze, hid the dice away in his hands and repeated the ritual, incantation and all. The ensuing fiver jackpot drove an eternal love for the game into his son’s heart.

Two months after his initiation, all Lyoshka did was study to improve his various focuses. He hadn’t parted with his father’s gift since his awakening, holding firmly to his belief in the stones’ magical powers.

One morning, the father called the boy over to him, sat the boy on his knee, and spoke to him sternly.

"Son, promise me you'll take care of your mother if something ever happens to me."

"Dad," Lyoshka startled himself, for the first time naming this stranger Papa. "What could ever happen?"

"Just promise, and don't ask!"

"I swear!"

"Also promise that instead of playing with idiotic cars and toy weapons, you'll play checkers, backgammon, chess, cards, and even after amassing all the wisdom of such crafts, you'll be the first to play 'for the very air.' If I ever disappear, I will leave you my register with a list of debtors. Call on them if you ever find yourself in desperate circumstances."

"You have my word."

"Alright then."

As quickly as his father appeared in his life, so too did he vanish. His mother, unable to hold back her tears, merely went to her son and held him close. Lyoshka needed no explanation.

He never forgot the about deal he made with his father. Incapable of coping with the boredom of school, Alexei would sneak out of his dreary chemistry, history, and geography classes and meander over to the chess and checkers club. Amongst his father's belongings were found books filled with mathematical card tricks which he would commit to heart. The boy's memory knew no bounds, and his vision was superb. In the sixth grade,

while barely making C's in humanitarian studies, he came home with proud A's in math, physics, and geometry. He was dubbed the chess champion of the region amongst his peers.

His mother alone could not scrape up enough to provide for a growing boy's needs, let alone buy him fashionable clothing. The only thing which was holy, each and every day, was one ruble for lunch. Any time she fell ill, was injured, or ended up without work – hunger struck. Alexei looked upon advertisements from high-end clothing stores with a stony stare.

In the eighth grade, when he was already considering the meaninglessness of his studies in an eternally hunger-panged life, one of his classmates called Sucker (for the overbearing, loving care his father gave him – his father was some important boss somewhere) went over to the chalkboard during the class shift.

"Well, ladies, does anyone wanna play?"

Alexei disengaged himself from a perplexing chess move and asked, "Play what?"

Pulling a deck of cards from his pocket, Sucker masterfully shuffled the cards from one hand to the other and smirked.

"You know this isn't tic-tac-toe, right?" he said. "Board games are for chumps. Real men play cards." Lyoshka modestly declined. "What, mommy doesn't give you an allowance? I can start a line of credit for you!"

Beaming internally, Alexei accepted the challenge. They agreed to play for a ruble. For several years now, he had saved up about a hundred rubles by eating cheap dumpling pies at lunch.

Upon agreeing to a game, Lyoshka was already thinking about winning more than just a few bucks, rather, about solving his troubles at home.

Alexei lost the first ruble. On purpose. He continued to lose in this fashion every day until about 30 rubles were left, but he upped the ante anyway. The thought of all this money in the pot got Sucker worked up and, flaunting his status, he decided he would put the squeeze on his opponent.

"I say we go all in. Go big or go home. A thousand riding on one pot. And may the loser go crying home to mommy."

The students were speechless. A classmate nudged Alexei's arm and whispered, "Don't even think about it. It's a trap."

Lyoshka not only agreed to the terms, but "unexpectedly" won. He scooped up all of Sucker's pocket cash, he counted three hundred rubles, and was promised the rest in the morning.

Barely containing the pride in his chest, Alexei started to rush out of the classroom. As he approached the door he could already hear Sucker angrily cursing him.

"Happiness is fleeting – enjoy this peace while you can before it's snatched away from you."

Lyoshka turned and with a look of doom in his eyes, made a taunting gesture.

"If you wish to continue playing, I am at you service."

The shaking hands of his classmate were enough of a response.

"This is a man's game. I bid seven hundred, which I have, plus

another thousand.

He not only took the bait, thought Alexei. He swallowed it whole.

"Deal."

The cards were spread, Sucker moved quickly in an attempt to prevent Alexei from collecting himself. Ignoring the impatience of his opponent who was blaming him for dragging out the game, Alexei carefully considered every course of action. He threw down, imagining the pictures on the cards coming to life, and by the last hand the last trick was rightfully his.

Now, accompanied by sympathetic looks, Sucker was the first to leave the table.

The next morning, Alexei's winnings grew to two thousand. The loser was smashing a large pot-bellied piggy bank, and the delighted guests gathered around and plaintively suggested a different game. Alexei staunchly refused.

"You do not play for the sake of the game, or merely for the pleasure, but only in the pursuit of money. These are of no value to me, but you will never win. Why take unnecessary risks?"

Leaving behind the jealous glances of his comrades, Alexei rushed off to the hospital. He set fifteen thousand rubles on the stand next to his mother's bed. She started crying. She hid the bulging tumor on her neck with her hand and quickly said, "Return it."

Lyoshka patiently waited for the long shattering teeth of the wrought iron fence to open for him. A large Caucasian shepherd

stood in the narrow opening of the gate assessing the stranger. The boy hardly dared to breath for fear of upsetting the frightening dog with any sudden movement. Finally, a tall mustachioed man appeared and called the dog away to him.

"Alex, right?"

"Yes, hello. I came to return my winnings."

"I see. Come into the house. We shall discuss matters there."

The guest was seated in a plush leather chair. The friendly gentleman puffed a thick cigar, poured a cup of coffee, and stated in a serious tone, "Your behavior does you credit, but does not honor the spirit of a player. You were, as I understand, making a claim to this title?"

Lyoshka, burning himself on the hot bitter liquid, nodded proudly.

"Good. In that case I will not accept your money."

"Why not? Here is everything, down to the last cent."

In the doorway, Sucker appeared in tears.

"You do not understand, boy," said the mustachioed man, staring down his long nose at Lyoshka. "It is not about the money, but about the concept of duty. Those men who are not able honor it are called fools, and such a label, to any decent man, is a lasting disgrace. I can only rejoice in the fact that that numbskull," he nodded to Sucker who stood in the door sobbing pitifully, "had the sense not to play any longer. In short, it is not our money, but yours. It is my only wish that it is spent wisely. I heard that your mother is sick. I don't think the extra money will hurt."

“My mom doesn’t want the money.”

“I will call her and explain everything.”

“She’s in the hospital,” explained Alexei.

“Then I shall write to her immediately, and to the chief physician. He will prepare a list of the necessary medicines.” Contemplating the subject, the man disappeared into his office, dealing his son a heavy slap upside the head as he passed by.

Shortly after that, Alexei’s mother died, and he was left on his own. His life changed completely. A problem arose – how was he to earn a living? He was forced to leave school and take up odd jobs, but he didn’t always have luck with that. One such day, while attempting to fend off the eternal hunger pangs, Alexei found the list of debtors in his father’s book bag and timidly dialed a number.

“Who is this?”

“Big’s son.”

“A-a-a…,” The line was silent for a while. Don’t rush this Alexei. “Well… what do you want?” The owner of the gravelly voice was clearly nervous.

“I need to meet with the right people. I want to play. Perform this service, and we’ll settle your accounts.”

“With no future claims?”

“Do I sound like I’m bullshitting you?” Remembering the lessons of his father, Alexei turned the tables in his favor.

“Alright then.”

And so he took his first step onto the slippery slope.

Freedom soon gave way to dependency. The next year passed imperceptibly. After becoming accustomed to the drab existence of camp life, Lyoshka accepted the zone as a second home. Over time his desires became realized – the money, the influential friends, and above all else, there was the game. Every conquest spread the name "Lyoshka the Great" further and further to more and more influential ears. Men of reputation and renown specially arranged long-distance visits to see the master and face off against him. Although suffering the loss of their fortunes, they did not truly feel defeat, for the honor of challenging the best was worth more than any material asset.

Alexei had long since ceased to sit at a table with amateurs. In Moscow, his patience had won him a mansion. His second year put a Mercedes 500 under the roof of his garage, begging to be driven. In a discrete, well-established Austrian bank lies one of his larger prizes, which was the result of a rather serious game with a handful of Swiss grifters that had upset more than one casino. The only thing missing from his lifestyle was family.

The fame of the wizard traveled all of the way to the remote areas of the Urals. A frail old man, dragging behind him a suitcase that was a little worse for wear, bought a train ticket, and left to meet with the Great, who had recently become available for a few days.

The best players from all over the commonwealth had come to meet for the games. Foamy champagne surrounded guests under the blast of fireworks and other means of extravagant

celebration. In the very midst of this elegant, well dressed crowd, squeezed the wizened old man, asking for an audience with the Great. The authorities were taken aback and made way for the strange man. Alexei threw a momentary glance at the fellow and held his tongue as he passed right by him. A steady voice at his back made a snide comment, causing him to stop in his tracks.

"Sure, the Great is not as disgusting as his painting, but most people see a king where I see a stable hand."

Time seemed to stand still. Everything else in the room seemed to fade as the man looked with a challenge at the Great. The piercing silence only increased the tension in the room, and everyone was waiting for Lyoshka's reaction, hoping he would defuse the situation with dignity.

The Great slowly turned around and looked over the old man's hands, examining his battered jacket with a glance, and finally met the stare of the impolite elder. For the first time in many years, Lyoshka felt uncertain and anxious. He did not recognize the sound of his voice as he spoke.

"Perhaps you would like play me and put your money where your mouth is, old man."

"What are the stakes? The balance of the treasury?" The old man replied quickly.

"I accept all bets."

The old man slid briskly over to the Great with a brazen grin.

"For all that you have."

The crowd buzzed. Someone suggested they simply give the

old man a good thrashing for being so stubborn. Others openly questioned his sanity. A voice in the crowd stood out from the others.

"And what do you bring to the table other than your shoes, grandpa?"

Alexei, dissatisfied with the situation raised a hand to stop the fidgety old man, but he was too late. He snapped open the locks of his old-fashioned suitcase, lifted the lid, and with a flourish presented a sea of green US dollars. His dramatic display intrigued the crowd and brought forth the desired response.

"Cards!" Alexei chose.

Soon the best room of the nearest Hilton was packed full with a buzzing crowd of people. The players stipulated the rules, cards were dealt, and the game began. The match lasted six intense hours. Usually, in serious games, all sorts of banter, friendly or otherwise, can be heard – distractions, obscenities, threats. But this time it was different. For six whole hours, neither player uttered a sound.

Finally it came down to the last hand. The old man raised the cards from the table and waited for the word from the Great. Alexei did not rush; he had a complete set of no trump in hand. He slowly reached his hand into the pocket of his jacket, and produced a bright talisman – two dice, cracked and split by time. Calmly glancing from the cards to the dice to the old man, the Great spread his hand on the table and declared, "Full, no trump."

The old man, without showing his hand, chuckled.

“You lose.”

His cards remained facedown, yet some diabolical force made everyone believe his words. The old man, scratching the back of his neck, coolly suggested, “I will play to let you recover your losses. The dice. Roll higher than me, and win everything back. Lose, and you can never play again. Shall we?”

The stringent terms upset the already unruly crowd. Alexei’s closest friend and partner in the game, Jack, cursed loudly and demanded the old man be thrown out a window immediately. But the Great silently took the dice and rolled. The approval of the crowd seemed to shake the walls.

“Six-five!”

The stranger, anxiously groaning and grunting, lifted the dice. He raised his fist to his lips, whispered a mysterious incantation, and threw the dice with a dramatic flourish.

Alexei stood frozen, he could not believe his fortune. The crowd again began to buzz anxiously.

“Six-six. This devil… Isn’t it enough just to outplay someone?”

Jack reached for a knife, but the Great jumped up from the table and ran to the old man.

“Father, father!” Lyoshka cried out in tears. “How long I have been waiting for you!”

They embraced one another and left the room, oblivious to anyone around them.

***

"Now, this is something entirely new, Valdemar!" After a long pause, Senya scratched his head, and for the first time since these gatherings began, expressed his complete devotion to the only reading of that story. "I say, you should bring it to the publisher of The New Yorker. He'll take it; he'll take it and thank you. You brought forth a style which our Anastas here lacks. Surely, our gatherings have influenced your writing, Mr. Salvador Dali."

"Senya, Dali was a true artist…"

"But I tell you what. You just created a masterpiece the king Dali never could've imagined in his lifetime. Simply astounding, my friend!"

After Anastas shot him a stern look, Senya nodded.

"Yes, little Vova is breaking all of the records."

"Well, you two must have quite the conspiracy between you. Perhaps I can order something stronger for you, so that you hypocrites may go on deluding yourself."

"Oh come now, it was a harmless joke. No need to get up in arms. I was only speaking of the style." Senya exuded genuine interest as if discovering a new author for the first time.

"Indeed, the Muse has been unselfishly kind to me over the last few days," I interjected.

"There now, come along! I suggest a walk to our favorite park. Let us get some fresh air remember in solitude the chiding

Americans who, in recent days, have come down as with chains upon us Russian folk…"

That day we no longer returned to creativity. We talked about politics and Russian emigration and basked in the sun, which radiated a welcoming smile to anyone who needed it. Full of endorphins, embracing, each returned to his usual way of life.

All the next week I worked on a new story called "Silver Absolution," and I couldn't wait for Tuesday to come around. When I tried to call Senya on Monday evening to confirm our meeting, I found that I couldn't reach him. My first instinct was alarm, but I didn't put too much thought into it, and the next day I ran to our café with a particular fervor.

My anxiety flared back up when I reached the front of the café. Senya's ever present Cadillac was absent. Overcoming my doubts, I ran into the hall, quickly glancing around, but didn't find the familiar faces of either of my friends. I dialed Senya's number, but the familiar voice of the operator echoed that he was out of reach. I then flipped through my notebook and sighed with relief when I found Anastas' number. The voice on the other end sounded hoarse.

"Valdemar, not on the phone. I will arrive and speak to you there."

I drank several cups of coffee in nervous anticipation before the familiar Greek heralded his presence. Anastas's face was unreadable and, torn by curiosity, I could no longer sit still.

"What the hell is going on?" I shouted.

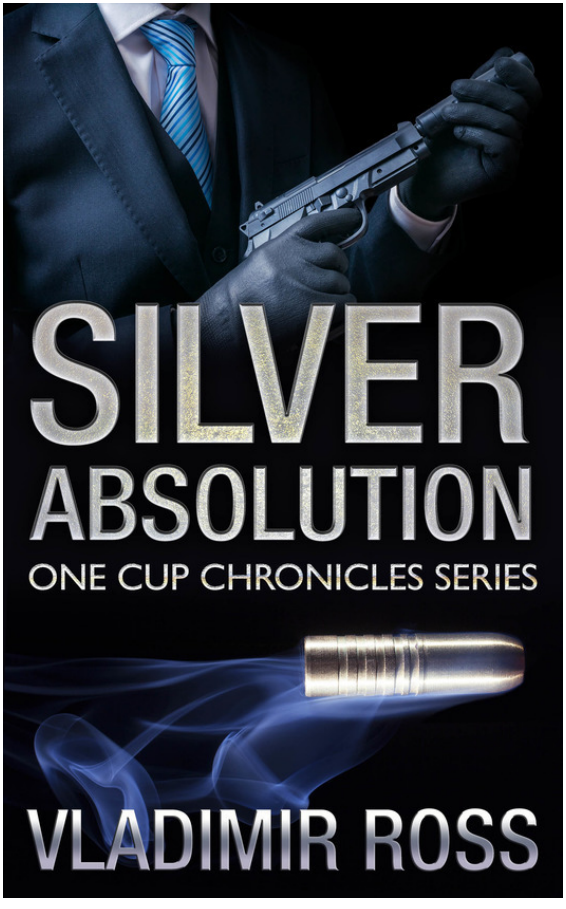
“Calm yourself, Valdemar.” The bridge of Anastas’ nose seemed to be a bit shinier due to an increased amount of rubbing from his large thumb. “I can say that we’ll be fine to do a little extracurricular reading without Senya. All I know is that he was forced to go into hiding underground.”

I could think of no words to accurately convey my astonishment, but I’m sure my face reflected those unhappy occupants of the painting “The Last Days of Pompeii.” I have always believed in the honesty and integrity of old thieves, but I can’t see why, for no apparent reason, one such thief who is in his seventies would be forced to lie low. It was beyond my comprehension.

“Don’t get worked up, Vovchik. I came to hear a story, so come now, read. I know I alone cannot provide a complete criticism, but so be it. Let’s read first, then we shall talk, okay?”

“Well brother, this is a story from the category of, how do I put it, “Inevitable Retribution.”

So for the first time, I decided to put my story forth to only Anastas.


SILVER
ABSOLUTION
ONE CUP CHRONICLES SERIES
VLADIMIR ROSS

Silver absolution

Only a select few of the city's residents hadn't heard of Yuri Nikolayevich Bakharev's wealth and prestige. He was a renowned philanthropist, family man, father of two wonderful daughters – quite simply, a gentleman. His kindness and empathy when solving the city's issues was astounding. Nobody seemed to know or care when this outstanding gentleman arrived in the city for the first time. He seemed to have lived here for ages, seeing how people quickly become accustomed to generosity.

Almost every week the citizens learned about a new project undertaken by Yuri Nikolayevich. Sure enough, when a church was in want of money for repair and restoration, priests in their robes and collars ran like mad to him. If there was a need to build an orphanage, bureaucrats knocked on the same door. If someone wanted to support gifted young people, wily producers artfully gained an audience and discussed their cause. It was an easy job that required no sacrifice of pride to receive patronage for those who did not overuse his kind-heartedness. All that's required is finding the most extravagant mansion in the city, ringing at the entry phone, introducing oneself, and explaining the purpose of the visit. After a short pause, the private secretary with her charming voice announces the date and time of the meeting, and all that remains is to arrive punctually and state one's case. Some bureaucrats appeared in Bakharev's luxuriously

furnished receiving room so often that one could start to take a pride in one's statesmen for solving so many vital problems!

So then, if a man loves to help his city and facilitate the achievement of many great social causes with undisguised pleasure, wouldn't it be the height of ingratitude to bite the hand that feeds? Five years ago, one of the city administrators had doubts regarding the great local sponsor's honesty. Rumor had it that an official enquiry would be made into the source of his incredible wealth. But an outlandish tragedy in the form of a freak car accident soon occurred to the inquisitive administrator. Only an urgent intervention of German surgeons could save the inspector's life. As always, Yuri Nikolayevich generously helped. After that, there were no volunteers willing to commit the sin of questioning the holy man.

Bakharev was a cofounder of several companies and was quickly named an honorary citizen, thanks to putting all his efforts into solving problems for the community. However, his cornucopia of virtues hid Yuri Nikolayevich from inquisitive glances like a dense wall. The honorary citizen spent most of his time at home drifting from the receiving room to the study and back. On Saturdays, watchful neighbors witnessed a regular departure. The headlights of his Mercedes could be seen emerging from his garage and speeding off into the country. The first idea that occurred to his fellow citizens was that Bakharev of the carefully manicured reputation let off steam by wantonly amusing himself in some other city. Some gossipers

said that in the neighboring city a whole restaurant or even an entertainment complex would be reserved for his revelry, and that the money spent on even one of these occasions could easily repair all the dilapidated roads in the city or buy more advanced equipment for the local clinic. The majority of the city scoffed at the wild fantasies of the envious.

The whole mystery surrounding Yuri Nikolayevich was complicated by one more oddity – tormenting nightmares. However, this was a very well-kept secret. The consulted neurologists, psychoanalysts, and doctors received a stern warning that it would be tactless to dig into the psyche of the honorable gentleman; they would depart leaving behind endless bottles and instructions, baffled by the fact that Bakharev was a paragon of health. Throughout nine years of visits, he took a cocktail of drugs before bedtime.

Sturdy young men acting as bodyguards were present day and night throughout the mansion. One guard was always stationed in the room adjoining the bedroom, while three others paced about the yard. Only at the crack of dawn would they disappear into the annex designated for the staff.

Bakharev was extremely zealous about his security. He would wake up before dawn, listen attentively to the silence accompanying the cautious steps of the guard of honor and peep into the neighboring room. The slightest doubt in the quality of protection, be it muffled chuckles behind the window or a sleepy, inattentive face, would spiral into immediate dismissal

of the whole “secret service.”

One night, after waking up in the darkness, Bakharev rubbed his head, still spinning from the tranquilizers, and spat an oath.

“Oh, hell! Even a double dose is useless!”

The noise drifting under his door did nothing to ease his anguish. A merry fellow with whom he entrusted his life was passing the dull hours of the night listening to sugary hits on a popular radio station. Apparently immersed in one such banal tune, he was singing in a nasally falsetto and tapping his foot in time to its pulsing rhythm.

“Three days have passed since I employed the new service. I shall have to fire them again. Such diversion is unacceptable during work hours. Someone could be in my room at this very moment smothering me to death, and he wouldn’t even notice. What date is it today? Oh, yes, it’s the twenty-eighth.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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