

SECRET TARGET



Thriller

**Sergey
Baksheev**

NUMBER ONE BESTSELLING AUTHOR
"The Noose"

Sergey Baksheev

Secret Target

«Издательские решения»

Baksheev S.

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The Russian Investigative Committee entrusts its most difficult cases to Detective Elena Petelina. Now the detective faces yet another mysterious murder. Each person associated with the crime has his or her own secret, and somehow one of these secrets involves Elena's own father as well as her brother who disappeared many years ago...

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Secret Target

Sergey Baksheev

*Translated from the Russian
by Boris Smirnov*

Translator Boris Smirnov

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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**

Secret Target. The Russian Investigative Committee entrusts its most difficult cases to Detective Elena Petelina. Now the detective faces yet another mysterious murder. Each person associated with the crime has his or her own secret, and somehow one of these secrets involves Elena's own father as well as her brother who disappeared many years ago...

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1

What's keeping her? How much longer till that skank gets back?

Pressed flush against the steering wheel, Inna watches the green gates to the private residence. The autumnal dusk helps conceal her car, as does the roadside brush she's parked behind.

What if I got the address wrong?

She looks around frantically. The address post by the gates reads «24.» The street sign at the intersection reads «Dorozhnaya Street.»

This is the skank's house alright. She'll be back from work soon. Come on, what's keeping her? And what if she's working late tonight?

Inna checks her watch for the hundredth time. Its hands tick with the urgency of molasses and a new fear grips her tighter than the last.

Maybe it's me who's late and she's home already? Then all is lost!

But at long last something stirs in the vacant, suburban street. Inna wipes the cold sweat from her forehead with the palm of her gloved hand and sinks back into her seat. Through her sunglasses and the steering wheel, her eyes follow the approaching xenon beam as it glides along the fence. A car turns onto the silent street. The tires rustle and the beam splits in two, tracing a smooth arc over the bushes until it comes flush up against the closed gates. Inna recognizes the Volvo's silhouette. That's the car she's been waiting for. In the twilight it looks darker, but as the door opens, the interior light rewards her anticipation.

The car is red.

The automatic gates remain closed.

Everything is as it should be.

She's so on edge that her body feels like a seated statue. Unblinking, she watches the woman emerge from the car. The headlights illuminate her little ankle boots, their thin heels, but Inna is not interested in such details. The woman presses up against the gates and begins pushing them open. Now she's fully in the lights' glare.

She's a blonde! It all fits!

As sensation returns to Inna's limbs, she slips her hand into her purse and feels cold steel through her the fabric of her glove. Her eyes scan the little street one last time.

It's still empty. Now is the time.

Inna throws open the car door and makes her way toward the gates. Her gaze is drawn taut, riveted to the back of the woman's head, and it's like she's been attached to some invisible cable, gliding toward her target with the implacability of a counterweight. As she approaches, her right arm rises shoulder-level and extends. Inna's two, bloodshot eyes are now joined by the gun's empty barrel – all three straining at the blonde's neat ringlets.

The owner of the house is rolling back the unruly gate when, suddenly, she stops mid-motion. Surely she's heard Inna's rapid footsteps. Surely she will now turn and – but it's already too late. Nothing will save her. Inna walks right up to her and takes aim at her head.

No words – just pull the trigger.

She squeezes. The shot is deafening. Inna shuts her eyes from fright. When she opens them, it's all over. The blonde is lying on the ground, her head across the gates' threshold. The toes of her splayed boots cast long shadows, while the headlights' glare creeps crassly up her rumpled skirt.

You earned it, you bitch.

Inna backs away, drops the handgun and runs back to her car.

Away from here! Home!

The drive from Aprelevka back to Moscow passes as in a fog. But there at last is her street. She turns into her building's driveway. She feels the car come to a stop, and as it does so, a savage chill

seizes her. Inna begins to shiver. Tears stream down her cheeks. In her mind, she's still there, outside 24 Dorozhnaya Street. Murky spots float before her eyes. A green gate, a red car, bleach-blond hair and – a horrible gunshot. The memory strikes her like an electric shock – her tears, her shivers cease.

Gather yourself. You're only halfway there.

She gets out of the car, walks to the front entrance, notices the trash bins.

Almost forgot! Dump the clothes – there's gunpowder on them.

She tosses her gray coat and gloves into the trash. The oversized sunglasses follow. Now she'll buy herself some slim ones to change her look. She'll have her bob trimmed short and buy a bright colored jacket. No one will recognize her.

Inna enters the building lobby and wearily ascends the stairs. One little pull of the trigger – but how exhausted it's made her! Here's her apartment. She already knows what's inside and begins to grow afraid all over again.

But there's no way back now. Have to make it through this too.

A deep breath – she holds it – then exhales. The door is unlocked. Inna crosses the threshold. Pop music blares from the television – starlets howling in unison about being humped and dumped – and Inna feels like screaming: «What'd you expect? A plastic doll?» But there's a heavy lump in her throat that wants to come out, and it's too early to start screaming anyway. She's got to take at least a look first.

She takes three steps and comes across her husband's slippers, lying forgotten in the middle of the hallway. And there is he who once wore them. Bare male legs stick out of the bath, heels up. The water bubbles, the pop singers squeal and a dull drill hums tediously inside her head. Inna latches onto the doorjamb and peeks inside with rising horror. The back of her husband's new blue bathrobe is smeared with whitish lumps of something revolting. Her gaze rises higher to the horrible gash on the back of his head. Dirty blood glosses the tile around the cleaver, little dried hairs stuck along its blade.

Inna wants to take a breath but cannot. The lump is choking her from within. Her eyes grow dim. She swoons and collapses onto the corpse – her hand flops into the pool of blood.

2

As Major Elena Pavlovna Petelina entered the lab, her heart tightened in rueful expectation. This is how it was each time some young man's remains from the mid-'90s were uncovered. Eighteen years of searching. In the beginning, she would visit the morgue to identify the bodies. Back then, new ones would turn up as often as several times a week. She saw it all. By the age of seventeen, the gangsters' cruel executions had been chiseled into the young girl's memory not by the newspapers' terse type but by the sight of broken bodies, gunshot wounds, burned flesh. And by the smell – of rot and decay. Thankfully, these days, the victims' remains took on a more palatable appearance and were subjected strictly to DNA identification.

Mikhail Ustinov, the young forensic expert, was too busy fiddling with an electron microscope to notice the detective's entrance. Unruly tufts of hair billowed out and over his large headphones. Misha rode his motorcycle year-round. His giant helmet, along with his brainy, longwinded explanations, which he inevitably introduced with the phrase «allow me to explain,» had earned him the jocular nickname «the Tadpole.»

Pushing away from the lab table, Misha rode his office chair over to the computer. His left hand grabbed a metal mug, while his right began to clatter on the keyboard. A DNA helix rotated in one corner of the large screen. All of the Tadpole's equipment was connected to one network. There was even a cable running from the mug to his notebook, to keep the coffee warm.

Elena Petelina stopped beside the forensic expert. Mikhail noticed the detective and knocked his headphones down to his shoulders.

«The results look negative,» he answered her unspoken question. «This isn't your brother.»

Elena's eyes flickered uneasily as if she was looking for something. Her fingers tapped on Misha's shoulder in distraction. Finally, she thanked him with a pat on the back and turned to go.

Her brother, Anatoly Grachev, went missing in July of 1994. He took the day's receipts from their father's store, got in his car and left. No one had seen her brother or the car since. Meanwhile, on the night of his disappearance, the police arrested their dad. Pavel Petrovich Grachev was found wandering along the main alley of Izmaylovo Park in a bloodstained jacket. He had suffered some broken ribs and a fractured skull. When they were putting him into the paddy wagon, he raved deliriously, «I killed Tolik. I killed him.»

Afterward, the doctor established that her dad had been hit by a car causing a concussion and temporary amnesia. But the investigators were more concerned with other details. The store's workers told them of a quarrel between father and son that evening. Forensic experts discovered Anatoly's blood on Mr. Grachev's jacket. The detective working the case quickly slapped together a murder indictment and began to seek a plea bargain.

Anatoly was nineteen back then. Elena was seventeen. She had just graduated high school and been admitted to the university. She wanted to major in chemistry. But that one tragic day brought her family's happy life crashing down. Her mother fell ill, leaving Lena to struggle with the detective assigned to the case on her own. The girl kept trying to convince him of a grave error, but the experienced old hound would just grin and send the meddling girl around the morgues to identify bodies. That year was blessed with an ample harvest of corpses, young and old, and the detective had figured that the girl would throw up a few times and then think twice before showing up at the prosecutor's office again.

But the grim lesson had the opposite effect on the stubborn girl.

«It's no wonder you have so many unsolved murders. It's all because of people like you.» Such was the reproach Elena flung in the detective's face. «Instead of finding the real culprit, you just lock up the first person you come across!»

«Why don't you step into my shoes and give it a shot?» The detective slammed a stack of cases against his cluttered desk, sending a cascade of folders fanning to the floor. Elena was silent for half a minute. In this time she managed to calm herself and reach a fateful decision.

«I will give it a shot,» she said, helping him pick up the folders. «Tell me where to apply.»

The next day, Elena Gracheva said farewell to her beloved chemistry and submitted her application to the criminal investigation program at the police academy.

Her dad was released a year later – no body, no case.

«He lucked out,» said Detective Kharchenko without a grudge. «It's a big park – we can't search it all. But you, Elena, don't get complacent. That corpse can show up in five years and then... Well, as good of a student as you are, you know yourself what'll happen.»

Her father had changed. He looked older and had grown taciturn. He never said a word about the day that Anatoly disappeared. His wife interrogated him, tormented him with suspicions, begged him to tell her what had happened to Anatoly. But the father stayed silent and the family fell apart. Pavel Petrovich Grachev left Moscow to live in his mother's house in the country. In the meantime, with her newfound skills and learning, Lena would return to that fateful day a hundred times in the course of her career – striving to finally get to the truth of what had really occurred.

This week was no different. During the demolition of some garages in the Izmaylovo District, the remains of a male corpse dating to the mid-'90s had been uncovered. Elena asked Misha Ustinov to run some DNA tests, but the results had come back negative. And yet, for Detective Elena Petelina – née Gracheva – there was nothing negative about it: For, this meant that there remained some slender chance that her brother Anatoly was still alive.

«Detective Petelina!» the Tadpole called her back. «What about the remains? Should we keep working with them?»

«Of course, Misha. Maybe someone out there is looking for him too,» said Petelina. Then, her hand already on the door handle, she turned back. «Almost forgot – I didn't come here just for this. You better get your stuff together. We have a new case. A body's been found in an apartment.»

3

Captain Marat Valeyev heard out the dispatch on his phone, slammed the receiver into its cradle and aimed a crumpled piece of paper at his partner.

«Wake up Vanya – you don't get to Major by sleeping.»

The paper ball struck Senior Lieutenant Ivan Mayorov square in the forehead. It was not for nothing that Valeyev was famous for his shooting at the firing range – there were even some women out there who knew that the captain could kill with but a look.

«I – I was just thinking about something,» explained the drowsy lieutenant, flapping his eyelids. No sooner had Ivan set foot in Homicide and introduced himself as «Lieutenant Mayorov,» than jokes referencing the rank of major had begun to fly thick and fast at the fair-haired giant. And though it was all in good fun of course, there was a hint of mockery in them too.

«We've got a murder. Let's go.»

The operatives grabbed their jackets, shut the door to the office and set off down the stairs. Marat Valeyev, trim and limber, descended first, adjusting his sidearm in its holster. Behind him trudged the brawny and laconic Vanya Mayorov. At the landing, without slowing his stride, the captain pinched busty Galya Nesterova, who ran the passport desk, and whispered something in her ear. The girl in the tight-fitting lieutenant's tunic blushed and remained standing for a long while, waiting for the raven-haired captain to turn and flash his impertinent, bright smile. In the end, only Vanya turned to look at her – which fact, the girl utterly ignored.

In the car, the senior lieutenant could no longer contain his curiosity. He had already spent hours agonizing over the best possible reason to stop by the passport desk and say something to the lovely little donut with red lips. The captain had crippled these reveries without missing a stride.

«Marat, what'd you say to her?» asked Vanya.

«Who?»

«Galya Nesterova. Back there, on the stairs.»

«Ah, Galya... I don't recall. I just kind of blurted something.» Valeyev sat at the wheel, watching the road.

«What do you mean you don't recall? She...» Vanya's creaky brain had trouble grasping how someone could be so careless with such miracle-working words.

«Must be nice to have titties on your mind right now. It's not like we're going to a murder or anything.»

«Who got killed?» Vanya banished from his mind a vision of Galya's legs beheld from an inappropriate angle.

«The Police Patrol Service found a male corpse in an apartment. They've detained a woman at the scene.» The Captain flew through the intersection on a fading yellow. «It'd be good to get there before Elena.»

«The Noose?»

The Noose was Homicide's nickname for Senior Detective Elena Petelina. Homicide didn't come up with the name – the felons had. And it wasn't just because her last name sounded like *petlya* – the Russian word for «noose.» As a detective, Petelina was meticulous, cerebral and severe. If she sensed a murderer, she'd latch on and never let go. Inch by inch, she'd tighten the evidence round the suspect's neck. She hassled field ops and forensics to no end, but her cases never fell apart at trial and were never rejected for further investigation.

Vanya had noticed that Valeyev always tried to work with Petelina. Rumor had it that they had been classmates, but the captain didn't like to talk about his younger days. He was always informal with the detective, even though she was his senior. But that didn't mean anything. Ladies liked the captain. His shameless approach could shatter the ice encasing the hearts of beauties you wouldn't

believe. And yet when it came to Petelina, Valeyev never seemed as sure of himself. Around her, he might as well have been some high-school milksop in the presence of a supermodel.

Vanya could not comprehend the captain's fascination with the detective. Of course, she was an interesting woman, but she had such a cold gaze and strict voice, and her figure lacked all those nice curvy bits. Basically, she was just like – a noose! Yuck! And therefore not in the least like lovely little Galya from the passport desk. Little lips, little cheeks, little eyes and everything in the right place – front and back! Vanya had been lucky enough to witness firsthand the running exam portion of Galya's fitness evaluation. Since then, the lovely vision of her in a taut T-shirt had, on more than one occasion, appeared to him in his dreams.

Vanya took a breath and glanced sideways at his senior officer. He really hoped the captain wouldn't get it in his head to take things further with Galya. He was the kind that could after all.

«We're here,» said Valeyev turning into the driveway to a Stalin-era apartment building.

He parked snugly between the ambulance and a police cruiser. Slithering out like an eel through the cracked door, the captain offered a cigarette to a loitering beat cop, exchanged a few words and called to Ivan through the windshield.

«What are you, stuck? Petelina ain't here yet. Let's get to work Senior Lieutenant Mayorov! Service stars don't just fall out of the sky.»

Vanya tried to open his door, assessed the width of the crack – no more than a pack of cigarettes – and, grunting, began to clamber over to the driver's side.

4

Elena Petelina walked into the lobby of the apartment building.

The crime scene had attracted the typical hubbub. Cops stand smoking in the stairwell, quietly panning some soccer player. She does not know them but as soon as she appears, fists close over cigarettes, stomachs are gathered in and something like «Good evening, detective!» echoes in her wake – to be replaced by a respectful whisper once she has passed: «That’s her – that’s the Noose.» Elena doesn’t take offense. As Colonel Kharchenko puts it, only the best detectives are given nicknames.

Detective Petelina always tries to visit the crime scene herself. Evidence gathered in the first hours of the investigation is always the most precise. Better see for yourself than sift for it later among barren reports.

She ascends the stairs to the apartment where the corpse was discovered. The Tadpole, still wearing his motorcycle helmet and toting a heavy backpack, can barely keep up behind her. Through the half-open apartment door, she catches a momentary glimpse of a shoulder draped in a familiar jacket. The glimpse is accompanied by a confident gesture, curtly pointing somewhere – and she’s recognized him. Elena is pleased to find Captain Marat Valeyev working the crime scene – and this is not simply because they had once made out at their senior prom and she still remembers going hot all over from his slightest touch.

Life had separated them since that night and only reunited them last year when Valeyev was transferred from the Organized Crime Unit to her district. It was a demotion. But following the death of Valeyev’s partner during an attempted arrest – a death that was caused by Valeyev’s actions – he could consider himself fortunate. Elena never asked Marat about that tragedy. She was confident that he was an excellent officer. He never complained about all the assignments she gave him, was always willing to work on weekends – just as she was – and knew how to get results in a way that would move the case forward. Not every detective knows how to do that. It’s not hard to work with your fists and wave your gun in people’s faces – the problem is that any evidence obtained that way will be crushed to dust by the lawyers at trial.

And the fact that she sometimes catches his masculine gaze lingering upon her – that’s just flattering, no more. She is a woman after all.

«Hello Marat.» Petelina paused long enough to catch his eager but disciplined smile. «What’s the situation look like?»

«Hi Lena. The situation here is looking thusly: A wife patted her husband on the head with a cleaver and the poor guy didn’t find the joke very funny.»

«Alcoholics?»

«God no. Middle class, decked-out apartment, wife’s covered in diamonds. To be fair, there’s an open bottle in the kitchen – but it’s genuine cognac, not the cheap stuff.»

«I hope you haven’t touched anything?» Mikhail Ustinov, the forensic expert, barged into their exchange, moving the captain aside as he entered.

When the Tadpole went to a crime scene, he always brought with him a large backpack stuffed full of cutting-edge electronic devices which he referred to as his gadgets. These enabled him to set up a mini-laboratory on site. Misha pulled off his helmet and passed further into the apartment.

«Nothing but the money and the valuables,» Valeyev grumbled after him.

«Have you examined the windows and the balcony?» asked Petelina.

«Of course. Everything is locked from the inside. There’s nothing in the apartment but the corpse and the murderer.»

«The murderer? That fast?»

«Come on, Lena. We weren't born yesterday. You'll see for yourself. Open and shut case, a domestic dispute.»

The detective made her way down the hallway. Ustinov was already fiddling around next to the corpse in latex gloves, taking pictures and bagging evidence. Petelina carefully examined the dead man lying in a bathrobe with a staved-in head.

«The blow came from behind. Unexpectedly. The murder weapon has been left for us as a parting gift,» she stated.

«Simple female imprudence,» Valeyev rushed to explain. «It's a normal thing with them: a fit of rage leading to a momentary weakness.»

«You're quite the expert,» Elena smiled wryly.

Valeyev flushed.

«She'll confess. I'll bet you anything.»

«That doesn't mean we don't have a job to do. Where's the suspect? What's her name?»

«Inna Maltseva. She was discovered unconscious right beside the corpse. Here's her passport. She lives with her husband, Dmitry Maltsev. Or, to be accurate, she now lives without him. At the moment, the little lady is in the other room with an EMT. There's a PPS sergeant watching over her.»

«Which room?» the Tadpole stirred. «I need to take her fingerprints.»

«There's the door,» pointed Valeyev.

«And who made the call?» asked Petelina.

«The neighbor. An old bird. A very curious elder lady. I reckon that she'll be happy to tell us everything she knows.»

«Then she's the one I'll start with,» Elena decided. «Take me to her.»

Before they could leave the apartment, however, a disgruntled-looking EMT appeared in the hallway.

«Are you the detective? We need to go. We've got other calls to attend to.»

«A couple of questions and you'll be free.» Petelina wrote down the number of the ambulance and asked a few rudimentary questions: When did they get the call? How quickly did they get to the scene? What did they see? What condition was the suspect in?

«At the moment the lady is alright,» the medic came to the end of his story. «She suffered from a severe loss of consciousness resulting in delayed reactions, but she doesn't need to go to the hospital. As for the victim – obviously a fatal case. Instant death. We didn't even touch him. Can we go now?»

Petelina nodded. She spent the next half hour talking to the Maltsevs' neighbor and the PPS unit that responded to the call. The neighbor had noticed one inconsistency. The police confirmed it. The inconsistency required prompt verification and so Elena sent Valeyev on an urgent assignment.

5

An hour had passed since she had arrived at the crime scene and Petelina had not even laid eyes on the murder suspect. She knew that her first impression would be pivotal. It could as much help as hinder her subsequent investigation. At times, a suspect could look so innocent and exude such charm that you would need to make a conscious effort to avoid becoming their lawyer. Other times, it would be the opposite – you'd think you were faced with a coldblooded killer when, in reality, the softie couldn't hurt a fly. However, conundrums like these threw Elena off her track only in the first years of her service. These days, she preferred to conduct her first interrogation only after she had studied all the details of the suspect's character, as well as the circumstances surrounding the crime. Before first meeting the suspect, she would always compose a mental portrait of her antagonist and, more often than not, it would turn out to be accurate.

Elena Petelina entered the kitchen where Mikhail Ustinov had unfurled his field lab. Fingerprint recognition software was scrolling through the patterns on his tablet computer.

«Any results?» inquired the detective.

«Too early,» the Tadpole cut her off without so much as a look.

Such brevity did not annoy Petelina. She knew that Ustinov would notify her as soon as anything substantial turned up. It did not serve to hurry the young forensic expert. He was already all afire to examine the slightest hair or fingerprint at the scene of the crime. If anything, the Tadpole needed to be restrained at times: Enough, we're already up to our ears in evidence – save your energy and equipment. The experienced detective envied his enthusiasm and at the same time feared that the monotonous hours and paltry pay would soon turn this enthusiast into a lazy hack. To delay this as long as possible, she went to the top brass every quarter to wring funds for yet another intricate piece of lab equipment.

«Did you pull the Maltsevs' files?» she asked.

«Sent it to your phone.»

The possibilities afforded by modern communications, which her pushy forensic expert had initiated her in, never ceased to amaze Elena. Her hand darted into her purse. A few gentle swipes of the screen with her finger and, voilà, your standard personal file.

Maltseva, Inna Olegovna. Forty years old. Married ten years. No children. Residence permit matches current address. Studied Education. Has not worked in the last few years. Husband's name is Maltsev, Dmitry Nikolaevich. Forty-two years old. Businessman. Owns a construction and building repair company. Two years ago figured as a witness in a criminal case. *This is interesting*, Petelina made a mental note, *should check this out further*. Both husband and wife have cars registered in their names.

The detective dialed Valeyev right away.

«Did you find it?»

«Nothing yet. Maybe the neighbor got it wrong?»

«I thought you were an expert on women, Valeyev. Clothes are the first thing women pay attention to.»

«The neighbor's already retired.»

«Sorry, forgot. Your social circle is limited to twenty-year-olds.»

«My favorite memories involve a certain classmate of mine,» came the operative's repartee.

«Let's stick to work, shall we? Here's a slightly simpler task for you: The Maltsevs have two cars. Look around the yard.» Petelina read aloud the license plate numbers. She put the phone away and said to herself, *And now it's time to meet the lady of the house*.

Elena entered the spacious living room and nodded to the officer standing sentry. The cop's brown-green uniform clashed with the room's heavy, gold-fringed drapes. Cast in semi-darkness, the

woman sitting in the deep armchair did not respond to the detective's appearance. Elena turned on the overhead light. The woman stirred. The large eyes in her haggard face noticed Petelina. This was Inna Maltseva without a doubt, but the photo in the passport resembled the pallid original in the armchair before her about as much as a clear day resembles a foggy morning. Only her shoulder-length, chestnut bob still retained its previous splendor.

«I am Senior Detective Elena Pavlovna Petelina. I am in charge of your case.»

Maltseva did not say anything.

Saturday I'll dye my hair, Elena made another mental note, noticing the gray roots at the suspect's scalp. *I've got grays coming in too. Sooner than I thought.*

«Inna, tell me please, what happened between you and your husband?» Elena asked softly.

Maltseva's chin twitched. She noticed the water on the coffee table, reached for it and looked at her unruly hands with surprise. Handcuffs fettered her bloodied palms. Petelina ordered the cop to remove the cuffs and leave the room. A man with a machine gun isn't a helpful presence when you're trying to have a sincere conversation.

Elena handed the glass of water to Inna. The woman drank greedily. Eyes still fixed on the floor. Lips still pursed. A shade of guilt on her face.

The detective decided to begin by stating the current situation.

«Inna Olegovna Maltseva, you have been arrested under suspicion of the premeditated murder of your husband.» Inna raised her eyes imploringly. Petelina repeated her first question in a stricter format, «Why did you kill him?»

Maltseva shook her head.

«I didn't kill him. I didn't kill Dmitry.»

«The facts suggest otherwise.»

«That wasn't me. I didn't touch Dmitry. Please believe me!»

«A criminal investigation is not interested in concepts such as belief. You were found at the scene of the murder.»

«It wasn't me. I didn't...»

Petelina decided to force the woman's stubborn resistance. She left the living room and returned a short while later with the next-door neighbor, a woman of about seventy who clearly took care to maintain her appearance.

«Ms. Broshina, please repeat what you told me earlier,» the detective requested.

«There's not much to say – it was all quite in the open... The Maltsevs were fighting during the day. Don't look at me like that Inna! I wasn't listening on purpose – you know how our walls are! So anyway, in the evening I heard a terrible scream. My Chana began barking and ran to the door. I went to see what it was about. I have an intercom with a screen – you saw it. I look at it and see Inna dart out of the apartment and run off down the stairs. „Uh-oh,“ I thought, „This doesn't bode well.“ So I called the police.»

«What was Inna Maltseva wearing?»

«A gray, tailored coat. She's been wearing it a lot lately. Oh, and sunglasses on her face. It's fall! Why would someone wear sunglasses in the fall?»

«What happened after that?»

«About five minutes later, Inna came running back all of a sudden. Without the coat or glasses this time.»

«Are you sure you remember this correctly? First Maltseva was wearing a coat, then she came back without it.»

«How could I forget? It's already cold out and she's walking around in just a shirt.»

«Did anyone enter or leave the Maltsevs' apartment while she was gone?»

«No, I would've seen it. And Chana would've sensed it. We were standing on the other side of the door together.»

«Okay. Go on.»

«Why there's nowhere to go on to. A little later, you people showed up. The door wasn't locked. They walked in and she was lying there... And she had... Heavens! What a sin to have on one's soul! What were you thinking, Inna?»

Petelina thanked the old lady. As she was seeing her out, it occurred to her that investigative work would go far less smoothly were it not for neighborly vigilance.

«What now, Mrs. Maltseva? It'd be silly to deny the row you had with your husband.» Elena decided to throw the woman a lifeline. «Perhaps your husband beat you or humiliated you or threatened you – and, succumbing to a fit of passion, you grabbed the cleaver..?»

«I didn't kill him.»

«Then why did you run away?»

«We had a fight and I left.»

«What was your fight about?»

«I think my husband is seeing someone.»

Elena recalled her own cheating husband, with whom she had separated four years ago. She sat down in a chair across from Maltseva and tried to look her in the eyes.

«That hurts, I understand. But if we women killed every flirtatious husband, the nation's military casualties would start to seem like child's play in comparison. Why did you decide to pick up the cleaver?»

«I didn't kill him. I took the car and went wherever my eyes were looking. Later I came back and saw his legs.»

«You couldn't have gone anywhere because you returned five minutes after leaving.»

«I went for the drive earlier.»

«In your coat?»

«Probably,» Maltseva faltered.

«Where is it then? We haven't found a gray coat in your apartment.»

Petelina did not fail to notice how flustered Inna became, how she looked down and began fumbling with her fingers, still stained with her husband's blood. She still had on shoes suited for fall weather because she really had been outside and yet her coat had vanished. This was the very inconsistency that had so invited the detective's attention earlier.

«Where is your coat!» Elena pressed harder.

Her experience told her that the slightest inconsistency in a murder investigation could reveal the most unexpected turn. She watched Maltseva's facial expression intently.

«I got it dirty.»

You're lying, Petelina thought to herself.

«I tripped and got it dirty, so I threw it away,» said Maltseva.

«Was it a new coat?»

«Yes.»

«And you threw it away?»

«Yes.»

«Where?»

«In the trash.»

«A new coat – in the trash. Where exactly?»

«Next to the house,» confessed Inna, looking earnestly in the detective's eyes.

But now, you're telling the truth. You really couldn't have gone far in five minutes.

Petelina heard Captain Valeyev's voice from the hallway. He was looking for her. Elena decided to continue exerting pressure and invited the field operative into the room with them.

«Did you have a look around?» she asked.

«Mayorov and I combed the district within a five minute radius from the house.» The operative cast Maltseva an unkind look. «Only, there's no coat anywhere – or glasses for that matter.»

«Did you look in the trash bins?»

«We checked them first.»

«Did you find the Maltsevs' cars?»

«They're parked down there. Both of them.»

«Find the keys and check inside the cars. Where do you keep the car keys, Mrs. Maltseva?»

Maltseva looked around the room dazedly.

«My purse.»

«Marat, look in the entryway. And another thing: If that coat was nice, someone could have fished it from the trash. Ask the building janitor about it.»

«What, like right now? Janitors usually work in the mornings. Where am I going to find him at this time of day?»

«Either way, it needs to be done,» Petelina smiled warmly. «I believe in you Marat.»

«Well alright,» the captain acquiesced and walked out.

In his wake, Misha Ustinov peeked into the room. Based on the sly look on his face, Petelina understood that he had something interesting for her.

«Detective Petelina, I am ready to make a preliminary finding,» he said with a cold look at the arrested woman.

«You can speak here, Misha.»

«Mrs. Maltseva's smudged fingerprints are on the cleaver. The blood on her hands is that of the deceased and the time of death coincides with the time that the neighbor called the police.»

«It all fits.»

«Your run-of-the-mill domestic dispute – it's not even interesting. Of course, I'll examine the secondary evidence as well, but that will only help to fill in the general picture.»

«It wasn't me!» Maltseva began to shake her head and cry. Long stray hairs stuck to her tearstained cheeks.

Petelina sighed. She was getting sick of this cheap spectacle. The evidence was unequivocal, as were the witness accounts. The detective's voice adopted a crueler tone.

«Enough, Mrs. Maltseva! You would be better served by a confession.»

The woman continued to whimper. Petelina bent down to her.

«You quarreled with your husband, decided to leave, got dressed but he insulted you. That's when you ran to the kitchen and grabbed the cleaver! He didn't expect the blow and you killed him. Then, terrified, you fled the apartment, noticed the drops of blood on your coat once you were in the courtyard, threw it away and, at that point, remembered the main piece of evidence. The cleaver! So you came back for it, but when you saw what you had done, you fainted.»

«Not much to it. Remember what I said when we first got here?» Ustinov looked at his watch meaningfully. «I'm done here. Oh, by the way, they've come for the body. Are we ready to send it to autopsy?»

«Let them take it,» said Petelina, still drilling into Maltseva with her eyes. «Did I get it right?»

Inna raised her hands. Her eyes were darting back and forth between the palms stained with dry blood and the detective's face.

«Blood. His blood. Help me wash my hands,» she began to shift, becoming agitated. «I didn't throw the coat away because there was blood on it. There is no blood on it! Where is my coat? Find it!»

«Please get ahold of yourself.» Elena was beginning to feel sorry for her. The woman had given in to her emotions and committed a fatal mistake. As long as she remained in shock there was no point talking to her. «Here, have some more water. We'll resume this tomorrow.»

Instead of drinking, Maltseva poured the water out over her hands and began to compulsively rub them with a handkerchief.

From the hallway came the sound of something being moved. The body was being taken to the morgue. Slowly, the shuffling receded beyond the apartment.

All of a sudden, Ms. Broshina's exclamation pierced the room.

«That isn't him. That's not Maltsev!»

Inna jumped up. Petelina managed to grab her in time but couldn't hold her back. Both women found themselves side-by-side in the landing beside the body. The dead man's face was now clearly visible. There was no agony on it, just a look of pain that had molded its muscles into a deathly pallor. The dead man on the stretcher scared Inna. Her face distorted in terror.

«This isn't my husband,» she exhaled.

Her eyes darkened as her legs wavered. Maltseva fell into the arms of the dispirited Petelina.

6

Detective Petelina's office remained well-lit long into the evening. She had asked the office manager to install additional lamps. This way she could create the illusion that it was still not too late and that she could go on working. The illusion worked – as long as she didn't look at the clock or turn to the darkened window behind her.

Elena both loved and hated these kinds of evenings. The day's surprise, with its unidentified corpse, had elevated the case from a simple domestic matter to an enigmatic conundrum. The top brass didn't like cases like this, whereas Elena, if she had it her way, would work exclusively with such bewildering incidents. And anyway, the unexpected turn of events created room for the possibility, however slight, that Inna Maltseva was innocent after all. Petelina sympathized with women who were in a bind and would often, scrupulously, seek out any details that could soften the indictment. Inna Maltseva still remained the chief suspect but at least now she wasn't the only one.

Elena hated having to work late because of her daughter. Naturally, Elena's mother could feed the 12-year-old Nastya and put her to bed. She could even take her to curling practice three times a week, but it was the homework that grandma could not be of much help with. And Nastya already has more B's than A's. Any day now, even those would turn to C's.

The detective had finished studying Dmitry Maltsev's criminal file when she got a call from Misha Ustinov requesting her presence in the lab. However, when she got down there, Elena had to wait and watch as the Tadpole flitted about in an unbuttoned lab coat between various devices and his computer's large screen.

«Just a second longer,» he kept promising as he passed.

Finally, the forensic expert raised his arms, stretched comfortably and pushed off on his office chair to the table where the kettle stood. The switch clicked, the water began to hiss, and the crackling of a chocolate wrapper filled the room.

«Would you like some coffee, Detective Petelina? I've got some excellent chocolate here.»

Petelina shook her head with a sad smile. The ever-hungry, forensic expert ate chocolate like bread and yet remained stick-thin. For her meanwhile, one extra calorie, especially before going to bed, was like an enemy invasion aiming to secure and expand a beachhead along the coast of her waist.

Thanks but no thanks, I'd prefer to stay a six.

«Vasilich will keep you company.» Elena nodded over at a nearby chair where a skeleton was reposed. This was a plastic anatomy model, with one important peculiarity: Its skull was a real human one. Word had it that a hardened felon named Vasilich had bequeathed it to the Investigative Committee, doing so because he had always wanted to be a detective himself. Skeleton Vasilich had made himself at home in the lab. At any time of day or night, he could be found hunched over a keyboard or just hanging out, taking it easy. Either way, there was always a note with some edifying message pinned to his frame.

At the moment Vasilich's bony digits had wrapped themselves around a bottle of dubious whiskey, confiscated from a nightclub in the wake of a mass poisoning. The note on his back read, «Don't drink – lest you become like Vasilich.»

Misha rattled his teaspoon, mixing a generous portion of sugar into his large mug. His lips made a reedy sound as he sipped the coffee.

«Get on with it,» the detective hurried him. «Why'd you call me?»

«I've confirmed your version of events, Detective Petelina. Dmitry Maltsev wasn't killed – the dead man was his brother, Anton. We have his prints in our database.»

«Okay, at least this isn't a dead end.»

«Why, where do we go from here?»

«I checked out his file. Anton Nikolaevich Maltsev, thirty-three years old, was released from prison just yesterday.»

«Looks like it's safer to be sitting under guard there than be out here. What was he in for?»

«Article 109—manslaughter. A hunting accident. Dmitry Maltsev testified at his trial. The victim was a business partner of theirs, Vadim Zaitsev.»

«An ominous surname for a hunter,» said the forensic expert, alluding to the *zayets* – «rabbit» in Russian – at the root of Zaitsev's name. He broke off another square of chocolate: «I've established that the Maltsev brothers were drinking. Their fingerprints are on the cognac bottle and glasses.»

«So they celebrated his release and then Dmitry disappeared. Maybe his wife Inna is innocent? One brother killed the other one and then got out of there.»

«Doesn't gel.»

«His fingerprints aren't on the cleaver?»

«Not just that. Dmitry Maltsev's disappearance was premeditated.»

«Meaning?» Petelina asked surprised.

«Allow me to explain,» the expert uttered his favorite catchphrase and slid his chair toward the computer monitor. «I started monitoring Dmitry Maltsev's credit card. This morning, he bought a ticket on the express train to St. Petersburg online.»

«Departing at what time?»

«Seven-thirty in the evening.»

«And the murder took place at eight!»

«Give or take five minutes.»

Petelina looked at her watch.

«If Dmitry Maltsev was on a train, then he has an alibi. His cell phone is on but he isn't picking up. I ordered field ops to find his whereabouts.»

«Hundredth Company received your orders. Look – » Mikhail pointed at the monitor where a bright dot could be seen moving through a map. «Maltsev is arriving in St. Petersburg on time. Or, at least, his cell phone is.»

«Let's give it another shot.» Elena dialed Dmitry Maltsev's number again and listened to it ring.

«You should call St. Petersburg and tell them to arrest him, detective.»

«What about the train's departure time? Clearly he's not the murderer – best case scenario he may be a witness. Dmitry Maltsev left the apartment at least an hour before the incident.»

«That does seem incontrovertible.» Misha took another sip of coffee and a bite of chocolate. «Then everything points back to Inna Maltseva yet again. Instead of killing her husband, she killed his brother.»

«Why? What's the motive? That's what I want to know.»

Misha reclined in his seat and locked his fingers behind his head.

«There were no signs of struggle. The blow came unexpectedly. Perhaps, something happened between Inna and Anton Maltsev, and she decided to get revenge.»

«In the past?»

«Well, why not?»

«It's possible,» agreed Elena, involuntarily recalling her missing brother. «The past holds many secrets.»

«And the husband will help us figure out what those secrets are. We need to arrest Maltsev.»

«Okay. Prepare a description and photo of Dmitry Maltsev. I'll try to get in touch with the St. Petersburg guys.»

The Tadpole hunched over his computer. When the APB for Dmitry Maltsev was ready on the screen, Elena read it over and said, «Misha, can you bring up Anton's data beside it?»

Grasping her train of thought, the forensic expert deftly combined the two men's information and blurted out what was already evident:

«The Maltsev brothers look like each other! Height, body type, hair color – it all matches. Even their age difference is just three years. And Dmitry also cuts his hair short.»

«Inna could have mixed them up. She struck from behind and thought it was her husband.»

«I wonder whether Maltsev will be happy to hear the news. On the one hand, the guy got lucky – but on the other hand... You know, Detective Petelina, this is another reason why marriage just isn't for me.»

«Random dates involve a higher incidence of murder.»

«I meet people through the Internet. In experienced hands, the web is like a treasure trove of information. I enter a girl's contact info and – »

«The less you say about that, the better,» Petelina cut him off, dialing a number on the office phone. «Don't forget where we work.»

Elena called her colleagues in St. Petersburg. They heard her out, transferred her to some other extension, explained that the senior officers were absent and told her to submit an official request. When the detective's patience had run thin and she was ready to lose it, Mikhail pulled on her sleeve.

«Detective Petelina, look!»

«What is it now?» Petelina glanced over, annoyed.

«Maltsev is on his way back!» Misha was pointing at a bank statement on the screen. «He just used the card at the train station to buy an overnight ticket to Moscow.»

«What's the train's number? And get me the number of the car he's in.»

«Just a second. Here it is! The train and car number. Train gets in to Moscow at 7:55.»

Petelina hung up on St. Petersburg and sighed.

«I'll say it again, our field ops are still the best.»

«As well as our forensics,» Mikhail added helpfully.

«You, Misha, are simply amazing,» Elena agreed reaching for her cell phone. «I'll tell Valeyev the good news. Let him put a welcome party together for Maltsev tomorrow morning at Leningradsky Station. While they're at it, they can have a chat with the car attendant on duty in the train that Maltsev ran off on.»

«Have you no faith in the power of computer technology?»

«Technical stuff is great and all, but I want to make sure that that cell phone was travelling in its owner's company.»

7

Elena got home after midnight. Her daughter was already asleep. In the kitchen, the TV hummed at low volume. Her mother, Olga Ivanovna Gracheva, was waiting for her so that she could go home. Her house was next door. If Elena's ex-husband had not arranged for her mother to live next door after Nastya was born, Elena would have long since had to quit the her job.

«Catch a lot of killers? Or was it rapists today?» buzzed Mrs. Gracheva pouring the tea. Her tone indicated that a serious conversation was coming. Elena knew the topic too: Normal people work so that they can live – not live so that they can work.

«I don't want tea, mom. I'm just going to shower and go to bed.»

«Sergey called.» Mrs. Gracheva placed the cup in front of her daughter, like a cable bollard in front of a ship. «He's inviting you and Nastya to go to Thailand with him during her Fall Break. He'll pay for the tickets and book you a nice hotel.»

«What's got into him?»

Sergey Petelin owned a transportation company that was always either on the up and up or barely making ends meet. Nonetheless, he made alimony payments promptly and was never stingy about it. Whenever he made any extra money, he'd bring Nastya expensive gifts and pay for vacations in warmer climes.

«I think he mentioned that he'll get a room for himself in the same hotel.»

«So that he can show off another long-legged girl for my edification?»

«You have your mother's legs, Lena! There are none better! But you get your temper from your father.» Mrs. Gracheva glanced at the television and turned it off but remained facing away from her daughter. «Have you called him recently?»

Lena figured that she meant her dad. Out of principle, neither the mother nor the daughter ever called their respective ex-husbands: Over time, they had crossed the lines of communication, as it were. Typically, the daughter would tell her father about how her search for Anatoly was going, while trying to usher him to a point where he'd tell her what had really happened that day. It didn't work. Meanwhile, her mom had long since labeled the entire topic taboo. After her granddaughter was born, she had redirected all her unspent love toward her disappeared son at Nastya.

«I spoke to him last week.»

«And?»

«He's living by himself, in case you care,» lied Elena to avoid tormenting her mother.

«Well, who'd give him a second look?» Mrs. Gracheva turned around and looked kindly at her daughter. Her voice became unctuous. «But Sergey, that's a completely different matter. He's intelligent, well-off and he loves little Nastya. Sure, he acted like a complete dog but that happens to the best of us. Now he's suffering from loneliness and thinking of you, Lena. He's been calling for a month straight, asking how he can fix things between you two.»

«And so you recommended we go to Thailand,» Elena grasped the larger picture.

«Why not? It's a good excuse to start over. A romantic voyage.»

«What's romantic about it?»

«Why, everything.» Mrs. Gracheva took a seat next to her daughter and turned serious. «I looked through your swimsuits. Really, you should be ashamed. You need new ones – a one-piece and a two-piece. Also a light dress. Though, you can probably find one in Thailand. I'm sure Sergey will be happy to get it for you as a present.»

«Can you just leave me out of this? If you think he's so generous, why don't you go to Thailand with him and Nastya?»

«What do I have to do with it? Sergey wants to see you, not me.»

«It would do you good to get out to the beach. I won't even be able to get the time off. They won't let me go.»

«I want to see them try. I'll go to your boss and let him have it.»

«I told you: I don't want to, mom.»

«You still can't forgive him?» Mrs. Gracheva shook her head. «It's been four years since the divorce.»

«And? Sergey spent the four years before that tumbling around with his sluts, following the example set by his drivers.»

«Have you considered that, maybe, it's you who is to blame? It's always work, work, work with you. You come home and pass out. Who could live with a woman like that?»

«That's enough,» Elena boiled over. «Go home! I want to sleep.»

Mrs. Gracheva stood up, shuffled to the door and stopped.

«Think about it, Lena. Sergey isn't a bad guy and he has money. Where are you going to find another one like that at thirty-five? And don't forget about Nastya. The girl needs a father.»

«No one took her father away. And if I'll need a husband, I'll find him myself.»

«What?» The mother looked onto the daughter suspiciously. «Are you still thinking about your Tatar? About Marat? He wore out the bench down in our yard when you were in high school and wiped our windows clean with those black eyes of his. And now, like some curse, he's come back around.»

Lena remembered how stubbornly Marat Valeyev worked to win her friendship. She remembered the shy kisses they exchanged at their senior prom. Her brother's disappearance, her father's arrest and her mother's illness had all created distance between the classmates. Later, Lena found out that Marat had gotten married. Word had it that his parents had arranged it. There was no one to blame, but regret lodged itself like a splinter in the young girl's soul. Years later, when she was already twenty-three, she ran into another classmate named Sergey Petelin. Sergey had become a businessman and was confident and assertive. Lena was afraid of becoming a spinster. That's how Nastya came about – first a flustering miracle in her stomach, then a rushed wedding in a roomy dress.

«What does Marat have to do with this?» Elena flared. Her indignation, however, did not come out sounding very convincing.

«Don't look away! You said yourself that Valeyev asked to move to your district on purpose.»

«He was transferred. That's just work.»

«Where there's work, there's friendship. You know very well what men think about.»

«Come on, I haven't seen Marat in ten years.»

«Uh-huh. You hear nothing from him for years, but as soon as he finds out that you're divorced, he starts to put the moves on you.»

«His apartment is in our district. That's why they transferred him there.»

«You've been to his apartment already?»

«Mom, we work together. Our paths cross. And even then, not often,» Lena added for some unknown reason.

«Forget about him, Lena. Forget him! You can't even take him to a church.»

«I don't go to church, mom!»

«I never went either. But as soon as I started getting sick, I started going. It's never too late to come to God. It never hurts to ask Him – nothing bad can come of it. I prayed for you and Nastya – whose full name is Anastasia Sergeyevna, by the way. Now doesn't that have a nice ring to it? But had you, in your foolishness, gotten mixed up with that Tatar, who would we have now? Nastya Maratovna? Yuck!»

«Enough!» Lena slapped the table. «I'm off to bed. Stay if you like. You know where the couch and the bed sheets are.»

She stood up and left the room without clearing the table.

«Think about the swimsuits, Lena,» her mother's quiet grousing followed in her wake. «Check the magazines to see if you like any of the newer ones. And don't be stingy. Swimsuits are like shoes – you should only get good ones. It wouldn't hurt if you got some new underwear too. Maybe we can go do some shopping some time?»

8

The next morning, after a quick breakfast, Elena took her daughter to school. The twelve-year-old girl was just beginning to resist such custody, asserting that she would rather go with her friends, but for Elena these ten minutes were basically her only chance to find out anything about her daughter's school life.

Rushing to her work, Detective Petelina began the workday by studying the contents of Inna Maltseva's purse. Just like the friction ridges that create the unique swirls called fingerprints, women's purses are staunchly individual and often have much to say about their owners. The examination methodology was simple but effective. First you dump everything on the table, then you examine each thing and, if there is nothing interesting about it, put it back into the purse. In the end, two items remained on Petelina's desk. Both had perplexed her.

Elena heard Marat Valeyev's voice before he opened the door to her office. The captain was matter-of-factly dragging a person down the hallway.

My swimsuits really are pretty dated, crossed Elena's mind for some reason as she glanced at herself in the mirror. She commended herself once more on choosing a short haircut. Two swipes of the comb and she was good to go.

First to appear in the doorway was a drunken face with a dripping wet and receding hairline. Captain Valeyev propped the man up from behind, holding him by his jacket. *Dmitry Maltsev*, guessed Petelina. It took a leap to connect this ruffled person with a businessman. The field operative pushed the fugitive into the office and plumped him into a chair.

«Have a look, Detective Petelina. This is Dmitry Maltsev. We plucked him straight from an overnight bender in the restaurant car. He was incomprehensible so I took the liberty and threw some water on him... «Doused' may be better word.»

Elena got up from her desk and cracked open the window.

«Well, offer him some water to *drink* because he reeks.»

«Drinking water won't help him. I gave him permission to imbibe forty milliliters. Otherwise, we'll spend half the day waiting for him to sleep it off. The car attendant says that he got caught up in the restaurant car and slept maybe about two hours. Here is his passport and here are the tickets. To St. Petersburg and back.» The operative looked at Maltsev dubiously, «Do you want me to stay? Just in case?»

«I've seen worse,» Elena assured him, looking through the tickets. «Did you speak to the car attendant for the train from Moscow?»

«That train comes back later. I sent Mayorov to take care of that.»

«Tell him to report to me as soon as he gets any information. What about the coat?»

«We checked the Maltsevs' cars. They're empty.»

«What does the janitor say?»

«Sorry Lena, I didn't find him yesterday. He was hanging out with some fellow immigrants somewhere.»

«I want that question resolved, Marat.»

Valeyev let his gaze slip down the dogged detective's shapely blue skirt and slender legs but refrained from mentioning what he wanted.

«Consider it done,» he assured her and left.

Petelina switched her attention to Maltsev and introduced herself formally. As there was no response, she asked loudly:

«Mr. Maltsev, do you understand where you are?»

Maltsev winced.

«Coffee. Do you have coffee?» he asked with a sour face.

«We have instant coffee.» Elena walked over to the kettle. «Do you prefer it stronger?»

«Uh-huh. No milk, no sugar,» he waved his hand.

«How about some brandy...»

«Why? You've got some?»

«You're not in a bar Mr. Maltsev!»

While the arrested man drank greedily, Petelina paced in a semicircle around her office. As per usual, she formed a mental portrait of her interlocutor.

Forty years old and reaching that age when his beard goes gray and the devil starts poking him in the rib. Got tired of his forty-year-old wife so he found himself a younger woman. Not too tall and fairly gaunt for his age, but doesn't work out. Well dressed, but not quite in the business style. His shoes have thick soles and are well worn, so his job involves making field visits. Acts like one of the boys with his employees and loses his cool at times. Doesn't regret letting a strong word fly here and there. So if his wife annoys him too much, he can allow himself to be crass with her too. Which, it seems, is what happened yesterday. And yet, being this drunk doesn't suit him, so last night's bender was most likely caused by some sort of nervous breakdown. My uniform and office stumped him more than being arrested on the train. It's one thing to think that your drinking has gotten you in trouble – it's entirely different when you see a sign that says Investigative Committee with a desk officer posted beneath it as you're brought in.

«So what is going on?» Maltsev spoke up, pushing away the emptied mug. «Who are you?»

«I am Senior Detective Elena Pavlovna Petelina.»

«A female major,» mumbled Maltsev, either from doubt or from respect.

Petelina had reached the rank of Major faster than many of her male colleagues. And yet, this was the rank beyond which women were seldom promoted. Wicked tongues liked to say that to become a lieutenant colonel, you needed to first let a colonel be on top of you – or, even better, a general.

«What am I here for?» asked Maltsev.

Petelina did not say anything. She began to tidy her desk and, seemingly by accident, dropped a photo of a lovely three-year-old girl into Maltsev's lap.

He reacted weakly.

«Yours?» and replaced the snapshot on the table.

The trick had not worked. And yet this was one of the two items that had stumped Elena during her examination of Maltseva's purse. All mothers carry a photo of their child with them – there's nothing exceptional about that. However, Inna Maltseva didn't have any kids! So who was this girl?

«Did my company commit some violation?» Maltsev inquired carefully.

The customer is ripe and ready, the detective decided and began her interrogation forcefully.

«Mr. Maltsev, I am in charge of investigating felonies – particularly serious ones. Currently I am working on a brutal murder.» Elena placed photographs of the body with the staved-in head on the table and asked, «Is this your doing?»

As she had expected, Maltsev sobered up in a flash.

«Why mine?» he became afraid.

«Have another look. Do you recognize him?»

«Anton...»

«Do you recognize where the photos were taken?»

«In my apartment – that's my bathrobe – »

«Precisely! Why did you kill your brother?»

«I didn't kill him! Who did this?»

«I am confident that it was you!» the detective continued to apply pressure.

«No!» Maltsev jerked away.

«Your brother got out of prison. You had a drink of brandy, got into a quarrel, then made peace – it's a normal sequence of events. But you harbored a grudge. And when Anton went to the bathroom, you hit him with a cleaver.»

«No! We had a drink with Anton – that part's true. But I left after that. I had to catch a train to St. Petersburg! I have a meeting there tomorrow, I mean, today.»

«Start at the beginning.»

«Of course... Where should I start?»

«Your quarrel with your wife.»

«Inna told you about that? You've got to understand, Inna and I haven't been on the best of terms lately. She'll say something, I'll say something back – it's stop and go. I don't even know what caused it this time. She threatened to divorce me and I swore she wouldn't get a penny, so she stormed out and slammed the door.»

«Does your wife have a job?»

«What are you talking about! When we met, Inna was a primary school teacher. No money – just stress. She quit her job about two years later. I insisted on it.»

«At what time did Inna leave the house?»

«I came back from work at two because I had to go to St. Petersburg that evening. She stormed out about an hour later probably.»

«What was she wearing?»

«You think I remember? She buys so much crap!»

«Try your hardest.»

«Detective Petelina, may I have some more coffee?» Maltsev glanced at the kettle longingly.

He calmed down fast. His brother's death didn't shock him, Petelina noted as she poured the coffee.

How would he respond to more precise information about his brother's death? Elena had spent eighteen years looking for Anatoly and had seen many bodies. She was mentally prepared to deal with the loss of a loved one. At this point, she would have been more shocked if she met her brother alive. In any case, she was compelled to discover what happened, where he disappeared to, who was responsible.

«How did it happen? Did you catch the killer?» Maltsev suddenly asked, as though having read the detective's mind.

«Mr. Maltsev, you are currently at an official interrogation about a murder case. Therefore, as banal as this may sound, I'm the one who asks the questions here. I would like to know what kind of coat your wife was wearing as she left your apartment yesterday.»

«She just put on some coat. Wait – that's it! It was gray and speckled. She just got it recently.»

«What time did Inna return?»

«If she did, I wasn't there. I haven't seen her since.»

«Did you know that Anton Maltsev was being released?»

«I knew that he was supposed to get out one of these days. He was serving his time in Koma and I figured it would take him some time to get back to Moscow. Then suddenly, there he was. It was around five.»

«Why did he go to your place?»

«Anton has his own apartment. I rented it at his request and saved the money for him. That's why he came to stay with me for the first few days.»

«What happened then?»

«Well, we celebrated his return. But I had to go to the station, so I left him there. „Get some rest,“ I told him. „Get some sleep and make yourself at home.“»

«How did you get to the station?»

«On the subway. I didn't have any luggage and the subway is nearby. It's more reliable when there's traffic too.»

«Did anyone see you leave the building?»

«How would I know? I was in a rush.»

Petelina's cell phone began to vibrate quietly on the table. The call was from Senior Lieutenant Ivan Mayorov. Elena stepped aside to the window to hear his report.

Mayorov had lingered around until the passengers had all left the train before approaching the weary-looking forty-something car attendant. He introduced himself and showed her a photo of Dmitry Maltsev.

«Do you recognize this man?»

«Why? Who is that?» the woman asked frightened. «A criminal?»

«Did your shift start yesterday?»

«Yes. We went to St. Petersburg in the evening and returned this morning. I'm about to transfer the car over to the other attendant.»

«Try and recall whether this man was among your passengers.»

«Let me see... Oh yeah, I remember. Only, here in the photo, he is sober, but last night he was a little drunk.»

«Did he get on in Moscow and get off in St. Petersburg?» inquired the operative.

«Of course – we don't run direct.»

Mayorov put the photo away and wrote down the woman's statement along with her number.

«Write the following here, please: „This is an accurate record of what I said.“ Then add the date and your signature.»

«Is this standard procedure?»

«Yes, don't forget to write down your number.» Vanya stood up and put away the witness statement. «Tatyana Fedorovna Semyonova, we will call you in the event that your assistance is further required.»

«Why? I already told you everything.»

«Well, we may ask you about that bruise, for example.» Vanya had long since noticed the attendant's black eye which she had tried to cover with blush. «An unruly passenger?»

«My husband, the bastard.» The woman became upset and turned in profile. «You're not the only one who noticed. My supervisor did too. Now, I bet I won't be able to work the corporate lines. And it's all because Nikolai keeps acting like a rabid dog. But it's okay, this time I'll get him put away for a while.»

«They won't give him more than fifteen days,» Mayorov said doubtfully.

«I'd like to see them try,» the woman raged. «I could go another century without seeing that pig.»

«You could just file for divorce.»

«Yeah, right. And divide up the apartment?»

The attendant placed her hands on her hips and scowled at the operative, as if he was her detested husband standing before her. Ivan backed away slowly until he stepped out onto the platform and dialed Petelina.

Elena thanked Senior Lieutenant Mayorov and as always assured him that he was destined to become a major – and not just because his surname demanded it.

Then she returned to Maltsev. His alibi had been corroborated. He was on the train at the time of his brother's murder. The detective, however, did not experience any more compassion toward him for this fact. She went on with the interview.

«Did you warn your wife that Anton was coming?»

«Why would I? We'd just had a fight. I wasn't about to call her.»

«Why didn't you answer the phone when I called?»

«You did? When?»

«When you were in the train.»

«Eh, I put the phone on silent and went straight to the restaurant as soon as I got on. I had a couple drinks and then it all hit me at once: the family, Inna, problems at work...»

«Don't forget about the other woman,» Elena decided to test out her theory.

«What? What does the other woman have to do with it?»

«So, you are cheating on your wife?»

«I'm not going to address that. My brother was murdered. Ask me about that.»

«Why did you buy a return ticket as soon as you got there? Didn't you have a meeting to go to?»

«I told you, I got wasted. Then my mind cleared up. My little brother's at home and I haven't seen him in two years. And Inna needs to be calmed down. God forbid something happens to her – she's a bit fragile, after all.»

Elena picked up the prescription she had found in Inna Maltsev's purse. This was the second item that had caught her attention.

«Are you aware that your wife was taking strong antidepressants?»

«Of course I am. I'm the one who convinced her to go see the doctor in the first place.»

«A psychiatrist?»

«Yes, naturally.»

«Was Inna diagnosed with something?»

«Some sort of depression. You had better ask the doctor. I can see that he hasn't helped her much though. She's either screaming or crying.» Maltsev began fiddling with the crime scene photos but froze on the most grizzly one and looked up frightened. «Did she do this..?»

«Did Inna have any kind of disagreements with Anton?»

«They barely ever spoke to each other. She's basically only spent time with doctors the past few years.»

«What was she afflicted with?»

«Women's stuff. Let her tell you herself.»

«Why did you just let slip that Inna could have killed your brother?»

«I saw the cleaver. One time, we had a fight and she reached for it – either as a joke or in earnest. It's hard to tell with her sometimes.»

«Are you claiming that Inna threatened you?»

«I'm not claiming anything. You've gotten me all mixed up; my head is killing me!» Maltsev covered his face with his hands.

«When you left the apartment, your brother was there but your wife was not?»

«Well, yeah. Yes!»

«And she had no idea that Anton was in your apartment?»

«If you don't believe me, ask her. What does she say? What the hell happened in there anyway, goddamnit?»

«Calm down, Mr. Maltsev. We will conclude our conversation for today, but I will need you again. Please remain in the city for now.»

«I understand.»

«Good. Tomorrow, please go to identify the body at this address...»

Petelina drew up the witness statement and gave it to Maltsev to sign. The sparkle of success in his eyes bothered her. What was making him so happy? The conclusion of an unpleasant procedure or had he managed to trick her somewhere along the way?

When Maltsev had relaxed and was about to leave, Elena asked a final question, a kind of test shot.

«Mr. Maltsev, could you please describe to me the car attendant on the Moscow to St. Petersburg train?»

Maltsev wavered and took his time responding.

«The attendant? What, am I required to remember her?»

Elena noted the touch of anxiety in his eyes. She always paid more attention to her subject's emotions than their words. A liar prepares all the right words beforehand; it's hard to trip him up. Emotions, however, reveal the truth at times.

«At least tell me her approximate age, or body-type. Or was it a man?»

«It was a woman. That's all I remember,» Maltsev grew angry. «Can I go?»

«If that's all you remember, you may go.»

As he was about to leave the office, Maltsev turned around glowing.

«I just remembered: The attendant had a black eye. She covered it up with make-up, but it was still noticeable.»

The test shot had whistled wide of its mark. Maltsev was telling the truth. The detective was once again left with one suspect in her murder investigation.

9

Elena Petelina could not shake the burdensome impression that her as of yet fruitless interrogation of Inna Maltseva had made on her. The chief suspect in the brutal murder had not answered a single question. She had clammed up and stared at the detective as if Petelina were some news anchor, speaking an alien language on the TV. Where was her mind? What was she thinking about? Why didn't she try to defend herself? At one point, the semblance of a smile had softened her tightly pursed lips. That was when Elena had asked her about the little girl's photograph in her purse. Elena had clutched at this straw but, try as she might, not a single peep had followed.

Someone rapped on the door. Detective Petelina turned away from the window, instinctively adjusted her cardigan and fixed her hair. In the doorway stood a heavysset, forty-five year old man in a mackintosh, an ascot and large glasses with thick frames.

«Arkady Borisovich Krasin, psychiatrist,» the doctor introduced himself. His was the signature on Inna Maltseva's prescription. «You wished to see me?»

«Please come in, Dr. Krasin.»

The psychiatrist noticed the coat rack and took off his mackintosh, unveiling a tweed jacket with ornamental elbow patches.

«May I?» he indicated the armchair next to the desk.

Elena nodded and Krasin sat down. From behind his glasses, his clingy gaze traversed across the desk and down to the detective's feet; it clambered its way up the detective's figure and stuck intently to her face. Petelina found herself the subject of an unabashed examination by a pair of hazel, half-squinted eyes. She began to feel uncomfortable: She was accustomed to observing the faces and mental states of her guests – not vice versa. Petelina sat down behind her desk, shuffled some papers, opened and closed a drawer and adjusted her laptop's screen.

«Please, feel yourself at ease, Detective Petelina,» Krasin said graciously.

Okay, this is too far!

The detective shut her laptop and looked defiantly at the psychiatrist.

«I'd like to remind you that it was I who invited you here and not the other way around,» she said.

Krasin leaned back in his chair and let a smile ooze across his face.

«Your uniform flatters you. I like women in uniform. The female body in a male guise connotes a volatile admixture of emotion and reason. Two opposing elements and which will be victorious remains an open question.»

Petelina made a show of turning on the voice recorder and rattled off in an icy voice:

«I am more interested in a different kind of question. I called you, Dr. Krasin, to discuss a patient of yours with you.»

«I am all ears.» The psychiatrist leaned forward officiously. «Whom do you have in mind?»

Elena could clearly make out his aquiline nose with its prominent bridge which looked custom made to support the glasses resting on it. Or had his toucan's beak evolved to accommodate the hefty frames' tectonic pressure?

«Inna Maltseva.»

«Inna... is not a simple case.»

«How long have you known her?»

«About three months. I was treating her for depression.»

«Is her affliction related to her familial relationships?»

«Yes and no.»

«Could you explain what you mean, please?»

«I am a doctor. For me, the physician-patient privilege is sacro – »

«Inna Maltsev is the main suspect in a brutal murder.»

Krasin threw up his hands.

«I am aware of the horrible tragedy that has occurred in her family. It is a very sad – »

«How did you find out?» the detective latched on.

«He husband, Dmitry, called me. He was cursing, accusing me of being unprofessional, that kind of thing. Tell me, did Inna really commit such a horrible act?»

«Let's not change the subject, Dr. Krasin. Please answer my questions. And so, what were the symptoms of Mrs. Maltseva's depression?»

«Please understand that in our society, people go to the psychiatrist as a last resort – they are at the end of the line and have nowhere else to turn. More often than not, their relatives force them to take this step. Accordingly, Inna's husband first brought her to me.»

«Did you know him prior to that?»

«No. One of his acquaintances recommended me to him. Word of mouth is the best advertisement for a doctor. For a lawyer too, by the way. As for a detective... Well, obviously your clients aren't exactly eager to find you.»

«Unfortunately, I am not lacking in clients.»

«You know, me too,» Krasin laughed. «What is happening to this country!»

«I would like to know the cause of Inna Maltseva's depression.»

«That is a sad topic. Inna was being treated for a long time. Not by me, but by an OB/GYN. She was diagnosed with recurrent pregnancy loss. This disease causes systematic early-term miscarriages due to genetic errors. Do you have children Detective Petelina?» Krasin asked suddenly.

«We are talking about Mrs. Maltseva at the moment,» the detective reminded the psychiatrist yet again.

«Of course.» Krasin splayed out his palms before himself in a peacemaking gesture. «You know, I am happy to see a woman in charge of this case. A reasonable woman. You will understand Inna's condition better than a man would. I am sure that you have a child. Just one. Did I guess correctly? A girl, most likely. A lovely girl who resembles her mother, who loves her very much. Now, imagine that the daughter vanishes. Dies!»

Elena started. Even though twelve-year-old Nastya would sometimes get sick, Elena refused to ask for medical leave. Of course, the grandmother lived right next door, but last winter when Nastya came down with a 104 degree fever...

«I'm not interested in discussing this.» Elena stood up from her desk, noisily scooting back the chair.

The psychiatrist seemed satisfied with her extreme response.

«And here are the emotions! You are uncomfortable, anxious – though I only mentioned death in passing, without going into detail. But Inna lost her child four times. Four times! She sensed and witnessed their deaths with her own eyes. Her own body took part in the deaths of her children, rejected her fruits like something alien and she could do nothing about it. Nothing! Can you imagine?»

The psychiatrist fell silent. Elena recalled her own fears during her pregnancy. Her stomach whined.

«Inna has an obsessive fantasy of having a child. It is, unfortunately, impossible,» continued Krasin in a calm voice. «This is the cause for her depression. I tried to remove this dependence, but... Hers is a very difficult case.»

Elena returned to her desk and forced herself to go on with her work.

«Did Mrs. Maltseva suffer from nervous breakdowns or sudden fits of rage?»

«Who doesn't?» smirked the psychiatrist. «I just observed one myself...»

«Did you come here to piss me off?»

«Honestly?»

«I don't advise lying to a detective.»

«This is my method Detective Petelina. Mere talk does not suffice in helping one understand a person's internal world. One must compel the subject to lose its cool. Induce stress and one may observe the psychosomatic state of the individual – as plainly as with an MRI. Then, the psychic pressure points are revealed and one may press on them as one wills. Or, if the opposite effect is desired, one may apply pressure to the areas of tranquility and appeasement and thereby return the subject to a state of psychic equilibrium.»

Elena realized that she herself had resorted to such methods during her interrogations. She smiled.

«And what did you learn about me?»

«You have a strong personality. I don't envy your suspects.»

«And yet you yourself seem intent on becoming one.»

«What?» a touch of anxiety flashed across the psychiatrist's eyes.

«You will find very interesting people to talk to in our holding cell, Dr. Krasin. There's enough material there for several monographs.»

Krasin snorted several times, nervously imitating laughter.

«I understand. A professional jest.»

«If you understand, then please start answering my questions. I asked you about Inna Maltseva's fits of rage.»

«The prescription is lying right there in front of you, Detective Petelina. It is for a very potent substance, but one that is absolutely justified in this case. If Inna was taking her pills regularly, loss of control would have been impossible. But if she forgot a dose, her organism may have rebelled. Unfortunately, I can only ensure that the medicine is being taken at the in-patient facility. Mrs. Maltseva stayed with us for two weeks. After that, I monitored her only as an outpatient.»

«Okay, let's assume she missed a dose. What then?»

«Depends on the circumstances. Though, her illness predisposes her more to making a scene.»

«Did you talk to Dmitry Maltsev regularly?»

«Naturally. It is impossible to improve a person's mental condition without familiarizing oneself with their family and surroundings.»

«And what was the relationship like between husband and wife?»

«It was fractured. But it could not have been otherwise. They had to deal with the endless attempts to get pregnant followed by the struggle to keep the baby, culminating each time with failure.»

«Take a look at this photograph.» Elena offered Krasin the photo of the three-year-old girl. «Do you recognize this girl?»

«No. I've never seen her before.»

«Mrs. Maltseva had it in her purse.»

The psychiatrist became pensive.

«A strong, obsessive idea always manifests as something concrete. It is possible that Inna imagines that her unborn child looks exactly like this girl. It is vital for her to have a real image of her fantasy. As for the photo itself, she could have found it anywhere.»

«We discovered Mrs. Maltseva beside the body. Everything points to her guilt. She behaved calmly, maintaining that she did not kill her husband, but as soon as she saw that the dead man wasn't him, she fainted. She hasn't said a word today. She refuses to speak.»

«Did you take her medicine away?»

«Yes. She is not allowed to have it in the holding cell with her.»

«You cannot leave Inna without her medicine,» Krasin began to fret.

«I can have her transferred to the prison hospital.»

«God no! Do you know what kind of doctors are working there? There aren't any psychiatrists there, are there? I hypothesize that, due to severe stress, Inna's memory has blocked out any horrible recollections. Even with the help of medicine, you won't get anything out of her.»

«What should we do then?»

Krasin entwined his fingers self-importantly and furrowed his brow.

«There is one surefire way to bring someone back to reality.»

«What's that?»

«Hypnosis.»

The detective looked at the psychiatrist incredulously.

«Yes, that's right, hypnosis. Hypnosis alleviates fear and dismantles internal barriers that the unconscious mind uses to defend itself. The subject becomes truthful and regains its memory. Hypnosis is a form of treatment. I tried a couple sessions with Inna. They yielded favorable results.»

«Interesting.» Elena traced a large spiral with her pencil on the sheet of paper before her. When her mind was occupied with something, she would often draw mindless doodles that would surreptitiously depict her state of mind. At the moment, Elena remembered that hypnosis – as a method of influencing a person's psyche in order to bring their memory back – had long since been used by the special services of the developed world. It had been employed in Moscow as well, just not in her division.

She decided to risk it:

«And if I were to ask you to perform a session here, in my presence? What would you say?»

Krasin looked around.

«I think we can easily do it right here in your office.»

«When?»

«Detective Petelina, I am a busy person – as are you. Since I am already here, why put it off?»

10

Marat Valeyev noticed his partner's large figure a block before the intersection. He braked and waited while Mayorov crammed himself into the passenger seat.

«How did the train welcome go?» asked the captain.

«The car attendant recognized Dmitry Maltsev. At the time of the murder, he was on the train getting drunk.»

«He did more of the same on the return leg. I've already delivered the flabby product of last night's libations to Petelina.»

«Why waste all that money on tickets?» sighed Vanya recalling his unenviable salary. He noticed that the captain was not heading back to the division. «Where to now?»

«Back to our former haunts. We never found that janitor, remember.»

«Oh. Man, the Noose just doesn't let up, does she? Other operatives don't even have to go to the crime scenes. They're allowed to stay in the office writing reports – »

«It's Detective Petelina to you. Got it?» Marat would have preferred it if Lena Gracheva, the valedictorian of his class, had remained Gracheva, instead of getting hitched with Sergey Petelin, with whom he used to scuffle in school.

«What are you getting on my case about? Have you any idea how they bitch about her back at the Investigative Committee? She's constantly setting back deadlines, requesting additional tests and ordering field operatives to go here and there, back and forth...»

«She may order us around, but it's for a good reason. As for deadlines, the entire reason we're going to find the janitor right now is to speed things up. Oh, and did you not get an award last quarter?»

«Yeah, something like that.»

«There you have it. And thanks to whom? Petelina!»

«I didn't even understand how we got so many merits.»

«A detective gets merits on his record for each criminal case that goes to court, but us operatives get them for each episode. Episodes constitute individual crimes that may all be a part of just one case. Whomever the detective decides to give the merits to gets the golden goose. Remember how we nabbed that gang that stole the gasoline from the oil refinery?»

«Yeah, we followed them and got them as they were about to fence it.»

«The total recovered damages in that case amounted to five million. We divide that into one hundred episodes at fifty thousand per – and that's how you got all those merits on your record.»

«Huh.»

«You should always try to be friends with your detective, Vanya.»

«I mean, I have nothing against her. Only, she's obsessed with this coat. And yet the whole thing is so obvious. We discovered Maltseva at the scene of the crime and the Tadpole got all the evidence we could need. All we have to do is lean on her a bit and she'll crack. Why waste time talking to Tajik janitors?»

«Because I can't say no to a pretty woman, Vanya. I'm simply incapable of it.»

Mayorov was ready to submit a different paragon when it came to female beauty. A more striking, younger one with gracious curves in the right places. To that end, he had asked for the attendant's address on purpose. Now, he would have a good reason to stop by the passport desk and ask Galya Nesterova whether the woman with the bruise really did reside at the address she had given him. He would bring some chocolate with him. Or maybe a rose? Flowers, of course, would be a better idea, but he was a little frightened. If a man gives a woman flowers, he is effectively confessing his love. Maybe if it was Galya's birthday, it would be okay. How could he find out when she was born?

It was as if Valeyev had read his younger colleague's mind.

«I remembered what I said to Galya from the passport desk yesterday, Vanya.»

«What?» Mayorov turned his entire, ample frame to face the captain.

«„Now or never.“»

«Tell me now – why wait?»

«I already told you.»

«I don't understand.»

«That's what I told her: „Now or never!“»

Vanya's eyes went round; his mouth opened a little. More than a minute went by before he exhaled.

«Why?»

«First thing that came to mind. So I said it.»

«But what does it mean?»

«Now means now! And never...» the captain flourished his hand vaguely in the air. «We will catch the culprit... now or never.»

«Are you sure that that's how Galya understood it?»

«Well, we were on our way to a murder, weren't we?»

«But Galya didn't know that!»

«Yes, a misunderstanding... Well, you know what they say: From each according to his ability, to each according to his depravity.»

Vanya recalled the fiery look that Galya had cast after the captain and felt a tinge of sadness:

«I think that she thought something entirely different.»

Valeyev turned into the driveway to the Maltsevs' apartment building and instantly spied the janitor in the courtyard.

«Well, speak of the devil. Come on Vanya – time for you to practice your Tajik.»

«Me?»

«Yeah you. What are you sitting there for? If we both go, we'll scare him. You're the more diplomatic one here.»

Valeyev sat back, relaxed and enjoyed a cigarette, watching the 240-lbs. «diplomat» variously and valiantly attempt to explain to the cowed and skinny janitor exactly what was wanted of him.

At last, the time came for the senior officer to involve himself.

«Come over here, brother.» Valeyev clapped the janitor on the shoulder. In the next instant, the captain went bug-eyed and thrust forth his neck in simulated rage. «If you don't hand over that coat this instant, I'll send you back home to Central Asia first thing tomorrow morning. To your motherland. And after that, you'll never get back into Russia again. Ever!»

The sacred words «Russia» and «motherland» had a profound effect on the janitor. Five minutes later, the operatives were digging through a pile of clothes in the building's basement, while the janitor regaled them with a haphazard tale about wealthy residents who throw away «completely new thing,» insolent bums with «completely no shame,» and a strict supervisor who «completely does not talk quietly.»

The operatives did not part with «Completely Completovich» empty-handed.

11

Inna Maltseva looked relaxed. Her eyes were closed and she was reclining in her chair with her arms lying limply on the armrests. Dr. Krasin held an open hand to Inna's forehead, while his other hand supported the back of her head. His long nose was almost touching her temple and he was speaking to her in a soft and poignant voice.

«Inna, you can feel the warmth from my hands spread through you. Your fear lets go of you and you begin to feel better and better. There is nothing that has happened in your life that cannot be fixed. A minor nuisance has occurred. We are here to help you figure out and extricate you out of this situation. On the count of three, I want you to open your eyes and look at the woman before you. She is your friend. You must be honest with her. Don't hide anything. She will help you.»

Krasin counted to three and traced a circle with his palm in front of the patient's face. Maltseva's eyes opened.

«You may ask your questions,» the psychiatrist whispered to the detective.

Petelina was sitting across the table from Maltseva. She brought her palms together pensively in front of her pursed lips and watched her enter hypnosis. Inna had changed. She looked like a guileless, infinitely weary woman now. Her wide-open, clear eyes awaited Petelina's help.

Elena slowly lowered her arms and surreptitiously turned on the voice recorder. She tried to formulate her questions as tactfully as she could.

«Inna, do you remember what happened yesterday evening?»

«Yes, of course.»

«Tell me, please, what were you doing?»

«I was waiting.»

There was a pause. Maltseva's gaze became foggy. It became evident that she was submerging herself in her memories.

«Were you waiting for an opportune moment?» the detective tried to lead her.

«Yes.»

«What was supposed to happen then?»

«I wanted to approach unnoticed.»

«Approach whom?»

«The person I wanted to kill.»

«Did you plan out the murder beforehand?»

«Yes.»

«Did you plan how you were going to do it?»

«I did.»

Petelina could not believe that Maltseva would so stubbornly ruin herself and rephrased the question:

«Try and think hard before answering, Inna: Did you want the person to die as a result of your actions?»

«Of course,» Maltseva answered naïvely.

Elena pursed her lips in disappointment. Murder in the first degree was far removed from the charge she had planned on for this poor woman who was so tormented by her impossible desire to have a child. Article 5, Section 1—murder in the first – provided for 6—15 years' imprisonment, whereas Article 107—manslaughter in the heat of passion – entailed a maximum of up to 3 years. Meanwhile, if the court decided that Maltseva had acted with excessive cruelty, then she could even be charged under Article 104, Section 2. Then, if she was found guilty of that, she could be given life.

Elena was overcome with compassion. The psychiatrist had been right when he had remarked that her investigations vacillated between the cliffs of reason and the waves of emotion. Waves could

erode the jagged edges to softness, but only rock could ensure a stable footing. Elena had to cast aside emotion and discover the truth. She had to present it in the form of clear evidence and submit it for the court's decision. That was her job. Feelings during an investigation could only get in the way of that.

«Tell me how you put your plan into action,» Petelina asked more coldly, already anticipating the answer. The image of the crime and the murder weapon – the hair-plastered cleaver – did not leave much room to the imagination.

«I came up from behind.»

«Unnoticed?»

«Yes.»

«Go on. You came up from behind and...»

«And fired.»

Fired?! The word, pronounced so quietly, had the effect of a real gunshot.

Petelina recoiled and looked quizzically at the psychiatrist. Krasin remained unperturbed. He scribbled something on a piece of paper and passed it to the detective. Elena read: «In a state of hypnosis, she is unable to make anything up.»

The detective looked at Maltseva. The woman had an open and earnest expression on her face devoid of the slightest smirk or shade of cunning. She had given her reply and was simply waiting for the next question.

Had she told the truth then? But that was impossible!

«Inna, let's try this again, from the beginning. You decided to commit a murder. You approached your victim from behind. And then? Do you remember the gunshot clearly?»

«Yes.»

«Then you must have the weapon somewhere.»

«The gun.» Maltseva looked at her hand, raised it and extended her index finger. «I fired. Like this.»

Inna bent her finger. Her hand jumped from the recoil and dropped to her knee.

Elena could not understand what was happening. Anton Maltsev had been killed with a cleaver – the autopsy had confirmed it. There was no handgun! There were no bullets! What the hell was the suspect talking about?

Petelina glanced at the voice recorder and mechanically asked her next question:

«Where did you aim your shot?»

«At her head. I fired and she fell.»

«She?!»

12

Captain Valeyev put some clothes in a bag and explained what he was doing to the janitor.

«These constitute material evidence, which I am hereby confiscating.»

«Completely?»

«Completely completely.»

The Tajik janitor nodded enthusiastically and suggested the boss take some more things. He understood now that his date with his motherland had been put on hold and was grateful to the kind boss for his wise decision. Valeyev handed the bag to Mayorov and the two operatives left the basement.

In the courtyard, the captain noticed Dmitry Maltsev hurrying by.

«What a welcome surprise!» Valeyev exclaimed. «It's good to see you back in the free world!»

Maltsev twitched as if he had stumbled against an invisible barrier.

«I was released,» he muttered.

«Verily, the drunk tank overfloweth. Thy return shall be most welcome.»

«Well I don't normally drink so much... That was kind of an accident.» Maltsev waved his hand in resignation and asked, «What about Inna, my wife? Where is she? She isn't answering her phone.»

«Kindly direct all your inquiries to the detective.»

«Is she under arrest?»

«Are you deaf? Ask the detective!»

«Yes, of course,» Maltsev checked himself and pointed at the driveway uncertainly. «May I go up? To my apartment?»

«If you've got your keys, go for it.»

«But isn't the... well.. you know, in there...?»

«They're doing the autopsy at the morgue. It's more comfy there. I'm sure you understand. In fact, I know you do because I heard that you've dealt with this kind of thing before – like when you went hunting that one time.»

Maltsev's eyes flashed with a spark of rage. The man deflated and turned away. His stooping figure, its sour face, dragged off toward the front entrance.

«And where are we off to?» asked Mayorov.

«To the car, Vanya, to the car.» Valeyev gave his partner a soft push, weighing whether he should tell Petelina about his meeting with the janitor in person or by phone.

Detective Petelina's head was running in circles. What was Maltseva talking about? Where was she getting this stuff? A *gunshot* instead of a blow? A *handgun* instead of a cleaver? A *she* instead of a *he*? Drivel – plain and simple. Everything had happened completely differently.

«Go on,» Dr. Krasin whispered to Elena. His expression, however, lacked its former conviction.

Elena discarded all tact and stated directly

«Mrs. Maltseva, last night you did not shoot anyone.» Elena discarded all tact and asserted directly. «Instead, you struck a man with a cleaver!»

«No. I shot a woman with a gun.»

«What woman?»

«The woman in the red car.»

«What car?»

«A red Volvo.»

«You were at home last night.»

«I was in Aprelevka, waiting for her.»

«In Aprelevka?» Elena shook her head helplessly. «Okay, let's say you really were there. Where then exactly?»

«At 24 Dorozhnaya Street.»

«Are you sure?»

«Yes. There was a sign on the fence that said „24.“»

«And who was it that you shot?»

«The blonde, but she dyes her hair.»

«A bleached blonde? How fascinating! Tell me, how did it all happen?»

«She drove up and got out of her red car. She began to open the green gates. I walked right up to her and shot her in the head. Then, she fell.»

«Where did you get the gun?»

«It's my dad's gun. He was in the army.»

«And where is the gun now?»

«I dropped it back there. I didn't need it anymore.»

«At what time did all this happen?»

«After six. I checked my watch while I was waiting.»

«So according to you, you lay in wait for a woman in order to murder her?»

«I shot her and she fell.»

«What happened then?»

«I got in my car and went home. I thought everything over several times. I was wearing sunglasses so that no one could recognize me. I threw them in the trash. I also threw away the coat and gloves. Did I do it right?»

«What was the woman's name?»

«I don't know.»

«You killed a complete stranger?!»

«She was a bad person.»

«Had you met her before?»

«No.»

«Then why did you shoot her?»

Inna clenched her fists and began to batter the table's edge.

«She's a whore. A bitch. She doesn't have the right to live. She humiliated a child. I had to kill her.»

Inna Maltseva was convulsing hysterically. Dr. Krasin quickly moved the detective aside and began counting backwards to bring the patient out of her trance.

When Maltseva had been taken away, Petelina got into the psychiatrist's face.

«Your hypnosis is utter crap.»

«I wouldn't say so. And, in your heart of hearts, you do not really think so either. I did everything right. Inna could not have lied under hypnosis. To the contrary, she had to recollect whatever she had blocked out of her memory.»

«She recollected enough nonsense to send my head spinning!»

«I was just trying to help, Detective Petelina.»

«Well, you did quite enough. Thank you for all the extra work.» The detective was gradually regaining her cool. «Do you realize that I am required to corroborate any confession? Even one that's utter drivel?»

«And what if Inna is telling the truth?»

«Two murders in one day?»

«You should hear some of the stuff I've come across in my clinical practice. Like this one time – »

«Please go, Dr. Krasin. I will sign your release; just go.» Elena rapped her fingers on the voice recorder. «I've had it up to here with this whole story.»

«As you wish, Detective Petelina.» Krasin put on his mackintosh. «If you need any further assistance with Inna, I will be at your service.»

Recalling the suspect's troublesome testimony, Elena began massaging her temples and agreed with the psychiatrist, «I'm afraid to say it, but I have a feeling that we'll meet again.»

13

What to do with the woman's delirious ravings? Put them on the back burner or check out the details right away?

Detective Petelina preferred to be proactive. From a professional perspective, she had just received new information and now needed to corroborate Inna Maltseva's testimony. Her hand cultivated mindless ornaments on a sheet of paper.

«Detective Petelina, this is Captain Valeyev reporting!» Valeyev's cheerful voice through the phone extracted Petelina from her reverie.

Elena glanced at her drawing. The cleaver was distinctly visible among the delicate penciled lines, while the gun's outline was only vaguely discernible. Elena circled both items, then crossed them out angrily and threw the crumpled paper into the trashcan.

God only knew what was going on. The suspect had confessed and in so doing, all the witness statements, as well as the gathered evidence, had been provided with their logical conclusion. What else did a detective need to consider this case closed? But of course Inna Maltseva had confessed to an entirely different crime: A woman had been killed, instead of a man! The murder took place on a street in Aprelevka, instead of in an apartment in Moscow! The murder weapon was a handgun, instead of a cleaver!

After such unexpected testimony, Petelina was compelled to undertake certain investigative measures to corroborate or repudiate the murder confession. She had already received a part of the necessary data. It had forced her to think very hard. At the moment, Elena was waiting for the final and most important piece of the puzzle.

«It's hard to find a black cat in a dark room. Especially, if it's not in the room to begin with,» Valeyev joked.

Elena could hear him smile.

«What are you talking about, Marat?»

«About the not so simple assignment you gave me.»

«Success?» Elena perked up recalling the missing coat. A forensic analysis of micro-fine particles on the clothes could throw this convoluted case wide open. What could be there? Traces of gunpowder? Drops of Anton Maltsev's blood? Both?

«Success.»

«Well, bring it to the lab ASAP!»

«What? The janitor?»

«What does the janitor have to do with it? I'm talking about Maltseva's coat.»

«We only found the janitor. The coat... There is no coat.»

«Marat, are you messing with me? I've been sick of your dumb jokes since we were in school.»

«I'm sorry Lena, I really was talking about the janitor.»

«Oh god.»

«We didn't discover the coat in question,» the operative confessed and instantly began looking for an excuse. «There probably never was one to begin with!»

«Why are you so certain?»

«We asked the janitor. Who else could have taken the coat out of the trash? It was either him or the bums. But, the janitor doesn't work in the evening. And the bums make their rounds during the day, when it's light out. However, Mrs. Maltseva claims that she threw the coat away when it had just gotten dark. If that were the case, we would have found the coat that same evening. Think about it yourself, Lena, who's going to go digging around in the trash? Only field ops. And even then, just the ones that have the dreaded Noose for a supervisor.»

The detective ignored this little jibe. If the case required it, she'd send them to the bottom of the ocean. In fact, that too had happened before. And not just once. Our dear criminal friends often like to toss material evidence into deep waters, hoping that that'll be that. Luckily, Misha Ustinov has a lovely device that can render the ocean floor in stark detail.

Elena's hand twirled the pencil over a summary of yesterday's incidents in Aprelevka. The section dealing with murders and severe bodily injuries was heavily underlined.

«So there is no coat,» concluded Elena.

«Nor gloves, nor glasses,» the captain joined in enthusiastically. «We went through the janitor's trove. He's a collector of every half-decent thing that gets thrown out. I even picked out a children's coat and some tiny overalls for myself.»

«Why? What do you need them for?»

«Well...» Marat hesitated.

Elena recalled why he had been thrown out of the city's organized crime division. Operative Nikita Dobrokhotoev had perished as a consequence of Valeyev's actions. Internal Affairs had spent three months investigating Marat. It was only due to a general's intercession that Valeyev managed to remain in the service at all. That was how he ended up in Petelina's district.

«Nikita Dobrokhotoev has a kid,» Elena guessed.

«Two.»

«How old?»

«The girl's starting fourth grade. The boy's going to be five soon. The overalls are for him. They're very nice actually.»

«Eh, Marat, why didn't you tell me earlier? I have so many of Nastya's old clothes from when she was younger.»

«Look Lena, this is kind of a personal matter. Don't tell anyone, okay..?»

«What nonsense! I don't want to hear another word. „A personal matter!“ I'll get the clothes ready for you and you'll come by to pick them up. As for the ones you got from the janitor, take them to the dry cleaners first.»

«That's a good idea. I hadn't thought of that.»

«Well, therein lies the difference between women and men.»

«There are other difference too,» the captain humbly submitted.

«Let's stick to work, Captain Valeyev.» Elena reached for a printout from the State Traffic Inspectorate database and circled a license plate number with her pencil. «You didn't find the coat, but I found the car.»

«What car?» asked the operative surprised.

«The Volvo. A red one, as luck would have it.»

«You're getting a new car?»

«It belongs to a woman who was born a brunette but prefers to be a blonde.»

«Lena, I'm not following.»

Misha Ustinov came flying into the detective's office. Petelina put the phone down and switched her attention to the expert. Her eyes burned with anticipation.

«Well?»

«I've figure it out, Detective Petelina, all of it! I've already made the call. You know what they told me?»

Petelina greedily listened to his brief report. Her worst fears had been confirmed. She snatched up the phone and yelled, «Valeyev, get over here this instant!»

14

Using a finely sharpened pencil, Detective Petelina doodled an abstract design on a blank sheet of paper. This time, the drawing was coming out all convoluted and scratchy. In the room with her, Marat Valeyev could barely contain his shock as he listened to the recording of Inna Maltseva's interrogation, while Vanya Mayorov stood leaning against the windowsill and quietly sipped his tea.

«What a business!» the captain exclaimed once the recording had ended. «So this little dormouse knocked off two people? First some lady and then her husband!»

«I checked yesterday's incidents report for Aprelevka. There's no record of a murder there.»

«Why would she lie?» Valeyev furrowed his brow.

«Well, for one, to draw out the case.»

«Come on now, career criminals who've chalked up four stiffs make up one or two more to throw us off. This lady doesn't fit the bill.»

«Another option is to incriminate herself and then beat the charges at trial,» the detective suggested.

«Exactly! Maltseva's just messing with us. She wanted to off her husband but mistook his brother for him. After all, he did show up unexpected and was wearing Dmitry's bathrobe. Then, when we nabbed her, she decided to come up with another murder.»

«She's playing the fool,» Ivan agreed. He had been contemplating whether it would be inappropriate of him to dump out the last, cold dregs of tea into the detective's flower pot.

«Scrambling our brains,» Valeyev echoed.

«If that were the case, I wouldn't have called you here so urgently.»

«Why, I am up for anything at any moment, like a boy scout.» Valeyev had trouble pulling off a humble smile convincingly.

Elena frowned and looked down at her papers.

«We corroborated a number of details from Inna Maltseva's statements,» she said.

«Such as?»

«There is in fact a certain Oksana Drozdova residing in Aprelevka. She is 32 and her address is 24 Dorozhnaya Street. Also, she likes to bleach her hair.»

«A blonde.»

«What's more is Drozdova owns a red Volvo.»

«A blonde with a red ride – nothing farfetched about that,» Vanya proclaimed a bit of worldly wisdom, while secretly relishing the fact that Galya Nesterova wasn't some painted bimbo, but a real woman with real hair: He liked her close-cropped cut with its short braid and he also reckoned that there wouldn't be anything weird or creepy in it if he brought her a flower or, say, a cactus to protect her from her PC's electromagnetic radio waves. He could tell her that he'd brought it from home and had nowhere to put it. Galya would be pleasantly surprised of course. «Do you have an entire orchard at home?» she would ask and he would nod and offer to show it to her. Then, she would come over and—

«Red's a rare color for a Volvo.» Valeyev's remark cut short Mayorov fantastical orbit and sent him plummeting down to the detective's office with all the grace of a descent vehicle on a parachute-less trajectory into the ocean.

«And now for the best part.» Petelina picked up a printout. «Misha Ustinov pulled up Oksana Drozdova's contact info and sent me her photo. Have a look.»

The detective handed her phone to the operatives.

«She likes her makeup,» surmised Valeyev.

«She's a blonde,» Mayorov confirmed for no one's benefit. He was gaining respect for Galya by the minute.

«Oksana Drozdova works for the regional branch of the Housing and Utilities Ministry.
«She's a clerk.»

«That's not the main thing though. Ustinov called them up and found out that Ms. Drozdova did not come into work today. She hadn't given notice and hasn't answered her cell phone.»

«Another goner! Did the Tadpole check for tickets to St. Petersburg?»

«He did,» Elena replied seriously. «Nothing anywhere. Now it's your turn to check.»

«What do you want us to do?»

«I want you to go to Aprelevka, Marat. Check out Drozdova's house.»

«Are we looking for a hidden body?» the operative smirked skeptically.

«The thing of it is that hypnotized people don't tell lies, Marat.»

Twenty minutes later, the two field operatives were flying down Kievsky Highway. Mayorov was behind the wheel. Marat Valeyev sat beside him, adroitly sending off text messages.

«Talking to Galya Nesterova,» he explained. «She's really hung up on the whole «now or never' thing.»

«Why? What's so special about it?» Vanya grumbled, feigning disinterest.

«Check out what she wrote. „Never or now?“ With a question mark!»

«What'd you say to that?»

«I wrote, „Never put off until tomorrow that which you can do today.“»

«What'd she say to that?»

«She wrote, '+100'»

«What's that supposed to mean?»

«It means she agrees, one hundred percent. So I switched over to numerology too: „2+2=4!“»

«I don't get it.»

«Galya didn't either. It's code for a date.»

«What kind of date?» Vanya grew nervous.

«Two pairs of hands is four. Two pairs of feet is four. And two pairs of eyes consuming each other from desire is also four. And so, four pairs times four pairs, joined in intimate intercourse.»

«Eyes, hands, feet... what's the fourth pair?»

«Ears, you perv. Ears are the most important part. If a girl's all ears as you're whispering your sweet nothings, you can be sure that she'll be yours.»

«Yours?» terror washed over Vanya.

«The hell are you off to – you unformed major, you? Turn here! You'll miss the Aprelevka exit!»

The senior lieutenant braked abruptly. Valeyev cursed, opened the atlas and found Dorozhnaya Street. He began to give his partner directions, while the melancholy Mayorov wove through the unfamiliar streets obediently and kept trying to divine whether the whole date code thing was just a joke. The captain did love his jokes, after all.

«Here we are. Twenty-four Dorozhnaya Street,» Valeyev announced cheerfully and shut the atlas.

«The gates are green, just like in Maltseva's statement,» recalled Vanya. His police brain clicked on, drowning out the whine of jealousy permeating his solid body.

«And open,» noticed Valeyev. «Why do you think that is?»

The operatives entered the yard and found a sedan parked within.

«It's red,» Mayorov switched to a whisper.

«Wait!» Valeyev stopped his partner in mid-stride.

The captain squatted and picked up a plastic fragment from the cobblestone.

«Look, it's from a phone. No wonder her cell phone isn't working.»

Valeyev noticed two small stains on the pavestone, rubbed them with his finger and carefully examined the smudge on his finger.

«Look's like we have a situation on our hands. This is blood, Vanya. Could be from a pooch that nicked its paw or could be a...» he reached down again and picked up a couple of light hairs. «Well, well, well... Seems to me like these smell like gunpowder. Have a sniff, Vanya.»

Valeyev stood up, while Mayorov inhaled loudly with his nose.

«I can't tell. I'm no hound.»

«You're a sleuth, Vanya. An operative, as we like to say. What's the operative's motto? „*To contend and to seek – to uncover and bring to justice.*“ Wish the Tadpole were here with his satchel.» Marat looked around. «If we keep going at this rate, we'll stumble across a blonde corpse any second.»

«Where?»

«Well, where would you hide a body?»

The operatives both looked at the lilac bushes in the corner of the yard. The rust-colored leaves had partially fallen, exposing an oblong object covered with a plastic tarp through the bare branches. The operatives exchanged a look and walked around the bush from both sides. The oblong object covered with plastic was shaped like a human body.

«Should we look around for witnesses?» asked Vanya.

«The hell do you want with witnesses?» Valeyev jerked the tarp off in one sharp motion, revealing a black mound of fresh earth. The captain shook off the water that had gotten on his hands. «What we need is a shovel, not witnesses.»

«Maybe we should report to Detective Petelina first. Let her...» the senior lieutenant stumbled onto the captain's accusatory look and shut up.

«Why don't you call Galya Nesterova too? You and I can have a pleasant smoke while they do our jobs.»

«I'm just going by the book. Clearly the corpse is here. The earth is loose. Buried yesterday.»

«You know, I think maybe you can't see the forest for the trees. Have you ever seen black earth like this anywhere around Moscow?»

Vanya shrugged his shoulders.

«Did it rain yesterday?» Valeyev pressed on.

«Hasn't rained a drop in three days.»

«There you have it. And yet, there was some pooled water in the tarp's folds. And it was covered with withered leaves.»

Valeyev snapped off a branch and used it to poke the black mound. The branch entered the earth easily but stopped at something hard at ground level. The captain prodded the mound from every side and threw the branch away.

«This is just potting soil for a vegetable garden. It was put here a while ago and covered with plastic to keep the weeds out.»

«Where should we look for the body now?»

«You forgot about the house. That's the best option for the murderer. Neighbors might be able to see into the yard. But this way, you shoot her, get her keys and drag the body into the house.»

«Maltseva couldn't have managed that on her own.»

«Who said she acted alone? In this line of work, best always assume the worst.» Valeyev nodded in the direction of the house. «Here's the plan. I'll get the door, while you cover me through the window.»

The operatives stomped along the grass to the house and split up. Mayorov turned the corner. The curtains were drawn. The operative looked into the first window from his great height. The living room was empty. The next window showed the living room from a different angle. He could see

the door to the entryway. For a moment, Vanya thought he caught a slight motion among the pane's tessellated reflections, as if someone had darted past quickly and quietly.

On the other side of the house, Marat Valeyev ascended the stairs and tried the door. To his surprise, it was unlocked. And not only that but, when he pulled, the door swung toward him with such ease that it was almost like someone was pushing it from inside. This boded danger. Before the captain could pull his service weapon, the blonde's body fell onto him. He had been caught off guard for just a second, but this lost moment turned out to be fateful.

Vanya heard a sharp scream of pain and the sound of someone falling. His hand automatically whipped out his service weapon. He could swear that the scream had been Valeyev's.

15

The same entrance lobby to a once-desirable, Stalin-era apartment building; the same stairwell with its tattered steps; the same apartment with the tall front door. Only now, there are no smoking cops. There are no napping operatives, nor careworn EMTs. There are no curious inhabitants peeking from the safety of their apartments. Gone is the dead man with his staved-in head. Gone are the vacant eyes, the slumped shoulders of the main suspect. And, more notably for Elena, gone from her chest is the onerous feeling she gets every time she first enters a crime scene. It is the feeling of running in endless circles: one more murder; the world is no better for it; man has killed man, again.

Detective Petelina turned away from the shut door to the Maltsevs' apartment and rang the neighboring doorbell. Earlier in the day some new questions for the main witness, Lyubov Broshina, had occurred to Elena. The detective had not, however, considered it necessary to summon the elderly lady to the Investigative Committee officially.

A dog's muffled bark answered the doorbell. The peephole dimmed, a series of locks clicked in ascending order, the security chain stretched taught and Petelina was confronted by a slice of a woman's face. A second passed and its severe wrinkles softened. The retiree recognized the detective.

«Oh, it's you... The husband came back this morning.» Broshina cast an unkind look at the Maltsevs' front door. «Rumpled coat, hair all greasy – it's too bad I couldn't make out his face. Wonder whether he's happy or not – the jackass. Calm down, Chana, heel! This is a nice lady.»

The shaggy little dog at the elderly woman's feet fell silent. Its fur's chalky whorls bore a passing resemblance to the white curls on its mistress's head.

«Actually, I've come here to ask you about Maltsev one more time, Ms. Broshina.»

«Sure,» the elderly woman replied eagerly through the crack.

«Maybe, I could...» Petelina indicated the security chain politely.

«Oh, but of course. Come in.» Broshina let the detective enter. «Put on these slippers. I'm sick to death of cleaning up after Chana. She's old and molting. We're the same age now, she and I.»

«She's a lovely dog.» Elena smiled into the dog's toothy grimace.

«Maltsev called a cleaning service. Two guys came out in coveralls and with chemicals. They won't wash away any of your evidence will they?»

«Don't worry. Our forensic expert already got everything,» Elena assured her, following the elderly lady into the kitchen.

«I'll put a little tea on. I only have yesterday's brew, but it's a good one.»

Noise from the kettle filled the kitchen and thin, porcelain teacups – produced from the sideboard for the occasion – alighted triumphantly onto their saucers. Teaspoons clinked next to them. As none of these sounds boded anything of promise to the old dog, Chana curled into a sullen ball on the handmade cover of one of the chairs.

«Have you figured out who the victim was yet?»

«Yes. It was Mr. Maltsev's brother, Anton. Did you know him?»

«Had I known him, I would have recognized him. I remember now that he had come by before. I saw him once or twice. But, back then he was alive, whereas yesterday...»

«Is it possible that Inna Maltseva had an intimate relationship with Anton?»

«I don't like to speculate about what I don't know. But I doubt it. Inna wasn't like that. She just wanted kids. All she ever did was spend time in doctors' offices.»

«Could she have mistaken one brother for another?»

«Well, we all did at first. I thought it was Dmitry too.»

«Ms. Broshina, what can you tell me about the Maltsevs' family life? Typically, when these kinds of murders take place, the motive lies somewhere in the relationship between the spouses. Disputes, quarrels, cheating. I'm sure you know what I mean.»

«Sure I do. What's not to understand?» nodded the retiree. «Private life, conflict, cheating. I watch the TV shows – God only knows what doesn't happen on them.»

«And the Maltsevs? How did they get on together?»

«The Maltsevs have been my neighbors for ten years. Inna used to be a teacher, just like me. I taught history – social science. Did it long enough to become a principal. As soon as Inna married Maltsev, she transferred to my school – it's the local one over there. I retired two years after she arrived. She quit not much later, but we went on being friends. So there are some things about her that I do know. She didn't have a very easy life, you know.»

«You don't say?»

«Let me just tell you...»

Half an hour later, Detective Petelina knew all about the tragic miscarriages of Inna Maltseva. She listened attentively to the heartrending tale of how poor Inna went from doctor to doctor and stayed in various hospitals, while her husband ran around wooing some painted trollop, the jackass. Ms. Broshina had caught them leaving an expensive restaurant and had even told Inna about it.

«Inna just waved me off, saying that her husband had a business meeting. Business! What business? I saw him myself. He was drunk and ogling her and pawing at her waist like a bear at a beehive. If there hadn't been people around, I bet he'd have summoned the temerity to slip his hand under her skirt... But, of course, if a wife doesn't want to know the truth about her husband, there's no point on insisting on it. So I stopped mentioning it to Inna – even though I saw him bring the bimbo home. Twice, in fact.»

«When was this?»

«During the summer. Her perfume stank up the lobby so bad that it needed to be aired out. Meanwhile, Inna was suffering in a hospital bed. There's a «business meeting' for you.»

«Do you know her name?»

«He never introduced us.»

«What does she look like?»

«She's blonde. Dresses for effect. Likes bright lipstick and eyeliner.»

«Can you look at this photograph and tell me whether this is her?» Petelina pulled up the image on her phone.

The pensioner adjusted her reading glasses.

«Why, that's the very one,» she exclaimed, «Maltsev's lover. She's always wearing skintight fripperies. One might think she is still in school when, really, she is well past thirty. Though, she is younger than Inna. Younger... Men are some dogs, eh?»

Elena remembered her ex-husband and offered no objection. The photo of the efficacious blonde – Oksana Drozdova, clerk at the Housing and Utilities Ministry for the Moscow Region – glowed on her screen. According to Maltseva, she had killed this woman the day before. According to the police, no such incident had occurred. And yet, Oksana Drozdova had not come in to work today.

I wonder what's keeping Marat. It's about time he reported back, Petelina began to worry, remembering the operatives she had sent to 24 Dorozhnaya Street.

16

Ivan Mayorov crept along the wall of the house and, reaching the corner, peeked around at the porch. There, at the foot of the wide-open door, lay Valeyev.

He's alive! The operative was relieved to see a grimace of pain on the captain's face. Marat raised himself onto one elbow and pressed his free hand against his chest. *He's wounded! There was no gunshot. He's been stabbed!* flashed through the operative's head, and, covering the entryway with his service weapon, Vanya hopped up onto the front porch.

He was instantly deafened by a savage shriek. Its source was a woman in cotton pajamas. She stood in the entryway, guarding herself with shaking, splayed palms. She did not have a knife. *It wasn't her.*

Mayorov shoved the woman aside and burst into the house. *Gotta find the bastard! Who attacked Marat?* throbbed between the operative's temples. He began going through the house, checking room by room as Captain Valeyev had taught him.

«These rules are written with the blood of our friends,» Valeyev had pounded into the novice operative's head. «The most likely cause of a police officer's death in a building is a shooter hiding behind an open door. You walk into a room and he's behind you. You may as well be in the palm of his hand. Only slightly less dangerous is when the shooter presses up along the latch-side wall. You'll see him, of course, but he's already got you in his sights. A door is a dangerous object in general – it can be used to deliver a blow or knock a person off his feet. For these reasons, your tactical approach should be as follows: Dash through a doorway quickly and, as you pass the threshold, check the latch-side wall and then whether anyone's hiding behind the door itself. Keep your service weapon in your right hand and steady it with your left. Keep your hands at eyelevel and crooked slightly at the elbows. Keep your barrel pointed where your eyes are looking so that you don't waste valuable time aiming. You may never get that extra second.»

Valeyev hadn't mentioned the blood of friends just for dramatic effect. Vanya knew that at his previous post, the captain's partner, Nikita Dobrokhotov, had perished during an attempt to arrest a terrorist. Word had it that it was Valeyev's bullet that killed Dobrokhotov. There were even certain colleagues who would whisper in Mayorov's ear: «Better be careful when you're out there with him.» Vanya ignored such vile advice. He had learned a lot from the experienced captain.

Previously, whenever they would examine a building together, they would take turns moving. One would cover, while the second moved forward, hunching under the line of fire. When the second reached his firing position, the first would move, past him and onward, hunched in the same manner. If an antagonist appeared, the covering operative would fire, since the one moving might not even have seen him.

At the moment however, Vanya was acting on his own. Following Valeyev's instructions to the word, he combed all the rooms of the house's two floors. There was no one there. With his free hand, Vanya wiped the sweat from his forehead. Then who had stabbed the captain?

The sharp crack of a slap resounded from below, cutting off the woman's shriek. Mayorov dashed down the creaky stairs. Valeyev stood facing the woman who had covered her cheek with one hand.

«Is there anyone else in the house?» the captain asked his partner.

«It's empty.» Vanya was trying to get a look at the wound on Marat's chest.

«Zapped me with a stun gun,» Valeyev explained and kicked a little box with sharp protrusions lying on the ground. He looked sternly at the terrified woman. «Documents!»

«Who are you?» the woman glanced nervously at the gun in Mayorov's hand.

«Police. I'm Captain Valeyev. Vanya, put the piece away. Is this your house?»

«Yes it is.» The woman's spirits lifted somewhat. «What are you doing stomping around my yard? Why'd you break into my house?»

«Documents, please.»

«Why? What's the matter, captain? What right do you have to burst into my house?»

«She's blonde,» Vanya nodded to Marat. «Bleached blonde.»

«What business is it of yours?» the woman asked offended.

«We're just doing a check,» the captain assuaged her. «Will you show me your passport or would you like to accompany us to the precinct for identification?»

The woman snorted, disappeared into the house, returned and slapped the passport into the operative's hand.

«Oksana Drozdova,» read Valeyev, confirming that the living, breathing blonde, whose corpse he had been ordered to find, was in fact standing right there before him. «Did you hear any gunshots last night?»

«What gunshots? Are there gangsters in the township?»

«Calm down, there aren't any gangsters. Does the car in the yard belong to you?»

«Yes, it's mine. Would you like to see the Volvo's passport too?»

«Did you drive home last night in that car?»

«And how else am I supposed to get home?»

«Did you see anything out of the ordinary?»

«I didn't see any gangsters, but that didn't make my life any easier: My gates haven't worked right in a week. The repairmen took the control unit and are taking forever to fix it. I'm sick and tired of opening and closing them by hand. Broke a heel last night. Just look at this – I just got these boots too. And of course, I fell as a result and scraped my knee. Anyway, does all that count as out of the ordinary?»

«Why didn't you go in to work today?»

«Am I allowed to be sick? I even called the doctor to get documentation for my sick day. Left the gates open for him, but he never showed up. No one wants to do their job! I'll have to go in to the clinic tomorrow.»

«And what's wrong with your cell phone?»

«Why, it fell out and broke when I fell. These cobblestones are unforgiving. I barely managed to call the clinic this morning with it – all the buttons keep falling out. Say, you couldn't take a look at it, could you?»

«I'm not a technician. What about your landline?»

«What do I need that for? Cell phone service is cheaper and more convenient around here.»

Valeyev decided to say farewell to the riled young lady. He had fulfilled his assignment and found the blonde. That Maltseva sure had come up with some tall tales. Though the better question was how in the hell Lena had fallen for her gibberish.

Just in case, Marat asked:

«Tell me, Oksana, are you familiar with an Inna Maltseva?»

A shadow flashed across the young woman's face.

«No, I've never even seen her.»

«But you know her?»

Drozdova turned to face her closet mirror and began making a show of examining her cheek: Was there some visible vestige of the slap the police captain had given her – the one that had so ungraciously brought her out of her fit?

«What's your name? Captain Valeyev? You may expect an official complaint for battery. Hitting a defenseless woman with a fist! You'll regret that! Just wait and see what I'll write about you!»

Instead of replying to this, Valeyev squatted and delicately slipped the stun gun into a plastic bag.

«This evidence will be submitted along with a report about an assault against a police officer. I'll also make sure to attach a medical report detailing the dermal burns suffered as a result of electric shock. In the meantime, you, Ms. Drozdova, may expect a summons from the detective in Moscow tomorrow.»

«What detective? Why?»

«Do you know who Inna Maltseva is or not?»

«Well, I am aware of someone by that name. But I've never even seen her. I know her husband, Dmitry Maltsev – from work. He frequently bids on repair projects in the housing sector. My department processes his tenders. That's all I know though!»

«And has he ever mention his wife to you? During your work together, of course.»

Drozdova adjusted her hair and smiled cruelly.

«We women are a curious bunch – especially those of us who are single. For example, you, captain, are not married. And neither is your partner. You know how I can tell? It's not just because you aren't wearing a ring. Your collar is greasy and you have no one to let you know about it or even wash it in time. And yet, my dear officers, I find you completely uninteresting. You can go to the department stores to pick up your sales girls. I'm sure they'll find your salaries and intellectual abilities impressive.»

«I think I understand. You prefer married men?»

«Well, just think for a second: Where am I supposed to find successful men who aren't married at my age? You must be a genius to have figured it out so quickly!»

«Best of luck in your search then.» Valeyev screwed up his face. «I'll be taking the stun gun, just in case you decide to file that complaint. Until we meet again.»

He pivoted on his heels and drummed out each porch stair in his descent. Vanya Mayorov paused on his way past Drozdova and studied the top of the woman's head from his great height. He shook his head.

«I never liked blondes anyway, especially bleached ones.»

«Jerk! Wipe your feet next time before barging into someone's house!» Drozdova yelled after him.

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Ms. Broshina shuffled down the hall in her soft slippers. Chana jogged ahead, claws clicking along the hardwood floor.

«You're welcome to come back any time you like, Lena dear,» the elderly lady intoned, seeing the detective out. She opened the door. «I can tell you so many interesting things – and not just about Maltsev – »

The pensioner cut herself short upon seeing a spunky young woman with violet bangs and heavy looking shoes out on the landing. The sharp-nosed girl had a large purse slung over her shoulder and was speaking with Dmitry Maltsev at his apartment door.

«Could you please tell me, Mr. Maltsev, what went through your mind when you learned that your wife wanted to kill you?»

Maltsev noticed the detective. The puzzled look on his face turned to displeasure.

«And how does it feel,» the woman warbled on, «to discover that you've lost two family members – your brother and your wife – at the same time? Surely, you won't be able to forgive her after what she has done? Isn't that so?»

«Please go away. I have nothing to say to you.»

«Domestic murders are a serious issue in this country. Getting your account published in our paper could land you guest appearances on TV!»

«Leave me alone!»

Maltsev tried to slam the door, but the intrepid reporter had taken the precaution to jam it with her shoe. The young woman deftly produced a camera from her tote and bright flashes began to slip and slide along Maltsev's receding hairline. He flew into a rage, snatched the camera from her hand and hurled it down the stairs. The door slammed shut. The reporter threw up her hands helplessly.

«Did you see that? Did you?» she picked up the camera. «What a spaz. That's the second camera in a month. What is wrong with people! He should be happy he isn't dead. Why, he could be lying in the morgue right now with his head smashed in.»

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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