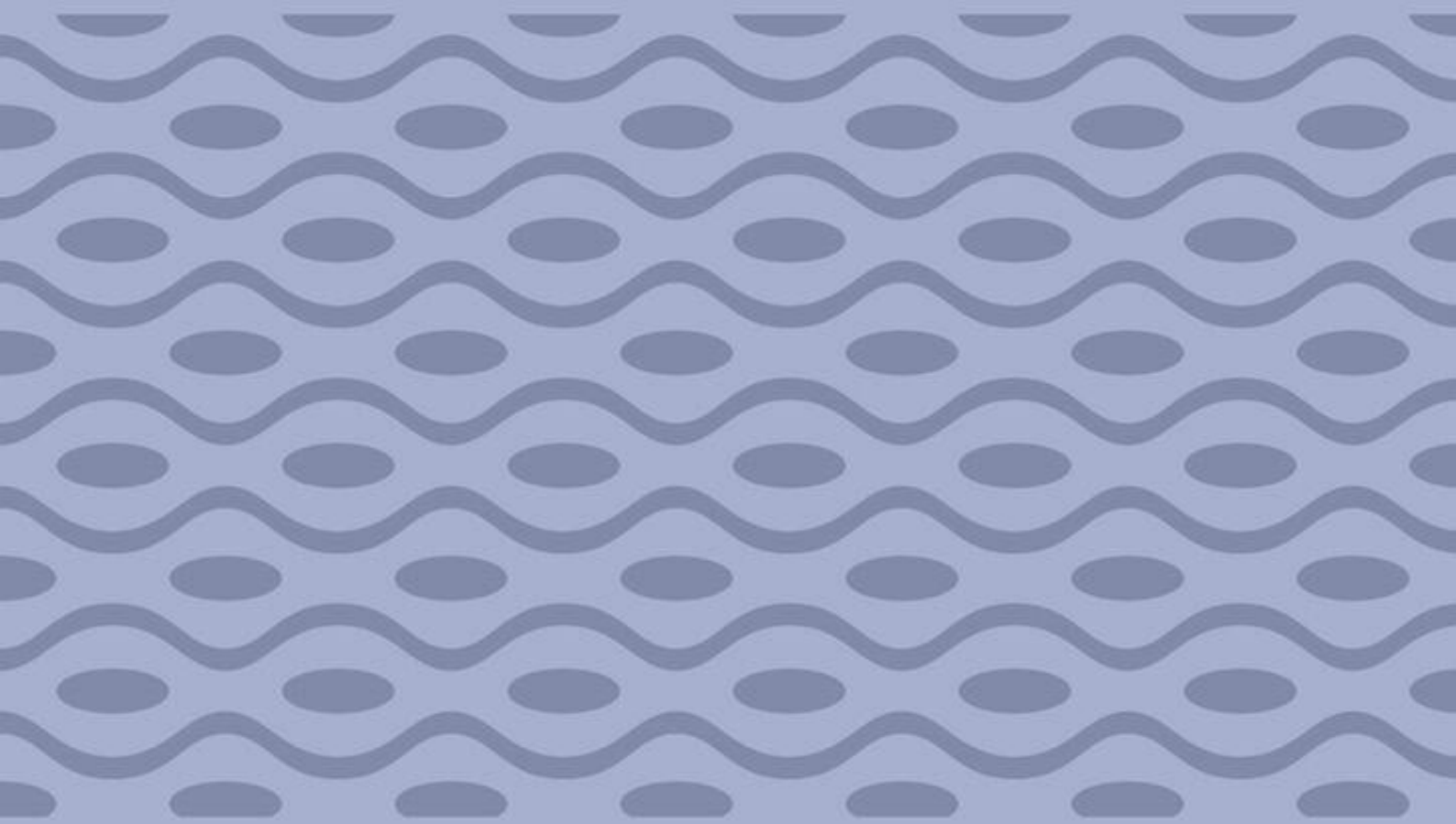


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Arina Laurel



COLD GLITTER

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Cold Glitter

«Издательские решения»

Laurel A.

Cold Glitter / A. Laurel — «Издательские решения»,

Moscow, 1970. Behind the velvet curtains of an elite jewelry store, diamonds are not just beauty — they are power, passion, and deadly secrets. Eleonora Kostenetskaya, a destitute librarian with a dying mother, never imagined she would enter the closed world of Soviet high society. When she lands a job at Samotsvety — a state-run jewelry shop hiding a secret back room for the Party elite — she becomes the silent witness to a decade of opulence and corruption.

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Cold Glitter

Arina Laurel

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COLD GLITTER

A Novel

PROLOGUE

Moscow, 1982

The display case was locked. The glass, cold as the ice on the Moscow River in December, reflected only the pale light of the night lamp and the figure of a woman in a worn but tidy suit. Eleonora Kostenetskaya gazed into the depths, at the empty velvet cushion that only yesterday had seemed the center of the universe.

She could see that necklace with her eyes closed. Turquoise the color of that impossible morning when the air outside Moscow was clearer than crystal, framed by a scattering of small diamonds that the old master Pozier had set with such filigree precision that even with breathing, the stones seemed to live their own lives, shimmering and whispering to one another. One slight nudge to the stand — and the electric light, piercing through the dusty glass, turned into fireworks, a cascade of sparks that stole one's breath. Today, the cushion held only a light, almost indecent indentation, like the trace of a kiss.

"Taken," she breathed soundlessly, her lips barely moving. "Again."

In the staff corridor, separated from the sales floor by a heavy curtain, boots thundered. They had already turned the storage shelves upside down, cracked the safes with the "gold" reserve, and sealed the manager's office door with strips of tape. From behind the wall came fragments of phrases in unfamiliar, meaningless voices: "...no traces," "...like a cow licked it clean," "...she was shaking when she opened the cabinet." Eleonora did not turn around.

She knew: this was only the prelude, the cheap fuss of local operatives. The real thunder would strike in the Kremlin, in those high-ceilinged offices with oak panels and heavy drapes, when **they** finally realized whose set had disappeared that night. When they understood that not just a price had been stolen, but an entire epoch.

Irina Bugrimova. Her name was forged from steel and risk. The lion tamer, the first woman who dared to enter a cage with predators. An aristocrat, erased from history and brought back only through inhuman effort. She had survived revolution, war, newspaper persecution, and still endured. Her turquoise set, the work of Pozier himself — Catherine the Great's jeweler, whose pieces were worth whole palaces — was listed in the strictest registry of national treasures. Now it was gone. Vanished as if it had fallen out of time.

And with it, other artifacts that Eleonora had held in her dry, warm palms dozens of times: heavy brooches, sunset-hued tiaras, rings that had adorned the sculpted breasts of the most famous women of the Soviet Union. All slipping through her fingers like water from a communal apartment faucet.

Eleonora ran her palm over the cold glass — a greasy streak of dust mixed with the settled scent of perfume and cigarette smoke remained on her finger. At fifty-two, she felt like a century-old statue eaten away by time. She remembered the weight of every stone that had passed through her hands during twelve years at Samotsvety. She remembered the day Bugrimova first crossed the threshold, clutching a worn casket to her chest. With trembling fingers, surprisingly delicate for a beast tamer, Irina Nikolaevna lifted the lid, and in her eyes stood tears — not from fear, but from

pain when Eleonora confirmed: everything was genuine. “I will never give them away,” Irina had said then, her voice ringing like a taut string. “This is my life.” And she never did. But there was someone who did not keep another’s word. Someone who spat on memory and took what was not theirs, hiding behind night and universal chaos.

“Eleonora Vasilievna,” a raspy voice sounded from behind her.

A detective in civilian clothes approached, but with a military bearing that betrayed a man in uniform with years of training. He held his notebook as if it were a machine gun. “We’ll ask you a few questions. You saw the set last.”

She turned slowly. A dim lamp burned in the corridor, and the detective’s face resembled freshly poured concrete — gray, expressionless, with fine cracks of wrinkles around his eyes. She had seen such faces every time “from the organs” made a visit: polite, impassive, with X-ray eyes that scanned every wrinkle, every gesture, every breath.

“I saw it,” she replied, her voice steady, though the skin on her fingertips had gone white. “On Friday, during the pre-exhibition inspection. Irina Nikolaevna brought it personally. We conducted an inventory together, photographed it with a Zenit, packed it in a special case. She left with it in the evening, around six.”

“And then what?” The detective did not take his heavy gaze from her.

“I have no idea. She got into a black Volga and drove off toward the center. I haven’t seen it since. Only the empty cushion this morning.”

The detective scribbled something in his notebook, raised his eyes, and in that look, steel flickered:

“Are you aware that Irina Nikolaevna had enemies? People who hunted her collection not in words but in deeds? Those who might use force?”

Eleonora felt a wire tighten in her chest, ready to snap. She knew. Too well. She had seen the daughter of the General Secretary standing at this very display case — Galina Brezhneva. Had seen her pupils, dilated with desire, fixed on the turquoise. Had seen her fingers, covered in rings, grip her crocodile-skin purse as she whispered to Shchelokova, leaning close to her ear: “This will be mine. Do you hear me? She’s old, she’ll die soon, and the stones will remain.” But to say this aloud here, in this corridor, before this man with military bearing — meant putting one’s head in a noose and pulling it tight with one’s own hands.

“I only know what I saw here,” she replied carefully, as if tasting the words. “Different people came to the store. Many asked about the set. What happened outside these walls is not my concern. I’m a saleswoman, not a detective.”

The detective smirked, crookedly, with the superiority of a man who knows more than he says:

“You’re being modest, Eleonora Vasilievna. We know you associated with Galina Brezhneva, Zykina, Durova. You were on familiar terms with them. You remember how these women argued

for the right to possess the stones. You couldn't have missed how their passion affected the fate of these artifacts. Every conversation of yours is a thread."

Eleonora was silent. Silence rang in her ears. She remembered how Natalya Durova, already at the door, had turned and thrown over her shoulder a phrase that now seemed prophetic: "Be careful, Eleonora. Here, diamonds hit harder than bullets. They leave scars that never heal." Now those words were no longer a figure of speech. Bugrimova was dead. The doctors said — heart. But Eleonora knew that the heart cannot bear it when the most precious thing is torn from it. Durova followed, and her things also dissolved in the fog of perestroika. Zykina was still breathing, but her stones had long been sold off by her nephew, who squandered the fortune at cards.

And Galina? The leader's daughter now sat in her spacious apartment on Kutuzovsky Prospekt, locked in, trembling, knowing her time was up. Soon they would come for her — not with flowers, but with questions for which there were no right answers. But even fear could not bring back Pozier's turquoise.

"I'm not accusing anyone," Eleonora said quietly, almost in a whisper, feeling her throat go dry. "I just want to understand where it all went. These things were worth more than I've seen in my entire life. They couldn't just evaporate. Diamonds don't dissolve in air."

"They could," the detective cut in, his tone hardening. "If they're hidden in a diplomat's briefcase, smuggled abroad as souvenirs, or, more likely, melted down into scrap. We're leaning toward an organized group operating under the cover of names from high offices. You can help if you come clean. Every name. Every glance."

Eleonora looked again at the empty cushion, and before her eyes rose a scene from a year ago. She stands here, at this glass, and beside her — Galina Brezhneva. She holds the necklace, turns it, catches the light, and the turquoise blazes blue fire, reflected in her pupils. "I'll buy it," Galina says, her voice soft but with steel in it. "Name the price. Any price." And Eleonora, knowing the item is listed in the state registry and not for sale, replies: "It's not for sale, Galina Alexandrovna. It belongs to Irina Nikolaevna. It's her legacy." Then Galina clenches the stones so hard the setting cuts into her palm, leaving red marks, and hisses, no longer hiding: "In this country, nothing belongs to anyone, Eleonora. Everything belongs to whoever is stronger. Remember that."

Eleonora flinched, returning to reality. The detective waited patiently, and his silence pressed harder than words.

"I'll tell you," she said, her own voice sounding firmer than she expected. The steel she had hidden for so long under the mask of a gray employee appeared. "But not here and not now. Come tomorrow at ten in the morning. I'll gather my notes. I have personal notebooks, copies of inventories, index cards. I kept them for myself, but they might be useful to you. I think there are things there you don't even suspect."

The detective raised an eyebrow, and something like respect flickered in his eyes. He nodded, briefly, in a military manner:

"Agreed. Tomorrow at ten. And, Eleonora Vasilievna..." He paused, and the air between them thickened. "Take care of yourself. We have information that the thieves won't balk at witnesses. People who know how to take diamonds from lionesses won't stop at an old saleswoman."

He turned and left. His footsteps faded in the corridor, drowned out by the voices of the operatives. Eleonora remained alone at the display case.

She shifted her gaze to her own reflection in the glass — and saw a stooped figure, gray, poorly styled hair, deep shadows under her eyes that not even foundation could hide. She was no longer that timid saleswoman who nervously opened safes for Party elite, feeling like an outsider. She had become part of their world, its chronicler, and simultaneously its victim. She kept secrets capable of destroying entire families, ruining careers, rewriting history. And now, with Bugrimova lying in the morgue on cold metal and her stones vanished into oblivion, Eleonora understood with crystalline clarity: she could no longer remain silent. Silence was complicity in murder.

She pulled from her apron pocket an old, rusty key that she wore on a cord under her blouse and opened the bottom drawer of her desk. There, under a stack of invoices, lay a notebook in worn leather — a diary, started on her first day of work. Dates, names, fragments of conversations, belated suspicions, sketches of stones. No one had ever seen it. Not even her husband, had he still been alive.

Now, leafing through the yellowed pages that smelled of dust and tobacco, she saw: these were not just notes. They were evidence. A chronicle of an entire decade when diamonds signified not just wealth, but power, passion, and death. Every page breathed danger.

She closed the notebook, hid it at the bottom of an old shopping bag, on top of a greasy apron and an empty wallet. Tomorrow she would begin to speak. Tomorrow she would open the door she had kept bolted for so long, afraid that death stood behind it. But today — a gray, damp Moscow evening — she simply stood at the display case and watched the snow falling outside.

Large, wet flakes settled on the blackened asphalt, on the roofs of rare Volgas, on the shoulders of hurrying passersby. The city was wrapped in cotton wool, made deaf, blind, and indifferent. And it seemed to her that along with the snow, that special silence descended on the city — the silence that remains when jewels fall silent. A silence in which the names of departed women echoed.

She sighed, deeply, until it hurt in her lungs, adjusted the strap of her bag cutting into her shoulder, and walked out of the store. The door with its glass windows clicked shut, and she was left alone on the dark, poorly lit street. Ahead lay what would overturn her settled life — and not only hers. Gorbachev, perestroika, glasnost — all of it hung in the air, but Eleonora was not thinking about politics. She was thinking about justice. She knew: this was necessary. For Bugrimova. For Durova. For all who had paid too high a price for glitter that was never truly needed. That was simply beautiful.

And the snow kept falling, covering tracks, hiding old secrets under white grit — secrets that waited to be finally dug up, thawed, and brought to light. Time marched on. And it would wait no longer.

CHAPTER 1

****Moscow, 1970****

In the corridor of Yuvileprom, it smelled of machine oil, dry printing paper, and a barely perceptible hint of caramel — where it came from, Eleonora never understood in all her years of work, but now, standing twelfth in line, she inhaled this strange cocktail and felt her knees buckle.

She clutched her diploma in her fingers — worn, with a blue cover and gold embossing that had already begun to rub off. From nervousness, the paper had become damp, and she feared the ink would blur, though she remembered every line by heart: History Faculty of Moscow State University, art history, honors degree, which had brought her nothing but ninety rubles a month and headaches from library dust.

She surveyed the line — seven women and four men, all dressed to impress. One lady wore large amber beads around her neck, too heavy for her fragile frame — clearly family heirlooms, hidden from Soviet reality. A young man in glasses with a metal frame nervously leafed through papers, moving his lips as he memorized figures. Eleonora caught herself thinking they all looked as if they were headed for an exam at the conservatory, not an interview at a store.

Beside her, a blonde in a dress the color of May greenery shifted from foot to foot — too loud, too silky for a Soviet office where even secretaries wore strict cotton blouses. She alternately adjusted her bouffant, lacquered into a tall tower, glanced at the door marked “Reception,” and fidgeted with a gilded costume-jewelry bracelet that jingled like a bell. Energy seemed to burst from her like a fountain — she was clearly used to getting everything she wanted with a smile.

Opposite, leaning her back against the wall, stood an elderly woman in a dark wool suit with a hammer-and-sickle brooch on her lapel — she held herself as if she had just finished a shift as a history teacher and had stopped by out of habit to check others’ knowledge. Her gaze was heavy, appraising.

Eleonora felt out of place here. And it wasn’t the dress — her only decent one, dark blue with a white collar, washed until threadbare but still holding its shape. It was the feeling that she was an impostor. These people — or at least some of them — knew stones. Felt them. And she... she had only read about them in books.

She had come here not out of love for jewelry. Not out of career ambition. Out of desperation.

The Lenin Library, her home reading room where she had spent eight years, paid her exactly ninety rubles a month. Peanuts. It was enough to keep from starving — bread, milk, cheap chicken a couple times a week — but medicine for her mother, a former French teacher crippled by a stroke the previous year, cost three times as much. Validol, euphyllin, cordiamine. Ampoules, tablets, drips. And private doctor visits, which in Soviet medicine were called “gratitude” and accepted in envelopes. She had pawned her mother’s brooches — silver, with semiprecious stones, brought from Riga in the fifties. Then she sold her father’s chronograph, the Pobeda, inherited from her grandfather. Only her diploma and determination remained.

She had cut the announcement from *Vechernyaya Moskva* with jagged scissors: “Jewelry store Samotsvety invites sales consultants. Higher education, foreign language, pleasant appearance.” Brief. Cold. As if recruiting for intelligence.

She read it five times, then climbed into the closet for her only decent dress — the same dark blue one, bought for her thesis defense. French she’d known since childhood — her mother had taken her to a circle at the French embassy until it was banned. English — from university, where she studied Western art historians in the original. Appearance? Thirty-two years old, pale, thin, with shadows under her eyes like someone had diluted watercolor and accidentally spilled it. Neighbors

called it “intelligentsia” — and grimaced. She didn’t know if that counted as pleasant. Whether it meant anything at all behind that door where fates were decided.

“Kostenetskaya!” A voice from behind the door jolted her from her thoughts, and her heart skipped a beat.

She entered, smoothed her skirt, adjusted her collar, and froze.

The office was spacious, with high ceilings and stucco molding painted over in places with white paint. Behind a long table covered in green baize sat three people. On the left — a man with the bearing of a captain: crew cut, jacket fitting like a second skin, hands resting palms down on the table. He was clearly from the “competent organs,” and Eleonora felt a knot in her stomach. On the right — a woman in thick glasses with a notebook, ready to record every word. And in the center, at the head of the table — the one about whom legends were whispered.

Antonina Tsnel.

People whispered about her in the corridors. Deputy head of Yuvileprom, a woman who personally selected salespeople because she didn’t trust HR. They said she knew the value of every stone and every person. Twenty years in Gokhran — where the country’s diamond fund was stored, where diamonds lay in safes underground at a depth of twenty meters. They said she personally knew Brezhnev and his daughter Galina, that she remembered the imperial registries and could have written Russia’s history through its jewelry alone. She was in her late fifties, but she sat straight as a string — gray hair gathered in a strict bun, on her finger a single ring with a small sapphire. Not for beauty. For weight.

“Sit down,” she said, not even glancing at the diploma Eleonora placed on the edge of the table. Her voice was low, with a rasp, as if she smoked heavily, though the office didn’t smell of tobacco. “Last name?”

“Kostenetskaya Eleonora Vasilievna.”

“Education?”

“History Faculty of Moscow State University, art history.” She exhaled, trying to speak evenly. “French and English. I read professional literature in the original.”

Tsnel looked up — small, light eyes with a barely noticeable squint. She examined Eleonora unhurriedly, even lazily, like an experienced appraiser examining an item at auction: from worn but polished shoes to the careless part in her hair. Her gaze lingered on her fingers — the ones gripping the edge of her dress.

“Art history,” she repeated with a slight smile, and in that smile there was no malice, rather the curiosity of a cat that had found an unfamiliar mouse. “And have you seen Fabergé in person? Not in books, not in catalogs, but standing next to it, holding it in your hands? Old-cut diamonds, those cut in the eighteenth century when there were no lasers — have they ever lain in your palm?”

Eleonora swallowed. She knew this question. Knew it was a trap, because the truth was unflattering.

“In the Armory Chamber, I saw them. In the Diamond Fund — twice, on tours. And diamonds,” she hesitated for a second, feeling her cheeks flush, “only my own earrings. Silver, with cubic zirconia. My mother’s.”

Tsnel chuckled — and the sound was strangely encouraging.

“Honest. That’s rare. Dishonest ones I weed out in five seconds.” She leaned back in her chair, folded her hands on her stomach. “Alright. And can you talk to people? Persuade them? Not sell, no — any market hustler can sell. I’m asking: can you make a person **want** what they see?”

Eleonora thought. Not about sales. About the library.

“I worked as a librarian,” she replied, her voice growing firmer. “There, I had to persuade students to read what they thought was boring. To convince them that ancient history wasn’t a set of dates, but living fates. That behind every book was a person. I learned to speak so they lost track of time. I think it’s similar.”

The military man snorted — short, dismissively. But Tsnel didn’t smile. She looked at Eleonora with new interest.

“And if the buyer isn’t a student? If he’s a general, a minister, a member of the Politburo? Will you speak to him the same way — about fates, about living people?”

“I don’t know how to bow,” Eleonora said directly, surprising herself with her boldness. “If I lie to them or pretend, they’ll sense it. But if I tell the truth — about the stone, its history, why it’s special — they’ll remember. Respect, not flattery. That’s the only thing I can offer.”

Silence fell in the room. The captain exchanged a glance with the woman in glasses, that look more eloquent than words. Tsnel slowly removed her glasses — old ones in a metal frame — wiped the lenses with a handkerchief, and looked at Eleonora point-blank.

“And aren’t you afraid your truth will be unnecessary? That you,” she paused, searching for the word, “won’t fit in?”

Eleonora remembered her mother. Helpless, lying on the couch, staring at the ceiling. Remembered her whispering in French, no longer aware of what she was saying.

“I can’t afford to be afraid,” she answered.

Tsnel nodded — approvingly, barely noticeably. Then she pulled a sheet of paper from a folder, yellowed, with typewritten text, and slid it across the table:

“Read it aloud. Slowly.”

It was a dry, bureaucratic text about a set with Ceylon sapphires: caratage, cut, weight, assay, registry number. A set of digits and terms that would make an ordinary person’s head spin. Eleonora began reading — mechanically, but by the second phrase she realized: this wouldn’t do. Simply listing meant killing the stone. She remembered how her mother used to read Verlaine and Baudelaire aloud

to her as a child — with pauses, with emphasis, with that special intonation when poetry ceased to be just lines.

She tried the same. Slowed her pace. Pronounced the names of the stones with weight, as if they were not minerals but the names of people whose fates she held in her palm. Sapphires — not just “sapphires,” but “dark blue, like the night sky over Ceylon”; diamonds — “small, but pure water, old-cut, each facet preserving the gleam of old candles.” She added the history she remembered from a university article: that this set had once belonged to a countess who fled St. Petersburg in 1917, her trail lost in Europe.

She finished — looked up. The room was silent. The woman in glasses had stopped writing. The captain sat with his mouth open.

“What did you feel?” Tsnel asked, her voice softer than before.

Eleonora thought for a second and answered directly, meeting her eyes:

“That these are not just stones. Behind them stands a person who wore them, who dreamed, loved, feared. Who may have paid for them with their life. My job is to convey that to the buyer, so they don’t just buy, but understand what they hold in their hands. So they feel responsibility. Because beauty is always responsibility.”

Tsnel removed her glasses entirely — now they lay on the table. She leaned back in her chair and looked at Eleonora with a long gaze. There was no judgment in it. Something else — recognition.

“Unusual,” she said quietly. “Everyone else talks about prices, discounts, percentages. About how to push the product. You — about fate. About beauty. That could be foolishness, infantilism,” she paused, “or it could be what we lack. Too many salespeople. Too few keepers.”

She placed her glasses on the table, leaned forward, and her voice became harder, but not angrier — simpler, more confiding:

“Listen, Kostenetskaya. We’re not an ordinary store. You’ve probably guessed. Behind this wall,” she waved toward the invisible corridor, “is a completely different life. Not the one behind the amber display case. We sell things that shouldn’t exist in Soviet trade. Imperial relics, monarchs’ gifts, what survived revolution and wars. We don’t work with ordinary people. With the elite. With those who make decisions. With their wives, daughters, mistresses. You must know how to speak to them — like valuable books: respectfully, delicately, but without servility. They hate sycophants. They grew up on flattering looks.”

Eleonora nodded, feeling her heart thudding beneath her ribs. She understood: this was a chance. Not just for money — to enter a world she had read about in textbooks, thought was extinct. A world where value was placed not on Party loyalty, but on knowledge, memory, taste.

Tsnel took a pen, old, with a gold nib, and wrote something on a scrap torn from her notebook. Handed it to Eleonora:

“Call in three days. If you don’t call — it means we found someone else. But honestly,” she allowed herself a brief smile, dry, almost imperceptible, “I think you’ll do. You have what can’t be taught. A feel for stones. The rest — we’ll teach.”

Eleonora took the paper, clutched it in her fingers, feeling it warm from her palm. Stood, smoothed her skirt.

“Thank you. I’ll call.”

She left the office on rubbery legs, and the door closed behind her with the same tight, dull click.

On the stairs, she was caught by the blonde in the green dress — out of breath, with a strand escaping her bouffant.

“Well?” she asked, greedily peering into her face. “Did they take you?”

“They said to call in three days.”

“Ah,” the blonde waved her hand, her bracelet jingling, “that means no. They told me the same. It’s a polite refusal.” She snorted, adjusted her bag. “I heard they already have two candidates from Gokhran. Their own people. We,” she gestured around the staircase, “are just for show. Higher education, foreign language... It’s all for appearances. They want their own.”

Her heels clattered as she descended, leaving behind a trail of cheap perfume.

Eleonora stepped outside, inhaled the cold October air, smelling of gasoline and decaying leaves. Under the Yuvileprom sign, ordinary Moscow life hummed: a line at the dairy for cottage cheese, a tram bell on Arbat, an old woman with a string bag full of potatoes. Grayness. Daily grind. The struggle for survival.

Suddenly, it became clear to her: behind that door — velvet, parquet, and diamonds that remembered emperors. Here — asphalt, lines, and endless waiting. She didn’t know if she wanted that world — it frightened her with its closedness. But she knew for certain: she would not remain in this one. Couldn’t. Had no right.

Three days later, at exactly ten in the morning, she called the number written on the scrap. The voice on the other end dryly, without greeting, said: “Monday at nine. Entrance from Arbat. Say you’re here for Tsnel.”

She hung up, her hands trembling. Turned to her mother. She lay on the sagging couch, covered with an old wool blanket that smelled of mothballs, and smiled through the pain — through that awkward, forced smile that appeared when she saw clearly through the haze of medication.

“Did they take you, daughter?” her mother asked in French, not switching to Russian — an old gesture, a reminder of another life.

“It seems so,” Eleonora answered in the same language. “It seems I’m entering someone else’s world.”

Her mother closed her eyes and whispered, barely forming the words: “Be careful. Other worlds have their own laws.”

On Monday at nine in the morning, Eleonora stood before the Samotsvety display case. Behind the glass on black velvet lay amber earrings — beautiful, but simple, accessible, for ordinary customers who would stop in, look, and leave with nothing. She already knew: this was a façade, a decoration. Behind it were other earrings, other display cases, locked safes, and people with different names.

She pushed the door. The glass closed with a soft, almost musical chime, and the noise of Arbat was cut off as if with scissors. Inside smelled of polished oak and the French perfume sold only in Beriozka for foreign currency — sweet, heavy. The first hall was small, with low wooden counters and crystal lampshades under the ceiling casting a dim yellow light. Behind the counter, a woman in a white medical coat, without looking up, said in a practiced voice:

“For Tsnel? Second door on the right, at the end of the corridor.”

Eleonora walked down the narrow corridor. Behind the first door was a room with safes up to the ceiling — metal cabinets with massive bolts, like the entrance to a bank vault. Behind the second — a small reception room, two men in suits sitting in leather chairs, drinking tea from fine porcelain, not looking her way. Behind the third — Tsnel herself.

She sat behind a table, as long as the one at Yuvileprom, but here everything was different — more expensive, older. On the wall hung a painting in a heavy frame: a winter landscape, signed illegibly, but clearly not by a Soviet artist. On the table — a silver candlestick with a single candle, though electricity worked.

“Sit down,” Tsnel nodded without ceremony. She set aside her papers, folded her hands. “Today you’ll learn how we work. First: we have two entrances. The one from Arbat — for ordinary visitors, sightseers, and those who just want to look at the glitter. The second — from Kaloshin Lane, through the service entrance. There, tea is served in silver tea-glass holders with chocolate and chandeliers hang, each worth more than your five-year salary. There, people don’t talk about prices. They talk about desires. You’ll work mostly there. I hope your hands don’t shake.”

“No,” Eleonora said, though her hands were trembling.

“Second: you’ll keep index cards for every regular client. Names, preferences, dates, finger and wrist sizes, favorite stones, birthdays of wives and mistresses. We work with people accustomed to getting everything immediately. You must remember their tastes to the point of automation. If a client says: ‘I want an emerald teardrop, four carats, flawless,’ you must know which safe it’s in, who brought it, and its history. No mistakes. No pauses. No ‘wait, I’ll check.’”

“Understood.”

“Third,” Tsnel lowered her voice to a whisper that in the silence of the office sounded louder than a shout, “you must be able to remain silent. Everything you see or hear here stays here. Not to your husband, if you have one, not to a friend, not to the police, not even to a priest in confession. Can you promise that? Do you understand these are not just words?”

Eleonora held her gaze. Thought of her mother, the hospital, money. Of the fact she had just crossed a threshold from which there was no return. Nodded.

“I promise.”

Tsnel stood — and in that movement was strength, the habit of command, but without arrogance. She walked to the window, looked out at Arbat where passersby scurried, and said without turning:

“You know, many think we’re just a little shop for Party wives. That we hand out trinkets to those with power.” She turned. “That’s not true. We preserve history. Every stone that’s passed through my hands is a person’s trace. We are the last instance. The last ones who remember what true beauty is. And if we lose that,” she snapped her fingers, “Russia will remain without memory. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Eleonora nodded. She didn’t fully understand, but she felt: Tsnel was telling the truth. The truth for which, in this country, one could pay dearly.

“Welcome to Samotsvety,” Tsnel said, allowing herself a smile — the first time, but not the last. “If you survive the first month — you’ll stay. If not,” she shrugged, and in that gesture was the weariness of an old person who had seen many depart, “the library isn’t going anywhere. But I hope you’ll stay.”

Eleonora also stood, but lingered at the door. She turned and looked at Tsnel, at her gray bun, at her sapphire ring, at the painting on the wall, and it seemed to her that she was crossing the threshold not of a store, but of an entire decade. A decade when diamonds gleamed as brightly as the names of their owners — and faded with them. A decade that would soon collapse like an old house, leaving only dust and memories. But for now, she, Eleonora, was inside it. For now, she could touch the stones that had survived revolutions and wars, and say: “I am here. I remember.”

“You’ll manage,” she told herself, already stepping into the corridor. “For your mother. For yourself. For those who didn’t live to see this day.”

The door closed behind her with a soft, tight click — the same one that twelve years later would sound as she stood before the empty display case, watching snow cover old secrets. But that would come later. Now — October 1970, Moscow, and ahead — a whole life full of glitter and lies, passion and betrayal. And she, Eleonora, did not yet know that this day would be the first in a series of days that would change everything.

CHAPTER 2

Eleonora stood in the staff corridor, trying to orient herself in the labyrinth that opened behind the door marked “No Entry.” Behind her remained the first hall — bright, sterile, with display cases of twenty-ruble red-gold rings and silver chains, crowded with ordinary Muscovites examining the displays with the same sacred reverence with which their mothers had gazed at icons in closed churches. Here, in the depths, it smelled different: the pungent wood of old furniture, dry dust settled on velvet cushions, and the cold metal of safes that seemed to emanate not a smell but time itself — thick, heavy as syrup.

She caught her breath. The corridor walls were paneled in dark wood, worn to a shine by the elbows of countless visitors she would never see on the street. Along the walls — dim sconces with frosted glass shades, casting light not from above but from below, creating a strange, theatrical illumination. Every step echoed dully, as if she walked not through a store but through the catacombs of the Hermitage.

“Well, Kostenetskaya,” a voice lashed from behind, sharp as a whip crack. “Come on, I’ll show you what’s behind our doors. Keep up, or you’ll get lost — these corridors are like the Kremlin’s.”

She turned. A woman of about fifty, short hair cut like a boy’s, a gray strand carelessly pinned, white coat buttoned all the way up — and on her belt, a heavy ring of keys that jingled with every movement, like a prison guard’s. Klavdia Petrovna, senior saleswoman. Tsnel had assigned her to the newcomer — not for protection, but for testing.

“Klavdia Petrovna,” she extended a dry, hard palm, which Eleonora shook respectfully: cold fingers with prominent knuckles, accustomed to locks and jewels. “Fifteen years here. I’ve seen directors, ministers, thieves. Want to survive — listen and don’t ask questions. Especially ones you already know the answer to.”

Eleonora nodded, trying not to stare at the keys that hypnotically swung.

“Main thing to remember,” Klavdia led her down the corridor, her voice dropping to almost confiding, “in this store there are two lives. One — for everyone, for passersby, for tourists, for those who believe Soviet trade is honest and transparent. The second — for those with access. You already understood that, standing at the Arbat window looking at cheap costume jewelry?”

“I understood,” Eleonora replied, feeling a strange excitement growing inside — not fear, but anticipation of a secret.

“Then watch,” Klavdia stopped at an unremarkable door at the end of the corridor. It was upholstered in leatherette, with a worn brass handle, and was indistinguishable from the utility room doors Eleonora had seen in any department store. But Klavdia produced the largest key, with a bit like a medieval lock, turned it twice with effort — and the door opened with a deep, oily sigh, like the chest of a sleeping giant.

Eleonora involuntarily paused on the threshold.

A spacious hall, like a museum, but without “Do Not Touch” signs. Stucco on the ceiling — cupids, garlands, scallop shells — cracked in places, but restored with the love that in the Soviet Union was reserved only for government buildings. Crystal chandeliers, heavy, with pendants that tinkled from drafts, cast yellow reflections on the parquet. Walls upholstered in dark green velvet, faded by sunlight but still luxurious, with gold braid. In the center — a massive oak counter, darkened by time, with display cases lit from within by soft, white light. Stones gleamed so brightly it hurt the eyes, and Eleonora blinked for a moment, adjusting to this magnificence.

Behind the glass, she made out serious pieces that took one’s breath away. Necklaces with Ceylon sapphires — each the size of a pigeon’s egg, pure water, with an internal fire that seemed to pulse in rhythm with the heart. Tiaras in diamond settings, old cut, with stones so large Eleonora involuntarily recalled the description of the crown of the Russian Empire. Emerald brooches from

which emanated a deep, rich light, like the color of a summer forest after rain. Platinum bracelets, thin as spiderwebs, studded with small rose-cut diamonds.

“This is for special ones,” Klavdia said, looking at Eleonora’s stunned face, and in her voice was not pride but weariness. “Entry only from Kaloshin Lane, through the back door. Ordinary buyers don’t even know this room exists. They think Samotsvety is just a shop on Arbat where you can buy a ring for March 8th.”

“But how don’t they notice?” Eleonora surveyed the space, estimating its size. “From outside, you can’t see this much space. The building is ordinary, Stalin-era construction.”

“And try sticking your nose in the service corridor,” Klavdia smirked, and in that smirk was the age-old wisdom of a saleswoman who had seen thousands of curious noses. “There’s a sign saying ‘No Entry’ with a stamp, and a guard downstairs by the back entrance. A normal person won’t go in. Everyone’s used to stores having back rooms, stockrooms, kitchens. It never occurs to anyone there’s a palace inside. Besides,” she lowered her voice, “those who know, keep quiet. And those who don’t know — don’t need to.”

Eleonora approached the nearest display case, and her heart skipped. Under the glass — a platinum necklace with a yellow stone the size of a walnut, cut in a pear shape, with an elegant setting studded with small diamonds that framed the central stone like a wreath. She recognized it instantly — from the pre-revolutionary magazine “Capital and Estate,” which she’d seen in the university library.

“The Golden Rose,” she breathed, her voice trembling. “Princess Yusupova. I saw it in a 1913 catalog. Her husband gave it to her on their twentieth wedding anniversary. The stone is citrine, of unique clarity, weighing fifty-seven carats, pear cut. The setting is by Fabergé.”

Klavdia glanced at her with approval — for the first time, something other than sternness crossed her face.

“So your studies weren’t wasted. Yes, it’s that one. Smuggled from Petrograd in 1920 when the Yusupovs fled. Then it lay in Gokhran until ’68, and last year it was transferred to us. Formally — for sale. But in reality — already sold.”

“Sold?” Eleonora turned in surprise. “To whom? Here the price...” she hesitated, realizing that price wasn’t the right word here.

“None of your business,” Klavdia cut in, but softened at the bewilderment in the newcomer’s eyes. “Alright, since you’ll be working with these people anyway, I’ll tell you. It’s waiting for its new owner. A very important lady. Very high-ranking. We keep it here so she can come and admire it whenever she wishes — for her alone. But it cannot be bought. Only looked at.”

Eleonora frowned:

“So it’s not for sale, just on display? Like an exhibit?”

“Exactly. Half the displays here are for showing, not selling. Items aren’t sold, they wait for their owners. Or for those who consider themselves owners.” Klavdia lowered her voice, and in the corridor fell that special silence where every word becomes heavy. “You see, Kostenetskaya, for such

people, the very fact that they can come and see an item means it's already theirs. Money isn't paid here — influence is paid. Influence is more valuable than rubles. For us, that's currency not traded on any exchange."

She led Eleonora behind the counter, through a massive iron-clad door — and they entered a concrete corridor with bare bulbs under the ceiling, metal shelves reaching to the top. Here it smelled of cardboard, dust, and that particular scent of old papers found in archives. On the shelves — neat cardboard boxes tied with twine, with white labels affixed.

"Storage," Klavdia explained. "Private cases for regular clients. Each box — with a surname. Inside — what they've set aside but haven't collected yet, or what they bring for safekeeping — homes aren't safe, safes get cracked, but here — guard, alarm, Tsnel personally oversees."

She walked to a shelf where identical brown boxes stood in a row with white labels bearing calligraphically written surnames. Eleonora's eyes scanned them, and her breath caught: "Shchelokova S.N.," "Zykina L.G.," "Durova N. Yu.," "Brezhneva G.A." Names that resounded across the country — here merely labels on cardboard.

"God," she breathed, feeling a chill run down her spine. "All their jewelry is here?"

"Not all," Klavdia corrected, but pride sounded in her voice. "But most of it. These women can't buy a ring like ordinary people, walking into a jewelry store and choosing. They need service. For their desires to be anticipated, for the stones to be ready and waiting. We keep here what they might need — what matches their status. They come — we open the box, show them. Sometimes they take, sometimes not. But they know — we're waiting."

Eleonora ran her finger over Brezhneva's label — the box slightly larger, tied with twine, the label signed with a flourish. She almost felt the weight of what lay inside: the blue diamonds whispered about in corridors.

"And what does Brezhneva have?" she asked, trying to sound indifferent, but trembling inside.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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