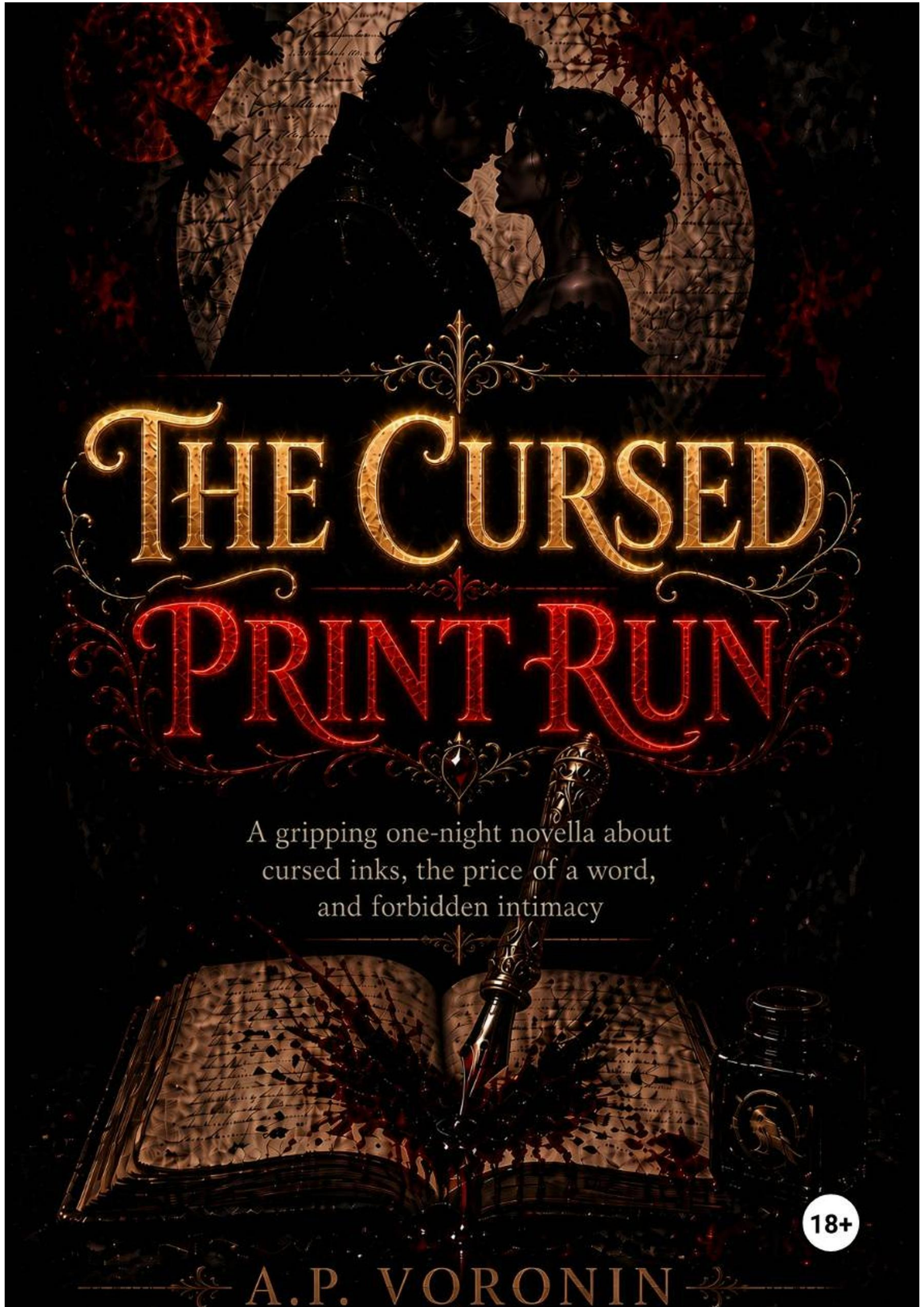




THE CURSED PRINT RUN

A gripping one-night novella about
cursed inks, the price of a word,
and forbidden intimacy

18+

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CURSED PRINT RUN

«Автор»

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Seven days until release. The ink is still wet. Junior editor Vera Korsakova finds a handwritten note in violet ink on page 300 of the advance copy. It predicts her death that same night — at 00:15 in the Fontanka. The brakes of her car fail exactly as written. The man who saves her is the author himself: Christian. His ink doesn't just describe reality — it rewrites it. Every line demands a price: memory, blood, a life. The publishing house has been using this curse for years as the perfect printing press. To survive and protect those she loves, Vera must take the pen and rewrite the ending herself. Even if it costs her own memory. A dark Petersburg thriller about the price of words, forbidden closeness, and magic that always collects its due.

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Андрей Воронин

CURSED PRINT RUN

THE CURSED PRINT RUN
A GRIPPING NOVELLA ABOUT THE PRICE OF WORDS AND FORBIDDEN CLOSENES

Seven days left till the official release of the novel “Ink of Dead Words”. The advance copy is still warm. The ink is still wet.

Junior editor Vera Korsakova comes to the night print shop on the Fontanka to sign the acceptance papers. On page three hundred she finds a handwritten insert in violet ink. It describes her own death with frightening accuracy — today at 00:15 in the cold water of the Fontanka.

The brakes of her old Toyota really do fail. The man she has hated all these months saves her — the author himself, writing under the name Christian.

His ink is not just words. It changes reality. Every line demands payment: a memory, blood, someone else’s life. The publishing house “Slovo” knows about this and uses the magic as a perfect printing press — on blood, on deaths, on million-copy runs.

Vera can no longer stay just an editor. To survive and save those she loves she will have to take the pen herself and rewrite the ending. Even if she has to pay for it with her own memory.

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INTRODUCTION

This book was born from a simple and scary question: what happens if words start coming true for real?

Not in a figurative sense. Not as a pretty metaphor. But physically — when a line written with special ink reshapes the asphalt, breaks the brakes, erases a person from the lists of the living and leaves someone else's name on the skin.

I worked a long time in the publishing world and know too well how easily a text becomes a product and a person turns into expendable material for a nice binding. “Cursed Print Run” is the story of what happens when the magic of the word falls into the hands of those who can count only print runs and profit.

At the center is Vera, a junior editor who is used to fixing other people's manuscripts and believing only in facts. And Christian — the author whose ink stopped being paint a long time ago. Between them is a forbidden closeness that kills faster than any hitman, and a countdown to publication that cannot be stopped by ordinary means.

This novella is not about saving the world. It is about how one person decides to rewrite their own ending, even if it means giving up memory, reason, and the right to a safe, predictable life.

If you love dark Petersburg, the smell of printer's ink, heroes who do not know how to give up, and magic that always has a price — welcome to this print run.

The ink is still wet. The pages are already turning themselves.

CHAPTER 1: ADVANCE COPY

Seven days left until the publication of the novel “Ink of Dead Words”. The ink is still wet.

The smell of fresh printing ink digs under the skin faster than the cheap coffee from the machine, but to Vera it seemed the only honest smell in this city. At midnight, the oldest printing house in Saint Petersburg on the Fontanka embankment looked like the belly of an ancient steel monster. Heavy rotary presses thudded dully, shaking the century-old brickwork, and above her head, book spreads stretched on conveyor belts flew like endless white birds.

Vera pushed up her glasses that had slid down to the tip of her nose from the damp heat and took another sip from the plastic cup. Bitter, cloying, and completely useless. Her eyes stung from dry fatigue. For the last three weeks, she had lived on three hours of sleep a day, reading, cutting, and literally reassembling other people's talentless texts piece by piece. At twenty-five, Vera was a junior editor at the prestigious publishing house “Slovo”, which in practice meant only one thing: all the dirty, thankless work fell to her.

Here, Vera. Straight from under the knife. Still warm, the dull voice of the old printer, Uncle Kolya, made her flinch.

He held out a hefty “brick” in a dense technical cover without a picture. It was the advance copy, the very first test print of the book that tomorrow morning was supposed to go into a hundred-thousand-copy print run. The publishing house's main bet this season. The novel by the mysterious hermit author writing under the pseudonym “Christian”.

Vera took the book. The paper was indeed warm, almost hot, and slightly damp. The title of the manuscript, approved against her opinion, stabbed at the eye: “Ink of Dead Words”.

“Thanks, Uncle Kolya. I'll quickly check the print quality and sign the papers.” Vera smiled tiredly, heading to a free assembly table under the bright fluorescent lamp.

Christian was the embodied nightmare of any editor. He never appeared in the office, gave no interviews, sent no synopses. His manuscripts arrived by the general director's personal courier, always printed on strange, dense paper and, for some reason, written by hand in an incredibly beautiful, calligraphic script with sharp, flying flourishes. Vera typed this text into electronic format by hand, cursing the author every night. His style was brilliant, dark, hypnotic, but Christian himself seemed to her an arrogant psychopath, reveling in his own inaccessibility.

Vera opened the book at random closer to the end to check the density of the ink fill. Page three hundred.

She slid her gaze over the evenly printed lines, and suddenly her heart skipped a beat. The air in her lungs instantly became thick and cold.

The text on the page was not set in the standard Times New Roman typeface. Right in the middle of the printed block sat a paragraph done in violet, slightly glossy ink. And this handwriting Vera would have recognized out of a thousand. These were Christian's handwritten corrections. But that was not what frightened her.

Vera quickly read into the lines, feeling a sticky, primal horror growing inside: "...The icy rain obediently washed the dirt from the asphalt of the parking lot on the Fontanka. It was exactly 00:15. Vera came out of the heavy doors of the printing house, buttoning her coat on the move. She did not know that two minutes earlier a man in a dark coat had cut the brake hoses of her grey Toyota. She will turn the key in the ignition, press the pedal, and the car, picking up speed, will roll toward the embankment. The water in the Fontanka tonight will be dark and hungry..."

Vera recoiled from the table, almost knocking over the coffee cup. The book fell from her hands and hit the concrete floor with a dull thud, opening on that very three-hundredth page.

"What kind of idiotic jokes?" she whispered with dry lips.

The girl looked around. The presses still thundered as before. Uncle Kolya had gone to a far machine and was shouting something to his partner. Everything was the most ordinary, routine, down-to-earth.

Vera frantically pulled her phone from her trouser pocket and unlocked the screen. The clock showed 00:05. Exactly ten minutes left until the time indicated in the text.

Her pragmatic mind, nurtured by years of study at the philology faculty, desperately clung to logic. This is just a mean prank! Christian somehow found out which shift she would go to sign the print run, got into the electronic layout, and inserted this nonsense to mock her for cutting his description of Petersburg roofs by three whole pages last month. Yes, this is just the revenge of a wounded author!

But why was the ink on the page violet and three-dimensional, as if applied with a pen only a minute ago? And why did everything inside scream "Run!" at the sight of it?

Vera grabbed her bag from the chair, without even picking up the fallen book. Enough of this night for her. Tomorrow morning she will come to the office on Vasilyevsky Island, throw this copy on Mark Aristarkhovich's desk and demand to be taken off this project.

She walked quickly toward the exit. The heavy iron door of the printing house opened with a creak, letting her out.

Outside, an icy, piercing October rain was indeed falling—exactly the kind described on the ill-fated three-hundredth page.

Vera ran through the puddles to her old grey Toyota standing alone under a dim streetlamp. Her fingers trembled so hard that she dropped the keys twice before she could open the driver's door. She slid onto the cold seat, breathing heavily. The phone clock showed 00:12.

— Just a stupid joke — she repeated out loud, inserting the key into the ignition.

The engine purred as usual. Vera turned on the wipers, which began smearing water across the windshield with an unpleasant squeak. She shifted the gear lever, took the car off the handbrake and... out of habit, pressed the brake pedal a little harder to hold the car before driving out.

The pedal sank softly to the floor with no resistance.

Vera's breath caught. She pressed again, and again, harder. Nothing. The brake pedal had gone to the floor. The car, pulled by the slope of the old asphalt, slowly rolled forward — straight toward the low granite curb beyond which the icy water of the Fontanka blackened. The flash of the headlights caught the dark, hungry waves of the river.

— No, no, no! — Vera screamed, yanking the handbrake, but the old cable snapped with a metallic crunch somewhere under the bottom.

The car was accelerating. The speed was low, at most twenty kilometers an hour, but the door locked from the inside would not yield, and ahead, only five meters away, waited emptiness and death. The phone clock lit up: 00:15.

Suddenly the side window exploded with a crash, showering the cabin with a thousand small shards. Cold air and the smell of wet wool hit Vera in the face. Someone's strong hand in a black leather glove burst into the cabin, gripped the steering wheel tightly, and twisted it hard to the right.

The Toyota spun. There was a deafening scrape of metal against the granite parapet. The car jumped, hit the curb with a wheel, and with a heavy sigh stalled half a meter from the drop.

Vera sat, clutching the seat tightly, unable to move. Her heart was pounding somewhere in her ears like a crazed printing press.

The car door was yanked open from outside. In the opening stood a tall man in a thoroughly soaked black coat. The hood had fallen back, revealing sharp cheekbones as if carved from marble and tousled dark hair from which water was dripping. His eyes, deprived of any color in this darkness, burned with fury.

Christian. The author of “Ink of Dead Words”. Somehow Vera, who had never met the writer before, recognized him at once. The man was breathing heavily. Vera shifted her gaze to his hand holding the car door. The leather glove was torn, and from under it, right across the back of the hand, thin scars-letters glowing violet snaked.

Christian leaned sharply forward, grabbed Vera by the shoulders, and literally pulled her out of the cabin into the pouring rain. The tension between them was so dense you could touch it.

As if through a thickness of water, Vera heard the phrase: “You must learn about the order and the curse...” Suddenly her right wrist felt as if scorched by heat; it ached with sharp, unbearable pain. Vera lowered her gaze and cried out at the unreality of what she saw: through the layer of skin, violet letters had come through like scars.

CHAPTER 2. BUSINESS ON BLOOD

Six days left until the publication of the novel “Ink of Dead Words”. The ink is starting to thicken.

Morning sun broke through the grey Petersburg haze, but this light seemed unnaturally white, almost hospital-like. Vera sat in the back seat of a taxi, pressing her forehead to the cold side window, and watched the granite embankments floating past. Thoughts appeared and vanished, lazy and sticky; they created a whirlpool in her head, a chaos that caused physical pain. The rain had stopped, leaving behind only dampness, the smell of wet asphalt and a sticky, suffocating feeling of unreality. Christian had left at night as suddenly as he had appeared. He dissolved into the fog by the Fontanka, leaving her alone with the broken window of her old car, the jammed handbrake and the burning wrist. The

letters under the skin no longer glowed with violet neon, but they ached with a dull, exhausting pain, like an old burn scar.

The city around lived its ordinary, noisy, and deeply indifferent life to other people's troubles. People hurried to the metro stations, wrapping themselves in scarves; by the roadside kiosks it smelled of over-fried coffee and fresh pastry, at the crossroads cars lazily argued with their horns. No magic. No curses. An ordinary Petersburg morning. For a few minutes Vera even believed that the night nightmare had appeared to her because of the wild fatigue accumulated over the weeks. But the violet outline of her own name on the right hand, reliably hidden under the wide leather strap of the watch, sobered her better than any ice-cold shower. It was real.

The publishing house "Slovo" was located in the historical center, in a restored three-story mansion on Vasilevskiy Island. Inside, everything breathed that very European polish which their general director valued so much: expensive oak shelves with the company's best releases, muted light, soft carpets that completely muffled footsteps, and the polite, barely audible hum of employees' voices. This empire of success was built on letters.

Vera wasn't walking; she was almost running down the third-floor corridor, ignoring the greeting nods of colleagues and designers. She clenched her handbag so hard that her knuckles turned white. She needed to see Mark Aristarkhovich. Right now, before the fear completely paralyzed her will.

She pushed the heavy door of the general director's office without knocking, breaking all possible rules of corporate etiquette.

Mark Aristarkhovich, as always impeccable, in a grey three-piece suit of individual cut and with perfectly styled grey hair, sat behind a huge table of solid dark walnut. He unhurriedly drank espresso from a tiny porcelain cup and looked through the pre-order graphs on a tablet. The office smelled pleasantly of expensive perfume, with subtle notes of fine tobacco and conditioned air.

— Verochka? — he raised a carefully plucked eyebrow in surprise, assessing her disheveled look, pale face, and bruises under the eyes. — Why aren't you at home? Uncle Kolya already reported last night that you checked the advance copy and signed the papers. Well done, dear; the print run has already gone to the rotary presses. The book is breaking all sales records even before the official release. We will skim the cream of this season.

— Mark Aristarkhovich, stop the presses. — Vera approached the table, leaned on the lacquered surface with trembling hands, and looked the boss straight in the eyes. — This book cannot be released. It cannot be given to people at all. It is dangerous.

The director set the cup down on the saucer slowly, with a light clink. The expensive porcelain rang too warningly in the silence of the huge office. Not a shadow of fright appeared on his face, only a slight, condescending irritation with which adults usually look at capricious or overworked children.

— Dangerous? And how exactly? Has our secretive genius Christian again overdone the anatomical details in the murder scene? Vera, drop this philological snobbery. This is a high-flying thriller. The reader wants blood; he wants to feel fear, and he pays good money for it.

— It is not about the text on paper — Vera exhaled noisily, feeling how her pragmatic mind was finally surrendering under the pressure of facts. — The plot of the book comes true in reality. At night in the printing house I opened the three-hundredth page. Christian had handwritten a correction in violet ink. In it, in every detail, it was written that the brakes of my car would fail at a quarter past midnight on the Fontanka and I would fly into the river. And they really did fail, Mark Aristarkhovich! I was saved by the author himself, who came there because he himself got scared of that line.

Mark Aristarkhovich froze. For a second, his gaze turned cold, calculating, and sharp, but then he leaned back against the high leather chair and laughed quietly. His smile was warm, inviting, but his eyes remained completely dry and motionless.

— Verochka, my dear. You have overworked; you have classic burnout syndrome. Christian has a heavy, sticky style; he professionally presses on a strengthened psyche. I myself sometimes sleep with the floor lamp on after his drafts. But the brakes in an old Japanese car break because of metal wear and bad weather, not because of lines in a novel. Kovrovsky, our main city critic, has been pouring dirt on Christian in the press all week too, shouting on every corner that the author has written himself out and it is time to throw him in the dump of history. And so what? Alive, healthy, probably right now scribbling another nasty thing in his blog.

— Kovrovsky is dead, — Vera interrupted him quietly, almost soundlessly. — Look at the internal crime reports for the morning if you don't believe me. He was found two hours ago in his own bed. He suffocated. And around the body, pages of his own scathing article were carefully scattered. This is page forty-five of Christian's new novel. I proofread that paragraph the day before yesterday afternoon and asked the author to soften the scene. He refused.

The director's laughter cut off instantly, as if the wire through which it came had been severed. Mark Aristarkhovich slowly stood up from the table, walked to the huge panoramic window overlooking a quiet Petersburg side street, and put his hands behind his back. The silence in the office became tangible, heavy. One could hear how, in the corner, the old floor clock with a pendulum ticked measuredly and dully. Each swing brought the deadline closer.

— You are a smart girl, Vera, — the director began, without turning his face to her. His voice had lost its former paternal softness, becoming dry, even, and frighteningly businesslike.

— And your father was a very smart man. Too smart for a simple investigative journalist. That is exactly why I took you on without experience when he disappeared without a trace five years ago.

I thought you had inherited his analytical mind, his ability to see the structure, and not a tendency to cheap mystifications and panic.

Vera flinched at the mention of her father; everything inside clenched from the old pain, but she forced herself to stand straight.

— You knew, — she exhaled, feeling a bitter lump rising to her throat. — You knew from the very beginning that Christian's books possess this terrible power. You are using him.

Mark Aristarkhovich slowly turned. His well-groomed face no longer wore the mask of a caring mentor; before Vera stood a cynical, hard media magnate who was used to breaking other people's lives for profit and print runs.

— I know only one thing: Christian brings this publishing house millions — he stated, taking several steps back to his table. — Forty thousand pure pre-orders have already been placed for this novel across the country. The contract with large retail chains and investors is signed. Missing the publication deadlines will destroy "Slovo" in one day. We will go under the hammer. I don't give a damn about coincidences and your fears, Vera. The presses are working and will keep working. The book will come out exactly in a week, as planned.

— But on the three-hundredth page it is written that I will be killed at the official presentation of the novel! — Vera finally broke into a shout, frantically tearing the watch from her hand and thrusting the wrist forward. — Look at this! This is his handwriting! The ink is coming through right under my skin; it burns!

Mark indifferently slid his gaze over her hand. His pupils widened for a fraction of a second, but he immediately took hold of himself. He didn't even try to touch her wrist, as if he were panicking about getting dirty or catching an unknown disease.

— Listen to me carefully, — the director leaned over the table, resting his palms on the wood, his voice dropped to a sinister, piercing whisper. — Your father, five years ago, also tried to dig under the Order, tried to find out where Christian gets this ink and paper from. And where is he now? Shall I remind you? Do you want to repeat his fate and disappear forever from the lists of the living? You will stay on this project. You will be Christian's personal lead editor right up to the day of the release. Your task is to control every step of his, every line this psychopath puts on paper. If you go to the police, to journalists, or try to run from the city, I will destroy your reputation and your life so that they will not even take you as a waste paper sorter at the dump. Do you understand me, Vera?

Vera looked at him and, with horror, understood: this man really would not stop. Christian's magic for him was not a curse or a tragedy, but an ideal fail-safe printing press generating unlimited power and colossal money. On blood, on deaths — he did not care.

— You are free, — Mark Aristarkhovich demonstratively sat back in the chair and took the tablet in his hands, showing that the audience was over. — Tomorrow by two o'clock in the afternoon I expect from you a full report on the intermediate proofreading of the advertising materials for the press. And finally, tidy yourself up. You are the face of our company, not a station beggar.

Vera slowly, almost blindly, put the watch back on her hand, carefully hiding the violet brand, and, with effort, moving her disobedient legs, left the office. In the corridor, she was almost knocked down by the modest, always-stooping chief editor, dragging a huge stack of old archive documents. He slowed down, adjusted the glasses in a cheap frame that had slipped to the side, and looked at Vera with a strange, too-long and attentive gaze.

— Vera, are you all right? — he asked quietly, with some insinuating concern, glancing at her right hand. — You are unusually pale today. You know, the violet shade does not suit you at all. Right now, warmer, living colors are in fashion. Take care of yourself.

Vera was hit by an icy heat from the tips of her fingers to the crown of her head. She stepped back, frantically pressing her right hand to her chest. How does this quiet little man know about the violet color?

— Everything is fine, just a bit dizzy — she threw and almost ran toward the stairs, feeling how the luxurious walls of the old mansion were slowly beginning to squeeze around her, turning into a stone trap.

She no longer had a choice. The world around was collapsing, and the only person who knew the rules of this mad game was the gloomy hermit author. She needed to go to Christian urgently.

CHAPTER 3. HOUSE BY THE BAY

Five days left until the publication of the novel “Ink of Dead Words”. The paper is becoming heavier.

The old suburban bus breathed heavily over the bumps, taking Vera farther and farther from the familiar, understandable Petersburg. Outside the window, grey trunks of coastal pines flashed by, half hidden by the dense milky fog brought from the Baltic. There were almost no passengers: a couple of silent summer residents with empty buckets and a gloomy older man in a greasy storm jacket. Vera sat by the window, pressing a worn leather briefcase with the printed first pages of the manuscript to her knees, and tried to calm the fine trembling in her fingers.

The address she had forced out of Mark Aristarkhovich’s secretary’s database was not marked on any electronic map. It was a dead end in the area of old Komarovo, where century-old trees hid abandoned pre-revolutionary dachas.

The bus stopped at a leaning stop, and Vera stepped out into the damp emptiness that smelled of rotten pine needles and salt. The fog here was so thick that it seemed tangible. It settled on her face in fine drops of moisture, making her shrink from the piercing wind.

She walked along a narrow sandy path, guided only by the dull, measured sound of the surf somewhere ahead. At last, out of the grey veil, the outlines of a massive fence of black bog oak appeared, and behind it — the mansion itself. The house in the northern modern style looked both majestic and frightening. Sharp roof spires rose straight into the low sky, the stone foundation was overgrown with dark-green moss, and the narrow, elongated windows on the first floor were tightly curtained with heavy drapes—no signs of life. The house would have seemed an uninhabited crypt if not for a thin wisp of grey smoke lazily rising from the high brick chimney.

Vera approached the heavy forged gate and pulled the steel ring. A sharp, rusty scrape sounded. She took a deep breath, trying to put back on the mask of a self-confident professional, and walked along the stone path to the porch.

She did not have to knock. The heavy oak door opened by itself; from the depths of the house came a sigh of the parquet boards. Inside, a semi-darkness reigned, diluted only by the weak amber glow of old lamps. A dense, unusual aroma hung in the air: the smell of old archives where rare folios have been stored for centuries: bitter cedar, dried herbs, and a sharp, metallic taste of iodine.

— You are persistent, editor. That is your main virtue and your most dangerous vice— a dull, slightly hoarse voice came from the depth of the spacious hall.

Christian sat in a deep armchair by the huge fireplace, where birch logs lazily crackled. He wore a simple black high-neck sweater that emphasized his sickly pallor and sharp cheekbones. The windows behind his back looked straight out onto the seething Gulf of Finland, and it seemed that the huge grey waves were beating right against the walls of the house.

— Mark Aristarkhovich refused to stop the print run. — Vera walked forward without waiting for an invitation and, with a dull thud, set the briefcase down on the low coffee table. — He threatened me. Said that if I tried to leave, he would destroy me the same way he destroyed my father five years ago.

Christian slowly raised his head. In the semi-darkness, his eyes seemed completely black, without pupils. He cast a glance at her right hand, on which Vera was fidgeting with the strap of the watch.

— Mark is only a trader, — the author smirked cynically, and in his voice sounded the fatigue of a man who had not slept for too long. — He knows how to count only numbers and profit. For him, our lives are expendable material for a beautiful binding. Why did you come here, Vera? I clearly told you at night: leave. Staying away from me is the only way you'll live until Monday.

— You promised that we would find the one who rewrote the ending. — Vera took a step forward; her voice grew stronger; the pragmatism of the philologist demanded answers. — I do not know how to run, Christian. I am used to working with text. If this damned book cannot be stopped, then we must edit it. Change the plot. Cross out the scene of my death.

Christian stood up sharply. He was tall and angular, and his movements held a hidden, dangerous strength. He approached the table, took one of the pages of the manuscript, and looked at Vera with gloomy superiority.

— Edit? — he repeated quietly, stepping closer to her step by step. — You think this is ordinary paper waste that can be reshaped at your will for a happy ending? You do not understand the nature of this ink.

He stretched out his palms. In the uneven light of the fireplace, Vera clearly saw that all the skin on his fingers was cut with thin, deep scars of violet color. They formed chaotic, frightening patterns that looked like scraps of ancient words.

— The magic of the text does not come from nowhere — Christian spoke quietly, but each of his words sounded in the silence of the room sharply and heavily, as if someone was striking an old bell. — Every change of reality requires an equivalent exchange. The paper must absorb an emotion, pain, or a memory. Want to see how it really works? How your logic will crumble to dust?

He turned sharply, went to the work desk on which stood a heavy crystal ink well with thick violet liquid, and took a long silver pen. Christian pulled a clean sheet of paper from the drawer, yellowed with time.

— Recall something very important to you, Vera. Something that defines you as a person. Your brightest, lightest memory from youth— he ordered without turning around.

Vera hesitated for a second, but under his hypnotic gaze she gave in.

— My graduation at the university, — she said quietly. — Father was still with me then. He gave me his grandfather's old fountain pen and said I would become the best critic in this country. I remember that day down to the smallest details: the smell of lilac by the main building, the taste of champagne, the color of his old jacket...

Christian quickly wrote several words on the paper with a sharp scrape of the pen. Vera watched spellbound as the violet lines instantly soaked into the dry surface of the sheet, as if going deep into the structure.

Then Christian took a match, struck it against the box, and brought the flame to the corner of the sheet. The paper flared up instantly, but the flame was not orange; it was cold, violet. It left no grey ash behind — the sheet disappeared into the air, dissolving without a trace.

At the same second, Vera felt as if struck by an electric current. Inside her head, something cracked like fragile glass. For a moment, black circles swam before her eyes.

— What... what did you do? — she whispered, grabbing the edge of the table with her hand. Suddenly she realized that an enormous empty hole had formed in her thoughts. She remembered studying at the university, remembered the graduation, but her father's face, his words, the gift—all of it had been erased, turning into a faceless grey haze. The memory had disappeared physically.

— I crossed that day out of your life. — Christian carefully put the silver pen back into the stand and turned to her. In his eyes there was no triumph, only deep, endless sorrow. — Every word written with this ink and destroyed erases a part of reality. Now do you understand? If we try to cross out the scene of your death at the presentation, reality will demand a payment. And that payment may become your personality, your reason, or the lives of hundreds of people who happen to be nearby. The text cannot simply be rewritten. It must be deciphered. We need to find the one who holds the second pen before the ink in the print run finally dries.

Vera stood, unable to hold back the tears that rolled down her pale cheeks. The logical, pragmatic world in which she had so long hidden from the pain after her father's disappearance had finally collapsed, leaving her defenseless before the face of an ancient, merciless force.

CHAPTER 4. FIRST BODY

Four days left until the publication of the novel “Ink of Dead Words”. The violet paint smells acrid.

The awakening was sharp, as if from a physical push to the chest. Vera opened her eyes and for several seconds stared motionless at the high ceiling, lost in the semi-darkness, finished with heavy beams of dark bog oak. For a moment it seemed to her that she was still in the cabin of her car falling into the Fontanka, but the measured, sleepy crackle of the birch logs burning out in the fireplace brought her back to reality.

She did not remember how she had fallen asleep right here, in the deep leather armchair of the living room of the mansion in Komarovo. Christian had wrapped her in a heavy woolen blanket that now smelled of smoke and dry pine needles. The icy storm rain no longer beat against the huge panoramic windows, but the grey Baltic fog behind the glass had grown so thick it erased the border between the earth, the black pines, and the Gulf of Finland. The world around had frozen, turning into a soundless grey haze.

Vera carefully lowered her feet onto the cold parquet and grimaced: the right wrist under the watch's leather strap ached again with a dull, exhausting pain. She unfastened the buckle and examined the hand. The violet letters of her own name that had come through under the tender skin at night had become clearer and darker, as if Christian's oily ink had taken root for good in her capillaries. They pulsed in time with the beating of the heart.

— You slept a long time. The body was trying to compensate for what I took from it— Christian's quiet, slightly hoarse voice made her flinch.

The author stood at the kitchen island with his back to her. He still wore the same black things — a loose high-neck sweater and crumpled trousers. He was methodically pouring thick black tea into a solid ceramic mug, and fragrant steam with notes of thyme and wild mint rose above the table. Christian turned, came up, and held the mug out to her. Vera, hesitating for a second, took it. Their fingers touched for a moment, and a strange, almost frightening wave of dry, clean warmth washed over her, from which the letters on the wrist weakly responded for a second with a violet flash.

She hastily stepped back, sitting down again in the armchair and pressing her palms to the warm ceramic. The rule of the forbidden zone that they had established at night worked with a creak: his physical presence in this room, isolated by the fog, was felt too sharply. Every movement of Christian, the sharp break of his cheekbones in the semi-darkness, the smell of cedar coming from his clothes — all of this knocked the ground out from under Vera's feet more strongly than the collapsing world of rational facts.

— We need to work, — Vera took a sip of the scalding tea, trying to make her voice sound as collected and professional as possible. — Yesterday at the publishing house, before my trip to the printing house, Mark Aristarkhovich mentioned Kovrovsky—our main city critic. Mark laughed and said that Kovrovsky was alive and well despite his scathing articles in the press. But I clearly remember that in your draft, on page forty-five, you described his suffocation in detail, down to the smallest physiological details. We need to check the city news.

Christian did not answer. He silently approached the low wooden table, took an old remote and switched on the liquid-crystal television fixed on the wall among the bookshelves. The screen blinked a couple of times, spitting out grey stripes of interference because of the poor connection in the remote forest, but then caught the local Petersburg channel.

On the screen, against the background of a gloomy grey apartment building on the Petrograd Side, stood a young journalist in a thoroughly soaked raincoat. The wind tousled her hair, and her face was pale from excitement. In the background, cutting through the fog, the blue-red beacons of

two ambulances and a police van flashed anxiously. The cameraman caught a frame: orderlies were rolling a black plastic stretcher out of the entrance.

“...Tragedy on Bolshoy Prospekt, — the girl spoke quickly and agitatedly, pressing the microphone to her blueing lips. — Today around six o’clock in the morning the well-known literary critic and publicist Anatoly Kovrovsky was found dead in his apartment. According to preliminary data of the investigation, death occurred as a result of an acute attack of asphyxia. Experts speak of a rare, lightning form of pulmonary edema. Yet, the attention of the operatives was drawn by a frightening detail: the entire bedroom of the deceased was literally filled with printed sheets of his last scathing article, and on the lips and face of the man there remained a deposit of an unknown violet pigment of chemical origin...”

Christian pressed the button sharply, and the screen went out with a dry click, leaving behind only the quiet, monotonous hum of the old kinescope.

Vera slowly set the mug down on the table. The tea inside it trembled finely. Her pragmatic world, built on philological facts, quotations, and logic, had finally flown to pieces. The documentary accuracy she had so valued had now turned against her. The situation had gone out of control.

— This is page forty-five — she whispered, feeling icy sweat come out on her back. — Exactly. Down to the last word. Kovrovsky wrote a disgusting review of your previous novel, accused you of charlatanism, and someone... someone took revenge on him with your own text.

She turned sharply to Christian, and in her eyes, despite the forbidden zone, a spark of the former desperate suspicion flared up again.

— Was it you? Answer me honestly, Christian. Without your pathos and riddles. Did you write that paragraph? Did you set your ink on him because of a wounded ego?

The author did not stir. He slowly raised his palms, turning those scars upward, right under the dim light of the fluorescent lamp. Vera saw with frightening clarity that the thin violet lines on his skin had swollen, become inflamed, and that dark droplets of lymph had come from several deep scars at the bases of his fingers. His fingers trembled noticeably, as if from strong hypothermia or a cramp.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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