



**SERGEY
BAKSHEEV**

**a BRIDE
of
ALLAH**

Sergey Baksheev

A Bride of Allah

«Издательские решения»

Baksheev S.

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Years ago, at war, he hated and killed; today, he saved the life of a female suicide bomber. And now, a deadly chase is on. He is hunted by both the authorities and the terrorists; his only friend betrays him. He is to be killed; she is to be blown up in a public place wearing a bride's dress. Only love can provide the strength needed for the unfair fight.

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A Bride of Allah

Sergey Baksheev

Translator Nikolai Chuvakhin

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Sergey Baksheev
A BRIDE OF ALLAH
A Novel

Translated from the Russian
by Nikolai Chuvakhin

Annotation

Years ago, at war, he hated and killed; today, he saved the life of a female suicide bomber. And now, a deadly chase is on. He is hunted by both the authorities and the terrorists; his only friend betrays him. He is to be killed; she is to be blown up in a public place wearing a bride's dress. Only love can provide the strength needed for the unfair fight.

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About the author

Sergey Baksheev is one of Russia's famous modern day authors in the genre of suspense thrillers. His novels feature not only an exciting plot, but leave readers questioning the morality of the storyline. Incredible intrigue, gripping suspense, shocking secrets, romance and lust – his writing has it all, appealing to a world-wide circle of readers.

He is the author of 26 novels, and lives in Moscow.

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Chapter 1

August 31, 7:36 PM

Dmitrovskaya Metro Station

A beige Lada, model six, leisurely moved in the right lane of Dmitrovskoe Shosse towards the center of Moscow. Andrei Vlasov has been operating a gypsy cab for a few months now. He deliberately drove slower than the traffic flow, keeping an eye out for a pick-up. The business day was over, the traffic got denser. Annoyed drivers flashed headlights at him and made gestures aimed to show what an idiot of a rookie driver he was.

Vlasov didn't care about the insulting gesticulation. As soon as he picked up a passenger, he would show the lazy asses what driving in traffic looks like. They are having trouble passing him? Get a helicopter if you've got no patience!

His mental exercises in pride were interrupted by a call on his cell phone. He pulled a vibrating Siemens out of his shirt pocket.

"Hello?" he said wearily.

"Andrei, is that you?" Mom, with her usual stupid starter question.

"Who else would it be, Mom?"

"Andrei, make sure to buy some bread for dinner! Rye."

"Okay, Mom, I will."

"Just don't forget! I know you; it will just skip your mind! Buy some right now and come home. You have to eat; you don't take care of yourself. Unless Mother reminds – "

"All right, I'll go get some," Vlasov reassured her, trying to avoid getting annoyed.

Over the years of living with Mother, just the two of them, he got seriously tired from her nagging. Mom didn't want to understand that he was twenty-six years old and managed his own schedule. That said, he really could forget about bread; it happened before. It would be better to buy it right away, drive home, and have dinner. The most profitable passengers would be later anyway, when the restaurants downtown start closing.

Vlasov drove under a railroad overpass and parked the car in a narrow alley between two retail pavilions near Dmitrovskaya metro station. Getting out of the car, he habitually looked at the slightly bent front fender and broken turn signal. It was high time to get it fixed and touched up. The fall would start soon, rains and all. Corrosion would grow like spring grass on a sunlit hill. But everything takes time and money.

The small window of a baked goods kiosk gave off a mature smell of fresh bread. A big woman working the counter adroitly stuffed a brick of rye into a plastic bag, matte and rustling, and handed it to him along with change.

It's got to be hard to stay fit among appetizing smells, though the skinny Andrei. His fingers, as if on their own volition, sank into the flavorful softness. Like an impatient kid, he broke off the end of the loaf; his mouth started salivating even before his teeth tore into the porous crust.

He didn't feel like going back to the stuffy car right away. Andrei walked into a shady spot, moved his shoulders to unstick the damp shirt from his back. The bag was dangling on his wrist; a light breeze pleasantly cooled his sweating body.

How about some water?

His eyes scanned the small square for a suitable kiosk. Something about the foot traffic was unpleasantly off; it gave him a weird feeling, like a speck of dust in his eye. *Okay, here are three men drinking beer by a colorful store display. The bottles are sweaty, just out of a fridge, so there's got to be water in that fridge, too.*

Andrei took a step toward the kiosk he selected, and the feeling of eye sore returned. An indistinct feeling of danger crept in. He's been through this during the first Chechen war; everything around was still quiet, but something was already wrong.

He tensed without realizing it; shoulders unmoving, a slight turn of the head. His gaze landed on a scared-looking strange woman erratically looking around. Now that was the reason! It was that erratic glancing that made him uncomfortable.

The woman stopped indecisively obstructing the foot traffic. Andrei looked more closely. Dark complexion, straight longish nose, a headscarf covering the forehead, oversize knit cardigan, long, to the ground, dark skirt, hands clasped over her belly, like she was pregnant. From what God-forsaken place has she come into the capital city?

He kept looking. The woman, with a worried expression on her face, was looking at a policeman taking his time checking identification of a swarthy man from the Caucasus. The cop finished his inspection, handed back the papers with visible displeasure, and spotted the scared woman in a headscarf in the flow of foot traffic.

Good thing the cops were harassing the swarthy, Andrei thought. What the hell were they doing in Moscow anyway?

The policeman, looking tired, adjusted his hat and started toward the woman. Vlasov, curious, turned to look: would the woman try to get away? She definitely had a paperwork problem. Should he gently hold her arm to help the public servant extract a bribe out of a provincial from the Caucasus?

The woman, still indecisive, took a step back. No, honey, you aren't getting away! Andrei smirked and quickly caught up with her. Behind his back, the policeman was clumsily navigating the foot traffic. The scared woman started looking for something inside her clothes; the nondescript cardigan opened up. Andrei suddenly noticed that the woman was young and slender. She was nowhere near forty as he first thought; a girl of barely twenty, just dressed like a villager.

On her stomach under the blouse, Andrei noticed an unnatural bump. Was she really pregnant? His brain was still trying to find an explanation, while the eyes noticed a strange hand movement. Her fingers now held a small black box with a thin twisted wire sticking out of it and disappearing into her clothes.

"Allah akbar!" the girl screamed. Fear in her wide opened eyes, her finger hit a bright button on the little box.

Hearing the call gave Andrei an electric jolt. The two words switched him into the danger mode, when a split second can make all the difference between life and death.

He hit the girl's arms, pushing them to the sides. Tore the triggering device away from her. More wires were hanging down from under her blouse; the girl was confused, the expression of desperation on her face. Both her hands closed on Andrei's fist clutching the trigger.

"Allah akbar!" she screeched, scratching with her fingernails.

Andrei threw the trigger away, bloody scratches on his hand. A few scared passerby stopped. Everyone was looking at the girl. She lifted up her blouse and started fiddling with torn wires.

"Allah akbar!" she lamented.

On her waist, there was a wide belt wrapped in tinfoil.

People in the crowd screamed.

"She's got a bomb!"

"There's a Shahid¹!"

"Aaaargh!"

Many tried to run away. Crush, panic, crazy screaming! The policeman reeled back, stumbled, and fell down. Then he got up and hid behind the corner of a nearby building. His hat, left on the ground, was trampled by the crowd.

The three beer drinkers, bewildered, started pointing their fingers.

"Hey, she wanted to kill us!"

¹ Shahid, literally translated from Arabic as "witness", also denotes a Muslim martyr. In Russia, the word is often used by non-Muslims to refer to a suicide bomber. (Translator's note.)

“For reals!”

“Let’s rough up the bitch!”

“Kill that snake!”

They surrounded the confused girl. One, wearing a flowery shirt, seized her by her hair and pulled her head back. Another, of a soft constitution, grabbed a beer bottle by its neck. The remnants of beer flowed over his fat arm. Foam was sticking to the red arm hair. The swing-up was accompanied with dirty cussing. Then a blow on the stomach! The blow was awkward and hit the thick belt. The bottle slipped out and broke on the asphalt. Sound of breaking glass and foamy spatter.

“Nah, that’s not how it’s done!” the third one got excited.

He was skinny and muscular, thrill in his eyes, a T-shirt clinging to his athletic frame, a tattoo on his arm. He struck with relish and visible pleasure. His fist collided with the girl’s chest; she fell back, but held up by her hair and pushed forward to meet another blow.

“Allah akbar,” she kept repeating stubbornly. But it sounded like a moan now.

Her helplessness excited the Skinny even more. His next blow hit her in the solar plexus. The girl bent over and gasped for breath. The hitter was pleased and indicated by a hand gesture that he wanted the victim’s head lifted up. This time, the blow was aimed at her mouth, hissing laboriously, “Allah —”. The whisper stopped with the blow, as bright-red blood started flowing from the split lips. The Flowery Shirt still held the girl. His breathing was heavy with excitement, spittle flying around.

“Drop the bitch!” the Skinny ordered. He was genuinely pleased with himself.

The girl was pushed down. She fell on her knees, the palms of her hands landing on the shards of the beer bottle. Her face was contorted with pain, but instead of a scream, her lips uttered another, barely audible, “Allah akbar”. Her headscarf slid off her head; raven-black hair flowed over her shoulders.

A kick landed onto her defenseless body. The girl lost her breath and fell on her side. The Skinny knew how to hit.

The Softie wanted another chance. He was idle for a while and now wanted to catch up.

“Hey, you, take it easy,” Andrei Vlasov asked shyly.

What at first looked like a righteous retribution, suddenly morphed into a brutal reprisal. He saw the girl’s face screwed up in pain. Blood flowing freely across her cheek and chin; her mangled fingers clutching on to her stomach; bloody spots on her white blouse. But no one listened. Human forms jerked excitedly. Kicks kept coming. A crowd of viewers encircled the spectacle. People were slowly getting over the initial shock, fear gradually giving way to anger; they were encouraging each other.

“Hit her!”

“Terrorist bitch!”

“Keep at it!”

“People like that should be killed on sight!”

The policeman, now calm, was watching from a distance, an expression of curiosity on his face. The crowd went nuts.

The girl helplessly threw her head back; lips pressed together, eyes closed. On her outstretched neck, now in full view, right above her collarbone, Andrei saw a dark spot. At first, he thought it was a drop of dried blood. No, blood can’t dry that fast. It’s still flowing on her skin, looking like the crawl or wet crimson worms.

The spot was a birthmark. Just like the one Sveta had!

The constricting feeling of forgotten tenderness made him lurch forward.

He loved kissing that birthmark. Sveta’s was slightly raised; he could find it even in the darkness. Just by running his tongue over it. He has done that many times. Found the birthmark, touched it gently, and then kissed her on her open quivering lips...

The memories made him lose his breath.

“Enough. You’re going to kill her,” Andrei whispered.

No response. People had their backs to him. Behind the kicking legs he could see the girl’s twisting body. Pain radiating from the writhing figure like a palpable wave hit Andrei on the sides of his head; all he could see was Sveta, the girl he loved.

His darling was suffering. It was impossible to take!

“Bomb!” Vlasov shouted furiously and tossed the plastic bag with the loaf of bread in it into the crowd.

Everyone immediately stepped back. The new wave of panic was stronger than the first one. Shouting pushed people into action. People ran away, some fell, covering their faces with their hands. They were stepped on, trampled, stumbled on. Desperate screams! Stampede!

Andrei Vlasov picked up the battered girl. Her body was fragile and light, but the thick oval belt on her waist dragged her mid-section down making it inconvenient to carry her.

Behind the kiosks, he put the girl into the back seat of his car. The key scratched the face of the ignition lock for a time before it finally went in. A turn of the wrist, and the engine started purring; sweaty hands grabbed the steering wheel. The car backed up and then charged away.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, one man kept his cool in the commotion.

A lithe young man by the name of Aslan Kitkiev stood near a newsstand behind a thick trunk of a tree. His hands twisted an open glossy magazine while his eyes carefully watched what was happening. Aslan wore an impeccable dark suit and a light shirt. He didn’t wear ties; rich bangs covered his narrow forehead, his long dark hair was obviously cared for by a good hairdresser. Only his thick black eyebrows and longish straight nose betrayed a native of Northern Caucasus.

The young man’s normally gloomy look turned downright evil as Andrei Vlasov was stuffing the girl into his car. The beige “sixer” was very close; at the last moment, Aslan moved to intercept, but stopped. He was supposed to have nothing to do with this, just be a random passerby.

His teeth were gnashing as his narrowed eyes stared at the license plate of the car driving away.

Chapter 2

August 31, 8:05 PM

Aslan

When Vlasov's Lada disappeared from view, the young man muttered a curse, threw away his magazine, and started walking quickly between apartment blocks. Along the way, irritated, he pushed away a bum in dirty clothes rummaging through garbage. And these were the people he was at war with! Disgusting creatures, lousy pigs, not human beings.

Aslan Kitkiev's thoughts kept coming back to the scene near the metro station. Why didn't Aiza do it? Everything was well thought out. Any sign of danger, push the button, and that's the end of it! Why did the hoe get confused? What was the bitch thinking of? She wasn't supposed to think. Just do what you're told, and that's it!

Has Fatima injected too little into her, or what?

Had the clients not been too cheap for remote control, everything would have been different! Aslan mentally cursed the clients unknown to him, along with the glorious commander who gave him this assignment. After cursing made him feel better, he grudgingly admitted to himself that the clients had nothing to do with this. They paid for an act of terror, and they didn't care about the technology used. It was Aslan himself who was too cheap. He wanted to save some of the advance payment. There was no one else to blame.

But why would he have to reinvent the wheel? The hoes were worked up in the best way imaginable! They were practically sticking their necks into nooses, they didn't want to live. With the first two, everything went down smoothly. Two airplanes fell out of the sky one after another.

Aiza, damn her, was a disaster. And it just had to be the hoe that actually knew him well! Bitch, foul bitch! What went wrong with her? Now there were going to be some big problems.

After passing through several courtyards, Aslan made it to the next street over. His fingers found car keys in his pocket, the car alarm chirped, and the young man got inside an unobtrusive burgundy model nine. Hidden behind tinted glass, he quickly dialed a number on a mobile phone.

A woman's voice answered immediately. Without a greeting, Aslan asked, "Fatima, how did the wedding go?"

"The bride married well," the woman answered excitedly. "Just now."

"How many guests?"

"Enough for the celebration to be remembered for a long time."

There was a pause as the young man passed the phone from one hand to the other.

"Why are you quiet, Aslan?" the woman asked guardedly. "Are you not happy?"

"My wedding didn't work out."

"The bride ran away?"

"No. It was interrupted."

"The uniforms?"

"Doesn't look like it."

"Where is she?" the woman started to worry.

"Some idiot drove her away."

"You know the rules. There is no way back for a bride! Either a wedding or... You had to –"

"Keep your advice to yourself, woman! I know what I have to do!" Aslan barked.

His fist rammed into the car's dashboard; his lips moved in a soundless curse. He hated to be lectured by women. The very word "woman" sounded contemptuous when he said it. They weren't born into the world to tell men what to do.

After he calmed down a little, the young man whispered into the phone, "I'll find her. And kill her."

"Are you done with your hysterics?" Fatima asked calmly. "Now listen to me. You can't come back to the old address. We are meeting as per Plan B. Don't do anything without me!"

In response, Kitkiev roared something indistinct and ended the call. The damned teacher!

His thumb started dialing another number, but after pushing a few buttons, Aslan started thinking. He's already said too much, forgetting the code words. The phone flew to the passenger seat; the car abruptly cut into traffic.

After a few intersections, Aslan slowed down. Now he was driving slowly, looking for something. He noticed a couple of payphones and stopped the car about hundred meters away from them. A few minutes later, he wrapped the payphone handset into a newly bought newspaper and dialed a number by heart.

"Lieutenant colonel Sviridov," a tired voice answered.

Aslan smiled, imagining the unsuspecting expression on the fat-assed policeman's face. He hadn't been bothered lately, so he was about to get a jolt.

"This is Aslan." Kitkiev took a pause, enjoying the shocked silence of his conversation partner, and gave an order, "I need to trace a car by license plate number; owner's name and address. This is urgent!"

The voice on the other end of the line hissed in annoyance, "I said I didn't want to be called again!"

"Write down the number," Aslan said, unfazed.

"Do you have any idea what's happening in the city?"

"I know. I need a name and an address."

"I told you last time I wasn't going to work for you anymore."

"A friend's request – is it really work?"

"I am no friend of yours. Because of a single mistake... I have worked it off."

"Quit whining!" Aslan snapped. He was tired of bickering. "Tomorrow, your video will be in the feds' hands. What song are you going to sing then?"

For a while, the lieutenant colonel breathed into the phone. Aslan broke the silence.

"Are you awake? Do you want me to drive the tape over to them today?"

"Okay, I'll do it. But this is the last time. I want your word!"

"You have it. Write down the number. I'll call back in forty minutes. If you leave office, don't even think of turning off your cell phone!"

Aslan dictated the license plate number of the beige "sixer" and hung up.

The corners of his thin-lipped mouth came apart; he was pleased with the outcome of the conversation. The young man looked around, fixed his hair, and strolled back to his car.

He tossed the newspaper out of the car window after he picked up speed.

Chapter 3

August 31, 8:09 PM

Dmitrovskaya Metro Station

Colonel Oleg Alexandrovich Grigoriev of Federal Security Service urged his driver again, “Come on, Sasha, step on it! You’ve got the flasher on.”

“I am trying, Oleg Alexandrovich.”

“Orders are not to be discussed!” The colonel adjusted his impeccably knotted tie and brushed an invisible speck of dust from his shoulder.

The black Volga was driving in the left lane along Butyrskaya Street, waving into the opposing traffic lanes every now and then. Despite the flashing light, drivers were reluctant to make way.

Grigoriev sat in the front. His fingers drummed on a brown leather portfolio, which he invariably carried into the field. His large head with closely cropped dark hair abundantly streaked with grey constantly turned this way and that in abrupt little motions. It seemed Oleg Alexandrovich couldn’t move his eyes and had to use his neck instead. There was a third person in the car, first lieutenant Yuri Vladimirovich Burkov. Everyone was in plain clothes. The strawberry blond Burkov sat behind his supervisor and reflexively followed the motions of his head.

“Ah, now that’s good,” the colonel approved an apt maneuver made by the driver. “We are a respectable organization after all. And we’re not going to Rizhskaya. Over there, it’s a huge traffic jam for sure. We, meanwhile, don’t have an explosion on our hands.”

“Oleg Alexandrovich?” Yuri Burkov made an awkward pause.

“What?”

“Why did Tomilin and his guys get sent to Rizhskaya, and we, here?”

“Why? You wanted to see dead bodies?”

“Over there, it’s serious. An act of terror. And we... Could be a crank call after all.”

“That’s what we’re to figure out,” Grigoriev replied firmly, signifying the end of the conversation.

Oleg Alexandrovich suspected that early next year, if not earlier, he would be asked to retire. That’s why he wasn’t given any complicated cases. On acts of terror, investigations can go on for months, even years. But his subordinates didn’t have to know that. His goal was to handle things in a responsible manner. And teach his workers to do the same.

The Volga rolled up to the Dmitrovskaya station.

“Get to the other side!” Grigoriev commanded. “Where the police are congregating, can you see?”

“Oleg Alexandrovich – » the driver tried to appeal to the supervisor’s reason.

“Come on, I tell you! You’ll have to turn around anyway. Turn on the siren and go ahead!”

The car, with flashing lights and wailing siren, abruptly turned around across several lanes of dense traffic. Grigoriev jumped out of the car to look around.

The metro station worked as usual, but many kiosks were closed. A dozen or so of policemen, including a canine unit, intensely looked into the passing crowds. Some were pulled aside for ID checks. People threw disapproving glances and walked faster.

The screw-ups, the colonel thought about the cops habitually. They can’t think, so they show up in numbers. Standing around like prison guards, that’s all they’re good for.

Near the beer kiosk, two senior policemen talked to witnesses. When the Volga arrived, they got tense.

Grigoriev motioned to Burkov.

“Yura, find the sales clerks from all pavilions and talk to them.” He, meanwhile, started walking toward the waiting policemen and introduced himself. “Colonel Grigoriev. From Lubyanka².”

² The street in Moscow where the Federal Security Service’s headquarters is located. (Translator’s note.)

“Panteleyev, the head of the local precinct,” the policeman with colonel’s tabs replied, shaking his hand. “This is my deputy, Ignatiev.”

“Where are the prosecutor’s people?”

“On their way. Coming.”

“You mean, crawling? What have you found out?”

“So far, nothing’s definite. Witnesses contradict each other. Looks like someone wanted to incite panic.”

“What the hell? Why incite it here? Just turn on the news.”

“Yes, but – ”

“You reported there was a Shahid woman!”

“We did,” the precinct head agreed. “There was an Eastern woman, looked like a Shahid. She screamed ‘Allah akbar’, but no explosion followed.”

“I can see that no explosion followed!” Grigoriev lost his patience. “Stay on point. Where did the Shahid woman go? What are the witnesses saying?”

“Witnesses... There was panic, people ran away. We only have these,” Panteleyev pointed to the three beer lovers standing nearby, shepherded by two plainclothes operatives.

Grigoriev threw a dirty look into Panteleyev’s face; a verbal chewing-out seemed inevitable, but Oleg Alexandrovich kept his cool and walked over to the witnesses. He picked a fat man with surprised expression on his face and asked him, “What did that suspicious woman look like?”

“A stupid headscarf, ugly, mean. She screamed she’d kill everyone!”

“She screamed about killing?”

“Not exactly. Something about Allah.”

“Going forward, answer precisely.”

“Isn’t it the same thing?”

“That’s up to me to decide. So what exactly was she screaming? Try to recall the exact words.”

“She screamed ‘Allah akbar’!” the skinny beer lover interjected.

“Yeah, that’s right,” the fat one confirmed.

Oleg Alexandrovich redirected his attention to the skinny one.

“Did she have an explosive device? A large bag or a thick belt under her clothes?”

“She did!” the witness rejoiced. “Something on her stomach. With wires sticking out.”

“Have you actually seen the wires?”

“Yes, she clutched at them. And she had an accomplice, too.”

“An accomplice?” Grigoriev frowned. “Have you seen him?”

“Yes.”

“What did he look like? Can you describe him?”

At that point, the witness in a flowery shirt joined the conversation. Waiving his hands, he explained to Grigoriev, “A typical Chechen! Wild eyes! Screaming! And a trigger device in his hand.”

“Nah, he didn’t look like a Chechen,” the fat one was doubtful.

“Who is he, if not a Chechen? Those bastards blow up everything. They should all be booted out of Moscow and not let back in!”

“Well, I didn’t get a chance to look at him closely. Maybe he was a Chechen.”

“I am sure he was! Young, insolent.”

Grigoriev decided to interrupt the argument.

“Tell me about the trigger device.”

“Sir,” the precinct head interjected, “we actually picked it up at the scene.”

He handed out a plastic bag holding a smashed box half the size of a matchbox.

“Is this it?” Grigoriev asked warily, looking at the splintered pieces of plastic.

The three witnesses replied simultaneously.

“Yes.”

“That’s it.”

“He was about to blow us all up. How did we manage to stay alive?”

“Because we stood up to him.”

“Yeah, were it not for us, there would be nothing left here,” the fat one said assuredly. “Everything would be blown up.”

The precinct head could not hold his indignation and said firmly, “The act of terror was prevented by our officer. It was he who stopped the terrorist on her way into the subway. He’s here.”

Panteleyev pointed out a plain-looking sergeant holding a crumpled hat in his hands. Grigoriev was suddenly interested.

“How did it all start?”

“I was checking papers. Stopped the suspicious-looking individuals. So I wanted to check her papers, too.”

“Because she looked like she was from the Caucasus?”

“Um, yeah. She was dressed strangely, eyes shifty. I came up to her, she started screaming. I pulled the trigger from her hand, and then... then the panic started. So she disappeared.”

Oleg Alexandrovich pulled the case of the trigger device apart without taking it out of the bag. A simple design; a power source, a button, and a switch. No remote control.

“Were there two of them?”

“She had a helper,” the policeman nodded assuredly. Otherwise, I would have handled her.

“What kind of car have they driven away in?”

“I didn’t see that.”

“Have you noticed the car?” Grigoriev asked the civilian witnesses.

“No, we haven’t.”

“Everyone was lying face down. There could be an explosion.”

“The Chechen and the Shahid woman ran over there, behind the kiosks,” the guy in the flowered shirt said.

Grigoriev turned to Panteleyev.

“If the presence of an explosive device is confirmed, our office will take over the case. Get the witnesses and the officer to our office for some Identikit work. And have your people canvass the area. Someone might have seen something coming home from work or looking out the window. In other words, the usual. Got it? Any additional information, contact me directly at this number.”

The colonel took a business card from the breast pocket of his impeccable suit.

“We’re working on this already,” Panteleyev replied uncertainly, putting away the card without looking at it. He looked unhappy, staring into the asphalt under his feet. It was clear that the head of the precinct didn’t like being ordered around by the feds.

“That’s good,” Grigoriev smiled condescendingly. “When you’re done, report.”

Oleg Alexandrovich noticed first lieutenant Burkov standing nearby in a tense pose and took him aside.

“What have you got?”

“Broad strokes, Oleg Alexandrovich, it’s like this. There was a Shahid woman, her bomb didn’t go off, and her accomplice helped her escape.”

“Broad strokes I already know myself. Give me the details! What kind of car did they have?”

Burkov, guilty expression on his face, spread his hands. “None of the merchants had seen the escape car. They’re scared out of their minds, some are in shock.”

“Bad business, Yuri,” Grigoriev signed.

Burkov took out a cigarette and a lighter.

“Put it away!” the colonel ordered quietly, but firmly. “You and I represent an important government organization before the ordinary citizens. By our appearance and actions, they judge

the entire Service. Look at yourself. Crumpled pants, stained tie, and about to smoke. No smoking in public! Better yet, quit altogether.”

The first lieutenant crushed the cigarette in his hand, embarrassed, and started looking around for a place to toss it. The colonel reassuringly patted him on the shoulder.

“Keep the office’s image in mind. And one more thing. This is a busy place. Someone definitely saw the terrorists leave. Maybe even remembered the license plate number. Keep working the scene, and I’ll head back. Have to look at everything together. I have a feeling that those airplanes and today’s events are links in one chain. And that chain isn’t complete yet. You find out anything, call me.”

Chapter 4

August 31, 8:11 PM

Riga Overpass

Andrei Vlasov drove onto the Riga overpass and immediately found himself in a standstill traffic jam. Cars barely moved; drivers looked down, bewildered. Between the Rizhskaya metro station and the Krestovsky shopping mall, several cars were on fire. A thick column of black smoke rose up into the sky.

Andrei stuck his head out of the car's window. Up ahead, a young woman driving a Toyota Corolla looked this way and that and kept asking, "What is this? Why are they on fire?"

"An act of terror, dammit," a tired-looking cabbie cursed. "A bomb."

"Maybe an engine shorted out and went up in flames?" Andrei made a guess.

"An engine fire? Are you freakin' blind? Look at it!"

Vlasov looked and froze.

On a square in front of the metro station, people were wounded. The lightly wounded, their clothes torn, tried to help themselves and others. Some barely moved, but there were dead, too. Immobile bodies broken by explosion left no hope for an alternative outcome.

"What a nightmare," the Corolla girl moaned, rolled up her window and tried to drive between the lanes.

Vlasov got out of the car. His eyes kept stumbling on the details of the horrible spectacle.

An elderly woman desperately tried to hold together the bloody mess that used to be her abdomen. A severed hand with fingers spread apart was lying on the sidewalk tiles.

"Look over there," the cabbie pointed.

Andrei turned and shivered. On the roof of a pavilion, there was a woman's head. The face, deep cuts all over it, eyes gone and mouth open, was turned towards the metro station. Long black hair got into the gaping mouth, clung to the empty eye sockets and the bloody fragments of the neck. The hair must have gotten tangled when the head rolled along the roof like a ball.

If the head is on the roof, the body... Now it was clear what the strange lumps in-between the bodies were. The soot, it seemed, smelled of burned flesh.

The cabbie wheezed. He was throwing up.

The sound of sirens made Andrei tear his eyes away from the terrifying picture. Through the standstill traffic on Prospekt Mira, multiple ambulances and fire engines made their way. He felt a little better. At least someone would get help.

Vlasov returned to his car. On the back seat, the battered girl stirred. With some difficulty, she lifted herself up, a grimace of pain on her now pale face. She saw the fire and black smoke and leaned forward. An expression of interest showed in her eyes.

"Is that a metro station?"

"Rizhskaya."

The girl's thick black eyebrows furrowed; she whispered grudgingly, "Zarima is already in paradise, and I..."

She looked up and around. The sight of the traffic jam seemed to somehow improve her mood. Her lacerated fingers picked up the loose wires and tried to connect them. When the naked wires touched, the girl closed her eyes happily and leaned back on the car seat.

The traffic jam started moving. Andrei drove in short bursts, looking at the girl in the rearview mirror. The smile was gone; she opened her eyes, surprised, and tried to reconnect the wires a few more times.

"It won't detonate. The battery's gone," Andrei explained calmly.

The surprise in the Shahid's eyes turned into desperation. Her narrowed eyes stared at the car's cigarette lighter. Picking a moment when Vlasov's attention was on the road, the girl pushed the

lighter in. When it popped up, she grabbed the little cylinder with a hot spiral inside and jammed it into her belt. Her clothes began to singe.

Andrei turned to look and braked hard.

“Stupid!” He tried to pull away the hand holding the lighter.

The girl bit him on the wrist. Andrei wrestled the lighter away from her and threw it out the window. On his hand, there were bloody teeth imprints.

“What a beast! Are you tired of living?”

The girl hissed. Big dark eyes gave off lightings of fury. Her headscarf slid all the way down to her neck. She started thrashing, strands of hair falling across her open forehead.

“Hey, Shahid, calm down. You’ll wreck my car.”

The girl opened the right door and tried to get out. But the door was blocked by the bus sitting next to the car in the traffic jam. She threw herself over to the other door and pulled the handle. Andrei looked at her fruitless efforts and smirked, “Sorry, that lock’s broken.”

The girl, hysterical, attacked Andrei; screaming, she went for his throat. Her fingers pressed on with mad determination; her fingernails bit into his skin. Vlasov swiftly swung his elbow backward.

“Get away from me, you idiot! You’ve already been beaten up!”

A powerful swing hit her squarely on the head. The girl helplessly dropped back on the seat. He heard a common sniveling female weep.

Andrei rubbed his throat and glanced around. From the next car over, the fat driver smiled insolently, but approvingly.

He thinks I am manhandling my wife, Vlasov thought, irritated. A wife; what the hell! For him, there’s only one woman in the world! Only one! And this psychopath... Whatever possessed him to get involved with her?

If only she didn’t have that birthmark on her neck. Just like Sveta’s...

Chapter 5

Nord Ost

Day One

Sveta. His darling Svetlanka. How could he forget her?

So many times he was startled by incoming calls on his cell phone. So many times he thought he heard her voice and saw her lithe figure in the street crowd. So many times the simple melody of a popular song brought him back to the day when their carefree life changed forever.

On that October evening, Andrei ambivalently watched TV. A movie was on; something about a werewolf and wolves. Actors worked hard at creating fear, indistinct howling figures and wild green eyes flashed on the screen.

His cell phone chirped an upbeat melody. Andrei, suppressed expectation in his heart, picked it up and wasn’t disappointed; it was Sveta. A few days back, they had a stupid falling out. He tried to call her several times to make up, but Sveta coldly rejected his requests to see her. But now she was calling him!

The beloved voice was unusually incoherent and worried.

“Andrei, I can’t call my mother! It’s always busy. Call her and tell her that I am okay. I just can’t get out.”

“Sveta, hi. I’m glad to hear you,” Andrei felt a happy smile widening on his face.

“Andrei, I am at Nord Ost. There are armed people and women in black masks in the theater. Looks like Chechens. They aren’t letting anyone out.”

“Nord Ost?” The beginning of the sentence blocked out the rest. Sveta was watching a musical? So she’s not alone. But not with him. “Who are you with?”

“It’s not important!” the girl shouted, irritated. “Tell Mom I am alive and well, just can’t get out of here. I don’t know when I’ll be home. That’s it, I can’t talk anymore.”

Short beeps banged into his ears like large drops of water falling into a metal bowl. Andrei blindly stared into the TV. He gradually began to understand what he just heard. Armed people in a theater! Men and women. Chechens! How did they get there? This was Moscow, not Grozny! It couldn’t be! It was unthinkable!

Was this some kind of prank?

Andrei, bewildered, kept dialing Sveta’s home number. Short beeps. Just like she said. Finally, he heard her mother’s voice.

“Hello, Polina Ivanovna. This is Andrei. Is Sveta home?”

“No, she’s off to see a play.”

“A play? Nord Ost?”

“Yes. Everyone says it’s a great musical, so she went. How come you’re not with her?”

“Um, it sort of happened that way,” Andrei mumbled. *Sveta is in that theater, and that’s not a joke*, he thought.

“Did you two have a fight?”

“Sveta called me and asked to tell you not to worry.”

“Why would I worry? Sveta’s a big girl. Are you not telling me something?”

“No. It’s just that she could be late.”

“With you? Does she want to stay at your place tonight?”

“I am just telling you what she asked me to. I’m home.”

“Oh, you youngsters! What are you up to? Have her call me, okay?”

“Of course; I’ll tell her. Goodbye, Polina Ivanovna.”

Andrei tried to call Sveta’s mobile. No answer.

The movie was interrupted by a news flash. The female newscaster was saying imperturbably, “It just came to our attention that in Moscow, a group of armed individuals has taken control of a theater during the showing of the Nord Ost musical. Shots were heard in the building. All spectators and performers are held hostage. Right now, the theater is surrounded by special services and police. Negotiations have started, but the terrorists’ demands are still not clear. There’s no information about casualties. Expect an update in fifteen minutes.”

Andrei, confused, lowered the hand holding the mobile phone, which he held by his ear all this time. The screen came alive again with the gloomy frames of the werewolf movie. After the shocking newscast, characters’ fears seemed ridiculous.

Andrei pushed a few buttons on the TV remote. Different channels repeated the scant information about the attack on the theater on Dubrovka.

Was it really that serious? No, it couldn’t be! Moscow was a peaceful city; there couldn’t be a large number of armed bandits. It was probably just a couple of crazy idiots with handguns; they would be easily neutralized soon enough.

In the next news update, TV was reporting live from the scene. Armed people, it was said, were numbered in dozens; they threatened to blow up the theater if the war in Chechnya is not stopped.

“Those Chechens again! Monsters, there’s no life around them,” Andrei’s mother cursed on the spur of the moment. She, in her nightgown and bathrobe, came out of her bedroom when she heard the troubling newscast. “When are they going to be over with? Praise God you’ve finished your service. I was so worried...”

The woman launched into her customary speech about how she was scared and worried while Andrei served in the army.

The scar left by a Chechen bullet on Andrei’s shoulder started itching. The old memories reminded of themselves with a chill. What must Sveta be going through? She was scared often; she

was even afraid of mice. If she lost it, the terrorists would kill her in a blink of an eye. He knew what they were capable of.

He immediately thought that had he been there, everything would be different. He would calm her down and think of something. There is no such thing as a no-exit situation.

Andrei maniacally watched the news, flipping channels, and with every second, he realized more and more clearly that this wouldn't be over soon. It would be serious business.

Late at night, he heard police sirens and looked out the window. Along Volgogradsky Prospekt, a convoy of armored vehicles and military trucks was moving downtown. The authorities must be preparing for resolution by force. In that case, there was no way to avoid casualties.

He thought it best not to think of the worst. He couldn't wait! He had to act!

Andrei found the army dagger that he had hidden in a toolbox. The heavy handle comfortably fit into the palm of his hand; the steel blade gave off cold specks of light. Andrei put on a hooded windbreaker and unlocked the front door.

"Where are you off to?" he heard Mother's sleepy voice.

"Sleep, I'll be back soon," he assured her and slipped out of the apartment.

He wanted to be with the woman he loved and he was convinced that if he couldn't save her all by himself, he would get into the building during the breach and protect her from any danger.

The interior of the Lada, damp with the moisture of the autumn night, made a surprised squeaky noise as he plopped onto a faux leather seat. Andrei stepped on the gas and drove into the Volgogradsky. On the intersection with Melnikov Street, he hooked an illegal left and immediately faced a police cordon. He parked the car in a nearby courtyard, went around the cordon, and came up to the front of the theater.

The giant Nord Ost sign was brightly lit. Under it, bullet holes were visible in the foyer windows. The entire Dubrovka was full of cars and buses. Numerous TV crews tried to get footage, soldiers smoked by the armored vehicles, careful to stand on the protected side, policemen kept away the gawkers and tried to maintain vehicle access.

Can't get in through the front, Vlasov thought.

Behind the theater was some kind of industrial plant. Andrei stealthily scaled the fence. He could see soldiers there as well, but it was dark, so he walked by a long wall trying to get closer to the theater. When he found a shallow pit around a basement window, he moved aside the unattached latticework and jumped into the pit. He pulled off his windbreaker and used it to press the glass in. When he was in the basement, he looked around.

It was a low-ceilinged utility basement. Pipes of different sizes with valves and taps on them came in from different sides. A big bunch of pipes went out towards the theater.

Andrei broke through the flimsy wall above the pipes. Now there was about fifty centimeters of crawl space between the pipes and the ceiling. Andrei carefully crawled on the grey pipes. Every now and then, he would flick on a cigarette lighter to look around. The pipes were hot and dusty, wrapped in wire mesh that sometimes caught on his clothes. Soon, the bunch of pipes curved and went into a wall.

Andrei carefully felt around the obstacle. Here, just as in the beginning, the wall was just a few barely cemented bricks. He could see light through the cracks. Andrei pulled out the dagger and started prying the bricks out one by one. After he removed two bricks, he saw a room with concrete walls. This had to be the theater's basement.

He was close!

Never mind if he's found, he thought. They'd think he was a theater employee hiding in the building and put him with the hostages. The important thing was to be close to Sveta.

Suddenly, one of the bricks slammed into the floor. There was the sound of footsteps in the room. Andrei held his breath.

The man in the basement didn't think long. A handgun appeared in the opening above the pipes. Its barrel was pointed at Vlasov.

Without thinking, Andrei stabbed the hand. There was a scream, then furious cursing. Vlasov picked up the dropped handgun and quickly crawled backwards. When he was behind the curve, a burst of machine gun fire erupted above the pipes. The banging was unbearably loud. Andrei curled into a donut, shielded his face, and felt tiny shards of concrete bite into his clothes.

When the shooting was over, he heard the hissing of water. Up ahead, hot water sprang out. The crawl space was quickly filling with steam. It looked like the machine gun fire damaged one of the pipes.

The return trip took much longer. Andrei had to crawl feet first, because there was no room to turn around.

Vlasov waited until gloomy morning and exited the plant pretending to be one of its workers.

Chapter 6

August 31, 8:26 PM

Vlasov's Car

After he got out of the traffic jam on the Riga overpass, Andrei Vlasov made a fortuitously easy dash along the third belt road and turned off into Volgogradsky Prospekt. Music on the radio suddenly stopped; it was urgent news. A fast-talking female voice said, "News flash. Twenty minutes ago, there was an explosion in Moscow, at the Rizhskaya metro station. There are dead and wounded. Their numbers are still being ascertained. The city's emergency services are conducting rescue work. One theory is that the explosion was set off by a female suicide bomber. To remind, a few days ago, female terrorists calling themselves Shahids blew up two passenger airplanes departing from the Domodedovo airport. About hundred people died. According to the law enforcement authorities, there were four Shahid women deployed in Moscow to conduct acts of terror. If that's the case, another explosion is to be expected soon, for the fourth suicide bomber is still at large."

The newscaster caught her breath; there was the sound of shuffling paper.

"We have just received new information. Near the Dmitrovskaya metro station, an unidentified woman attempted to detonate an explosive device. Police officers intervened. There was no explosion, but the terrorist managed to escape. Her description has been sent out to all police stations. Moscow's law enforcement is working extended shifts. Stay with us; we'll keep you posted on any developments."

At the mention of police officers preventing the explosion, Vlasov smirked. The girl in the back seat quieted down and listened intently. Andrei glanced at her. Looking scared, her whole body curled into a ball, tangled hair, ridiculous clothes. And that stupid headscarf to top it off. A scarecrow, really.

"Hey, scarecrow! Does it feel good to be in the news?"

The girl kept quiet.

"Are you Chechen?"

She shot him a glance. But the rage was gone quickly. She was too weak for rage.

"You don't have to answer. I can see you are. And don't you cast lightning with your eyes. I know how much you people love us. Just as much as I love you."

They rode in silence until the turn to Lyublinskaya Street. Near the Tekstil'schiki metro station, Andrei pulled over. Out the window, there was the usual throng of people between the subway station exit and bus stops. Only police presence was much heavier.

"Get out, you wanted to," Vlasov waved his hand toward the station.

The girl curled even tighter, trying to hid behind the car door. Her eyes stared at the uniforms near the station.

"Get out, I said!" Andrei raised his voice. "Get away from me!"

The shouting worked like a strike of a whip. She straightened up, there was determination in her eyes.

"I have to be in heaven. I am a bride of Allah. Get me a battery."

"A battery? To you? What a bitch!" Andrei flared up.

He made a fist and punched himself on a thigh.

The Lada jerked forward running a red light over a pedestrian crossing. Andrei sped along Lyublinskaya Street; the girl was mumbling non-stop, "I want to go to paradise, I can't live anymore. I must die and go to paradise. Zarima, Mareta, and Yahita are there already. They are well. Get me a battery. I can't live here! Get me a battery, I'll take some infidels with me, and Allah will reward me for my suffering. I want to go to paradise!"

Andrei turned into an empty alley, then drove on to a dirt road. On one side, there was a concrete fence, on the other, a railroad. When the car reached a dark spot, he braked hard, jumped out of the car, and pulled the door open.

"Do you think I am helping you, bitch? Do you really think I am going to help you kill my people? Who do you take me for, bitch? I fought against you in your shitty mountains. I shot at your

bearded degenerates. Here!” Andrei pulled on his shirt and poked his finger into the bullet wound scar. “That’s a Chechen mark. And a buddy of mine, Sasha Petrov, didn’t come back. Stabbed while in captivity. They cut his belly open side to side and left him to die.” He leaned toward the girl and hissed, “Since then, I’ve been killing your prisoners.”

The Chechen seemed to be glad to hear this muddled outburst.

“So kill me, too! You’re Russian, you’re so brave and strong, so kill me. I am your enemy.”

Andrei wanted to take a swing at her smiling face, but stopped at the last moment and only pushed her rudely.

“I will if I have to! I know how to do that. I do...”

Chapter 7

Nord Ost

Day Two

Vlasov couldn’t stay still. He kept thinking about Sveta. She’d been a hostage for eighteen hours now! How was she holding up? When was it going to be over? Where were the supposedly highly acclaimed special forces?

Heavy thoughts gave way to rainbow-colored hopes. If she thought of him at the moment of need, it had to mean she still thought of him as the closest person in the world. Sveta reached out only to him and her mother. That said a lot. She put her hope in him, she believed in him, and maybe she still loved him.

If only she made it out alive! Then everything would straighten out; indeed, until recently they felt good about being together.

Thinking along these lines, he watched the news all day long on different channels. Suddenly, it was announced that a hostage was killed, a young woman between twenty and twenty-four years of age. The camera showed a covered dead body being carried out of the theater on a stretcher. His heart started racing. What if that was Sveta? She was twenty-two.

He was instantly overwhelmed with a hot wave of rage; he couldn’t see straight. If that was she, he would avenge her! If Sveta was dead, he would have revenge on her killers!

Even fighting in Chechnya and losing friends, he never felt such burning hatred toward the opposing fighters. That was war, armed men died. Nothing to be done about it; those were the rules of war.

But what did that have to do with his darling Svetlanka? She was always opposed to that war and felt for the Chechens!

Andrei’s body tensed, teeth clenched, veins snaked on his temples. No, he wouldn’t let it go! The bandits had to be spoken to only in the language of power. They understand no other language. The only valid response to their threat is a counter-threat!

Andrei turned on his computer and barely finding the right keys, typed, “Baraev, a woman I love is among your hostages. If she dies, I will kill ten Chechen women. And I am not going to go to Chechnya for that. I will kill them here. I will kill the innocent. Just the way you did. That will be my revenge! You do respect blood revenge, don’t you, Baraev?”

Once again, he drove up to the ill-fated theater. He rubbed elbows with journalists and when no one was watching, stuck his message under a windshield wiper of an NTV van. After a few minutes, the message was noticed. Someone took it, read, and quickly walked off to somewhere.

Andrei tried to find out the name of the dead woman. No one seemed to know. He kept asking if anyone had seen the deceased hair color. One photographer said her hair was fair and short; he even took a few pictures.

“Where are they? Show me!” Vlasov demanded.

“Can’t; already sent them to the editor,” the photographer shied away.

Fair! Short! Like Svetlana's, Andrei kept torturing himself. Her hair color went so well with her name.

He tried to call Polina Ivanovna, but her phone was dead.

She must be around here somewhere, among the hostages' relatives. But that simple thought was quickly displaced by another. What if she had already been told about her daughter's death and asked to identify the body?

Andrei walked every street in the neighborhood, looked into the faces of hunched women, but haven't come across Polina Ivanovna. He kept dialing Sveta's number, then Polina Ivanovna's, then Sveta's again, but all he ever got was an unending series of beeps. Along with the soulless sounds, his body was pierced by fear; Sveta was dead!

Fear and pain gave way to determination; he must take vengeance!

Chapter 8

August 31, 8:33 PM

Vacant Lot near a Railroad Line

Andrei turned away from the girl's prostrate form on the car seat; his trembling fingers were having a hard time pulling a cigarette out of a crumpled pack. The lighter wouldn't work, either. *The car's lighter would be handy right now, he thought, too bad I threw it away.* Finally, the end of the cigarette caught a tiny lick of flame. Andrei pulled on the cigarette with delight.

The suicide bomber wailed covering her face with the palms of her hands. This typically female reaction to life's troubles calmed Vlasov down. Or was it the strong tobacco in the cigarette? Lately, he smoked much more than he used to, and stronger stuff, too.

Between sobs, the girl moaned, "I don't want to live, I don't..."

Without turning, Andrei said through his teeth, "Shut it, will ya? I'm not going to give you to the cops. Just take off your belt and get lost."

"I don't want to live," the girl kept saying, rubbing on her wet eyes.

"Okay, the railroad is over there. Go throw yourself under a train."

"Suicide's a sin," the terrorist said earnestly and even stopped bawling. Her rounded eyes looked at Vlasov in amazement. How can anyone not understand this?

"Righteous, are you? So what was it you wanted to do by the metro station? What do you call that?"

The girl sat up, put the palms of her hands together, and started droning in a monotone, "I must die for my faith. I shall take the enemies of Allah with me; then I shall go to paradise. Paradise is a good place. There is no pain and no humiliation. There are flowers, divine fragrances, and everlasting happiness."

"Exactly what enemies were you planning to destroy? Did you actually see those people by the metro station? Women with children, shopping for the start of the school year!"

"All infidels are enemies of Allah. Your women raise soldiers who kill our children."

Andrei cringed; he'd heard those "songs" before.

"Soldiers are killing children. Yeah, sure, they've got no one else to fight, just children. What are you, a black widow?"

The girl suddenly stopped crying and said dejectedly, "No, I didn't get a chance to be a wife."

"Got it. Your guy fought against the federal forces, so he got wasted?"

"No, he wasn't fighting."

"Had to be a good man," Vlasov winced sarcastically. "What happened to him?"

"He was killed in a raid."

"Happens," Andrei yawned ambivalently.

"What? Happens?" The girl, indignant, jumped out of the car. "They hit him with the butt of a rifle on the head and shot him like a dog. Prostrate, on the ground! He wasn't even armed!"

Andrei flicked away the cigarette butt.

"Don't you make a soldier angry when he's got his finger on a trigger! He may be in a uniform, but he's just a kid, and he pees himself when he walks into your courtyard, with hostile mugs all around! So you and your guy had to stick your highlander pride up your ass when you got raided. Got it?"

Andrei's stare met the girl's; flames of rage ran toward each other and snuffed out like a brush fire when one wave of fire meets another. Andrei looked down and said calmly, "Take off that belt."

"I can't," the girl said desperately.

"What do you mean, can't? Don't make me angry!"

"It was put on so that I can't take it off myself."

Vlasov leaned forward. "Show me."

The girl, ashamed, covered herself; her swarthy face reddened.

“Stop playing hard to get!” Andrei spread the girl’s clasped hands and opened her cardigan. His fingers carefully lifted up the loose blouse. On the girl’s slim waist, there was a weighty foil-wrapped bundle shaped into a wide belt. “Um, nice package.”

The girl pulled the blouse down, “Don’t look!”

“Hands off, okay? Don’t make me angry! I am not trying to play your lover.”

The girl closed her eyes in embarrassment and bit her lower lip; her face bore an expression of suffering.

“Take off your cardigan,” Andrei ordered.

The girl, ashamed, clasped her hands and shook her head no.

“Come on, take it off. No need to cover. I don’t care about your curves.”

“They tied it up from behind.”

“Okay, so turn around.”

The girl obediently took off her cardigan and leaned forward, her face to the car seat.

Andrei lifted up her blouse; on her back were large bruises.

“Ouch! That’s quite a beating you got by that metro station.” He looked closer; along with fresh bruises, there were older, yellow marks. “Where did you get those? Did our military do that? Did you try to fight for your fiancé? Special forces have hard boots.”

The girl sobbed silently; her body started shaking as she wept. Andrei bared her entire back. Under her fine skin, he could see the protrusions of her vertebrae; on both sides of her spine, there were traces of multiple beatings. She wasn’t wearing a bra. Andrei looked askance; he could see a part of her breast and on it, a dark bite mark.

The girl moved her elbow covering her breast; her shoulder blade lifted up on her back.

“What are you looking at? Untie it!” she hurried him rudely.

Andrei bent over the knots; his fingers couldn’t grab on the nylon cord.

“It’s tied fast. Can’t untie.” He pulled with his teeth, but soon gave up. “Looks like this belt wasn’t supposed to come off. Too bad I don’t have a knife. I’ll try a screwdriver. Hold on.”

He opened the trunk; for a while, tools clanged as he rummaged through them. Andrei came back with a small screwdriver. The girl faced him sitting up. Hardened expression on her face, she watched the lights of a commuter train speeding by. When the train’s rattle died down, she said tiredly, “It wasn’t yours.”

“What? I don’t get it.” Andrei inquired.

“It wasn’t the military who beat me up.”

“Who then?” Andrei looked at the girl, surprised.

There was no answer. The suicide bomber turned her back to him and shouted rudely, “Untie it!”

“What do you think I am doing? You better, um, wipe your face. You’ve got dry blood on your lips. I’ve got tissues between the front seats.”

Andrei made an effort and broke the cord in two places with his screwdriver. The belt came off. He weighed it in his hand, ran his fingers over it.

“Solid preparation. About three kilos. They’ve cut up enough wire to cause mayhem! Explosives alone are about two kilos. You know what would be left of you? Maybe your head.” Andrei thought of the woman’s head he saw on a pavilion’s roof near Rizhskaya. “Girl, you would fly all the way up to heaven. With no help from God. Only your fiancé wouldn’t recognize you, I’m afraid.”

He looked for a place to toss the explosives, but put it in the trunk.

“I’ll dump it into the river. Otherwise, kids may find it. Or you, silly, change your mind and get that battery.”

He closed the trunk and looked at the girl standing next to the car.

“All right, goodbye, suicide bomber. Now you’re harmless. Maybe you’ll live a while longer, and I have to go.”

Chapter 9

August 31, 8:45 PM

Grigoriev

Oleg Alexandrovich Grigoriev sat behind the driver and thoughtfully looked through the papers in his leather portfolio. He was no longer concerned about the slow driving. The colonel was more concerned about the troubling events of the last few days; steady movement was helping him concentrate.

Terrorists surfaced in Moscow again. True to their new custom, they were using the most monstrous and most effective weapon, female suicide bombers; someone even came up with a catchy moniker for them, brides of Allah. Had to be decent image makers at work.

How were they able to keep producing those “living bombs”? How much of a fanatic fighter for the illusory idea of independence did one have to be to sacrifice themselves in this barbarous way? Unless it’s something else altogether; fear, hatred, revenge? Perhaps every case had its own motive, but one way or another, the intelligence reports were being confirmed. Another batch of “brides of Allah” had been dropped into Moscow.

How many were there? Most likely, four. That’s what the source in Chechnya said. Unfortunately, he could provide no details, so there was no way to intercept. And now, the results.

First, there was an explosion on a bus stop on Kashirskoe Shosse, which at first received no attention because there were no casualties. That must have been a test of the explosive device. Then, there were horrible crashes of two passenger airplanes that departed from the Domodedovo airport with a brief interval between them.

By now, it was clear that both crashes were caused by onboard explosions. The nature of damage to the planes suggested the use of an explosive device without an outer shell filled with wire fragments, similar to those commonly used in suicide bombings.

And today, two suicide bombings near metro stations, one of which, unfortunately, had been successful.

Analyzing information at his disposal, Grigoriev was beginning to conclude that the same group of terrorists was behind all cases. The entirety of facts suggested that someone brought to Moscow four female suicide bombers. Two of them blew up the airplanes, the other two were supposed to blow up subway stations. One blew herself up on her way up to the Rizhskaya station, too scared of the police patrol to go inside; the other for whatever reason failed. Most likely, a faulty detonator or a dead battery. This kind of thing happened, and it was easy to fix.

But the terrorist escaped.

The colonel winced, thinking about a living bomb hiding in the city, ready to explode at any time in a public place. He wanted to call home and tell his family to stay inside. His wife, to be honest, would be home anyway, but his daughter was getting ready for her wedding, so she spent a lot of time in public places.

Grigoriev dialed the number of his daughter, Lena. “The subscriber you’re trying to reach is not answering or is unavailable,” a soulless voice informed him. This could mean anything, even that the person was already—

No, the colonel cut off the stream of troubling reasoning. Because of this job, the darkest thoughts get into his head. His daughter could simply be on the subway, where mobile communications don’t reach, Oleg Alexandrovich reassured himself. But immediately, there was an old man’s pain in his chest; his daughter was on the subway! Where the suicide bombers were headed.

He wanted to drop everything and go look for his daughter. But what kind of example would he set for his subordinates? He could not incite panic! For that, stupid journalists were more than enough. He must find and neutralize the suicide bomber.

Find and neutralize! Sounds good, but how?

His cell phone started vibrating in the sweaty palm of his head; Russian national anthem started playing. It was Lena's joke; she downloaded the ringtone into his phone and set it up to ring when any of the co-workers were calling. So that had to be an office call.

"Oleg Alexandrovich, I have a description of the suicide bomber," Yura Burkov was chattering excitedly.

"How did you manage that?"

"Interviewed strictly by the book! First the policeman who was on duty near the station, then other witnesses."

"Are you sure they aren't confused?"

"The policeman remembered a lot; the others concurred."

"This is good. Get it to the office and give it to the press."

"To the reporters?" Burkov asked shyly.

"Yes. And quickly."

"What about secrecy?"

"Wrong case for that, Yura. Let's make the opponent nervous; they'll make a mistake or get scared and drop their plans."

"She may go in hiding."

"So be it. People's lives are more important. And our job is to figure out where she is and find her there, wherever that might be."

"Got it, Oleg Alexandrovich."

"Now describe her."

The colonel listened to the terrorist's description and hung up.

This was a small success. This was how cases got cracked, step by step. Now his colleagues in the Northern Caucasus would have new information. When added to the previously available data, it might lead to finding out the Shahid's name and known associations. The identities of the two airplane suicide bombers should already be established. They were caught on security cameras at the airport. Also known were the names under which they registered for the flight. The investigating team at Rizhskaya would likely dig up something, too. Forensics from the plain crashes had already come in, DNA analysis was being conducted.

All that would definitely provide some food for thought and help trace the remaining terrorist.

The colonel smiled for the first time today. This was an analytical problem of the kind he liked. He'd have something to do in his office at Lubyanka. Grigoriev snapped his portfolio shut and impatiently tapped the driver on the shoulder, "Sasha, step on it."

Chapter 10

August 31, 8:59 PM

Lyublinskaya Street

Andrei Vlasov walked around the gloomy-looking girl and got behind the wheel. The sound of closing car door put some distance between him and an unneeded dangerous problem. The car made a three-point U-turn on the narrow lane and slowly drove over the bumps toward the asphalt. In the rearview mirror, Andrei could see the girl's figure shrink.

She put her cardigan back on, adjusted her hair, and tied the headscarf. Then the twilight hid her from sight.

Good thing it was over, he sighed with relief. What had got into him? He just helped a terrorist escape retribution! The crowd would have torn her apart, and rightly so. He, the fool he was, had to intervene. He had to forget this stupid story as quickly as possible.

Andrei turned on the radio and immediately got a newscast.

"A detailed description of the suicide bomber who escaped from the Dmitrovskaya metro station has been released," the newscaster was saying. "She appears to be twenty to twenty-five years old, approximately 170 centimeters tall, slender, of dark complexion, oval face of European type, arched eyebrows, brown eyes, the bridge of the nose narrow and straight, wide mouth, triangular chin, long black hair. She was wearing a brown skirt below the knee, a gray cardigan with blue geometric patterns, a light blouse; on her head, a green checkered headscarf. She is assisted by an accomplice, a young man. His description is still being finalized. Law enforcement authorities are asking anyone who has information about the terrorist to call 02."

Not bad this time around, Andrei thought, surprised. He wouldn't be able to give a better description of the girl himself. Except maybe add something about bruises on her back and that damned birthmark on her heck.

He didn't like the sound of the word "accomplice". What a role he'd been given! Wait a bit, and he'd be promoted to mastermind.

He was getting worried.

As soon as the damn Chechen shows her face in public, she'd be grabbed. The police are out in numbers, the description fits perfectly. If she is arrested, she would tell on me, Andrei kept reasoning. She definitely would. If she doesn't want to, the pressure will do the trick. The security services can do that, they have a lot of experience. She'd cover the real masterminds to avoid her family getting hurt, but she'd tell on me for sure. What's her reason to keep quiet about me? None. And if she remembered the car, I've got about five minutes left as a free man.

What a bind! How would I explain the idiotic act I pulled near that metro station? That was aiding and abetting terrorists, pure and simple. Vlasov sighed heavily and cursed through his teeth.

I can't leave her alone now! She'd sink herself and drag me down with her.

The Lada quietly driving along Lyublinskaya Street suddenly made a U-turn over the double solid, tires squealing, and sped back. Turning into the now-familiar alley, Andrei turned on the headlights. The high beams highlighted the figure of a girl wearing a long skirt standing on the side of the road. Without the thick belt under her clothes, she looked taller and more slender. But her headscarf made her look like nun in the dark.

Andrei drove up to her and braked. She apathetically continued to walk.

"Wait! Where are you going?" Vlasov shouted.

The girl, it seemed, didn't notice him. Vlasov lowered a window and barked up the car.

"Where are you going to go now?" he asked in a calmer tone.

The girl looked at him ambivalently, but kept on walking without a word.

“To your people? Here in Moscow?”

The girl shook her head no.

“Good idea. Forget this foolishness and go home.”

The girl still walked barely shuffling her feet, while Andrei drove along.

“Do you have money for the trip?” He looked at her skeptically. “Nah, where would you get it? You were going on the longest trip, the no-ticket-required kind.”

The girl was still silent. Andrei lost his patience, stopped the car and jumped out.

“Wait, you!” He stood in her way, irritated. “At least take off your headscarf, stupid! Otherwise, the first cop you come across will grab you! Your description is already on the radio.”

She stared into his face in confusion. Andrei took her by the elbow and steered her toward the car. The limp female body offered no resistance.

“Okay, here’s the deal. We’re going to my place. You spend the night there. Tomorrow, I’ll get you new clothes and send you home.”

Andrei pushed in the door lock safety and closed the door on the girl’s side. When he got behind the wheel, he turned to her.

“Take off that damn headscarf, will ya?”

The narrow palm of her hand pulled the headscarf down to her knees. The girl shook her head; long black hair fell onto her shoulders.

Andrei said approvingly, “Now that’s better.”

The girl closed her eyes in exhaustion; her head fell back on the seat. Her pale lips opened slightly, and her chin made several jerking motions.

Chapter 11

August 31, 9:20 PM

Safe House

Aslan Kitkiev looked at the apartment number again. Everything was right; building 18, apartment 64. He remembered the address ever since he left for Moscow, but hasn't been here yet. The apartment was a backup location to be used in the event of a partial failure of the operation. It had to have a supply of medication and food for two weeks, enough to sit around without going outside.

Aslan had a key, but he preferred to push the doorbell button and take two steps back. While the lock was clicking, the young man held his hand inside his coat. The palm of his hand was wrapped around the ribbed grip of his handgun.

The door was opened by a woman of about forty. A shock of unnaturally white hair framed her round face with prominent slightly crooked nose, straight black eyebrows, and thin brightly painted lips. At the roots, her hair was black for about a centimeter. Massive earrings pulled down her earlobes. She wore a variety of necklaces, rings, and bracelets. Her pink blouse accentuated not only her large breasts, but also the folds on her stomach.

The woman quickly glanced around and retreated into the apartment. Aslan quietly came in, looked into the only room and into the kitchen. Only after that his right hand left the inside of his coat.

"Where did you leave the car?" the woman asked.

"Don't ask meaningless questions, Fatima! There are more important things now," Aslan snapped and went into the bathroom.

"Nevertheless," Fatima repeated her question when Aslan came out of the bathroom.

"Are you still harping on about the car? What a bore! The next street over, near the store."

"You've finally learned the basics. Now tell me about the girl."

Aslan hated to report to women. Although Fatima had been posted to Moscow years ago and conducted several operations here, it was he who was appointed the head of the group. She would have to report first. But the failure of his mission made Aslan more agreeable on the small stuff. In addition, no one else was there to see it.

He sloppily dropped into the only armchair (let the woman stand!) and briefly told her about what happened to Aiza near the metro station.

"Too bad they didn't kick her to death!" Fatima barked.

"Since that didn't happen, we have to leave!"

"Why?"

"Woman," Aslan hissed, lowering his eyes to fat knees peeking out from under her skirt, "Aiza may already be captured and spilling her guts on us as we speak!"

"She doesn't know about this place."

"No, but she knows us!"

"What about the money?"

"We've done a lot already."

"Especially you. We won't get anything for blowing up that glass booth on Kashirskoe Shosse."

"I know. But three brides out of four succeeded. The airplanes were my work! Or have you forgotten? Hundred fifty thousand bucks would be enough for now."

"We can't leave her alive! That's bad example. Did she come by the old place?"

"No. Vakha is posted there. If she shows up, he'll let me know."

"Just don't bring him here. Remember the rule? Only you can see me."

"And the girls."

"They don't count. They are here today, gone tomorrow. Were it not for today's mishap... Where could Aiza be?"

"I think she's still with that guy."

"Did you find out where he lives?"

“Yes.”

“Is he a cop?”

“No. A common idiot.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s reliable. Our source from the police headquarters came through.”

“That one?”

“Yeah,” Aslan smiled. “It was my idea to recruit him.”

“Show me his address on the map.”

Aslan opened a Moscow road atlas.

“He lives here, on Volgogradsky Prospekt. I wanted to go there, but you said to do nothing until I saw you.”

Fatima faltered, but finally said in a decisive tone, “No. We won’t stick our necks out at night. Too risky. We’ll go there in the morning, when everyone’s off to work.” She opened a curtain slightly and looked out the dark window. “I still hope the girl would push the button. Aiza wanted to die so badly.”

Aslan’s face spread in a greasy smile, “I tried my best.”

Fatima threw him a contemptuous look, but didn’t say anything. She found a remote control and turned on the small TV.

“Let’s hear the news. You’ll see my work, and maybe Aiza would show up, too.”

“What is she doesn’t?”

“The Russians have a saying, there’s no bad thing without a good thing. Tomorrow is September 1, the beginning of the school year. We’ll find her in the morning and send her to a school. I’ll up the dosage, and she’ll do what she must.”

“Are you still drawn to schools, teacher?”

“Why not?” Fatima lowered her voice. “I’ve discussed a school with you-know-who a while ago. And if tomorrow we – ”

“School; girls with bows,” Aslan smiled. “That would be way better than a metro station.”

Chapter 12

August 31, 9:25 PM

Sviridov

"I've had it! I've had it! I've had it!" Lieutenant colonel of police Sviridov clenched his fists and imagined smashing his office furniture. He wanted to turn the desk over, break down the cabinet, kick around chairs and file folders full of paper. He wanted to take out his handgun, empty it into the fire safe's iron door and throw it at the head of the first person to enter his office. He also dreamed, fearfully, of running up to a window and throwing himself out of it. Frame breaking, glass crashing. And a long fall, hands spread, in a cloud of glistening shards.

A whole range of emotions running wild reflected on Sviridov's exhausted face. But his body remained motionless.

Today, the Chechens reminded him of an old sin again.

He got a call from Aslan, the wheeling-dealing bastard who took a video of it all four years ago. He gave him a job to do and said he'd call back. Until the last second it seemed that the callback wouldn't happen. The Chechen would get lost, disappear, vanish, and everyone would forget about a long-gone moment of weakness experienced by Gennady Sviridov, a normal police officer.

But the callback came. The lieutenant colonel mumbled the details of registration of a certain VAZ-2106 automobile, wiped hot sweat with a shaky hand, and released a volcano of curses that up to that point were held inside. Rage boiled on the inside, but on the outside, it manifested only as grimaces of pain, moving of lips, shaking of fists, and pieces of broken pencil on his desk.

In the adjacent offices, his colleagues were working; the lieutenant colonel didn't want any questions from them. He was afraid of them and he was afraid of Aslan.

Gennady Sviridov convulsively pulled out a desk drawer. The plastic tray crashed onto the floor, file folders and notebooks mixed up forming a disordered pile. His hand pulled out of that pile a small burgundy day planner. Inside it, against the back cover, was a black-and-white photo. The lieutenant colonel carefully spread it on his desk.

Two young police lieutenants, uniform hats pushed back carelessly, were laughing into the camera. Pashka Borovkov and Genka Sviridov. The best friends, happy to have received their long-awaited lieutenant's tabs.

The lieutenant colonel's body shivered, the palm of his hand spread tears on the stubble-covered cheek. Shivers and tears have become frequent visitors in the life of an overweight forty-year-old man with thin greasy hair.

* * * * *

Twenty minutes later, Gennady Sviridov left his office. He slowly drove home in his dark-blue Volkswagen; suddenly, a yellow Mazda passed him on the right and braked abruptly in front of a red light. His foot hit the brake, his body shifted forward and leaned on the steering wheel; the policeman's car almost clipped Mazda's bumper.

Sviridov jumped out and yelled at the insolent driver. The bottled-up emotions came out in flares; drops of spit were landing on the tinted glass, his fist banged on the car's roof.

A window smoothly rolled down.

"Pops, go away," a young unshaved Caucasian snapped insolently.

Another one smirked crookedly over his shoulder.

"You sucker, do you have any idea where I can send you?" Sviridov was boiling over. His hand was checking the pockets of his plain clothes for his service ID. The insolent face of the Caucasian now represented everything that was wrong in his life.

"Well, where?" The driver got out of the Mazda, glanced around, and suddenly hit Sviridov in the face with his fist.

His nose was smashed, his head fell back; Sviridov fell.

The Mazda drove away.

Other cars carefully drove around an awkward fat man rolling on the asphalt. Drivers looked in disgust at a staggering man in dusty suit with a porous red nose.

The lieutenant colonel returned to his car and wiped his bleeding nose with a handkerchief. The bout of rage exhausted Sviridov; the “cold shower” of the beating suddenly calmed him down.

“I can’t live like this anymore,” Gennady Sviridov decided firmly.

In the lieutenant colonel’s head, a plan to liberate himself from bonds of fear began to form.

Chapter 13

August 31, 9:40 PM

Vlasov's Apartment

Andrei Vlasov opened the door of his apartment with one hand, while using the other to hold the exhausted body of the Chechen suicide bomber. Were it not for his help, the girl wouldn't be able to walk. She was shaking; large drops of sweat rolled off her hollow-cheeked face; her hair was stuck to her forehead, as if she got wet in the rain.

"Come in, we're here," Andrei helped the girl to come in and sat her down on a stool. He took a deep breath and shouted into the apartment, "Mom, it's me!"

Yekaterina Fedorovna walked into the hallway shuffling her slippers. A well-worn house robe enveloped her full shapeless figure; under the robe, there was a T-shirt, which she wore around the house for years. She got out of her good clothes as soon as she returned home from work.

The woman looked at her son's hands gloomily. "Have you brought bread?"

"I forgot, Mom, sorry."

"Like always; whatever I ask, he does nothing! Can't buy a piece of bread for his own mother."

"Calm down, Mom. Do you have any idea what's happening in the city?"

"Ten reminders, and he still forgets! What kind of life is that?"

"Mom, we'll have to do without today. Let me come in. The girl's hurt."

Yekaterina Fedorovna stood in the middle of the hallway, blocking the narrow passage. She moved her stare to the girl, as if she just noticed her. Her eyebrows shifted toward each other; the lines on her forehead deepened.

"Who's she? You didn't say anything about her."

"Mom, I'll explain later. We have to help her out."

"I haven't seen her before. What's her name?"

Andrei looked at the girl, perplexed; he still hadn't asked her name. The girl looked up and whispered, "Aiza".

"What a name has God given you. You're not Russian, are you?"

Andrei gently pushed Yekaterina Fedorovna aside.

"Mom, questions can wait. Let us through."

"Where did we get such wonder?"

"Mom, later!" Andrei said firmly.

He led Aiza into a small room, sat her down on a couch, and closed the door to block his mother's curious stare.

"Sit still. I'll figure something out. Name's Andrei, by the way."

"I am sick," the girl whispered, her eyes closed. "Very sick."

"What's wrong with you? Can I get you a medication?"

"Pill."

"What?"

"Get me a pill," the girl whispered.

From the hallway, Yekaterina Fedorovna's deliberately loud grumbling was heard.

"Forgot his mother altogether! Only thinks of himself. Brings home who knows whom, God forgive me. Where did he find this tramp? In the farmer's market?"

Andrei made a calming gesture for Aiza.

"Don't pay attention, okay? She doesn't mean it... I'll get you water and find some meds." He stepped out of the room and face his mother, gradually displacing her into the kitchen. "Where do we keep the meds?"

Yekaterina Fedorovna retreated, but continued to grumble, "I can't even get bread from my own son."

"I'll get you bread, okay? I will!" Andrei lost it. "Borrow from the neighbor! Just be quiet."

“What am I being punished for? Others have normal kids, and mine... He even yells. Yells at his mother!”

Andrei decided to ignore his mother's nagging. It was completely impossible to win a verbal confrontation with her. He found the meds and came back into the room with a glass of water. The girl, curled up into a ball, shivered in the armchair.

“Here. I found aspirin and dimedrol. You're probably stressed out. Nerves. A couple of tablets should help. Take them.”

The girl obediently picked up the pills.

“Can you do it yourself? Here's water. I'll be right back.”

Andrei stepped outside the apartment and rang the doorbell of the apartment next door. The door was answered by a chubby disheveled guy wearing a faded T-shirt and rumpled gym pants.

“Hey, Andryukha!” he barked, blowing a heavy dose of vodka vapors into his neighbor's face.

“Hi, Vityok,” Vlasov cringed and took half a step back. “Can I borrow some rye bread?”

“Andryukha! Have you heard what kind of shit's going on?” Viktor Chervyakov waved his hand over his shoulder. Inside his apartment, a TV was blaring. “The Chechens blew up another bomb. Near Rizhskaya. Dropped a whole bunch of people. You know what I would do to those bastards?”

“Why do you think it's the Chechens?”

“Who else?”

“Maybe bandits' turf war?”

“By blowing up bombs near metro stations? Nah, those guys are no more. The TV says, a female suicide bomber.”

“Maybe so. Can I have some bread?”

“Good thing I don't ride the metro. My truck is my other home.”

“Have you got bread?”

“Come in. We'll throw back some vodka. Vodka is liquid bread!”

“I can't right now. Give me some bread; Mom's getting to me with her endless nagging.”

“We won't be long. We'll talk a little, watch some TV.”

“I can't. I'm not alone.”

“Ha, good deal! Who're you with?”

“Will you give me some bread?”

“Okay, okay, right away.”

Viktor disappeared into a dark hallway. He came back shortly. One hand was clutching a quarter-loaf of bread, the other, a bottle of vodka.

“Thanks.”

Andrei took the bread, but the neighbor started tailing him.

“The damned Shahid blew up near the metro,” he muttered from behind. “The TV says it's confirmed. Lots of casualties. She wanted to blow it up on a train, but – » he stopped when he noticed Aiza curled up in the armchair through the slightly opened door. “Who is it you got there?”

Andrei walked on to the kitchen.

“Mom, I've got bread!”

The door squeaked. Yekaterina Fedorovna stuck her head out of her room and threw a dirty look to Viktor and Andrei.

“I don't need anything!” she shouted and slammed the door.

“Hello!” the neighbor said as the door was being slammed. “And goodbye. What's got into her?”

“Nah,” Vlasov waved him off. “Just ignore it.”

From behind the wall came a new wave of irritated grumbling. The tension on the neighbor's face disappeared; he definitely liked the fact that Andrei's mother locked herself in her bedroom.

He looked at the girl curiously, quickly figured out her highland origin, and frowned. His fist clutching a bottle of vodka pushed open the room's incompletely closed door.

Chapter 14

August 31, 9:55 PM

Offices of Federal Security Service

Only the uninitiated think that today's FSS is but a pale shadow of the former KGB. In the early 90s, when everything old was crumbling, it might have been the case, but now, with the new president at the helm, the power of the all-powerful agency was restored, and in some respects even expanded.

The secretive organization once again operated like clockwork. Officers didn't need to worry about reporters' attacks, so common in the past. Moreover, the internal security service protected the officers and could easily put a muzzle on a scribbler running wild. Once again, young capable people started joining up, and they didn't want money as much as they wanted to belong to an elite caste of the chosen. They, like their likes in other developed countries, were attracted to the mystery of the special services. Thank you Hollywood; the filmmakers embellished the intellect and bravery of special service agents and intelligence operatives as much as they could.

Speaking in modern terms, a positive image of the all-powerful organization was created; ordinary citizens didn't shy away from cooperating with it, so the quality of investigative work improved greatly.

This is what colonel Grigoriev was thinking with some satisfaction, as he was sitting at his office computer reviewing the materials collected during the investigation of the two airplane explosions. Success was obvious.

In a matter of days, the identities of suicide bombers who carried out the bloody acts were established. The path of their relocation from Chechnya to Moscow was tracked. Two days before the explosions, both took the same flight; apparently, the organizers were introducing them to the boarding routine and rules of behavior onboard. The details of ticket purchases became known, as well as those of terrorists' boarding the planes bypassing security checks. The criminally negligent officials and the involuntary accomplices have been apprehended.

But all of this didn't make the colonel happy. The immediate supervisor of the suicide bomber girls, the one who accompanied them and gave them their final instructions, somehow remained in the shadows and never came to light. Moreover, it wasn't even clear if that person was a man or a woman. In one case, a middle-aged woman was seen around, in the other, a young man spoke to the terrorists. Witnesses couldn't give a usable description of either.

By juxtaposition of facts, it was finally clear that the group included four Shahid girls. As was the rule in these situations, they were brought in from a region beholden to an influential field commander who worked off foreign sponsors' money in this fashion.

With two of the girls' names known, it was possible to define the circle of suspects. Files on potential suicide bombers were kept meticulously. By now, a few potentials have been identified.

Oleg Alexandrovich once again looked through the descriptions and photos from the database.

A wondering youthful face, then a weary-looking mature woman with crow's feet around her eyes. Most photos were from identification documents and didn't provide a full picture of what the person looked like, but a complete professionally compiled description enlivened the picture, made the person visible and palpable.

The colonel clicked through the photos of young women and rubbed his tired eyes in desperation. None of them matched the description of the only terrorist still at large.

Grigoriev was waiting for new photos from the colleagues in the Southern Federal District. They have received the latest data on the terrorist and were running them hastily.

Oleg Alexandrovich threw some instant coffee into an unwashed cup and poured boiling water over it. He didn't want to go to the end of the hallway to wash the cup. Generals had secretaries, but he didn't make it to general. And never will. Soon, he'll retire. The upper echelons have already made the decision.

Colonel Grigoriev took a sip of hot coffee and smiled. Someone young and ambitious must be eagerly waiting for him to vacate his position. They're probably already trying on the stars on the tabs and evaluate the fit of his office chair for their butt.

Oh well, that was bound to happen. Meanwhile, the colonel still held his office, so he must identify, find, and neutralize the terrorist. In that order: identify, find, and neutralize. Most importantly, identify. This was the problem only he could solve. Others could find and neutralize, but the colonel wanted to do his last job, from beginning to end, by himself.

In the corner of his computer screen, a new message icon started blinking. The colonel clicked on it, and a color photo of a young woman unfolded on his screen. He barely looked at it, and before he read any accompanying text, he realized that was she. He remembered her description too well to think otherwise.

So that's what you look like, a bride of Allah, the colonel thought; but aloud, he read, "Aiza Guzieva, 20 years old."

His screen showed a fresh face of an attractive black-haired girl. Precise arches of eyebrows, childish wide open eyes, straight nose, brightly painted lips, and thin craning neck. Aiza looked to her right; the photographer caught her unaware, probably in motion; a strand of wavy hair broke out of the hairpins, its sharp end almost touching the corner of her mouth.

The girl wore a white headscarf wrapped around her neck. This was good, the colonel thought with satisfaction. Today, the terrorist wore a headscarf, too, although of a different color; it would be easier for the witnesses to identify her.

Grigoriev dialed an office extension and called Burkov into his office.

"Yura, this is our target," Oleg Alexandrovich pointed at the monitor when the first lieutenant came in.

"Are you sure?" The first lieutenant stared at the girl's happy face in confusion. "She's attractive. Why wouldn't she want to live?"

"When we find her, we'll be sure to ask. Meanwhile, find all possible contacts Aiza Guzieva could have in Moscow. Relatives, fellow villagers, acquaintances. You know the drill."

Oleg Alexandrovich finished his coffee, looked at the brown residue on the bottom of his cup, and stuffed the cup into the bottom drawer of his desk. He was too busy to wash it now.

"I am forwarding the terrorist's vitals to you, print the photo out in color," the colonel opened his e-mail and clicked. "Send the photo to the police precinct where the witness is based. Get in touch with him. Let's see if he identifies her."

"Got it," Yuri Burkov mumbled, throwing a sideways look at the clock on his boss' desk.

"And don't you even look at the clock!" Grigoriev noticed the look. "The night is young. If you're done quickly, I'll let you go see your wife for three hours. I used to be young, I understand."

"Oleg Alexandrovich –"

"What, three hours is not enough? Or did you want to catch a nap, too? Pick one, marathon runner."

"I didn't –"

"Stop the gabbing! Proceed with your assignment. I'll be bunking around here."

The colonel looked at the well-worn leather couch with round armrests. This antique probably sat there when the office wasn't even called KGB; it was MGB before. Back in those times, it was customary to stay at work until the mustachioed leader of the world Communism, who preferred night moon to morning sun, turned the lights in his office off for the night.

When he was alone, Oleg Alexandrovich called home. He was worried about his daughter.

"How's Lena?" he asked when he heard his wife's voice.

"God, you still remember your daughter's name!" his wife said sarcastically. "Do you remember she's got a wedding in two days?"

"I do. But does the groom?"

“What are you talking about?” his wife started getting upset.

“Okay, got it. No joking about the holy. Is Lena home?”

“Do you want to talk to her?”

“I tried. Her phone wasn’t answering. Where is she?”

“Home. Just got here. When are you coming?”

“What a silly question,” Grigoriev sighed, relieved. “Are you watching TV?”

“Makes me want to throw up. When is it going to be over?”

“When I am home.”

“So get here already,” his wife tried joking.

“Service first. Rest later.”

“Your daughter is about to get married!”

“We’ll have to wrap it up by then, Valya. I’ll let the terrorists know they have until Saturday to surrender.”

Chapter 15

August 31, 10:00 PM

Vlasov's Apartment

Viktor Chervyakov stepped into the room and stared at Aiza. Vlasov came in behind him.

"Where are you going? Let's get out of here!" Andrei literally pushed his neighbor into the hallway and closed the door. "What did you want?"

"I, um – » Viktor brought up the vodka bottle, "think we should have a drink."

"Some other time."

"Sure, some other time and now!" Viktor proceeded to the kitchen as if he owned the place. The bottom of the bottle plopped on the kitchen table's plastic surface. The neighbor smiled. "Why put off until tomorrow what can be done today? With all this terrorism, I am in such a foul mood, I just don't want to live!"

"You too, huh?" Andrei looked at his neighbor gloomily. "Then strap on some explosives and go see Basaev. A symmetric response."

"Huh? I mean, what the hell is happening in Moscow? First, an airplane, now the metro. I've got to have a drink."

"And everything will be alright?"

"You can't blow up a metro station with vodka," Viktor concluded seriously.

"Okay, let's drink. Today was a stupid day indeed."

Andrei pulled out two glasses and put them on both sides of a salad bowl. Forks chinked as he put them on the table, kitchen stools creaked, skillfully measured vodka gurgled.

"Okay, to health?" Viktor offered.

"Yeah."

The buddies drank and ate some salad. Andrei cut up the bread he brought.

"Now we found a use for the bread," Viktor smirked.

"Yeah," Andrei gave another indeterminate answer. The troubled expression on his face made it obvious that his mind was elsewhere.

"Turn on the TV, the news is about to start."

"Don't want to; I've had enough. I've seen it live. Let's have a quiet time," Andrei answered quickly, putting away the remote.

Viktor poured another round. When they drank, he smiled slyly and asked, "Who's that broad you got there?"

"Nobody," Andrei shrugged. "I just met her today."

"And right away, you dragged her home? A brave one. But she looks strange."

"She's sick."

"Not in the head, accidentally?"

"Haven't figured it out yet."

"Wow! What's her name?"

"Aiza," Andrei signed calling out the unusual name.

"So she's not Russian after all; I thought so! She's not Chechen, is she? She looks like one!"

"So what if she is?" Vlasov flared up. "What do you care?"

"I can't stand them, you know."

"Who? Girls?"

"Of course not! The nosy Caucasians."

"While working for Armenians?"

"I am a delivery driver. What am I to do if they took over the vodka business?"

"Find a job delivering sausages."

“The best sausage is vodka. It feels you up and makes you happy. And Armenians aren’t like Chechens or Azeris. But I don’t like them, either. And I take my revenge on them! In my own way. They suffer!” He flicked on the bottle. “I get by.”

“You’re stealing?”

“Not from the government; only from the Armenians. May they rot in hell!”

“And if your company gets bought by Russians tomorrow, will you stop pilfering?”

“Let it go, okay? I don’t bring home swarthy women.”

“And I just did! Okay, let’s have another drink.”

“That’s better.”

Vityok tossed back another one, leaned forward, and squinted, “Have you forgotten how you wanted to kill all Chechen women? It wasn’t that long ago. Back when the Nord Ost thing went down. You even asked me for an address. Remember? For the first victim.”

Vlasov slowly wiped his moist lips with a palm of his hand; he dropped his head onto his interlocked fists. Little knots of muscles bulged on his wrists. While in service, he realized a terrifying truth: killing people is not very difficult.

One can actually get used to it.

Chapter 16

Nord Ost

Day Two, Afternoon

I have to avenge! They killed, and so must I! I’ll kill! Vlasov kept telling himself on his way home.

He didn’t remember coming home from the theater held by terrorists after leaving a threatening note on the TV van. In his empty head, only one thought rolled around ringing like a steel ball, *They’ve killed Sveta! I’ll avenge her! I’ll avenge!*

His eyes saw the number on his apartment door, but the hand holding the keys went back into his pocket. His hard-to-control body rocked hesitantly and turned to the neighbor’s door. His tense finger kept pressing the doorbell button even after the door opened.

Viktor Chervyakov, the neighbor, looked at Andrei hardly recognizing him. His buddy’s dull eyes, it seemed, looked inward; his stooping figure oozed cold like a stone statue. Chervyakov’s hand took Vlasov’s wrist and pulled the petrified hand off the doorbell button.

“Are you crazy?”

Vlasov’s eyes lost some of their sticky dullness; he recognized his neighbor and gloomily came closer. His hand grabbed at the shirt on Viktor’s chest; his sunken stubby cheekbones started moving nervously.

“Where is she? Where is that bitch?”

“Who? You really need to sleep it off.”

“That Chechen woman. With the kids. Where is she?”

“What Chechen woman?”

“She used to live in our building.”

“Let go, will ya?”

“She was renting an apartment here. She’s been driven out after the house explosions in Moscow. You brought your truck to help her move.”

Andrei lowered his hand. Viktor straightened his shirt and flexed his neck.

“Oh, that one. She hired me all right.”

“Where is she now?”

“What do you want with her?”

Andrei suddenly exploded.

“They kill, so I will kill, too! Baraev spilled blood first! Now it’s my turn.”

“Quiet, you! Don’t yell.” Viktor stuck his head out, looked around, and pulled Andrei into the apartment. The door lock clicked. “This is serious; you can’t do it on the spur of the moment.”

He carefully looked over his neighbor, as if trying to figure something out, then asked quietly, “You want your revenge?”

“Yes,” Vlasov exhaled.

“Kill?”

Andrei nodded curtly. Viktor rubbed his hands nervously; his eyes shifted around looking for something usual and necessary.

“Come into the kitchen. Let’s talk.”

In the kitchen, Viktor took an opened bottle of vodka out of the refrigerator and poured generously into the glasses. They drank in silence, without clanking the glasses.

“Good decision, Andryukha. I would do it myself! But you’d be better at it.”

“Where does she live?”

“Why do you want her?”

“I don’t care, as long as she’s Chechen.”

Viktor took a pause, but not a long one.

“Okay, I’ll tell you. But don’t get me involved.”

“I can handle it myself.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. If something goes wrong... don’t tell on me.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not a baby.”

“Good deal; now listen.”

Viktor gave detailed directions on finding the building and apartment to which he moved the Chechen single mother with children.

“Just don’t do anything rash! Do it properly,” the neighbor urged before saying goodbye.

“I’ll manage,” Vlasov promised heading out.

“When?”

“Now.”

“Maybe – » Chervyakov started to worry.

Andrei turned around abruptly and pulled Victor closer.

“He started it. Now it’s my turn.”

“Of course,” Viktor mumbled, shivering as he took in his buddy’s insane look.

The neighbors said their goodbyes at the apartment’s front door. Viktor Chervyakov stood still and listened to the heavy stomping of his old buddy Andrei Vlasov’s shoes. The footsteps were getting more distant, but not dying down. Then, the building entrance door slammed resonantly. In the silence that ensued, Viktor, trying to control the shivers of excitement, knocked on the wood of the doorframe three times; he wanted Andrei to succeed.

If everything goes right, he’d throw another address his neighbor’s way. After all, the swarthy did take over mother Moscow!

Chapter 17

August 31, 10:15 PM

Vlasov's Kitchen

"Yeah, Andryukha, you were right back then! They kill us, we kill them!"

Viktor moved closer and tried to look up into his neighbor's eyes. Andrei, looking down, kept turning his empty glass in his hands. The glass bottom knocked on the plastic tabletop.

"Those bastards blow stuff up for big bucks; you wanted to do it for an idea. Revenge is a noble business. If someone did that to my girlfriend, I would... Remember Nord Ost?"

Andrei jumped up from behind the table; his chair fell over on the floor.

"I remember everything! I remember too much! I don't know what to do with those memories! They are in me, burning me, burning – "

Viktor hastily splashed into the glasses the remained of vodka.

"Drink it down, Andryukha! And forget everything!"

Yekaterina Fedorovna stuck her head out of her bedroom and winced.

"Another bash. Go easy on the furniture. Who's gonna replace it? And they're gonna it all the bread."

"That bread really got to you, didn't it?" Andrei grabbed the remains of the loaf and rudely pushed them into his mother's hands. "Take it and hide it. And go to bed, don't be in the way."

"Got drank, didn't you? Have some food after you drink. There are dumplings in the fridge. I'll boil them."

"I'll do it myself, Mom."

Andrei almost pushed his mother into her bedroom and came back; he grabbed the glass, vodka splashed out on his fingers. Andrei licked the wet palm of his hand.

"Tomorrow is Sveta's birthday."

"Will you go to her?"

"Yes."

"Then let's drink to her," Viktor lifted up his glass.

"To Sveta!" Andrei said and tossed back the glass. His lips pursed; he noisily inhaled through his nose. Vlasov looked at his buddy from under his eyebrows. "Now go."

"Do you want to spend some time with the girl?" Viktor asked playfully, picking at the salad. "She doesn't look right."

"I told you. She's sick."

"Call her out here. We'll cure her."

"No. Go home."

"And she's dressed like a scarecrow, too. Hey, should I run and get another bottle?"

"Just go, okay?"

"Are you in heat?"

"Go, Vityok."

"Look here, Andryukha. A pussy's a pussy, but I wouldn't do it with a Chechen. If her uncle isn't a bandit, her brother just might be. Or she is a Shahid herself."

"Nobody is asking you to do anything." Andrei nodded toward the exit. "Go, I'll explain everything later."

Viktor reluctantly started down the hallway. Along the way, he, as if by accident, looked into Andrei's room. The girl fearfully looked at the two men; her tense hands rested on her knees. Viktor winked at Aiza with a smile; he squinted and ogled the girl.

At the front door, he whispered to Andrei, "Have you changed your tactic? Now you suffocate the enemy by hugging?"

Andrei, silent, pushed out his laughing buddy and locked the door behind him.

Alone in the stairway, Chervyakov lit up a cigarette. His smile disappeared, his forehead wrinkled up, his lips whispered thoughtfully, “He used to bash their heads in.”

Chapter 18

Nord Ost

Day Two, Evening

His feet plodded through puddles. Cold gusts of wind blew through his clothes; drops of rain ran down his hollow cheeks, getting caught and breaking in his stubble. Andrei Vlasov, consumed by the idea of revenge, paid no attention to whims of nature; before he knew it, he was near the building he looked for. All the way over, he talked to Sveta in his mind. He though she was asking him to avenge her.

He came into a courtyard flanked by two standard five-story apartment blocks. Sveta lived in a building just like these, so Andrei knew the apartments’ numbering. Every time he walked his girlfriend home, he would stand under her windows waiting for Sveta to wave goodbye to him through a window.

He gazed over the façade. The windows of the Chechen woman’s apartment overlooked the courtyard. All windows were dark: no one in the apartment. That was even better; no need to break in, he would wait and do her in the courtyard.

Andrei tried to remember what the woman looked like. All he could remember was an eternally concerned stare of her dark eyes. Would he recognize her? Definitely. She was from the Caucasus after all. She would be his first victim! That was his decision. Why she? What did it matter? She had no time to look for another. He wanted to get it all done today!

Once he decided, he calmed down. His brain was coldly calculating the plan of the murder. The important part was to decide whether he wanted to disguise the murder as a robbery gone bad or to demonstrate right away that it was revenge.

After some deliberation, he decided to stick with option one. It was too early to show that Chechen women were being killed just for being Chechens. After the fourth or fifth instance, everyone would make the connection anyway. And if they didn’t, he would throw a hint to the nosy reporters.

How would he kill her? He wouldn’t use the gun just yet; he might have to use the bullets elsewhere. There are easier ways to kill a single woman.

Vlasov looked around. Along the road, there was a low metal fence, bent in a few places by recklessly driven cars. A few hits with the heel of his shoe, and Andrei was able to pull a piece of rebar out of the ground. Short and heavy: just what he needed. One strike, and that would be it!

Andrei wiped the rod with wet leaves; whatever the reason, he didn’t want to use a dirty rod. In addition, now he could hide it under his clothes. The piece of rebar fit into his sleeve up to the elbow. This way, it was completely invisible. The end stuck out and could be hidden in the palm of his hand. He only had to wait for the victim.

It was still raining; cold, disgusting drizzle. The weather was crappy. Vlasov walked into the other apartment block and up to the top landing. Through the window, he could see the courtyard very well. Wherever the Chechen woman were coming from, she wouldn’t go unnoticed.

Andrei also decided that if anyone sees him in the building, he would put the murder off. He’d find the woman later, elsewhere, and kill her anyway. But right now, he had to be careful. One victim was not enough. He had big plans.

* * * * *

Two hours went by. It was completely dark now, but it wasn’t raining anymore, so the streetlights, it seemed, shone brighter. Finally, he saw a silhouette in the courtyard; a woman and

a boy of about six. For a moment, the streetlight highlighted the long-nosed face with a headscarf wrapping around it.

That's her!

His heart started racing.

During this time, he hasn't seen anyone. So he could act. But the boy? What to do about him? Should he leave a witness? He quickly came downstairs, feverishly adjusting the operation plan.

When he stepped out of the building, Andrei pulled his hood over his head and looked around. Not a soul. The Chechen woman and the boy were fifteen paces away, their backs to him. The ideal setup. The fog of doubt lifted completely; his mind was terrifyingly clear, his muscles tensed.

He would quietly walk up to them. Push the kid hard. The boy would have to fall face down, so that he wouldn't see anything. When he falls, Andrei would hit the woman on the head. Better do it a few times to make sure. Then he would pick up her purse and walk away quickly, but without panic.

He wished the kid wouldn't turn around, or he would have to get rid of him, too.

Andrei wasn't worried about accidental witnesses. A black hooded figure in a dark courtyard; with a description like that, he'd never be found. He wouldn't leave any fingerprints, either. He would only take cash from the purse and dump the rest around the corner. Let it be found. A typical robbery. And he would destroy his gloves and jacket. Just to be sure.

"Sveta, I will avenge you!" he thought excitedly.

Vlasov was catching up to the woman quickly, but quietly. He could walk stealthily; he learned that in the army.

Five paces between them. Now, only three. Show time!

The woman stopped and started to adjust something in the boy's clothing. Andrei, looking only at the back of her head covered with the warm headscarf, took another step, pulled the piece of rebar from his sleeve unsteadily, and raised his weapon.

The kid! He had to push the kid first!

But his hand was already raised high. Now he would have to kill him too.

Chapter 19

August 31, 10:25 PM

Andrei's Room

After he showed his neighbor out, Vlasov came back to Aiza. The girl's tension and shivers were gone, her breathing was steady, but she was visibly depressed. She seemed full of sadness and suffering. Upon a close look, he noticed the slight tremor in her fingers and a carefully concealed grimace of pain.

"Poor girl," Andrei almost said, but he immediately thought back to the outbursts of fury with which the mad girl with TNT wrapped around her waist attacked him in his car. He instinctively touched his neck; the scratches were still hurting.

The bobcat turned into a sick kitten. For how long?

"Have you taken the pills?" Andrei unceremoniously touched the girl's forehead. Aiza nodded obediently; her sweaty cool skin felt slippery to the touch. "You're not burning up. Looks like a hangover after a big party. Have you drunk anything since this morning?"

Aiza shook her head no.

"No smell... Have you been injected?"

The girl nodded. Andrei lifted up her powerless hand and rolled up her sleeve.

"Clean," he concluded after he looked on the insides of both her elbows. "Did you get injected only today? Come on, talk to me!"

"Yes," the girl said barely audibly.

"Did they say it was for courage, so you feel no fear?"

"Um, yes."

"That can be fixed. Tell you what, let's have some vodka! It won't hurt you. A great antidepressant. I know it from my own experience. In Chechnya, we used to – » Andrei faltered and pulled on the girl's hand. "Let's go!"

In the kitchen, he sat Aiza at the table and rummaged on the shelves.

"Here!" He pulled out a bottle of vodka. "ER! Know what it means? Emergency Reserve. To be used only in emergency. Like now."

He rinsed the glasses and poured vodka.

"Drink."

Aiza obediently drank, then winced.

"Now that's good," Andrei approved. "Now eat something. By the morning, you'd feel cool as a pickle. Speaking of, we've got pickles. Great snack. And I'll boil some dumplings, too."

He was working the kitchen looking at Aiza over his shoulder and talking almost non-stop. Here are the dumplings, frozen. Now the water is boiling, I am tossing them in. Damn! I almost burned myself; splashes. Now let's salt it. Do you like dumplings? Mom used to roll her own, but these days, there's such variety in the stores, just pick. These seem to be okay.

The girl's face lost its deadly pallor; her eyes came alive. She looked around.

"Do you live here with your mom?"

"Yes. You've met her."

"Do you have a wife?"

"A wife?" Andrei paused, as if looking for an answer to a complicated question. He slowly stirred the boiling dumplings. "I don't have a wife."

"A bride?" Aiza asked quietly.

"I did... But not anymore."

"What's her name?"

"Sveta. Svetlana."

"Did you have a fight? Did you break up?" Aiza got interested.

"You could say that."

“Is she beautiful?”

Andrei turned away, pretending to remove a sore from his eye. He whispered quietly, “Very.”

“Is she nice?” Aiza wouldn’t quit.

Andrei, surprised, look at her. Why did she keep prying? But he answered, “Yes.”

“Then you have to make up! Call her.”

“Now?” Andrei was baffled. “I can’t.”

“It’s late,” the girl agreed and added convincingly, “Sveta will call you! She definitely will! You’ll see. You’re a good man, she’ll call.”

Andrei instinctively touched the phone in his pocket. It seemed that the phone was about to start vibrating announcing an incoming call.

Just like it did that evening, when he raised a piece of rebar over a woman and a child.

Raised it to kill.

Chapter 20

Nord Ost

Day Two, Late Evening

Suddenly, something stirred inside his jacket. Andrei started, his fingers lost the grip, the raised piece of rebar dropped on the asphalt. The woman turned around, scared, trying to cover the child. Her pose betrayed the helplessness of a hen trying to protect her chick; fear was in her eyes. She understood everything, her fear transferred to the child, he squeaked, “Mama!” The woman’s wide opened eyes awaited execution.

Here eyes were light, a strand of dark blond hair fell from under her headscarf. It wasn’t the Chechen woman; it was someone totally different!

Andrei looked at her stupidly until he realized that his phone was vibrating. He turned the ringer off before he tried getting into the theater. He abruptly pulled the phone out. The woman jumped aside and fell down. The child cried louder.

“Sveta!” Andrei yelled when he realized whose voice he just heard through the phone. “Svetochka!”

“Andryusha, dear, honey,” Svetlana prattled incoherently. “I can’t call my mom. Where is she, did you talk to her?”

“Of course; she’s hanging around the theater. Waiting for you. There’s a bunch of relatives there; they’re getting help. Are you alive?” he asked a stupid question and immediately corrected himself. “Are you okay?”

The scared woman got up from a puddle, picked up the crying child and ran away into a building.

“Yes. Tell my mom to start organizing pickets against the war in Chechnya. Otherwise, we’ll be shot. Tomorrow, everyone has to come out into the Red Square.”

“Sveta – ”

“I can’t talk anymore. If there are no protests, we’ll be shot,” the girl kept repeating.

“Sveta, is anyone standing next to you?”

“Yes.”

“Can I call you later?”

“No.”

The call ended. Andrei stood in the dark courtyard, looked at his phone, and waited for another call. Then, he carried the phone in his hand for a while to be able to answer Svetlana’s call right away. Every now and then, he looked at the display to make sure that the battery isn’t dead and the network is available.

The phone was in working order. But no more calls came in.

She called him “honey”. It’s been so long since she called him that. An eternity.

The hostages may be shot! No, those were empty threats. Just empty threats, he kept telling himself. And immediately remembered: one girl was already dead. And kept beating away a shameful thought: good thing it wasn’t Sveta.

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