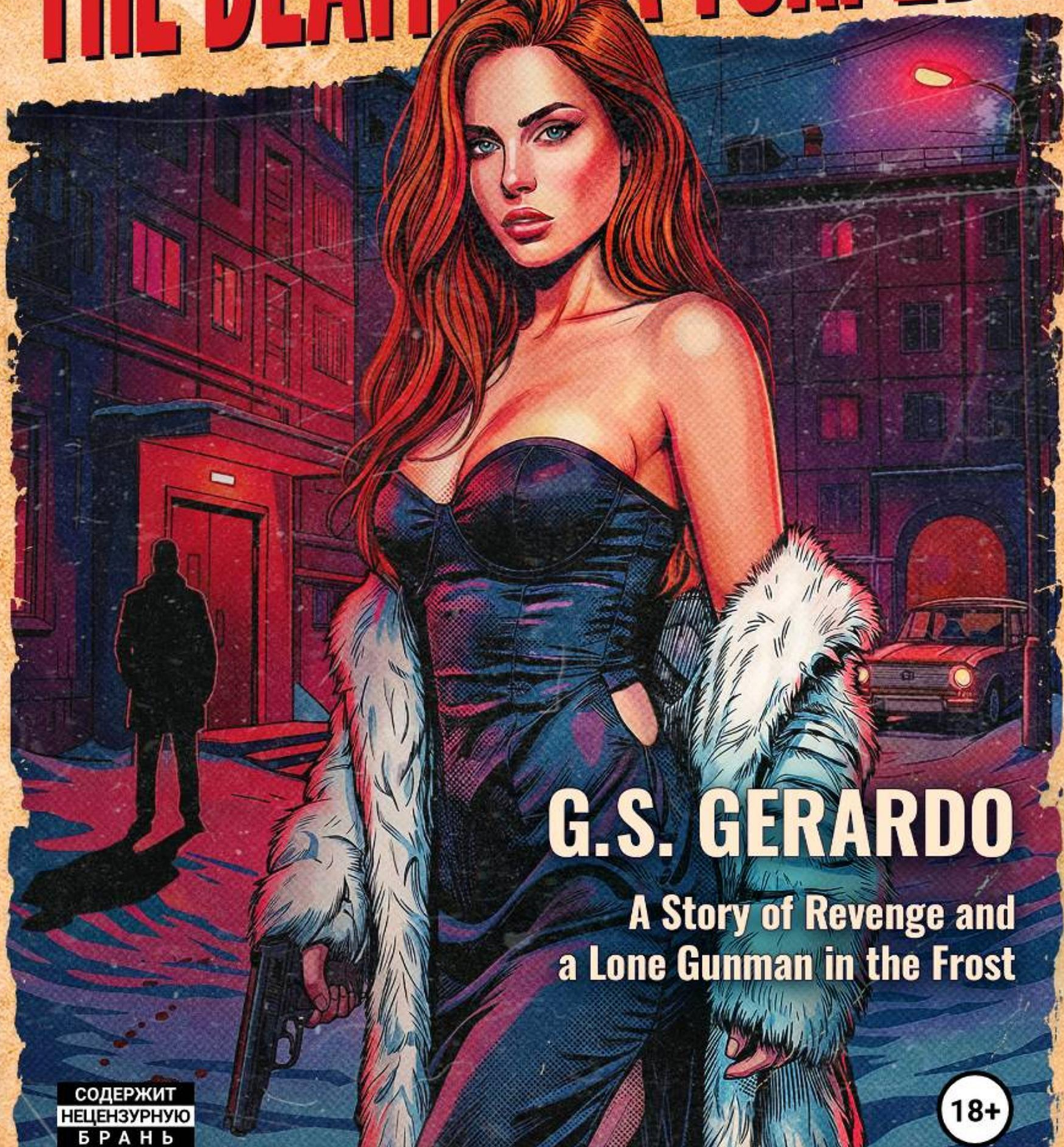


A SENSATIONAL NOVEL OF ADVENTURE!

THE DEATH OF A TORPEDO



G.S. GERARDO

A Story of Revenge and
a Lone Gunman in the Frost

СОДЕРЖИТ
НЕЦЕНЗУРНУЮ
БРАНЬ

18+

BY THE AUTHOR OF BLACK LAKE

G.S. Gerardo

The Death of a Torpedo

«Автор»

2026

Gerardo G.

The Death of a Torpedo / G. Gerardo — «АВТОР», 2026

Some secrets are worth killing for and some people are worth killing. In the shadowed streets of 1990s Moscow, cynical private investigator Volodiya Chaika thought he knew the game—until a simple murder case pulled him into the city's brutal post-Soviet underworld. Hired by the mysterious Valeriya Volkova, he uncovers a dark secret: her father was a notorious contract killer, and his death is just the tip of a deadly conspiracy masterminded by a ruthless oligarch desperate to erase his past. But peeling back the layers drags Chaika into a viper's nest—a ruthless oligarch's plot to torch his bloody past, guarded by feral gangsters and a phantom assassin who strikes from the snow. Loyalty's a myth, bullets are currency, and every shadow hides a loaded gun. In this post-Soviet hell, Chaika's playing for survival... or a shallow grave.

© Gerardo G., 2026

© АВТОР, 2026

Содержание

Chapter	5
Chapter 1: The Macedonian	7
Chapter 2: Tired of Running	13
Chapter 3: Two Guns	15
Chapter 4: The Case	17
Chapter 5: Two Cognacs	22
Chapter 6: The Deadman's Apartment	25
Chapter 7: Bullets in Broad Daylight	27
Chapter 8: A Resume Written in Flesh	30
Chapter 9: Sins of the Father	33
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	35

G.S. Gerardo

The Death of a Torpedo

Chapter

The Death of a Torpedo

By

GS Gerardo

© 2026 GSGerardo. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the author, except for brief quotations used in reviews or scholarly works.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

For inquiries, permissions, or further information, please contact:

Cover design by Violetta Korobkova

Printed in the United Kingdom

First Edition, 2026

Dedicated to my family

Contents

Chapter 1: The Macedonian

Chapter 2: Tired of Running

Chapter 3: Two Guns

Chapter 4: The Case

Chapter 5: Two Cognacs

Chapter 6: The Deadman's Apartment

Chapter 7: Bullets in Broad Daylight

Chapter 8: A Resume Written in Flesh

Chapter 9: Sins of the Father

Chapter 10: Nikitskaya

Chapter 11: The Man with No Face

Chapter 12: Puzzle Pieces

Chapter 13: Said the Spider to the Fly

Chapter 14: Meeting the Lawyer

Chapter 15: Step into My Office

Chapter 16: Spitting Blood

Chapter 17: Meet Anatoliev

Chapter 18: Too Deep

Chapter 19: This is Professionally Inappropriate

Chapter 20: A Day at the Office

Chapter 21: An Ivory Tower

- Chapter 22: Red Snow
- Chapter 23: Bleed Some More
- Chapter 24: Russian Roulette
- Chapter 25: Fair Exchange
- Chapter 26: The Macedonian's Pay Day
- Chapter 27: The Call
- Chapter 28: Meeting The Macedonian
- Chapter 29: A Classic Moscow Hit
- Chapter 30: Old Timers and Shotguns
- Chapter 31: Waking...
- Chapter 32: Ratchet
- Chapter 33: The Standoff
- Chapter 34: Moscow Never Sleeps

Chapter 1: The Macedonian

Under the relentless fall of white snow, Moscow's monolithic gray apartment blocks loomed like silent sentinels in the darkness. The city's streets were cloaked in winter's finest, a cold, heavy duvet. In frozen this city, secrets hid behind frosted windows, and every shadow carried a whispered promise of danger.

The snow sparkled when hit by the rays of jaundiced yellow, that emanated from the many streetlights, which stood watch over the city's streets. The air reeked of crisp, chilled snow and damp concrete, and soon, the smell of gunpowder from a freshly fired gun would be added to the mix.

A cold wind whistled through the streets and alleyways of the city, carrying with it the scent of the crisp, chilling snow, and damp concrete. It also carried something long forgotten, perhaps it was the weary and restless spirits of its many inhabitants who strived for the dream of a comfortable life in a city that, in recent years, could no longer provide such comfort. A city that had become a warzone for the warring factions of its criminal underground.

Bullets flew and bodies dropped, that was the order of the day and tonight would be no different.

One citizen marched alone through the snow. He wore a black ushanka that was perched on his head, complemented by a long, sleek black coat and matching trousers. His worn winter boots showed scuff marks from many journeys. The only burst of colour was a crimson-coloured scarf he wore tightly around his neck, like a hangman's noose, adding a stark contrast to his chiaroscuro outfit—like bloodstains on the pallid snow.

The figure marched through the snow like a transient phantom caught between the gritty reality of life on the streets of Moscow and the allure of the darkness that threatened to smother the city during the night. The shadowy figure stopped when he reached Nikitskaya's bar.

The bar was a wreck of a building located on the first floor of an old Soviet apartment block that had seen better days, years, and decades. The once bright yellow paint had decayed like a body left to rot in the open air. Old pipes hung from the wall. It was like the skeleton of a body on show for everyone to see.

One door provided access at the front, located under a metallic arch that painters had coated in lime green, but the hue had faded, yielding to a rusty brown. A changeable sign for "OPEN" or "CLOSED" was part of the glass panel on the door. The only part of the bar that looked like it was less than fifty years old was the neon sign advertising a western beer that had become all the rage since the fall of the Soviet Union. The garish red colours of the neon sign flickered on and off with each blink of an eye, both inviting and ominous, as if giving all those who entered a welcome and a warning.

The door under the steel arches looked like it was barely hanging on by its hinges, and when the lone figure opened the door, it emitted a high-pitched shriek, like it was in pain.

The interior of the bar was just as unattractive as its exterior, and the place reeked of cigarette smoke and booze. The wallpaper looked as worn out as the building itself and was peeling off. No matter the effort the owner made to put a new patch of wallpaper, it still looked awful and was about as helpful as putting a plaster on an amputated leg.

Square wooden tables covered the floor with matching chairs that looked about as comfortable as sitting on the ground. The only chairs that had some type of cushioning on them were the tall stools parked in front of the wide bar table where drinks were served.

The owner stood behind the bar, counting money from the till. He was a middle-aged man who wore his age on his face, whilst there were still a few dark hairs on his head to remind himself of the young man, he once was, they had given way to the dreary grey colour of the elderly. His craggy face and his calloused hands earmarked him as a man who, in his five and a half decades of life, had always been fighting and scurrying to eke out an existence.

He stood in front of shelves which were filled with glass bottles of varying alcoholic drinks favoured by the clientele, the locally produced vodka—at a time in which prices for most products were spiralling out of control, the only constant was that cheap vodka was still affordable for anyone desperate to find relief from their constant sorrows at the bottom of a bottle.

“Can’t you read the sign on the door?” the bar owner said. “We’re closed.”

“No, you’re not,” the man replied before dishing out an order. “I’ll have a shot of whiskey. No ice.”

“I said we’re closed,” the bar owner repeated in a tone of voice that showed that he was losing patience.

The man opened his jacket and flashed two pistols he kept on his waist resting in holsters.

The bar owner froze and raised a hand to his mouth.

The guest smiled before going back to the door and turning the sign from CLOSED to OPEN.

“Is this a robbery?” The bar owner asked.

“No, I’ll tell you why I’m here,” the guest answered. “But first, I need a drink.”

The unwanted customer didn’t just walk through the bar; he seemed to glide through the room. He was brisk, with only the faintest footsteps.

The figure parked himself on one of the tall chairs in front of the bar, and opposite the owner, who now had a better view of the man. He could see his face, which looked freshly shaved yet unblemished, which gave him an appearance that suggested he was in his late twenties. He had a spectral, pale complexion and a long mane of straight black hair that went down to his shoulders. He had piercing blue eyes that looked grey when hit by the light, but the eyes looked vacant.

“Any particular whiskey?” The bar owner asked, hoping the unexpected guest would have his drink and leave. He didn’t care about the drink being paid for; he just wanted this man to disappear like an apparition. If he left some coins on the table, that would be a bonus.

“Surprise me,” the unwanted customer said with a smile that had about as much warmth as a corpse in a morgue. The owner scanned the whiskey section of the shelf. His hand lingered over the bottles as he decided which one was less likely to offend his armed customer. He picked one and grabbed a glass before setting it down on the table that stood between him and this mysterious figure.

“What’s your name?” The armed customer asked. The bartender only answered with a nervous sound. “Your name? What is your name?”

“Why?” he asked, trying to keep himself composed, failing as his hands shook like brown coloured leaves hanging limply from a tree branch in the autumn. He tried to pour the whiskey into a glass without spilling a single drop. When trying to placate an armed man, even the smallest and most trivial of tasks became harder.

“Why?” the man asked, mimicking the bartender. “Your name. You have one, right?”

“M-M-Mikhail,” the barman answered. He had to force the answer out of him as his lips quivered.

“Is this your bar, or do you just work here?” The guest asked, ignoring the glass of whiskey that sat in front of him.

“Huh?” Mikhail blurted out. The shaking in his hands was getting worse the longer this man stayed. He wanted him gone, but his fists going up against a gun were useless.

“Do you own this fine establishment?”

Mikhail nodded, not wanting to say his answer. Maybe keeping the conversation as short as the day in winter might cause the man to get up and leave. When the visitor looked at him, Mikhail felt that the man wasn’t seeing him as another human being, but maybe an irritating fly that he might decide to swat.

“W-What’s the idea h-here?” Mikhail asked, choking on his words as if an invisible pair of hands were wrapped around his throat.

“There isn’t one,” the man replied, letting a long pause hang in the air like a body swinging from the gallows before speaking once more. “There isn’t an idea.”

The door of the bar screeched open once more. A cold gust of wind filled the room like ennui at a funeral. The man didn’t flinch, but Mikhail looked up to see one of his regulars, Vova, a baby-faced university student, who wore a long navy winter coat that went down to his knees, enter the bar. The young man stamped the snow off his boots on the mat at the door, each footstep a loud stomp.

“The bar is—,” Mikhail started the question, but he didn’t finish it. The man shot his sentence stone dead.

“Open,” the man declared, as if he owned the place, not just by the way he made himself at home, but also by the way he now seemed to control the opening and closing hours. Any minute now he’d be choosing which drinks to sell, Mikhail thought.

“What are you doing?” Mikhail asked the man, who only smiled at him.

“The young boy’s dry, give him a drink,” the visitor said, as young Vova stomped his way to the bar, his boots leaving a trail of wet footsteps on the floor.

“I didn’t know you were open so late,” said Vova.

The man didn’t look at Vova. He only kept his eyes on Mikhail. They were like daggers, the way they pierced the body and cut to the soul. Even when the man picked up his glass, his eyes remained fixed on him.

“Change of policy,” Mikhail said, trying his best to sound natural and to give nothing away. It wasn’t just his life that was now on the line, but also the life of the young man who had just entered the bar, not knowing the situation he was in, like a blind man walking into a lion’s den.

The younger man reached the bar. He couldn’t quite know what was wrong, but he knew something wasn’t right. He looked at Mikhail’s face, the same one he always saw behind the bar, but something about his eyes and the way they twitched from side to side told him something was up.

“Is everything okay?” The young man asked, unsure of the reply he would get to his question.

“Everything is okay,” Mikhail replied, a long second after the question had been asked.

“Are you sure?” Vova asked, ignorant of the fact that the man sitting on the stool next to him had two loaded guns on him, and that soon he would use them.

“He said everything is okay,” the man spoke. His voiced carried the weight of authority in the way it seemed more like a command, rather than a verification of Mikhail’s answer.

Mikhail swallowed spit. He got the feeling that the armed man was a grenade without a pin.

Vova looked the mysterious man in the eyes. It was like staring into a void.

The man in black stared right back into his.

Please, kid, don’t do anything stupid, Mikhail thought, desperately hoping the younger man would somehow get the message that this was not a moment to be brave.

“I’m sorry, what?” Vova asked.

Here we go, Mikhail thought.

“He doesn’t hear so well, does he?” the shadowy figure asked Mikhail, as if Vova wasn’t there.

Mikhail’s heart was thumping inside his chest. He swore he heard it beating, like he was listening to it through a stethoscope. Sticky sweat was dripping down the back of his neck and trickling down his spine. Mikhail got the feeling that this living shadow, that had crept in through the door of his bar, was doing this for its own amusement.

Vova turned to Mikhail, like he was being confronted by an otherworldly entity—a malevolent demon that had crept out of the pits of hell and taken the form of this thing that Mikhail was loath to call a man, or even a human. It was not just the way he held the place down, or the guns he claimed to be concealing; it was the way he was enjoying himself, like a boy peeling the wings off a fly.

“Hmmm,” the figure said. “Now I have an idea. You, young man, get behind the bar.”

“What? Why?” Vova asked. He started to shake as the fear seeped into his body like a downpour of rain through a hole in the roof.

“You’re too close to me. I don’t want to get my jacket dirty,” the man said.

“Please, just do what he says,” Mikhail pleaded, desperate for the night to end with his head in one piece.

The young man stumbled around the bar with his heart beating against the back of his throat. There was a loud thump as his foot bumped into one of the stools, which came crashing down to the ground.

The shadow only watched with his expressionless chess player’s face, the master moving pawns as part of a grand strategy that was yet to reveal itself.

As Vova reached the end of his little journey around the bar, the silence was like a loud death rattle.

The shadow reached into his jacket. Both men stood behind the bar and assumed death was coming, and were about to face it head-on, like a punch to the face.

Vova began to mutter a prayer in a whisper. He stuttered and stumbled over the words to the point that it became hard to tell which one he was reciting as a ticket to heaven.

Mikhail could feel his heart in his throat. If it beat any harder, he would be spewing his heart out onto the bar table in front of him.

The man in black pulled out a carton of cigarettes; he removed a cigarette from the carton. He kept his eyes fixed on the two men behind the bar.

“Is there anyone else here?” The shadow asked. He placed the cigarette between his lips.

“Just the cleaner, she’s in the kitchen washing the dishes,” Mikhail muttered.

The shadow ordered him to bring the cleaner out and join the party, as he struck a match. The flame flickered, like the last breaths of a dying man, as he placed the tiny flame against the end of the cigarette.

Mikhail called out for the cleaner. He stumbled over his words and had to try again to force them out. A short and overweight, older woman with gray curly hair and a wrinkled face staggered into the bar wearing an all-white uniform with a stained apron.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

The shadow got up and removed his hat and held it against his chest as he looked at the older woman.

“I’m sorry to say, ma’am, that you are in danger of becoming an extra in a tragic play, if you or any of your co-stars decide to go off script.”

“What is this all about?” Mikhail asked the man, as his nerves had got the better of him. If he was going to die, he at least wanted to know why and whether it was worth it in some way.

“I’ll tell you in a few minutes,” he replied. “But first, you, young man, and you, my dear lady, you’re both going behind that door with me.”

The shadow got off the stool that he had been sitting on like an eagle on a branch, waiting for its prey to reveal itself. He removed a pistol from the inside of his jacket and began walking the length of the bar. He pointed at the door behind the bar and gestured for both the old lady and the young man to go through it.

The old woman was pale and looked like she had aged another ten years in a few minutes. The shadow placed an arm around her shoulder.

“Don’t worry, ma’am, I’ll try to make things comfortable for you,” he said, in a voice that seemed to mimic compassion. He even held the door open for her. “You remind me of my own mother.”

Before the shadow walked in through the door with them, he turned to face Mikhail; the attempt to mimic compassion had disappeared from his face like smoke into the night.

“I’ll be back in a minute.”

Mikhail froze, and the shadow left him to tend to an empty bar alone with dark thoughts running through his head. What was going to happen there? Was he going to kill them? Was he going to kill him too? He might still have a chance to live if he made a run for it while the shadow was preoccupied

with the others. He couldn't hear what was happening behind the door; he only imagined what was going on in there, and that made the wait for his turn even worse.

“Alright, done,” Mikhail could hear the man say. He turned back to the door, which swung open as the man stepped back out into the bar. The gun was still in his hand, and he held it at a ninety-degree angle. He aimed the pistol at Mikhail's chest. Despite the distance between them, the barrel of the gun looked enormous, a big black circle that resembled the tunnel of an underground train.

One thing bothered him: he had to know what the purpose of all this was. Why was his life being cut short by this random stranger who had walked in from the shadows of the night? Who was he? Just how unlucky was Mikhail going to be tonight?

“I-I've g-got to ask,” he heard himself say the words, but he couldn't believe they were coming out of him. “I've got to know...you come into my bar...I mean...what is this about?”

“I'm here to kill a man, Nikolai Volkov is his name, maybe you know him as Kolya or Chainik,” the man said.

The man was staring at Mikhail but not seeing him. Only looking through him.

“Why? What's he done to you?”

“Nothing,” the man answered. “He hasn't done anything to me. He won't even get the chance to do anything to me.”

“Then why are you going to kill him?”

“I've been paid to, that's why.”

“Is that all it takes for you to kill someone?”

“When I'm paid, I see the job through until the end,” the man said, almost with a sense of pride, like it was a boast. “But before that, I need you for one more question, Mikhail. I need you to confirm that this man, Kolya, lives in this area.”

Mikhail thought about what he was being asked to do: he was being asked to be a participant in the execution of another man. He might as well be putting the gun to Nikolai's head and blowing out his brains with his own hands. He swallowed spit; the gun remained aimed at his chest; a simple pull of the trigger would mean a hot lead bullet through the heart.

“He lives in this area, right? In fact, this is his favorite bar, is it not?” The man asked, a single eyebrow raised as he studied Mikhail for any possible reaction he may have, or any clue that the older man was going to try to deceive him.

Mikhail didn't answer. He would try to hold out, but he had the feeling that he might not be able to for much longer. He was a fly caught in the spider's web, unable to move, stuck, and the spider that had spun the web was inching closer towards him. Mikhail could feel the sweat trickling down his forehead like the tears streaming down the cheeks of a heartbroken man.

Fear. Pain. Death. This was everything that was in store for him—they didn't make for a good night. He refused to speak, even though he was staring down the barrel of a gun, like he was peering into the abyss of a dark alleyway during the coldest of winters in Moscow.

“Let me make this easier for you. You do want to go home and see your wife tonight, don't you?” The man asked while pointing at Mikhail's ring.

Mikhail nodded in response to the question. He struggled to hold himself together as he battled the urge to speak. He knew this would mean that a man would die tonight.

“You love your wife, don't you?” The shadow asked him.

Mikhail nodded.

The man in black pulled out a crumpled piece of paper and unfolded it on the table. There was an address scribbled on it. The man shot him a question, asking Mikhail to confirm Kolya's address. “All you have to do is confirm the address, then and only then, will you be able to go home to your wife for a nice dinner, a hug, and maybe a goodnight kiss.”

Mikhail stared at the crumpled piece of paper on which someone had scribbled an address. He thought about what he was being asked to do: to give another man a death sentence. He thought about

his wife and the dinner that she would cook and leave for him when he got home after closing the bar—if he was to go home tonight—he would never take her cooking for granted again.

The shadow studied him, peering at his face and locking onto him with its eyes, the same way a hunter looks through the scope of a rifle when they're about to take down an elk.

“Do you want to go home and see her?” The man asked.

Mikhail answered without speaking. He nodded his head with the enthusiasm of a man about to be put into a medically induced coma. Warm tears trickled down his cheeks. They touched the sides of his lips.

“You only have one thing to do for that to happen, and I need you to think carefully. Think about the wife you have at home waiting for you. Think about how she is missing you right now, and how she would miss you even more if you never came back home.”

Mikhail knew what this meant. He took a deep breath and wiped away the tears that were pouring out of his eyes like water from an overflowing well. Mikhail relented and nodded. In effect, he had just condemned Kolya to death.

“You're a good husband,” the shadow said, with a wry smile as he finally concealed the gun back in his jacket. He withdrew a wallet from his pocket and started counting some money.

“Here's the money for the whiskey,” the man said as he dropped a few roubles on the bar table. He marched towards the door to leave the bar, and then he came to an abrupt stop.

Mikhail's heart rattled around in his chest in a frenzy as the man approached him once more, whilst reaching into his pocket. He closed his eyes; he didn't expect to open them again. He took what he thought were his final breaths.

“Buy some flowers for your wife,” the man said.

Mikhail opened his eyes. The unwanted guest had left some notes on the table.

Then the shadow turned his back on Mikhail and marched out of the bar. He disappeared into the dark shadows of the night, like a whisper carried onwards by the cold, hard winds of winter, leaving only a sense of mystery and dread in his wake as he set off on his mission to kill Kolya.

Chapter 2: Tired of Running

Mikhail knew one thing: he had to do *something* to help Kolya survive the night. He couldn't stop the man in black from setting off on his murderous path, but he could get someone to knock on Kolya's door and tell him to run before death came for him.

He rushed to the backroom to check on the cleaner and Vova. He barged the door open with the extreme urgency of a man who knew time was running out. Every second mattered.

The backroom was a shadowy world unto itself; the dim lighting of the room was due to the single functioning lightbulb that hung from the ceiling. The air was always thick with the pungent smell of vodka, cigarettes, and desperation. The room's discoloured walls looked like an artist's abandoned canvas. Grimy tiles decorated the floor. Mikhail's steps landed with a loud thud as he rushed towards the cleaner and Vova, who were bound and gagged. At least the older woman sat more comfortably on a wooden stool, whereas Vova had to make do with sitting on the cold ground.

Mikhail rushed to unbind and ungag them. Both let out a loud sigh of relief as they were both released. But there was no time for this. Mikhail grabbed hold of the younger man and barked orders at him with the urgency of a platoon leader in a war zone.

"Kolya! You've got to help Kolya!"

"What?"

"Kolya! He's going to kill Kolya!"

"What? Why?"

"That's not important right now! You've got to get out there and warn him. He's got to leave."

Vova staggered to his feet and swore as he raced out of the bar.

Mikhail put his arms around the old lady and gave her a tight hug as she cried.

"Wh-what was that?" she asked between sobs.

"I don't know and I don't want to know. I just hope he gets to Kolya before it's too late."

The old lady returned his tight hug with an even tighter embrace of her own.

*

Vova tried his best to run on the snow and ice without slipping.

He was so caught up in his urgent mission that he didn't feel the biting chill of the harsh winter that turned each of his breaths into an ethereal apparition that evaporated into the night. The only cold was the icy grip of fear that had taken hold of him. Every heartbeat resonated like the ticking of a clock.

The young man sprinted through the frozen labyrinth that were the rough and narrow alleyways of Moscow. Each step he took was a gamble, a fifty/fifty chance he would either be able to stay on his feet, or that he would lose his footing and end up landing on his ass.

His heartbeat thumped at breakneck speed. He zigged and zagged between the tight alleyways and hopped the odd fence.

He arrived at a tall, high-rise apartment building, one of many in this part of the city that housed hundreds of souls within it. The snow covered the tops of the grey apartment blocks like icing on a cake.

Vova took a few breaths, inhaling the cold air, before going in through the large steel door that took him inside the building. The interior of the building was as drab as the outside, and the aroma of stale cigarettes and pickled food filled the young man's lungs.

He got in the lift; as the metallic doors of the lift parted for him, he pressed the button for the sixth floor.

This was the last stretch of his journey.

*

Nikolai woke up from his slumber to the sound of a constant, hard banging on his door. A frantic knocking and a panicked voice shouted from the corridor of the apartment.

Shadows cloaked the bedroom. The only light in the room had made its way through the Venetian blinds. A spectral glow, which snuck in through them and illuminated the mess inside the room. Clothes lay discarded on the floor in a small mound of fabric in front of a wooden wardrobe that age had chipped and cracked. An old bed with a rusted metal frame sagged under the weight of threadbare blankets.

“Kolya, wake up!” The nervous voice shouted as the banging on the door continued. “You have to get out of here!”

Nikolai thought, "Please, just let me sleep," but his wish would not be granted, so he flung the bedsheets aside. He sat on the edge of his bed in only his underwear, rubbing his face and then running his fingers through his short crew cut hair that was turning grey, as the vestiges of time took their toll on him.

The pounding on the door continued.

“Give me a minute!” Kolya said, loud enough for the person behind the door to listen. He got to his feet and stumbled towards the apartment door.

He was a beast of a man, heavysset and muscular, but with a large, round gut that made him look like a barrel with muscles. Tattoos decorated his body, a tapestry of ink that told the story of who he was and the experiences he had been through. Whereas most people kept a journal, he had his life story inked onto his skin with needles.

“Jesus, do you have to be so loud?” Nikolai barked at the young man behind the door. He opened it, still half asleep and yawning. The bright yellow light of the apartment hall invaded his apartment and bathed it in a golden hue.

“Someone’s coming to kill you,” Vova said.

Kolya nodded his head; it didn’t even register a single raise of an eyebrow.

“Okay, thank you for telling me,” Nikolai said. His voice showed no emotion; he might as well have been reading the phonebook.

“I don’t think you understand,” the younger man implored. “You need to get your clothes on and get out of here.”

“I don’t think you understand,” the older man said, using the authority that came with age to cut Vova off before he could continue. “I’m tired of running and I’m tired of hiding. Please, just let me be.”

“Are you sure?” Vova asked.

“I’m sure. I just want to get back to sleep,” Nikolai said, before closing the door on the young man’s face.

Vova stood in the apartment corridor. He thought about knocking on the door once more. But he knew from the way Kolya had spoken and reacted to the news that it wouldn’t matter; he had the look of a man who had accepted his fate. He was a man standing on the ledge of a building and refusing to be talked out of it; instead, he would be that man diving headfirst into concrete from the highest floor possible.

The young man buried his hands in his pockets and left. He knew he had played his part in the story of tonight. He had given the best performance possible and read his lines with all the emotional weight that they carried, but he knew now that his role in the story was over.

All he could hope for was that the script had a happy ending.

It didn’t.

Chapter 3: Two Guns

Nikolai stood alone in the dark. An otherworldly glow shone through the wooden slits in the Venetian blinds. They cast shadowy prison bars across the room. He thought for a second about how he would spend his last hour, minutes, or even seconds, since he did not know how much time he had left.

The light cast a serene glow across the surfaces that it touched, including the old wooden wardrobe that stood in the far right of the room. He stumbled towards it, under the watchful eyes of the photos that hung on the wall. They tracked his movements, including an entire platoon of young men in Red Army uniforms holding rifles in their hands.

A young Nikolai smiled at the camera, with one arm around one of the young men in that photo and his Dragunov rifle slung across his body. Many of those young men never made it back from Afghanistan. Nikolai was one of the lucky, yet unlucky young men to make it back and witness what life had become in Moscow. A dark curtain had been drawn over the country, as if the sun had stopped shining.

He opened the old wardrobe with a forceful tug on the handle. The hinges yelped in agony; the years having taken their toll on not just Nikolai, but even the furniture in this cramped apartment he called home.

In the wardrobe he found the one object he was looking for, the one thing he cherished the most, the one item he wanted to die holding: his Dragunov rifle. It was both sinister and alluring to him, a cold sentinel of forgotten tales and ruined lives. The rifle's sleek lines boasted the precision of its crafters, who carefully crafted each contour for the brutal act of killing, as if the devil's minions had forged it in hell's fires. The wood stock, dark and polished, glimmered like the eyes of a beautiful woman. Nikolai grabbed the rifle with the tender care that he would hold a lover.

He unloaded the rifle with a flick of his wrist. The lead rounds landed on the wooden floor before rolling away from where Nikolai stood with both of his hands on the rifle. He stood with his eyes fixated on the door. He gripped the rifle in his hands.

Nikolai looked at the clock on his wall. The ominous ticking and tocking of the clock sounded louder than it ever had before.

He could hear footsteps outside his apartment door. At first, they were faint, but they grew louder as whoever was outside got closer to the door. The gap between the bottom of the door and the floor had been bright; a strip of golden coloured light that was then eclipsed by the dark silhouette of a pair of shoes. Whoever it was had come to an abrupt stop.

This is it, Nikolai thought.

His breathing got deeper with every sound of the footsteps outside his apartment; he knew whoever was coming for him had arrived. He could hear the door being unlocked from the outside.

The door opened, revealing the person behind it. The assassin held a pistol in each hand, Macedonian style. Nikolai said nothing; with two guns pointed at him, he smiled as if he were being visited by an old friend, as opposed to being visited by a man whose sole intention for tonight was to snatch Nikolai's life from him.

"Well, you're here now," Nikolai said. "You might as well get on with it."

The man at the door didn't wait any longer and was more than happy to oblige. He pulled the triggers of both guns and fired a volley of bullets at Nikolai's chest. With every shot fired, there was a loud, monstrous roar as the man fired both guns again.

The pungent scent of gun smoke filled the tiny room. Nikolai's rifle landed on the ground with a loud thump, yet he had stayed on his two feet. He staggered backwards holding his punctured chest. Blood leaked and trickled down his body from the bullet holes.

Nikolai smiled at his assailant, a crazed, wide-eyed grin that revealed a full set of teeth that had gone red with blood. He spat a thick crimson glob toward his would-be assassin. The blood and spit landed just in front of his feet with a sickening splat.

“Is that all you got?” Nikolai said before closing his eyes. He knew what was going to come next, and this time, he knew he couldn’t withstand the second wave of bullets.

The guns spoke once more. They did not have to speak again, as Nikolai landed backwards on his bed with a thud and the screech of bedsprings. Puddles of blood formed around the bullet wounds in his chest before leaking down onto the plain white bedsheets of the cramped single bed he had been sleeping on. Nikolai’s eyes may have been looking up at the ceiling, but they were no longer seeing anything.

The man in black put his guns back into their holsters. He took one last look at the mess of a man that was lying in a starfish like pose on the bed and bolted from the scene.

The snow continued to fall, further burying the city and its people beneath it. The soft, pure, and relentless snow could hide the sins of the night, drawing a veil over its secrets and the inevitable truths that will rise and haunt the living like phantoms in the cold, cruel light of dawn.

Chapter 4: The Case

Thousands of souls had tread upon the pavements of Arbat Street, their feet churning the snow into a soiled, black mire that clung to footwear.

Just off the bustling and snow-covered street of Arbat, there was a small, dimly lit street that led to an office block. A grey building that had seen better days and was some way off from the other blocks on the main part of Arbat, that was geared towards tourists and anyone looking for a warm tea to offset the bone chilling cold. It was an unassuming office block, with a weathered sign on one of the windows that read: Vladimir Chaika, Private Investigator.

The office itself was basking in the warm glow of the light that hung from the ceiling. Beneath the lights on one side of the room, there was an old wooden table. Polished yet scarred from years of use, the table had become jaded by the stories and scenarios it had witnessed throughout the years.

There was a wooden bookshelf which was overflowing with yellow case file folders; some had even turned a light brown colour because of their age.

On the right-hand side of the table sat a vintage typewriter; the letters on the keys were almost worn out from use. Despite its vintage status, it wasn't aging like fine wine, but more like a carton of milk on a scorching hot day. On the left-hand side was an ashtray filled with cigarette butts and ash. In the middle of the table, there was a stuffed yellow envelope.

On each opposite side of the table were two chairs. The person sitting behind the office desk wore a tidy grey suit with thin white stripes and was Volodiya Chaika. A tall figure with a strong jawline and high cheekbones that gave him a rugged demeanour, especially with the stubble as opposed to the clean-shaven look other men may have favoured. He had a broad forehead and jet-black hair that was slicked back and tidy; there wasn't a single hair out of place. He had a pair of deep-set light blue eyes that glistened under the amber light of the room, yet despite their brightness they seemed to act as a disguise for a darkness within him.

On the other side of the table, on a cushioned wooden chair, sat a real schlub of a man, Ivan Petrov. A doughy short man whose remaining hair was on the sides of his head, a hairstyle that resembled a horseshoe. He wore a blue suit, but it looked wrinkled and worn out, like he had kept it for too long. On the man's shirt there were a few light brown stains, and he wore a tie in a very loose and messy knot.

Volodiya got the sense that this was the type of man who birds would shit on in the morning, and then the rest of the day, life would shit on him.

Volodiya picked up the envelope that rested on the table and stretched his arm out towards Ivan. Before handing him the envelope, he retracted his hand just as Ivan was about to grab hold of it.

"I warn you; you're going to see some things that are going to make it hard for you to smile for quite some time," Volodiya said.

Ivan nodded as the private investigator stretched his arm out once more, offering the envelope to him. Ivan took the envelope, his hands trembling as he held the envelope and he chewed on his lower lip.

Volodiya decided it was a good time to open his table side drawer, which contained a few bottles and shot glasses. For a moment, his hand hovered over the bottle of Armenian cognac. He decided that was too good to waste on Ivan, so he opted for the vodka. He filled a small glass with it before placing it in front of Ivan, who tore open the envelope.

Just in case, Volodiya thought, as Ivan now held the photos that were in the envelope. He scanned them one by one.

Picture 1: An image of his wife and a man meeting in front of the entrance to a cheap hotel. They are all smiles. Smitten teenagers who should know better than to be caught out in the open by a hidden photographer.

Picture 2: The man and the woman are now kissing as they hold each other in a tight embrace. This is when Ivan's tears flowed, like cheap booze at a bar.

Picture 3: They enter the hotel together, his arm around her waist. The sobbing and sniffing got louder.

Picture 4: In a hotel room, the man and woman are now kissing. Her hands unfastened the man's belt.

The sobbing continued, as well as the occasional "no" Ivan blurted out.

Picture 5: In the same hotel room, the woman lies on her back, her legs wrapped around his back as they kiss.

Picture 6: Her face in close-up, lips curling, and eyes closed in an image of bliss, as the other figure in the still image has his mouth on her neck.

"I'll kill her, I swear I'll kill her!" the man bellowed in between sobs, the tears streaking down his cheeks like drops of water from a melting icicle.

Volodiya rolled his eyes as Ivan continued to cry. He had heard it all before and knew how to respond to such promises, especially when they always lacked the conviction to pursue them. He knew the type, too scared to burst a grape, let alone kill another person.

"Don't make promises you can't keep," he said, as the man continued to weep.

Volodiya couldn't stand criers, especially when they were men.

Ivan tore the pictures and slammed his head onto the table. Tears streaked down his cheeks.

"Don't cause a flood in here, Ivan. I've just had the floor cleaned," Volodiya said, as he got to his feet and stood beside Ivan, who now had his head buried in his hands. He slid the glass of vodka closer to Ivan. "Have some of this. It'll help clear your mind."

Ivan gulped the drink down like a thirsty dog lapping up water from a puddle. Volodiya gave him an "attaboy" and a pat on the shoulder.

"You've just got to accept that what happened has happened. Your head is a mess right now. You're angry and upset. Just take some time to think things over and then decide what you do next — marriage counselling or divorce."

The private investigator didn't expect to be playing the role of a motivational coach, but for the money he was being paid, he didn't mind.

"You're right, Volodiya. I need to get my head screwed on right."

"Of course I am, you know it makes sense," Volodiya said, faking a smile as good as any actor on a daytime soap opera. "I mean, aside from this, you've got a good career and you're making good money, right? Which firm do you work for, again?"

Ivan wiped away his tears.

"Moskva Capital Advisors."

"Good."

"We've just been hired for the Monarch account."

"Even better, now come on, get on your feet. You can't be here keeping that seat warm all day. I've got another client coming in soon," he lied.

Ivan got to his feet whilst slamming the empty glass onto the desk, and then he grabbed Volodiya in a bear hug. He was now in a vice like grip (Volodiya was sure no woman in his life had held him with such vigour).

"Thanks, Volodiya," Ivan said. "Thanks for everything."

"You only have to thank me once."

"Sorry, I can never thank you enough for this."

"Well, I'm pretty sure you just have."

“I mean...if you...you know... ever need anything, let me know.”

Ivan then put on his coat and stumbled out of the office, much to the private investigator’s relief.

He went back to his desk and checked his schedule. From six in the evening onwards, he was free. There were no more appointments. He would not have to act as a private investigator or a motivational coach for the rest of the evening.

He thought about what he would do with his free evening until the phone in his office shrieked and disrupted all thoughts of time spent curled up with a book and a glass of brandy. Volodiya picked up the phone. The voice of the receptionist for the office block, Yulia, greeted him.

“You’ve got an appointment,” she said.

“No, I don’t.”

He checked his schedule. It was empty, just like the last time he had checked it a few moments ago.

“You do now,” she informed him.

“With whom? I have no more appointments today.”

“A Miss Valeriya Volkova.”

The private investigator thought for a second and relented. If this woman thought she could just get an appointment by turning up, it meant only one thing: she had a sense of entitlement, which also meant she was rich.

“Okay, send her in,” he said with all the enthusiasm of a man about to undergo a prostate check. Volodiya straightened his tie and jacket, which Ivan’s bear hug had ruffled.

The door to the office creaked open. He stood up right, like a soldier greeting his drill sergeant. With the corridor light shining behind her, she was a beautifully shaped silhouette, and when she sashayed into the office, she glowed like an actress entering the stage.

Light illuminated her face, revealing her lipstick's light tone and her icy blue eyes that glistened. The face was a delicate canvas, with high cheekbones and a delicate glow of porcelain skin. Her brown hair glowed in the office's warm amber hues; it cascaded over her shoulders in silky waves. A slender waist accentuated the rounded curves of an hourglass figure. She moved with a natural grace, every step poised and effortless.

“Good evening, Mr Chaika,” she said, in a husky voice that was both harsh yet sensual to hear.

“Good evening, Miss Volkova,” he said, armed with a smile and the most charming voice he could muster up. “Please take a seat.”

Volodiya circled his desk, the worn leather of the office chair sighing as he settled into it. When sitting opposite her, he noticed there was an icy quality in her blue eyes. They resembled frozen lakes in winter. The dark, black, strapless dress she was wearing contrasted with her eyes. The silk material of the dress stressed her body and revealed her figure, whilst leaving the rest to the imagination of any man she caught the attention of.

Volodiya deduced from the way she strutted, and with every step she took, she was aware of her beauty and the impact it could have on any warm-blooded man. But there was a vulnerability in her. He noticed it in the way her eyes flickered with a tremor of uncertainty.

“Alright, Miss Volkova,” he said as he grabbed a pen and a notepad. He clicked the button at the top of his pen. “You’re here. You’re in my office. What can I help you with?”

“I’d like to apologise for the state I’m in,” she said as she wiped her eyes.

“No apology needed.”

“You see, I’m a daughter in mourning.”

“I understand.”

She held her emotions in better than Ivan did. Volodiya respected her more for it and respected Ivan even less.

“So, is this an issue to do with his will? Some sort of fraud related to the family inheritance?” He said, reeling off any reasons anyone would need a private investigator after the death of their father.

She shook her head.

“Well, what is it?”

“I need help to investigate a murder,” she said in a flat tone. “My father’s murder.”

Her right hand clenched into a tight fist.

“Murder? That is outside my remit. I’m a private investigator, not a homicide detective. I’ve often worked on jobs that involve adultery, blackmail, fraud, and extortion. You should go to the police with such a request.”

Her right hand relaxed.

“I think you know, like everyone else here, the police are about as useful as lipstick on a pig,” she said.

“Some pigs look good without lipstick,” he quipped.

“Spare me your wisecracks.”

“If I do, I won’t have much more to offer here.” Volodiya shrugged his shoulders. “I’m not a homicide detective.”

“I don’t need a homicide detective; I need a private investigator for this.”

“Why should I take a job that is as far out of my remit as Vladivostok is to Moscow?”

“I have money, lots of it,” she stated in a way that was like someone announcing that the sky was blue, winter is cold, and hell is hot. “Is that enough, or should I pack you some fuck to go?”

“You speak the universal language of cash; no translation is needed.”

“Please, stop being so glib; it’s about my father.”

“The murdered man.”

“Sort of.”

“Sort of?” He repeated with a quizzical eyebrow raised. “He’s either been murdered, or he hasn’t. There is no half murdered or half alive. Death is final.”

“When he was killed, he had a gun with him, a rifle he kept from his years in Afghanistan. He had it in his hand, but he chose not to use it. He just let himself get shot down without firing a single shot back. He just let it happen. He stood there and took it.”

Volodiya took it all in like a fresh glass of water. He scribbled some details down in his notepad in a rough handwriting that would be an enigmatic cypher to most.

“Any reason?”

“That’s what I’m hoping you’ll find out.”

“Do you know anyone who might have any particular grievances against him?”

“Too many to name.”

“What did he do to become so popular?”

“I’m hiring you to find out.”

“Did you love your father?”

“I tolerated him.”

Volodiya scanned his notes. A case was a jigsaw, with every bit of information being a piece that would slot into others to form a clear image, but he didn’t have many to work with.

“What did your father do for work?”

“He never told me, even when I asked.”

Volodiya considered this answer a clue to who the murdered man might be, or at least the line of work he could have had.

“What did he tell you when you asked?”

“That he loved me. There was nothing he wouldn’t do to keep a roof over my head and food in my belly. That I was always grateful for, no matter that he did.”

“Did you feel this involved illegal activity? *Nalieva*?”

Nalieva was a slang term in Russia for working outside the law.

“I can guarantee you it was, but I don’t know the details. Sometimes, I would hear other men he’d meet call him *chainik*. But he would never speak about work in front of us.”

Chainik. It was a nickname that had often been used to describe a bully among those doomed to serve and then survive Afghanistan—Volodiya knew this from experience. It could also describe a man with a temper shorter than the legs of a leprechaun. The type of man who would resort to violence at the drop of a hat.

“You never answered the question about whether you loved your father.”

“I told you. I tolerated him up to a certain point.”

“What was that certain point?”

“The more I got the feeling he had gone *nalieva*, the more I came to resent him. Don’t get me wrong, I held my nose and took money from him. I knew the money was tainted, but I still took it, and he kept my mother safe. I loved him and I hated him.”

Volodiya put his pen down and closed his notepad. He placed both hands on his table as he stared at the woman who sat in front of him. He studied her and admired her beauty at the same time. It was like he was sitting in an art gallery looking at a masterpiece that he was trying to interpret the true meaning of. There was the coolness of her character, but there was also a hidden sense of vulnerability.

“Why do you want to spend your money digging through dirt?”

“I want to know who killed him. I want justice. Even a man like my father deserved it.”

“Justice. Something that’s hard to come by these days.”

“But something that’s up for sale, like everything else in this country.”

Volodiya smirked. She remained stoic, revealing no emotions, like a theatre mask, just an icy look that could freeze any man’s heart. She revealed how much she was willing to pay: a base amount per day working the case, plus all expenses covered that could be linked to the job. It wasn’t just money; it was a lot of money. She handed him an envelope with a photo of the dead man and his address.

Then she got up, wished him a good evening, and she left just as he returned the pleasantries.

He sauntered towards the office window to catch a glimpse of the street outside. He put a cigarette between his lips and struck a match.

The scenes beneath him unfolded like a film on a cinema screen, a cinematic tableau where shadows played and danced against the snow. The people walking the streets were all wrapped up in puffy clothes, hats, and gloves in a desperate battle to stay warm. Their faces obscured by woollen hats and scarves, but the tension in their bodies and movements spoke volumes about a historic city that had fallen on hard times, in which oligarchs and gangsters had used it as their private playground. The hurried glances here, furtive steps there, it was like each of them were extras in a play whose story was too complex to determine under the cold light of day.

Volodiya killed his cigarette as he stubbed it out on the ashtray on his table. He grabbed his notepad and pen and stashed into his blazer pocket. For a second, he thought about the solitude he was meant to enjoy this evening, before she entered the picture.

He let go of his hopes and dreams for a quiet evening of relaxation with a moment of silence and then proceeded to do what was necessary.

He got to work and made a call to an unreliable, yet reliable source in the police force.

Chapter 5: Two Cognacs

The snow fell softly, and the bitter cold chilled Volodiya's bones as he strode through the streets of Moscow. Streetlamps cast jaundiced lights that illuminated the cobblestoned path he had to take. They glistened under the lights like polished emeralds and diamonds on a white velvet rug.

Each step Volodiya took was like the sound of a heartbeat. He thrust his gloved hands deep into his pockets, pulling his puffy beige coat snug against his body as if being held in a close, secure hug. The type a mother would give their son when he tells her he's been conscripted to fight in a war—Volodiya knew that from experience.

The snow continued its descent as the city was coated in it, creating a sense of deceptive stillness. In the white expanse, there lay secrets waiting to be revealed when the snow either melted in the spring or was swept away by the many street sweepers who tried their best to clear the pathways.

It was the very essence of Moscow. A snow-covered city in which millions of souls reside, each with their own stories of love and loss, happiness and despair. The private detective had only the most barebone facts of one of those millions of stories that unfolded in a city in which danger could be lurking around the corner.

Volodiya slipped a few bits of loose change into the weathered hands of an old, plump woman selling flowers at the side of the street. He declined the rose she held up for him to take. Instead, he received a blessing from her before moving forward on his journey.

The bitter cold wind against his face was like a pair of sharp blades cutting away at his cheeks. The chilly air that he breathed in was a reminder that winter had reclaimed the city and transformed it into a vast monochrome landscape that resembled a Christmas card, as the bright white snow clashed with the pitch-black skies.

He strode down the street as old gray Stalinist blocks towered over him, like giant sized guards keeping an eye on their prisoner. He was getting closer to his destination, and as he moved, he pondered the case.

He knew at least one person who kept his ear to the ground. A former comrade-in-arms who worked within the police force, and even better enjoyed a good drink—even more so if someone else was footing the bill. If he plied him with enough free booze, his mouth would flap like a broken shoe.

Volodiya had arrived at his destination, a bar known as *The Hermitage*. The exterior was lit with decadent red neon lighting that acted as a siren call for anyone chasing a cheap drink and an even cheaper thrill.

As he stepped inside, the air was thick with spilled vodka, cigarette smoke, and cheap perfume. All three mingled in a misty haze that enshrouded the bar and its patrons. The once regal gold-colored walls had given way to decay, as it was now tarnished by time and neglect. The cracked leather of the booths sagged under years of tears and regrets, and there was a scarred wooden bar where a surly bartender took cash and served drinks.

The room was inhabited by a motley crew of dreamers and drifters, the criminal and the innocent, the high and mighty rubbing shoulders with the weak and powerless, those who do what they want and those who do what they can, the puppets and the puppeteers yanking them along by their strings. It was easy to tell who was who judging by their extravagant clothes; those who had made their money through dubious means wore ill-fitting, brightly colored suits that were jarring to the eyes and an affront to good taste. Others wore gray or black suits, typical of the standard office drone.

The man he was looking for sat at the bar, wearing a black leather jacket and black trousers that matched the thick, long black hair that went down to the back of his neck. He had a darker complexion that marked him out as being from one of the mountainous regions in the Caucasus.

He had dark brown eyes and a short, clean-cut beard on an angular chin that made him resemble a warrior extra from a film set in Ancient Greece. He was only missing a spear and a shield.

"I take it you'll be having a cognac as always, Sergei."

"If you really want me to talk, it'll be two cognacs."

"Are you going to try to avoid being caught drinking and driving this time?"

Sergei rolled his eyes like a teenager who was annoyed at being told off by their teacher. He hated being reminded of his many discrepancies; his most recent was being caught drunk driving on duty behind the wheel of his police car.

"I wasn't drinking and driving. I got drunk and then I went driving," he protested, with conviction behind his words, like an innocent man in a courtroom pleading his case to a sceptical jury.

Volodiya ordered two cognacs. The surly bartender grabbed two glasses and filled them before sliding the glasses towards both men.

"I saw you couldn't have picked a more discreet place for discussing a case," Volodiya said.

"It's a dirty, cheap old bar inhabited by shifty characters and loose women. It's why I love it," Sergei said with a smile.

"It has a quaint charm to it," said Volodiya before he added: "And a certain scent."

"I take it you're not here to talk about the finer drinking venues in Moscow."

Volodiya removed the envelope Valeriya had given him and emptied out the picture inside. Sergei picked up the picture and studied it for a second before he let it drop out of his hands onto the bar table.

"That charming gentleman. The last I saw of him, they were loading him into a body bag in his own apartment. Someone didn't like him, or his taste in tattoos."

"Anything interesting about him?"

"As opposed to the other thousands of tattooed *vory* living in Moscow? As you know, the devil lives in still waters. He's just one of many, another shark among the fish."

"Someone hooked this shark."

"A few other sharks have been hooked."

"What do you mean?"

Sergei dug deeply into the pocket of his black leather jacket and pulled out an envelope of his own.

"You probably owe me another drink for this," Sergei said.

"Whatever you're giving me *has* to be worth another drink."

Sergei smiled. He reached into his pocket and placed an envelope full of photographs on the table.

"Have fun," he said.

Volodiya withdrew the photographs inside the envelope. Each one had a recurring theme: a heavily tattooed man lying in a pool of his own blood. The only exception being one sat slumped behind the wheel of a car.

"It's an epidemic," Sergei said. "Someone seems to have made a habit of doing the police's job, only this guy is going one better and wiping them out. Maybe I should buy him a drink."

"Okay, but aside from a questionable taste in tattoos, what do these dead guys have in common with my dead guy?"

"Look closer at the tattoos. Find the one they all have in common, and you'll find your answer."

Volodiya studied the tattoos on the dead bodies and was met with a variety that ranged from the clichéd, the esoteric, and the blasphemous. Tattoos of barbed wire fences, stars, and even army tattoos were to be expected, but some that were not expected included an image of an eroticised Virgin Mary with her breasts exposed, a tattoo of Lenin with a saint's halo around his head, and then Volodiya found the recurring theme in every picture. Each one had a tattoo of a torpedo.

This meant one thing. Nikolai Volkov was a contract killer whom Moscow's criminal underground hired for what they referred to as wet work.

“Am I worth an extra drink or not?” Sergei asked while ogling one woman in the bar. He then slipped his wedding ring off his finger and put it in his pocket.

Volodiya reached into his pocket and slammed a few rubles down on the bar table in response.

“Why don't you drink with me?” Sergei asked. “See who's the last man standing?”

“The same reason I never get into a pissing contest with a skunk. It has a natural advantage.”

Chapter 6: The Deadman's Apartment

The dowdy, old landlord opened the apartment door with a single turn of a rusty key. He gave Volodiya the go ahead to walk inside the room where Nikolai Volkov had seen his killer standing in the doorway before being gunned down.

“Enjoy,” growled the landlord, not too happy with being called in to open the apartment on “police business.” Volodiya wasn't a cop, but he knew how to sound and act like one. Therefore, the landlord gave him access to the dead man's apartment.

Before the landlord left, Volodiya hit him with a quick question.

“Has anyone come to claim any of his personal artefacts?”

“Nobody, the only other people who had a look around were other cops.”

Right. Other cops, Volodiya thought.

“Not even his daughter?”

“Nikolai had a daughter?”

“Never mind.”

The landlord left with a scowl and a word that would be offensive to the ears of a nun.

Volodiya entered the apartment, and the room's darkness swallowed him whole, as if he had dived headfirst into the open mouth of a great white shark. He tapped away at the wall until he reached a light switch, which he flicked on. The light hanging from the ceiling illuminated the room, giving him a clearer look at his surroundings. The lightbulb above buzzed in a dull droning tone, like an annoying fly around a room, when it realises it can't get back out. With every step he took on the wooden floorboard, there was a high-pitched squeal.

The light cast Volodiya's stretched-out shadow, which seemed to glide across the faded, peeling wallpaper.

The apartment was thick with the musty smell of old cigarettes and stale vodka. The scent came from an empty bottle which lay on its side on a bedside table, like a fallen soldier. A half full packet of cigarettes lay next to the bottle, the perfect bedfellow of bad habits. It lay there, backing anyone to help themselves to a smoke.

He worked under the watchful eyes of photographs that hung on the wall, watching him every move the way a wolf would watch a sheep in the distance. The chill of the past made itself known on the back of his neck as he moved in their presence.

Volodiya scanned the place for anything that could give him some more clues as to what he was chasing. He was like a mouse stuck in a maze that didn't have an exit. He opened the wardrobe in the room. The hinges squealed as he opened it. There was a messy pile of old clothes, but beneath them he could see what looked like a stack of photographs. He reached into the wardrobe and took it.

The private investigator now held a treasure trove of memories of a life frozen in time and preserved on glossy paper. Each one bore the weight of moments of happiness, jubilation, and even sadness.

The first picture depicted a group of men in the old Red Army uniform. Volodiya remembered the uniform as the final clothes that some of his closest comrades wore in death, with the green color of the uniform caked in blood. The group of men smiled whilst pointing their rifles at the camera. He turned the photograph over, and there was a date scribbled in the lower right-hand corner: 03/07/1985.

Volodiya flicked through more pictures of a young Nikolai, yet to put on the barrel of fat around his stomach that comes with years of life experience. There were pictures of him holding a Dragunov rifle in multiple poses that looked like they were stills from an old war movie. In one image, he was

sitting in front of a T-64 tank which loomed large behind him, like a huge green dragon. The date: 07/08/1987.

The man looked more aged and withered in the pictures from the early 90s. With every picture of him there was a transformation as his belly got larger; it was like watching a balloon inflate. Even in pictures that depicted him smiling, there seemed to be a look of sadness, a tragic encrypted in the veneer of a triumphant smile, as shown by an image of the man holding a giant fish in his hands whilst in a small wooden boat. Someone dated the picture 07/21/1991.

One picture was of Valeriya. She looked just as she had when she turned up at his office. But in this picture, she looked so carefree, not the woman made of ice who gave him this case. Even in the grainy image that he was holding in his hand, she still exuded a radiant beauty, as her bright blue eyes shone through even with the inferior quality of the old photograph. He flipped the photograph over. The date, 10/04/1992, was scribbled on the back. A more recent one, as most of the other photos ranged from the mid-80s to the early 90s.

He flipped over to the next picture, and one thing that was hard to miss struck him, like a brutal left hook to the jaw. The photograph depicted a serene landscape in the background. A sunset over a huge, clear blue lake. The vibrant hues of orange and red were reflecting on the surface of the lake. From the picture, it looked like a beautiful day for Nikolai and his daughter to stand in front of the lake, posing for a picture with another man. Valeriya stood between the two men. Nikolai Volkov's face was visible, but someone had sabotaged the picture, removing the other man's face. A lit cigarette had been driven through the face of the person who was once in the picture. Somebody didn't want to see this person's face anymore and removed them from this memory like a cancerous tumour.

He held the picture in his hand; he turned it over to look at the back. The picture was dated 08/08/1993.

He placed the photograph into his pocket; he now had something to work with.

His mobile phone rang with a shrill shriek. He picked it up, and there was a familiar voice on the line.

“Volodiya,” said Valeriya between deep, loud breaths.

“You’ve either just finished running a marathon, or you’re in big trouble.”

“I don’t need sarcasm. I need you here. Now.”

Volodiya hurried out of the block and made a dash for the nearest metro. He kept the phone to his ear as Valeriya screeched out the address.

He kept the address in mind.

He paced through the snow-covered pavement like a shadow slipping through the cracks of an alley at midnight. Volodiya moved at lightning pace, taking no notice of the many others who trudged their way through the blanketed streets of Moscow.

Chapter 7: Bullets in Broad Daylight

Volodiya arrived at the address. He was late. Too late. Shots were fired. Shell cases littered the floor. Bullet holes had punctured a car door. Five black holes. Police officers kept the crowd at bay. Red and white tape cordoned off the tragic scene. Red drops were splattered against the purity of the snow. Someone lost their life.

Volodiya surveyed the scene. The large tower blocks surrounding the scene stood defiant against the backdrop of bright blue skies. Everyone below received a reprieve from the snow's burial as it stopped falling.

The apartment blocks that surrounded Volodiya were an immense structure of dark granite and polished marble. Their windows were eyewitnesses to a shootout and a murder. Ornate granite balconies jutted out from the buildings like the fangs of a ferocious beast. Residents watched the events unfolding beneath them from each adorned balcony.

This street would be an idyllic place to live if it wasn't for the body that lay sprawled out on its back. Vacant eyes looking up at one of the few rarities of a winter's day in Moscow, a bright blue sky. Those eyes could look, but they couldn't see. All the life in that body had gone, like the juice in an orange that had been squeezed dry.

It was the body of a man dressed in a black suit with a blood-soaked shirt that had once been white. The body lay in front of a car in the middle of the road. Dead as a plant left to wither in the alleyways of Moscow.

Police officers surrounded the scene.

Someone had peppered the driver's door with shots. The passenger door at the back was wide open. Whoever was there had bailed.

Volodiya made a note of the car. A grey Mercedes. Expensive. As rare in Moscow as a warm winter.

Valeriya stood behind the car, talking to a police officer and a detective who scribbled into a tiny notepad. Despite the circumstances and distance, Volodiya couldn't help but admire her composure. Her hair looked dishevelled, yet her face still maintained its natural beauty. She looked elegant, draped in a fur coat that cloaked her body, shielding it from the icy temperatures. Even through the thick layer of fur, he could imagine her slim and slender figure.

The police officer was a giant of a man, barrel chested and tall. Decked out in the navy-blue police uniform, complete with the shapka hat. Ear flaps down. The detective scribbling down notes was much shorter; in fact, he only reached the shoulders of the officer towering over him, yet he was a burly man. Middle-aged in appearance and heavy set. A stubbled face and messy, unkept black hair added to his rough appearance and demeanour.

Her eyes turned away from the detective to Volodiya. The detective scribbling notes turned to face Volodiya. Valeriya and the detective exchanged words while Volodiya stood at a distance. It was like he was the subject of gossip, as they talked until the detective turned to the officer next to him. The detective muttered something to the officer, who then turned and paced towards Volodiya.

Here we go, Volodiya thought.

He wondered what would have happened had he left his office earlier on the day Valeriya strutted into his life. He'd have spent that evening curled up with a book and a shot of whiskey. Instead, he was out in the cold, freezing and due for an interrogation.

"You, the detective wants to ask you some questions," the officer said in the most commanding voice he could muster. The way he spoke was like a drill sergeant barking orders at the fresh-faced rookies.

"Any chance he's keen on finding out my star sign?"

“Come with me,” the police officer said as he beckoned him to move past the police cordon.

Volodiya followed the officer and sped towards Valeriya and the detective as snow fell once more. Before she could say anything, the detective cut her off.

“Mr Volodiya Chaika, I’m Detective Ivan Kavinsky,” he said as he balanced a lit cigarette between his lips. “The lady here says she hired you as a private investigator.”

Valeriya averted her gaze. An unspoken apology for roping Volodiya into this affair. The detective stared into his eyes. A deep stare. He wasn’t just looking into his eyes. He was trying to get to the core of Volodiya’s inner being.

“The lady has indeed.”

“Well, Mr Chaika, I’d like you to tell me why your client’s car and driver has been used as target practice.”

Volodiya had a few ideas racing through his mind. He stared at Valeriya’s face. Although it wasn’t obvious to everyone around them, there was something in her eyes. Maybe it is the way they seemed to water. The tears forming in her eyes made them look like the bottom of a well. He expected her to break down and release the full waterworks. The tears were there, but she held them at bay, like a dam holding back a flood.

“No, I cannot,” Volodiya said.

The detective squinted his eyes, looking further into what he could see beyond the surface of Volodiya’s face.

“Curious,” the detective said. “You don’t seem to know much about your client or the case you’re investigating. Very curious, I would say. An unidentified vehicle pulls up next to her car and lets rip with a Kalashnikov. Rat-tat-tat. Very curious.”

The detective mimed the firing of a gun with his fingers, just in case Volodiya didn’t get the message. He then turned to the officer.

“How many shots were fired?”

“Thirteen shots, sir.”

“Thirteen shots!” the detective repeated. “Women scream. People duck for cover wherever they can find it. Then a body hits the ground and paints the snow red. The lady who hired you is riding around in the back of that car, and lucky for her, the reaper isn’t here to collect her soul. But her poor driver...”

The detective removed the cigarette from between his lips and pointed at the body parked on the ground. Spread eagle on its back. Eyes forever open and staring up at the sky. Snowflakes landed on the body and created the impression of polka dots on the body.

“He gets hit about...how many times did the driver get hit?”

“Six times, sir,” the officer said.

“Six times! The bullets damn near cut him in two. So, what we have is an unknown gunman firing at a car, killing the driver, and your client is sitting in the back seat of said car. What does that sound like to you?”

“Sounds like another day in Moscow.”

The detective took a drag on his cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke towards Volodiya’s face. A direct hit.

“You’re funny, Chaika, real funny. You should be working the bars with that routine, you know that? Something about this doesn’t add up,” the detective announced. “I’ll be keeping an eye on you. Both of you.” The detective walked away for a few steps before he turned around to deliver a parting shot. “Oh, and Chaika. If you obstruct this investigation, or any investigation into your pretty client over there...well, you’ll find out. I’ll be seeing you around.”

Volodiya turned to face Valeriya. She stood there in the cold. The fur coat wrapped around her body. Her brown and dishevelled hair fluttered as the wind blew. Despite the frigid cold, she didn’t shiver. Despite what had just happened, she showed little fear. There was something about her that

set her apart from most women he had met. To him, she was a sparkling diamond in a city full of shadows that were mundane and ordinary.

“Thank you,” she said. Valeriya's lips parted to say something else, but Volodiya cut her off.

“Don't thank me, talk. Tell me everything that happened from start to end,” he ordered in a harsher tone of voice. “When did you call me?”

“Straight after it happened.”

“You didn't think to call the police?”

“In this city, there are about as useful as flies without wings. I thought you would be better.”

“Oh, yeah?” Volodiya asked as he put a cigarette between his lips. “How could you tell?”

“From the moment I saw you. There's something about you. There's something inside you. There's something in your eyes that tells me there's more to you. Something beyond your sarcasm and wisecracks.”

“I'm flattered you think highly of me. I don't think any woman has since my mother. Tell me what you saw,” Volodiya said before he took a long drag on his cigarette. He blew out smoke that resembled a miniature cloud, which floated into the dark sky like a spirit leaving the world of the living. “Tell me everything.”

“I was sitting in the back of the car. Everything seemed so normal until...until...”

“Until it wasn't,” Volodiya said, finishing the sentence for her.

She nodded her head.

“Nothing stood out to me. It was just another day in Moscow. The snow was falling thick and fast. Kids were playing in the snow. One old lady whom I often see on the street, trying to sell whatever she could, was out holding flowers and onions. Just another day. Then, from nowhere, I heard an engine revving. Then I heard the shots. The glass of the car window shattered and cracked into pieces. The shooting continued. My driver jumped out of his seat. That's when whoever was shooting cut him down.”

Volodiya snuck another glance at the body. Two paramedics stooped over it. They carried a large plastic bag to send the body to the mortuary, express delivery. Valeriya also stared at the dead man. She didn't blink. Eyes transfixed on the lifeless husk. She wanted to look away, but she couldn't.

“Those bullets were meant for me,” she said. She was now shaking like the last gold coloured leaf hanging on a naked branch in autumn. Her resolve had melted as she mentioned the life that was now lost. A body was being hoisted off the street in front of them. She spoke once more. Her voice had lost its husky tone. “I know it.”

The paramedics were heaving the body into the large, oversized zip up bag. He turned his attention back to Valeriya.

“Better him than you.”

A tear rolled down Valeriya's cheek. She put her arms around Volodiya and held him tight and close.

“Don't squeeze too tightly; the coat has just been washed,” Volodiya said.

She said nothing.

“Is this the area where you live?”

“Yes.”

“You should lie low somewhere. Maybe like in a hotel or motel.”

“A hotel? Where?”

“I know a few spots under the radar; they might not be to your liking, but if it keeps you hidden from the sight of a loaded gun, then I wouldn't complain.”

The snow fell out of the sky like thick wisps of cotton dropping from the sky above them. The two figures stood in a tight embrace. Not noticing or caring about it.

Chapter 8: A Resume Written in Flesh

Volodiya sat behind his desk, ruffling through the next day's newspapers. He puffed away on a cigarette. The office was thick with the aroma of tobacco and carcinogenic tar. Light was creeping in through gaps in the venetian blinds. They cast dark parallel lines across the office space that made it look like a prison.

He scanned the newspapers for any mention of the case he had taken. A spate of shootings should make the news. The editors seemed to disagree. The economy took precedence. More stories of hyperinflation, Chechnya, and the super wealthy businessmen throwing their money and weight around as they pledged to back the President against the Communists.

Nothing of interest to Volodiya.

He slammed the paper he was reading to the side and started scanning the pages of Izvestia. Again, the stories repeated themselves. An inescapable loop of economic woe and conflict. He skimmed through the pages and articles and was met with adverts for McDonald's Big Macs, BMWs, Coca-Cola and Sony electrical goods.

I could use a new television, Volodiya thought.

He allowed himself that moment of distraction before he continued skimming through the newspaper at breakneck speed. The rustling of papers echoed throughout the office as he flicked through the pages. Volodiya was about to turn the page again until he noticed something that leapt out at him, like a flame dancing in the wind.

MAN GUNNED DOWN IN LATEST MOB SLAYING

The headline caught his attention. Now he read every word of the article. A shooting. No witnesses. Authorities suspected the victim of having mob ties. The assassin didn't go for a quick kill. He took his time and unloaded multiple rounds into the victim, Andrei Rezhnikov. If he was anybody in the streets like Nikolai was, he'd have a record just like Nikolai did. Volodiya knew who to call. He also knew to keep some money apart for the man he was calling. Information didn't come cheap, especially when it came from Sergei.

Volodiya picked up his office phone. He punched Sergei's number into the keypad. He snuffed out his cigarette on the overflowing ashtray.

"Hello," Sergei answered the phone. He sounded bored.

"A bad time to call?" Volodiya asked.

"Depends," Sergei said, now sounding a bit more enthusiastic. "I never miss a good business opportunity. What can I do for you, Volodiya?"

"I have a man who might be of interest to me. A dead man, to be more precise. One Andrei Rezhnikov."

There was silence on the phone. He could hear Sergei ruffling around on the line through papers.

"That body is still fresh. It's in the morgue. Nobody has stepped forward to claim it."

"Do you reckon you can set up a meeting between me and Mr Rezhnikov?"

Sergei hummed and hawed. He was pantomime acting a non-existing hesitation. Volodiya spoke his language and knew what the humming and hawing was code for.

"I take it you don't provide this service for free," Volodiya said. He knew full well who he was dealing with. "I take it you need a gift to set up the meeting."

"It's more of a donation. One that will make someone very happy. You see, my kid wants a Sega Genesis. I've got to put money away for that. A donation would help."

"You don't even have a kid."

"Yeah, that's true," he said, struggling to contain his laughter. "But a donation would still be appreciated."

“For a Sega?”

“For my pension. If things keep going the way they have the past few years, it will be worth a grand total of twenty dollars. With your donation, I can hit the giddy heights of one hundred dollars.”

“How quickly can you organise the meeting?”

“Can you be at the morgue in about an hour’s time?”

Volodiya agreed to the conditions and timing of the meeting. He rose from his chair and threw on his coat. He gazed out of the window and down at Arbat Street. On seeing the constant snowfall on the busy street, he zipped his coat up tight.

The snow had gone from a beautiful white colour to being a mixture of grey and black sludge. A dirty mess that only got dirtier with every trudge of the foot from the many denizens of the city. Their faces had turned pink and red from the extreme cold. Volodiya rushed towards the metro station. The stiff wind slashed at his face like sharp razors slicing through flesh. His boots crunched the mixture of grit, dirt, and snow under his feet.

As he moved, he thought about the journey he was on. Volodiya pondered where all this would lead. Shootings. Murders. The further he went into the case, the more he was wading through mud mixed with blood. Everywhere he went, death was lurking around the corner, hiding among the shadows. Volodiya could only hope that death wasn’t coming for him. He had a case to crack and a lot of money to make from it. It wouldn’t be fun to die before he could cash that cheque.

*

The fluorescent light cast flickering shadows across the walls and the floor of the morgue. Trembling silhouettes that shook across the sterile grey walls. The morgue chilled Volodiya to the bone even more than the wintry weather he had ambled through. It was something about so many dead bodies being stored there that created a frigid atmosphere.

Metal drawers lined the room, guarding the terrible secrets they kept inside. Rows and rows of tiny, square shaped doors. The metallic handles gleamed in the gloom of the space they occupied. Each one concealing a body within it. Someone’s mother, father, son, daughter, brother or sister.

The air was thick with disinfectant and formaldehyde. The aroma revealed everything about what lay inside those small, square doors. Darkness, decay, and death. A hint of lives that once were. Those lives were no more. Extinguished like the flame of a candle that the wind had snuffed out.

The dead body of Andrei Rezhnikov lay prostate on the steel table. A dirty white cloth covered the body.

“Ready?” Sergei asked as he smiled.

Volodiya nodded. Sergei pulled down the dirty white cloth to reveal what lay beneath.

“TA-DA! Here’s the prize,” Sergei said in the voice of a game-show host.

The dead man resembled a sleeping giant from a fairy tale. He had a large slab of a head. His eyes were closed. He looked at peace despite the bullet holes around his chest and gut. The man was broad shouldered with an even broader belly.

“Volodiya, meet Andrei. Andrei, meet Volodiya,” Sergei said. He even held up the dead man’s hand. “What? No handshake?” He cackled, and it sounded like a sharp pick chipping away at ice cubes.

“What do you know about him?” Volodiya asked.

“His name was Andrei Rezhnikov, forty-eight years old. He had a criminal record. Armed robbery in the eighties. He got four years for it.”

Volodiya studied the bullet wounds that had punctured the flesh. They were now black holes that decorated his chest and stomach area. The shooter wasn’t just content with shooting the man once or twice.

“Whoever did it wanted to make sure he was dead. The shooter killed him at least three times,” Volodiya said. “Just like Nikolai.”

“He was shot down in an alleyway,” said Sergey, as he surveyed the written report. “Broad daylight. No witnesses.”

Tattoos covered the flesh on the dead man’s body. He had seen these tattoos before in pictures of the other murdered men. He had also seen it on Nikolai’s body. These men didn’t get inked up for aesthetic reasons. They were resumes carved into their flesh.

Volodiya traipsed around the table. He wanted to scan and note every tattoo inked onto Andrei’s skin. A red star on both his knees. He had inked the onion domes of a cathedral on his wide and bloated belly. A tattoo of a spider and its web was on the left side of his chest. On the right side was a large tattoo of a torpedo.

“There we go,” Volodiya said.

“The torpedo tattoo.”

“This man was a contract killer. Nikolai also had it, and he suffered the same fate. Although Nikolai’s killers at least allowed him the dignity of being gunned down in the comfort of his own home, not in some random alleyway.”

“What’s that the English like to say, about every cloud having a silver lining?” Sergei asked. He had a smile that was like that of a young kid who had discovered swearing for the first time.

“You know what this means?” Volodiya asked.

“You tell me.”

“Someone is killing off hitmen in Moscow. Nikolai. This gentleman. Not to mention all the others. What might be happening is that someone high in the underworld is ordering these deaths. He’s using the same killer. He uses two guns and fires multiple shots. Then he disappears into the shadows.”

“But why would someone want to have all these hitmen killed? Revenge?”

“Revenge? No, this is something different.”

“Well, what is it?” Sergei asked, eager to hear something that would open his eyes to what was happening.

Volodiya folded his arms and then scratched his chin.

“I’m not sure.”

He would call Valeriya and talk her through what he found out as he put his hypothesis together.

Volodiya thanked Sergei and then left the morgue. He was relieved to leave the room full of refrigerated bodies. It was less cold in the streets of Moscow, and upon leaving, Volodiya didn’t even put on his gloves. As he paced through snow-filled roads, he had his thoughts to chew on.

In Moscow, clarity was a rare coin. It had to be pursued through the thick haze of mystery, one bleak thought at a time.

Nikolai’s body was just one of many that had fallen in the streets of Moscow. The same went for Andrei. Someone wanted these men dead. Not to mention all the others. Someone in a position of power, where past affiliations could be a threat to their life.

Chapter 9: Sins of the Father

The café was dimly lit; shadows pooled in every corner, like secrets waiting to be revealed. Dust motes floated in the weak sunlight filtering through the grimy windows, casting flickering patterns on battered wooden tables. The aromatic haze of spilled whiskey lingered and mixed with roasted beans, a reminder of late nights and broken promises.

Near the door, a middle-aged man loomed like a monument carved from granite. Broad shoulders filled out a dark suit that seemed to swallow him whole. He clenched his jaw tight, and cold, watchful eyes hinted at lurking menace. Every movement he made was deliberate, alert for any sign of trouble. His eyes would dart from Volodiya and Valeriya sat at their table to the windows and door of the café.

“He’s a big man,” Volodiya said.

She chuckled. A sweet chuckle.

“I’m not keeping him around to discuss the finer points of classic Russian literature, Mr Chaika.”

“If you must know, he knew my father.”

“Do you stay in contact with men who knew your father?”

“Some. They got in contact with me after he...got killed. After my car got hit, a few more got in contact in case I needed help. Now, you’ve invited me here, so please, tell me, what have you found out.”

The bodyguard looked out of place there. He looked more like the type of man that would be an enforcer of the local racquets. A man more at home punching someone in the face rather than hanging around a café waiting on hand to drive someone around.

Volodiya turned his attention towards Valeriya. She sat back in the chair opposite him. Her long legs were crossed. Shadows clung to the inside of her thighs. He focused his attention on her face. His eyes glanced at her lips; they were plush and crimson and beckoned with a sultry promise that lingered, like a forbidden secret that Volodiya wanted to know.

“I’m going to tell you things that will change the way you think of your father,” he said.

She shifted in her seat. He caught her attention, but he deliberated about what to say. It was his job as a private investigator to tell the client everything they wanted to know. But not everyone liked what he had to say.

“You have my attention, Mr Chaika. The question is...what will you do with it?”

She smiled as she spoke. Her luminous lips looked like the last ember of a dying fire.

Volodiya had no way to polish what he was about to say. There was no way to sand off the edges and present the news he was about to break in a softer way. He had to give her the truth.

It’s what she’s paying for, he thought.

“Do you remember when you first came to my office, you told me you knew your father was mixed up in something?”

“That’s right,” she said. She popped open the top of her tiny bag and pulled out a slim silver case of cigarettes. “I knew he wasn’t a saint.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” he said, as she was about to place a cigarette between her lips. She froze with it dangling from her fingers.

“Say it, Mr Chaika. Whatever you have to say, say it. I’m not paying you to be silent.”

The words he was about to say weighed a ton. In the shadowy light of the café, he looked every bit like a man who was about to break some bad news, as his lip quivered before he got the words out.

“Your father was a torpedo,” he said. Blunt and to the point, like a hammer smashing against a nail.

“This means...” she started the sentence but couldn’t bring herself to end it.

“People paid him money; people got killed.”

Valeriya put her hand over her mouth. Her eyes watered. He had seen many people cry, sometimes in his office, particularly when he was hired to expose affairs. Hell, Ivan had almost flooded his office with tears when Volodiya exposed his wife’s secret romance. But she held herself together. He admired that about her. Despite the news, she didn’t break down into a wreck. There were tears in her eyes, but she held them back like a dam.

Volodiya found himself captivated not only by her radiant beauty but also by the strength in her resolve and the delicate vulnerability that lay beneath.

“I always knew he was mixed in with something. But I never imagined my father could be a killer. I mean, he was in Afghanistan, but he wasn’t...you know, right?”

“I know,” Volodiya said, nodding his head. “I was there too.” His fists tightened as he said those words.

Years after, the shadow of the Soviet Afghan War continued to enshroud life in this country. There were always new ways it came home. The men who never returned left behind widows and grieving mothers. The men who came back were broken and resorted to begging on the streets in winter. Or like Volodiya, there were the men who had nightmares, visions of sand covered roads strewn with blood, bodies and blown off limbs. Then there were the many drawn to crime and easy money, like gamblers to a casino. The real winners in that war were the undertakers and the gangsters of Russia.

Volodiya reached into his pocket for a handkerchief. He held it out to her. She turned it down as she raised her hand. A flat palm. He nodded and put it away. She lit her cigarette.

“Shocked?” Volodiya asked.

“Yes and no,” she said. Her answer said so much, yet also said very little. It was hard to decipher what she was telling him and what she was hiding. Volodiya kept his eye out for any action that revealed more than any words could. “You see; we had money at a time when for the average person it was scarce. My dad wasn’t a businessman. You’d have to be blind or stupid not to know that the money wasn’t coming from somewhere nice.”

“And to know that he killed people?” Volodiya asked. His eyes were fixed on her.

“For money. For his family,” she said as she took a short drag on her cigarette. “He was the roof we lived under. He was the man who kept us safe at a time when many others felt unsafe.”

“Did you ever receive money from your father?”

“Not for quite a while.”

“Define not for quite a while.”

“Not for half a year. From what I heard, he had been blowing whatever he had earned at his local drinking spot, Nikitskaya.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «Литрес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на Литрес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.