



**Sergey
Baksheev**

Dangerous Evidence

"The Noose"

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«Издательские решения»

Baksheev S.

Dangerous Evidence / S. Baksheev — «Издательские решения»,

ISBN 978-5-44-961551-0

A young woman's suicide sets off a whole chain of mysterious crimes. Detective Petelina is being blackmailed to destroy a vital piece of evidence. Her former husband has been ruined by a conman, and her close friend is accused of a crime he did not commit. Only a rapid and effective investigation can restore her normal life. And Petelina decides to take a risk. She befriends the killer in order to expose him — but the cunning and respectable criminal figures out her plan.

ISBN 978-5-44-961551-0

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Dangerous Evidence

Sergey Baksheev

*Translated from the Russian
by Boris Smirnov*

Translator Boris Smirnov

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ISBN 978-5-4496-1551-0

Created with Ridero smart publishing system

Annotation

The Noose is a series of detective novels about a woman detective. Protagonist Elena Petelina is a tenacious, creative and decisive woman with an unsettled personal life. Besides investigating crimes, she must solve the problems afflicting her loved ones and delve into the secrets of the past – all while she strives to love and be loved.

Book1: **Secret Target**

Book2: **Dangerous Evidence**

Dangerous Evidence. A young woman's suicide sets off a whole chain of mysterious crimes. Detective Petelina is being blackmailed to destroy a vital piece of evidence. Her former husband has been ruined by a conman, and her close friend is accused of a crime he did not commit. Only a rapid and effective investigation can restore her normal life. And Petelina decides to take a risk. She befriends the killer in order to expose him – but the cunning and respectable criminal figures out her plan.

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1

The dirty snowbanks at the entrance to the apartment building were melting into puddles. Igor Vasilevich Grebenkin double-checked the address on the piece of paper in his hand. The feckless 50-year-old father had come to Moscow for the first time in his life to see his grown daughter. A faded ushanka hat – made of muskrat fur and long since unfashionable – betrayed his provincialism. Seeing that he was at the right place, Grebenkin began waiting patiently in front of his daughter's apartment building as they had agreed on the phone earlier.

The entrance door slammed and a young woman with a black mane of finely-curved hair flitted out of the building. Grebenkin gasped to himself: *How pretty she is!* An unzipped red jacket with a fox-fur lining, a white blouse revealing ample cleavage, a black leather skirt and maroon boots with high heels all underscored the girl's sex appeal.

"Katya!" exhaled Grebenkin, moving toward the girl.

Noticing the crimson welt on her cheekbone, he knit his brows.

"Who did that?"

"I got into a fight with Boris. Nothing is ever enough for that bastard."

"Look, I know all about the line of work you've been forced into. I've come to put an end to all that. Just wait till I get ahold of him!"

"You don't know the first thing about what's going on. This is *my* life."

"To hell with a life like that! Everything's going to be different now." Grebenkin rummaged in his pockets and produced a small box with a worn lid. "Here – this is the ring I wanted to give to your mother. It's yours, Katya."

"That's a lie! You never had any ring for her. Otherwise, why'd you run off as soon as I was born?"

"I was transferred to a different unit. As an officer I couldn't –"

"You men always seem to have some excuse handy." Katya slipped on the ring with the blue stone and twirled her hand. Her face softened a little. "Alright, forget it. Women are no angels either. Wait till I tell you this one thing..."

The girl tipped her head back. She craned her neck and squinted, trying to make out something on the roof above them.

"What's wrong?" Grebenkin asked anxiously.

"I have a surprise for you! A major surprise!" the girl babbled. "Wait here and you'll see in a second... *Dad.*"

Katya held out her arm to keep her father from following her and darted back into the building. Left alone, Grebenkin began stamping between the puddles. He recalled that it was April Fools' Day. What kind of a surprise had Katya prepared for him? It had been many years since he had found any joy in silly pranks.

Nearby, two middle-aged men stood smoking beside a spotless silver Skoda. The proud owner was lovingly showing off the car's polished paint job.

"Check it out, neighbor. Look how perfectly they smoothed out the roof. I had to change all the windows, had it painted in a paint-shop and then polished. All of it on my dime!"

"Sure. Can't get much from a suicide girl."

"From the goddamn sixteenth floor, the bitch. Couldn't be bothered to fall even a foot to the side."

"At least the car looks brand new now. Aren't you afraid to park it in the same spot?"

The Skoda owner smirked.

"You've got to be kidding me. Lightning doesn't strike in the same place –"

But here, a woman's scream – high-pitched and strident like the sound of shattering glass – forced both men to look up. Seeing the unimaginable, they staggered back. A second elapsed – and a female body slammed flush onto the newly repaired car right before their eyes. The glass crunched, the alarm went off, the men's jaws dropped. A smoldering cigarette tumbled from the neighbor's lip. The owner went weak in his knees and lowered himself onto the snow.

Igor Grebenkin dashed up to the car. His gaping eyes instantly recognized the maroon boots and red jacket. The woman's rear had landed on the seam between the windshield and the roof; the back of her head had struck the hood. Though her curls covered her face, a puddle of blood was already beginning to seep from beneath her head. On her limp hanging hand, Grebenkin recognized his topaz ring. Unwilling to believe his own eyes, he pushed the black curls from the girl's lusterless face – and howled in agony.

His daughter Katya lay lifeless on the dented car.

2

The first day back at work after a vacation feels like the first day on the job – everything seems somewhat familiar, but you don't feel like it belongs to you and so you're compelled to acclimate yourself to your surroundings all over again. And then sometimes you get a feeling like you've just emerged from the sleeping car of a high-speed train which has traversed half the planet while you were inside lounging. Or you feel like a Formula One rookie, in a car that hasn't warmed up enough, pulling out onto the racetrack where your fellow drivers are already counting off laps at breakneck speeds.

This is approximately how Senior Detective Major Elena Pavlovna Petelina felt as she climbed the stairs up to her office. She had naïvely assumed that her coworkers would be happy to see her – that they would at least mention her Thai suntan. As if..! A preoccupied lieutenant colonel brushed past her. “Hello.” “Good day.” It was as though they had seen each other just yesterday and she hadn't been gone for two weeks. And people considered him a meticulous detective!

By lunchtime, however, her work started falling in its groove. The mail had been checked, the documents had been arranged and organized, all the necessary calls had been made. During a water break, the girls had apprised her of all the new office gossip. They had, naturally, asked her all about her vacation – especially since Elena had spent the two weeks on sunny Phuket Island not just with her daughter Nastya, but with operative Marat Valeyev as well. Accordingly, she was now forced to entertain the girls' “And so how is he?” and “You don't say!” as well as come to grips with the officious-sounding “your common-law husband.”

“Lenok, finally you're back!” Elena's ex-husband Sergey Petelin burst into her office.

Elena had divorced the businessman five years ago, unable to cope with his constant cheating and his constant accusations that she put work ahead of her family. Thirteen-year-old Nastya remained the only link between the former spouses.

“Who let you in, Petelin?”

“Why, they're about to open a criminal investigation into me! I've been coming and going here at the Investigative Committee like I work here.”

“What criminal investigation? Can you speak more calmly?”

Sergey Petelin was the owner of a trucking company. Like any other businessman, sometimes he encountered problems and would therefore turn to his ex-wife for consultation. Besides having plenty of experience, a senior detective also has some pull, after all.

“I've put my foot in it this time. But for real!” Sergey Petelin plunked himself into a chair and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“Are you going to explain what's going on or not?”

“A while back, I got an order to deliver a large batch of pharmaceuticals from Moscow to Volgograd – from the vendor to a buyer. Your ordinary, everyday job. Loaded up two trucks and sent them on their way. In the documents, the delivery address was a warehouse lot called The Southern at 15 Industrial Street. Here's the paperwork.”

Elena glanced over the paper certifying that the goods had been received.

“Why are you showing me this?”

“Hang on. So my drivers get to Volgograd late in the evening. They drive up to the warehouse lot and see some people waiting for them, so they unload the trucks!”

“I can see that. What then?”

“This! The buyer is a company called ‘Pharma-Prod.’ But they handed the freight over to a warehouse called ‘Pharma-Prof!’ Check out the seal!”

Elena could see that the last letter in the buyer's information indeed did not match the last letter of the receiver's seal. It followed that the two were utterly different legal entities.

“The drivers didn’t notice a damn thing and went back to Moscow. And here, at this point, I start getting complaints – where’s the cargo? We started to look into it. The warehouse where they unloaded is empty! ‘Pharma-prof’ doesn’t even exist! Whereas ‘Pharma-prod’ is right there next door, as it has been for a hundred years!”

“And? What now?”

Sergey sighed heavily.

“It’s curtains for me. I accepted the goods as an issuing carrier and then delivered them to god-knows-who. The buyer and the vendor want money from me – but it’s three million dollars!”

“Legally they’re in the right.”

“But this is highway robbery, Lenok!”

“Any way you can take care of it under the table?”

“Those days are long gone. They’re going to take me to court and they’re going to win.”

“Feeling nostalgic for the protection rackets of old? The mobsters would’ve straightened it out.”

“It’s no laughing matter, Lenok. Better tell me what I should do.”

“You need to file a fraud and grand larceny complaint. They’ll start a criminal investigation. Assuming you get a solid investigator – ”

“Well you’re an investigator!”

“Petelin, I deal with completely different cases in a completely different city.”

“The vendor is from Moscow – he’s in cahoots with the buyer, I’m sure of it!”

“Good for you, but you’ll need to prove the criminal conspiracy, in addition to the fraud and the grand larceny.”

“So help me, Lena.”

“You don’t get it, Petelin.” Elena placed her hand onto the stack of folders on her desk. “I only work the criminal cases that the brass assigns me. In your case, the investigation will be assigned to the detectives in Volgograd.”

“So you’re refusing to help the father of your child?” Petelin asked, offended.

“I can make a call, lodge a request. No more.”

“No more,” Sergey aped. “Did you have fun vacationing in Thailand with your lover on my dime? No doubt you and Marat had a good laugh at my expense. Sure. I mean, why not? You have a nice patsy to pay for your little trysts.”

Elena stood up.

“Alright, here’s the deal, Petelin. You gave me money for our daughter’s vacation. Marat and I paid for our trip with our own money. And he’s not my lover, just like you’re not my husband!”

“So then who is he? A male specimen reserved for casual encounters? When the female feels like it, she just raises her tail and – ”

“Get out!” Elena boiled over.

Sergey Petelin stood up and gathered his papers.

“Three million bucks is a big sum for me. If I lose it, you can consider me ruined. Neither you nor Nastya will see another dime from me. At least think about that.”

Sergey Petelin was no penny pincher. He had provided a nice apartment for his daughter and ex-wife. He paid the monthly alimony regularly and frequently treated Nastya to various presents. He hadn’t scrimped on his daughter’s vacation either and Elena knew it.

But money doesn’t give him the right to insult me!

“You’d better leave, Petelin,” Elena ordered, reining in her anger.

Her phone rang loudly on her desk. Based on the ringtone – The Beatles’ “Love Me Do” – Elena knew that it was Marat Valeyev. Sergey recognized the photo on the screen and muttered a curse. Elena did not hurry to cover the photo which she had taken on a Thai beach when Marat, tanned and with a lusty look on his face, was making his way towards her.

“Both of you can go to hell!” Her ex-husband walked out, slamming the door. Elena calmed herself before answering the song’s cloying lyrics:

*Love, love me do...
You know I love you...
I'll always be true...
So please, love me do.
Whoa, oh, love me do!*

Marat had purposely set this ringtone on her phone. He frequently whispered similar sweet nothings into her ear during their closest, most intimate moments.

This time, however, his voice sounded anxious.

“Welcome back, Lena. We’ve got a suspicious suicide on our hands here. A young woman. Can you come out here?”

3

General Konstantin Viktorovich Bayukin had not seen his son Aleksey for almost five years. The initial rift between father and son happened because the general had divorced Aleksey's mother for putting on too much weight. The rift was exacerbated when, not long thereafter, a frenetic and enticing hussy – about Aleksey's age – moved into the general's apartment. The final straw came when the father refused to help his officer-son move ahead in the service. While Bayukin Sr. luxuriated in the air-conditioned climate of his comfortable office in the Main Housing Department of the Ministry of Defense, Aleksey Bayukin – attached to a motorized rifle brigade – choked on dust and grit in restive Dagestan.

How hard was it for a father to arrange for his son's transfer to a good post in Moscow? Many other fathers would do so without a second thought. But General Bayukin was a self-made man who believed that the exigencies of service in a combat zone would be edifying to his sole offspring. Such assumptions enraged Aleksey to no end. He was already thirty and still a captain – a captain with a general for a father. Hearing the stories of his “proper Pops,” Aleksey's brothers-in-arms twirled their index fingers next to their temples and screwed up their eyes.

The dominant aspect of General Bayukin's character, however, was not so much his sense of duty as his a natural proclivity to caution. Working towards his goals, he was simply terrified of losing it all over nothing. The general had learned his lessons from those of his colleagues who had “flown too high”: Affecting humility was quite profitable – until the right time. Take care of your business and don't stick your neck out. Eventually, the right moment will come, and you will reap the fruits of your caution.

The doorbell sounded from the entryway and the general, already expecting it, hurried to get the door. His son had arrived in a weathered pilot's jacket with a ripped-off badge and a traveling bag over his shoulder. His wind-blown eyes groped at his father with a wary sullenness.

“Come in, come in,” fussed Bayukin Sr., slapping his son on the shoulder. “Straight to the kitchen. We'll have a drink to celebrate.”

He sat Aleksey at the kitchen table, decked with a bottle of vodka and some light snacks. The general poured some shots.

“It's good that you've come. To our meeting – cheers!”

Aleksey looked around.

“Where's your – ”

“Forget it,” the general anticipated the rest of the question. “I kicked out that tease a long time ago. The young lady turned out to be a proper bitch. Wasted my money and cheated on me. Eh, you know what they say: ‘It is what it is!’”

General Bayukin swallowed his shot and took a bite of a pickle.

“I live alone now. When it comes to the deed... Well, I don't really get the itch very often. Once a week, I have a call girl come over. She's younger and doesn't get on my nerves – it's cheaper in the end too. What are you staring at me like that for? These days, it's simple to arrange – not like years ago with party committees and all the other Soviet claptrap. Drink up, Aleksey.”

Bayukin Jr. took his shot and wiped his lips with the back of his fist.

“So basically, you've traded mom for a whore.”

“Don't start, Aleksey.”

“You kicked her out and didn't help me a damn either. I'm fighting in hell itself down there, while back home I've got neither an apartment nor a future. I don't even have a place to invite a girl to – and yet here's my Pops, bragging about how he bangs hookers in his palatial chambers.”

“What's done is done! I didn't help you for your own good.”

“Really?” Aleksey flapped his eyelids sarcastically. “Could you elaborate, general, sir, for the benefit of this stupid captain?”

“Come on, let’s just have a drink like we used to. Remember how we got you your lieutenant’s epaulets?”

“I couldn’t give a damn about your remembrances!”

“Stop yelling at your father and let me finish!” The general took another drink and so did his son. “Do you watch TV? Do you understand what the situation is these days? Did you forget what my position is? Claims, verifications, comparisons of income and expenditures – eh, it is what it is! You think I can’t spare an apartment for my son? No! But I’m under constant watch. The slightest inconsistency and they’ll charge me with corruption and lock me up – and take your apartment away to boot.”

“Are you trying to tell me you’re the only honest person in the Ministry of Defense?”

“I’m the most cautious.”

“Let’s drink then to the ostrich’s caution!” Aleksey raised his glass. “See no evil, hear no evil – but whoever comes along may treat my backside as he pleases.”

“What a fool you are, Aleksey!” The general drank again. His face was beginning to flush. “I haven’t been sitting on my ass here, you know. I got some irons in the fire. Do you know how one may misappropriate housing intended for service members who’ve been transferred to the reserves? It’s a nice con! The directives for issuing state housing to these soldiers are incredibly long documents. It’s normal to simply draw up authorized extracts from them. What I do is make up a fictitious extract authorizing the issue of housing. Another person forges a rental agreement with the district public housing office. As you probably know, according to Russian law, a tenant renting from the government can apply to privatize their apartment. So we have a lawyer petition a court for the right to privatize the real estate in question. The judge, who’s also with us, rubber stamps the petition. A title is issued and that’s that – go ahead and list your new apartment on the market.”

“And so then where does your caution lie?”

“In that I forge my supervisor’s signature but don’t get any money in return.”

“There it is – your saintly charity! You angling to become Pope or something?”

“In return, I get something else entirely – something no less valuable.”

“Gold and diamonds?”

“Nope. Just a slender little envelope that’s easy to slip across the border.”

Bayukin Jr. took another drink, poked around the salad with a fork, chewed the greens with one side of his mouth and glanced at his father askance.

“What’d you call me up here for? I can munch on vodka down there just as well.”

“They’ve launched an investigation into the embezzled apartments – and it’s looking serious.”

“They’ll put you away – that’ll teach you not to steal!” Aleksey parried with a famous quote from *Beware of the Car*, a classic Soviet movie.

“Don’t talk to your father like that, Aleksey!”

“I prefer it when people call me Alex.”

The general took another shot, chased it with a bite and studied his son from under his brow.

“In two weeks I’ll be fifty-five, in case you remember. A good age to get out of dodge, before it’s too late. I’ve already submitted the paperwork for my discharge. I’ll retire on my pension, buy a house in Lithuania and apply for citizenship. I won’t be taking anything with me. You’ll get this apartment which, may I remind you, is in a prestigious generals’ building. I’ve already hired a lawyer to deal with any problems that may crop up. His name is Denis Gomelsky. He’s preparing the documents as we speak. All you have to do is sign them and the apartment is yours! I’ll also see to it that you’re transferred to a post here in the city. There are two options – ”

“What options! Are you even aware that I was concussed in a blast? That I have PTSD? I spent two months lying around the hospital; then, a week ago, I got a medical discharge!”

“It’s that serious?”

“There are times when it all comes rushing back and...” Alex glared and knocked on his head bitterly. “It’s like there’s a worm in my head. And then I’m ready to tear everyone apart!”

“Alright, alright. There are good positions available in civilian life too. We’ll think of something.”

The general poured some water in his glass and drank it slowly, furrowing his eyebrows.

“One more thing.” Bayukin Sr. looked up at his son. “I’ll be honest with you. Gomelsky, the lawyer, warned me that if the investigation turns towards me, they may search the place. I need to get rid of any incriminating evidence. I don’t keep any money or valuables around here; however, the envelope... It’d be better if you take it and stay with your mother for a bit.”

“What envelope?”

“The one I mentioned. The one that’s better than money. I got rid of two others – but this third one is the most valuable.”

“I don’t understand a damn thing.”

The general smiled slyly.

“Come on, I’ll show you.”

Father and son entered the spacious living room. The general approached the bookshelf. He pushed apart two books, froze for a second, and then began to frantically riffle through the neighboring volumes.

“What the hell? Where is it?” he exclaimed. “It was here just yesterday!”

Books began tumbling from the shelves onto the floor. Once the bookshelf was empty, Bayukin Sr. dropped his arms.

“The envelope isn’t here. It’s vanished.” He thought for a moment. “Katya! It couldn’t have been anybody else.”

“Who’s Katya?” Seeing the state his father was in, Alex became worried himself.

“The prostitute. She was here last night and left this morning. She was the only one who could have taken the envelope!” The general grabbed his son pleadingly. “Alex, you have to find the envelope and get it back. This is insanely important! No one knows who you are. You can act freely. I can’t stand out.”

“What do you mean by ‘freely?’”

“Kill the bitch, if you have to – just get that envelope!”

“It’s that valuable?”

“I’ll pay you half-a-million rubles.”

“What about the apartment? Is it mine too?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, alright then. How can I find her?”

“Okay, remember this: She’s young – about twenty-something. She has a nice figure: tits, waist, ass – everything’s in the right place and in proper proportion too. She’s about up to your nose in height. She’s got wavy black hair that reaches below her shoulders. Dark, hazel eyes. Puffy lips and a straight nose. On the whole, she’s a sultry little piece. She was wearing a red jacket with fox fur last night – and knee-high boots.”

“Better tell me where the hell I’m going to find her!”

“Right.” The general grabbed his phone. “There’s a surefire way to locate her. I can find out where she went after she left.”

4

It was not difficult to locate the scene of the incident amid the residential block of cookie-cutter apartment buildings. Elena Petelina parked her car and made her way to the onlookers gathered at the police tape. The police tape had been stretched in a square plot abutting the wall of the sixteen-story building. Zooming off on his motorcycle, Senior Lieutenant Mikhail Ustinov, the forensic expert, had of course beaten the detective to the scene. His large curly head could be seen fussing over a silver Skoda, upon which lay the body of a young woman.

Homicide had christened Mikhail Ustinov with the nickname “the Tadpole.” He was now occupied with taking photographs and dictating his observations to a detective named Egorov, who had arrived to the scene of the incident from the local police precinct.

“Deceased is a young female, aged 20—23. Height approximately 5’5”. Hair color is black, wavy and shoulder-length.” The expert’s fingers, sheathed in latex gloves, pried open the eyelids of the dead woman. “Eye color is hazel, nose is straight, mouth is medium-sized, lips are puffy. The deceased is wearing a leather jacket with a fox-fur lining. I’m not going too fast, am I?”

Egorov placed the folder with the report on the car’s trunk so he could write better and nodded for the Tadpole to go on.

Elena Petelina examined the dead woman. Having a teenage daughter of her own, she always reacted emotionally to the deaths of young women. The outer garments concealed the inevitable internal damage, but the deathblow had most likely been the back of the woman’s head striking the hood. It had been so violent that bruising had formed on the girl’s face.

Elena looked up to the edge of the roof and tried to imagine the horrid fall. Doing so was vital. Indulging her emotions at the scene of the crime – before anything of substance had been established and any evidence had been gathered – stimulated Elena’s intuition. More than once, the detective had found that her initial impressions served as a constructive impetus to her subsequent investigation. Being able to picture the scene of the crime, remember its attendant smells and sounds, would help her later as she sat working in her office.

Having made a note of her impressions, Petelina stepped away from the car and looked around for Captain Marat Valeyev. Following her recent fight with her ex-husband, she wanted a reliable man by her side. Before she could catch sight of Valeyev, however, she came across his partner Ivan Mayorov. The tall and powerfully-built senior lieutenant was doing his best to restrain a gaunt and irate man of fifty in a polyester jacket and an old-fashioned ushanka hat.

“Detective Petelina!” the operative called to her. “Here is an eyewitness.”

Encountering a strict look from the detective, the man settled down enough for Vanya to release him.

“Who are you?” asked Petelina.

“I am the father. That’s my daughter, Katya Grebenkina.”

Elena’s felt her chest constrict. Interviewing a parent beside the body of their child was a sadistic undertaking. However, as the case in question could be a murder, these first few hours would be invaluable to catching the perpetrator. Consequently, tact was not something she could afford.

“I can understand your present state of mind, but if you would like to help us...” It occurred to Elena that she could channel the man’s wrath to a productive purpose. “If someone murdered her, we have to catch the criminal immediately. Could you tell me how this happened?”

“We met here. Katya ran back into the lobby and then – ”

“Please state your name and try to be more detailed in your account.”

“My name is Igor Vasilevich Grebenkin. I came to Moscow just today from Saratov. I called Katya the moment I got off the train. She gave me this address, so I came here.”

“Did Katya reside in this building?”

“I believe so.”

“You don’t know for sure?”

“I separated from her mother when Katya was just a newborn,” Grebenkin explained. “We were living in the town of Grayvoron back then, not far from the military base. I was in the army. Then they transferred me to Transbaikal. We weren’t married, so I had to go on my own. I was young and stupid – I didn’t even write. Ended up married to someone else, just not for long. We didn’t have kids. After I got out of the army, I settled down in Saratov. This past year, Katya found me herself – over the Internet somehow.”

“She wrote to you?”

“She came and visited! From then on I became a different person. I started to feel like I wasn’t alone in the world. We made plans to meet in Moscow today. I arrived and... well...”

“What did you talk about when you saw her today?”

“We didn’t have time to talk about anything at all. I gave her a ring with a topaz. Katya put it on, smiled and told me that she had a surprise for me. Then she ran back into the building and then...”

“A surprise? That’s the word she used?”

“Yes, ‘a major surprise.’” Grebenkin sunk into himself even further. “I don’t understand a single thing. Could she really have meant..? Tell me, damn it, what the hell happened here?!”

“Calm down please. We will figure everything out. Did Katya harbor any grudge against you?”

“Grudge?”

“As I understood it, you abandoned her when she was still little and never once tried to find out anything about her.”

“What are you implying? You think she did this because of me? I came here to help her!”

“How much time, would you say, elapsed between her running into the building and her fall?”

“How would I know?” Grebenkin snapped. “I didn’t have my stopwatch out!”

“Alright, we’ll come back to that later. Where is her mother at the moment?”

“As soon as Katya graduated, her mom found some Greek guy on the Internet and ran off with him. I guess she reckoned that her parental duties had come to an end.”

“You did the same quite a bit earlier,” the detective couldn’t help needle Grebenkin.

She had decided that she had asked enough questions for their first interview. It would be better to give the witness some time to calm down.

Marat Valeyev emerged from the building’s entrance and noticed the delicate figure of the woman he loved.

“It’s good of you to come, Lena.”

“If this is a suicide, I won’t be much help.”

“Well, listen to this: Exactly forty days ago another woman jumped off that same roof onto this same exact car. That was written off as a suicide, but here we have an identical incident. One and the same. What are the chances? I called you because I know how much you enjoy puzzling cases like this.”

“At the moment, I wish it was cake that I enjoyed so much,” Petelina said pensively, mulling over the unexpected news.

“Sweets are the nemesis of a shapely waist. You know how I love to embrace you there – ”

“Will you cut that out!” Elena slapped away Marat’s impertinent hand. “We’re at a possible crime scene. What did you find out anyway?”

“I went up to the roof. Found a purse up there and a bottle.”

Valeyev held up two evidence bags containing a little black purse and a half-drunk bottle of brandy.

“Have you studied them closely?”

“No.”

“Give them to the Tadpole.”

The senior detective and the operative returned to Misha Ustinov, the forensic expert. The medical technicians had just taken the body away. A glossy puddle of blood remained on the dented hood of the silver car. The color of blood depends on the surface it's on. On the ground it looks brown. Here, however, it had the same scarlet color that older women, in search of a partner, apply to their lips.

"Find anything, Misha?" asked Petelina.

"Nothing major at the moment, Detective Petelina. I did gather some materials for further tests though." The Tadpole deposited several evidence bags into his backpack. "I discovered this photo in the pocket of the deceased."

Elena took the photograph. Incessant reminders of the frailty of life were yet another hidden cost in her line of work. An hour ago this young woman had her entire life ahead of her – and looked like this. An hour later, her tepid broken body lay ensconced in a plastic body bag on its way to the morgue.

The photograph, taken in the winter, showed Katya Grebenkina with her father. The wind had picked up the girl's hair and she, a prudent smile on her face, was trying to tuck one of the unruly locks back under her knit hat. Igor Grebenkin, whose receding hairline had abandoned parts of his scalp to glint in the sunlight, was half-turned, watching his daughter intently.

"This is for you, Tadpole – a present from the roof." Marat Valeyev placed the evidence bags containing the purse and the bottle of brandy onto the trunk of the Skoda.

"You went up there without me?" the forensic expert became annoyed. "If you wiped out any shoeprints –"

"What shoeprints? The roof's covered in puddles. Anyway, a couple local cops went up there with me and witnessed me gather this evidence."

Peeking into the purse, Petelina noticed a passport.

"Grebenkina, Ekaterina. Twenty-one years old. Registered resident of the town of Grayvoron in Belgorod Region," the detective read turning through the passport pages. "At least there's no question about her identity."

"No question about our main suspect either." Misha Ustinov fished out a pack of cigarettes and flashed the warning label with a large bold inscription. "SMOKING KILLS!" Looks like this case is closed, Detective Petelina."

"What a clown you are," Valeyev shook his head.

Petelina spied a folded piece of paper tucked inside the passport's dust jacket. She pulled it out but didn't find the time to unfold it because, at that very moment, an enraged man began trying to make his way to the car, pushing and squeezing through the throng of police in his way.

"Owner of the car," clarified Egorov in reply to the detective's questioning glance.

"Let him through," Petelina ordered.

"Who's going to pay for this? I just had her fixed!" the man clamored. "A month ago it was another bitch. They want to drive me into the poorhouse!"

"Calm down please. Have you seen this woman before?"

"I've seen this whore here a billion times! They've got a whorehouse up there in the fourth unit."

"What whorehouse? Are you saying the dead girl was a prostitute?"

"Of course! That other one last month was her friend. What do they have against my car?"

"Don't you dare! Don't you dare insult my Katya!" Igor Grebenkin began trying to get at the car's owner. Vanya Mayorov, who was about ready to knock the irate man flat on his back, held him back by his jacket's hem.

"Ah! So she was yours! You can pay then!"

From personal experience, Elena Petelina knew that men, like children, could be jolted from their tantrums by an abrupt change of topic.

"When is the last time it rained here?" she asked the wranglers in a very serious tone.

"I just got here from Saratov," Grebenkin remembered after a short pause.

"Rain? It was snowing here a week ago," mumbled the Skoda's owner.

"Excellent," Petelina praised the two stumped men. "Could you recall now please which one of you approached the girl first?"

"I did," said Grebenkin dully.

"Misha, deal with him. And you, sir plaintiff," Petelina took the car owner by the elbow, "show us where the girl's apartment is please."

"It's the entrance to the fourth unit over there, apartment number 180. I already tried to get damages from them. Waste of time!" The unhappy man jerked his arm away.

"A police officer will take your statement."

Petelina handed the auto enthusiast over to Detective Egorov. She and the operatives headed for the fourth entrance. As they were entering the building, she remembered the paper she had found in the passport. She unfolded it. The page, which looked to have been ripped out of a notebook, was covered with uneven lines of the same sentence: "Boris is a jerk. Boris is a jerk. Boris is a jerk..."

A banal suicide caused by unrequited love, flashed through the detective's mind.

In the meantime, back at the scene of the incident, Mikhail Ustinov had offered Grebenkin some chewing gum.

"For the nerves. It's supposed to help." He waited until Grebenkin started chewing mechanically and asked, "Could you recall please what position you found the body in?"

"The head was here. Katya had long hair. I pushed it back to make sure that..." Grebenkin frowned as he looked at the bloody spot, then spit out the gum and pleaded, "I'll show you on another car."

"As you wish," Ustinov agreed and, once the man had turned his back, retrieved the discarded gum.

5

Marat Valeyev was about to ring the doorbell to apartment No. 180.

“Hold on!” Petelina stopped him. She flashed the keys she had found in the girl’s purse. “Let’s see if these work.”

The key slid smoothly into the lock and turned twice. The detective opened the door and hung back while the operatives, guns drawn, entered before her.

“Katya, is that you?” A woman’s voice came from a nearby room.

Valeyev pushed its door, scanned the room through his iron sights and lowered his sidearm.

“Whoa,” came the silent exclamation.

A young woman in a satin gown with a dragon print was sitting on an ample bed which took up most of the room. She had been painting her nails. Her eyes and mouth gaped in surprise, while her splayed fingers remained suspended before her chest. Elena Petelina was compelled to agree with the bit of male wisdom that observed that the most helpless moments in a woman’s life occur while her nail polish is drying.

Elena flashed her badge and introduced herself.

“Senior Detective Elena Pavlovna Petelina, Investigative Committee. Anyone else in the apartment?”

The girl shook her head. While the operatives began looking over the apartment, Petelina decided to have a seat beside the woman.

“You like bright colors?”

“The clients do.”

“So you admit that you’re engaged in prostitution here?”

“Oh please. I just fall in love easily.” The woman smiled sardonically having recovered from her initial shock.

“Today it’s one, tomorrow it’s another.”

“I’m a hopeless romantic.” The woman fanned her wrists to dry the nails faster.

“Prostitution does not concern me.”

“Awesome. “Cause you cops have screwed me half to death with all your raids. So what do you want?”

“What’s your name?”

“Lisa. Elizaveta Malyshko.”

“When’s the last time you saw Katya Grebenkina?”

“Why, she’s upstairs on the roof waiting for me this very moment.”

Petelina walked over to the window and peeked through the stiff curtain. The window looked out on the street instead of the courtyard where Katya Grebenkina had fallen. Lisa got up as well. Elena looked her over: black spiraling hair tucked into a bun, black eyes, alluring lips, a nice figure, a naïve face but a certain sexuality in her movements that would have no trouble lighting the fuse of male desire.

“What’s happening on the roof?”

“We’re going to commemorate our girlfriend. It’s been forty days since Stella threw herself off the roof. The three of us lived together.”

“How did you get roof access?”

“We got the engineer to give us a key. It’s a good place to have a smoke. And if some stalker starts creeping around, you can go down another stairwell and out another entrance.”

“Do the creeps often stalk you?”

“It happens. Birdless Boris takes care of those.”

“Boris?” Petelina recalled the dead woman’s note cursing a Boris. “Is that your pimp?”

“He prefers the term ‘manager,’ the goat!”

“What’s with the ‘Birdless’ part? Does he have a last name?”

“He’s called ‘Birdless’ because he’s missing his middle finger. His last name is Manuylov, I think. He’s the manager of a modeling agency called Gentle Lily. It’s just a front that brings in a stream of dumb girls for him to work over.”

“Was he here today?”

“So it’s him you’re looking for? Why didn’t you say so? I can give you his number.” Lisa reached for the pink cell phone on the dresser and looked up the number. “Boris was here earlier. Paranoid as ever – afraid that we’ll hide his cut from him. After last night, I was only half-awake, but I heard him cussing up a storm, the goat. It was Katya’s turn to deal with him.”

“And? What happened after that?”

“Katya reminded me that it was time to commemorate Stella. We spent almost a year living together.”

“Stella is the woman who jumped off the roof?”

“Yup. Forty days today. Katya went to get some brandy and told me that she’d wait for me at the same spot, up there on the roof.”

“Did Stella jump off on her own?”

“Stella was from Moldova. She had a funny last name. Stella Sosuksu. So we messed with her: ‘Sucking off men is in your blood,’ we’d tell her. She’d get upset. She fell in love with a grad student from Moscow State University, but he found out about her occupation and told her to get – well – to keep doing what she had been, I guess. Aren’t men assholes?”

“You get all kinds,” replied Petelina noncommittally. “So what happened with Stella?”

“Stella got depressed. The clients started complaining. Boris got pissed. And me and Katya... eh, we should’ve kept a closer eye on her. In this line of work, you’ve got to be a cynical bitch – like Katya.” Lisa blew on her fingers. “Dry enough, I think. It’s time I got dressed. Katya’s waiting.”

Marat Valeyev peeked into the room.

“Lena, there are two more bedrooms here, just like this one. There’s no one here.”

Lisa Malyshko untied her sash dramatically and stuck out her breasts. Only a G-string and sheer stockings covered her naked body.

“Shut the door, you pig! I’m changing in here.”

Elena intercepted Marat’s curious gaze as it slipped down the young woman’s body. How incorrigible were men! Never happy with what they had! Petelina stepped in between Marat and the sassy girl.

“There’s no hurry, Lisa. Katya Grebenkina isn’t waiting for you any longer. She’s dead.”

“What? How?” exclaimed the startled girl.

“The same as Stella Sosuksu. Jumped off the roof.”

“Well, geez!” Lisa sank back onto the bed.

“I’m investigating these incidents. Which of these was Katya’s room? We need to examine her belongings.”

“The door on the right.”

Lisa’s rudeness had melted instantaneously. She remained sitting on her bed, blinking vacantly and looking forlorn, while the operatives worked over the apartment. She answered their questions passively and promised to go to the detective’s office as soon as she was called in. And yet, as soon as the operatives shut the front door behind them, the girl perked up, dashed over to the dresser and began to feverishly gather her things. An escape plan was forming in her mind.

Nothing bright. To hell with the miniskirt. No pins or boots! I have to melt into the crowd. Hair up in a ponytail, no makeup, no trace of sex appeal. What do we have here? Jeans, though embroidered along the back pockets. It’ll have to do. A white sweater with a lips print across the entire front. No matter – no one will see it under the jacket. I’ll throw on this blue down jacket over it – it’ll sparkle

in the headlights but ordinary students wear these too. These simple shoes will do for footwear. And remember to grab the knit cap – I can use it to hide my long hair. How do I look? Lisa looked at herself in the mirror on the wall and came away satisfied. *No mud duck, but no slut either.*

Having finished dressing herself, Lisa grabbed her phone, dialed the number that she had just recently given to the detective, waited for an answer and then quickly blurted, “Boris, Katya’s dead. Jumped off the roof just like Stella. The cops came by, along with a detective. They’re looking for you. Get out!”

Lisa hung up. The pimp instantly called her back, but Lisa popped off the lid, dumped the phone battery and fished out the SIM card. She got a new SIM card from her purse and put it into the phone. The girl cocked her head and shut her eyes.

“What else? What else?” she whispered to herself.

Her memory gave her a hint. She darted to the dresser and found a photo album. She ran to the bathroom. Her little fingers with the newly-painted nails began pulling out photo after photo and flicking the lighter. As the fire consumed the girls’ faces – Katya Grebenkina, Lisa Malyshko and Stella Sosuksu’s – the photos’ singed corners tumbled into the toilet bowl. Having dealt with the last snapshot, Lisa flushed the toilet.

It was time for her to vanish too.

The girl peered into the front door’s eyehole to make sure that no one was waiting outside. Then, she slipped out of the apartment. Instead of calling the elevator, she decided to play it safe and began to descend the stairs as quietly as she could. After she had descended three floors, Lisa stopped and listened. No one. The young woman lifted a loose windowsill and extracted an ordinary envelope from the hiding place underneath it. Having made sure that its contents were in place, she put it in her purse and – now throwing caution to the wind – took off running down the stairs at full speed.

The police had left the courtyard, but the buildings’ residents were still discussing the unhappy event around the damaged car. Lisa paused for a moment and hesitantly glanced at the spot where her two friends had encountered their terrible ends. She did not want to pass near the bloody car. The girl pulled the jacket’s hood tighter over her head and hurried into the opposite direction.

As soon as she turned the corner and felt safer, someone grabbed her from behind. One arm wrapped itself around her belly, while the other painfully compressed her throat in the crook of its elbow. The girl flailed helplessly, unable to scream.

6

The taxi stopped at the gates to the hospital.

“Here you are. They won’t let me onto the premises,” the taxi driver warned the sullen passenger in the army field jacket.

Alex Bayukin thrust another thousand-ruble bill to the driver.

“Wait here,” he ordered.

The ex-captain pushed his insulated cap down onto his forehead, walked up to the security booth beside the boom gate and asked how to get to the morgue. The haggard guard took a slurp of tea from his large mug and pointed in the needed direction without betraying the slightest bit of courtesy. Alex stomped off into the depths of the fenced-off area.

Bayukin Sr. had propitiously remembered that Katya, the prostitute who had pilfered the envelope, always used the same taxi service. Sometimes the general would watch from his window as the girl got into a car with an easy-to-remember phone number on its door. The general knew that anytime the dispatchers took a request, they would ask for the destination address. Having called the dispatcher, he announced his address and requested that he be taken to the same destination where his “daughter” had been taken that same morning.

This was how Alex Bayukin found himself in front of the same sixteen-story building where the tragedy had occurred. He instantly noticed the car with the dented roof. The girl’s body had already been taken away, but the impressionable housewives were happy to describe the deceased and even provided her name – Katya!

Alex called his father. The general spent a long time swearing, then ordered Alex to make sure that this was the same thief who had robbed him. To this end, he revealed a distinguishing feature of the girl to his son.

One call to the emergency services and Alex Bayukin found himself at the doors of the morgue he needed.

Alex felt his anger roiling inside of him, and he didn’t feel it necessary to hide his mood from the lanky orderly in the blue scrub cap and the bespattered oilcloth apron.

“My girlfriend was brought here today. She fell off a roof.”

The lanky orderly perked up.

“For sure. Do you want to arrange a funeral? I know a great funeral parlor – here’s their business card!” He offered Alex a black card embossed in gold.

“I’d like to see her,” Alex squeezed through clenched teeth.

“For sure. We can arrange that. How do you want her prepared? You want the premium job or the regular?”

“What?”

“Premium costs more, but the client will look like a perfect peach. As for regular... well, regular is more like a carrot from the vegetable patch.”

“I want to see Katya right now!” Alex could barely contain himself.

“For sure,” shrugged the orderly. It seemed that this phrase suited anything that happened in his life. “Go on through. Though keep in mind that before we’ve had a chance to work on “em, the clients, they don’t look so great.”

The mortuary cold chamber – with once-white tiled walls, drains in the floor and dim dome lights on the painted ceiling – exuded a suffocating smell of formaldehyde. The orderly pulled on rubber gloves as he led Alex over to a metal gurney on which rested the body. He pulled the sheet from the head of the corpse. The girl’s lusterless face revealed a swollen eye and a dried trail of blood emanating from her contorted mouth.

“I warned you,” the orderly apologized, noticing the visitor’s initial reaction.

Alex suppressed the spasm in his stomach and ripped the entire sheet from the body. Despite the internal fractures and the splotches of hematoma, he could appreciate the girl's body. *Dad's bouncing around with young girls – the dog – while I'm forced to hit on some fat-ass sales girl.*

"Flip her," Alex nodded to the orderly.

"For... are you sure..?"

"Flip her, I said!" Malice flashed in the visitor's eyes.

The orderly groaned a bit but did as he was told. Alex was trying to avoid looking at the fractured head and the legs which were positioned unnaturally relative to the torso. His eyes fixed on the tattoo on the girl's lower back. He aimed his phone and took a large photo of the butterfly.

"Where's her clothes?" Alex asked, once they had emerged from the cold chamber.

"She's not going to catch a cold in there, you know," scoffed the lanky orderly, unhappy with having had to flip the bag of bones.

His abrasive reply, however, was the final straw for the already-irate Alex. He punched the orderly in the stomach. The orderly sighed and doubled over and Alex brought his joined hands down on the back of the poor man's head. The orderly collapsed. Alex began to kick the fallen man, demanding he show him the girl's clothes.

An unshaven and muscle-bound orderly came running in response to the racket. Striking Alex from behind, he knocked him off his feet and twisted his arm, stiffly pinning him with a knee to the back.

"Keep it up and we'll find a berth for you too," threatened the stubby orderly and turned to his injured colleague, "What does he want?"

The lanky orderly got up from the floor and wiped some blood from his lip.

"I don't know! He's a psycho!" Outraged, he kicked his assailant as hard as he could. "He wanted to see the stuff of the girl that came in today."

"A psycho, eh?" The unshaven orderly looked Alex in the eyes.

"For sure!"

"Better let him see it then." Before releasing the violent visitor, however, the beefy orderly twisted Alex's arm to its limit and warned him, "You get one look and then you get the hell out."

The lanky orderly tossed Alex a large black bag. Alex looked through the jacket pockets, went through the rest of the clothes and even stuck his hand into the boots. The envelope was nowhere to be found. Alex cast a glance at the orderlies who had remained standing over him.

"Where's her purse?"

"Will you just look at this guy? Bud, that dead hooker there is the subject of a criminal investigation. You should ask the detective – or the pimp. Leave us alone. We work here, man."

Recognizing that any further fight would not be a fair one, Alex made his way out. When he emerged into fresh air, he sent his father a message with a photo of the tattoo. His dad called him back almost instantly.

"That's her, that's Katya!" the father grew animated. "I remember the butterfly on her waist pretty well. Was the envelope on her?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"It's not among her clothes. But she had a purse too. Ask your lawyer who the detective in charge of the case is."

"You think that they already got the purse?"

"Either the detective has it or the pimp does. I'll try to find the pimp. What do you know about him?"

"The girl mentioned some kind of Birdless Boris. But I've never seen him."

"Well, how'd you find her?"

“I came across that damned thief through the Gentle Lily modeling agency. They offer either modeling services or escort services or some other kind of services – but, hey, either way, they have grade-A whores. I found them on the Internet.”

“Then I’ll find them too,” Alex reassured his father.

7

In the bar located on the 31st floor of the Radisson Royal Hotel, formerly known as Hotel Ukraine, a sixty-year-old gentleman sat at a glass table situated beside a panoramic window. His rare, obviously dyed hair was slicked back on his head. His lengthy sideburns, thin mustache, tweed jacket, satin neckerchief and delicate white cane, which stood leaned against his armchair, all endowed him with an old-fashioned but elegant look. The man was the holder of an Estonian passport and his name was Tarmo Keelp.

At the moment, Keelp was agitated. The Estonian was sick to death of looking at the steely surface of the Moscow River, the Russian White House and the giant Gazprom sign crowning the neighboring building. The armchair across from him was empty. He was waiting for Katya the prostitute. As per custom, they would not go to his room right away. They would first have a cocktail. Keelp would take a Viagra and wait a little until the stimulant began to take effect. At his advanced age it was better not to experiment and deal with one and the same girl, who knew how to produce the required result.

Keelp had not chosen this bar because of its vista onto the Russian capital. The drinks menu here included the “Green Fairy,” a 140-proof absinthe served the way tradition prescribed: A special perforated spoon is placed on the rim of the empty glass along with a sugar cube. Drop by drop, the absinthe is slowly poured over the sugar cube. Then, the cube is set alight. The sugar turns to caramel and streams down into the strong spirit.

Tarmo Keelp had made sure beforehand that if enough of the liquor was in the glass, one could accidentally set it on fire. His current calculations were based precisely on this effect. It would be in this green flame, as if by accident, that the invaluable envelope brought to him by the girl would ignite.

The Estonian checked his watch. Katya was running very late. Where was she, goddamn it!

Keelp retrieved his cell phone and dialed the girl’s number, but the call went straight to voicemail, just as it had been doing for the past hour. What was going on? Where was the envelope that the girl was supposed to bring? They had had an agreement after all!

The Estonian swiped his fingers along the phone’s screen. He looked up the Gentle Lily website and dialed the phone number in its contacts section. The secretary, upon hearing Keelp’s request, transferred him to Boris, the agency’s manager.

“I am a longtime customer,” Keelp explained. “I am waiting for Katya, but she is very late and isn’t answering her phone. What is the meaning of this? When will she be here?”

“Katya jumped off a roof, the dumbass,” interrupted the man on the other end of the line.

“What?” the Estonian asked startled. “How?”

“She fell from the sixteenth floor. To her death.”

“I am expecting her and she... Where did this take place? I must see her.”

“What do you care, you old stump? Just go to the site and pick out some other girl.”

“But I want – ”

“Oh, get lost!”

Boris Manuylov, alias Birdless, flung aside his phone. God, how sick he was of these stupid clients. He wished he had their problems! If you can’t have one girl, just grab some other! That’s what whores were for – to foster diversity!

Boris angrily crushed his cigarette butt in the overflowing ashtray, tousled his long hair and jumped up off the couch. Once upon a time, he had banged Katya real good on this very couch. She had just come to Moscow, hoping to become a model. It took him a long time to impress on her stupid ass what position one needed to assume to make decent dough in the capital. But finally he had

broken her down. Then, he had set her up in heavenly conditions and sent her around to the richest clients – and then today the ungrateful skank pulled all this!

And on top of it all, this was the second such incident! One bad apple spoils its fellows, as they say. Thankfully, everything had worked out with the first suicide, but he knew that it would be much harder to get the fuzz off his back this time around. Someone had already called his personal phone and he had been forced to turn it off. But if the cops didn't catch up with him today, it'd be tomorrow. Then he'd have to face all sorts of unpleasant questions.

Birdless started: The video intercom to the agency's front entrance buzzed annoyingly. He glanced at the screen. Well, speak of the devils...

Waiting at the door were two men. He had no doubt that they were operatives. The pimp had often tangled with law enforcement and had learned through hard experience to recognize cops by their shifty looks, their splayed arms with the pieces underarm and their postures which reminded him of hunters. Say what you like, but a government issue piece sitting snug in a shoulder holster sure does change a person.

"Captain Valeyev," the visitor introduced himself. "Open up, we need to talk with Boris Manuylov."

How quickly they'd put it together!

Birdless quickly threw on his leather jacket and checked the inside pocket – the envelope was still there. His salvation lay enclosed within. He pulled a colorful scarf in a tight noose around his neck, grabbed his car keys and darted out to the hallway.

On the way to the rear exit, he ran into the girls.

"You haven't seen me!" hissed Boris. "Keep your lips sealed, you bitches!"

8

The young woman in the blue jacket and the lilac cap pulled snugly on her forehead emerged from the subway station near Kazan Train Station. As she walked, she kept glancing around herself fearfully. The square was full of people, which both worried and reassured her. On the one hand, the scary man could be watching her even now. On the other hand, he wouldn't dare attack her here, the way he had near her house. Back there, he had grabbed her from behind and strangled her, demonstrating that her fragile life lay utterly at his mercy.

Then, he had hissed in her ear, demanding that she give up the pimp. She had figured out who the assailant was quickly enough and was happy to tell him everything she knew about Birdless Boris. She told him about Gentle Lily and about Wild Kitties, the strip club where that four-fingered jerk liked to hang out. She had also mentioned his white Honda and given the man Boris's phone number. Having obtained the required information, her assailant vanished. The girl felt her throat. She had survived. Now all she could do was hope that the cruel man would channel his wrath against Birdless and leave her alone.

Soon enough she would go far away. Then, she would become wealthy and start a completely new life!

The girl entered the train station and headed for the ticket counter. This station had service to Sochi and in Sochi there was a gentle sea and pretty mountains and also true honest-to-god spring. There, she could spend a wonderful summer in the lovely resort city – far, far away from the preoccupied clients, the bastard pimp and the greedy Moscow cops.

To hell with the past! I want the good life! I want others to serve me for a change!

On her way to the ticket counter, the girl took her passport from her purse. She opened it and read the name – Elizaveta Malyshko. Ooof! After all her recent close calls and narrow escapes, it was small wonder that she had momentarily forgotten her own name.

“How much does a ticket to Sochi cost?” Lisa asked the ticketing agent after waiting briefly in line.

“Would you like a seat, a berth in a compartment, or a sleeping car? We have different types of trains as well.”

“What's the very best?”

“Sochi Premium Express. Leaves tomorrow morning. A sleeping car ticket costs...”

Lisa was surprised by the amount. That was almost all the money she had! She thrust her hand in her purse. Her manicured fingers stubbed against the thick envelope. There it was – her new estate!

“Miss? Would you like to purchase a ticket?”

“I'll come back later,” the girl promised. “Are there any computers with Internet access around here?”

“This isn't the information desk,” the ticketing agent said through her teeth. “Next!”

Lisa wandered around the station until she found some kiosks with paid Internet access. The girl liked the fact that each computer was separated from its neighbors with a divider. She scooted her chair as closely as she could to her desk, made sure that no one was around and carefully opened the envelope.

Her first few searches on Yandex were fruitless. Nope! Nope! Was it really all in vain? After a few minutes, though, she got a hang of what she was looking for and found the site she needed. Her eyes bored into the screen. Would you look at that!

Lisa carefully studied several niche sites, tucked the envelope back in her purse and pressed the purse itself tightly to her chest. Now she needed to carefully consider how she would manage the wealth that had so suddenly come to her. Soon enough, she had made her decision.

She wasn't going to pinch pennies shirking comfort and would travel to the sea in the best train available! She had earned this new life with suffering from the very day she had been born. If she managed this business carefully, she'd have enough money for anything she desired. But first, she had to arrange a safety net. She knew better than to go wandering around Moscow with an priceless purse on her shoulder.

Lisa found the station's post office and bought an ordinary letter-sized envelope. As surreptitiously as she could, the girl transferred all the contents of the old envelope to the new one, sealed it and began thinking about a good address to send her treasure to.

Her wandering gaze alighted on the number of the post office she was in. Lisa wrote it on the new envelope and added her name with "care of" before it.

The envelope, with its new precious weight, slipped into the slot and dropped to the bottom of a blue mailbox affixed to a column.

9

A mid-luxury sedan rolled up to the gates of the hospital. Sitting at the wheel, Tarmo Keelp lowered the window and waved a bill at the security guard. The guard brushed some crumbs off his whiskers and slunk over to the visitor. The bill changed hands, the boom gate swung up and the expensive car drove off in the direction of the morgue.

The sixty-year-old gentleman was shaking with grim anxiety. Boris, the manager-pimp, had told him about the tragedy – Katya had died. The best thing to do was to forget, put the girl out of mind and switch her for some other young slut. But not everything in life was that simple.

The Estonian liked Katya. She provided quality services to him in bed, didn't fail to praise him when everything went the way it needed to go and paid little attention to male foibles. Paid sex, however, was not the most important thing in their relationship. Keelp had brought Katya into his confidence and entrusted her with an important assignment. The day for her to fulfill her assignment had come. Today, Katya was supposed to bring him a certain envelope and receive an ample reward in return. For an uneducated girl, the envelope's contents could not have meant very much, but for him, they were extremely valuable.

Tarmo Keelp parked the car beside the morgue van and made his way to the two-story nondescript building. In the hallway of the smelly facility, the Estonian beckoned with his finger to a lanky orderly with a busted lip.

"Tell me, my friend," Keelp opened his wallet, demonstrating his readiness to share its contents with the orderly, "you had a girl delivered here this morning, a suicide, isn't that so? She is my favorite niece."

"Yeah?" the orderly agreed reticently. After the rambunctious Alex, he was assessing this new visitor with suspicion.

"I'd like to say farewell to her." Keelp twirled a couple thousand-ruble notes in his fingers. "Unfortunately, I am due to fly out of the country soon and won't be able to attend the funeral."

"For sure," nodded the orderly.

He lifted his oilcloth apron and pointed to the pocket of his blue jacket. The money was deposited in the indicated place. Not much later, Keelp was standing over the body of the girl who was supposed to be appeasing him in bed that very moment. Her face was battered. The exquisite lips which the girl had so expertly used to raise both his member and his spirits had transformed into a dried bloody scowl. Only her dense black hair retained its former attractiveness.

Covering his nose with a handkerchief, Keelp scrupulously examined the body. He was particularly interested in the girl's hips. The visitor kept frowning, either from dissatisfaction or the unpleasant atmosphere.

Straightening out, Keelp asked the orderly to flip the body. The orderly eloquently lifted his apron again and indicated the pocket-depository. Keelp nodded his assent and gestured the lanky orderly to hurry up.

The butterfly tattoo was quite familiar to Keelp. In his youth, tattoos were a testament to one's membership in the criminal underworld. These days, they had become an industry for decorating the bodies of the unfettered youth. The Estonian was a conservative in many ways; however, he quite enjoyed tattoos – so long as they adored young nubile bodies. He had therefore remembered Katya's ethereal "butterfly" in detail.

Back in the hallway, Keelp recalled the main thing and reached back into his pocket for the wallet.

"I would also like to examine my niece's belongings."

"For sure." After his brawl with the psycho, the orderly was happy to do business with an understanding person.

The girl's clothes revealed nothing new. Keelp became downcast.

“What about the purse? Did she have a purse? You see, Katya had in her possession a private letter of mine. I am prepared to pay good money to see it returned.”

The orderly's greedy mind stumbled across an entrepreneurial inspiration – why not bring this old geezer someone else's purse? Surely, he won't figure it out! Yet, remembering that the visitor had referred to a specific letter, the orderly had to confess, “That's all she had with her, mister. Or – on her, rather.”

Back in his car, Keelp fell deep in thought. He was tormented by well-substantiated doubts. His life experience – replete with plenty of risky situations – spoke to him unequivocally: An unexpected death at the most critical moment cannot be an accident! In any affair, there is always some interested third party. If that is the case, then he must wait for the next move – and assume it would be the least pleasant one when it came.

The Estonian got out his phone and made a call.

“Benjamin, hello. This is Tarmo. I have a favor to ask. If in the next few days someone brings you anything out of the ordinary, give me a call. And try to arrange matters so that the persona in question and I can cross paths – What are you looking for? Well, you've got a trained eye, Benjamin. Believe me, when you see *it*, you'll understand. And be assured that I will express my gratitude not merely in words.”

10

The workday had long since drawn to a close, yet in Detective Petelina's office, all the lights remained on. Elena was sitting behind her desk, her back to the darkened window. The wall clock that her irritated husband had given her as a present many years ago lay in a box on the bottom shelf of her bookcase. This is how she created the illusion that the day was still alive and she could go on working as calmly as ever.

Petelina was examining the unpleasant photographs on her laptop that Mikhail Ustinov had taken at the scene of the incident. Or, was it the scene of the crime after all? Had the girl jumped off the roof on her own or had someone been there to help her? Who could profit by her death? Inevitably, Elena felt a certain professional anger whenever a young girl was killed.

The detective opened the passport of Ekaterina Igorevna Grebenkina. It had been issued in the district center of Grayvoron, in Belgorod Region. The girl in the photo was only fourteen, one year older than Nastya. The shy teenager did not much resemble the twenty-year-old woman who had met her demise on the hood of a car. Despite her battered face, it was clear that she had been attractive. It was unfortunate that she had made such a poor professional choice, but this could be written down to her parents' lack of oversight just as well. Her dad had only recalled her existence when he was fifty, while her mother eloped to seek her fortune abroad.

The door cracked open and the gaunt and, as per usual, disheveled Mikhail Ustinov slipped into the office. They had agreed that Petelina would stay late and await his preliminary findings.

"What do you think, Misha?" asked Detective Petelina and instantly went on to share all the doubts she had accumulated. "For a suicide, this girl acted much too quickly and decisively. She met her dad, promised some mysterious surprise, climbed to the roof and... If she had wanted to hurt her father, then she would have at least yelled something from the roof – forced him to feel guilty and to try to talk her down. Young women, as a rule, spend a long time deciding to take that final step. It's not only the end result that's important to them: They care about how they'll look after the fact... But in this case – well, it's just a nightmare and no more."

"Are you considering the murder option?" the Tadpole entered the conversation, taking a seat across from the detective.

"It could be an accident. Maybe she bent over to shout something to her father, slipped and – "

"That, I completely agree with," the forensic expert asserted decisively.

Petelina interlocked her fingers and looked the self-sure expert directly in the eyes. The Tadpole had a tendency to speak in riddles, expecting his interlocutor to figure things out.

"Alright, let's have it," the detective said impatiently.

"Let me explain," the expert began with his favorite phrase. "I did not uncover any evident traces of a struggle either on the body of the deceased or on the roof – torn clothes or missing buttons, for instance."

"So it was an accident then. The girl bent over and lost her balance."

"I didn't finish." Mikhail Ustinov produced a plastic doll from a bag.

"What is this now?"

The forensic expert stood the doll on the edge of the table.

"We shall conduct an investigative experiment. Let us assume that the young woman is bending over, losing her balance and plummeting down." Mikhail illustrated his narrative with the doll. "As she falls, she flips and as a result lands either onto her stomach or onto her back, but with her legs pointing away from the building. Correct?"

Elena got up and circled the desk to see the doll on the floor.

"But the girl was lying – » the detective began to grasp what the expert was getting at.

“Absolutely! Face-up, with her head away from the building. This could only happen if she had originally fallen backwards.” The expert demonstrated his version of the fall with the doll. “What’s our conclusion then?”

“She was pushed.” Petelina grew pensive and then shook her head doubtfully. “Push me.”

“You?”

“Go on and push, Misha. This an investigative experiment, remember?”

The flustered expert raised his hands so as not to press against the detective’s breasts and gave her shoulders a sharp shove. Elena started back but managed to grab the Tadpole by the cuff.

“The survival instinct,” she explained. “You proved yourself the Grebenkina fell backwards, so she could have been pushed only against her chest. The girl had long nails. There must be at least a few fibers caught in them. Did you check under her nails?”

“I’m sorry, Detective Petelina. The incident took place in a residential area. There were kids gawking from the windows – I wanted to be done with the body as quickly as possible.”

“We need to warn the medical examiner.”

“I do have some findings about the brandy.”

“The bottle from the roof?”

“Yup. The bottle was opened immediately before being drunk from. I established this through the absence of oxidization on the lid’s threading. The only fingerprints I found on the bottle belong to Ekaterina Grebenkina, the deceased. I measured the brandy’s temperature when I found the bottle. It was five degrees warmer than the outside temperature. You may recall it was 41 degrees out today.”

The expert paused, awaiting an answer to his unasked question.

“If Grebenkina took the bottle up there in her purse,” Petelina began to think out loud, “then the brandy couldn’t’ve cooled so quickly. If the brandy had been brought to the roof earlier, its temperature would have matched the air temperature. And yet, when we found it, the temperature was still falling to match the ambient temperature. This means that someone was waiting for Katya Grebenkina on the roof with the brandy.”

“The note about the pimp,” the expert reminded. “‘Boris is a jerk,’ remember..?”

“Okay. What do we have?” Petelina sat back down at her desk. The thin pencil in her hand began to produce arrows, circles and question marks on a blank sheet of paper. “Katya meets her father and suddenly runs off to get up on the roof. But why? Boris Manuylov, her pimp, is waiting for her up there to commemorate the suicide of Stella Sosuksu. However, Katya has decided to kill her pimp in front of her father.”

“I don’t think that pimps are so sentimental,” remarked Misha. “He couldn’t care less about commemorating a dead girl.”

“Let’s say you’re right. Then here’s another possible version. What if the father had come to loathe his prostitute-daughter? We only have Grebenkin’s words for what happened. The car owner and his friend saw him with his daughter. But they have absolutely no sense of how much time passed. For instance, how many minutes passed between the girl entering the building and falling? And what was Grebenkin doing in this interval? They don’t even remember whether he remained in the courtyard. Then, after the body hits the car, they’re in utter shock and remember nothing whatsoever. Like, for example, how quickly did Grebenkin appear? What if he pushed Katya off the roof and then took the elevator down?”

“Not to mention that Grebenkin was heard threatening the pimp.”

“This fits the theory of blind revenge. Both the debased daughter and her seducer.”

“Grebenkin seems more like a simpleton than some adroit revenger.”

Elena Petelina nodded, glanced over the doodle she had made and sighed.

“Nothing but questions.”

“Wouldn’t be much fun if there weren’t any.”

Before leaving, the Tadpole nodded toward the framed photograph on the detective’s desk.

“Shall I leave you the doll? For your daughter?”

Elena looked at the photo of Nastya on her first day of first grade, holding a bouquet of flowers and wearing a great big bow in her hair.

“Oh, Misha,” she smiled. “She’s given up dolls and taken up curling. She prefers 40 pound granite rocks to dolls these days.”

As soon as the forensic expert had left, the office phone rang. The detective picked up the receiver and heard a polite question.

“Detective Petelina?”

Petelina was happy to hear the voice of Ivan Ivanovich Lopakhin, the medical examiner. She did not know exactly how old he was but was sure that he had performed autopsies and written up findings for detectives who had long since retired. As Lopakhin liked to quip, “The best surgeon in the world hasn’t got a thing on me. Not one of my patients has ever complained.”

“I was just thinking of you, Dr. Lopakhin.”

“Speak of the devil and he shall appear. Sometimes I get the impression that I’m working in his waiting room.”

“That would make me the travel agent who books your patients.”

“One-way tickets only – no round trips.”

Elena liked to chat with the medical examiner and assumed that it was only thanks to his self-effacing irony that Lopakhin had managed to hold out at his job for so long. However, it was time to get down to business.

“Dr. Lopakhin, I have arranged for the body of Ekaterina Grebenkin to be delivered to you. Please pay special attention to her epithelial tissue as well as any fibers under her nails.”

“Actually, I called you precisely because I am so attentive. The poor girl’s body was first delivered to the nearest morgue. We were forced to arrange for her to be delivered here, to the police morgue. And here is what the orderlies told me...”

“I’m all ears.”

“Imagine this, Detective Petelina, there were already two men who came to visit the girl at the hospital morgue today. One said he was her friend, the other her uncle. They came separately. The common thread was that each one wanted to look at her belongings, especially her purse.”

Elena frowned and looked over at the couch. There, in a plastic bag, lay the dead girl’s purse. Elena had automatically dropped it there upon entering her office and turning on the light. Here was the price you paid on the first day of work after a vacation!

“Thank you, Dr. Lopakhin. As soon as you find anything...”

“By all means.”

The detective said farewell to the medical examiner and retrieved the purse. The latch clicked. Elena’s gloved fingers carefully unzipped the zipper. Petelina dumped the contents of the purse onto her empty desk. Her eyes instantly fixed on the most important item.

She couldn’t believe it!

11

Elena's dissatisfied mother was waiting for her when she got home that night. Olga Ivanovna Gracheva lived in the building next door. She would meet Nastya as the girl came back from school and take her to curling practice. The sixty-year-old woman was not much for diplomacy and spoke whatever was on her mind.

"Normal people miss their homes when they go away on vacation. Un-normal people miss their work."

"I had to stay late, mom. There was business to take care of."

"Criminals, eh? How about sparing a thought for your family? The apartment is dusty. The fridge is empty. I had to haul the groceries from the store all on my own to make dinner."

"What dust? We were gone for two weeks."

"Dust doesn't vacation in Thailand. Dust stays here and looks for ways to get into the house. If there's no one around to clean, then just like those lazy Romans in Pompeii, dust will bury our entire city."

"Pompeii was buried by Vesuvius erupting, mom."

"Vesuvius-Shmesuvius. If you can't find the time for it, find a maid. Cleaning your apartment gives me a backache."

Nastya emerged from her bedroom. Elena noticed a pent-up sadness in the thirteen-year-old's eyes.

"What happened, Nastya?"

"While I was off riding that cute elephant in Thailand, I missed the Moscow curling tournament."

"Big deal. There'll be other tournaments."

"The coach got angry and made Vera the skip. Now she's the team captain. The girls are saying that I'm going to be vice skip now. It's not fair."

Elena hugged her daughter.

"At least we had a good time on the beach."

"You and Valeyev had a good time. Locking yourself away from me every day."

Elena became embarrassed. Wearing light clothes on the warm beach, she and Valeyev could barely keep their hands off each other like insatiable a pair of newlyweds on their honeymoon.

"You left the girl on her own?" Mrs. Gracheva perked up. "In a strange and savage country with elephants and jungles?"

The front door opened. Marat Valeyev had returned from work. A month before their vacation, Police Captain Valeyev had moved in with Major of Justice Petelina. The two did not feel it necessary to keep their relationship from their coworkers.

"Still a captain?" Mrs. Gracheva greeted her "sonny-in-law."

"Mom, it's time for you to go home," Elena instantly jumped in. "I'll do the cleaning Saturday and thanks for the dinner."

"Saturday is still a whiles away," burbled Mrs. Gracheva, getting her things together in the entryway.

Initially, she had objected to her "smart, successful and beautiful" daughter's relationship with "an ordinary captain, and a Tatar to boot – God help him." But once she saw that Lena was not going to change her mind, the mother began to push her agenda in other ways. Accordingly, Mrs. Gracheva used every possible opportunity to barb her "sonny" with a look or a word.

"Are you planning on formalizing your relationship? Or is the plan simply to have a fling and then move on?"

"Let's talk about that later, mother. Here is your scarf."

“The scarf, of course! We wouldn’t want me to catch a cold! After all, who would make the soup and look after little Nastya if I did?”

Elena bore this reproach calmly, figuring that it was best to keep quiet. Her mother, however, did not share the same virtue.

“Since you’re already living together, you should at least help the bonehead get promoted or something. You hear me, Valeyev?” Mrs. Gracheva raised her voice. “I won’t give you my blessing to get married until you’re at least a major!”

“Oh Lord!” sighed Elena as she shut the door behind her mother. “Don’t pay her any attention, Marat. She wants what’s best for us.”

“I can only imagine what would happen if she starts wanting what’s worst for us...”

Two hours later, by the light of the bedside lamp, Elena was sitting on the edge of her bed, applying nourishing lotion to her dry skin, bronzed from the two-week tan. Marat rolled up to her from behind and reached his hand under her nightgown.

“Argh! Watch your ice claws!” Elena tensed and slapped at the pushy man’s hand. “What happened with the pimp? Why couldn’t you locate him?”

Marat was used to the fact that Lena always talked about her work and was happy to talk business even in bed.

“Boris Manuylov wasn’t at the modeling agency, but we found out a lot about him.”

“Anything interesting?”

“He’s thirty-four. He used to play guitar in a popular rock band when he was twenty. Supposedly, he was really good. The band toured around the country and acted like real rockers – you know, drinking, groupies, orgies. Then one day, in one of the towns they were playing in, a crook burst into Manuylov’s room – Manuylov was in there with his girl. The crook did the wise thing. He didn’t kill anyone and didn’t even beat the boy up. Instead, he stuck Manuylov’s left hand between the door and the jamb and rocked the door back several times across his fingers.”

“That’s horrible!”

“As a result, they had to amputate his middle finger – the other ones are just mangled. That’s how Manuylov got the name Birdless. He’ll never play guitar again. It’s worth noting that all of this happened because of the girl.”

“Got it. Since that time he didn’t hold women in much esteem, so he became a pimp.”

“That’s it.”

Elena finished massaging the lotion into her legs and feet. Her hands moved up to her lower back.

“Want me to help?” Marat offered.

The woman lay down on her stomach. Marat happily rolled her nightgown up to her shoulders. His eyes sparkled.

“Why just look at you!”

“Don’t get distracted. Why didn’t you catch up with Manuylov at his apartment?”

“It was empty, but he won’t get very far. I know his type. He’s hiding out somewhere this very moment, drinking no doubt. He may try to go back home in the morning. We put a mark on the door and warned the beat cop. As soon as old Birdless turns up, the local cops will detain him. Then we’ll put the squeeze on him and get him to talk.”

“A mark? What kind of mark?”

“A thief’s mark. A piece of transparent plastic from a bottle. We wedged it into the door crack. Burglars use this trick to case apartments – to make sure the owners are out of town. We just adapted it for our own ends. If the mark falls out, then Manuylov came back. The beat cop will check it in the morning and call a patrol car.”

“Learning from the burglars.”

“They learn from us, we learn from them. Symbiosis.”

“That same beat cop knows very well that Boris Manuylov is a pimp. Why didn’t he arrest him earlier?”

“Female instinct is incorrigible.”

“What instinct?”

“To have men take care of them.”

“It’s the male instinct that’s incorrigible – hey there, the deal was you rub my back, not my butt. I already did that part, thank you very much.”

“You’re tanned all over, except here. And your skin is all soft...”

“What are your fingers doing? Oh you animal!”

Elena tried to slap him away, but Marat grabbed her arm and flipped the woman onto her back. Elena encountered a pair of clouded eyes which left no doubts about his intentions.

“Who’s a slave to his instincts now? You male anima – ”

She did not get a chance to finish her thought. Marat sealed her mouth with a long kiss. His fingers wandered along the most intimate parts of her body, encountering no resistance. Responding to his attention, the woman relaxed and at some point herself guided her lover between her legs.

With growing passion, Elena replied to the man’s thrusts. Her arousal grew. Suddenly she recalled the birth control pills that had fallen out of Katya Grebenkina’s purse. It was time for her to think about some birth control as well. It was so difficult to control Marat when he was unbridled like this. Or was it better to have some faith in God’s plan? What would her mother say if—

“Oh Marat,” the woman’s lips whispered, as a series of shuddering thrusts culminated in a deep burst of delight.

12

Dirty white letters and the silhouette of a cat with a raised tail glowed in the red storefront. Alex Bayukin checked the tattered note in his hand: Wild Kitties, a strip club. He was at the right place.

Following his severe concussion in combat, Alex did not put much stock in his memory. He had gotten the strip club's address – where the pimp might be – from the floozies at the modeling agency. Initially, the proud little bitches had refused to tell him anything. But their silence lasted exactly up until the moment that the bimbos realized who was more of a threat to them – the runaway pimp or the unwanted guest with the crazed look in his eyes.

While they were at it, the long-legged fillies also provided a nice description of Birdless Boris and even threw in an image of his insolent mug on one of their cell phones. It wouldn't be hard to spot a goon like him: Birdless, who was of average height and a little older than thirty, sported a shoulder-length rocker's mane and wore a guitar-shaped pendant around his neck. For clothes, he seemed to prefer dress-shirts with unbuttoned collars, vests, and leather jackets adorned with multiple zippers. The greatest distinguishing mark, however, was the absent middle finger on his left hand.

A 240 lbs. mountain of a bouncer towered before the entrance to the strip club. Alex could barely keep himself from kicking the man in the apex of his wide stance. For his part, the bouncer looked askance at the Alex's dirty shoes and standard-issue pilot's jacket that Alex's friend, a helicopter pilot, had give him.

"I'm fresh out of the army, brother. It's my first day in the capital," explained ex-Captain Bayukin.

The bouncer smirked and told Alex to buy a ticket for a thousand rubles. Then, he scanned Alex with a handheld metal detector. When the metal detector squealed, the bouncer's eyebrow rose inquisitively.

"If it ain't these," grinned Alex, demonstrating his keys and phone, "maybe I'm just too eager to get in." He made sure to hold his hands at the level of his waist to screen the Yarygin Pistol tucked in his belt.

The bouncer reciprocated the grin.

"Go nuts, bud. It's a white party in there tonight."

The most conspicuous part of the semi-dark, music-filled hall was a catwalk that terminated in a pole. Girls in snow-white lingerie that resembled bridal wear would appeared on the catwalk. As they danced, "the brides" parted with their inhibition and their clothes, which were evidently supposed to symbolize innocence. The simple conceit was aimed squarely below the belts of the male onlookers. By the end of the striptease, the former "prudes" were left with only their shoes, thongs and garters. At this point, the now "mature" women would descend and walk along the snug alcoves of the club's floor, searching for a customer's lap among the alcoves' plush seats.

Alex sidled up to the bar and ordered a whiskey. It was a good thing that his general-father had outfitted him with money to carry on his search. The action around the pole was bedazzling. Having taken in several dances and three servings of booze, Alex recalled his reason for coming here in the first place.

The fingerless pimp! Where was that gimp, anyway?

There were no mangled hands to be seen along the bar, so Alex turned and began walking along the plush alcoves. The dim lighting concealed the customers' faces, but thankfully current hairstyles prescribed short haircuts, whereas the pimp wore his long.

And there he was, a solitary figure with a shoulder-length mane sitting in a corner booth – and he had on a vest!

Alex bent down and coughed politely.

"Excuse me, you haven't seen..."

A pendant with a guitar glinted on the man's chest. The hand holding the glass looked more like a cleft claw, with a gap where the middle finger should have been.

Alex plunked down beside him.

"What's up, Birdless. I've come here for you."

"I don't believe we've – » The pimp was peering into Alex's face trying to remember him.

"Relax. My memory's no good either anymore. But I do know one thing for certain. You're going to give me Katya's purse as well as the envelope."

"What envelope?" the pimp tensed up.

"Well at least you didn't ask who Katya was." Alex grabbed Birdless's balls and twisted his fist.

"Your whore took an envelope that didn't belong to her. You're going to return it."

"I don't know a damn thing," the pimp whimpered.

Alex tightened his grip.

"Hand over the envelope," he whispered ominously, "or you'll lose something a bit more vital than your middle finger."

"I don't have anything."

"Why don't you think a little *harder*. Maybe you'll recall after all..."

"Yes, yes!" begged Boris.

Alex relaxed his hand.

"Where's the envelope?"

"It's downstairs. Hang on, I'll go get it."

The pimp signaled and a nude beauty appeared across from Alex. Spreading her legs, she straddled Alex's knees; then, wrapping her fingers around his neck she began to gyrate her head and rear to the music's rhythm. Startled, Alex found a pair of plump, stiff nipples tittering inches away from his lips. He wanted to bite them and, unwittingly, squeezed the dancer's waist with his arms.

"You gotta pay extra for that, friend!" the girl warned.

Alex removed his hands and suddenly noticed that Boris had vanished.

"Where'd he go?"

"No third wheels. He ordered you a private dance, handsome."

"Where's Birdless?" Pushing away the stripper, Alex jumped up from the sofa.

"Easy!" the stripper became upset. "You won't even thank me?"

Alex grasped her implication and stuck two thousand-ruble bills into the garter on the girl's thigh.

"Where did Boris run off to?"

"He went downstairs, I think. We have a sauna down there." The girl pointed and licked her finger suggestively with her extended tongue. "Wish I had someone with your energy – just maybe in a more capable body, bunny."

Downstairs, Alex found himself in a lounge dimly illuminated in red light. A door led to a VIP-only sauna from which wafted the scent of dry lavender and music filled with female moans. Standing next to a small but well-stocked bar, a cute, plump girl in a skintight black leotard smiled at him politely. She was wearing riding boots, leather shorts and a vest that was doing its utmost to rein in the silicone implants struggling to get out.

"You are expected," the little donut cooed through puffy lips, pouring a glass of champagne.

Alex thirstily gulped down the cold drink and opened the door to the indicated room. Here, he found two bronze-skinned girls in white bras and stockings, writhing alluringly from a giant bed with a coffee-colored cover. Various animal skins and rugs lay covering the floor. Like a cat, one of the bronze-skinned girls began crawling towards Alex. She rubbed herself playfully against his leg and began to unfasten his belt. As the female fingers slipped beneath his clothes, Alex's breathing became halting. As if by miracle, the bachelor's most improbable fantasies were coming true.

At this moment, something fell softly onto the bearskin rug. Terror distorted the girl's dark face. Alex turned around and saw his fallen gun. Like a frothy wave against a cliff face, his reveries came shattering against reality.

Zippering his zipper, Alex darted out of the room and stuck his gun into the silicone implants of the donut in black.

"Where's Birdless at? Start talking, bitch!"

"He ran out!" The girl glanced at the emergency exit at the end of the hallway.

"Did he tell you to distract me?"

"A customary surprise for our favorite customers."

Enraged, Alex headed for the emergency exit. His mind was having difficulty coming to terms with the realities of living in the city. *Everything here is so goddamn customary*. He wished he could shoot holes in the girl's over-inflated balloons and shout "Surprise!"

In the meantime, outside in the parking lot, Boris Manuylov had reached his white Honda. He plunked down behind the wheel and checked to see if the psycho from the club was still chasing him. Seeing no one, he took two deep breaths to calm himself and slid the key into the ignition. The psycho had been diverted, while he had managed to keep his envelope. It was time to get the hell out of dodge.

At this moment, a dark figure rose from behind the driver's seat. A garrote fashioned from a rope slipped around the pimp's throat and pulled tight, binding him tight to the headrest.

"Here we are then," a sinister voice whispered in his ear.

13

Lisa Malyshko had made up her mind. Her new life was going to be beautiful. She would go to Sochi in the nicest train available. But first, she would dress herself up in the best boutiques. Money she would have aplenty. But, to actually get her hands on it, she would have to remain in Moscow a day or two longer.

Lisa returned to the computers at the station. It was stuffy here, in the corner under the low ceiling. Lisa pulled off her hat and unbuttoned her jacket. The guy in charge of the Internet kiosks smiled upon seeing the bright-red lips plastered across the girl's sweater. The girl instinctively turned in profile and opened her mouth a little. She knew this posture embellished her sexiness.

But, damn! This wasn't one of her clients. It was about time she started dropping this stupid habit.

Both her reflexive reaction to the guy's wolfish look as well as the sweater that triggered it – which she had often shared with her now-dead friend – all reminded her of her former occupation. Both girls had been brunettes. Both had similar bodies. Even their past lives resembled each other.

Katya Grebenkina had been born in the small town of Grayvoron. Her mother had conceived her as a result of a fling with an officer stationed at a nearby base. She had given the girl her father's last name in the hopes of collecting alimony. Half a year later, the officer was transferred to Transbaikal. He vanished without a trace. Katya thought her mother unlucky. She cursed her provincial little town and dreamed of becoming a famous model. Her mother never missed a chance to rebuke her and blamed her daughter for her inability to find a new husband.

Having barely graduated, Katya went to Moscow and applied at a modeling agency. The agency's handsome manager, who later turned out to be a pimp, filled her head with a bunch of nonsense. He seduced the ignorant and provincial girl and convinced her that without a portfolio, makeup, a first-rate hairstylist, brand-name clothes and shoes, no one would take her on as a model. Of course there was only one way to earn the money she needed and, luckily, it wasn't even very tedious work – one could say, it was even pleasant. That was how seventeen-year-old Katya became a prostitute.

Meanwhile, back home, Katya's mother met a foreign gentleman on the Internet and eloped to Greece. From her first letter, Katya figured out that her mom had traded the backwoods of Russia for the backwoods of Greece, where she was forced to dote over a Greek retiree and beg him for money to go see a dentist. Katya did not write back.

Lisa Malyshko had been born in Voronezh Region – in a village beside the Don federal highway. The entire life of the village revolved around serving truckers at the motel, the café and the sauna. Lisa never knew her father. Her mother would concoct a different story about him every day. Most likely, she had become pregnant by a random driver, whom she could no longer recall. The good-looking woman liked to have a drink and had a mischievous laugh. The neighbors would quietly remark that she “put her balls before her brains.” She was constantly hanging around the roadside café where little Lisa was allowed to take whatever she liked from the kitchen.

Lisa's mother died between the wheels of a truck when she tried to cross the highway drunk one night. Lisa was sixteen at the time. The café's owner seized his opportunity at the wake: He plied the girl with alcohol and then raped her.

“Now you're going to serve me instead of your mom,” he told the shattered Lisa the next morning. “What, you thought I was going to feed you out of the good of my heart?”

Lisa endured the rape for two weeks, until the owner of the cafe decided to let one of his relatives have a go. The relative – who had just been released from prison and who, besides being starved for women, turned out to be somewhat of a sadist – did quite a number on the girl. After that, Lisa made her decision. She cleaned out the café's register and hitched a ride to Moscow. She had

no illusions about who she was going to be. It was better to work as a prostitute and get paid for it than endure being raped over a bowl of soup for the rest of her life.

Lisa Malysheva was certain that if she had had a father, he would have defended her and her life would have turned out otherwise. However, finding her mythical father seemed impossible. Katya Grebenkina's situation was not even worth comparing: At least she knew the exact age of officer Igor Vasilevich Grebenkin – and where he worked.

“What if he's a general by now?” Lisa would goad her friend. But Katya would simply wave her off. Finally, Lisa took the initiative herself and located Igor Grebenkin on the web.

This was how the newly-uncovered father came to Moscow to see his daughter. Their long-expected reunion, however, had turned into a horrific tragedy.

Recalling these things, Lisa also remembered that it was forty days since the death of Stella, with the funny last name of Sosuksu. Stella had only been eighteen and never laughed at anything. The first time Lisa saw Stella smile was when – having told Birdless Boris and his preoccupied clients to go to hell one evening – all three girls had gone to Sparrow Hills to see a grandiose fireworks show.

A crowd had gathered. In the sky overhead, bright flashes burst and broke into thousands of shimmering fires. Katya and Lisa were warming themselves with gulps of brandy and yelling, “Because we feel like it and not because it's what the client wants.” They kept prickling Stella, trying to get their impassive friend to loosen up. Stella tripped, flailed her arms and struck a skinny young man, knocking off his glasses. Mumbling an apology, she replaced the broken glasses onto his flummoxed face and could not contain her smile. The young man replied in kind.

His name was Oleg Deryabin. He was a PhD student – a botanist – who was doing his research right there in Moscow State University's Botanical Garden in Sparrow Hills. He was the kind of guy who got mocked in school, but Stella fell for him. After that, she would take any opportunity she could to run off and spend time with Oleg.

One day in the fall, Stella showed her girlfriends their humble little lovers' retreat in the botanical garden – a derelict conservatory nestled among ancient apple trees. The girls munched on apples they found on the ground and fantasized about all kind of impossible nonsense that only happens in romantic comedies. The naïve rustic girl from sunny Moldova was the most vocal of the three. She went on in detail about her future plans for her future happy life.

And yet dreams come true much more often in the movies than in real life. Birdless Boris located Oleg Deryabin and showed him photos of Stella participating in orgies. “Professionals don't spread their legs pro bono,” the pimp told the botanist – mostly to scare him. “You owe me, fellah.” The young man, who hailed from an intellectual family, could not forgive his girlfriend's betrayal. When he saw her again, he called her words that Birdless himself would use in times of anger.

Overcome with grief, Stella stepped off the roof.

Lisa forced herself to forget her friends' deaths and typed yet another query into Yandex. She had goals and she wasn't about to abandon the path she'd settled on. Yandex returned the addresses of three specialized stores. Lisa chose the first one and wrote it down.

Her hand checked the envelope in her pocket. It was almost empty, and yet even these dregs would more than suffice for her immediate plans. Tomorrow she would be rich, but for now she needed to find a place to sleep. It would be too dangerous to go back to her apartment and the train station was patrolled by pushy cops who had a sixth sense when it came to prostitutes – they would find something to make a problem out of and then try to get a free ride.

Then it came to her. Not for nothing had Lisa recalled the pavilion in the botanical garden in Sparrow Hills.

“Thanks, Stella. Now I know where I can spend the night.”

14

Feeling fooled and seething with rage, Alex Bayukin stormed through the emergency exit and out of Wild Kitties.

Wait till I get my hands on you, Birdless.

The narrow parking lot and sidewalk were filled with cars. A solitary taxi stood waiting at the club's entrance.

Damn it! If the pimp has a car, he's long gone.

Alex tucked his gun behind his belt and ran up to the taxi.

"Did you see a guy with long hair? He's a friend of mine. Did he get into a taxi?"

"I've been here ten minutes. There haven't been any other taxis." The taxi driver was smoking, flicking the ash out of his open window.

"Did you see any car leave at all?"

"All I know is I haven't had to move for anyone," the taxi driver shrugged. "You need a ride or what?"

Alex understood what the driver was getting at. The taxi was blocking the only way out of the strip club's parking lot. All of a sudden, one of the cars standing off to the side honked and abruptly fell quiet.

"I'll get a ride from my friend," Bayukin muttered, turning in the direction of the sound.

Looking carefully, he saw a white Honda with someone inside. Alex crept up to the car from behind and squatted. Two men were conversing in raised voices. Judging by the rocker's mane, Birdless Boris was behind the wheel. A tense man in a hat of reddish fur was sitting right behind him.

"Touch the wheel again and I'll strangle you," the man threatened.

The pimp, his head pressed to the headrest, was babbling excuses.

"I don't know anything! I saw her this morning and that's it. I took my cut and left."

"That's a lie. Katya could not have jumped on her own."

"She's not the first. Who knows how a whore's mind works?"

"You piece of shit!" The man in the hat tightened the garrote over the pimp's throat.

"Let me go..." Birdless's voice grew hoarse and faint as he tried to break free.

After a short struggle, the passenger eased the tension. The pimp began to cough.

"Look, you're right," Boris agreed after regaining his breath. "The whole thing doesn't seem like Katya. She wasn't the type to start drama like that. If anything, she was more liable to off me first – and then maybe do herself in too. But be that as it may, I have no idea what happened back at the apartment. Like I told you, I wasn't there!"

"What are you hiding from then?"

"Who likes talking to the cops?"

"Far as I'm concerned, you're guilty either way. You turned my daughter into a prostitute. I was going to kill you either way."

"For what? She agreed of her own –"

The pimp's frightened explanation was cut off by more croaking and the sound of a body thrashing.

This crazed pops is going to end him, Alex began fretting. Then I won't find out anything about the envelope at all.

He rose, tore the rear door open and struck the passenger on the temple with the butt of his gun. The blow didn't land perfectly flush, but it was enough to tear the skin and knock the man unconscious. Grebenkin's hands relaxed, loosening the garrote.

Alex pushed him to the other side, sat down in his former place and shut the door. The pimp was sputtering and rubbing his throat. His teary, agitated eyes were trying to make out his unexpected savior in the rearview mirror.

“Don’t get your hope up, creep. It’s me again,” explained Alex and stuck the gun’s barrel into Birdless’s back. “Where’s the envelope?”

The pimp began thrashing hysterically.

“What’s is with you people?” he screamed. “Leave me alone!”

“The envelope, you goon.”

“The envelope! The envelope! What is your fixation with the envelope?”

“Looks like I shoulda let this other guy finish his job. Are you going to give me the envelope or not?”

“You’re all crazy!”

“You’re not going to trick me this time. Do you have the envelope on you or not?”

Boris’s hand unwittingly touched the shirt pocket under his vest. Alex noticed this gesture and broke into a crooked grin.

“Don’t bother. I’ll just help myself.”

Alex’s right hand pressed the barrel to the pimp’s temple, while with his left he reached over Boris’s shoulder. Alex had been so focused on his interrogation that he had failed to notice Grebenkin open his eyes. Realizing the delicacy of the situation, Grebenkin decided that he too must act. Surreptitiously, he drew a nonlethal pistol that had been modified to shoot live rounds, pointed it at Alex and pulled the trigger.

Two gunshots sounded mere hundredths of a second apart. The bullet from the nonlethal gun struck Alex in his shoulder, causing his trigger finger to slip – and nine grams of lead propelled Boris Manuylov’s brains out of his head. Dirty blood splattered the window pane, greasily rimming the hole the bullet had left.

Grebenkin pulled the door handle, tumbled out of the car and took off running. In his haste, he failed to notice that he had lost his ushanka hat.

Finding himself wounded, Alex Bayukin also realized that it was time to flee. He got out of the car and felt the wound. The bullet had glanced his shoulder, tearing off a clump of skin. The shock drowned out his pain.

The envelope! The scorching thought pulsed through Alex’s mind. *I came here for the envelope.*

He opened the driver’s side door and, restraining his disgust, reached toward the dead pimp. His hand fished out a clean envelope with something flat in it from the dead man’s pocket. Alex stuck his prize in his pants’ rear pocket and hurried away down the dark street.

The road led him to the subway station. The pain, awaking in his shoulder, almost paralyzed his right arm. Alex sat down on the edge of a ventilation hatch and gritted his teeth. He needed to think. He was without his jacket, which he had left in the club, and his shirt arm was soaked with blood. Someone would definitely notice a passenger like him on the subway. It was dangerous to take a taxi too, since taxi drivers were a naturally observant lot. Plus, he needed medical attention and it was unlikely that his general-father would be willing to risk his dodgy reputation to ask around for a surgeon.

Alex got out his phone. His left thumb poked at the buttons and found a number in the brief address book. Luckily, Alex had a friend in Moscow who would come to his aid under any and all circumstances.

He pressed the call button and waited for the familiar voice to answer.

“It’s me.” Alex confessed relieved. “I’m wounded and can’t call an ambulance.”

For a moment, the phone was silent.

“Where are you?” came the curt question at last. “I’m on my way.”

15

The next morning, Operatives Marat Valeyev and Ivan Mayorov were walking down a hallway of the Investigative Committee building. Even their gaits suggested their different personalities. Fit and charming, Valeyev held himself upright and took precise, measured steps. His eyes, however, automatically darted to every pair of passing legs belonging to his female coworkers. On the other hand, tall and dirty-blond Vanya Mayorov wavered constantly between a long stride and a short one. He kept trying to get his partner's attention.

"Marat, Galya insists that we give you some money for your apartment." When Ivan spoke, his powerful arms seemed to aid him in finding the necessary words.

"It's your apartment, Vanya. You're living in it. Anyway, you're paying to feed that insatiable feline specimen – that's enough for me."

Twenty-eight-year-old Ivan Mayorov had found true love for the first time in his life. His beloved was Police Lieutenant Galya Nesterova, who worked the passport desk in the same building. Vanya was prepared to propose formally, but Galya kept trying to put it off: "Let's at least wait until you make captain, Mayorov. Then we can commit to a mortgage." Initially, Vanya and Galya had been renting an apartment on the outskirts of Moscow, but then they quarreled with the landlord after he raised the rent unexpectedly. Valeyev came to their aid, offering them his tiny studio. By that time, Marat had already basically moved in with Elena Petelina and would only stop by his apartment to feed Genghis, his tomcat.

"It's just too awkward, Marat. We've been living there a month already and haven't given you a dime."

"Forget it! I was on vacation for two weeks. Someone would've had to take care of that cat anyway. How's old Genghis doing without me?"

"Can't say he's had the time to give you much thought. I now understand what the expression 'as anxious as a tomcat in March' means. Genghis slips out of the window every night to go prowling. He can't get enough. You know how fiercely he looks at Galya when she does her morning exercises?"

"Be vigilant, Vanya. Don't leave your woman in such a situation. Genghis is a real dog!"

"Get out of here!" Vanya noticed the glint of mockery in Valeyev's eyes and pushed his partner in the shoulder. "Watching Genghis, I start feeling a little like an animal myself."

"Just a little? Certain women are convinced that men are pure animals and nothing more," Marat recalled a recent barb of Elena's. "The only difference is that we've learned how to dress ourselves."

As he related this to his partner, Marat opened the door with a stencil that announced "Senior Detective E.P. Petelina."

The mistress of the office overheard the last phrase, nodded to the operatives and, without interrupting her work, remarked, "A famous scientist claims that a lion's behavior and a man's behavior have much more in common than that of a man and a woman."

"At least he chose to illustrate his comparison with the noble lion," muttered Valeyev.

"He was just flattering you guys."

"We should also establish whether this supposed scientist is a man himself or one of those..." Vanya pursed his lips effeminately in imitation of a homosexual applying makeup.

"Here, I'll give you his address," Petelina reached for her address book with a very serious face.

"Why?"

"So you can check out your theory. You can meet him mano-a-mano and conduct an investigative experiment, as it were. Make sure to videotape it, so we can all be sure."

"I'm certain you'll take a liking to him," Valeyev piled on.

Vanya widened his eyes, noticed his partner's barely-restrained laughter and frowned.

"Detective Petelina..."

“Alright, you have learned to dress yourself!” Petelina flashed a smile and looked up strictly. “I hope that in this case, you’ve come to pay me a visit in your capacity as operatives. What’s your report on that assignment I gave you? Where’s the pimp Boris Manuylov?”

“He didn’t come home last night,” replied Valeyev. “The insert in the door was there this morning.”

“You think he’s panicked?” the detective mused, twirling the pencil in her hand. “I swung by the morgue that they took Ekaterina Grebenkina to. Interviewed the orderlies. Two men came by to see the deceased; neither of them resembled Manuylov. The first was aged about thirty with a prickly look and short hair. He said he was her friend. The second one was about sixty with a cane – a real, old-fashioned aesthete.”

“The murderer is unlikely to show up at the morgue.”

“Unless he needs to get some vital clue. Both of these guys were interested in the girl’s belongings, particularly her purse. It’s a good thing we have it. I checked its contents but didn’t see anything very interesting.”

“Perhaps the murderer’s fingerprints?”

“I already submitted it for tests.”

“Detective Petelina, are you certain that this is a murder case?” Mayorov asked doubtfully. “After all, there was a similar suicide earlier. The second girl could have just jumped out of desperation.”

“She didn’t jump. She fell backwards.”

The desk phone rang. Petelina picked it up, recognized the caller and put him on speakerphone.

“It’s Dr. Lopakhin, the medical examiner,” she explained to the operatives.

“I completed the autopsy. You’ll have the full report within the hour. For now, I can tell you the following,” reported Lopakhin. “The blood alcohol level correlates to one hundred grams of strong liquor, no more. There are multiple internal fractures that are indicative of the fall she suffered. Cause of death was a severe blood hemorrhage in the brain and was basically instantaneous. I also examined her fingernails as you requested. I found nothing that suggested that the girl struggled for her life. And another thing: I found particles of what looks like cement among the hairs on her nape. I collected them so that your Tadpole, as you call him, can run tests on them.”

“Thank you, Dr. Lopakhin.”

“Don’t thank me for my infernal work. The older I get, the younger become those who end up on my table. There’s no justice in it,” Lopakhin sighed. “Am I showing my years?”

“You’re just reminding us that if a victim pays a visit to your table, then we must make sure that the guilty party pays a visit to the defendant’s bench.”

“Godspeed your search, Lenchka. Good luck.”

The medical examiner said his farewells.

“According to Ustinov’s findings,” Petelina explained to the operatives, “the bottle was first opened on the roof. It’s missing about three hundred grams of brandy, and the victim, as we just heard, only drank one hundred.”

“So someone else was definitely up there with her.”

“Someone prudent enough to keep their fingerprints off the bottle. Find me that pimp, Valeyev.”

“*To contend and to seek – to uncover and bring to justice*,” Valeyev recited the operative’s motto and slapped his partner on the shoulder. “Alright, Vanya. Enough daydreaming about that scientist. Let’s go find us that Manuylov.”

At this moment, Colonel of Justice Yuri Grigorevich Kharchenko, Petelina’s boss, briskly entered the office.

“Lena, you never stopped by last night after your vacation. Now your poor old boss is forced to come down here to welcome you back.”

Petelina flushed.

“Colonel Kharchenko, I brought you a souvenir actually.” She waved to the operatives. “You guys can go.”

“No, no, let them stay – in case you’ve decided to bribe me and I need witnesses.”

From her desk’s top drawer, Petelina produced an elephant miniature carved from teak.

“This is the symbol of Thailand. They have more elephants there than anywhere else in the world.”

“Thank you. I have something for you too. I’m not sure it counts as a present but... Didn’t I hear you mention Manuylov just now?”

“Yes, we are looking for a Boris Manuylov alias Birdless. He’s the pimp and known associate of one Ekaterina Grebenkin, who died yesterday under mysterious circumstances.”

“Well, your Manuylov has turned up. He won’t be able to answer your questions, though. He’s missing more than just a finger these days: Part of his head is gone too. He was shot point blank while sitting in his car last night.”

“Last night?”

“Yes. I’m putting you on that case as well, Lena. The evidence gathered during the preliminary examination will be delivered promptly. I reckon that the pimp’s murder and the death of his, erm, employee are somehow related. It’s only logical you work both cases. What do you say? Is this a present or just the opposite?”

“Well, for Captain Valeyev and Senior Lieutenant Mayorov here this certainly is a present. There’s no need to go chasing after a dead man, after all.”

16

On the screen of his video intercom, General Konstantin Viktorovich Bayukin beheld a tall man of forty years in an unbuttoned car coat and long scarf. The man's immaculate coif, his self-assured and somewhat insolent look, his excellent clothes – the high collar on his white dress shirt had been drawn tight around his throat by the necktie – and his leather briefcase, all contributed to the impression that this was a very successful man indeed. The general recognized lawyer Denis Gomelsky and opened his door.

“Mr. Gomelsky, at last!”

An exquisite fragrance of perfume sneaked into the apartment behind the lawyer.

“Good day to you, General Bayukin.” Gomelsky passed confidently into the living room, deposited his hefty, expensive briefcase onto the sofa and plunked down beside it. “I must admit that your request came as somewhat of a surprise.”

“Circumstances,” Bayukin spread his arms haplessly.

“I did the due diligence and found out who the detective in charge of the Ekaterina Grebenkina case is. The detective's name is Elena Pavlovna Petelina. An intelligent, meticulous and beautiful woman they call ‘the Noose,’” said Gomelsky, referencing the nickname, a pun on *petlya* (Russian for “noose”) with which the felons had christened Petelina. “That is, if she pulls the case around your throat – you won't squirm your way out.”

“You are familiar with her?”

“I've had the pleasure of meeting her, personally.” The lawyer smiled enigmatically, as though recalling some racy affair, but instantly regained his former composure. “I think however that, now, it is my turn to ask the questions. Why are you interested in the Grebenkina case? The girl either jumped off the roof or someone helped her. If I am not mistaken, the girl's only gainful occupation was prostitution.”

“You are not mistaken. Moreover, I personally made use of her services. The day before her death, Katya was with me and...”

“Finish your thought, General Bayukin. One should keep no secrets from one's doctor and from one's lawyer. Sooner or later, your most secret sins, your most noisome ailments, will surface and if by then it is too late, then neither your lawyer nor your doctor will be able to help you.”

“Well, the issue is a bit delicate...”

“What are you afraid of? Did the prostitute have some kind of compromising information about you? Did you incite her to commit suicide? Were you perhaps on the roof with her when she did it?”

“I only spent time with her here. I was an ordinary client, as far as she went.”

“What is it that worries you then? Your colleagues' whispering or the retribution of some former spouse?”

“I don't even know how to begin to explain the matter.”

“I can see that you are agitated. Please start with the main problem that is tormenting you.”

“Well, alright,” the general said decisively and called to the closed door to the neighboring room. “Alex!”

Bayukin Jr. emerged into the living room.

“This is my son Aleksey. He is a captain in the armed forces,” the general introduced his son. “He came to Moscow yesterday and I asked him to find Katya's pimp in order to resolve a certain little problem. He found him and...”

“Battered him?”

“An accidental gunshot, you understand... Basically, the pimp is dead and Aleksey is wounded in his shoulder.”

A wrinkle of displeasure cut through the lawyer's face. Denis Gomelsky stood up and circled Alex Bayukin as if trying to commit his 3D image to memory.

"Recount to me in detail: where, when and how did this happen?" he asked.

Somewhat unwillingly, Alex related the incident outside of the Wild Kitties strip club.

"And you're sure the pimp's dead?" the lawyer inquired. When it came to common criminals – as opposed to his more vaunted, white-collar clients – Denis Gomelsky felt comfortable to speak informally and directly.

"The bullet went clean through his head. Instant death."

"The gun. How'd you get it?"

"It's from my unit. It's a Yarygin Pistol. It was issued and registered to me, but I claimed that it had been lost in combat, so I could have a piece of my own."

"A Yarygin Pistol? That's a comparatively new model."

"Yes, they've been issuing them for a few years now. Almost all of our officers has one."

"Officers! Not criminals! Did the casing remain in the car?"

"I, uh, I didn't really think at the time –"

"They'll find the casing. It'll lead them to the gun and from the gun to you! It could have been possible to use the combat loss as an excuse, but you've already made a whole heap of mistakes! You publicized your pursuit of the pimp, you displayed the gun in the club, and you talked to the taxi driver. In other words, you left a trail of witnesses in your wake, who will all happily identify you!"

"I only wanted to scare him a little! Someone shot me and my finger twitched!"

"Who was the third person in the pimp's car? Do you know him?"

"Some guy aged about fifty. I heard him refer to the whore as his daughter. He too had a gun on him. He shot me and wounded me in the shoulder."

"Alright. Now let's talk about your wound. Where were you treated?"

"You don't have to worry about that. My mother came to pick me up. She is a doctor and she won't say anything. The bullet merely grazed me. I feel better already."

"Better," the lawyer shook his head acerbically. "You're in it now!"

"Mr. Gomelsky, will you be able to defend Aleksey?" asked the worried general. "He isn't guilty. The whore's father fired first."

"If you are so certain about his innocence, you are welcome to file a confession."

"Mr. Gomelsky, I am coming to you as a professional. This is all at least partially my fault. Please help us. I am ready to pay whatever you like."

"Okay. I know a thing or two from taking on criminal cases in St. Petersburg. The lesson here is that, right after the accidental shooting, you should have called me! It's far cheaper to solve the problem by dealing with the operatives when they're first collecting evidence in the field. No evidence – no case – no problem! But now, much will depend on which detective is assigned to the case. Some of them are amenable, while others... But okay! First thing to do is find out who it is."

The lawyer got his phone, stepped out into the kitchen and shut the door tightly behind him. He returned ten minutes later.

"I have good news and bad news. The murder investigation has been assigned to Elena Petelina – the same Noose I was telling you about earlier. That's the bad news. Be assured that she will trace the gun and identify your son."

"What's the good news?" the general asked, refusing to give up hope.

"The good news is that I am acquainted with Lena Petelina. And our relationship was not limited to work."

"Can she be bribed?"

"Don't judge others' standards by your own," Gomelsky replied with sudden abruptness. "Money is not the only thing in life. Now, please clarify your intentions for me. What the hell did you need to find a prostitute and her pimp for? And don't go spinning any tall tales."

Bayukin the father and Bayukin the son exchanged glances. Alex spoke first:

“Dad wanted me to find an envelope.”

“The cheap bitch stole it.” Bayukin Sr. stepped over to the bookcase. “It was right here, tucked between the books like some trifle, when in fact...”

“I didn’t find it among the whore’s things. The pimp had it.” Alex nodded in the direction of the coffee table, in the center of which lay a blank, white envelope.

“You brought it home from the murder scene?” Gomelsky inquired and shook his head emphasizing the stupidity of such a deed.

He put on some gloves, picked up the envelope gingerly by its corner and shook out its contents. A maroon passport issued by the Republic of Bulgaria fell out onto the table. The lawyer opened it carefully. A man with an untamed mane of hair, reminiscent of the kind that rock musicians prefer, looked out from the photograph. Gomelsky read the Bulgarian name and surname. The lawyer’s grim eyes fixed themselves on Bayukin Jr.

“Whose passport is this?”

“The pimp’s. That’s his mug. The bastard bought it so he could go to Europe without a visa. Or maybe he decided to scam under some stranger’s name.”

“Congratulations! You’ve helped uncover an imposter!” Gomelsky praised Alex without bothering to hide his sarcasm. Am I to understand that you committed homicide over this envelope? And then brought the evidence home with you?”

“I’ll burn the passport.” General Bayukin tore the document in half. “It’s a blunder. This isn’t the envelope that Katya stole from me.”

17

Elena Petelina stapled the preliminary report on Boris Manuylov's murder scene to her folder. Here were the first pages of her new murder case. Only the goddess of investigation could know how many volumes the folder would grow to – if, that is, the ancient Greeks had ever gotten around to inventing her.

Justice has a goddess: Themis. But who is responsible for bringing the evidence to her scales? There are goddesses of wisdom, memory and vengeance. The ancient Greeks even spared a thought for the criminals. Hermes is considered the patron of wanderers, craftsmen, merchants and thieves. Only the detectives who spend their lives rutting around in search of the truth were overlooked.

A phone call jolted Elena from her mythical musings. Marat Valeyev's tanned torso appeared on the phone's screen, while The Beatles' love ditty filled the office. How far had their romance come! Nowadays, she couldn't even guess what Marat would bring to her: either it'd be some new findings in the investigation or he'd say that he missed her and was hurrying over to lock the office and crush her in his embrace.

Oh Lord! That already happened – on that narrow couch and on this ample desk. I should change his screen photo, eradicate the temptation.

"Lena, I'm calling from the strip club," Marat instantly put her at ease.

"What strip club?" It took Elena a second to switch her thoughts and remember that the pimp Boris Manuylov had been murdered outside of the Wild Kitties strip club.

"I'm interviewing the strippers, while Vanya searches them. He's trying so hard that it's making him blush."

"Valeyev, can you be serious please?" demanded Elena, understanding that she was being toyed with.

"Well, speaking seriously, the strippers aren't here yet. Actually, there's no one here at all besides some cleaners and the day manager. Both the ladies and the bouncers are sleeping off a busy night. And yet, here I am – on the job, after the exhausting night you and I had –"

"Oh sure, you worked so hard. Three minutes and he's out."

"What? I'm setting a timer next time."

"Why don't you *reset* your head, Marat? We're at work here."

"Well, okay. The situation here is looking as follows: There aren't any cameras in the club or out front of it. Confidentiality and whatnot. But there's a little park across the street. Vanya did his thing, went over there and chatted up the dog-owners. One unhappy lady, the owner of an old half-blind Cocker Spaniel, really hates the customers of this fine establishment. She doesn't much take to the fact that men come here to stuff money into the girls' unmentionables. She avers that all interested parties should be castrated."

"That sure would lessen my caseload."

"Her spaniel can't see a damn thing, but the lady has senile hyperopia and a mean memory."

"What do you mean by 'mean'?"

"A mean memory is when you can't remember the day of the week and yet you manage to record that at 1:25 in the morning, the upstairs neighbor was upbraiding his daughter for coming home too late. Among other things, the talkative lady remembered that the bouncers refused an irate man of about fifty entrance to the club. The man had almost stepped on Joe Cocker, you see."

"The English singer? What was he doing there?"

"Hmm, how do I put this delicately. He was fertilizing the lawn with his natural emissions. Joe is the name of her Cocker Spaniel... He was wearing a faded ushanka hat of reddish fur."

"Who? The singer or the spaniel?"

"I mean the guy that wasn't allowed into the club."

"Listen Marat, can you speak clearly please?" Petelina became irritated. "Stop distracting me with Joe Cocker."

"Remember that song of his, the one that was playing when Kim Basinger did her striptease in *Nine 1/2 Weeks*?"

"Are you implying something? Men can do a striptease too you know."

"I accept your challenge. First, you can startle me with your dance, and then it'll be my turn."

"You might need to work out a bit first."

"Which muscle am I working out?"

"Marat – we're pretty off-topic here..."

"Yeah, just like the witnesses. You can't imagine what it's like listening to them. The dog lady started telling me about her dead husband, who wore the same exact muskrat hat back in the eighties. Have you figured out who she was talking about yet?"

Hearing the word "husband," Elena remembered Sergey Petelin, her ex-husband, and not at all Marat, with whom she was currently living. Sergey and she had had the Wedding March, a white dress with a bridal veil, two "I do's," and a kiss. He became her first husband, and she had given birth to her wonderful daughter thanks to him.

And yet yesterday Sergey came to me for help, thought Elena. He must be in real trouble to squash his pride and come begging for help.

But she had to work.

"The father of the prostitute," Petelina answered Valeyev's question.

"Exactly! The description is a little too close to Mr. Grebenkin, our peculiar eyewitness. Now, note that, in the dog lady's account, he didn't go away instantly but lingered, loitering around the club. His presence unsettled aging Joe to the point that the poor guy had to finish his business at home."

"Enough already with the Cockers and the Spaniels!"

"I'm sorry. Joe is a witness too. The next morning he uncovered the ushanka hat in the little park. The same one that had formerly crowned the agitated patron, the presumable Grebenkin."

"Are you sure?"

"Go ahead and try finding another one like it in Moscow. And let's not forget Joe here, who, blind as he is, has preserved his keen sense of smell."

"Did you write down the woman's statement?"

"You're insulting me, Len. I even took possession of the hat."

"Have it checked for sweat and grease deposits."

"I wouldn't be so sure about Grebenkin's sweat and grease deposits. I'm afraid that they've been contaminated by Joe's hair and slobber deposits. The dog, you see, felt it necessary to exact his revenge on the hat of his assailant."

"Igor Vasilevich Grebenkin, the father of Ekaterina Grebenkina," Elena Petelina checked her notes. "I recall that he mentioned the pimp and even threatened him."

"There's your motive – blood vengeance! Manuylov fell out with his 'employee' and pushed Katya off the roof. Then, her distraught father shot him dead."

"Could be. Here's what I want you to do. Find and bring Igor Grebenkin to me as quickly as you can."

"I think the Tadpole took a photo of him. And you wrote down his number."

"A call from us might scare him off." As she spoke with Valeyev, the detective began searching the law enforcement databases on her computer. "In the meantime, get Grebenkin's photo from Ustinov. Have him send it to your phone."

Petelina could here Valeyev relay her order to Ivan Mayorov. A few minutes later, her computer displayed the results of her search on her screen. The detective's face lit up.

“Okay. Found it! Last night, an I.V. Grebenkin registered himself into the Sayany Hotel. I sure do enjoy working with amateurs. Get over there, Marat, detain him and bring him to me!”

Having finished talking to Valeyev, Elena Petelina went down to the forensics lab. The first person she saw upon entering was Vasilich, crumpled in his armchair. The eternal inhabitant of the lab, Vasilich was a human-sized artificial skeleton with a natural human skull. This time, Vasilich was decked out in felt boots, an ushanka hat and mittens. As per custom, a sheet of paper hung from his ribs with a plaintive quip: “This winter is starting to get to me!”

This year’s winter really had distinguished itself with its snowfall and length.

“It’s the second month of spring,” remarked Petelina to Misha Ustinov, who had looked up from his electron microscope upon her entrance.

“Yet it’s summer eternal in Thailand.”

“Envy is one of the criminal motives, Misha. When you take your vacation, you’ll be able to visit the tropics too.”

“Masha is begging me to go to the mountains. She wants to put me on a snowboard.”

“You’re still dating that perky journalist? Your constancy is admirable. How is she doing?”

“She’s closer friends with Vasilich than with she is with me,” the expert nodded his curly head in the direction of the skeleton. “She’s started a blog for him on the Internet. Every week she posts a new photo.”

“You don’t say!”

“She’s gotten more than two thousand followers in two months.”

“But of course: In Russia, true fame comes only after death.”

Petelina glanced from Vasilich back to the Tadpole. People who spent their entire lives behind a computer had the worst posture. Soon enough the Tadpole would become a living copy of Vasilich. It was a good thing that her daughter Nastya didn’t spend her time hunched over the keyboard, preferring to pursue a sport. It was no big deal that she wasn’t a champion; at least her womanly stature was already manifesting itself.

“Listen, Misha, I got this issue for you. You got the evidence from Boris Manuylov’s murder scene?”

“I’m already working on it.”

“How did the night shift do?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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